

ROCKCELLAR

Carlos Santana Talks New Album 'Sentient' and the Spirits That Have Guided Him Along Life's Journey (The Interview)

By Ken Sharp | April 11, 2025 |  2 Reply



Carlos Santana (Photo: Marylene Eytier)

Throughout his storied career, **Carlos Santana** has thrived in collaborative partnerships, whether with his band **Santana** or working with the likes of **John McLaughlin**, **Herbie Hancock**, **Wayne Shorter**, **Willie Nelson** and later on *Supernatural* with the likes of **Rob Thomas** of **Matchbox 20**, **Eric Clapton**, **Lauryn Hill**, **Cee-Lo Green**, **Wyclef Jean**, and **Dave Matthews**.

His [latest album](#), *Sentient*, takes that ethos to a new level marking his creative collaborations with artists alive and in our memories, including **Miles Davis**, **Smokey Robinson** and **Michael Jackson**.

Rock Cellar: Let's start with the new album, *Sentient*. How did you land upon this very cool idea?

Carlos Santana: From the beginning, I have to say, pretty much since I came out of the crib since I was a baby, I feel like there was a legion, a group of spirits who would orchestrate scenarios for me to walk into and become who I am and do what I do. The same thing happened with this album and the songs that happened with *Supernatural*.

I read in *Rolling Stone* that with that album they likened it to almost 25 people who were creating, almost like Santa's helpers, they're creating in a room the components, elements, nutrients, and ingredients for "Smooth." I came in almost when it was finished, and I just put my guitar on top of it.

And the same thing happened with this album with Michael Jackson and Smokey Robinson and Miles Davis. The songs are already there. I just needed to walk in and close my eyes, feel my heart, and compliment it with my playing.

Rock Cellar: What was your thinking of which artists and songs would work for you, starting out with Miles Davis?

Carlos Santana: My association with Miles and this album was because of Paolo Rusticelli, who Anna Maria, Wayne Shorter's wife, had turned me onto. She called me up and said, "Carlos, there's a guy named Paolo Rusticelli who wrote songs for Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, and Herbie Hancock, and he wrote a song for you. Would you like to hear it and play on it?" I said, "Sure."

I played on it, and Paolo liked it so much that he invited me to record on this other song. So being with Miles Davis, Michael Jackson, and Smokey Robinson, and Darryl from Run DMC, I feel very grateful to be in a position to be the recipient of this.

With Michael Jackson's album, the song "Stranger In Moscow," for some reason it didn't get promoted like it was supposed to. I think at that time there was tension between **Tommy Mottola** and Michael Jackson. I don't know if it was the same thing with Smokey Robinson but the songs didn't get the attention that they deserved and were supposed to be bonafide hits.

I believe that they're hits right now, this summer they could be, they will be bona fide hits. The thing is the economy is based on women. When women get bored with this or that and they decide to go shopping, get their fingernails done and buy a dress, the economy goes up immediately. You can't say that Bush or Ronald Reagan or Trump or Obama saved the economy. Women saved the economy every single time.

That happened on *Supernatural*. Women bought the album, and men bought the album for the women. So that's my reality. I think that this album is a woman-friendly. *Sentient* is a woman-friendly album.

Rock Cellar: What was Smokey's reaction to what you did?

Carlos Santana: He loved it. He told me he loved what I did. He was en route from the airport to the studio. I was already there so I just said "Record" and I played on it. And the night before, I was listening to Miles. The song was "Prince of Darkness," so I snuck in the theme for that there for just a little kiss.

When we played it back to Smokey of what I'd done, to my amazement and surprise he loved it, so we kept it. I took just a little bit of the theme for "Prince Of Darkness," I'm not clear right now whether it's something that Herbie Hancock wrote or Wayne Shorter wrote.

Rock Cellar: With the new album, playing in all these different genres you seem so comfortable. Did you surprise yourself as a player with what you came up with some of these tracks?

Carlos Santana: Where I am, I'm almost 80 years old, but I have the same awareness that I have when I did *Abraxas*. When **Gregg Rolie** brought in "Black Magic Woman," we were rehearsing in a parking lot in Fresno. He brought the song and said, "I think we should do this song." I hadn't listened to **Peter Green**, so I wasn't aware of that song. When it was time for me to play my solo, this is what I did ... Santana, since the beginning, has had a big Rolodex, a big portfolio of other musicians and melodies. When people ask me, "With Santana, what kind of music do you play?" I say, "I play life."

