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Two of a Kind

Raul Rekow & Karl Perazzo



Raul Rekow and Karl Perazzo outside the Beacon Theatre in New York City before Santana's sold out show.

FOR MORE THAN THREE DECADES, CARLOS SANTANA'S unique fusion of Latin, rock, and blues has grown to symbolize the universal voice and passion of music without boundaries. Marking this 30-year milestone was a star-studded Santana concert at the Universal Amphitheater in Los Angeles, celebrating Carlos' induction into the Hollywood RockWalk Hall of Fame two days earlier. The show featured such notables as Jorge Santana, Herbie Hancock, Buddy Guy, John Lee Hooker, Armando Peraza, and many other special friends and musicians who have been touched by the magic of Santana's "ground breaking music." Of course, Santana percussionists and longtime LP endorsers Karl Perazzo and Raul Rekow helped set this special night on fire, with the pulsating colorful rhythms that have so much become a part of the Santana sound.

Also participating in the celebration was LP Chairman and Founder Martin Cohen, who attended the Santana concert and RockWalk induction ceremony. Martin also invited Karl and Raul for an in-depth interview in Los Angeles where they discussed the valuable contributions both men have made to music, as well as their many experiences as distinguished percussionists.

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The extraordinary music of Santana defies categorization. Drawing its strength from a combination of Latin, rock, and blues music, the result is an eclectic mix that excites the soul, as well as the senses. And a great deal of what makes Santana's music so instantly identifiable is the rhythmic groove that speaks to the listener without words, a groove whose origin lies in the gifted hands of timbale player Karl Perazzo and conga player Raul Rekow.

"Santana stands for the rhythm," Rekow says emphatically, with 20 years of performing with the band under his belt. "The conga drum moves people, and touches them in a way that no other instrument does." Such enthusiasm for the drum is not only apparent in Raul's conventional voice, but in his musical voice as well. It is this genuine excitement for playing that fuels Rekow's ability to marry different styles of music within the Santana forum, and he welcomes the challenges it presents. "I'm always trying to incorporate Afro-Cuban rhythms within the rock and roll arena," he reveals. "Many times I will listen for an accent somewhere throughout the tune, and abbreviate or add to the rhythm to fit the song."

Raul Rekow's chameleon-like technique has prompted many of his peers to credit him with creatively fitting conga parts into any musical situation, a compliment he accepts modestly. "I was fortunate enough to have the chance to play alongside two masters like Orestes [Vilato, former Santana timbale player] and Armando [Peraza, former Santana conga/bongo player] for 12 years, which helped me grow immensely as a musician," he recalls. "But I am still learning how to play congas, and constantly keep discovering new territories that further push my playing to another level."

It was a show at the San Francisco Cow Palace featuring a group called the Santana Blues Band that sparked Rekow's original interest in conga drums. He soon bought a \$30 conga drum at a pawn shop and taught himself to play, later studying the true roots

of the congas through African and Cuban rhythms. Prior to joining Santana, Rekow played in the bands Malo and Sapo, and, at the age of fifteen, began to play congas professionally with a Santana cover band, Soul Sacrifice.

When bandmate Karl Perazzo joined Santana in 1991, he was simply fulfilling his destiny. As a child growing up in San Francisco, Perazzo always knew that he would become a member of the band. "I used to play with the band when I was younger, but then the needle broke," he laughs, recalling his practice of playing along to Santana record albums as a young boy. "Seriously, when I joined the band six years ago, it was like, 'finally,' because I was raised listening to Carlos' music."

Listening to Karl perform today, it is not difficult to hear where he got his distinct playing style. His father, a hand percussionist, introduced him to jazz, while his guitar-playing mother exposed him to Mexican music. The family band soon began garnering first place honors in talent shows with young Karl behind the congas. He was later recruited to play jazz for his Junior High School's "top ten" stage band, and was already gigging in clubs by the time he entered high school. Such early exposure to performing live prepared Perazzo for a long, illustrious career on stage and helped him sharpen his stage presence.

Perazzo's first big break arrived at the tender age of 12 years, when he began playing congas with Latin-jazz great Cal Tjader. Over the next several years, Karl worked with the band Malo, played and arranged with Ray Obiedo, and recorded with and toured behind Prince and Sheila E. He also fondly recalls his collaboration with jazz guitarist Andy Narell, whose high-energy music challenged him to soften the volume while maintaining the same energy level. Perazzo performed on three albums on the Windham Hill label, and traveled extensively with Narell before he departed and joined the Santana band.

