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FEATURES

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**SPECIAL SIXTH ANNIVERSARY
JUICE ISSUE**

FEATURES

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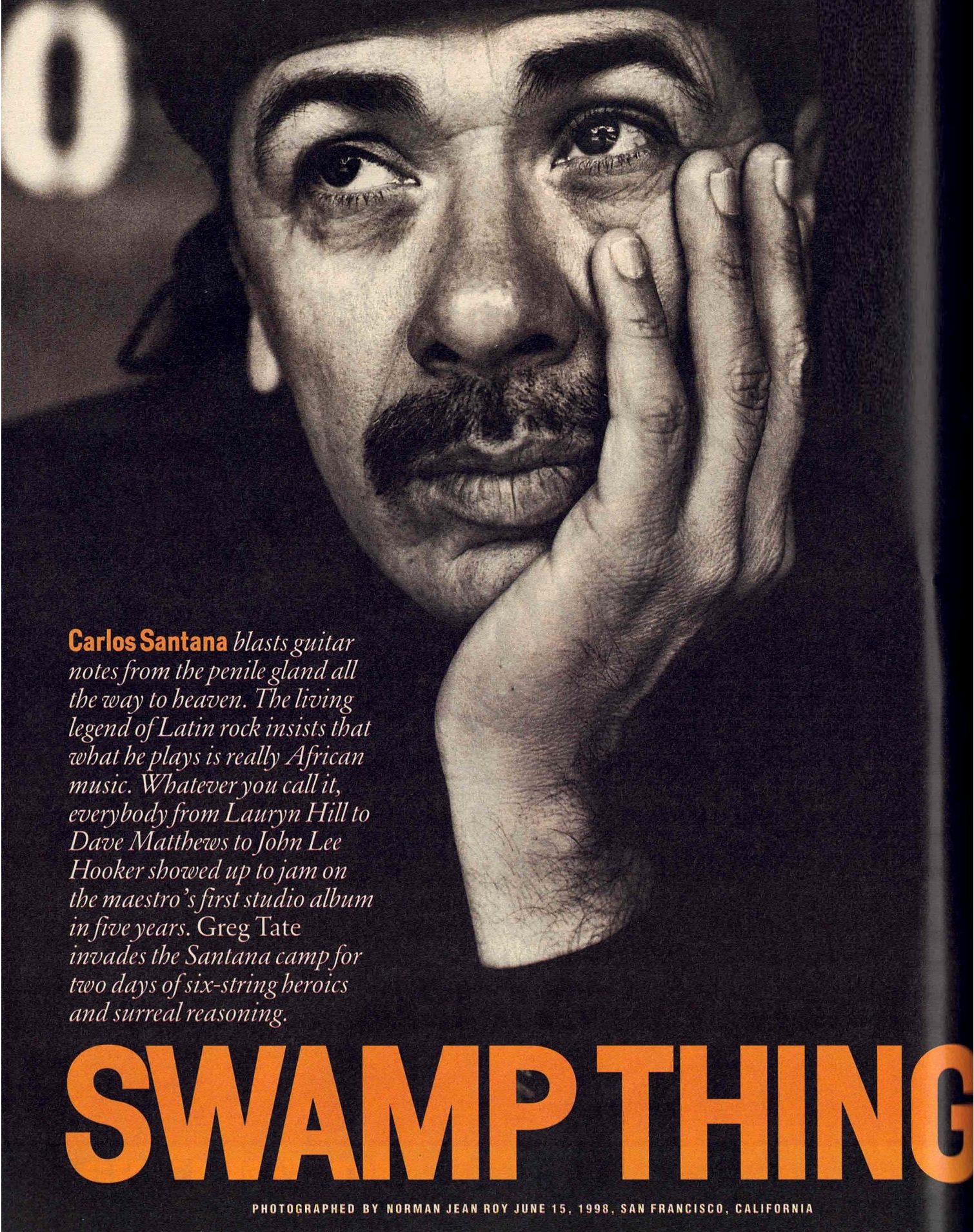
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184 THAT OL’ BLACK MAGIC If you thought the music of Britney Spears, Backstreet Boys, and ‘N Sync was strictly white powder pop, think again. Behind today’s sugary superstars are a team of black producers, managers, and songwriters who keep the vanilla tasty. *By Rob Kenner*