When I say that, then you don't need to ask me, because if I play life, I'm able to play Irish music like "Oh Danny Boy" and combine it with "Nature Boy" from **Nat "King" Cole**. I can combine **James Brown** with **Buddy Guy** or whatever. I learned a long time ago to combine elements and ingredients and nutrients and components so that it becomes seamless.

Rock Cellar: And it all comes from your life. It's coming from a pure place. How do you tap into that pure source of creativity? Do you feel that all great creativity comes from a higher place?

Carlos Santana: Thank you, Ken, for asking these questions. A lot of artists, they will benefit from listening to what I'm presenting because the main ingredient for becoming a multi-dimensional musician who can go anywhere, Japan, Ireland, Africa, Mexico, and be relevant is, one, it's imagination, creativity, and trust and belief.

Jesus created wine from water. That's called alchemy. Every single human being on this planet has the gift to create alchemy in one way or the other, whether you're a doctor, an accountant, or a lawyer, whatever. We all have the capacity to create alchemy. But here's the element. You have to trust and believe. If you don't believe, then you won't get it.

If you don't believe you can win the lottery, you will not win the lottery. You have to trust and believe. That's the magnet of the universe to give you what you want.

Rock Cellar: And you've always had that?

Carlos Santana: Yes, I was born with it. Everybody's born with it. I just happen to be a little bit more heightened with it, more intuitively with precision to it. But everyone has it.

Rock Cellar: Being the band leader with so many different lineups through the years, what do you think is the key to being a strong and compassionate band leader?

Carlos Santana: You had to balance compassion with discipline. You have to know when to congratulate people and compliment people and when to say, "No, not like that. I need the fullness of your heart. Give me all the commitment." There's no room for anyone come to Santana and do the Rope-A-Dope. Rope-a-dope is shucking and jiving and doing things half-heartedly. Get in the middle of the ring and knock the sucker out.

Rock Cellar: As a band leader, how do you create that sense of freedom of spirit without any barriers?

Carlos Santana: You inspire people and direct people to a better part of themselves. Sometimes when people are lazy, they bring the same shit for every song. I can't say it any more clear than that, and that annoys me. It's like dating 25 different women. You don't approach the same one the same way. It's an insult, and it's stupid. Each one has her own identity, authenticity, uniqueness.

You need to respect ... Living in San Francisco is different than New York or Los Angeles. You have to honor and respect the citizens in San Francisco, opposed to New York. I walk differently in New York than I walk in San Francisco. I walk differently from Central Park to the Village. I learned that a long time ago. I walk like I belong there with conviction, and that's something really important to have in Santana or a group like Santana. You have to have conviction, and confidence, not arrogance, but confidence that what you have is good enough to complement and make it perfect.

Rock Cellar: When you burst onto the scene with Santana, you came out of San Francisco, one of the most fertile music scenes in the late '60s. I'm curious, how do you think coming from San Francisco and that scene shaped you as a musician, as a songwriter, and your overall sense of artistic purpose?

Carlos Santana: I went to a lot of hippie houses. In each house that I went to, they were playing **Bob Dylan, Ravi Shankar, Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, The Grateful Dead**. They weren't playing Santana yet, but they were starting to play **Sly and The Family Stone**. After a while, I learned that each house that I went to, I would take certain things from that. I said, the people in this house are into **John Coltrane** and Ravi Shankar, so I'm going to grab that and put it into my music.

Rock Cellar: Was there someone early on in your formative days, and someone today you could always go to to tell you the truth and not tell you what you want to hear?

Carlos Santana: In my formative days, the two people are my father and mother. My father was very, very knowledgeable about a lot of music. My mother was very knowledgeable of conviction, what feels right. My parents just didn't want me to play anything that is fake or half-hearted.

The other people are **Bill Graham** and **Clive Davis**, who are extremely important spirits that guided me through Woodstock and through Supernatural, incredible doors and stages to walk onto the Woodstock stage. Here's the stage that Jimi Hendrix and everybody played. When we played, nobody knew us. We didn't even have an album out, so nobody knew who we were. But within the first 30 seconds, people were like, "Holy shit, what's this?"

The next thing I know, I can I see people from Sly or Jimi or other bands that were like, Oh, they're bringing something to the table so it gives you confidence. It's a compliment and it gives you confidence that you're worthy to be in that stage.

Rock Cellar: You've always understood the role of spirituality in music, and it seems like we need it even more, probably more than ever. But talk a bit about the spiritual nature of music and its ability to transcend injustice and hate and raise awareness and bring understanding. How have you utilized music that way in your career?