Performing with Santana has taken Raul and Karl around the globe several times, including some unlikely forums for the band's Latin-tinged blues-rock. In addition to Colombia, Brazil and Puerto Rico, the band's itinerary has included North Vietnam, as well as Seoul, Korea, Jakarta, Indonesia and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Other stops included New Zealand (a first for both Raul and Karl), Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand. Such a broad diversity of tour venues illustrates the ability of Santana's music to transcend cultural differences.

Traveling the world has exposed Raul and Karl to many different customs and even political conflicts within each country. Though many of the incidents they encountered appeared downright peculiar by Western standards, some even proved to be life-threatening. So dangerous, in fact, that Raul and Karl will not soon forget them. For example, while performing in Chile several years ago, Karl found out - the hard way - how Chileans usually express their sincere approval for a band they admire. "Armando Peraza and I had just gotten offstage after finishing our solos when we saw this big ball of fire land right under the timbales where I had been standing," he says. "It was a huge flaming torch that somebody threw, which, in that country, means they love you and appreciate your playing. We really must have been cooking that evening!" he jokes. To this day, the band now keeps fire extinguishers on either side of the stage for just such an auspicious occasion.

Similarly, Raul also experienced quite a surprise while performing in Milan, Italy, during the height of Red Brigade terrorist group activity. "While I was playing, a large nut and bolt 'whizzed' right past my ear and hit the speakers behind me," Raul remembers, with concern still apparent in his voice. Rocks and other objects soon followed, and Raul was on his guard. "Next, about 100 guys with red bandannas over their faces ran up in front of the stage, and started pointing at the band."

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As soon as I turned and began to run off stage, I saw a big flash explode about six feet from where I was looking." The "flash" turned out to be a Molotov cocktail, and Raul and the rest of the band could hear the commotion outside as they ducked into the dressing room. Needless to say, the band unanimously decided not to return to the stage that evening.

With a 30-year catalog of music to choose from, Raul and Karl still find the band adding favorite Santana songs from the past to the repertoire, such as "Everybody's Everything" and "Evil Ways." Interestingly, because there are so many Santana songs to choose from for each tour, the band is just now performing "Evil Ways" with Karl since he joined six years ago. Regardless of the set list, however, both Santana percussionists work as a tight unit and "lock up together" on the songs, to lay down a solid, punchy rhythmic hotbed. "Depending on the song, there must be a lead instrument for each tune," reveals Raul. "Sometimes the drums are the leader, and other times the timbales and the congas do the job."

Both Raul and Karl agree that Santana's music encompasses more than just strict Latin figures, and requires a firm mastering of funk, jazz, reggae, and other diverse styles of music. "It's just an understanding I have of the band, growing up listening

to Raul and Carlos," admits Karl. "I know the concept of where the music is coming from, but I also bring the Mexican, funk, pop, and Latin element into the band."

Despite Santana's hectic touring schedule, Raul and Karl still make the time to conduct their own LP-sponsored clinics between gigs. Anyone who has attended one of their popular clinics will attest to the fact that they are both an educational and spiritual experience. "We try to give our audience an idea of the wide variety of LP instruments and sounds available to them," says Rekow. "It's almost like time-lapse photography, where we begin from the roots of both the instrument and music, and trace its progression up to the music of this century."

Raul and Karl make it a point to offer clinics that educate, as well as entertain, the audience, which often ranges anywhere from 200-500 people per night. "What's unique about our LP clinics is that we've found the perfect combination of performing for and educating the crowd, so people are entertained while they learn," says Rekow. "We excite them with our performance, then 'break it down' for them, so they get the best of both worlds." This mix of learning and entertainment continues with the video release of "From Afro-Cuban To Rock," from LP's *Adventures In Rhythm* series. The video features instruction with the Santana rhythm section, as well as never-

released concert footage, making it possible to get a private lesson from Raul and Karl right at home.

Though Raul and Karl definitely take their playing and music seriously, they also understand the important role that humor plays in the learning process. Both share the philosophy that people should be relaxed in order for learning to be enjoyable, so they inject lighthearted fun into their clinics. Once the crowd is at ease, Raul and Karl get down to business to demonstrate and explain rhythms and how they adapt them to Santana's music. If the audience's enthusiasm is any indication of their success, then Raul and Karl have found a winning combination.

The clinics also give Raul and Karl the opportunity to introduce people to the diverse LP instruments and sounds available. At a recent music store clinic in Akron, Ohio, Karl began demonstrating an LP Merengue Guiro for the crowd, many of whom were unfamiliar with the instrument. After the show, he spotted a smiling audience member on the autograph line, clutching a newly purchased LP guiro. "The guy told me that, even though he had never seen a guiro before, it touched him so much that he had to learn to play it," recalls Karl. "Raul and I want to inspire people to play music, whatever the instrument may be. As long as they at least attempt to learn it, we've done our job."

-Steve Nigohosian



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