

Reviewed: Yamaha EMX5000-20 mixer, Community MVP28 monitor, and more

FOR THE PERFORMING MUSICIAN

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2003 Vol. 4, No. 1

# onstage®

## Carlos SANTANA

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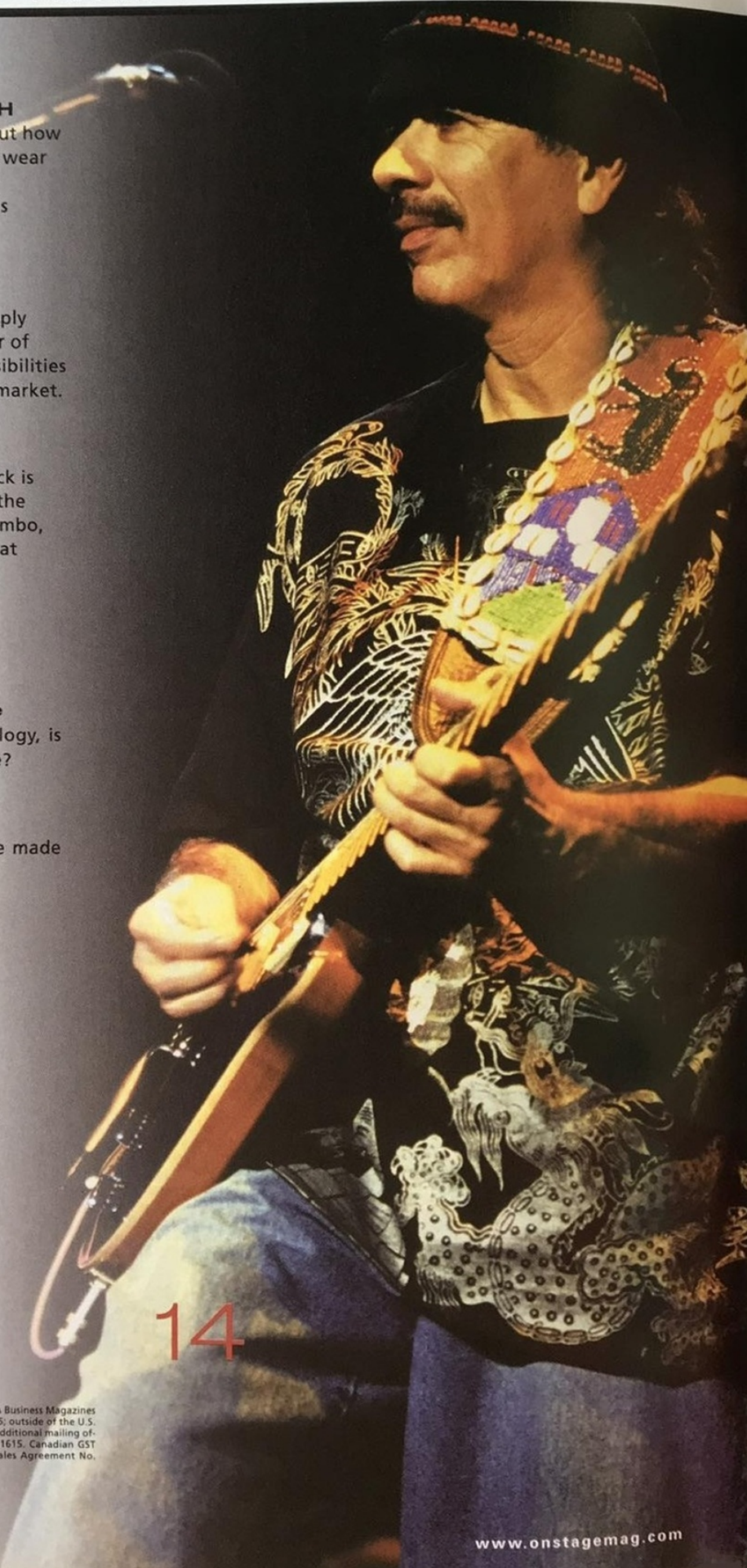
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Cover: Carlos Santana. Photo by Steve Jennings.

