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FEATURES



31. Santana

Guitar legend Carlos Santana and his band are back with a CD featuring young stars from every corner of today's music world. The result, an album entitled *Supernatural*, is Santana's fastest selling record in years and one of several topics discussed in our exclusive chat with this platinum-selling performer.

By Mark Nardone



36. Rock en Español!

Lurking in the shadows of the current "Latino pop" hysteria is an army of "alternative Latin rockers," bands offering a harder-edged brand of music, complete with lyrics sung in Spanish. And nowhere is this music more popular than in Los Angeles. With that in mind, MC looked into the past, present and future of this growing movement.

By José Martinez

12 A&R Profile: Chad Williams, Rev Records	By Tom Kidd
17 Crosstalk: Mark Snow	By Jonathan Widran
19 Songwriter Profile: Phil Roy	By Dan Kimpel
21 Promoter Profile: Jimmy Lewis	By Tom Farrell
28 Guide To Music Educators	Compiled By Eric Moromisato
44 Industry Profile: Outwest Entertainment	By Jonathan Widran
50 High Profile: The Verve Pipe	By Pat Lewis



6 CALENDAR



8 HEART & SOUL



10 CLOSE-UP



11 SIGNINGS & ASSIGNMENTS



12 A&R REPORT



15 SIGNING STORIES



16 STUDIO MIX



17 NEW TOYS



18 SONGWORKS



20 NIGHTLIFE



22 CYBER MUSIC



24 SHOW BIZ



26 LOCAL NOTES



52 DEMO CRITIQUES



54 DISC REVIEWS



56 CLUB REVIEWS



60 MUSIC MARKETPLACE

Cover Photo: Jay Blakesberg

Carlos Santana

An Exclusive Interview by
MC Senior Editor Mark Nardone

For over 30 years this guitar master and Rock & Roll Hall of Famer has been guided by the heartfelt belief that music has the power to transcend all ills. Revered as a musician's musician, he has inspired a new generation of stars, including Rob Thomas of Matchbox 20, Dave Matthews, Everlast, Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean, and Eagle-Eye Cherry to collaborate with him on his band's latest album, Supernatural. The result is Santana's most commercially successful work in years.

Tune in any classic rock station on the planet and you'll eventually hear it, a record whose blues lyrics and Latin dance rhythms give way to a coda that with its pulsing bass, staccato percussion and bravura guitar, climaxes in a wave of feedback which can only be described as extra-terrestrial.

The recording, "Black Magic Woman/Gypsy Queen," by Santana, is one of rock's most enduring achievements, made great by the inspired musicianship of the band's namesake. Indeed, in the pantheon of guitar heroes, none is more distinctive or more deserving of a place in it than Carlos Santana, whose intensity and integrity immediately sets him apart from other ax grinders of his generation.

Now, with his most recent Santana band album, *Supernatural*, he is connecting with a new generation. In fact, this CD, released in late June, is the fastest debuting Santana album ever, selling more copies (72,000) in its first week than any Santana recording to date, entering the *Billboard* 200 at an impressive 19. With "Smooth," a catchy, salsa-tinged single featuring the lead vocals of Matchbox 20's Rob Thomas now being added to radio, the album seems destined to be one of Santana's most commercially successful ventures in years.

It is not by accident. Having been largely absent from the airwaves of late, the Grammy-winning artist decided it was time to reacquire himself with young record buyers. "I went into this CD with the intention of connecting with radio, which I haven't done in years — with junior high schools, high schools, universities. I'm upfront about it, because I think that Santana has a message for the young hearts."

It is a message that he has carried for over three decades. Born in Autlan de Navarro, Mexico, on July 20, 1947, Carlos Santana first came to the United States with his father, a mariachi musician, in 1962. Emigrating from Tijuana, father and son settled in the San Francisco Bay area, where Carlos was first exposed to blues and

R&B music. After high school, Santana and keyboardist Gregg Rolie formed the Santana Blues Band (the guitarist became the nominal head only because of a musicians' union rule stipulating that one player be designated the "leader") and over the next couple of years, the band made a name for itself by gigging at local clubs and parks. By the time they graduated to the stage of the Fillmore West, which had risen to international prominence as ground zero of Sixties youth culture, the young band was known simply as Santana.

Several personnel changes later, Santana grew from just one of many blues-rock outfits to a distinctive act whose adventurous blend of rock, blues, jazz, Latin dance, and soul was astonishing in its innovation. Listeners in search of "a separate reality" were especially drawn to this unique sound, which seemed to burn with mescaline intensity.

