

MESSAGE of LOVE

Desperate for a successful follow-up to his group's 1969 breakthrough debut, **Carlos Santana** took his band closer to its Latin roots and the music they cherished. The result was their definitive record, and a number-one hit: *Abraxas*.

BY NIKKI O'NEILL

TO ME, THERE are two kinds of guitar players," Carlos Santana says. "Some people go up and down, or left and right, and some people go deeper in a different way by bending the strings. Because once you bend the strings, you're messing with microtones. And microtones are the ones that give people chills. It brings tears to their eyes. There's something about the sound of a microtone that reminds molecules to scream.

"Once you bend the note a certain way, like Otis Rush, Ali Farka Touré or B.B., Albert or Freddie King, you get attention in a different way, because you start to sound more like a woman's voice. So for me, playing guitar is beautiful in many ways, like a Segovia way or Paco de Lucia way. But when you stop and bend the notes — even when it's just nylon strings — if you bend them a little bit, people go, 'Ooooooh.' It gets sacred and sexy really quick."



Sacred and sexy is one way to describe the cover of *Abraxas*, the Santana group's second album, released 50 years ago in 1970. Its title refers to a deity associated with early Christians' mystic practices, though the meaning of the word has been lost. It may be a reference to "the salvation of the cross." And indeed, the painting on the album's front presents a surreal and sensual

interpretation of a sacred moment. Titled *Annunciation*, and painted by German-French painter Mati Klarwein, it depicts the angel Gabriel as a winged, bright-red female form straddling a conga drum in a landscape filled with fruits, flowers and other fertility symbols, pointing to the heavens as it reveals to a Black, naked Virgin Mary that she will conceive the son of God. Meanwhile, the back cover carries a quotation from German author Herman Hesse, who called Abraxas "the god who was both god and devil." "We stood before it and began to freeze inside from the exertion," it reads. "We questioned the painting, berated it, made love to it, prayed to it: We called it mother, called it whore and slut, called it our beloved, called it Abraxas..."

But sacred and sexy are also apt descriptions of the music on *Abraxas*, in which Santana takes its blues-rock jazz fusion to exotic new realms that

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Carlos Santana performing with his 1968 Gibson Les Paul Custom at the Sunshine '72 Festival, in Honolulu, January 1, 1972