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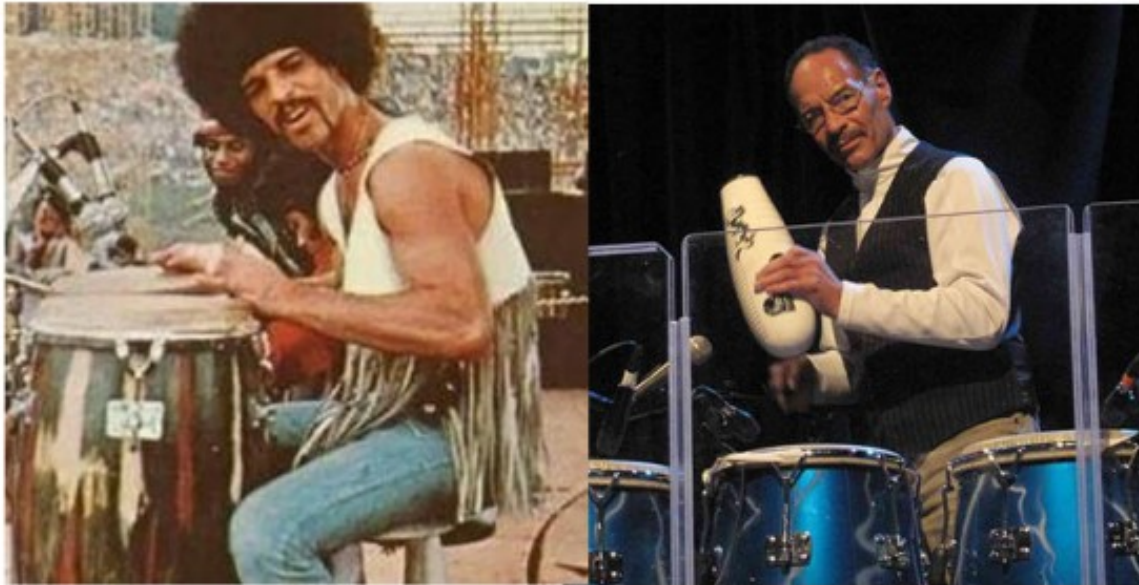
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[The MICHAEL CARABELLO interview](#)

By Dr. Alan Carlos Hernandez on December 3, 2018



SAN FRANCISCO (Herald de Paris) — In the opening scene of the Santana band segment in the film *Woodstock*, there is a haunting tribal beat, then insistent hands playing congas, then a young man in an afro with a Fu Manchu mustache, his appearance, his look, his attitude and the sound he helped invent signaled a paradigm shift in Rock Music and a socio-iconoclastic shift in the way young hip Latinos articulated their identity.

This Puerto Rican/Spanish artist is the first and only Conga player in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, his name is Michael Carabello. He is the only original Santana Classic member born and raised in San Francisco's Mission District, which is now adorned by many fantastic tributary murals depicting the major Latin artists of our times. Mike Carabello and his image are nowhere to be found, a major socio-political oversight which someday should be rectified.

Michael's life has come full circle since the wild ride of fame and fortune which has made him world famous, whose best friends included Jimi Hendrix, who asked him to join his band; Sly Stone, who convinced him to buy a Cord hyper luxury Automobile (Mike bought 2, one Yellow one Black); and a relationship with Miles Davis, Neal Schon, and of course his close friend from the age 16, Carlos Santana.

Mike now lives in Boston and New York with his wife Linda Houston. She grew up in San Francisco as a close friend of Carlos', as well.

Carabello is an articulate artist and teacher whose musical palate is informed by North Beach jazz, traditional Latin while tipping a hat to a Beatnik vibe. His new music is smooth sophisticated and resonant with the times.



Michael recently released on iTunes, Spotify, Amazon some new music Primitive Medicine sessions vol. 1.

