

A closer look at **Leon Patillo**

The term “legend” is thrown around quite loosely these days, but in the case of Leon Patillo’s musical accomplishments, it certainly applies. The singer/songwriter is perhaps best known for fronting Santana, one of the most seminal acts of the 1970s’ rock and roll landscape with an indelible hit string that penetrated all facets of pop culture. Besides that incredible run, Patillo is also recognized for his work with Funkadelic and Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, while the last two and a half decades have been filled with a consistent and ground-breaking solo career.

“Man, let me tell you, it’s been an incredible ride,” the silky voiced Patillo offers. “The Lord is good and He’s been using all the experiences I’ve had in music to help me become a more effective minister. A lot of times people want to hear stories from the old days, and that’s allowed me to open up my heart and prepare a place for them to hear my message.”

Indeed tales of yesteryear are a top request on a near daily basis for Patillo, but he’s happy to oblige, especially considering how formative the days with Santana were on his own material and even coming to faith. After attending school in California and fronting a local band called Creation (signed to Atlantic Records), he became aware of Carlos Santana, the guitar guru and founder of his eponomously titled band. Though Patillo’s creative career was already off to a solid start, he couldn’t pass the opportunity to sing lead vocals for Santana upon a personal request from Carlos in 1973.

“I remember driving from L.A. to San Francisco and going to his house for a meeting and a writing session,” he recalls. “Carlos opened the door and greeted me with open arms like we’d known each other for a million years. He took me downstairs to where his studio was and showed me a song he was working on. I listened to what he was doing, sat down at the organ next to him, and he looked at me and said, ‘Oh my goodness, you can play too!’”

Patillo then showed Santana one of his ideas (which would later become “Mirage” off the classic 1974 *Borboletta* album) and the rest, as they say, is history. With its new singer/songwriter/keyboard player in tow, Santana continued to reach crests on the touring circuit, playing venues as diverse and lauded as Radio City Music Hall, Madison Square Garden, the Hippodrome in England and The Sports Center of

Australia. Add in a string of other albums and singles, plus a continual evolution of direction (including R&B and ethnic elements into the group's eclectic amalgamation) and Patillo skyrocketed to the ranks of rock's upper echelon.

But despite all the fame, glitz and glamour, there was something missing from the superstar's life. And Patillo didn't know exactly what that was until he started dating a girl from San Francisco whose brother was a believer. Having grown up with a father who was Methodist, a mother who was Baptist, and early church memories of Catholicism, the singer was admittedly confused with Christianity. But come July 4, 1974 (after repeated witnessing and encouragement from his newly found friend) Patillo accepted Jesus Christ into his life and made a commitment to steer far from the spotlight's distractions. However, that didn't mean throwing in the career towel, and he continued with Santana before branching off on his own.

"I remember we were on tour with Earth, Wind and Fire and both bands were on a plane together," he says. "Everyone was sitting separately until I finally went up to three of their guys, starting with the one who turned out to be their singer Phillip Bailey. I had a Bible in my hand that day and I remember him saying to me, 'do you know how that thing works? Why don't you teach us something out of it?' I hadn't been a Christian long, but I studied hard and after every concert for the next six weeks, I would teach what I'd learned."

It's as a result of those conversations that Bailey and some of his band mates accepted the Lord come the tour's completion, though their friendship and evangelism desires didn't stop there. Patillo and his newly converted friends decided to put their faith into action, renting out The Roxy (Sunset Strip's infamous night club) and hosting a handful of Gospel nights they christened "Jesus at the Roxy."

"Word traveled pretty fast that we were doing this and people started pouring in, so much that we had to add a second show one night," he reminisces. "We had tons of fellow musicians and celebrities- Smokey Robinson, Donna Summer, producers, people that the public idolized- and all they really wanted to do was praise the Lord with us."

As it became apparent that such means of reaching out was a success, Patillo began rethinking his vision and decided the most natural way to mix songwriting with spirituality was to embark on a solo path. After stepping down from his highly coveted position in Santana, he signed with Word Records in 1979 releasing the cutting edge celebration *Dance Children Dance*. An array of blockbuster projects continued throughout the 80s and 90s, spawning smashes like "J.E.S.U.S.," "Cornerstone," and the wedding anthem "Flesh of My Flesh."

"I had no idea God would use me as one of the many pioneers in this new thing called contemporary Gospel, but I think my work in the mainstream prepared me for what was to come," he confirms, citing session time with Funkadelic and Reeves as providing additional leverage. "In those early days of my ministry and as I continue through today, I've always sought to be as innovative as I could be."

From seamlessly meshing dance, R&B, soul and Gospel styles, to dynamic live shows, Patillo turned his amalgamation of sights and sounds into an all out experience. He was one of the first to tour with an entirely electronic one man band and also was known for having an all female backing band on another jaunt. In current contexts, few inspirational artists are as explosive and uplifting on stage, while keeping their feet firmly planted on the ground.

Since 1999, Patillo has hit the road performing for the “Get Motivated” motivational speaking series, which has put him on stage with everyone from Colin Powell to George Foreman to many of the presidents (including The Bush family, Bill Clinton, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter). It’s out of those conferences and continued support from fans that birthed not only one but a pair of new projects to highlight two prevalent but highly varitized sides of Patillo.

In terms of capturing the concert high, *Live Experience 2* packs plenty of punches, revolving around a sizzling live band, previous and present hits, plus Patillo’s unmistakable vocals and arrangements. Tracks like “Sky Is the Limit” and “I Can” are meant to encourage listeners to abundant living, while “Rise Above” and “Pulling Down Strongholds” are sure fire soundtracks to starting life over again. Of course “J.E.S.U.S.” appears in fine form even after all these years, while “Born Again Women” is a sizzling reworking of “Black Magic Women” from the Santana days. The record wraps up with a comical yet carefully delivered Christian message “I Am Your Friend” delivered directly from Patillo.

“It’s pretty self-explanatory, but you have to hear it for yourself to fully take in the whole happening,” he enthuses. “There’s something for everyone on it- those that have followed me since the beginning and the young people who may be hearing me for the first time. It’s sure to give you all the feelings and energy of coming to a Leon Patillo concert and hopefully help start a foundation for someone’s spiritual life that may not already have one.”

The double dose of Patillo power continues with *Breathe On Me*, a project anchored in praise that showcases the singer’s softer and more introspective side. Tracks like “Spirit of the Lord,” “Peace” and “Give Thanks” are sure to stir the soul, while “Worship and Adore You Lord” and “Manifest Your Power” give the glory entirely to God. It’s all tied around the underlying goal of fully drawing listeners into the Lord’s presence and supplementing their times of intimate prayer.

“*Breathe On Me* is definitely a worship album and it took me about three years to do,” Patillo explains. “Each song hopefully will speak to something you’re going through, for the need to seek and accept forgiveness when you’ve done something wrong or to getting going and out of the procrastination mode. It’s a spiritual workout of sorts where each song was written on my knees.”

But beyond the chart action and critical acclaim either Positive Pop Records’ endeavor is likely to receive, Patillo looks forward to the future in hopes each will cultivate additional seeds within the Christian and non-believing communities. Based on his communicative credibility and celebrated catalogue, it’s likely he’ll do just that and quite possibly much more than he can even imagine.

"The basis of my ministry is to portray my music in a way that gives people more hope and a better outlook for what is to come," Patillo sums up. "I just want to be a Christian cheerleader, for lack of a better word, where I can get people excited about all their good qualities and help them reach that next level. I'm all about seeing the glass half full even in our faults and I'm here to remind everyone there's nothing they could've done that could separate them from God's unfailing love."

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