

Sounds familiar

By Fred Shuster

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Music Writer

You've heard his licks a million times. If you were in the music biz during the '70s, you marveled at his Prince Valiant hairstyle. As featured soloist on landmark albums of the rock era, Larry Carlton was the dominant pop-session guitarist of an age not known for good taste.

During those wide-labeled times, Carlton's was the dizzyingly lyrical, sophisticated guitar sound that elevated remarkable albums by Steely Dan and Joni Mitchell to an even higher plane.

"Just another day at the office," is how Carlton recalls his reaction on hearing the first playback of his work on jaw-droppers like Steely Dan's "Kid Charlemagne" or the Crusaders' "Chain Reaction."

Since landing his first recording date just out of his teens in 1970, Carlton has been paid for more than 3,000 sessions, released about two dozen solo albums, won Grammy Awards and appeared on countless million-sellers.

Today this modest, peaceful musician rakes it in as a member of the unfathomably popular smooth-jazz ensemble Fourplay, an anchor of the Wave radio format. Although Fourplay has a couple of dates in May at the Cerritos Center, Carlton brings his own band to Catalina's in Hollywood on Wednesday for a five-night run, two sets a night, in support of his crisp new all-blues 'n' groove set, "Sapphire Blue."

Expect a line at the door.

"No matter what the audience comes to hear, when I play the blues, that's when I most passionately connect with them and my guitar," Carlton, 56, said.

That's partly because blues is at the foundation of what Carlton always does. Some of his best session work -- on albums by Steely Dan ("Aja," "The Royal Scam"), Bobby Blue Bland ("His California Album"), the Crusaders ("Chain Reaction," "Scratch") and Joni Mitchell ("Court and Spark," "Hejira") -- is instantly identifiable by clean bluesy solos (played on the versatile Gibson ES-335 guitar) augmented by imaginative chord voicings.

"Larry is an incredibly talented musician who doesn't just play a series of licks," said session veteran, producer and bandleader Steve

Lukather, Carlton's partner in an instrumental guitar duo project that won a Grammy in 2001. "What he does with the instrument is something only he can do. And he's a real gentleman and class act all the way around."

Early fretting

Carlton's talent was encouraged early by his mom. Growing up in Lomita, a small suburb adjacent to Torrance known in the '30s as the "Celery Capital of the World," Carlton initially showed interest in a battered acoustic propped up in a closet, after seeing the brilliant pedal steel-and-Telecaster duo Speedy West and Jimmy Bryant on TV. When he was 6, Carlton's mother Maebell began shuttling Larry to half-hour weekly lessons taught by a guitarist named Slim Edwards at a Torrance music store. The first 10 minutes were spent in a mini-jam session, then came a structured lesson. Carlton continued as Edwards' pupil for 14 years and went on to become a music major in college.

"I started listening to KBCA (the Los Angeles jazz station programmed in the '60s by the late Chuck Niles) where I first heard Joe Pass, John Coltrane and Wes Montgomery -- and it changed my life," the easygoing Carlton recalled, cradling the sunburst '60s ES-335 that's worth as much today as a new BMW.

Touchingly, Carlton remembers his mom driving him to the Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach so he could attend jam sessions there, then returning to pick him up several hours later.

Word quickly spread about the young prodigy. While gigging in local clubs and working talent shows as a teenager, Carlton began getting calls for demo sessions, which he also often arranged. Fellow sidemen on those dates mentioned Carlton during bigger-name recording dates. At the time, the first-call guitarist in pop was Louie Shelton.

"I was very lucky to sit next to Louie (on a number of sessions) and hear what he was doing, and then I'd go off and try some of it on my next job," Carlton said. "I eventually started putting things together the way I felt them -- and people responded; I'd get calls where the producer would say, 'Play whatever you think fits.' I was a new player, and there were always new producers and arrangers coming in. There was a lot of work, averaging 15 to 16 sessions a week for six years."

In 1971, Carlton joined the Jazz Crusaders, adding the famous melody line to the hit "Put It Where You Want It." He stayed with the much-lauded jazz-funk group for six years while also appearing on hundreds of records by everyone from Barbra Streisand to Mitchell (the allmusic.com database lists nine pages of credits for Carlton).

The next phase

Burned out from the studios by the late '70s and thinking about following Shelton's lead in moving to production, Carlton was a musician's musician when he began gigging for fun at the now-defunct North Hollywood jazz room Dante's. Guitar players from all over the world made the pilgrimage. Told that even his interviewer had smuggled a tape recorder into the joint in '77, Carlton smiled and said, "Everybody did."

Along with a clean, razor-sharp tone and perfectly pitched vibrato, Carlton is better-known for his melodic bent rather than showmanship. He was also one of the first to use a volume pedal to create a swelling sound that seems to bring chords out of nowhere.

"I never was into being a showoff," he says. "I mean, I know I've done it sometimes, but I really tried to be more about the song than anything else. The bottom line is the music."

Incomprehensibly, considering this unassuming and gentle musician sidestepped the blizzard of cocaine that swept through Hollywood's studios during the '70s, Carlton was the unlikely target of a random gunshot that struck him in the neck outside his studio near Burbank in 1988. The wound shattered his vocal cords and caused nerve trauma that required a long period of recuperation. As a result, the guitarist helped found Helping Innocent People, a nonprofit group to aid victims of random gun violence.

Today, when not touring with Fourplay or leading his own band, Carlton -- now a grandfather -- and his wife live on a ranch in Nashville, Tenn., where he listens to the sounds of nature or the satellite blues and jazz stations. Although his dad died several years ago, Carlton's 81-year-old mom still lives in Lomita, in the same house he grew up in.

Asked what approach he suggested a beginning guitarist take, Carlton had an answer the late Edwards, his first guitar teacher back in that Torrance music store, would've appreciated: "Standards. You have the melody and the harmony -- and you've got to master them both."