

CARLOS SANTANA'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

BY PATRICK DUREK



Mexican-American rock guitarist Carlos Santana has won ten Grammy Awards—and was named number 15 on Rolling Stone's list of the 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time. He was inducted into the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1997, receiving a star on Hollywood Blvd. In 1998 he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Patrick Durek, in an exclusive for Plain Truth, reveals the critically important spiritual dimension in Santana's life.

—the Editors

Born with a spiritual thirst left unquenched by the rigid, legalistic dogma of the Catholic Church of his childhood; left spiritually starved by a manipulative, attention-seeking Indian guru; and scarred by the dissolution of a 34-year marriage, Carlos Santana's turbulent search for God nearly

ended in suicide. Seven times. It was only through acceptance of God's grace that his life was spared and his spiritual hunger finally satiated.

Santana came to the realization that his life was in the hands of God, not his own. But in order to overcome the stranglehold of his past, he had to swim through a cesspool of

horror—his father's abandonment of his family, the friend's father who molested him and the guilt from his Catholic upbringing. Santana truly understood that "you have to go through the darkest night of the soul to get to the brightest light of the day."

A Childhood of Demons

Born in Autlán de Navarro, a seaside village in the southwestern Mexican state of Jalisco, Carlos Santana was swathed in the sounds of music from birth. His father, a mariachi violinist, fed his family with income earned as a musician. But in the early 1950s, Santana's father deserted his family, moving with his new girlfriend to the metropolis of Tijuana, fewer than

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twenty miles from San Diego, California. Though he had sent his abandoned wife support money, the children hadn't seen their father in a while, and Santana's mother decided that it was time to reunite. In 1955, she put the kids in the car and drove to the address that

she had thought was her husband's. Upon knocking on the door, the family was screamed at and chased away by the girlfriend. Santana's mother, in despair, stood on the street weeping.

Santana described what followed: "There was this guy on the

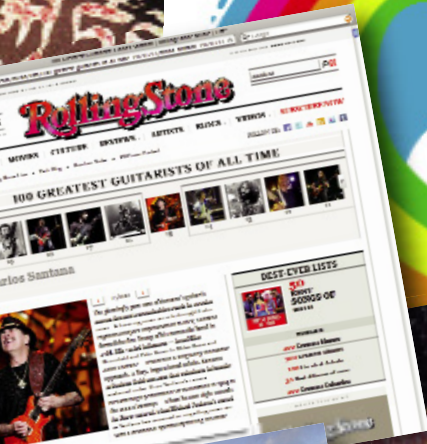


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Bob Dylan, Joan Baez,
Carlos Santana, 1984
—Hamburg, Germany



PHOTO BY HEINRICH KLAFFES

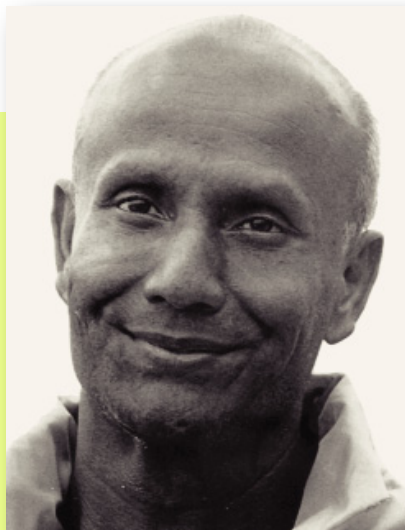
corner, this wino, who said, 'What are you looking for?' She said she was looking for her husband, and showed him a picture, and he said, 'Oh yeah, he's in there.' This is how God works, you know, through this wino, who told her to go back there. She knocked again, and this lady comes out screaming again, but this time woke my dad up from his siesta.

"He stuck his head out, saw me, my six brothers and sisters, crammed into the station wagon, and his face turned like the NBC peacock, all the colors, anger and joy and fear and doubt. It was the typical Mexican story...."

The father set his family up in a local hotel, where the children and mother resided for several months. Although the estranged spouses did not speak to each other, Santana's father bought them groceries and paid the lodging costs. He also taught his young son how to play

violin, and he was soon earning money as a street musician. But Santana hated the violin. Meanwhile, his father had moved to San Francisco, followed shortly after by his mother and the children. By age fifteen, Santana had transitioned to electric guitar (made possible by a gift from his father) and supported his family with income earned as a club musician. Things were looking bright.

But during the time in Tijuana, something ominous happened. At



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Stone, that the guru devised contests to see which members could sleep the least. He also pressured her and Santana to run a 47-mile race. She did, but Santana refused. When Chinmoy devoted a meeting to bashing the purported lesbianism of tennis player Billie Jean King, Santana had had enough, thinking, “Mind your own spiritual business and leave her alone.” He walked out and never returned.

