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Michael Carabello - Return To The Jungle - Modern Drummer Magazine

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27-35 minutes



Percussionist Michael Carabello, an original member of the Santana band, has always played with raw power, poetry, and the confidence and simplicity of an old master. He has played with a

“Who’s Who” of music greats, including the Rolling Stones, Stevie Wonder, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Herbie Hancock, Lenny White, Jefferson Airplane, Sly Stone, and Al DiMeola. After leaving Santana, he dropped out of the national music scene for a few years to lay back in his home state of California. But now he has come back— with a vengeance. A relocation to New York City has been a pivotal move for him. Based in New York, he has done percussion work on the Stones’ Tattoo You and Irene Cara’s first album. His latest studio work has been greatly varied, ranging from George Benson to the Jim Carroll Band to a cooperative effort with Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records for a new artist named Casper McCloud. Recently, he was featured at a Manhattan club on a bill with Tito Puente. He has also enrolled in the Juilliard School to study piano, and he’s been auditioning musicians and working on material for a new group of his own.

Michael is not one given to rambling discourses or philosophical musings. He is a man of action rather than a man of words. Still, when he has something to say, he states his opinions strongly and goes right to the heart of the matter. He has a great zest for life and he likes to have a good time. This Woodstock survivor has been through it all, and he faces the future with a smile.

CF: Why did you leave California for New York?

MC: Because New York is a jungle, and I’m a drummer. And there’s not a lot of work out in California. That’s why they’ve got Disneyland out there! [laughs] For me, there’s more music, more talent, and more energy in New York. In California, I was afraid of becoming a Valley Boy. I’m proud to be a member of vintage Santana, but I don’t want to stop there. I want to do it all. In New York, everyone who’s in the music business is just as good and has worked just as

hard as you. Some make it; some don't. It depends on how badly you want it. I've been very fortunate to be in the right place at the right time for all my life just about—especially in music. And that's part of this business, man—luck, fate. I've learned not to question it.

Here in New York, opportunity can present itself at any given time. You always have to be ready. You've got to stay disciplined. You never know. Sometimes when I go back to California to visit my family, I get so laid back that, when I return here, I have to remind myself to get back into it— fast. It's like I say, New York is a jungle. And when you're out in the jungle, you must always be aware that there are a lot of things out there that can get you, but you can come on a meal at any minute, too.

CF: You're studying piano at Juilliard. Why would a natural musician like you, who's already had great success, want to go to a formal music school? Musicians who've studied want to play like you.

MC: It's another instrument—another goal—to conquer. I want to see what the other side's like. And learning to read music will help me in communicating with other musicians who read, because I'll be able to convey more quickly what I want to hear. A lot of players in New York read music. If *you* don't, you're at a disadvantage. It's like overcoming a language barrier. I'll probably be there a term or two.

CF: You've played piano before, particularly on “Singing Winds, Crying Beasts,” which you composed for the early Santana album, *Abraxas*. Does playing piano influence your percussion work?

MC: It influences my song writing. I'll go to the piano for the melody

when composing a song. If I want to compose a *rhythm*, I'll go to my congas—although I can sometimes do the same on the piano for a rhythm. A lot of people forget the piano is a percussive instrument by definition. Maybe that's why I can play it. I don't know.

CF: Recently, I heard an album released in 1978 called *Giants* which you and drummer Greg Errico played on and produced. Herbie Hancock, Carlos Santana, Neal Schon, Gregg Rolie and Lee Oskar play on it, among others. I was especially moved by a song you wrote, and played organ and congas on called “Pancho Villa.” It has your stamp all over it, written with a simple, haunting melody, as in “Singing Winds, Crying Beasts.” By naming it after Pancho Villa, were you trying to make a political statement?

MC: Not really. I personally don't try to put messages in my music; I wouldn't write lyrics about a war going on, for instance. I don't do that. I write moods. I set a mood and write to that. Whatever it sounds like—whatever it makes me feel like—becomes the title of the song.

After I recorded “Singing Winds,” I took it home and listened to it for two or three days, and the sounds in it gave me the title. With “Pancho Villa,” I listened to it and a visual picture, kind of like a scene from a movie, came to me of a hillside in Mexico where you could see thousands of horsemen lined up. That's how I do it. Moods come to me. Musically, besides being a conga player, I'm at my best as a mood writer.

