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M A G A Z I N E



CARLOS SANTANA

A Musical Gypsy

Featured Interview – Carlos Santana



Anyone with more than a passing knowledge of Carlos Santana will quickly recognize his searing yet lyrical guitar playing, honed over seven decades of making music, primarily leading the band that bears his name.

He was featured in the movie about the original Woodstock festival, the band laying down scintillating Afro-Latin rhythms, providing a preview of their first three classic albums.

Santana was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame along with the band in 1998. His 1999 album, *Supernatural*, was a world-wide hit, garnering millions in albums sales along

with nine Grammy Awards. In 2013 he became the first Mexican immigrant to receive the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors award. In 2023, Rolling Stone magazine placed him in the 11th slot on their list of the greatest guitar players.

It has been quite a ride from the early days growing up in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. Learning to play the guitar at the age of eight, Santana was inspired by the music of his father's mariachi band. As a teenager, he was mentored by Javier Bátiz, an influential guitarist in the local Tijuana clubs who steered his protégé towards the blues of B.B. King, T-Bone Walker, and other classic artists. A move to San Francisco in the mid 1960s placed Santana in the epicenter of a dynamic music scene that would soon reverberate around the world.

“If people take the time to look from the beginning, what I listened to was John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed and Lightnin’ Hopkins. Then, later on, Peter Green\ and Michael Bloomfield. They were disciples of B.B. King, and me too, except that I got away from B.B King when I discovered Gábor Szabó A lot of people came from B.B King. They also listened to Freddie King and to Albert King, but for some reason B.B. King was the centerpiece for a lot of musicians that wanted to play the blues. I think it was due to his honesty, the rawness of his playing, and his heart.

“To me, Gábor was a very, very elegant gypsy guitarist. He was Hungarian, from Budapest. I learned a lot from him, especially because of the way he played with Willie Bobo, Victor Pantoja and Chico Hamilton. His playing was very, very different. In San Francisco at that time, everybody was listening to the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Janis Joplin. But I was listening to Gábor Szabó a lot, and Wes Montgomery.

“Peter Green was a very good friend. I miss him terribly. I’m grateful that we toured together a lot of times. You know, he would catch a plane and he would just appear and play with Santana. He would leave Fleetwood, Mac for a little bit, and then he will come sit in with us. I identify with the way he played the guitar because he was very lyrical. The only other person that is like that was Gary Moore. A lot of musicians play guitar, but very few people get deep, deep, deep, into the guitar, like Gary Moore, Peter Green, and myself. But again, we all came from B.B. King. BB King is the guy.”

Santana also shared the stage a number of times with Michael Bloomfield, the mercurial guitarist with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Contrary to some reports, Santana never took lessons with Bloomfield.

“Well, I could first hear B.B. King in Michael’s playing, and then I could hear that he was branching out. He sounded like he took some LSD or something because his music all of a sudden sounded like a hamster that just came out of the cage! The cage can be very limiting sometimes. But Michael opened the door, got out of the cage, and he started playing Ravi Shankar and Cannonball Adderley.

“That album, *East West*, with the Butterfield Blues band was extremely important because while people were listening to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, there were two bands who were like really, really incredible. One was John Mayall with Eric Clapton, and the other one was Butterfield with Michael Bloomfield. I listened it to over and over and over. Michael was my favorite guitar player of all the ones that played with Bob Dylan.”



In September of 1968, a bad bout of insomnia sidelined Bloomfield for the third night of shows at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco, leaving promoter Bill Graham scrambling to find a replacement. He quickly enlisted guitarist Steve Miller, Elvin Bishop, at the time another member of the Butterfield Blues Band, and an up-and-coming guitarist, Carlos Santana, who was making a name for himself leading the Santana Blues Band. He ended up on stage with Bishop and Al Kooper on keyboards for a jam session that was recorded and released as *The Live Adventures Of Mike Bloomfield And Al Kooper*, a follow-up project to the successful *Super Sessions* album released earlier in the year.

