

# “Abraxas”—Santana (1970)

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*Album cover*



*Original label*



*Carlos Santana*

Carlos Santana was not the first Hispanic musician to achieve success as a rock artist: Ritchie Valens, Trini Lopez, Danny Flores of The Champs and others had previously done so. But with the release of his first two albums, and especially with his performance at the Woodstock Music Festival in 1969, Santana became the most prominent Latin artist of the rock generation. To this day, he remains the most important proponent on Latin rock in the United States.

Born in 1947 in the Mexican state of Jalisco, Santana made his way to Tijuana in his youth, and by the mid-1960s, he had arrived in San Francisco, where he quickly immersed himself into the musical counterculture. A virtuoso guitarist, he formed the Santana Blues Band (later shortened to just Santana), which fused his hard-edged, blues-oriented sound with musical elements from Mexico, Cuba and other parts of Latin American and the Caribbean. He incorporated Afro-Cuban styles and rhythms such as mambo, salsa, and the rituals of Santería, and prominently included percussion instruments such as timbales and conga drums. Conversely, Santana's blues-based electric guitar differentiated the band from contemporary Latin groups that typically emphasized wind instruments such as trumpets and trombones.

The Latin character of Santana's music set the band apart and enabled it to carve out a niche in the San Francisco hippie scene, where radical innovation and eclecticism were valued, and conformity was despised. As a result, the band had some early success alongside other experimental artists such as the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane. Santana then exploded in popularity with its appearance at Woodstock in August 1969, where it performed a legendary 11-minute version of "Soul Sacrifice." A few weeks later, the band released its first album, simply titled "Santana," which contained the hits "Evil Ways" and "Soul Sacrifice."

In the year that followed, the band continued to infuse its psychedelic brand of rock with even more pronounced jazz and Latin elements. The result was "Abraxas," the band's

second album, released on September 23, 1970, when Carlos Santana was only 23 years old. (The title refers to the Gnostic deity Abraxas, a reference to whom Carlos Santana encountered in Herman Hesse's book "Demian." Hesse's quote appears on the album's back cover.)

Unlike the first album, which was more a collection of disparate songs, "Abraxas" represents Santana's refined concept of musical fusion, masterfully combining hard-edged acid rock, blues, soul, funk, jazz and Latin and African rhythms. The album was an instant success, spending 88 weeks on the "Billboard" charts, including six weeks in the number one spot. It has since sold more than five million copies. (The album was re-released in 1998 with three additional tracks which had been recorded live in the spring of 1970: "Se a Cabo," "Toussaint L'Ouverture," and "Black Magic Woman/Gypsy Queen.")

Despite their youth, Carlos Santana and his band were seasoned musicians whose skill and virtuosity shines through not only in the live performances, but especially in the studio. Vocalist and keyboard player Gregg Rolie sang most of the tracks, and his sensibilities on the Hammond B3 organ gives the album its blues/jazz quality. (A year after the album's release, Rolie left Santana and soon thereafter founded the band Journey.) Bass player Dave Brown, who also engineered much of the album, added the drive that energetically propels the music forward. Together, Rolie and Brown provided the space for the Latin percussion to shine: Michael Shrieve on drums, and especially percussionists José "Chepito" Areas and Michael Carabello, who supply the rhythmic elements that give the album its Latin character.

But the star is unquestionably Carlos Santana, whose guitar provides the band's characteristic sound. Indeed, though critics and historians usually point to Santana's importance as a seminal Hispanic musician, his success as an artist is principally due to his virtuoso guitar playing. (He is listed in "Rolling Stone's 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time" at number 20, though surely he deserves a higher ranking, perhaps even in the top five.)

"Abraxas" contains 11 tracks, all of which stand out for both their quality and their eclecticism. Whereas Santana's first album reflected the sensibilities of the San Francisco scene, "Abraxas" showed that Santana was clearly moving in an aural direction that was more and more removed from the psychedelic counter-culture of Haight-Ashbury and the Fillmore.