CF: Your composing seems to be very important to you.

MC: It is. A lot of drummers can write songs; they can write their *tails off*, but people don't think of them that way. People think of them as musicians up there just beating with their hands or sticks

on a drum, but it's not that way at all. A lot of drummers are very creative and complex. Like Michael Shrieve—he's a great composer, great drummer, and underrated as both. In the past, you've seen guitarists and keyboard and horn players writing all the songs, but a lot of drummers have gotten tired of sitting back and just being taken for granted.

CF: What do you think about the state of music today?

MC: A lot of people in music have *lost* it, man! They've lost the root of music—the basic rhythm—the true sound. So much music is too slick now; the truth has become airbrushed. Some players know it. That's why they've gone to Africa to study. That's why they're playing the more primal sounds, and getting back to what it was like when the first caveman got a sound from an animal skin stretched over a hollow log. Miles Davis has always been there. Also, Peter Gabriel, Mick Fleetwood, Steve Winwood, and the Stones are trying to get back to the root in their own way.

CF: So you see drum and percussion work, in its natural state and its primal aspects, as an important part—if not *the* most important part—of that root to which we have to return in music?

MC: Right. That's why I hate drum machines. A drum machine is like a pacemaker, as compared to a real heart. It doesn't surge when you need it. It's a very robotic sound. It's another example of how people in the business have lost the root—lost their humanity. Remember, the drummer—the percussionist—provides the pulse, the rhythm, and the heartbeat of the music. If you lose the heartbeat, it all dies—just drops dead on the spot. It's not the drummers' fault. It's the producers, like "Robby The Robot," who have gotten a million gold records, having their way over the

musicians too much these days.

CF: You seem to be echoing some of Armando Peraza's criticisms of studio producers' work with percussionists (*Modern Drummer*, October, 1982).

MC: He's right. Drummers are human beings. Some producers are into their machines so much that they want *you* to be a machine.

CF: Then do you really feel threatened by the increase in electronic music—electronic drums—the synthetic sound? Do you see the day when a more natural sound like yours could be obsolete?

MC: No.

CF: You think the humans are going to survive?

MC: I *have* to. I've got no choice. I'm a drummer. I use my hands. But I try to stay open to new instruments, like the Linn machine. It's a great machine if you want to go home and work on something, and not have to set up a whole drumset or get somebody to play something for you. You can set up your own rhythm, and that's good.

CF: Can you see, though, where maybe in the future musicians will stop even bothering with all the paraphernalia, like when they go on tour and just do everything with little boxes?

MC: No. I don't think it will last. I think it's good for what it is. It serves its purpose for experimenting and recording in a little room while you're writing something on the piano or guitar. It's great for that.

CF: Expediency.

MC: Yeah. But then it comes to the point where those machines can't do any more. They go far, but they only go to a certain point,

and then they become boring. A Linn machine won't kick a guitarist in the ass when it's necessary. There are an infinite number of rhythms in percussion. I don't think they can put that, truly, in a machine.

You can get the Linn, set it for some wild rhythm, and get a conga player to play against it. You may come up with something, like a new kind of sound. But you won't have anything if you just set up the Linn to a rhythm and have a guitar or piano play over it alone.

CF: So you're saying it's okay if you use the old and the new together—future primitive—but you really don't want to see the new replacing the old.

MC: Right. Keep the root. I'm willing to coexist with the new technology. I like it because it's a challenge. I'm not *that* much of a purist.

CF: How much do you think about rhythm and music when you're not playing?

MC: All the time—when I walk down the street, when people talk, when I see a little kid playing on the playground. Rhythm runs the whole universe. It has to. When it doesn't, we have wars. There's no harmony. If everyone were truly into the harmony of music, wars would end.

CF: I've thought, when I've been a part of the crowd at a rock concert, immersed in the consuming energy of the music, that rock music is a substitute for war. Do you believe that's true?

MC: Well [laughs] between musicians, yeah, for sure! No, I agree. It drains you in a positive way. It takes away your aggression. And for me, personally, playing the drums provides a tremendous release.