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# MAGIC

## Carlos Santana's

# TOUCH

**O**n a balmy early-October afternoon, the Santana band is onstage at the empty Shoreline Amphitheater in Mountain View, California (a half-hour south of San Francisco), charging through an incendiary version of Nigerian singer Femi Kuti's "Truth Don't Die," at the beginning of what will be a nearly one-hour sound check. Even playing an unfamiliar song by a top Afro-beat performer, the Santana sound is unmistakable. The thundering back line of drummer Dennis Chambers, conga man Raul Rekow, and timbales player Karl Perazzo grabs hold of the groove and drives it all the way to the distant reaches of the green sloping lawn that crowns the 20,000-seat "shed." There are two bassists laying down more low-end funk on this particular tune—Benny Rietveld and Myron Dove (who plays rhythm guitar parts on a piccolo bass), and off to one side of the drum platform trumpeter Bill Ortiz and trombonist Jeff Cressman punctuate the wall of rhythm with peppery blasts and slides.

Keyboardist Chester Thompson—a member of the group for nearly two decades—bobs his head and sways in his seat as his fingers dance across the keys and what sounds like a mixture of organ and kalimba be-

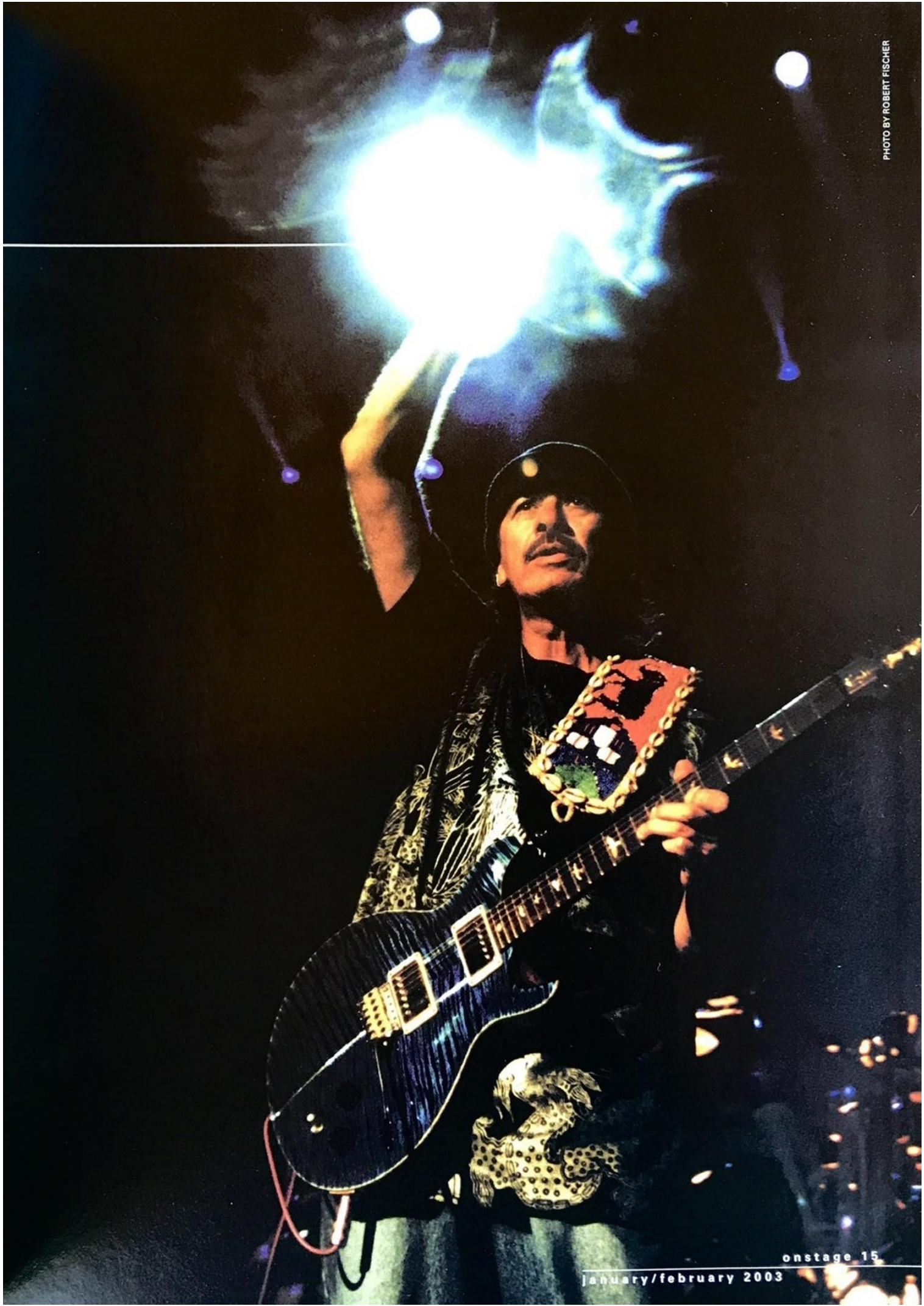
comes part of the brew. The group's two lead singers, Andy Vargas and Tony Lindsay, are on different sides of the stage, singing passionately to an ocean of empty orange seats and to front-of-house mixer Randy Piotroski. Soaring above it all—sounding like a cry one second, a moan the next, then bursting into a skittering flurry of long and short notes laced with a bit of distortion and a glaze of sustain—is Carlos Santana's guitar. You know it's him after one note; after two notes you're transported, and by the end of his solo you're convinced (if you weren't already) that there's no one else on the planet that plays with as much fire and heart.