1969 became a pivotal year. First, Carlos Santana's solo appearance on the *Live Adventures of Al Kooper and Mike Bloomfield* album drew the attention of A&R exec Clive Davis, who quickly signed the guitarist and his group to a Columbia

Records contract. Then, feeding off momentum and word-of-mouth generated by several key festival performances — including a show stopping set at Woodstock — Santana's self-titled debut album became a smash hit. Featuring the single, "Evil Ways," the LP reached the Top 5 and charted for two full years.

One year later, the band's follow-up album took Santana and their music to a new level of art and popularity. Dynamically conceived and dramatically sequenced, *Abraxis* reached Number One and spawned a pair of monster singles. "Oye Como Va," the group's version of Tito Puente's salsa number, cemented the band's pop appeal; but it was the inspired merging of an Englishman's blues ("Black Magic Woman," by early Fleetwood Mac's Peter Greene) with a Hungarian's instrumental fantasy (Gabor Szabo's "Gypsy Queen") that was the LP's most powerful statement. Containing all the elements that embodied the groundbreaking Santana sound, "Black Magic Woman/Gypsy Queen" presented a stunning marriage of opposites, of high-end and low-end, dynamic tempos, suppleness and brittleness, all of it shot through with Carlos San-



tana's passionate fretwork.

Adding new members Coke Escovedo (percussion) and Neil Schon (a sixteen-year-old guitar prodigy), the band's next album, *Santana III*, was its third LP to go gold in as many tries. It was, nevertheless, the last in a trilogy that, over the years, no future line-up of the band would ever equal.

"I still go back to those albums and use them to teach my new band members how to create that sound," Carlos Santana reveals, speaking today of those records, each of which has become a platinum seller.

The classic Santana line-up began to dissolve just one month after the third album's 1971 release. With the departure of co-founder and right-hand Gregg Rolie (who would form Journey with Neil Schon in 1973), Carlos Santana steered the group in a direction that had only been suggested in its previous music. In fact, 1972's *Caravanserai* made it clear that spiritual matters were paramount in this bandleader's world. Significantly, while the album went gold, it was the first Santana set without a hit single. It would not be the last.

Drifting from his popular blues-rock foundation, Carlos Santana was moved to explore the spontaneous, free-forms of jazz, particularly the style of the late, great sax player/composer John Coltrane. While this caused the guitarist's stock to rise among esteemed jazz musicians such as Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock, his power as a radio-friendly rock artist would suffer.

Nevertheless, Santana continued to strike gold (*Zebop!*, '81, *Viva Santana!*, '88) and double-platinum (*Moonflower*, '77) at Columbia before leaving the label in 1991. Still a consistent seller, the Santana back catalog averages a quarter of a million album sales each year.

Through it all, Santana's vitality as a live act, despite changing line-ups, has remained undiminished. It was after witnessing a 1997 Santana performance at New York's Radio City Music

Hall, in fact, that Clive Davis, who'd first signed Santana so many years ago, was moved to bring the guitarist and his band to his thriving Arista Records imprint.

Freed from his deal with Polygram, which had set up a custom label for him in 1992, Carlos Santana, Deborah Santana (his wife of 26 years), Clive Davis and Arista A&R exec Peter Ganbarg began to bring together the elements that would comprise *Supernatural*.

The album, which could have been a star-studded, hastily executed enterprise, is, for the most part, a pleasant surprise. Something of a "tribute album," *Supernatural* succeeds on skillful songcraft, especially on the collaborations with pop rockers Dave Matthews, Rob Thomas and Everlast. A rap track featuring the vocals of Lauryn Hill shows Santana exploring new territory. The album also includes a song with the premiere Rock en Español band Mana, and culminates with "The Calling," a guitar duet with old friend Eric Clapton.

More than anything, *Supernatural* is a milestone, the point at which Carlos Santana, after 30 years, lays claim to his status as one of popular music's most respected elder statesmen.

MC: How does it feel when new artists, especially the Rock en Español artists, cite you as an inspiration?

Santana: It's very gratifying. When I was a young man, the people who were doing it were Ritchie Valens, Jose Feliciano, people like that. So I always knew there was room for Spanish people in the Top 10. It was a matter of 'How do you honor the music that you play?'

MC: It's obvious that *Supernatural* was not entered into casually. What were your goals?

