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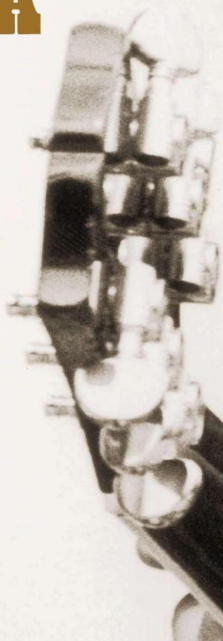
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CARLOS SANTANA

THE FRETMASTER SPEAKS

2019 is shaping up to be one of the most important years in Carlos Santana's astonishing career. His band's new album, *Africa Speaks*, was released in early June and debuted at #3 on *Billboard*, his summer tour honors the 20th anniversary of the Grammy-winning #1 colossus *Supernatural*, and of course, it's been 50 years since his breakout performance at Woodstock.

BY BRET ADAMS

Africa Speaks is a passion project centered on the crucial underlying role African music has played throughout Santana's life. It features Spanish vocalist Buika and is Santana's first LP for Concord Records (in January, he issued the EP *In Search of Mona Lisa*).

Carlos Santana: Maryanne Bilham.

Produced by Rick Rubin, the effort is close to Santana's heart; African music bubbles under the surface of the rock, Latin, and jazz blended in signature style – it's a fresh step even for a player five decades into a legendary career.

"It took so long because the grand design had not been put in place for me yet," Santana said. "My wife, Cindy Blackman Santana, playing drums, along with singers Buika and Laura Mvula, Rick Rubin, and John Burk, who's in charge of Concord... Sometimes, I have to be patient to allow the grand design, inwardly.

"This is music I hold so dearly, and it's not a stranger to me. The rhythms, grooves, and melodies from Africa have always inspired me. It's in my DNA."

Santana has also never allowed himself or his music be restrained by those who might advise against an album like this – devoid of an obvious radio hit and lyrics mostly in Spanish.

"I don't allow other people to tell me their fears about me. I have committed what they say was 'career suicide' at least seven times – where record companies didn't believe in something," he said. "For me, my vision and stature are worth more than other people's fears, no matter who they are. While I respect their opinion, I have to follow through with my spiritual convictions. I don't have – and never will have – someone tell me what I can and cannot do."

The album was recorded in just 10 days at Rubin's studio in Malibu, California; many songs were done in one take. The creative explosion resulted in Santana and his longtime band recording 49 songs, 11 of which made the album. The first single, "Breaking Down The Door," and others are highlighted by a host of guitar moments that bounce stylistically from



Santana with vocalist Buika.



jazz and blues to fusion and rock; "Los Invisibles" is driven by a great groove boosted by Carlos' wah-fueled solo. Those seeking a Santana-at-Woodstock vibe should head straight to the hard-charging "Batonga," on which he free-form jams with keyboardist

David K. Mathews' B3.

"This song means business – it's got warpaint," Santana said.

A suitable counterpunch is offered in "Oye Este Mi Canto," which features Buika's vocals playing off Benny Rietveld's mild, funky bass lines for the first 2:25, when the band kicks into an edgier groove over which Santana creates 1:20 of classic "guitar voodoo."

"This isn't Hollywood or Palo Alto," he said. "This is African music. This is what Jerry Garcia or Michael Bloomfield would have heard and said, 'I want some of that in my music!'"

There was minimal prep heading into the sessions.

"The only thing I said to Tommy Anthony, our rhythm-guitar player – the night before we started recording – was, 'Check out this song. Get it structured like I was coming to your house; give me the streets and everything. You're the GPS guy in terms of musical arrangements – you tell us, 'You've got the chorus,' 'You've got the verse,' 'You've got the bridge.' That's all he did. I didn't even have time to think about improvisation or guitar tone. We just did it," Santana remembers with pride.

"Now, when I hear the conversations, symbiotically, between Buika's voice and lyrics and my melodies, it's really astonishing that it all basically came together like glue. The first five days, we recorded a bunch of songs then went to Australia and New Zealand on tour. Then, Buika came in and recorded; I had not even met her. We came back again off of the tour and recorded more songs, and she tried it again. Again, I wasn't in the room. She just heard what we'd played and it freaked her out because all of the sudden she heard exactly what she needed to do with melodies, lyrics, harmonies, and everything. When

I listen to it now, it's incredible."

Choosing the final 11 songs around wasn't difficult.

"These are the songs in full blossom, and they make a statement. Everything you listen to on *Africa Speaks* makes a statement about what we want to present – music that is like a ritual to heal, cure, and correct human consciousness. We want to bring joy, which is the main ingredient of African music. Joy doesn't allow for you to feel miserable or be a bitch or a villain. Joy allows only for you to feel like you can create miracles and blessings, and you have superpowers," he said. "Rick had a different perception, but eventually he yielded to this flow I have. When you hear *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* or Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On* or Miles Davis' *Sketches of Spain* or Jimi Hendrix's first three albums, there's a flow from a beginning to an end. There's a flow that you honor and you just get out of the way. You allow it to manifest."

Rubin has a mind-boggling résumé as producer – Slayer, AC/DC, Johnny Cash, Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers, Metallica, ZZ Top, and Black Sabbath, to name a few – and Santana was certain he was the right person to helm *Africa Speaks*.

"No doubt whatsoever. To me, working with Rick was like working with Clive Davis or Bill Graham. I felt he would understand the need to nurture and shape the music. His hands and my hands, Buika, the band, and Cindy – we shaped this thing," he said.



Santana onstage with one of his PRS signature guitars.

**"A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO JUMP BACK WHEN THEY SEE US ON THIS TOUR."
— CARLOS SANTANA**

This summer's Supernatural Now tour commemorates the 1999 album that has sold more than 15 million copies with the megahits "Smooth" with Matchbox Twenty's Rob Thomas and "Maria Maria" with The Product G&B. Songs from *Africa*

Speaks and Santana's greatest hits also highlight the set.

"A lot of people are going to jump back when they see us on this tour," Santana noted. "The sound delivers impeccable integrity. The *Abraxas* album and this album or any other album the band makes, it's impeccable integrity. With that, it becomes significant. It's not unnecessary music. It becomes very necessary for this world."

Buika will perform with Santana this year whenever possible, and in 2020 they plan to tour together, performing only *Africa Speaks* songs including some left over from the sessions, along with any new songs they write. None of the old hits will be played.

To record *Africa Speaks*, Santana used his favorite Paul Reed Smith guitars, and PRS amplifiers in addition to his Mesa/Boogie, Dumble, and Bludotone amps.

"Live, I only play Paul Reed Smith, but I did record some with a Stratocaster I found in Chicago two or three years ago. That's how I got the deep, gnarly, piercing sound with the wah-wah," he said. "It's kind of a Frankenstein; I was ready to walk out with a vintage guitar that was like \$50,000 when I saw this yellow Strat. I said, 'Wait a minute,

that one's kind of growing on me. Let me try it.' The store owner said, 'Oh, you won't like that one.' As soon as I tried it, I said, 'Oh!' and put the \$50,000 one back on the wall then said, 'I'm taking this one.'" VG

Carlos Santana: Adriano Scognamiglio

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