Lest we get too wrapped up in the romance and majesty of the moment, Carlos abruptly stops the music after his solo and says softly but firmly, "No, no, no. We're racing. I want to slow it down and put more on that offbeat." He demonstrates the beat he wants to the percussionists, who, without hesitation, latch on to the idea and practice it together until Carlos is satisfied. At the peak of musical ecstasy, it's easy to forget that, like every other great band, this group has to work hard together to make what they do sound so natural and reflexive.

**The  
legendary  
guitarist  
doles  
out  
musical  
ecstasy  
on a  
nightly  
basis.**

**By Blair Jackson**







## SANTANA

This sound check isn't just for the benefit of Piotroski and monitor mixer Brain Montgomery, to get the levels right and work the kinks out of the system. It's a band communion, too, with Carlos clearly the leader and teacher. They roll through a version of "If '60s Were '90s" (Beautiful People's hip-hop take on Jimi Hendrix's "If Six Was Nine") and "Nothing at All"—a lovely Spanish-tinged song off Santana's new CD *Shaman*—which features Carlos on both electric and acoustic guitar.

At one point, Carlos leaves the stage and listens to the band from different parts of the amphitheater. He stops to make some comments to Piotroski, then comes down to the lip of the stage and speaks to the band about some fine point in the arrangement of "Nothing at All," a song they had never performed live before (and which would have its debut onstage three nights later at the Santa Barbara Bowl). As the sound check concludes, there are satisfied smiles all around; you get a sense that this evening's performance will be another triumph for this band that seemingly can do no wrong.

The previous night, across San Francisco Bay at the Chronicle Pavilion in Concord, Santana had a remarkably multicultural sold-out crowd—young and old; working class and yuppie; black, white, Asian, and Latino—dancing deliriously and singing at the top of their lungs. Most of the material was drawn



