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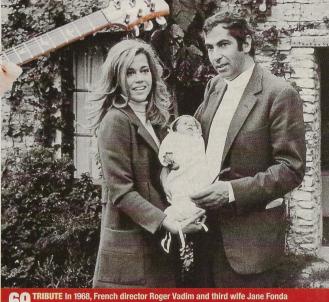
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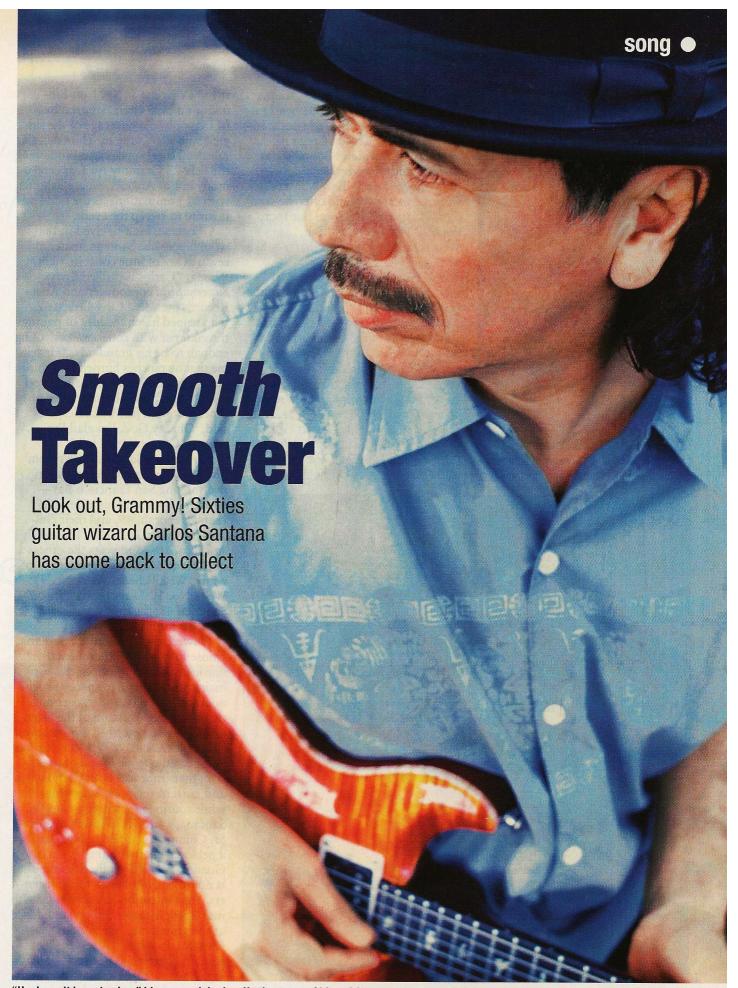
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"He doesn't have to sing," bluesman John Lee Hooker says of his pal Santana (in Marin County last year). "The guitar sings for him."



Lauryn Hill (at the '99 Grammys) returned the favor after Santana played on her CD.

ellow Marin County, Calif., where aging rockers nearly outnumber the redwoods, is a haven for the likes of Gregg Allman, Huey Lewis and Bonnie Raitt. Until recently, two resident icons—the Grateful Dead's Bob Weir and Carlos Santana—could often be seen coffee klatching at a local hot spot, the Mill Valley Depot. "But," says Weir, 52, "I haven't seen that much of Carlos lately."

Sudden superstardom tends to make people scarce. A stranger to the pop-chart summit since the Nixon Administration, Santana, at 52, has achieved one of the most surprising—and unlikely—comebacks in pop history. Powered by his trademark Latin-flavored guitar licks and backed by such young singing stars as matchbox 20's Rob Thomas, 28, Dave Matthews, 33, Lauryn Hill, 24, and Wyclef Jean, 30, Santana's 35th album, *Supernatural*, has sold 10 million copies worldwide and

spent six weeks at No. 1 on *Bill-board*'s album chart. Spurred by MTV and radio coverage of the single "Smooth" (sung by Thomas), CD sales will surely spike again following the Feb. 23 Grammy Awards ceremony in Los Angeles, where Santana, with 11 nominations, is the odds-on favorite to sweep the event.

Of course, for a tie-dyed-in-the-wool hippie like Santana, material rewards are of little concern, right? Wrong. "Carlos is thrilled," says *Supernatural* coproducer and Arista Records president Clive Davis, 67, who helped hatch the idea of pairing the guitarist with collaborators young enough to be his grandkids. "He tells me that he pinches himself that this is not a dream. When I called him and told him that the album went seven times platinum [for U.S. sales], he said, 'Oh, my God, I'm glad I'm laying down or else I'd fall.'"