In reviewing Michael's new music Carlos Santana said, "Wow! Totally awesome. Spectacular. Love, Love, Love it! This wonderful selection of songs came from the Vision of the creator of, "Singing Winds & Crying Beast," Michael Carabello. Four different dimensions of symmetry in sound, emotion, passion and feelings that offers creativity grace, elegance and mystery"

Author and Global Rock critic, Joel Selvin, said this about Carabellos new music:

Is percussionist Michael Carabello the true inheritor of the deep mojo of his original band Santana? His new solo album, "The Primitive Medicine Sessions Vol. 1," brings the essence of that band's unforgettable first three landmark albums into the 21st century. Sweeping together ambient, flamenco, world beat and other wildly disparate elements, Carabello fashions a spellbinding concoction that draws from the same well as the band he helped found 50 years ago.

I was privileged to be the first to hear four of the new selections; The first is an Electric Flamingo, The Second cut would have fit like a glove on the Santana Caravanserai project, The Third cut an homage to the Homeless is destined for a movie soundtrack, The Forth cut is a high energy jazz-whipped dance tune. The downloads are receiving rave reviews and are available via iTunes, Apple music, Amazon and Spotify.

Mike is a very private person, I met him in 1977 when I interviewed him for KFRC Radio in San Francisco, it is ironic, yet comical that neither one of us could remember the details of the broadcast conversation. A good friend of Mike's, Comic Legend Robin Williams, once said, "If you remember the 70s, you weren't there."

I'll leave it at that.

I received a call from mutual friend, Dr. Bernardo Gonzalez. He told me that there is a guy he thought I may want to talk to, through a text he reintroduced to Santana Icon Mike

Carabello. Mike checked me out up and down the web and called associates to make sure I was an honest journalist he then agreed to a sit-down interview.

We met in North Beach at his favorite hangout, Flor de Italia Restaurant, as North Beach has been a second home a significant cultural influence on Mike's life.

Mike told me, "The Flor de Italia is where I hang when I'm in Town San Francisco's North Beach. I had my wedding reception there when I got married, I love their neighborhood feeling that makes you feel at home. North Beach it's my office, hang place to eat and meet, I have been going there over 30 years and some "



We were ushered in a private room in the back, this place was where Mike's wedding reception was held when he married the love of his life Linda Houston about ten years ago. Mike had said, "Only the closest of friends were here, which included Alfonso Johnson, Neal Schon, and Carlos Santana who showed up directly from Pac Bell, it was Carlos Santana Day, he cut it short to be here for Mike and Linda, he gave a deeply emotional speech, all agreed it was a hard act to follow.

...and so, it began

Mike Carabello's grandparents were among the earliest Puerto Ricans to settle in San Francisco's Bayview District. He grew up hearing lots of music and old-world Latino drumming in Grandparents home, while they raised Chickens and goats.

As a teenager he played baseball which was his passion and was chosen by his coach to play ball for another High School outside of the Mission District because of his superior skill level as an infielder. Mike is an avid Giants fan and has a deep friendship with Giants Star Puerto Rican HOF Orlando Cepeda. Who Mike idolized as a kid, and still does.

Mikes Dad used to take him fishing on muni pier at Aquatic park in SF. They would have to walk past all the "Beatnik" Conga and Bongo players played at the park. As he and his Dad fished, he could hear the rhythms which complimented the sounds he heard at Grandmas house, this resonated deep down in his musical soul. Soon, Mike was going

with his Dad to fish only to take extended stopovers with the musicians, the music was somehow a part of him.

Eventually he borrowed a conga drum from a good friend painted it yellow put an O'Neil surfer sticker on it, took the 47 Potrero bus across town and began to hang out with beatnik drummers at Aquatic Park.

He was especially inspired by the conga playing of Puerto Rican percussionist with Victor Pantoja who played with Jazz musician Willie Bobo, on an album of his own titled *Spanish Grease*. When his musical mentor was master conguero Victor Pantoja, passed away his congas were given to Mike, these congas he still owns and cherishes.

Mike said, "While I'm playing at Aquatic Park on the stairs on a Sunday afternoon with the other Conga players & Guys with wine bottles being used as "Cow Bells" with sticks or whatever was available. Around around 4- 5 in the afternoon we start to wind down. A guy comes over to me and says I'm playing at this place on Van Ness tonight, why don't you come on up and sit in with us ' we start around 7:00. So, I asked my Best Friend Eddie Simmons if he wanted to go, he said sure I'm in, so we get one our friends to drive us there.