CF: What would it be like without music?

MC: You can't ask what it would be like without music, because if you're quiet now—do you hear that? [claps his hand] That's music. Sound is music. There's music in your voice. Music is everywhere.

CF: Even the hum of that air conditioner?

MC: Even the hum of that air conditioner. That's a waterfall.

CF: Obviously a percussionist, by nature, is attuned to the sound possibilities of a wide variety of instruments. You've already incorporated a pretty large arsenal into your playing. Are there any other instruments you'd like to try?

MC: Oh yeah, lots of them. I'd especially like to find the time to try out more drums and other percussion instruments of native cultures worldwide. Not just the Latin ones, but all of them. If you listen to some native drum or native rhythm that's used only in one place in the world, it will tell you something about *that* particular place. It's like a historical record. And if you get into it and you absorb it, you've enriched yourself and your sound a little more. You carry it

with you. You become more universal. People all over the world can relate to your music.

Even if it's whalebones used by Eskimos or reindeer bells from Lapland, I'll try it. I don't want to be known as just a Latin percussionist. I can play Latin music, and I love to play it, but that's not all. I play rock 'n' roll and more classical moods. I can fit into anything. I try to stay open and keep my pores open.

Like Airtó—he's what you could call a forefather in bringing native percussive instruments to modern music. I'd like to take it a step further. I'd like to break down the wall of groups that do not want to experiment with percussionists and with different sounds.

CF: Speaking of Latin percussion, I recently heard Tito Puente say in an interview that although rock and disco music employ many Latin-oriented instruments—congas, bongos, timbales, cowbells—he didn't think Latins have received sufficient credit for their contribution. He even said most rock groups who want a conga drum sound will use an American drummer instead of a Latin one. Do you agree?

MC: I don't know if I would say they won't use a Latin drummer, but I know what Tito's talking about. When Tito Puente plays on a Latin album, you can hear him clearly. It's there. Whereas on most albums, if there's percussion it's like a token thing. You have to *bend forward* to the speaker and *strain* to hear it in the background. It's very faint. That's the way it's produced.

From my experience, very few producers today know how to get a true conga drum sound. It hasn't even been *tapped* for what it can bring to music. Only those who've worked with Latin or African bands know how to set it up properly. Like Glenn Kolotkin, who got

us the really good percussion sound on the early Santana albums—he's a wizard. He came to California after working in New York with players like Mongo Santamaria.

Most groups, with the exception of a few, like those I mentioned before, are scared to go the distance with percussion. I don't know why—if it's because they're so wound up in the formula and what's safe, or it doesn't match their Mercedes, or what.

CF: You mentioned the sound from a hollow log a while back. I take it you prefer wooden congas over fiberglass.

MC: Let's put it this way: Drink some wine that's been aged in wood, and then drink some that's been "aged" in plastic. When drums originated, there was no fiberglass. Drums have to be grown as trees, not manufactured as glass.

When you play wooden drums, you return to the earth. You can close your eyes and feel it, taste it, smell it, and see it. They're starting to realize it, too, in the drum-making business. Things are changing. Latin Percussion came out with a wooden conga. I've played wooden congas that were terrible, but in general, a wooden conga gives a truer sound. Trap drums, the old Gretsch drums, and the old jazz drums are wood. Some drummers today use fiberglass and they sound good for loud bands and that type of music, but they're not for me.

CF: What about heads? How do you care for them?

MC: When I get new skins, I rub dirt on them, spit on them, get a little blood on them, and let them get real rank for about a week. I break them in like that. A good skin can last years if I'm really careful, and I remember to loosen it up after playing.

CF: How do you tune them?

MC: I *always* tune them *myself* before I play. When I'm playing for myself, I tune to the same sound I've had since the beginning, basically no matter what the song. But if I'm doing session work, it's different. I tune them to suit the music. For example, for the Stones on *Tattoo You*, Mick liked them tuned very high.

CF: There's no doubt that *your* playing maintains that link to the primitive beginnings of music that you speak of. I understand that you're very interested in the American Indian. Is there any connection there?

