



Andy Santana

By Dennis Carelli

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The San Francisco Bay area is lucky to have a small army of high-quality blues harmonica players. From north of San Francisco, south to Santa Cruz the traditions of blues harps remain alive and well in the hands and sounds of today's Bay Area players. This month we talk with Andy Santana who started his blues journey in Santa Cruz, the southern end of the Bay Area and who now resides north of San Francisco. Andy is a strong vocalist and harmonica player with urban Chicago style mixed in with the danceable, swing feelings associated with West Coast Blues. He has toured

and performed with artists as varied as Chicago's Jimmy Rogers and Willie Dixon, New Orleans legend Earl King, Booker T (of the MG's), and Bonnie Raitt.

DC: I know you've been quite busy working hard on your new CD. What's the name of the new CD?

ANDY: The name of the CD, it will be called *Take Me With You*. It's the title track to the first song on the album. It's a song I actually wrote probably fifteen years ago. I used to do it with a band I was in, *The Soul Drivers*, with Michael Schermer, June Core and Mark Carino. And then it kind of lost its oomph. As I went to other bands somehow I didn't have all the elements I needed. When I wrote that song I heard it with horns with a real funky kind of thing goin' on. That's what I got out of this album. I hired Jr. Watson, Mike Schermer again cause in the last fifteen years that guy just skyrocketed in terms of not only his playing ability, but overall his whole musical ability has really been improved. He toured with Howard Tate. He's just doing it. He's still with Angela Strehli from time to time. He's touring with Maria Muldar. And then I got Jr. Watson, he's my absolute favorite guitar player in the world. He's often imitated by many, many people. Of course he's more of a cult figure more than anything else because of his, (pause)

DC: Personality? His quirkiness?

ANDY: (Laughs) He's got an awkward personality. I love the guy man. I'll tell you straight-up he's of those guys, 1970 when I first met him and he's never ever failed. If I have a guitar player that I want to learn some of this [Jr.] Watson stuff, I'll take him over there and he'll teach him anything. My biggest and greatest accomplishment has been able to rub elbows with great musicians like Jr. Watson. And Mike Schermer who is up there with everybody. He's as good as anybody that's out there now. Of course Jr. Watson has been that way for many years. But like you said he's kind of a quirky guy. You got to know him. But to know him is to love him. Like I said he's nothing but giving to me in every way.

DC: I think part of the quirkiness or eccentricity is part of the spark of creativity. You see a lot of creative people who are off the centerline.

ANDY: Exactly

DC: When did you first start writing songs? When you first started playing an instrument?

ANDY: I actually was in a band... I think it was seventh grade. I was in a band cause these guys needed a singer. They put me in this band, and believe me I think I've told this story to two people in my life. You're the second one. I remember it being a lot of fun as it was my first exposure to being in a band and being in front of people. We would play these clubs, I lived in Hawaii at the time, and I covered all those groups Rolling Stones, Kinks, any of the popular songs of the day. I didn't play any instruments. I just simply sang. And because I didn't really know the words I'd always take a cheat sheet with me and just sing from reading off words. And people would make fun [of me]. Cause when you are younger they seem to make fun of you a little more. Like saying, 'He's reading the words.' But that was my first exposure to playing music, I think. But I started to write songs right about, I'd say long before I started playing harmonica, probably in the mid-70's. I didn't actually start seriously playing harmonica till probably late 70s. I always kind of had one.

I heard some guy playing harmonica in the park, that may have been Mark Hummel. He said he used to hang out in the park at the time. One of my biggest influences was Gary Smith. I used to go watch him play. I already knew [Jr.] Watson and Watson invited me to come along and check it out. I would go down there and check those guys out. I had already seen Rod Piazza, but he was standoffish. He won't talk to me. This was like in the early 70's when I saw him in Topanga Canyon at The Corral. Up there he was very standoffish at the time. And it took me in fact years before he started to really talk to me. But he's now a good friend. I've known him for years now. I've bought amplifiers from him. And microphones. He's been really cool with me. But Gary Smith was one of the guys. He didn't so much sit down and show me stuff. But he told me who to listen to. And when he was playing, I would say 'How do you do that?' And he would say do this. He's a "lipper" and I'm a tongue blocker. I started out lipping and he and Paul Durquette, you know Paul?

DC: Oh yes. There's quirky.

ANDY: (Laughs hard). I think that might be the definition of the word. Right there. Paul Durquette is also a dear friend of mine. We've had our ups and downs together because of his quirkiness. But I love the guy too. I've known him for years and we have banged heads, but he's always been very generous and a really good guy to me. I think he probably showed me more in terms of really telling me [to] stick to tongue blocking. He was really adamant. You know how he is.

DC: Do you tongue block your bends?