The place was a Pool Hall franchise called "Carousel" on Van Ness. We find the place walk in there is these Pool Tables and a Carousel in the middle of this place with a roof on the Carousel. There is a guy is up there with an up-right bass and a Piano player, no Drummer.

They are setting up and the guy says to me, come on up when I tell you, I say ok, but I'm frikin nervous. I had never sat in with a Bass player before, Eddie tells me to relax, he said, all you can do is just be you and play.



After a few songs, there's not too many people in the place as most are playing pool. The Guy calls me up. We play this Bossa nova samba sort of thing for the first song, then for the second song he starts playing this intro and he tells me to wait 8 bars and then come In. So, I play the song a great groove, it seemed like it lasted 5:00 minutes.

When we are done with the song, he looks at me and says, "Yeah that sounded great," so at that point he says, stick around were going play some, you are welcome to sit in on a couple of more songs, we are going to take a break right now. So, I go sit down with my

friend and Eddie says, “Did you recognize that 2nd song you were playing?” and I said, it kind of sounded familiar, but I was so nervous paying attention to the Bass player that I was just playing.

He said that song was “Cast your Fate to the wind” and that guy up there on the Piano that asked you to come and sit in with him tonight is Vince Guaraldi.”

Mike took his borrowed Yellow conga all over town, a friend named Yvonne who had introduced him to a local rhythm guitar player named Carlos Santana. The two hung around in similar circles, eventually Mike started playing with Carlos band that still not have a name.

Usually broke, Mike and Carlos both used to sneak into the Fillmore to see bands played, Carlos got caught tried to climb in a window Mike never got caught. At times Mike would go by himself, once he asked one of the management guys, how does a band get to play here? Guys said, you must send a tape, (reel to Reel) or audition, we didn't have a tape recorder nobody owned one and the band didn't even have a name.

Eventually Rock Promoter, Bill Grahams office called and said that they would like the band to audition on a Tuesday night, they asked Mike what the name of the band was, Mike thought Hmmm, the Carabello band, the I don't know, How about The Santana Blues band?

Because Mike and Carlos were huge fans of Paul Butterfield blues band which was one of the all-time favorite bands, they would sneak in to see.

Things progressed quickly, Mike remembered the time he and Carlos went to Palo Alto to check out Gregg Rolie who played keys for the band William Pen and his pals. Mike said, “To make a long story short, we were jamming, and smoking pot and the cops came, we all ran out and hid in a field. The next day they asked Gregg to join the band. Mike was adamant told Carlos that we are not wearing “Hamilton” William Pen and His Pals type clothes on stage the way Gregg did” At the time the band dressed in collar shirts, Carlos was the only hippie in Tie-Dyed and jeans.



The band was getting small gigs then out of nowhere Carlos was stricken with Tuberculosis and confined to SF General Hospital. Mike would sneak in (Without a mask) to bring Carlos pot and LSD get high with Carlos and bring him music, especially jazz. Mike and his friend rigged a way to bring a small record player and amp to play for Carlos. Carlos was getting restless wanting to play, so they broke him out of the hospital.

While Carlos was in the hospital the band wanted to rehearse and Mike did not want to rehearse without Carlos, so they found another Conga player Marcus Malone a major flashy showman who fronted the band, he also knew from aquatic park Mike was out.

Mike still hung out in similar social circles and he lived down the street from where the Carlos and Gregg lived. One day a friend called Mike and told him that Marcus Malone was arrested on a serious felony.

Mike knew there may be an opportunity to be in Carlos' Band again. Mike causally walked up the street to where the band was living. He acted as if he didn't know about Marcus getting busted.

Soon the conversation came around about Marcus being busted, Carlos and Gregg were nervous there was an up-coming performance coming up in two days, they didn't know what to do, Gregg Rolie said, "Why don't we use Carabello until Marcus gets out? They agreed, Marcus never got out and the rest is Rock and Roll Hall of Fame History.

When Carabello became the conga player for Santana, he delved deeper into his Puerto Rican musical heritage, bringing records for the band to hear, including New York Latin artist, Tito Puente's Oye Como Va. Which became Santana's first major hit.