Santana: I went with this CD with the intention of connecting with radio, which I haven't done in years — with junior high schools, high schools, universities. I'm upfront about it because I think

that Santana has a message for the young hearts. I don't want them to feel like me, or live like me, but to take this message, this menu that we present to them, that you are multidimensional spirits with tremendous opportunities and possibilities. You are not just one color in the rainbow, or one animal in the zoo, you are the rainbow, the whole zoo. That's the Santana message: once you embrace your totality, then you can conquer depression, frustration, which usually comes from fear and doubt. Those are the only enemies on this planet.

MC: Was there a defining moment in the recording of this album?

Santana: Yes. Everlast, when he brought "Put Your Lights On." See, he was having open-heart surgery and he was leaving his body, and he said, 'I don't want to go, I haven't done much and I don't really want to go,' and the angels gave him that song and he was so gracious in giving it to us.

Everlast's "Put Your Lights On" is, to me, the most pivotal, crucial song on the CD. This is a song we can play in San Quentin and Sing Sing and every prison, and say, "All you killers, put your lights on, and leave your lights on," which means compassion, understanding, graciousness, patience.

MC: Did "Smooth," the Rob Thomas track, originally have a Santana salsa-blues feel or did it need to be transformed?

Santana: Rob sent me this song, and we immediately said, "Oh yeah, this definitely sounds like Santana."

MC: How would you define the patented Santana sound?

Santana: I consider it African music. I don't call it Spanish or Latin. All the music I play is African music, whether you say it's from Cuba or Brazil, Mississippi or Chicago, it's still blues, it still comes from Africa.

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MC: When you first integrated Afro-Cuban elements into your blues-based sound, how was it received by audiences and other musicians?

Santana: When I started it was people like [the blues version of] Fleetwood Mac, Cream, Led Zeppelin, and Hendrix, all basically playing blues. But when the Santana band started using African rhythms, cumbia, salsa, cha cha, mambo and African melodies — voila! — we noticed that the women in the audience started moving differently. That's when we knew that Santana had something different, struck a different chord. And when we saw people like Chicago Transit Authority, the Stones, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix and everybody else using timbales and congas, we knew they were listening to us! [laughs]

MC: Whether Lauryn Hill or Everlast, what was

"I went with this CD with the intention of connecting with radio, which I haven't done in years — with junior high schools, high schools, universities. I'm upfront about it because I think that Santana has a message for the young hearts."

it like, on *Supernatural*, to go into the studio with artists you've never worked with before?

Santana: I basically came into the room, looked them in the eye, and heard the music.

MC: "Wishing It Was," features the vocals of Eagle-Eye Cherry. Didn't you know his father, the late jazz musician Don Cherry?

Santana: Yes. And working with Eagle-Eye Cherry was unbelievable. I once made a promise to his father to work together on something; unfortunately, Don passed away. But I got to fulfill my promise with his son. It was really beautiful.

MC: The producers of that track, the Dust Brothers, have had great success using samples. What's your opinion of sampling?

Santana: As long as you pay the fees that you need to pay to the artist that you're getting it from, I have no problem. The main thing is not to do it for superficial purposes.

MC: Eric Clapton duets with you on "The Calling." What is it like when two great guitar players get into a room together to try to come up with a special piece of music?

Santana: I said "Eric, I wouldn't want you to be involved with something that's already recorded, so why don't you come over and we'll do something from scratch." He said he didn't hear anything right now, hadn't written anything. I said, "Come on down. I have a couple of sketches." So he came down for about four hours. We talked for three hours about everything — Stevie Ray, Jimi Hendrix, life — stuff guitar players talk about. Then the last hour we just decided to play, and it was beautiful. When I hear that track, "The Calling," it sounds like two Apaches at the Grand Canyon calling out the spirits. That's the intro; and then when they do show up, it's pretty swampy. It's a groove that you can hear in Prince

or John Lee Hooker, both of whom I invited to the session, but they didn't want to or couldn't be a part of it for whatever reasons.

MC: Is it routine for you to go into the studio only with "sketches"?

Santana: It's pretty typical. I go in not with a whim, but a passion. You hear something in the back of your head, a vision and a sound. Convince everyone they can work together and it falls together.

MC: Do you ever just put your guitar in the closet for a month, or do you need to play every single day?

Santana: Both. I'm about to finish being on the road for five weeks. So I'll probably put the guitar down for two weeks and just be a normal person, hang out with my children and my wife.

MC: How does re-listening to your classic albums help you and your band today?