ON THE COVER: Mary J. Blige photographed exclusively for VIBE by Marc Baptiste; styling by Emil Wilbekin; makeup by Nzingha for Deborah Martin; hair by Dionne Alexander for Dionne's International; manicure by Bernadette Thompson for Zane; red knee-length tube dress with draped effect by Plein Sud; red sheared mink coat with fox collar by Guillaume Poupart of Ben Kahn furs; ruby cross, chain, and diamond earrings, all by Fred Leighton. **Face & Body:** Makeup by M.A.C and Givenchy. **ABOVE:** Gray knee-length leather coat with middle zipper by Plein Sud; black wool capri pants by Dolce & Gabbana; bra by La Perla

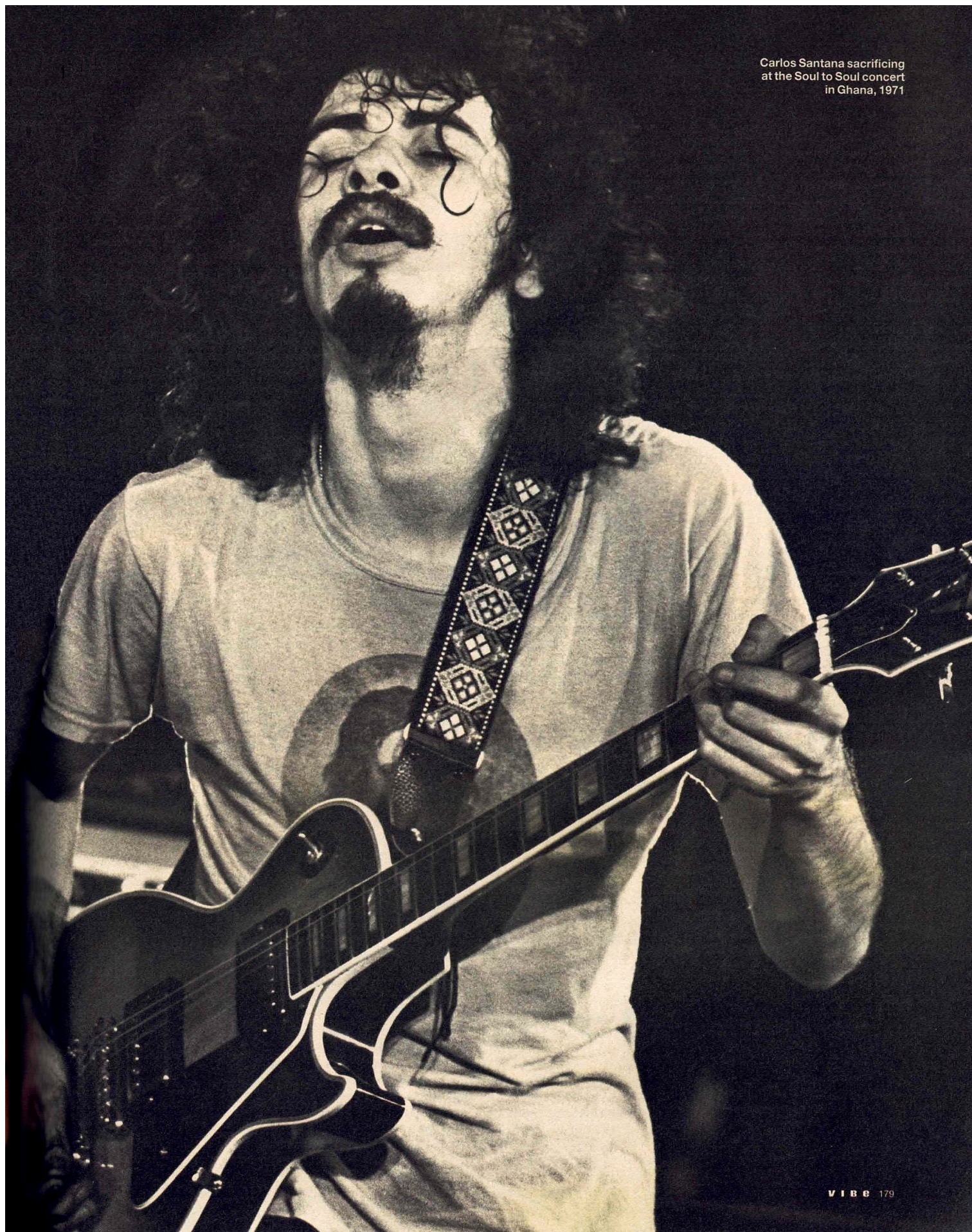


Carlos Santana blasts guitar notes from the penile gland all the way to heaven. The living legend of Latin rock insists that what he plays is really African music. Whatever you call it, everybody from Lauryn Hill to Dave Matthews to John Lee Hooker showed up to jam on the maestro's first studio album in five years. Greg Tate invades the Santana camp for two days of six-string heroics and surreal reasoning.

