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A CONVERSATION WITH CARLOS SANTANA

PART I: THE BIRTH OF FUSION

Some of the hottest guitar concerts last summer were the handful of shows featuring Santana and Al DiMeola. Using the same logic as the concert promoter, Guitar World wondered out loud if we could get the two of them to talk shop together. After a month of constant phone calls, we met these two guitar giants, prior to their show together in Philadelphia. What was scheduled to be an hour-long conversation quickly went beyond its limits.

Santana arrived first.

G.W. Your first solo album "Oneness" was a real high point for your guitar playing. Is "Swing of Delight" also among your finest moments?

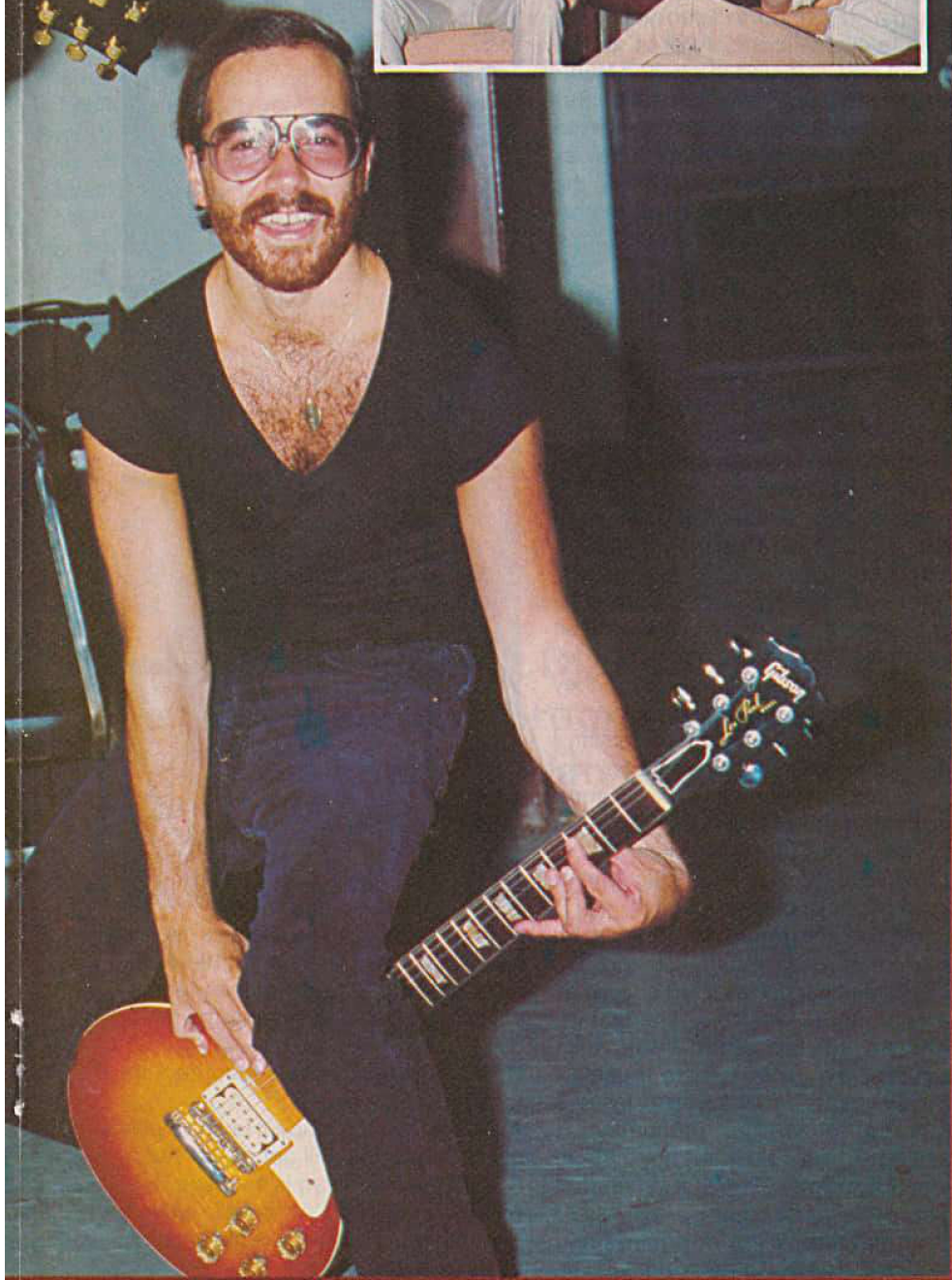
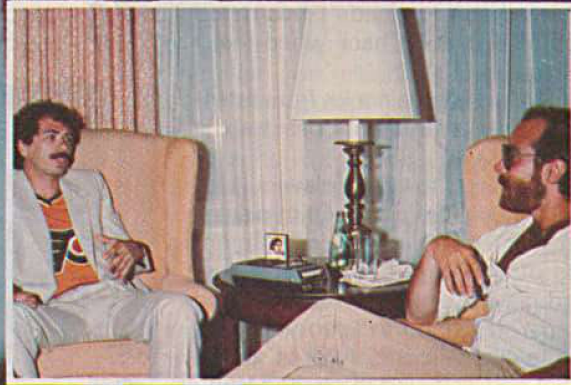
C.S. Playing with Tony Williams, Ron Carter, Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter, a whole kind of catalyst happens. The incentive was tremendous. They just grab you by the legs and throw you up Mt. Everest. I'm very proud of this album. I also liked playing with Mahavishnu. There's some things that we did that probably won't come out. I still feel like a teenager learning to get into the deeper part of the pool with those guys. To my ears and my heart John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, and Keith Jarrett are in a whole other ball game. Then the older brothers are like Chick and Herbie. I set priorities like that because when I listen to music I can tell how much strain it takes for my brain to sit down and listen. The mind is like a monkey. You play something and you want to go out and do something else. It's more demanding for me to check out Art Tatum and people like that. To me the first great of guitar is Django Reinhardt. He had everything that B. B. King, Wes Montgomery, and Jeff Beck have (or had), and he did it with two fingers (on his fret hand). As funky as Jeff Beck is,