ANDY: Yes. I started out lipping. Then Paul Durquette and even Gary Smith influenced me. Gary Smith who was a lipper said that if I could learn all over again I would tongue block. They both encouraged me to tongue block. Since I was just kind of starting out then, I just said hey, I got nothing to lose. So I started tongue blocking. Now it feels awkward for me to do anything else since I've done it for so many years. I don't even think about it. I just do it.

DC: When you started the harmonica were you playing guitar at that time, or was harmonica your first instrument?

ANDY: No. I've always kind of strummed the guitar, but I didn't take it seriously. I knew a few first position chords, basic chords. But I didn't know any blues at all in the very beginning. I could strum a couple chords, maybe read a chord out of a book and play. But I didn't study guitar until I was thirty when I started my first band. I decided I'm going to learn to play a little more guitar so I picked it up and started learning more chords and some scales. Just kind of messin' with it trying to see if I could pick up something by playing it. I've never really taken the guitar really serious. I have fun playing it and I think it's more through osmosis I've learned. Watching people and players in bands that I would pick up the guitar stuff. I have sat down and tried to convert horn lines into guitar lines. And I've done it successfully in a couple of things. But for the most part I sort of bang away it. I can keep some rhythms and know how to play a few solos.

DC: When you perform now do you play guitar?

ANDY: Yeah, yeah. I play the guitar. Jodie Williams is one of my favorite guitar players. So I copped a couple of his tunes, instrumentals that I do. I play a Johnny "Guitar" Watson song, "Late Freight Twist." I do that. It's a simple song for me to pull off. It's one of those few songs that [Jr.] Watson showed me. Paul Durquette showed me something on the guitar too. And then there's a few other things I do. I do "Moaning For Molasses," that Jodie Williams tune. Are you familiar with that?

DC: No, not that one.

ANDY: It's a great tune. It's got kind of a minor groove in it.

DC: I would definitely like it. I like minor blues tunes.

ANDY: Yeah, you would like it. It's really great. You should pick it up. Jodie Williams is one of my favorite guys. He really is. But I started to listen to some of these obscure cats that [Jr.] Watson turned me on to. I asked if he had some T-Bone [Walker] cause I going to try to learn some tunes. He said don't learn T-Bone. Learn like Goree Carter. And I go who's Goree Carter. He said go out and buy yourself a Goree Carter double album. And I did and I picked up some things from that. And some ideas. I liked his approach. He actually was sort of a T-Bone clone too. But he kind of had his own style. It was a little more raw, a little bit more (chuckle) suited to my abilities in terms of playing guitar. I never really listened to any of the Kings; like B.B., or Albert or others. There are so many guys who have and really know how to do that really well. So I thought I might try some more obscure cats. I listen to a little Bill Jennings and as many obscure cats just to try to get a feel for them. I don't think I accomplished really nailing down any of their styles but I got some good ideas from them.

DC: Harps players too. There are a lot of players who just listen to the "kings" like Little Walter, Sonny Boy, etc. But there are a lot other wonderful players in different styles; Frank Frost as an example. A lot of other guys who were and are there but just don't get thee attention.

ANDY: Speaking of those players, Papa George Lightfoot was probably my number one influence from the very beginning. I got turned on to him by mistake. At the time, Thrifty's was still around. Remember Thrifty's? They used to have those bargain bins where for fifty cents you could get an album. I actually found a Papa George Lightfoot album in there. It was just really weird. It seemed weird because I didn't know who he was. I saw this guy sitting on a chair and it said *Nachez* something, what's it called. I don't know. It's

his album when he plays with the *PG & E Band* or something like that. I can't remember what the name of those guys were. Anyway I picked that album up, took it home and it was one of the first albums I started actually tried to cop. Really cop. I did get turned on to [Little] Walter, but he was too sophisticated for me. I thought I'd never learn any of that stuff. Same thing with Sonny Boy. I got turned on to him a little bit later on. And Howlin' Wolf. I felt I could cop that cause he was a lot more simplistic in his approach to harmonica playing. But Papa George, I actually sat down and really learned to cop some of those licks he was doing. I still do some of those licks to this day. I find myself consciously thinking, oh yeah Papa George. Throw some of that in there.

DC: Sounds like you put in many hours of "wood shedding," listening to the records, breaking them down and learning little pieces. It's such a common thread for really good players who I have spoken with. People like Mark Hummel. Gary Primich or R. J. Mischo told me they spent hours and hours listening and learning licks and pieces and put it all together.

ANDY: Now they got these new machines that slows the music down and changes the pitch. What a wonderful idea. I got one of those things. I haven't really used it as much as I would like to. I've had it for about seven or eight months now—maybe a little longer than that. It's a valuable tool. What helped me with the phrasing and singing if I want to cop a song just like any lick I have to listen to the phrasing to try to get it. It's a really handy tool. But I didn't have that back then. It was basically lifting the needle up and moving it back and forth.