SWAMP THING

PHOTOGRAPHED BY NORMAN JEAN ROY JUNE 15, 1998, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Carlos Santana sacrificing
at the Soul to Soul concert
in Ghana, 1971



The first time I heard Santana's music I was somewhere between dreaming and waking. You know the deal: big old house, kids tucked in up in the attic, parents partying in the basement, gorgeously phony and melodious sounds filtering into your semiconscious mind without knocking. So you wake up the next morn and look among the beer cans and cigarette butts for the album cover that seems to match your sonic hallucination. In this instance it was Santana's *Abraxas* (Columbia, 1970). Hands down one of the top-five album covers of all time, its painting features a bare-breasted black Madonna, sans child, laying in repose beneath a hovering red-skinned, blue-tattooed, angel-winged devil woman with a conga drum locked between her thighs. The music inside was just as lush, mysterious, sexy, and enveloping.

Carlos Santana's journey into sound became the soundtrack to my life back in the early '70s. From what I gather, he was an important beacon for Vernon Reid and the Artist as well. Santana was The Man in terms of bridging all schools of music.

Some of you young 'uns may not have heard him until Lauryn Hill's 1998 "To Zion" came spinning through your Discman headphones, or seen him until he took the stage with Hill at this year's Grammys. But if you've been listening to radiowaves that aren't formatted strictly for blazin' hip hop

you're Spanish.' Uh-uh. I play African music, whether it's from Jamaica or Tupelo, Miss., or from Cuba or Brazil. It's all African music, and if you put a map of Africa next to the United States and showed what rhythms came from where, then it would all be clear."

Carlos Santana has a way of making you see the big picture. As he puts it, "Being truly hip is really a matter of

next century. His new album, *Supernatural* (Arista), finds Santana, who turned 52 this July, working with Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean, Dave Matthews, Everlast, and his old buddies Eric Clapton and John Lee Hooker.

Santana clearly believes that his music should travel on a universal frequency: "Like I told my sister Lauryn Hill, 'It's not a coincidence that

sound is as natural for his body as breathing. Everything you hear on the records—the virtuosity and the tone and the passion—is there, plus something else you need to be close up to truly feel and be humbled by: his apparent effortlessness.

His earliest musical memories involve his violinist father being the darlin' of the small Mexican town Autlán, where Santana spent his early childhood. "My dad had that charisma. He was passionate about going after people with his violin and sneaking in certain licks to get a giggle out of them," he says. Naturally, his father started him out on violin before the family moved to San Francisco in the early '60s. But violin lost out to guitar when Carlos heard his first live blues band play, in the middle of Tijuana. "The way the sound bounced from the amplifiers to the cars was supernatural, like seeing a flying saucer," he recalls. "The hairs on my arm stood up like I was touching an electric eel." That charge is still there today.

Since young Carlos's first gig was in a Tijuana strip club, you might wonder how he came to make the distinction between music for the planet and the penile gland. "I learned how to phrase certain melodies in a way that would make women react," he says. "If you play music in church, you can enchant people to go deeper. If you play in a strip joint, you can get women's nipples hard. Music can not only tame the beast, it can arouse the beast, and from this I've learned that the sensual and the



awareness, man. Back in the '50s, you could call me a spick or a greaser, but please don't call me a square. That was the worst—a cardinal sin. It wasn't so much about color as the way people carried themselves. Frank Sinatra was not a square, so it's not about smoking grass

you're No. 1 in schools all over the world, because the message you bring is unity and dignity and healing—all the vibrations and resonance that need to be heard in the 'hood, the ghettos all over the world."

My conversation with Carlos San-

"BACK IN THE '50S, YOU COULD CALL ME A SPICK OR A GREASER, BUT PLEASE DON'T CALL ME A SQUARE."

and R&B, then you've likely heard Santana classics like "Evil Ways" (1969), "Black Magic Woman," or "Oye Como Va" (1970).

His band truly had something for everybody: ripe melodies and low-down grooves for your rhythm-and-blues people, stun guitar for the metal-heads, congas and timbales for lovers of Afro-Cuban dance and jazz. That's the elusive beauty of Santana, the band: It can be whatever your musical prejudices need it to be without compromising its intrinsic mission or vision.

"There's really no such thing as Latin or Spanish music when it comes to this music," says Carlos Santana. "That's white people who put a hat on you and put some maracas in your hand and said, 'Behold, you're Latin—or

or being black. I mean, Elvis Presley took drugs and he was still a square, know what I'm saying? A hipster is a deep person, like Bob Marley, someone who has a passion for the highest good on the planet. A square only thinks of his penis or his ego."

