

LATIN BEAT

M A G A Z I N E

Latin Jazz, Afro-Caribbean, Salsa and more . . .

December/January 2001 Volume 10, Number 10

\$2.50 U.S./\$3.50 Canada www.latinbeatmagazine.com

2000 Top Ten Picks

The Latin Jazz Guitar
Carlos Santana
Plena Libre



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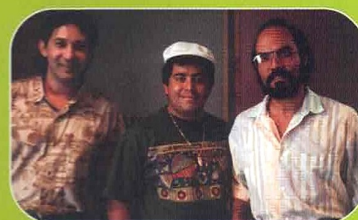
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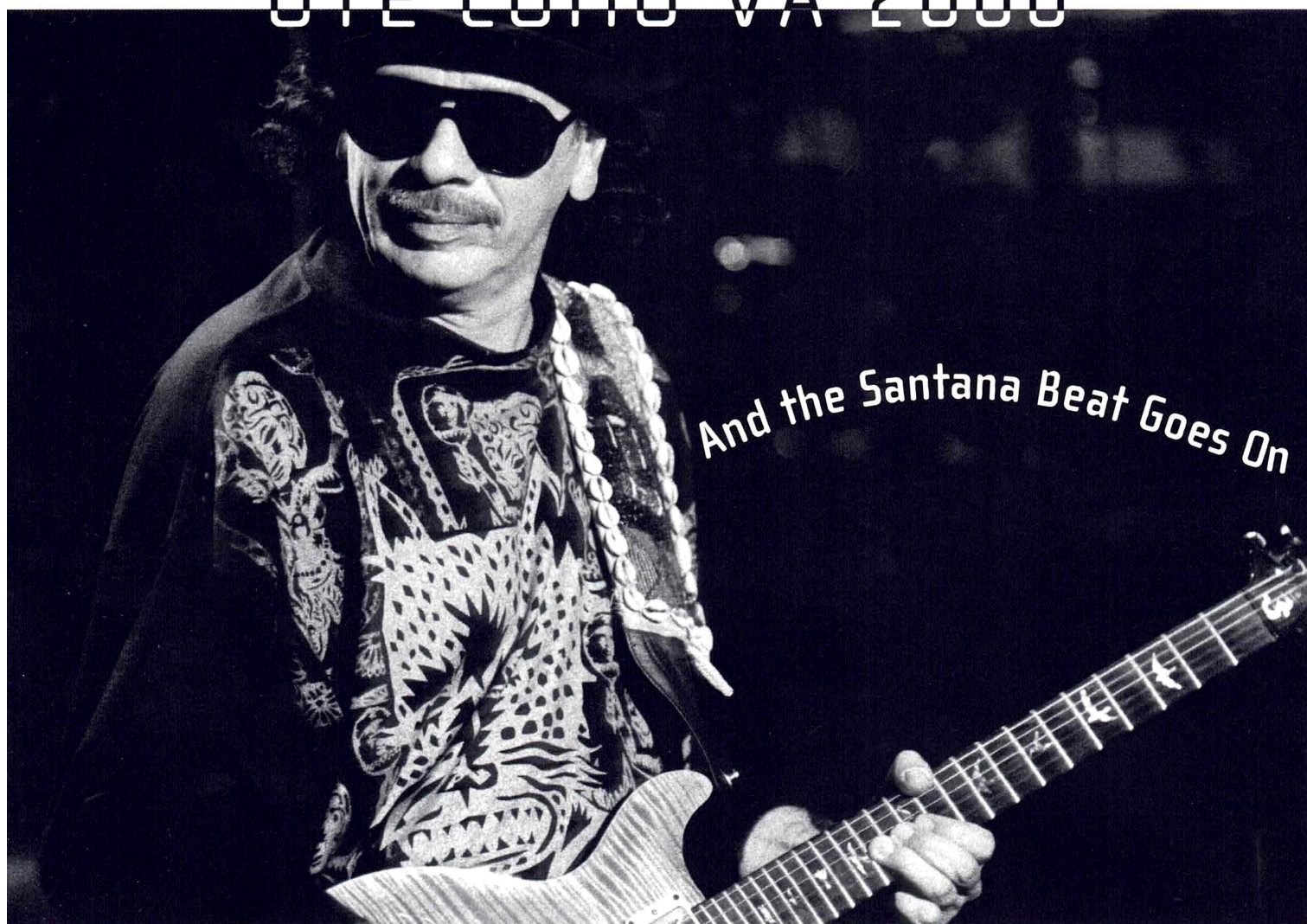
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OYE COMO VA 2000



