Play It Like
Growing up in Adelaide, Australia, Orianthi’s house was full of music. Her father had a great vinyl collection, which included Santana, Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton. Her father played the guitar, too, mainly Greek music, and when Orianthi was around five or six years old, she walked into the living room and sat down to watch him play. She loved how it looked, his fingers moving up and down the frets. The sounds he could create from that guitar just seemed to offer endless possibilities. Forget piano, which she had started playing when she was four. There had been something kind of boring about it—for her anyway.

Picking up guitar was a way to bond with her father and spend time together, but also, there was how it felt when she held that guitar in her hand. “As soon I picked it up, I just felt a really powerful connection,” she says.

She played the acoustic guitar for a few years. Then, when she was 11, she saw Santana in concert. And from the moment he played “Europa,” it was all electric for Orianthi. There was so much soul in his work.

While guitar was her life, school wasn’t so easy. Everyone at school was listening to the Backstreet Boys while she was enjoying Cream and Bob Marley. “I was bullied. I dressed like a hippie. I listened to music the other kids had never heard before. It was like I was from another planet, really. I felt like an alien,” she says.

Orianthi put everything into her music, signing with her first manager when she was 14. She produced her own first record from her house and sent a demo to Santana. Then, when she was 15, she left school behind and began her career as a professional musician, playing gigs three nights a week. Before her 16th birthday, Orianthi performed in a stage show with three-time Grammy winner Steve Vai. Vai would become like an uncle to her.

She made her second record when she was 18, which she again produced entirely on her own out of her home studio. Then, Jorge Santana reached out to her. “We’ve been cranking your record in our offices, and we love it,” he told her in an email. Not long after that, when she heard Santana was coming to Australia, she bombarded him with press kits. The day of Santana’s show, her manager called her. Santana wanted to meet with her. She had been gigging the night before until about 4 a.m., and next thing she knew, she was jamming with him at sound check. Then, he invited her up on stage. She stayed on that stage, in front of 10,000 fans, for 45 min.

“It was like being thrown into the ocean. Sometimes, those good musicians that you really look up to and admire, they do that to you as to know if you’re capable and to see how you do in different situations,” she says. “As an artist, you want to be constantly pushed. We’re constantly thrown in the deep end, all the time.”

Later, Santana had this to say about her on an Australian talk show: “If I’m going to pass the baton to someone, she’s my first choice.” In 2006, she relocated to Los Angeles and scored a deal with Jimmy Iovine at Interscope Records.

There’s no pinning her down. She’s jammed with Alice Cooper, Michael Bolton, and Carrie Underwood. When Michael Jackson was looking for the best in the business for his “This Is It” tour, he came looking for Orianthi and, after she knocked it out of the park with a blazing “Beat It” solo, the job was hers.
She finds inspiration in so many groundbreaking women guitarists: Bonnie Raitt and her blend of blues, rock, folk, and country; Jennifer Batten, the guitarist who performed in three tours with Michael Jackson; and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the godmother of rock and roll who popularized the electric guitar with her pop gospel. “That’s the journey of music and everything that gets thrown at you. You go on these different trips. You learn to take different things from different artists,” she says.

Go for It
Being a woman in the music industry can be difficult. It takes balance. Surrounding yourself with a good support team is very important. But Orianthi keeps a positive attitude and encourages all young female musicians to go for it. “Singing, songwriting, playing guitar, drumming, all of that. Just believe in yourself and stick to it,” she advises.

“When I first came to L.A., there were hardly any female guitar players, Orianthi recounts. “I was like a rare bird. But now, around 50% of guitar players are female. It has changed immensely. And this has to do with girls encouraging each other. The more girls who play guitar, once they own it, and they’re confident, they inspire others to do the same.” “That guitar is not an accessory. It’s part of you. I always feel that. You’ve got to play it like you mean it.”

When Orianthi was starting out, she used to send Vai demos. He’d send her notes back, telling her what he liked about them as well as where she needed to improve. He was encouraging but honest, and that, coming from such an icon and incredible guitar player, meant a lot. Today, many young musicians reach out to Orianthi through social media, and she hasn’t forgotten those days. They send her songs and lyrics as well as demos. In Los Angeles, she works with the students at the School of Rock, jamming with them every other week, and she loves the energy and the talent she sees in the young musicians.

After writing the song “Rescue Me” with good friend Marti Frederiksen, she knew she had the direction for her new album. She and Frederiksen spent 28 days recording in Nashville, and her new record, O, her first solo record in seven years, comes out at the end of 2020.

“It’s an experimental record, going on a vibe, experimenting with sounds, synth sounds, guitar tones, a different experience from my other records,” she says. It’s diverse, “a little heavier than you might expect,” she adds. There’s some Hendrix influence, and there’s a Buddy Guy track. There’s a song written by Motley Crue’s Nikki Sixx. It also features Frederiksen’s 21-year-old son Evan on drums. “I know a lot of people are going to ask, ‘Who’s playing drums on your record?’ because he’s really a great drummer. A little like Hendrix,” says Orianthi.

The music industry has been particularly hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has not only suffered financially, but playing shows with live audiences is where musicians thrive. Orianthi is looking forward to playing a worldwide live stream with her band from the Whiskey in 2020. “We’ll have a very small audience, probably just crew members, but I’ll get to interact with my band. There’s only so many times you can sing to a camera,” she says.

—Katianne Williams is a freelance writer specializing in the technology field.