The opening track, "Singing Winds, Crying Beast," is one of the album's three purely instrumental tracks. It sets the mood with mysterious cymbals that evoke crashing waves, and piano figures that provide an ethereal aura, setting the stage for Santana's wailing guitar riffs. The conga drums and Rolie's jazzy organ solo then pick up the pace, announcing that the journey has begun, and setting the stage for the next track, the tour de force "Black Magic Woman/Gypsy Queen" medley. The first half, written by Fleetwood Mac's Peter Green, mutates seamlessly into the second half, written by the Roma guitar virtuoso Gábor Szabó. Santana has recognized both Green and Szabó as important

influences on his style. The black magic and Roma culture evoked in the titles and lyrics are nicely underscored by the conga drums playing the rhythms of Afro-Cuban *Santería*, by Rolie's prominent organ figure, and by Santana's psychedelic guitar riffs.

"Oye Cómo Va," the third track and the album's most famous song, also fuses Afro-Cuban rhythms with Santana's electric guitar virtuosity. The song is essentially a continuous syncopated vamping figure, provided by the timbales, conga drums and Hammond organ, over which Santana displays his lyrical guitar solos. Written by Latin jazz and salsa great Tito Puente in 1962, "Oye Cómo Va" did not emerge into the national consciousness until Santana covered it. (Later, Puente often joked that he had been disgruntled because Santana's meteoric rise had been based in part on Puente's song, but his annoyance quickly dissipated when Santana's royalty checks began to arrive. Puente supposedly then called Santana and begged him to steal another song!)

"Incident at Neshabur" is an instrumental jazz/rock fusion experiment, characterized by Alberto Gianquinto's jazz piano and Rolie's smooth organ riffs, which contrast with Santana's in-your-face, bebop-style guitar, the whole complemented by the complex syncopated rhythms of the Latin percussion.

Several tracks rely specifically on Afro-Cuban rhythms, including "Se a Cabo," where the congas, timbales, and jazzy organ again providing a background for Santana's precise and piercing guitar. The only lyrics are the title words, repeated several times in the call-and-response fashion typical of the *montuno* section in a son or salsa piece. Similarly, "El Nicoya," which closes out the album, is the only track that does not include a guitar, as Santana steps aside and lets the percussion take center stage. Both of these tracks display the rhythms and call-and-response singing of Afro-Cuban *Santería*, and of styles such as the son and the mambo, which had been heard a few generations earlier in the nightclubs of New York during the Latin Craze, and before that in Afro-religious rituals in Cuba.

In "Samba Pa Ti," Santana goes farther afield and fuses Brazilian samba with his jazz and rock style. It begins with a slow romantic theme that provides yet another aural canvas for Santana's soaring guitar, gradually gathering energy which culminates in a full-fledged shuffling samba.

Not everything on "Abraxas" is Latin-oriented: "Mother's Daughter" reveals Santana's roots as a psychedelic San Francisco band, with a more Grateful Dead-like sound. Conversely, "Hope You're Feeling Better" is a nod to a more hard-edged funk style, with acid rock guitar riffs and a driving bass, and traditional hard rock rhythms which border on heavy metal. In some ways, these tunes, both written and sung by Gregg Rolie, are outliers, perhaps strategically designed to appeal to the psychedelic crowd that might have been turned off by the Latin nature of the album. If so, it was a needless concern. The Latin pieces have become the classic hits, while the psychedelic and funk pieces, though still vibrant and original, now come across as afterthoughts.

Though the compositions on “Abraxas” are crisp and calculated, they often feel like a succession of spontaneous improvised jams. Towering above it all is Carlos Santana’s piercing, crystal-clear guitar playing, which dominates every track but the last. Many of his riffs, if played in a vacuum, would be recognizable as classic B.B. King-style blues figures. Over Latin rhythms and cool jazz harmonies, they provide an innovative sound that is at the core of Santana’s style. This fusion of energetic Latin percussion and hard-edged rock guitar had never been heard before, and, though it has often been imitated in ensuing decades, it has rarely been equaled.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.