Now, when Santana drives from his sprawling San Rafael mansion overlooking San Francisco Bay—where he lives with his wife of 26 years, Deborah, 49, and their children Salvador, 16, Stella, 15, and Angelica, 10—and visits the offices of Santana Management, staffers go wild. "We all cheer, 'We're No. 1! We're No. 1!" says brother Jorge Santana, 48, the firm's music-publishing coordinator.

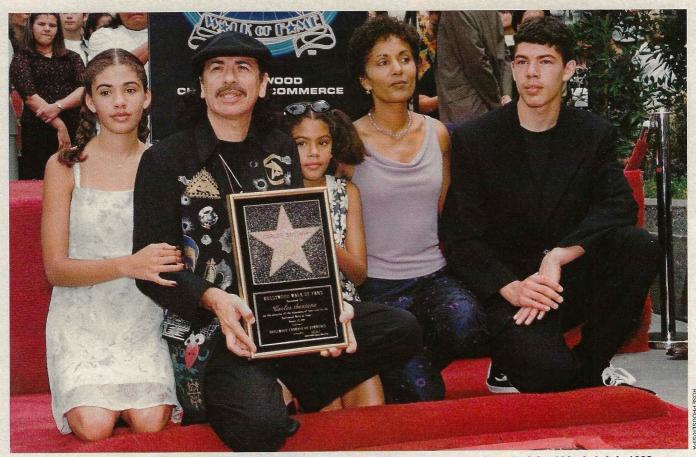
A sweet chant indeed for Santana, whose forays into experimental music distanced him from the pop mainstream. Prone to spacey pronouncements ("Music to rearrange the molecular structure of the listen-

er" is how he described Supernatural to ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY), he has pursued an eclectic brand of mysticism that embraces both Catholicism and Eastern religions. Last year, while touring in his native Mexico, Santana, a former follower of guru Sri Chinmoy, claimed to have had a personal chat with the Virgin of Guadalupe. And yet his first impulse is not to convert but to touch listeners. "My intention has always been to make people laugh and cry and dance at the same time," he told PEOPLE EN ESPAÑOL in 1996. "When people reach that state, it's not just me playing. A whole other spirit takes over."

That spirit first stirred Santana in



Carlos (left), Rolie (second from right) and bandmates commune in San Francisco in 1967.



Hollywood Walk of Fame: Santana's daughters Stella (left) and Angelica, wife Deborah and son Salvador joined him in L.A. in 1998.

the tiny village of his birth, Autlán de Navarro, near Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. He learned to play the violin at age 5 from his father, José (who died in 1971), a professional musician who raised seven children with Josefina, who now lives in the Bay Area. Having discovered guitar at age 8, Santana honed his skills as a teen performing in Tijuana strip joints. Nonetheless, Carlos once recalled, he was still "pretty straight, abiding by my mother's code of dress and behavior" even after the family moved to San Francisco's Mission District in the early 1960s.

"That all changed after I saw B.B. King at the Fillmore," he said. In 1966, swept up in the psychedelicrock fever of Haight-Ashbury, he formed the Santana Blues Band. "We were told we were crazy playing the music we played," recalls former Santana vocalist Gregg Rolie, 52, of the band's unique fusion of Afro-Latin and rock. "But it was original. To this day, nothing sounds like it."

Following a triumphant performance at Woodstock in 1969, the

band (by now renamed simply Santana) signed their first deal with Columbia Records, then run by Clive Davis. They promptly scored hit singles with "Evil Ways" and "Black Magic Woman." After a flurry of classic albums, Santana continued to tour and record but received dwindling radio airplay and was seldom seen on MTV. Well-off financially, he raised a family with Deborah King, whom he met backstage at a rock show in 1972. The couple married the following year. "Carlos got hit by a thunderbolt," says his longtime friend Stefani Charles.

In 1997, looking for similar zap in his career and without a label since he left Island Records in 1996, Santana, at his wife's suggestion, contacted his old mentor Davis, who mapped the strategy that would return the guitarist to pop prominence. "Santana," says Davis, "needed to be on the radio again."

Enlisting young stars to help get him there proved easier than Davis had imagined. "My God, he is one of the great influences of my life!" Lauryn Hill exclaimed when the idea was broached. Likewise, Wyclef Jean jumped at the chance. "I was real kiddish," says Jean, who was thrilled to meet his guitar hero. "I wanted autographs and everything."

Despite his renewed fame—a world tour begins in April, and his own Carlos line of clothing for Miami's Dino di Milano, benefiting his Milagro Foundation children's charity, is scheduled for this fall—Santana's name is new to some. "Honestly, I never knew who Carlos was," says 21-year-old Sincere, enlisted with Money Harm to sing "Maria Maria" on the CD. "After we did the song, we'd tell people, and they'd be, 'Carlos Santana! He's a legend!' I looked into it, and yeah, he is the bomb."

- Steve Dougherty
- Ken Baker in San Rafael, Lisa Kay Greissinger in New York City and Jan McGirk in Mexico City



Listen to sound clips of Santana and other Grammy contenders on PEOPLE on AOL (Keyword: People)