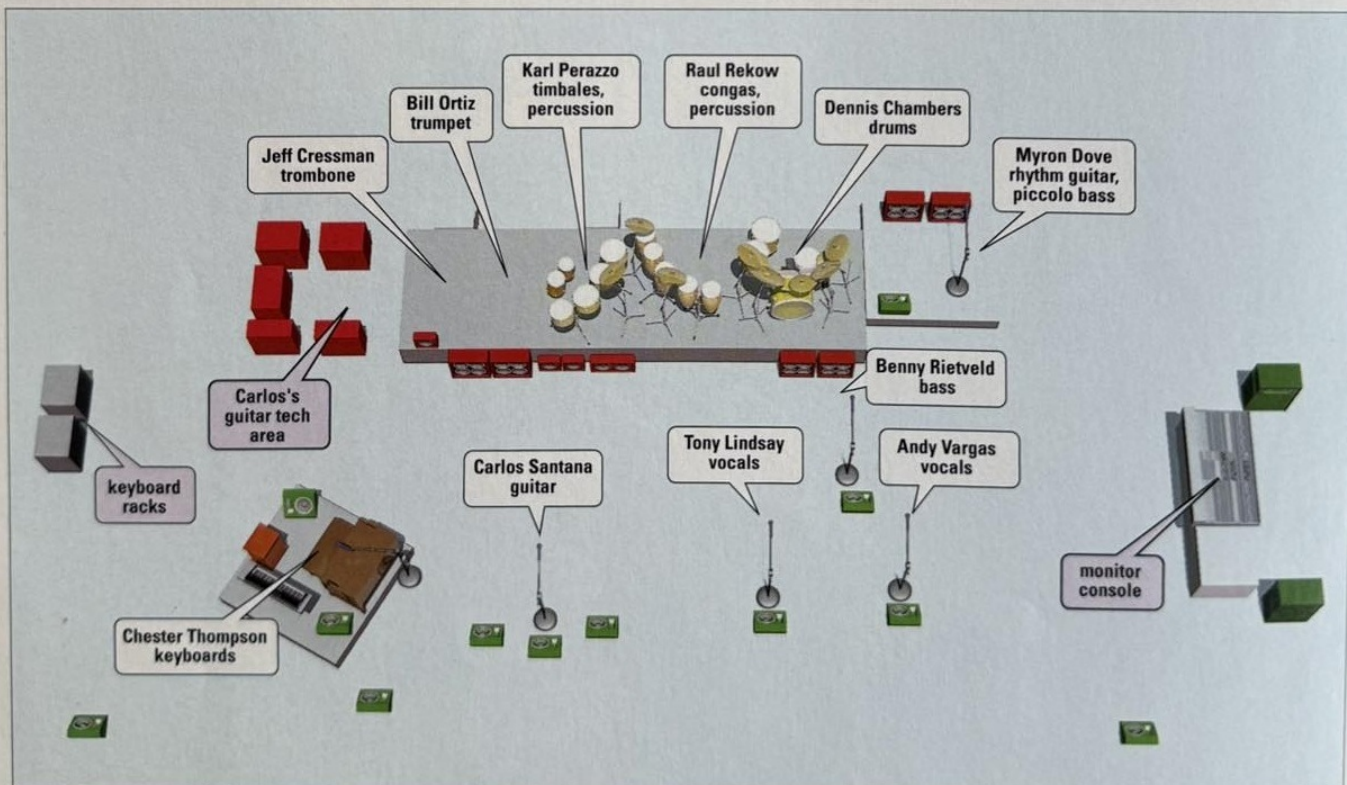
ROBERT FISCHER

Foreground, left to right: percussionists Karl Perazzo and Raul Rekow. Projected in the background: keyboardist Chester Thompson.

from the 25-million-selling phenomenon *Supernatural* and from the new CD *Shaman*.

The crowd seemed to love it all equally, shakin' to the new Latin cooker "Foo Foo" with the same abandon as on the ubiquitous "Smooth" and the group's one nod to '60s Santana, "Jingo." The beautiful instrumental "Victory Is Won," also from *Shaman*, was a midset highlight that gave Carlos a chance to really sing with his guitar—he roamed the stage with one of his many gorgeous Paul Reed Smith guitars, coaxing all sorts of interesting sonic subtleties from his axe: truly music of the spheres. Santana music has always been about contrasts: about air and fire, spirit and body, the ethereal and the earthy.