Photographer: John Stix

/AL DIMEOLA

by John Stix



and he can be rude on that guitar, Django would do the same even then. Django was like a guy playing with a deck of cards, showing how fast he shuffles. I can see that and just back off. The guy was mean. (Editor's note: See page 81.)

G.W. By diving into the deep end it seems you're more interested in stretching yourself as a musician rather than trying to get a platinum record.

C.S. I really don't think in terms of being a musician anymore, because that always proves to be very frustrating. I think of myself as a person, someone who is learning about himself, to discover the real self. It's never too late to learn theory or practice scales. What I do and feel comes naturally to me now. I'm very grateful to God for the feel that I have. I've always related to people like B.B. King, Louie Armstrong and Wes Montgomery. They're people that didn't necessarily read music, but every time they played something people would die to copyright what they did. Feel is the most important thing to me.

G.W. Did you once put pressure on yourself in this kind of situation? Did you feel they were from a different world, maybe a higher one?

C.S. Yes, pretty much. Most rock-and-roll people come from the blues. When they play with jazz musicians they feel sort of leery because sometimes jazz players throw different kinds of chords at you. Unless you have radar ears like Stan Getz, you're going to be lost and look like a fool on stage.

At this point Al DiMeola arrived and the two guitarists started joking about playing in their old age.

C.S. Only a few stick around. There are very few 24-hour musicians, where everything they do is music. There's a lot of weekend musicians that put on weekend clothes and get a hit. You can tell they're not totally and completely committed.

G.W. Al, I guess you weren't totally committed to the drums as your first instrument?

A.D. I was always into drums. When I was a kid I got off on the march-

ing bands, especially the drums. I wanted to be a drummer more than anything. I think the thing that turned me around was when The Ventures had all their hits. The sound of the electric guitar was pretty hip, pretty new.

C.S. I started on violin but I hated the smell of it and the sound of it. I wanted to play sax, but they told me I had to start with the clarinet. I hated the sound of the clarinet and said, "No way." My father was the first of the family to emigrate to San Francisco. When he left I quit playing, and started catching up with my life. I don't know about yourself, but when I was a kid, my father was very strict with me. He'd come home and I'd have to have my lesson down pat. So if the kids were playing, I had to learn my lesson. As soon as he went to San Francisco I wanted to make up for it and get into playing around. My mother didn't want me to lose interest in music, so she took me to see this group. They were playing Little Richard, B.B. King, Ray Charles and Bobby Blue Bland. As soon as I heard the guitar I said, "This is it!" I was 11 or 12 years old. I never got into Mexican or Spanish music like I got into the blues.

G.W. Was there a particular influence that helped shape your sound?

"To me melody is the most important thing in a tune. If I can't hear a melody, after a while I lose interest."