And the Santana Beat Goes On

By Jesse "Chuy" Varela

As I walked into the Santana rehearsal studio in San Rafael, California this past spring for this interview, I was running late and the renowned Mexican-born guitarist was playing some riffs on a worn Fender Stratocaster guitar as he waited for me. With all the lights off and only a red mood light illuminating the fretboard, the notes rang out with that inimitable sound. As I looked at his face there was a concentrated serenity in his expression that was magical and sublime. Then the spell was broken and he stood up and turned the lights on and said, "How you doin' man?" With an incredible comeback that includes the unprecedented feat of tying Michael Jackson's record of 8 Grammy Awards, Santana has journeyed a long way from his rural village of Autlan, Jalisco where he was born 53 years ago. A hippie superstar who could have lived the rest of his life playing his old hits, it took reconnecting with Clive Davis (who originally signed him to Columbia Records in 1969) at Arista Records to give him an unprecedented mega-return to mainstream pop.

In the following conversation, Santana talks candidly about the success of "Supernatural" and what it represents. Guided by a strong spiritual base and a rebellious spirit, Carlos is the Pablo Picasso of Latin music, taking the blues and Afrobeats and framing them in bold new angular ways. A messenger ushering in a new age for Latinos in the United States, Carlos brings a message of unity and love that reminds us that we are all human beings first.

Chuy Varela: Last time we spoke you were just finishing the *Supernatural* album for Arista. You were very excited about the music and its potential and I remember you saying that this was a "win-win" situation for everybody. What was the "win-win" quality of *Supernatural*?

Carlos Santana: It had a lot to do with honoring people and things that are sacred. It's important to concentrate on what you can do to affect the masses as far as inviting people to live up to their potential. People have a lot of excuses. "A la fregada!" This Mexican doesn't have any excuses and doesn't believe in mañana or any of that stereotype crap. I believe in making traction and acceleration. There are always people who accuse you of selling out but I'm only concerned with reaching out to new hearts to encourage and remind them that they have the capacity to do what I'm doing a hundred times more. You just have to be correct in your intention, motive and purpose. If that's right, you're going to get it done. Listen to your inner guides and you get all green lights. You have to allow grace to come in. Grace is knowing that when you die you ain't takin' a damn thing with you.

CV: *Supernatural* is an album with great music and critical commentary about the reality of Latinos living in the United States today. How did you get so much freedom from a corporation like Arista Records?

CS: It's about trust. I told them that whether it is Gloria Estefan, Jennifer López, or Whitney Houston, we all need a song. If you got the right song you can reach out to junior high schools, high schools and universities as well as grandparents and little kids. All it takes is the right song. The song is the key. Like a correctly built house it will not only hold a family but a whole generation. Anybody can write a song but it's how it's put together and the sound that goes inside of it that people embrace. It's really something to see, puertorriqueños, guatemaltecos, mexicanos, apaches, judíos y japoneses when they all want you to win. It's okay if I'm Puerto Rican and only Puerto Ricans like my music but we embraced a big chunk of humanity with this album. It now gives us an enormous capacity to be of service to people, especially young people, to help them strengthen their aspirations and visions. Clive Davis and his company got into a bloody radio war over this album. Not everybody wanted to play Santana music. Radio people said "this guy is too old" and had a lot of excuses but excuses that come from fear. At this point I'm mature enough that whenever I say I will do something I will do my best to back it up.