For over 30 years, through countless band lineups, the essential character of the Santana group has remained unchanged because Carlos himself is unchanged. He still burns with the same passion that blew people away in his career-making appearance in the film *Woodstock*. He still has faith in music's power to inspire, to heal, and to move hearts. Indeed, Carlos Santana still believes that love is the answer, and he's not afraid to use the stage—and interviews like this one—as his pulpit. At Concord and elsewhere he spoke out for peace, urging everyone to pray that President Bush doesn't take us into a war, and quoting Mahatma Gandhi: "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." He spoke



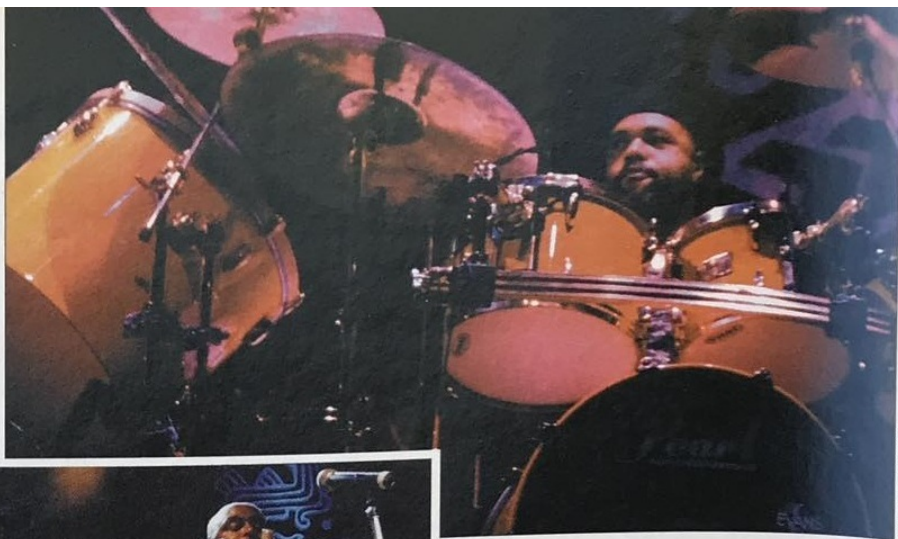
The band's stage configuration during their Fall 2002 *Shaman* tour.



## SANTANA

eloquently about the need for compassion and world unity, and about the oneness of all cultures and music—something his band demonstrates every night onstage. Promoting his first album in three-and-half years almost feels like an afterthought; raising consciousness is what Carlos Santana is really about.

After the sound check I adjourned with



Drummer Dennis Chambers plays a Pearl kit that includes a 20" x 16" gong drum (extreme left of photo).



Left to right: vocalist Andy Vargas, Santana, bassist Benny Rietveld, and vocalist Tony Lindsay.

Carlos to the "tuning room," a small but comfortable space in a backstage trailer with a couch, a couple of Fender amps, and the pungent smell of sandalwood incense. What follows are highlights from our interview, most of which centered on his relationship to the stage and to his band.

### What was it like for you when you were coming up as a young guitarist? Was it hard to become a "performer"?

I'm still not a performer. I'm just a musician. I play guitar. I have a band. Michael Jackson is a performer. People like him do things for hours in front of a mirror; I don't have a mirror. We play music. We do sound checks and we make sure that we're not lip-syncing, first of all. I don't want to attack the people that do that, because it's okay, but it's not us. In this beautiful garden that God made, there's room for real flowers and plastic flowers. So I don't have a problem with that.

For me, playing music from the heart is what I want to do; I don't want to learn moves or have a "show" where everything is the same every night. Every night you're stuck to a computer telling you the same tempos, the same this, the same that. I like the spontaneity of playing live music with other people where you don't know everything that's going to happen, you don't play it the same way all the time. I want it to have the spontaneity of being with a person the first time you touch,

the first time you kiss. I want newness. If you work everything out too much you kill the spontaneity.