Carlos Santana: Music is an eraser. Spiritual music is something that erases stupid shit, which is what people call false, flaws and imperfection. That stuff doesn't exist only in the mind. In your heart, all that exists is just beauty, grace, and perfection.

When you see a child with pristine innocence go to a Disneyland for the first time, and their eyes get really big with all the rides and the costumes and everything, that's how I approach music and the things that I get into.

Meeting BB King or Peter Green or Michael Bloomfield or Bob Dylan is the same thing as going to Disneyland for me, and I visualize the feeling of taking a ride. What does it feel like to go on the roller coaster with this or go on in the mystery tunnel with this or that. But life is like a ride. It really, really, really is and I'm not afraid to get in it and let go of my hands and go, "Whee ..." as I'm going down on the roller coaster. I have a lot of enthusiasm to discover things that I don't know. The unknown is very beautiful to me.

Rock Cellar: Do you think you can learn even more from mistakes than getting things right all the time?

Carlos Santana: Yeah, I learn every day, and I break it down for me, what are the ingredients for **AC/DC** and **Metallica** and **Rage Against the Machine**, how come these people are selling out coliseums. Same thing with Michael Jackson? What are the ingredients of multi-ultra dimensional songs like the Rolling Stones' "Start Me Up?" There are coliseum songs. There's songs that are specifically written to arouse a coliseum or a soccer stadium and there are songs for intimacy.

Rock Cellar: Prince was a huge fan of yours. Recall your first encounter with him and later jamming with him onstage.

Carlos Santana: He was recording in the same studio as me in the late '70s, early '80s. I heard about this incredible gifted musician, and I was in awe. From the first time I heard him and saw him, I knew that he was a brilliant genius. I'm deeply aware that he always gave me credit, next to Jimi Hendrix, for what he learned from Hendrix and what he learned from me.

What he learned from me was that one thing that I was born with, the gift that I have is I can make a melody come alive. Not too many musicians can play a melody. When they play it, it's like a hug that is not heartfelt. It's like candy that doesn't taste right. Not too many people can articulate a heartfelt melody and make it true.

I learned from Miles Davis. I learned from Leonard Bernstein. I learned from a lot of people in classical music that the way you play a melody, people surrender to you. You hypnotize them. You pull them out of their own existence into your world. Melody has the capacity to change the planet and people.

Melody ...that's how we're going to go into the next millennium, not with religion or politics or rich people telling us who to be, what to do and how to do it. No, no, no, no. It's a melody. They will make humans dance to a different drum, embrace a new paradigm and a new narrative, a melody.

Rock Cellar: What was that experience like playing with Prince?

Carlos Santana: He invited me to a couple of gigs, one was in San Jose. When I walked into the dressing room, they were getting ready to meditate, and so they asked it to meditate with them. Then after they meditate, Prince points to this guy and says, "Just play it." The guy goes, "What?" He goes, "Play it." When they played a video of Santana live in Mexico City, Prince said to this guy, "Tell him."

The guy looks at me and he goes, "Prince makes us watch and listen to this video every time before we go on stage. He tells us, 'This is what I want. Give me this.'" He's talking about energy. He invited me to sit in with him, and did a medley of Santana songs. He created a Santana sandwich and I played with him on the medley.

The last time he invited me to play with him was at the Oakland Coliseum. Now, he didn't tell me and I didn't ask, but they all have headphones. They were playing so they could hear themselves. They had one or two monitors on stage and I couldn't hear the music, and I was like, "Oh shit." I just heard a little bit, and played over the chord changes and melody.

Prince looked at me like I was out of my mind, and I probably was, but because I couldn't hear what they were playing, I had to go right through the wall. The next day, the reviews were like, "Man, Santana came and sat in with Prince, and he just freaking tore it up." The critic saw that I melted like a hot knife through butter through it because I couldn't hear the chord changes or the tempo. I just had to cut. I basically did the same thing at Woodstock with "Soul Sacrifice."

I just went right through it because I was in no condition to play because I was not under, but over the influence of LSD or mescaline or whatever I took with Jerry Garcia. I trusted, which is the key word, I trusted God to guide me through it. Same thing with Prince. Prince understood that when he invited me to play.

I was bringing an element more than just being a Mexican or being a blues guy or a guy who listens to the blues. Santana brings, like Miles Davis and Coltrane, multi-dimensional ways of different music. I'm not a one-trick pony, is really what I'm trying I say. *[laughs]*

Rock Cellar: Any final messages?

Carlos Santana: Let's keep our hearts open so we can receive a higher spirit to take us to a most delicious life.