



CARLOS SANTANA TALKS JAZZ

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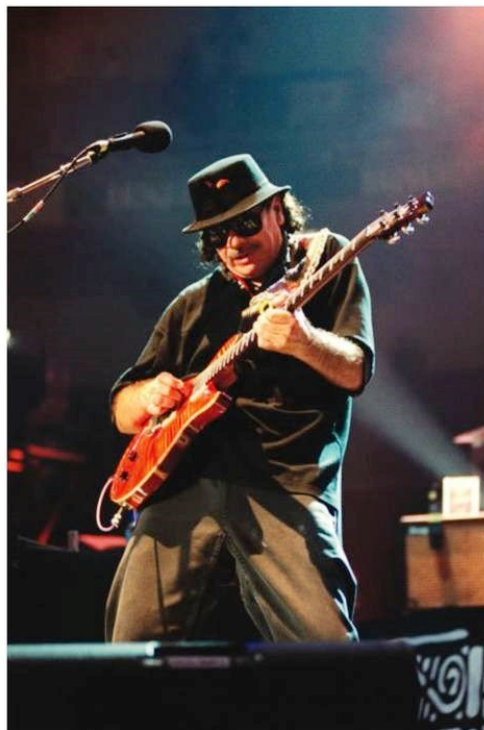
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Carlos Santana: Seeing for Miles

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By George Varga



As much as he loves the art of improvisation and being in the moment, Carlos Santana readily acknowledges he is not a jazz artist. But the music has been a constant in his genre-leaping career for nearly 40 years and one in which he has happily immersed himself, onstage and off.

"There's the Pacific Ocean, a lake and a swimming pool, and I know I could never get into the center of 'How Deep Is the Ocean' or 'How High the Moon,'" Santana says, speaking from his band's Bay Area office.

"I can't get into it like Trane or Clifford Brown, and I can't articulate the language the way I'd like to. But I can hang in a big lake; I don't necessarily hang in a swimming pool. That's how I perceive this. Like Miles would say, 'Play like you don't know how to play.' Play less, but say more, and with greater sincerity. I'm sure that's what he meant."

Wayne Shorter, one of Santana's most trusted confidantes and collaborators, has long been impressed by the pioneering Latin-rockers' passion for jazz. The legendary saxophonist also praises the Mexican-born guitarist and bandleader for his depth of knowledge and reverence for the music, on both aesthetic and spiritual levels. These two like-minded compadres are prominently featured on a pair of recently released DVDs.

The first is Carlos Santana/Wayne Shorter Live at the 1988 Montreux Jazz Festival (Image Entertainment), which was made during a 26-city international tour the two did together that year. Then there's the all-star Santana, Hymns for Peace, Live at Montreux 2004 (Eagle Vision), which features John McLaughlin, Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and a show-stealing Ravi Coltrane. Other Hymns guests range from jazz/blues vocal veteran Barbara Morrison to West Africa's Angélique Kidjo and Steve Winwood.

"I know Carlos is really into Miles and John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk, the whole library of modern or-what do you call it?-contemporary jazz, which has made an impact in the hearts of people," Shorter says. "I don't think Carlos was looking at record sales from the jazz tree, or branch, of music; I don't think sales impressed him at all. It was the spiritual embodiment that you present, whether it's jazz or the music that he's playing. Whoever played jazz that moved people, that's who moved him."

The soft-spoken saxophonist chuckled as he described his musical pal's remarkable comeback triumph of 2000. That was the year Santana won a record-tying eight Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year, for Supernatural.

"When he got all those Grammys," Shorter recalls, "he held up some of them, and said, 'This one's for John Coltrane! This one's for Miles!'"

Santana, who counted the late trumpet giant among his close friends, is likely the world's only non-jazz artist who has recorded with all four members of Davis' greatest quintet. The mustachioed guitarist's aptly titled 1980 solo album, *Swing of Delight*, teamed him with Shorter, Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams. He has also compiled rare live recordings by John Coltrane, which were released on Santana's own Guts & Grace record label. And he toured and recorded with McLaughlin in support of their joint 1973 album, *Love, Devotion, Surrender*, which featured charged, plectrum-centric versions of Coltrane's "Naima" and "A Love Supreme."

The following year saw the San Francisco-based Santana make an intensely spiritual duo album, *Illuminations*, with Coltrane's widow, Alice. It followed the 1972 release of *Caravanserai*, which was easily the most jazz-oriented work Santana and the band that bears his name had made up until that time (or, for that matter, since).

Caravanserai marked a daring and unexpected move toward extended improvisation and more open-ended rhythmic and melodic structures. It was also a sharp turn away from the Latin-tinged style of bluesy rock that had made Santana and his group one of the top-selling acts of the post-Woodstock era. He credits this stylistic shift to his then-budding friendship with Alice Coltrane and to Santana band drummer Michael Shrieve.