Formed in 1966 as the Santana Blues Band, the group's big break came in 1969 at Woodstock. In the famous documentary film of the festival, their acid-fueled rendition of "Soul Sacrifice" still stands out next to stellar performances by Sly & the Family Stone, the Who, and Jimi Hendrix. As the '70s unfolded, Carlos Santana became one of the few giants of Woodstock who remained healthy, current, and progressive. And the brother should continue catching wreck well into the

tana took place in the conference room of the unassuming Marin County, Calif., premise that serves as the band's business office and rehearsal space. On-site is a well-organized library of memorabilia and a guest house known as the church that's spilling over with antique musical gear: prototypes of now classic amplifiers like the Mesa Boogie, derailed P.A. systems, and dreadlocked bundles of cable.

Beyond the business office lies the Santana band's rehearsal space, where I spent a breezy June afternoon on a couch watching Carlos conduct and solo no more than five feet away from me. Seeing him rip line after line, sigh after sigh, cry after orgasmic cry from his Paul Reed Smith custom-designed git, I realized that the production of that

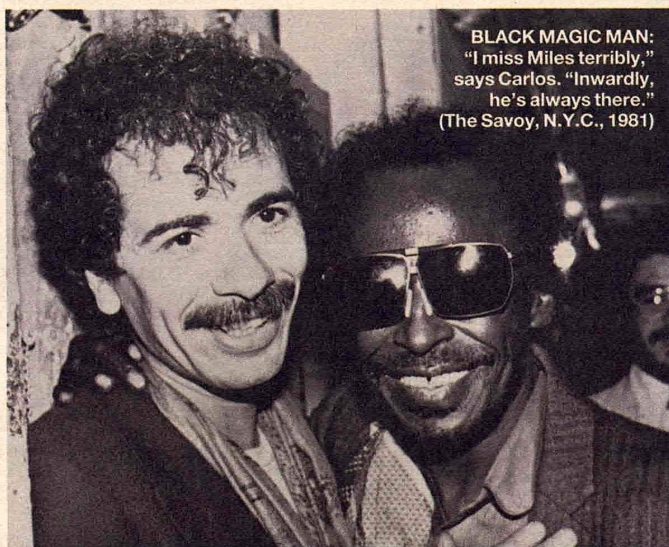
spiritual are really one. All people say 'Oh my God' when they come because they can't say 'Oh me.'"

The creation of the Santana band coincided nicely with the countercultural revolution of the '60s that made mainstream America go tilt. Coming straight out of San Fran's funky Mission District, the original Santana band was right in the epicenter of this momentous transformation of consciousness. "You'd go to Fillmore West and hear Ravi Shankar, Coltrane, Hendrix, and things just went into warp speed. Every day they'd flash Vietnam on television, and three times a week you'd see a cat pour gasoline over his

body. How many times could you see things like that, and the Black Panthers and King and the Kennedys being shot, and not be transformed?"

One major factor in this transformation was LSD, about which Carlos's opinion is as far from Just Say No as anyone's this side of Cypress Hill. "Some people may not agree with me, but I think mescaline, mushrooms, acid, and psilocybin will jump-start you from being a turtle on this planet to being an eagle. If you're not into the right intentions and the right motives, don't take it. But if you have a passion to complement life, it's like the music of Sun Ra—a rapture and a splendor. Do it under supervision and you'll feel how Jordan feels when he goes into that zone and scores 600 points. Hendrix and Coltrane would not have played so multidimensionally if they hadn't taken acid. It's not for everybody, but I bet if you put some of this medicine in the prisons, along with meditation, there wouldn't be so many brothers in there with so much hate."

Even before their first album, Santana was a headliner and featured act at the Fillmore West—thanks to rising superpromoter Bill Graham—flexing their young muscles opposite Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, and Miles Davis. This youthful collective of blacks, whites, and browns seemed like the poster children for multiculturalism.



BLACK MAGIC MAN: "I miss Miles terribly," says Carlos. "Inwardly, he's always there." (The Savoy, N.Y.C., 1981)

radio listeners and even band members; Rolie and second guitarist Neal Schon went off to form Journey. The next two decades found Santana globally in demand as a concert band but only occasionally popping up on radio.

Now signed to Arista—under the auspices of the same Clive Davis who got the band their first deal with Columbia—Carlos is intent on reaching the masses again via the FM band. "About five years ago, my wife, Deborah, and I were getting inner signals that we needed to hook back up

he really did a Hank Aaron on it. He totally beat out Babe Ruth, hit the grand slam. It's got class, dignity, funkiness, a great relevance of message, and a seriously supreme hook. I saw him do it right in front of me. It was like watching somebody manifest something from nothing."