After leaving, Santana told

being “a very, very frightening experience. I don’t recommend it to anybody.”

Santana, the Afro-Latin rock band was born, and numerous hit singles, albums and world tours ensued. In 1972, he married his

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age ten, Santana was repeatedly molested by a friend’s father, who silenced him through bribes of candy and trinkets. The pedophile’s perpetrations of utter evil instilled grave fear and guilt in the boy; it would take God’s grace to unburden his shoulders. Before he could see the light, however, he would enter even greater darkness. Ironically, spiritual dusk descended as the dawn of his fame ascended.

Fame

In an interview for CBS’s *60 Minutes* in 2002, Santana described his experience at Woodstock in 1969, where he was the surprise star of the legendary rock festival. Santana recalls that he was so drug-addled that he was barely conscious of the historic event: “My guitar is like—like [an] electric snake. So that’s why you see my face, you know, like making all these ugly faces.... Intuitively I just said, ‘God, please help me. I’ll never do this again.’” He stressed the horror of his hallucinations as

new love, Deborah. Fame and fortune abounded, but he felt spiritually parched. In search of answers, he found a man all-too-willing to provide them: Sri Chinmoy.

Grip of the Guru

From 1972 to 1981 Santana and Deborah followed the Indian guru Sri Chinmoy. The New Age charlatan Chinmoy renamed Santana and his wife, and forced them to “prove” their devotion to him. Deborah told Chris Heath, in a March 16, 2000 issue of *Rolling*

Rolling Stone about Chinmoy’s vindictiveness: “He told all my friends not to call me ever again, because I was to drown in the dark sea of ignorance for leaving him.” Like many cultists, Chinmoy, who died in 2007, would not permit an easy exit, and he used all his might to ruin Santana. But Santana was liberated from the guru’s tentacles, and Chinmoy rapidly sunk amidst reports that he sexually exploited several female followers, and used his famous followers to generate funds that he unethically harvested for his personal financial gain.

Free from the guru, following the lead of his wife, Santana was baptized in Santa Cruz, California. Aaron Gallegos, in a January 1994 article he wrote for *Sojourners*, attended Santana’s baptism, describing his statement as “a heartfelt, soulful expression of deep devotion

As Santana came to comprehend Christ, seeing his true teachings, not the clouded distortions of the legalistic church, he came to appreciate the uniqueness of grace.

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to Christ...rarely broached within the institutional church.”

Shattered Marriage and Near-Suicide

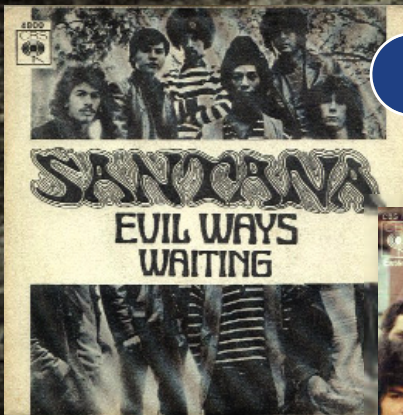
But the ceremony of baptism does not necessarily equal grace. Before Santana received grace, even darker clouds would enshroud him. Blessed with a strong, loving wife and healthy children, Santana,

who spent a great deal of time away from home touring the world with his band, gave in to temptations of the flesh. Female fans threw themselves at him, and his fidelity to his wife was broken. They separated, they reunited. Then, after 34 years of marriage, Deborah and Santana divorced. Both were crushed by the pain of marital dissolution.

“There were seven times,” Santana related in an October 16, 2008 interview with *Rolling Stone*, “seven times when suicide was knocking. It got to the point where I really thought that death would be sweeter than pain. But each time I would go light up a candle, and I’m still hearing all this inner stuff, a thousand voices screaming at you, accusing you, like, ‘You’re the lowest, you’re not worthy of anything or anyone around you.’ But then I would look at a picture of Jesus and say, ‘Help me,’ and then, very clearly, inwardly, I would hear this one voice that’s softer and louder than all the others, and it would say, ‘I

SANTANA'S

GREATEST HITS



1

“Evil Ways” is from Santana’s 1969 album. It was released as a single in late 1969 — it became the band’s first top forty and top ten hit in the U.S., peaking at #9 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart.