"Michael brought me a lot of records by John Coltrane and Miles," Santana says. "He said, 'You kind of sound like these guys and you remind me of these guys, so you should listen to them.' I was like, 'OK, man, I'll check it out.'"

"I was still into Lightnin' Hopkins, Jimmy Reed and John Lee Hooker. But hearing Miles and Trane play the blues, that's the key thing. If you don't play the blues, I can't listen to you. It can be Tony Bennett or Placido Domingo, but it still has to come from something deeply felt, and that's how my heart can hang with it."

"I was also hanging around with Alice Coltrane, staying at her house with her and her children. And I was being around Wayne, Weather Report and Miles. I was hungry, Michael Shrieve and I were hungry, for diving into a deeper musical well."

Ironically, Santana's initial reaction to the sophisticated, improvisation-charged music that has inspired him for much of his adult life was decidedly unfavorable. "I had a negative impression of jazz as a child. I thought it was 'old people' music," he admits. "Because I liked Little Richard, Chuck Berry and people like that, who were kind of like rappers are today. Not until I heard Monk, Trane, Miles and Stan Getz did I realize jazz wasn't a negative thing; it was a supremely positive thing that just required more wisdom and openness to understand."

Santana and Shorter first crossed paths in 1972, when Weather Report was the opening act for Santana on a brief North American tour. It was an eye-opening experience for both of them. "We requested for Weather Report to open up for us," Santana says. "If I'd had my way, we would have opened up for them. But the crowd is the crowd, and people who used to come to the Fillmore to hear the Grateful Dead would listen to Miles, Buddy Rich or Roland Kirk, whoever was also playing that night."

"Sometimes we were like the bait to get the youngsters to understand a deeper, more profound style of music. So, in '72, we did a tour with Weather Report, which at the time was Eric Gravatt, Dom Um Romao, Miroslav Vitous, Joe Zawinul and Wayne. We watched them from the side of the stage every night. They knew that we had, as Wayne would say, 'big eyes.'"

Shorter's voice still has a palpable sense of awe as he recalls a blizzard-imperiled Texas date on the Santana/Weather Report tour. "We did something like eight concerts together and one of them was in Lubbock," the saxophonist says, speaking from Los Angeles. "There was a big snowstorm. And even after the storm let up a little and we went to the venue, we didn't see any cars in the parking area, just a few buses. Then we went inside and the place was packed! We, as Weather Report guys, kind of realized, 'People will get here super-early, even in a snow storm, to hear Santana.' This kind of affectionate crowd, with that degree of dedication, was something we didn't see in a straight jazz-oriented setting."

"Beyond the music, I could see in Carlos' eyes and even in the attitude of the guys in the band that there was a humanistic approach to almost everything they did and were doing. I noticed that they were not like a band, but like a family. And I just couldn't help but see this tremendous, reciprocal respect from Carlos to the band, and from the band to Carlos."

"Of course, we'd heard about him from Woodstock. But when we signed with Columbia Records, Carlos was the number one record-seller. Where Carlos was a challenge for us was to try to achieve that kind of audience, to gather that kind of audience in those kinds of numbers, to hear what we were doing. Carlos' fame, audience-wise, ignited our imaginations to see if we could do that our way and accomplish that kind of audience recognition. We considered our music [to be] storytelling and almost very visual."

The budding friendship between Santana and Shorter took deeper root after they subsequently performed together at several benefit concerts and their families grew close. But it wouldn't be until 1988, 16 years after their first meeting, that the two would begin what remains their most extensive collaboration to date, an international tour that included a stop at the Montreux Jazz Festival.

The genesis of that tour came about in 1987 when Santana and Shorter met in Atlanta. It was then that the guitarist made a playful suggestion.

"I was bold enough to ask Wayne if I had his permission to spread a rumor that he and I would do a tour together. Wayne looked at me, and said, 'You may!' And so I did," Santana, who turns 60 on July 20, says.

"And once we decided, well, Wayne, as you know, is a person who has a lot of innocence and purity, like a child. So he won't sit down and discuss [musical] territory like it's a map: 'You take this house and that lot.' So it was up to me to sit down with the band and Wayne, and just present menus. And, after a while, I developed what I guess you'd call confidence that he trusted my heart and knew I would not do anything disrespectful to his presence or his music."

By coincidence, the Santana band's lineup at the time included two former Weather Report members, bassist Alphonso Johnson and drummer Leon "Ndugu" Chandler. The crisp, percussion-driven band was augmented for the tour by veteran keyboardist Patrice Rushen. She shines on a number of extended solos on the DVD, while also acting as a more overtly jazzy foil to Santana's stinging, blues-drenched guitar attack.