C.S. I used to see B.B. King at the Fillmore, when it first started. I was getting that tone the way I could, but there was something missing. I started using my imagination. I noticed every time he hit a certain note, a certain feel, he would make faces. I could tell it was excruciating. So I went home, and after a while it became more easy to express myself through a note than through more elaborate kinds of changes. That's what the blues is.

G.W. So the inspiration for your sound originally came from B.B. King?

C.S. I would say yes. B.B. King sounds like when your mother soulfully scolds you. You know it's good for you, but sometimes the way they do it, it's like they're putting something on you that is going to affect the rest of your life. This is how it strikes me. When you listen to your mom and dad, they want you to be tall. They want you to be significant in this life-

time. B.B. King's playing always sounds like he's giving me divine advice, soulful advice.

A.D. My background didn't include too much blues. I didn't reject it, but it wasn't dominant influence for me. I haven't listened to B.B. King as much as Carlos has, but I can tell there's a lot of deep feeling in his playing. But to be quite honest, I hadn't heard too much of B.B. King back when I was starting.

G.W. Al, did you gain a lot from listening to other instruments besides the guitar?

A.D. I listened to piano players, too. There's a different approach to playing each instrument. There's different kinds of lines that I hear that a keyboard player might use rather than a guitarist. It's good to keep your ears open to all musicians. A lot of guitarists are now listening to sax and trumpet players, not only guitarists. But back in the 60's, all you could listen to were guitar players. I don't know about you, but personally I think the guitar is the most expressive instrument. You can do so many things that other instruments can't. You can make notes sing, and bend, and articulate them in every kind of way. It's not the same for keyboards or for any other instrument I know.

C.S. It's very hard to bend notes with synthesizers. It sounds like a third generation. The sound of a guitar when it's played like Django Reinhardt, B.B. King, Paco DeLucia or Al DiMeola, cries. It expresses itself. When it sounds like horn players, you might as well pick up a horn. There's a lot of people I know that when you sit with them, they're just monsters, they have tremendous chops. But if they sound anything other than what I'm used to, say 60's rock-and-roll guitar, I lose interest. I've become very accustomed to hearing crying, haunting stab-my-heart, or get-right-to-it, playing. After that I can deal with it. It's all valid, it really is. It's just a matter of personal preference.

G.W. Did the guitar come easy for you?

C.S. The guitar came easy because all I wanted to do was solo. The first instrument I picked up after the violin was the bass. Then people told me I was playing too many notes. Instead of laying down the foundation, I wanted to wail. So I always think in terms of melody. That's my first and foremost love. So it came very easy to me to get the feeling from blues and think melodically. To me melody is the

most important thing in a tune. If I can't hear a melody, after a while I lose interest.

A.D. I feel the same way. If you place too much emphasis on improvisation...

C.S. It's beautiful for some people.

A.D. Yes it is, but what gets across to everyone is the melody.



Photographer: Ebet Roberts

C.S. That's why the Beatles are so heavy. Grandmothers and little children could be sweeping the floor or washing dishes and singing the melodies.

G.W. Al, do you have a favorite Santana record?

A.D. There're too many. He could play his old hits and I still get off on them. *Black Magic Woman* is a classic. I remember getting "Abraxas" when I was in high school. I was blown away by it. I still am.

G.W. Carlos, do you have any favorite DiMeola moments on record?

C.S. The first time I heard Al was in Houston. We came to jam and I was blown away. But somehow the empathy wasn't there until Bill Graham gave me a cassette of "Elegant Gypsy." I was driving home and all of a sudden this song just pierced me. It was Al and Paco De Lucia (*Mediterranean Sundance*) hitting this song, and I couldn't drive. I had to pull over and listen to it again and again. I called Al, praising him to the skies. There are very few ways to play Spanish things; it's what you put on top. Paco and Al knocked me right out. To this day I listen to that song a lot.

G.W. Any favorite electric moments?

C.S. I like what Al's doing right now. So many things came out and some things just naturally grabbed me. He has different taste, I have different taste. Right now Bob Dylan and Christopher Cross are just killing me. I haven't had the chance to get into Al's album totally, but I like the way he exchanges with Jan Hammer. There are very few guitar players that can go one-on-one with Hammer. He's a treacherous musician, and Al holds his own very well.

G.W. Carlos, you started this conversation by talking about the 24-hour musician. Were both of you 24-hour guitarists before your professional careers?