Which is one way of describing how Clapton ended up on the album too. "The day after we played the Grammys," Santana says, "he called our office. I told him I'd like to just sit in a room with him. You bring some songs

said that song is what he heard after he came back from wherever you go when you go to the other room. It's about the same thing as the song with Eric. He says, 'There's a monster under my bed but there's an angel with his hand on my head telling me it's going to be all right.' Dave Matthews also just came up with these lyrics about God and the devil walking arm-in-arm, and I didn't tell him anything either."

As Bob Marley once sang, there's a natural mystic blowing through the air. "I feel very incidental, because I just show up and things are happening already," says Santana. "All I bring are the three things I learned from Miles and B.B. and Muddy Waters: sincerity, simplicity, and soulfulness. You take care of those, and sensuality and spirituality are just gonna fall right in."

And even as he mixes it up with artists who represent the future of music, Santana keeps hearing the voices from the past. "I miss Miles and Bill Graham terribly," he says. "Inwardly, they're both always there. Throughout this recording process I feel them in my dreams, coaching me, telling me, *Don't let 'em box you in. If you don't hear it, let 'em know. Walk gracefully. Understand that there's control freaks and there's wet noodles, and don't be either one—walk through it.* These instructions are really freaky. It's all inner stuff, but all I have to do is be quiet and all the right things happen."

"MESCALINE, MUSHROOMS, AND ACID WILL JUMP-START YOU FROM BEING A TURTLE TO BEING AN EAGLE."

At the time of their 1969 Columbia debut, *Santana*, the squad included the supple bass of David Brown, the thunderous timbale, conga, and cowbell assault of Mike Carabello and Jose Chepito Areas, jazz savvy Michael Shrieve drumming his heart out, and the gruff but seductive vocals of organist Gregg Rolie. Then there was that guitar player—a cat whose mackadocious blend of high-voltage crackle, rock 'n' roll snap, and flamenco pop put every player in the world on notice that a new sheriff was in town.

But unlike most artists who find a formula and run it into the ground, Carlos—being a musician first and a rock star second—recognized a need to expand his horizons in the form of 1972's *Caravanserai* (Columbia). This album laid out his aspiration to follow in the footsteps of Coltrane, Miles, and John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra. In this effort to grow, Carlos lost pop-

with Mr. Clive Davis, because he knows how to get the right melodies and songs and lyrics. We bring what we bring and he brings what he brings so that we can get back onto the airwaves."

To that end, Carlos has been on a creative tear for the past year, joining forces with all-star collaborators. "Clive gave us the call," says Wyclef Jean, "and I'm a big fan of Carlos Santana. I wrote the song right there in the studio. People that are legends, you just gotta go in with them and vibe. It was incredible just to see him play the guitar. I sat back and absorbed everything."

"I have a lot of admiration for Wyclef," says Santana. "The force is really with him and Lauryn right now. When either of them walks into a room, you can feel it before they start playing. It was a very comfortable thing. We just put our hearts on the table and go from there," he says. "The song he wrote, 'Maria Maria,' is the best song so far—

and I'll bring what I have, and we'll do something. I told him, 'Let's milk the cow together' and he said, 'That's a good choice of words.'

"We did this song I call 'The Choral-One Love,' he continues. "It's really funky. I'm learning a lot from the hip hop guys like Wyclef and Everlast about looping a really fat groove and putting a swamp thing on it. Like B.B. King used to say, 'We're going to take it to the alley,' and John Lee Hooker would say, 'Forget the alley. Let's just go to the swamp.' What we're playing with Eric is real swampy, with a hip hop beat and a gospel choir," he says, "but I can definitely hear John Lee Hooker, because it's got that thing where you see snakes slithering in a soulful way."

That's the way *Supernatural* has seemed all along—a record of destiny. "The song Everlast wrote is the first song God gave him after he had that open-heart operation," Santana notes. "He

Unity is a major word in Santana's vocabulary, one that figures heavily into his musical philosophy and humanitarian values. As much as he's revered as our last mystic-hippie, Third World rock star, he's also one of the few people of substance and stature around who seem to embody the principles of democratic inclusion that the '60s were ultimately about.

"A lot of people are angry and fearful and resentful, and those things are cancerous, know what I mean? What turns me out in music is when it becomes like the moment at the Olympics after all the games are played and all the flags are like a river of colors." He's feeling it now, as he summons up the image. "You can't tell one from the other, you just see people laughing and crying and dancing. Those are the songs we need to hear now. Ones where you're honored as a human being first and foremost." ■