The 17-song DVD's repertoire focuses primarily on Santana band originals, which are elevated by Shorter's incisive tenor and soprano work. It also includes a set-opening version of Coltrane's "Spiritual" and three Shorter originals: "Elegant People," "Ballroom in the Sky" and a dramatically revamped version of "Sanctuary." The saxophonist doesn't exactly rock, Santana doesn't bop, and there are moments where the pairing seems like a stylistic mismatch. But the band swings and kicks mightily, with Chandler and percussionists Armando Peraza and Jose Chepito Areas producing a well-modulated polyrhythmic foundation over which Santana and Shorter engage in a musical dance, based on mutual admiration and respect.

"I asked Wayne if he would consider doing 'Sanctuary,' his song from Bitches Brew, and to do it more like a John Lee Hooker boogie," Santana says. "He looked at the ceiling and I just started singing a big fat groove, and he liked it. After a while, on the tour, I could tell he was fascinated with the response of people. I don't know if jazz artists are used to audiences going crazy and dancing in the aisles, rather than being in a jazz club that's like a memorial service in a cemetery, where people are so cool and hip that nothing happens.

"So I could tell by his eyes that he was enjoying watching women and men in the audience, with their eyes closed, dancing to one of the solos. It gives me chills just to think about it. He would take the horn out of his lips, and say, 'Wow, their bodies are expressing what's coming out of my horn, like Albert Ayler.' It was like going to a Grateful Dead concert where people dance to colors and emotions, which I think is what all concerts should be. I never understand why people go to jazz concerts and sit there like at a bank, waiting for someone to validate their parking.

"The power of complete response to human beings was what coming out of Wayne's heart and fingers."

Although it took place nearly 20 years ago, Shorter sounded equally enthusiastic as he recalls the reaction to the tour.

"There was much more audience participation," he says. "I remember George Wein's wife was backstage at the end of one of the concerts on our 1988 tour. She heard everything we did, and said, 'You all are doing everything. It's not a "Latin this" or a "jazz that." You are doing a show.' Because the people were crazy about it.

"Have you seen the movie The Deer Hunter? There was a song from that, written by John Williams, that the three of us played: Alfonso played a Chapman Stick and Carlos and I handed the melody around. Then there were other things we did that surprised people. There was no announcement of songs; we went from one to the other. And that band was hot."

Santana is well aware that he often serves as an entry point for his more rock-oriented fans to discover the riches of jazz, even if only for a moment or two. It's a position he welcomes, but doesn't take lightly.

"I like pointing the way, toward Coltrane and Miles and Monk, pointing the way to a deeper side of art," says the guitarist. "I had good teachers, man: Bill Graham, Miles, Tito Puente... When I tell you they all are in me and give me advice, I'm not exaggerating. All of them in very divine ways present perceptions to me. So I'm just very grateful."

Santana and Shorter most recently reteamed in 2005 for two ambitious peace concerts in Japan, which were mounted to pay homage to the victims of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. The year before that, they returned to the Montreux Jazz Festival to perform "Hymns for Peace," an ambitious concert that ranged from Coltrane's "Afro Blue" and "A Love Supreme" to favorites by Bob Marley, Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye and John Lennon.

But perhaps the most significant piece on the 22-song DVD is "In a Silent Way," if simply for representing the artist-trumpet icon Davis-whom Santana and Shorter each speak of with the greatest affection and respect.

"The first time I was aware that I was bringing something to the table was when Miles Davis-Mr. Miles Davis-was at the Fillmore East [in New York] three nights in a row, in the balcony, with Tito Puente, looking at us. It was like, 'Man, maybe we do have a certain something.' That was in 1970," says Santana, who would not perform with Davis until 16 years later at the closing concert of Amnesty International's "Conspiracy of Hope" tour.

"It took me a while, not with the ego thing, but just to validate my existence. Because I always feel like I'm still that street kid in Tijuana who's just trying to learn how to get by and learn a [musical] scale or something. Every day I wake up and I have immense gratitude to God, because I tend to forget from second to second who I am and what I do. So when I get to watch a concert like 'Hymns for Peace,' it gives me a chance to validate this crazy Mexican who came from Tijuana and has had a long life filled with blessings. To be in the presence of these great musical dignitaries, and especially to see Ravi Coltrane play with my son, [keyboardist] Salvador, is the ultimate cherry on the top for me."

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Custom PRS (the "Red Guitar")

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Ibanez Tube Screamer TS-9 (reissue)

Ibanez Modulation Delay Originally Published July 1, 2007