DC: You learned the hard way. Technology today certainly makes it much easier, but a player still has put the hours in.

ANDY: Yeah, that's the bottom line. I remember my housemates really encouraged me. When I first started playing harmonica I was playing bluegrass music. Before I learned blues, before I was turned on to Gary [Smith] and those guys. I would see them. I got turned onto them, but I wasn't really into it yet. The guys I hung out with played guitars all the time but they were playing a lot of bluegrass. So I know a hundred bluegrass songs. Any standard bluegrass song, I can probably play harmonica along with you. I sat down and did those songs with my friends.

DC: Do you know Tom Ellis?

ANDY: No.

DC: Tom is fairly well known for refurbishing and selling vintage microphones and he wrote a series of articles in *Blues Access* on Paul Butterfield. When I did an interview with him he told me that's where he started his harmonica playing in a bluegrass band. Then one day he heard of and then saw Paul Butterfield and then, pretty much was the end of bluegrass for him.

ANDY: What happened with me, I was seeing these guys play and hearing stuff and tended to go toward that [blues] as time went on. I remember in the very beginning it was really helpful. I may have told you, I had a friend of mine who handed me a harmonica and kind of got me started. That was I high school. Just got out of high school actually. I always kind of just blew on it but didn't really start to late, later on. I picked it up and played a little bit. I saw Gary Smith and thought he was amazing. Then I was hanging out with these friends that were bluegrass and country players so I got turned on to Charlie McCoy, which was a huge benefit. One of the things I always tell my students is that one of the things I learned from Charlie McCoy was that it was about melody. He can riff like a

'mother, you know he can. The guy is an amazing harmonica player. But he really had an incredible sense of melody. He wasn't just about riffs. It was about playing the melody, hearing the melody. And to me that is one THE most important things I try to teach. In fact when I teach harmonica students, one of the first things, first homework assignment, I make them do is nursery rhythm ditties. Anything you want to do. First position, second position if they're advanced enough to know what the positions are. I try to get them to imitate, whether it's "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" or something else. I tell them these are the foundations, the building blocks to more complex melodies. A lot of time I will sit down with them and take a piece of classic music and say, see this little line right here. Da, da da. And I'll play the line. It's only three notes. And it's "Three Blind Mice." But I'm taking it out of context. But I'm showing that that little thing, "Three Blind Mice," is in this really, really elaborate and very sophisticated score. Well that's just a building block. You can look at this music sheet and you'd be very confused because this might look like Chinese. But if you just break it down a little piece at a time you find that these little tiny things are just little melodies. And that's the whole idea, coming from the place of a melody. To me that's a very important thing. I don't always practice what I preach, (laughs) but I think I'm a better teacher than I am a player to be honest with you.

DC: How much teaching do you do?

ANDY: When I was in Sacramento I had probably about fifteen students at that time. I've had students from about 1985 on. People would say, hey show me. I'd be glad to show somebody something. Sometimes for no money. Later on, probably the early '90's, I started to actually become a little more serious about teaching. I devised a format. I give you thirteen basic techniques, starting with tongue blocking, lipping, being able to get octaves, doing double tonguing, triple tonguing, warbles, etc. I've got it broken down into thirteen basic techniques. From there, I teach them some really basic music. How a simple diatonic scale is built. Then apply the sequences with numbers so this way you'll know that a 1-3-5 is a triad. Tell them what a triad is, building block of chords. They'd kind of work from there. I try to do it by making it fun. I want to teach them some simple things right away. I'll teach them a little, simple melody line no matter what it is, even if it is like "Mary Had A little Lamb." I teach them that and they go away saying, I got something. It's real rudimentary but then add on to that. Or else I'll make them do it in sort of a triplet thing so it sounds like a riff. Then I say, now you are riffing. I'll take a little section of three notes of Mary Had A little Lamb and turn that into a triplet and I'll show you how to do that. Da da da, dadada. And I'll try to get them to do it fast. All of a sudden they have a riff and it doesn't sound like "Mary Had A little Lamb" or "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" or "Three Blind Mice" or whatever. They then start to get a little confident. Mainly what I teach when I do teach is all about air control. Because if you are huffing and puffing, you are doing it wrong. It's all about air control and position of your mouth. Being able to use your diaphragm right.

DC: Stevie Ray Vaughan made "Mary Had A little Lamb" a pretty good tune, so that's not a bad place to start as a good example.

ANDY: Like I said before, I think I'm a better teacher than I am a player. What I do is teach them not to do any of the bad habits I did when I started out. The bad habits hold you down and you find yourself struggling with the harmonica for a long time. If you break through the [bad] habit, it actually sometimes takes months, sometimes years, for you to get out of that thing that you do. I tell them, these are things I don't want you to do. I'll show them a little thing and say, no—don't do that. Do it like this. I do enjoy teaching.