Santana: For example, I sometimes want to play *legato* — long notes like a violin, like touching the body of a young, beautiful woman and you want to touch every part from head to toe. Then I'll want to play *staccato*, which is Coltrane, fast and short. See, in the country is *legato*, in the city is *staccato*. But once you balance your *legato* and *staccato*, you don't need to practice as much for a couple of days. Not all musicians can handle these different tempos. The early Santana albums created that effect very well.

MC: You mean a musical balance?

Santana: Right, it's all about balance. Everything on this planet is about balance. Look at it as a male and female thing: melody is the woman; rhythm is the man. The bed can be reggae, rock, classical, it doesn't matter. But it's how the rhythm and the melody get along that makes a song.

Santana 49 ►

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◀ 35 Santana

MC: You worked together with the Rock en Español band, Mana'. Are they Santana fans who know your music well?

Santana: Even though Mana' are more like the Police, a Mexican Police, I can tell that they listen to Santana, and they are doing their best to integrate African rhythms with classical melodies — real classical music — into their overall sound. You know, the great composer Igor Stravinsky was asked what he listened to, and he said, "I listen to the three Bs: Beethoven, Brahms and James Brown!"

MC: What do you listen to that would, maybe, surprise people?

Santana: Different things. With me, a lot of people would probably be surprised to know that I listen to Emmylou Harris a lot. I could work with Garth Brooks or Clint Black. But the music I mostly listen to is African music and, of course, Coltrane, Miles Davis, Hendrix, and Bob Marley.

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MC: What are your memories of the original Woodstock festival?

Santana: Sly Stone took the crown! Every musician in his band played like I'd never heard them play before or after. To my knowledge, that's the best concert they ever did. They were more than on fire — it was scary. The other great performance, of course, was Jimi Hendrix. But the main heroes there was the crowd — I mean, they endured atrocious accommodations.

MC: Any plans for Santana to appear at the upcoming Woodstock fest?

Santana: They invited me to play with some other particular musicians and do a tribute to Jimi Hendrix; and I told them that while I was very flattered, I wanted to do it with my band, play my music. So we're working it out. If it does happen, rest assured: Santana is going to be one of the top three bands.

I do feel from my heart that my band is one of the top three bands in the world right now. We have no problem opening up for the Rolling Stones, or Dave Matthews, or Prince or Sting. I'm not speaking from the point of competition, but of total communication with the audience. So if I can't play with my band, I'm going to pass.

MC: Your original band turned out some real stars — Mike Shrieve, Gregg Rolie, Neal Schon. Is there anyone in your current band like that?

Santana: Rodney Holmes, the drummer, is unbelievable, and the bass player, Benny Rietveld, he played with Sheila E, Prince, Miles Davis. Each one of the band is a supreme virtuoso. We can captivate any audience for three or four hours.

MC: What have you learned about how to audition players over the years?

Santana: It's more than chops; they have to be a team player. If we find a guy who says, "I don't do windows," well, he can't be in the band. You

have to be able to play all the roles. The main thing is to be sensitive. If you're blind and you put your hands on the body of a woman, you're going to feel curvature. Most musicians don't feel that. They don't know how to speed up or slow down and maintain the same tempo. A lot of people don't understand this, and I don't have the time to explain it to them.

I only work with musicians who understand the curvature of a woman, which is the same thing on a song. Speed up a little bit on the chorus, slow down on the verse, really slow down on the chords, and watch out for the intro.

Also, if you play the song exactly the same way from beginning to end, it's boring! You might as well get a rhythm machine!

MC: How crucial is it for musicians to listen to each other while they're playing?

Santana: Here's a secret. This is what I tell my band whenever we haven't played together in a while: A guy goes to a restaurant and orders a black coffee. The waiter says, "will that be with

sugar or cream?" [laughs] You can't make that mistake; you have to listen closer to the monitors, closer to what you think you are hearing. Sometimes I'll ask, "Could you please do me a favor and repeat what I just said to you?" and if the response is exactly what I said, alright, go do it. So I'll say to my band, "What did the guy order? Did he order black coffee?" [laughs]

MC: You mean, what is the other person saying with their instrument?

Santana: Yeah, I learned that from jazz guys like Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. The most sophisticated and trying music there is, is jazz. Jazz music is like an ocean. I hang out around a lake, and most rock & roll guys hang out around a swimming pool. There are three different dimensions. Maybe in the next incarnation I can hang out around the ocean. But right now, I'm still hanging at the lake! [laughs]

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