A.D. I was; I never hung out. I missed out on all of the high school stuff. I'm glad I did what I did, but I'm making up for it now. Carlos and I were in a bar the other night. I never did that back then. Even girls were second to my guitar. If I went too long without practicing, I felt strange. I had to get home and practice everyday.

C.S. It would be a drag to go to a party with a girl, because the first thing you want to do is jam. You're having a love affair with the musicians. I think girls have to be very strong to put up with that kind of attitude, and still support and stand behind you. I also feel, like Al, that I was committed to music from an early age. Even though I had to work to support my family, all I could think of was music. In 1964, \$5 was a lot of money. Especially for an immigrant who came with nothing. But I wouldn't hesitate to put that money in the juke box on Sam Cooke. I'd rather buy a record than anything. It was always music, first and foremost.

G.W. Can you remember the time when you first felt acceptance for your

music from people other than family and friends?

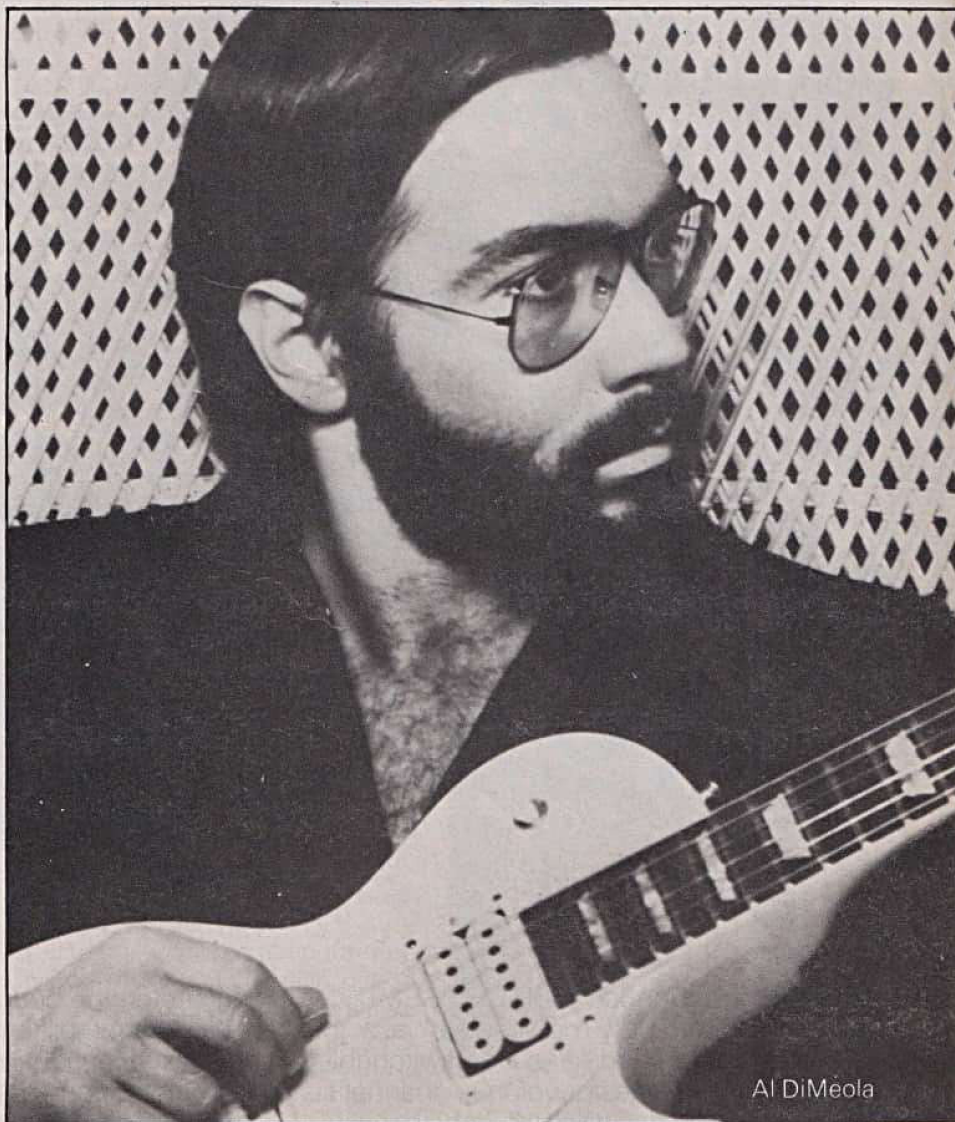
A.D. I always felt that way. I never did a gig that I didn't want to do.