Don't get me wrong. I see the beauty in Michael Jackson and Sammy Davis Jr. and all those people. I know they're consummate, supreme performers. But I couldn't do that.

### Is it something you ever wanted to be, even in your fantasies?

Not at all. I applaud it, and there's an excellence that goes with it that I can admire. I'm not interested in dancing—I'm more interested in making people dance. My spirit dances for me. *[Laughs]*

### At the beginning of your career, were there people who helped you learn how to be an effective player onstage? The atmosphere at the Fillmore West and the other San Francisco ballrooms in the late '60s was so congenial and supportive, with everyone rooting for each other.

That's true what you said about the Fillmore. Everyone was rooting for each other and it didn't feel at all competitive. We'd all play with each other and jam, and when you're in that kind of situation, where you have that support and you're playing with people you respect and who respect you, it becomes much easier to do what you're trying to, which is play from the heart and play well for the audience.

But you know what? I really got my education in Tijuana—before I ever played the Fillmore—playing in some funky clubs, very close to what people call the "cut and shoot" crowd: if they don't like you, they cut and shoot you. My education came playing John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins, and Jimmy Reed. If you couldn't play that music, you weren't going to go anywhere. Don't even think about playing Bobby Bland or Ray Charles; you're not gonna be in it unless you can play that other stuff that was more raw.

### What other players influenced you?

The main guys for me, even before I discovered B.B. King, who had such an influence on me, were T-Bone Walker, Lonnie Johnson, Django Reinhardt, Charlie Christian, and my father-in-law Saunders King. They were the guys who went from what Freddie Green was doing—that *chunk, chunk, chunk, chunk* comping he did with Count Basie; he never played a solo—to making the guitar a voice, like a saxophone, where you could play melodies and scales and things like that. Before that the guitar was like painting in the background. There were others, too, like Michael Bloomfield and Gabor Szabo, who no one really talks about much.

Anyway, I learned a lot in Tijuana, and by the time I came to the Fillmore, what I was doing was very different than the Grateful Dead or Jefferson Airplane or Creedence Clearwater or Sly. And by the time I unconsciously infused the things I learned with the Afro-Cuban music, it had a big impact because it was different than everything else. We gave birth to something that was in between a lot of things—rock, jazz, African music, Latin music. Miles Davis and Tito Puente would come around and they encouraged me, which meant everything to me when I was young. Miles used to say *[he imitates the famous raspy whisper]* "Oh man, I love that song..." talking about "Incident at



## SANTANA

Neshabur." So that was some of my first real validation.

Somebody said to me not long ago, "Man, for 35 years nobody invited you to the Grammys. Didn't you feel weird?" And I said, "You know, in all truthfulness, when my phone used to ring and it was Mr. Miles Davis, Mr. Wayne Shorter, Mr. Herbie Hancock, Mr. Otis Rush, Mr. Buddy Guy, Mr. John Lee Hooker, Mr. Pharoah Sanders . . . those were my awards!" Okay, it's not always cool to be called at two or three o'clock in the morning. [Laughs] But, hey, it's John Lee Hooker! When it finally happened two or three years ago, and I got that kind of validation in what you'd call the mainstream, it was a shock, but I'm still the same guy.

### It's nice that everyone seemed to be rooting for you.

That's true. I felt that. And it's great to realize that you're reaching grandparents, parents, teenagers, little children, and even toddlers. I want to play to everyone; I don't want to leave anybody out.

### I guess that appealing to such a wide range is key to remaining successful.

Another thing I learned is that you've got to have the songs, man. Those are the vehicles. Miles Davis played "Human Nature" and "Time After Time" until the day he died. John Coltrane played "My Favorite Things" until the day he died. I stepped back and realized, "Oh, it's the songs." Ozomatli needs some songs. Santana needs some songs. Frank Sinatra needs some songs; that's the key to the multidimensional crossover. That's why *Supernatural* was so successful—the songs.

### I'd like to switch gears and talk about your shows. What do you tell your band on the day of a show to psych them up or to get in sync with them?