MC: Maybe so. I've got tons of Indian stuff in my house. I just think they are a powerful, determined race of people. I want to keep their cosmic spirit and rhythms alive. When I was growing up, watching cowboys and Indians on TV, I was fascinated by the Indians. I was always into their drumming and dancing.



CF: What made you get into percussion in the first place?

MC: I used to hang out on Grant Street where all the “beatniks” sat on the corner playing bongos. I thought it was just the greatest sound I ever heard! Also, my stepfather would take me fishing in Muni Pier. I thought fishing was boring, so I would sit with the beatniks, and one day they let me play. I went home and made some drums out of Folger’s coffee cans put together with nuts and bolts. It was all I could afford. I didn’t buy my first congas until I was about 16. Then I started hanging out with Carlos Santana when I was 17. He and I started the band, playing in garages and stuff. We went to the Fillmore all we could. One day I asked Bill Graham how bands got to play there. He answered, “By audition.” So we auditioned as the opener on a bill which included Paul Butterfield and Charles Lloyd.

CF: Quite a bit has been written about your departure from the Santana band, which wasn’t on the friendliest terms. We won’t go into that here, but can you tell me what your current standing is with the original band members?

MC: Sometimes I play tennis with Carlos. I hate to admit it, but so far he’s won more than me. He goes for the jugular vein on the courts! He’s also the godfather of my little girl, Aisha. I love the guy. What more can I say? And I see a lot of Michael Shrieve. He lives in New York City. We’re very close.

CF: Michael Shrieve and you went on stage to play “Soul Sacrifice” with Santana during their concert at Madison Square Garden in the fall of ’82. You were almost unrecognizable from the man who played at Woodstock. You beamed with the pure joy of a child. You seem more positive and more mellow than you were in the early

days. Do you feel your playing has changed too?

MC: It's changed a lot. The old Michael Carabello is dead. I'm a new man. I'm more disciplined now. I practice at least three hours a day now. I never used to practice when I was in Santana [laughs]—never by myself, just the band kind of thing. You'd go because you had to go. I've grown up a lot. I don't smoke and drink anymore. I meditate [laughs]—just kidding. No, I'm married now and have children. I have a wife who supports me 100%. I know what I want to do and what I want to be. I'm more serious.

CF: Looking back on what were the “wild days” in the late '60s and early '70s of the original Santana band—the drugs, women, money squandered on fancy cars, etc.—a life-style that was too much for the best of them—Morrison, Hendrix, Moon—do you have an explanation for all the excesses? Was it because of the pain of the times, your poor ghetto background, or what?

MC: When you make it big so fast and so young, it's like a tidal wave hits you. It's like having it all at once. What do you do when you're a poor Hispanic kid and all of a sudden you become famous without even planning it? It just happens. Somebody gives you millions of dollars. You spend it. You buy all the candy you can and all the cars you can. You just *go* for it, man. Any normal person in their right mind would do the same thing. We spent a lot of money, but we saved some and made some good investments. *Everything* we did wasn't stupid.

What I did then wasn't because of having pain on me. Why say *that's* why I did it? The *whole world's got* pain as far as I'm concerned. On the impact of fame in the music business, I think David Lee Roth of Van Halen summed it up best: It's like a big

parade with everything going on at once; it's like New Year's Eve 24 hours a day. What do you do? You go for it. You deal with it the best way you can. I survived it.

CF: Rock 'n' roll hasn't been around long enough for us to see the early stars make it to old age. How will it be for you survivors to grow old together? For example, what will Mick Jagger be like when he's 70?

MC: Mick Jagger will be doing it till he's an old man—till the day he dies—and then he'll be doing it in his coffin, when he's underground, too.

CF: What about Armando Peraza? What's his secret?

MC: I've never seen the man smoke or drink.

CF: Is he married?

MC: No. Maybe *that's* what it is. [laughs] Mick Jagger isn't married, either. Maybe *that's* what it is! No, but speaking of Armando, he's a master percussionist. He sits up there like a Buddha. He's taught me that you can still be hot when you're 60, or however old he is. Nobody knows for sure.

CF: Can you name any other favorite drummers?