“That was the first time I was on a recording that was released to the public. I played the solo on the song “Sonny Boy Williamson.” It was a great honor because I love Al Kooper. I love what he played with the Blues Project band and what he played with Bob Dylan. He played the organ on “Like A Rolling Stone” and other songs on Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited* album. Later on he was with Blood, Sweat & Tears. He’s a very, very important musician.”

In 1989, Santana was able to lend a helping hand to one of his main blues influences. The project brought other artists together, including Bonnie Raitt, Charlie Musselwhite, George Thorogood, Robert Cray, and Los Lobos, to honor a true blues legend, John Lee Hooker. Entitled *The Healer*, it became Hooker’s best selling album, reviving his career and getting him the level of recognition that he deserved, including his first Grammy award.

“It was a thrill. You know, I came to his house on his birthday and told him, I wrote this song for you. But it’s a song that sounds like it comes from the Doors, the group with Jim Morrison. The Doors had Hooker’s sound, and they didn’t hide it. In fact, the Doors were a combination of John Lee Hooker and John Coltrane. You know, those are the two people, the two Johns that I love – John Coltrane and John Lee Hooker. So I played the song for him and he immediately wrote the lyrics, blues is a healer, and we did it. One take. Can you believe it? One take in the studio.

“I’ve received a lot of phone calls, but one of the greatest ones was Johnny Hooker when he called me you know he stuttered. And he said, Carlos, and I said, hi, John. He said, “when I hear your voice, it’s like eating a great big piece of chocolate cake.” Thank you, John. You know?

The guitarist has a new album coming out, a retrospective of tracks that have made an impression and stuck with him over time. The project is called *Sentient*, a veritable feast for the senses. For Santana, it focuses on striving for a higher consciousness, allowing you to think with a different mind, and reason with a different heart.

One track, “Blues For Salvador”, was written for Santana’s son. It was the title track on a 1987 solo release that earned him his first Grammy Award, for *Best Rock Instrumental Performance*.



“That song came from my brother Chester Thompson, who played keyboards in my band. Him and I, we started playing it in the studio. We said, record, to Jim Gaines, the fine engineer who just passed away. He recorded Stevie Ray Vaughan’s “Riviera Paradise.” We recorded at that time with tape, not digital, and the tape was running out. So we were very, very lucky and fortunate that it was good to the last note before the tape ended.

“A lot of people probably don’t know that I played some blues. But the way I played” Blues for Salvador,” it’s still the blues. It’s just that it is not the Chicago style of blues or Texas kind of blues, or Mississippi kind of blues, but it’s still the blues. I’ve been to Japan. They played the blues over there, and I’ve been to Italy. They played the blues over there, too. It’s just that they do it in a different way.”

Another highlight has Santana’s guitar answering a mesmerizing vocal from Smokey Robinson on “Please Don’t Take Your Love, “ a smoldering performance that answers any doubts about Santana’s blues chops.

“I did two solos in one day. One I did before Smokey got to the studio. He was on his way from the airport. I didn’t want to wait, so I just told the engineer to record, and I played. When Smokey got to the studio, then I did another solo the way he wanted me to do. He took the solo that I did when he was there and he put it on his album. Now I have the one that I did by myself on my album.”

Two other tracks have a Michael Jackson connection. “Whatever Happens” was featured on the singer’s 2001 release, *Invincible*. The other is a song Jackson composed, with more of Santana’s stinging blues licks.

“That was not too normal for me. I was doing a show with drummer Narada Michael Walden’s band. I showed up and they were playing the song, so I just went on stage and played it. No rehearsal, no soundcheck. I was familiar with it, of course, as I love Michael’s music and I loved the song, “Stranger In Moscow”, because I have been to Moscow and I know what it’s like to be in Moscow at night. You have to be very, very careful where you go and what you do, because if you get in trouble, Perry Mason cannot bail you out!”