I remind the musicians about the G-spot. There's a collective G-spot we all need to visit together. When I went to Africa, I saw women in the circle [with percussion instruments] going ginka-ginka-dinka-ginka-ginka-dinka-ginka-a ching . . . wah! Ginka-ginka-dinka-ginka-ginka-dinka-ginka-a ching . . . wah! Well, if you don't visit the wah, it sounds monotonous; you need that release. The people in my band are all great players—they've been with Michael Stern, John McLaughlin, all sorts of people—but I still need to remind them that in this band you must visit the wah. This isn't a nightclub gig where you show up with your chops and just play the songs. This is music that if you visit the wah, then all those people who come here start laughing, crying, dancing, and they forget about the rent, they forget about whether

## RIG AT A GLANCE CARLOS SANTANA

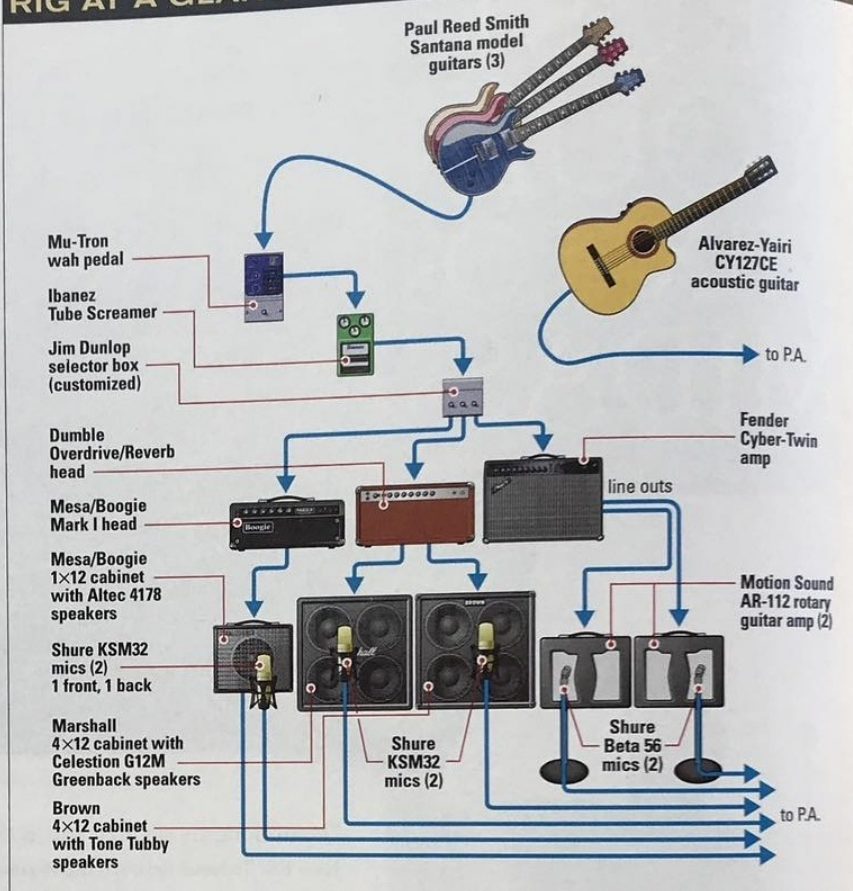


Fig. A: Carlos Santana's guitar setup features five different amps, but only two effects pedals.

you're Mexican or Irish. They forget about all those things and all of a sudden they enter into this vortex of exhilaration that's orgasmic.

Miles Davis said, "I wake up every morning to give and receive a two-hour orgasm onstage. And if I don't get it I'm not a nice man." And I thought, "Wow, he's right." So in order to get an orgasm, you've got to visit the G-spot, which is the wah. My children used to squirm when they'd see me talking like this. "Gee, Dad, what is this? It's always about sex with you." [Laughs] I said, "Don't kid yourself. There ain't nothing higher on this planet than orgasms and music." Because at the peak of both you say "Oh, my God!" They both lead you to totality and absoluteness.