MC: Well, like I said before, Michael Shrieve is one of my favorite drummers. Nobody—*nobody* plays like him. He's unorthodox. When you think a drummer would do a fill, he doesn't do a fill. He catches you off guard. He's unpredictable. He keeps you fresh. It's magic—Michael "Magic" Shrieve. And Charlie Watts—he plays so simple, but he does stuff you've never heard drummers *try*, let alone play. He's a one-of-a-kind drummer.





CF: Does *he* compose?

MC: Well, he plays in a jazz band in London. I haven't heard it, but I know he plays in a club with some other guys, kind of like Woody Allen does in Manhattan. I don't think many people in London know about it except musicians.

Other drummers I like are Robby Gonzales, who used to play with Al DiMeola. He's real fast—solid. And Greg Errico is a real solid drummer. Then there's Terry Bozzio. He's in a league of his own.

CF: Can you pinpoint any influences on your playing?

MC: Nowadays, Beethoven—I'm very interested in him. And Gabor Szabo, the guitarist who recently passed away—no one played like him. He made me play differently. I plan to dedicate an album to him some day.

There's this one album I was brought up on. My grandmother fed it to me. It's called "Cuban Jam Sessions," or "Descargas," which means "an unloading or letting loose" and has become the Latin term for jam session. There's this hot Cuban conga player on it named TaTa Guines, and a great bongo player, too named Rogelio "Yeyo" Iglesias. I still listen to that album. I never get tired of it.

When I was a teenager, I used to play along with the early Marvin Gaye records—they had the first war drum sound of any band out—and Smoky Robinson, who used bongos and maracas early. Other influences were Herbie Mann, Cal Tjader, Patato, Los Papines, and the Abreu brothers. All were innovators in percussion. I was also influenced by Stevie Wonder, who hasn't even reached his potential, and Steve Winwood—the only white rock 'n' roller from the days of peace and love that played R&B, and still does. Any time you hear him, you know it's him. Jose Feliciano is a genius. He is underrated *to death*. He doesn't only play guitar. He also plays percussion and nobody knows it.

CF: What is your reaction to the impact of video on the music industry?

MC: I think it's good. It's a new direction. It could have its negative points. At times, it can stop the growth of imagination. When I listen to music a lot of times, I like to close my eyes and conceptualize my own thing of what I think the song is about. With video, you're in front of the TV and you see what they want you to see. That's what stays in your head. But done right, they can be stimulating.

CF: Have you done any video work?

MC: Yeah. The *Abraxas* album cover, with the woman flying on the conga drum, was actually taken from a much larger painting—a mural really—that an artist named Mati painted to cover a whole room in Greenwich Village. Then he moved to Paris, and some rich guy from Austria bought the room and had it shipped overseas. Before the room was dismantled, a filmmaker named Peter Harron made a video of the mural, and I did the soundtrack to it. It's about 15 minutes long. I enjoyed doing that soundtrack. I'd like to get into

that type of video work more.

CF: Musical expression is such a personal, emotional thing, and yet so often nowadays you hear musicians talking about how important it is to have a “professional” attitude and to be flexible. Can you play with people you don’t like, personally or musically?

MC: No, I can’t play with them, but I can work with them. There’s a difference between the two. If it’s a job and I need the money, I can “work” with other people and give them what they’re looking for. But “playing” is like when you’re a kid, having fun.

CF: You’ve done quite a bit of session work lately. Can doing too much session work be a trap, in that it can threaten your own identity as a percussionist?

MC: Definitely. Definitely. To some extent, that’s what’s happening to me right now. I love just playing. I love doing session work to a certain degree, but at times it can be very unfulfilling. Somebody calls you up, you go in and do it, they tell you what to play, and you’re finished. You don’t get a tape when you leave; you have to wait until it comes out on the album and you don’t even know if it’s going to be on. You are *paid* well, but it’s kind of like being in a catalog. They see your name, you go in, and they say, “Thank-you-there’s-your-check—bye!”

That’s the trap of it that I don’t like. It’s not the good therapy that playing what’s in you can be. It’s not real freedom as an artist. I’ve worked with the best of them in the studio and I’ve enjoyed it—don’t get me wrong—but I couldn’t do just that forever. You just never get to be in on the creative process from beginning to end that way. You don’t see something through to the finish. I’ve played on three albums already where my name didn’t even appear on the album,

because I'm the last person who comes in, right at the end. I'm the percussion doctor. I 'll come in and clean up somebody's mistakes, because they have a certain date they've got to have the album finished by.