C.S. I didn't think in those terms at all. When I was playing in Tijuana with a violin and two other guitar players, we were playing for 50¢ a song, and I noticed I had something. I was very aware of it because when I started playing they would stop talking and start listening. I knew right then, that I would never be a weekend musician. I had to support myself all kinds of ways, but I would always be right on the heart of music.

liked Mike Bloomfield, but to me it was just a waste of time. If my friend would have said "Why don't you sit in with Otis Rush or Howlin' Wolf?" I would have said, "Yes." But to play with those guys, for some reason, they weren't impressive enough. BS&T impressed me, but Kooper didn't.

G.W. But as your first recording, wasn't it exciting?

C.S. All that stuff was exciting. It was exciting to come to New York for the first time, knowing very well it was a madhouse compared to what I was used to. But once I got into the flow of it, I loved the energy.



Al DiMeola

G.W. Was your first appearance on record (the "Live Super Session" album) a milestone for you?

C.S. No, I was actually pushed into it when I didn't want to. Bill Graham wanted me to play with Al Kooper. Now I've become infinitely more mellow and humble, but at the time I was very cocky. I didn't want anything to do with Al Kooper or those people. I

G.W. Al, can you remember how you felt when you got the call from Chick Corea? Did you think maybe it was a friend playing a joke?

A.D. I thought it was a joke, and then it felt like a dream come true. That was THE band I wanted to play with. I just had to look up and say, "Thank you God." It was a chance in a million.

G.W. Did you like the guitar playing

Bill Connors did with Chick?

A.D. Very much.

C.S. I don't know why he doesn't play electric anymore. That's a matter of taste, but to me, he's another heart grabber. I saw him perform the day I got married. They were hitting it so hard, I was in heaven. To a certain extent, they had the same goal, presence and dynamism that the Mahavishnu Orchestra had. It was an impressive era.

At this point we listened to records of various other artists which sparked some interesting comments. The first song was Chick Corea's *Spain* as

C.S. I love the way Miles (Davis) executes Spanish music. If you've never been to a bull fight or seen a bull fighter walk out proud, you can't play this kind of music. To play Spanish music the way Chick Corea plays it, you have to have seen Spain and the proud stuff that goes with it. This sounds like a bad blueprint of it. Larry Coryell is a great musician but this is not one of his best moments.

G.W. What happened to Coryell? In the early 70's when all the fusion players were happening, he never seemed to rise with the occasion. He never emerged the way so many were ex-

know what to do with it. They don't have any vision. If you go towards the light you have inspiration. If you have inspiration, you have imagination.

A.D. There was a time for him to emerge if he was going to. Larry was the first one to fuse jazz and rock into his playing. If things he did to himself didn't get in the way, I think he could have done some interesting things musically.

Next up was the title song from the Mahavishnu Orchestra's "Birds of Fire" album.

A.D. This was the first successful progressive band. Call it whatever label you want, but this was the one that opened the door. Miles began to do it with "Bitches Brew," but this is the one that really bridged the gap and brought in the whole rock-and-roll audience.