Mike was heavily influenced by Gabor Szabo, Tito Puente, Chico Hamilton, Willie Bobo, Cal Tjader and Vince Guaraldi He was the one who brought the straight up Jazz to the Santana Blues band, this influence colored its future and still informs the bands presentation to this very day.

Marcus Malone was a very flashy and accomplished player he had big shoes to fill, Mike has never been a flashy player he does things his own way, and because of his own way which is a blending of traditional, jazz, Latin and even blues, Mike was able to in essence invent, *The Rock Conga*, this path eventually led him to record with the Rolling Stones and his compatriots to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Local gigs around town for the Santana Blues band was going OK, but Mike felt that there was something missing in the music. One Sunday while he was drumming at Playland at the beach with friends, a guy came up and asked could his friend sit in and play, Mike filled with bravado said, “no man he can sit in once we are done”. When they ended their drumming for a break, a short well-dressed young man took over the congas and began killing it, his name was Jose Cheptio Areas!

Mike and his friend who were looking down from street level could not believe what they heard. What Mike heard was the similar drumming presence and flavor he heard as a kid at his Grandmothers house, it blew his mind.

Mike came down to where Chepito was and through an interpreter found out all about him. Not wanting to let Chepito out of his sight, he went home with Cheppy, as Cheppy changed clothes to play ta club gig that night with his group The Aliens. At the gig Mike was amazed at his ability, not only did he play the trumpet, Congas and Bongos, he played Timbales, the unique sound of the Timbales resonated with him.

Mike hurried to a pay phone to call his roommates Carlos and Gregg insisting that they come down to the club and check this guy out. Carlos and Gregg were very cynical, according the Mike they accused him of crying “Wolf” before. Carabello is very convincing and does not take no for an answer. Carlos and Gregg finally showed up and was truly blown away. Not only did Mike discover Chepito Areas, He was able to bring to blues and Latin music together which became the genesis of the genre Latin rock.



They invited Chepito to a rehearsal they had scheduled the next day. They had a rehearsal space on a dirt floor in a basement in Potrero underneath a building. Chepito is dressed nice and the rest of the band showed up looking like they didn't sleep in a week. Chepito worked with Carabello and band to integrate complex Latino rhythm patterns into the blues music, this was the Genesis of the Santana band of Woodstock.

“One-day Bill Graham called us to a meeting he was telling us that he booked us to play a big gig in New York somewhere, we were kind of half listening Carlos was glued to every word. Bill was saying that since we only played Bay Area gigs, we could have a hard time in the New York area because the crowds there were really different, they could be mean, they could boo you, could throw stuff at you, you had to bring your A game or else”.

I reminded him, Mike Shrieve their Drummer once told me in an interview that Santana was a gang with instruments, not knives, was that true?

Mike said he is probably referencing the time when the band played at Kent State University, “We finished our set, we got paid, but they wouldn’t pay the road crew, we found out and ran out onto the gym floor a huge fight ensued, we all threw down. Some guy came at me with a Tomahawk. I grabbed it from him, threw it over my shoulder and it got stuck in the backboard of the basketball hoop, everyone stopped they thought I was a Kung Fu expert the roadies got paid”.

“Bill Graham arranged for the band to arrive 2 weeks ahead of the Woodstock concert for us to get our bearings get settled and be well-rehearsed for the gig. We were the only band with no record album out at the time and was scheduled to do the biggest performance of our life, we had no idea of the historical import.

We rented a small house in the town of Woodstock, when we got there the place was small quiet and quite boring, little did we know that Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Paul Butterfield band and all the East Coast heavies lived out there.

We were so bored that the day before the concert, Carlos and I went for a hike up this tall hill that had a magnificent waterfall. We climbed to the top a steep hill, where the waterfall was, you had to over jump this rock close to the edge to get the full view. Carlos jumps over the water onto the rock, I think man, I’m more athletic than he is, this will be a piece of cake. I jump I miss, fall into the water and the water is taking me over the waterfall, Carlos reaches down grabs my arm and saved my life. Carlos saved my life the day before Woodstock, I am eternally grateful, and we remain close to this very day”

“The day of the performance, we are at a Hotel all the roads are closed, they don’t know what to do, we see 2 huge Military Helicopters land in the parking lot across the street from the hotel, they were going to fly us in. I get in with Jerry Garcia, Jack Cassidy and other Musicians, the thing lifts off, there is no door, I have never really flown in a Helicopter before it was scary. Garcia was enjoying the ride looking down out the window, all you could see was a sea of people.