CF: Could you explain the function of a "percussion doctor" in the studio?

MC: If somebody messes up the time on a song when they cut it, they'll get a percussionist to come in and *overpower* it so it won't sound like it's off time.

CF: Can you say that you've learned anything from session work for your own playing?

MC: I've learned how to be patient for one thing. [laughs] If I'm not, I can cut myself right out of a gig! I've learned to listen to others and do it *their* way, even though I may think it won't work. But I *try* it and sometimes it surprises me. So that has probably encouraged me to be a little more experimental when I'm playing.

CF: Even though you're a well-known musician, in demand for both studio and live performing, have you ever been shot down for a gig that you really wanted?

MC: Sure.

CF: How do you handle that?

MC: You can either let it do you in or you can learn from it. If you don't, you just suffer a little more and a little more. I've had several things fall through on me that I really counted on. The first time was like, oh, the end of the world! "Why did I ever get in this business?" The second time, I disciplined myself and got all psyched up again. *It* fell through, but I didn't feel as bad as I did the first time. The third

time it happened, I just went, “Well, that’s show biz!” It’s either *that*, or it’s nothing; the alternative is to pack it up. You don’t belong in it.

CF: That’s a good attitude.

MC: You learn to accept it after a while and you try to keep sight of that. There’s the stage over there, and this is reality.

CF: And you don’t take it personally.

MC: You *can’t*—*you can’t*. If you do that, you start dying. In other words, it’s been said before, but it’s very true: If you stop dreaming, you die. I don’t ever want to see the light at the end of the tunnel. If you start seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, you think, “Oh well, I don’t have much farther to go.” That’s bullshit. You always have to reach for something. You can’t *ever* have it made. And if you start getting sidetracked by what could have happened but didn’t, you won’t get anywhere. If you stay around long enough and learn from it, entertainment is a great career— one of the best. But you have to learn how to handle rejection, and it’s *tough*.

CF: It seems like it would be especially hard for people who are accustomed to having things their way to start out alone again and have someone tell them that they can’t do something.

MC: Yes, it’s a shock. Your first reaction is, “How dare they!” But it doesn’t work that way. Everybody has to learn humility. As Bob Dylan said, “Even the President of the United States sometimes has to stand naked.”

CF: You’re putting a group together right now. Can you tell us something about it?

MC: Everyone must be able to sing, play two instruments, and write. We’ll collaborate, although I’ll have the final word. But I don’t

want to be a “boss.”

CF: What type of music will you play?

MC: I can't give it a name. It will be danceable—not disco, but danceable music that people will like to move to. It will be different. But it's not something I want to contrive—to plan ahead of time, like a business. I hate to say it, but too many artists

are caught up in what someone else is playing on the radio and what's on the charts, whereas before they just played because it was fun, it was real and it was in them. It was happy. It was positive energy. It was good just to play. Now they want you to sound like Joe Schmo, because he's #1 on the charts.

You can't market your sound. Bob Dylan never did it. When you have to use your brain instead of your heart, and you have to stop and think about what you're playing, you're inhibited. You'll never do anything creative or different.

Take the Police. They didn't market their sound. They didn't start out to be a #1 band. They just played what was in them. Joe Jackson's different, too. He didn't start out to make a Top-Ten album with *Night and Day*, but it was a success because it was fresh and original. The same thing with Genesis. Peter Gabriel and Stevie Wonder are also different. You can be yourself and still be a success, and you'll have staying power. That's why when you ask me what kind of music am I going to play, I don't like labels. I hope I'm beyond that.

CF: Do you ever worry about drying up—that you wouldn't have any more songs?

MC: No. I don't think I'll ever run out of ideas. When you stop

listening to the young, that's when it all stops. Your whole conception of music dies. Little kids give you ideas, like my two-year-old daughter. She has all this energy. She's open to life. She *goes for it*, whether it's right or wrong. That's the way you've got to be all your life.

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