### Looking through your bio, I saw 14 different drummers, 11 bass players, all those singers. That's a lot of people you've had to teach the "Santana Way."

I've been blessed to play with so many great musicians through the years. It's nice to get the different interpretations, the different energy. But in this band, Raul [Rekow] has been with me since 1976 and Chester Thompson's been here since '83, so there is some continuity there, and obviously each of them con-

tributes a lot. The only thing that I ask is that people don't park their energy. Keep the enthusiasm, keep your eyes open.

I had a meeting with the band yesterday where I said, "With *Supernatural*, I didn't see it coming. But this time I do see it coming. There's a big old wave about to happen, and I need something from all of you and I need you to know that I am available to you also. I need for you to listen to the CD once in a while and go back and discover what you captured in the studio—that fire, or maybe it was a romantic moment . . . take that and put it onstage. Don't lose that. Don't let it ever become routine."

### Do you ever play a bad show, an off day where you're not feeling well or just not into it?

Fortunately, I'm surrounded by great musicians where even if I have a bad day, they're having a great day. There hasn't been one day where all of us collectively sucked.

At least you're at the level where it's going to sound good every night. You don't have to deal with bad feedback or the right side of the P.A. going out—like some of those '60s and '70s nightmares.



No, no, it's never like that anymore. But you know what? When that used to happen, you still have to play and do your best. You might be distracted. You might have to try a little harder. But you're still out there with that audience and they're going to know if you're parking it. Sometimes the shows where you have to overcome something—whether it's a technical problem, or something inside, something emotional—are the ones that end up rising higher. So you don't just give up and say, "Oh, this sucks tonight." You can't ever do that.

With the sound, I still go out and remind the gentleman who's doing the mixing, Randy [Piotroski], that I don't want things to sound like an omelet. I want distinction between the bass and the bass drum. I don't want it to sound like tie-dye. I need to hear the distinction between both vocalists, left hand and right hand. I like clarity. So when we do all freak together, you can still hear every individual part.

#### What's your monitor mix like?

It's fantastic!

#### You have that wall of drums right at your ear level.

That's true. But I like that. [In my mix] I want to hear everything soft but balanced. I want to be able to close my eyes and hear everything and my guitar is right there. I like to be able to move around and keep everything in perspective. That's why I don't wear [in-ear monitors]. I talked to Eric Clapton about it—I said, "You wear those things?" He goes, "No, do you?" I said, "No, I can't." He said, "I don't wear them because when you move around, everywhere I go it sounds the same." And that's true. I don't want it to sound the same.

#### I sensed last night that the new material was received nearly as well as the old stuff. You didn't have to play "Smooth" or "Jingo" to win over the crowd. That freedom is the greatest gift an audience can give you.

We didn't play "Black Magic Woman"! [Laughs]

#### But that must be a nice feeling—to know that you can play what you want to play and in a sense not worry about it. You're not playing the same 12 songs every night.

I remember we used to get really pissed: "Play 'Evil Ways,' motherf—." [Laughs] "Go get the album, man, we're gonna play something else." But I'll sneak that one in once in a while. I still like playing some of the old songs. If I didn't, I wouldn't. Right now I'm really fascinated with learning the things on Shaman, since some of it was with different

people than my band. Today, by playing "Nothing At All" [at sound check], I could tell by the eyes of my band that they were like, "Hey, that's nice." It's a different place than all that ass-kicking music. It's a song that works on a lot of different levels. Not everything has to be an assault on the senses. They understand about dynamics and that's why there is so much range to what we do live. I'm very, very grateful to be surrounded with these musicians because they understand that it's not about Carlos or Santana.

It's about a collective win-win situation. We're carriers of a wonderful spiritual virus.

**Blair Jackson** first interviewed Carlos Santana for a BAM magazine cover story in 1978.

For more of this interview and for a complete list of the band's stage gear, go to [www.onstagemag.com](http://www.onstagemag.com) and click on

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