When we landed, we were there backstage it looked like a huge picnic, not sure when we were supposed to go on, some guy come up and says, Santana you are on! We get up to the stage, County Joe Mac Donald of Country Joe and the Fish was coming off the stage, he looked at me and said, Good luck man”...

Showtime! On stage we took our places not trying to look up at the sea of people, we are ready to go, I look at Dave Brown, then Mike then Gregg, Cheptio counted it off and then we take off! I tried not to look at the crowd it was a sea of people, we just threw it down! Carlos was high on LSD, but I wasn’t surprised, he liked that sort of thing, the set went

by quickly, the set was magical. We really didn't know that it was such a big deal, until a few months after, we started getting booked like crazy and the money started rolling in. Carlos, Gregg and I were 21 at the time.



Many of Woodstock performers went to see the movie Woodstock in New York where they gave you 2 joints at the door. As we came out of the limousine, we were handed 2 joints apiece. We were really surprised at how it turned out, so was everyone else at the show, suddenly they looked at us differently, come to think of it we looked at ourselves differently also, I guess. The film was a turning point in the history of the band, people still talking about it, and generations of bands playing this genre to this very day, its History man, it's our History, and a paradigm shift in world music using congas and Timbales es in blues. After this The Stones, Led Zeppelin, Chicago many big bands started using congas.

Our performance at Woodstock was the first time the world saw Congas and Timbales in a blues band”.

After the Academy Award winning film and the release of Santana's first album, the band toured constantly for almost two years. Mike went from obscurity to the big screen to the most prestigious rock venues around the world. A Guaguanco, of Sex, Drugs and Rock and Roll.

I asked him if success changed him?

“I was able to buy a home for my parents a home that they could not afford before while everyone buying cars and clothes was most important for me to buy a home for my folks.

Everyone in the band wore their fame differently and expressed their individual indulgences and conspicuous consumption through the cars they purchased. Carlos who didn't know how to drive or a license bought an Excalibur. Gregg threw a bag of cash down in a dealership where they thought he was a broke hippie and bought a De Tomaso Mangusa, Chepito bought a vintage Rolls Royce, Dave Brown bought a Porche” Mike bought 2, 1932 Custom made Cords.

I asked Cords?

He said, “One-day Mike got called, he picked up by his good buddy Sly Stone they were going over to Oakland to hang with Jazz icon Earl Father Hines. I lived on Precita and Army street, I Come out of the house Sly pulls up in this amazing 1932 replica cord.

Mike was impressed at the car, so he bought 2, one he painted yellow like his first performance conga drum”

Mike, Gregg and Dave bought custom motorcycles and was soon riding around with the Hells Angels for fun, much to the chagrin of band management they could be seen roaring all around town on Harley Davidson Choppers, Mike told me he put that funk down years ago and no longer rides.

Although close to Sly Stone, another one of Mike's good friend was Jimi Hendrix and his Girlfriend Devin. Mike recalls in May of 1970 when Jimi played Berkeley community theater Mike and Carlos was there backstage.

Jimi asked them to hang out after the gig to talk, Carlos split. When Hendrix finished and went back to the hotel, at the hotel Jimi asked Mike “How is it you guys get away with playing new music? Jimi said Every time I play something new, they boo me, it's always gotta be Purple Haze, Watchtower, Red House...” Mike said we just play what we want and they either dig it, or they don't, they just roll with us...

At the height of Jimi Hendrix and Santana's success Jimi's Girlfriend Devin called Mike and said that Jimi wanted him and Chepito to join his band. Mike went on stage one night contemplating the offer but decided to stick with the group of guys who he started with whom he considered Family.

Mike never told Chepito or Carlos about the offer. Mike's view of the band was very much like a baseball team and that each player had a role, each role was designed to help the team win. Santana was winning big.

Mike's dedication to Carlos Santana was more important than playing full time with Jimi Hendrix who was the number one rock star on the planet at the time.