One third of the tracks on *Sentient* stem from two 1990s collaboration with Italian composer and keyboardist Paolo Rustichelli.

“I met Paolo through Anna Maria, Wayne Shorter’s wife, Anna Maria said that there’s a gentleman that is like the Quincy Jones of Rome, Italy. She told me that Paolo had written a couple of songs for Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, and me. She said, he wants to know if you would play on it. I said, of course.

“So I played on this song called “ Full Moon,” which I used on my album, *Spirits Dancing in the Flesh*. Now I also put it on *Sentient*, but again, a different version. There are two other songs Paolo composed and played on that feature me along with Miles Davis on trumpet, “Get On,” and “Rastafario.” Anything to do with Miles Davis is fun and it’s a real honor to be invited to play on a song with him.

“I hope enough people get to listen to the album and enjoy it. My favorite song in the album is “Vers Le Soleil.” It is a very elegant piece by Paolo. Every time I hear the song, I can see a ballerina dancing with elegance and grace at the Olympics. I love Europe. Because to me, Europe has turned me onto a flair, a different kind of elegance than United States, with all the museums and their own symmetry of geniuses. We have our own symmetry of geniuses, too. But I love coming to Europe because I learned so much from Picasso, da Vinci, and Stravinsky and that kind of symmetry of geniuses.”



The guitarist will also be releasing a deluxe, career spanning book written by Jeff Tamarkin, *Carlos Santana: Love, Devotion, Surrender: The Illustrated Story Of his Music Journey*, published by Insight Editions. It features a wealth of rare photos, a complete listing of his live performances across seven decades, along with photos of some of his favorite guitars.

“I’m very, very grateful to the gentleman who did it, probably two or three people that put it together. I have seen books like that on Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix. However, this book that they did on me is on a whole other level of beauty, elegance, and grace. I think our fans would really enjoy looking at it.”

It is no secret that Carlos Santana is a spiritual human being. When asked how he is coping these days when chaos seems to be the only constant in our lives, he had a quick response.

“A long time ago, I discovered that I needed spiritual discipline. So I decided to embrace a path with Sri Chinmoy. It was very, very challenging, kind of like West Point and the Marines. I think John McLaughlin turned me onto it. This discipline that I entered in 1972 has helped me today because I feel really healthy, very clear. The things that a lot of people suffered with, which is indulgence, almost like suicide by drugs and liquor, that stuff didn’t phase me. I looked at it and I said, no, this is not for me. I might kiss it, but I’m not going to totally go to bed with it! So I was able to put that aside and embrace more of my love for the music of Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Tony Williams, and Miles Davis.

“Music became my drug, and learning life is the only drug that is really, really happening. Carlos Santana likes life, this planet, and I love people. I hope that together we can bring down more walls of ignorance and darkness, and we can embrace oneness, unity, and harmony together.”

In the end, Santana keeps coming back to the blues. He realizes that his artistic vision has carried him a long way from the days when he was trying to scratch out a living playing blues. Those sounds continue to resonate in his soul, and will always be there in his music if we just take the time to listen closely.

“I had some funny interactions with Freddie King back in the day. He would say, “you know, Santana, I really liked your first album, but this new shit that you’re playing is too complicated for me, man.” Freddie wasn’t necessarily attuned to the *Caravanserai* or *Welcome* albums because he was a traditionalist. He just wanted to play the blues.

“I love the blues too, but if I stay there for too long, I get bored. I need the stimulant of African music and the gypsy element of Gábor Szabó, the jazz playing of Wes Montgomery. You know, I can’t just hang around in one particular room in the house. I have to visit the whole city!”

Blues Blast Magazine Senior writer Mark Thompson lives in Florida, where he is enjoying the sun and retirement. He is the past President of the Board of Directors for the Suncoast Blues Society and a former member of the Board of Directors for the Blues Foundation. Music has been a huge part of his life for the past fifty years – just ask his wife!

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