2

“Oye Como Va” was popularized by Santana’s cover of the song in 1970 on their album, *Abraxas*, helping to catapult Santana into stardom with the song reaching #13 on the Billboard Top 100. The song also reached #11 on Billboard’s Easy Listening survey and #32 on their R&B chart. The first sentence is “Oye como va mi ritmo,” which literally means in Spanish, “Listen to how my rhythm goes.”

But the phrase “Oye como va” is interpreted colloquially as “Hey, how’s it going?”



3

“Black Magic Woman” became a classic hit in 1970, reaching #4 on the Billboard Hot 100 in the U.S. and Canadian charts, after appearing on their *Abraxas* album, which stayed at #1 for six weeks. To date, this Grammy Hall of Fame album has sold more than 5 million copies in the U.S.

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am sitting next to you. Isn't that enough?' Once I heard that voice, something would shift, and I'd be able to find joy again...."

Through the "Darkest Night" into the Light

Santana opened his arms to divine grace. The grace of God allowed him to transcend his current pain by releasing his childhood pain. For the first time in his life, he contemplated the horrors of his abuse, then forgave his molester. "My God is a God of kindness and compassion, but we as people have free will, including the man who

molested me," he said in the same *Rolling Stone* interview. "I was able to remove the anger by forgiving

But as his career climbed into the stratosphere, his spiritual health rapidly declined into the pits of desolation. Neither money nor guru nor superficial praise could quench his thirst.

that man.... Forgiveness, man, forgiveness is extremely liberating. And I'm here to tell you, with all my heart and spirit, that it can be done. You can be freed." And thus

Santana cut the power that the molester had over him.

Santana has little use for legalistic religion. He has described the indoctrination of the Catholic Church he grew up with as being "like branding a cow with guilt, shame, judgment, condemnation, and fear...." He added, "I have crystallized all my religion into no religion—into spirituality. Religion is designed to divide and separate;

spirituality brings unity and forgiveness and compassion."

Acceptance of God's Grace

As Santana came to comprehend



4

"Smooth," from Santana's album *Supernatural*, is a collaboration between Santana and Rob Thomas (of the rock group Matchbox Twenty). "Smooth" became a massive hit in 1999, spending twelve weeks at #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 beginning October 12, 1999. The song won three Grammy Awards, including Record of the Year, Song of the Year and Best Pop Collaboration with Vocals. According to Billboard's Hottest Hot 100 Hits by Fred Bronson, this is the number-one song of The Nineties (2003).

5

"Guitar Heaven—The Greatest Guitar Classics of All Time" is Santana's latest recording project. The album features guest appearances by Chris Cornell, Pat Monahan, Rob Thomas, Chris Daughtry and Joe Cocker, to name a few.



Christ, seeing his true teachings, not the clouded distortions of the legalistic church, he came to appreciate the uniqueness of grace. "God made me worth something," he once said.

"But we're not programmed to think like this. Most people squirm or interrupt you when you give them a compliment because they think, 'I'm not worthy' or 'It will go to my head.' Man, suck it up; be gracious and say, 'Thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed it.' Because when we wake up to the fullness of the world, the foundation being spiritual principles, then we can see what Jesus wanted...."

Before concerts, Santana and his band pray for fifteen minutes, which he likens to a doctor washing his hands before performing surgery. "I want to play music that's kind of like celestial hymns."

"Duke Ellington, before he died, had the Bible on one hand and sheet music on another, and he was doing sacred concerts. I'm just following the script that is given to me, and after a while you can only do what you do. Then, God calls you to do something else...."

Santana has talked of his plans to retire from music in 2015 to become a minister, using his God-given communication skills to help people "get unstuck" with difficult parts of the Bible.

But the future is in God's hands. In the 2008 *Rolling Stone* interview, he articulated his humble accep-

"The only thing that we need to do is first accept that the only reality is God's love. Everything else is an illusion."



tance of God's plans: "But right now, I'm still with the dark night of the soul. I'm still with the 40 days and 40 nights. And I don't know how it's going to unfold. There is no clock, no script. What happens happens on God's time. But who am I to myself? That's the question. I am a child of God, and God is not done with me."

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8).

Santana clawed his way out of a

wretched childhood filled with abandonment, guilt and even abuse; finding fortune and fame, adoration and accolades.

But as his career climbed into the stratosphere, his spiritual health rapidly declined into the pits of desolation. Neither money nor guru nor superficial praise could quench his thirst. His spiritual dehydration nearly led him to suicide—seven times. As he recognized, it was only God's grace through Jesus Christ that saved him. "Nothing is impossible at this point," Santana said in a 2009 interview with *Beat Week*. "The only thing that we need to do is first accept that the only reality is God's love. Everything else is an illusion." □

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