There was also a time in New York when Mike and Carlos took Chepito to see Timbale master Tito Puente perform, Chepito never seen him in action before.

Chepito was invited by Tito on stage to do a timbale duel with Puente and blew him away. The New York cats could not believe what they experienced, Tito was done, and the new King of Timbales was born. *(Writer's note; Chepito told me the exact same story, some people dispute this story but there is an audio recording of it, and the musicians who were there still speak of it, Mike says if you were not there, then you don't know)*

After years of success, money, girls' and drugs, at its core the pressure of fame caused the Santana Classic band to break up, although many faulted the drugs, it was also about lifestyle and musical direction.

Mike said, “After I left the band there were a couple of years where I just drifted from one place to another without any sense of direction, I was numb and was afflicted with effected with break up. During those years I put together 2 bands, no direction, you can't sustain a career on just reputation”

Throughout the years Mike has worked on many musical projects with acts like, the best of the best, Miles Davis, Elvin Bishop, Boz Skaggs, Buddy Miles, [Harvey Mandel](#), Neal

Schon, Jimi Hendrix, Herbie Hancock, Stevie Wonder, Chick Corea, Irene Cara, Gabor Szabo, Eric Clapton, Narada, and legendary drummers. He has recorded the last three albums with the Steve Miller Band. He worked with The Rolling Stones on the Tattoo You Album.



In 1998 the group Santana was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame;

Mike is the first Conga only player ever to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to this day, Gregg Rolie quipped, “And in the foreseeable future” ...

Mike and Carlos have stayed close like family since the very beginning. Carlos’ and Mike’s Daughter are very close like Sisters and have remained so since they were Children.

For 10 years Mike toured with, Gregg, but gave up touring and decided to work on his new music with Neal Schon at his studio in Boston and produce other artists.

Sparingly throughout the years there have been a few Santana reunions with the original guys.

A couple of years Carlos called and said we were going to do a reunion and try to pick up where we left off. Mike was excited about the idea. “The plan was for each one of us to bring some new music to the table and decide the type of tunes we wanted to play”.

“I brought 3 tunes I had been working on for a while, Neal, Gregg and Carlos all brought tunes to the table, unfortunately they didn’t choose any of my tunes. It seems they favored a more rock guitar-based sound rather than the original Santana formula that made the band a success in the first place”

In April 2016 Santana released its twenty-third studio album: Santana IV. Santana IV because it was the fourth album released by the band consisting primarily of its original members”

Carlos is scheduled to perform at Woodstock 50th anniversary...

In Meanwhile Carabello still teaches congas to young and old alike, bonding Fathers and Sons, Mothers and Daughters together through the learning of the somehow tribal and occasionally visceral instrument the conga drum.

Today Mike Happily married with 4 daughters and 8 grandchildren.

Neal Schon, Caraballo and Carlos talk at least three times a week, forever brothers in arms.



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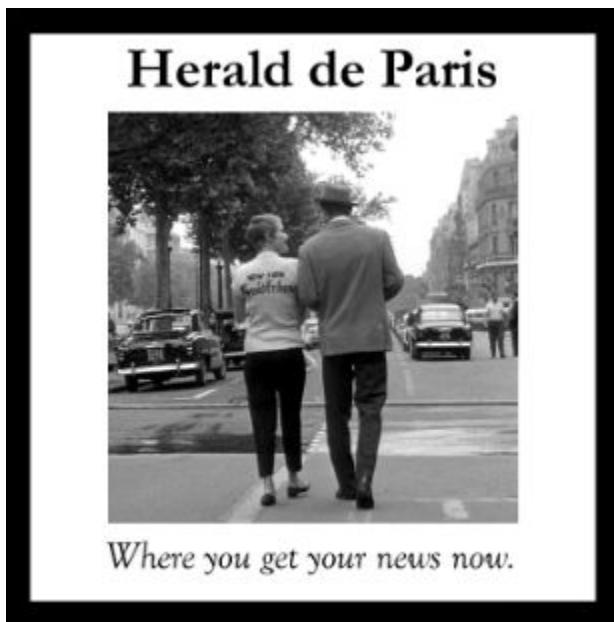
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