CV: *Supernatural* is very culturally nourishing. It has spoken out with incredible musicality and a groove and has refreshed family ties and united generations. How do you see it?

CS: I talked to Bill Cosby and Quincy Jones and they said the same thing: "We're so happy for you because we feel like it's happening to us and our families." There's a newspaper cartoon with a teenager saying, "Well I'm just sitting here with my parents listening to Santana," and another that says, "oh man, this is weird - I'm listening to Santana and my parents asked me to turn it up." What my wife Deborah and I wanted to do with this record was to reach junior high, high school and university students. Everybody else is along for the ride. For the first time in my life I'm in a position of success that I've never seen before. Not even with the first three albums. We're assaulting radio and TV and planting seeds (semillas de luz) about some of the things we address in the music.

What I brought Clive Davis was a concept of unity that translated to numbers. The reason I think Santana is creating a win-win situation is because we're promoting diversity, equality, justice and harmony. I'm not promoting Carlos Santana. I'm promoting principles that I think we need in order to uplift the way of life of people throughout Mexico and South America.

CV: This album also draws from a strong African root that translates in the rhythms and textures. "Mama Chola" herself on the cover is a transculturized idea of Afro-Caribbean dieties and Mexican indigenous spirituality.

CS: Ry Cooder and I share a passion for African music and a passion for letting people know about it. But mucha gente está presumiendo con zapatos ajenos (a lot of people are showing off in borrowed shoes). Es lo nuestro, it's ours, but wait a minute, man can you play it? If you can't play it how can you say it's yours? If you can't articulate and honor it where people say, "Hold on, I gotta dance to this. This is part of my life. It's my favorite song," how can you claim it? The majority of the music I play is African music. I don't know Latin. I went to Greece where Latin was born and I don't speak that. I'm Tarahumara, Huichol and Spanish. I do play Spanish music but it came from the Moors when they were conquered, but it's still North African music. I would love to play the pre-Colombian music of the Incas, Mayas, Chichimecas, Aztecas or Apache but that music is very sacred and it's not meant to be played on the radio. Even Ricky Martin says we're playing African music. If I go to Baskin Robbins I don't mind ordering vanilla but I have to put chocolate on top.

CV: Last December you told a press conference in Mexico City that the Virgen De Guadalupe had communicated with you. When paranormal experiences happen like that there's a lot of people that question whether you're really blessed or really crazy.

CS: I'm really blessed and I'm really loco. I went to Autlan, Jalisco last year. I hadn't been back since I left except for one time in 1988 when I stayed for a half-hour. I went with the mayor of Autlan and the governor of Guadalajara, who invited me to go. It was a Sunday about seven at night and I was watching the people getting out of church. It felt like the twilight zone being in the place where I was born. It was nothing but old people and little children and as it turned out all the young people left to go to universities or somewhere else to make a living. So I'm watching these people coming out of church and they recognize me. They couldn't believe it. I took my time and signed everybody's autographs. Then after everybody left the church I went in and knelt and crossed myself.

As I looked up to the Virgencita I started crying uncontrollably. It hit me hard when I realized that I had left this place with my mother, my two brothers and four sisters in 1955 to chase my father who was living in Tijuana. My heart felt like a cage and my soul like a bird who wanted to fly straight out to her. I was crying and my body was going through these convulsions. I was gasping for air and I couldn't stop it. At that point I felt like I was outside my body with this muscle spasm thing. Then I heard her voice and she said, "respira, respira" (breathe, breathe) in a real soft voice. As I calmed down, she said, "Estoy muy contenta contigo y muy orgullosa de ti." (I'm very happy for you and very proud of you). And that's all she said to me. I don't care if people think it's absurd that the Virgin De Guadalupe talked to me. I think it's absurd that people believe in God and live a whole lifetime without ever hearing his voice. ■