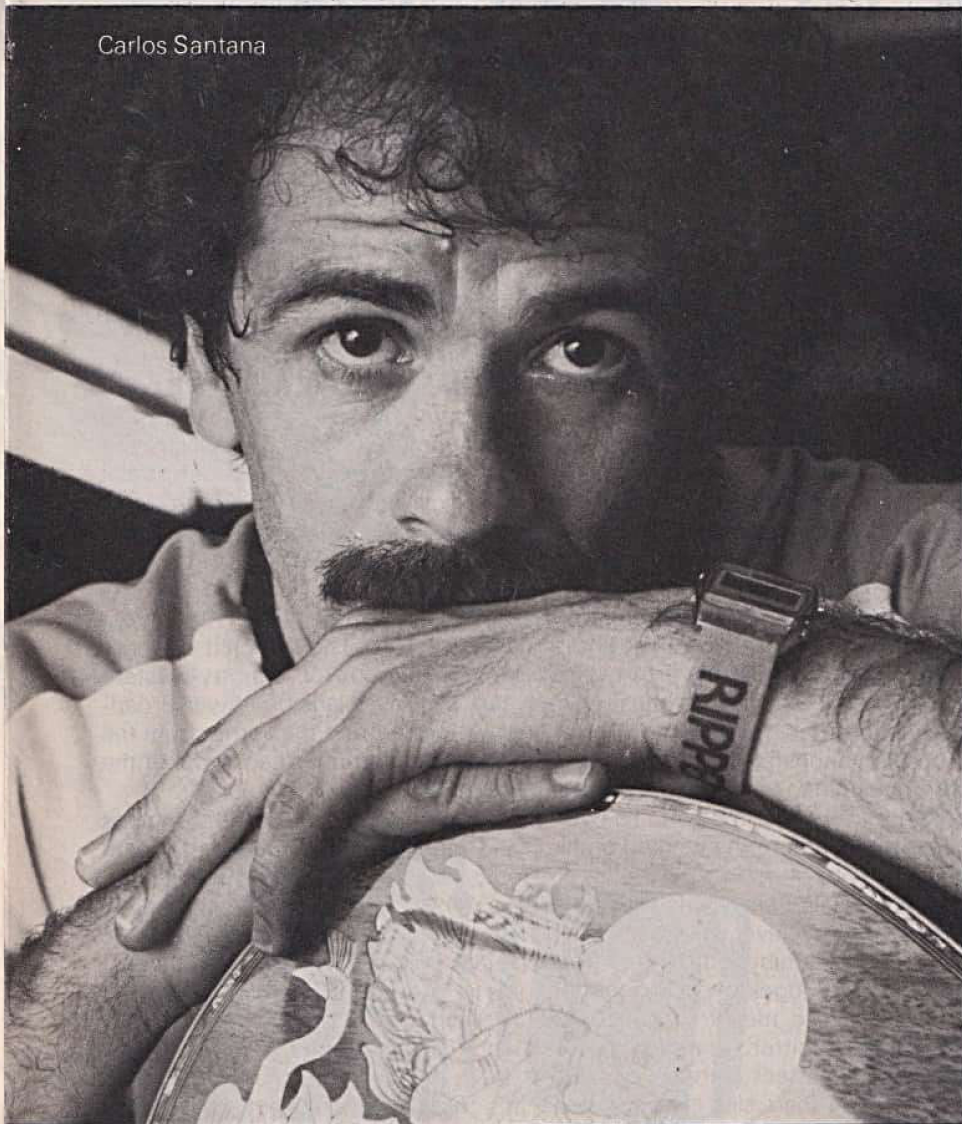
C.S. Again, the best thing I learned from Larry and Mahavishnu is the role and purpose of a musician. Mahavishnu affected me tremendously, mainly because I felt that his music was like an angel whose trumpet is begging everyone to awake and stop fooling themselves. There is an inner self in you that is crying to get out. That's what it meant to me. His music kept me in awe, like everyone else, but I saw that inside the music itself. His playing and his phrasing taught me a lot about Indian music. Indian and classical music used to put me to sleep. A lot of jazz put me to sleep. Being a kid from the streets, only rock-and-roll and blues really hit me where I wanted to be hit. Through Mahavishnu I learned to hear classical and Indian music and realize they were saying something just as significant, powerful, and great, as rock-and-roll.

A.D. But it took the fusing of different kinds of music to make it happen.

C.S. Right

A.D. The 70's was the time for that to happen. In the 60's there was no such thing as fusion. It was either rock-and-roll, blues, or Latin. What's the 80's going to bring? I say I think the 80's are going to bring more fusing no matter what. Steely Dan is fusing—the Doobie Bros, Santana. I'll always be fusing. It's more than rock or jazz. They still call John McLaughlin a jazz guitarist. John is much more than a jazz guitarist. Listening to him, I hear the intensity of rock, Indian phrasing, and jazz and classical concepts. This is where we're heading.

Our rap session didn't end here, but these guys came up with too much interesting stuff for one article. We'll conclude in our next issue. □



Carlos Santana

Photographer: Scott Weiner/Retna

played by Larry Coryell on solo guitar. We got as far as the opening theme when Al jumped in.

A.D. He lost track of the time. When you play that melody, you've got to feel it in there. This was all jagged. It's not the way Chick, Carlos or I would play it. That was Larry's approach and it's valid, but I don't feel the rhythm was there. There was no bounce.

pecting?

C.S. Because he embraced the wrong company—the wrong goals. It's like a deck of cards, there's a bunch of choices. Mahavishnu made a commitment to embrace life. John Coltrane embraced life. If you embrace life you have imagination. There are a lot of musicians that have tremendous chops and knowledge, but they don't