

## "Freewheeling gunslinger"

Musician's Friend's Artist Spotlight Exclusive Interview with  
Larry Carlton  
(The original transcript can be found at  
<http://www.musiciansfriend.com>)

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Almost every guitarist of the late 20th century is familiar with the spontaneous, lyrical, and melodically sophisticated playing of Larry Carlton. Having achieved household-name status for his peerless solos with Steely Dan in the mid '70s, Carlton has played literally thousands of studio sessions with every stripe of musician from hard bop to soft pop. His decades of solo and ensemble work have brought him critical acclaim in the form of almost a dozen Grammy nominations and several wins. Carlton is always trading musical hats. In the last year, he has toured the world with supergroup Fourplay and his band Sapphire Blues and has collaborated with Steve Lukather, for which he won a Grammy.

Long known as "Mr. 335," Carlton has a new Gibson signature 335 model out and will soon have a signature model Gibson acoustic on the market. Carlton took an hour out of his busy schedule to discuss his phenomenally broad background and his perennial passion for music. Especially considering his status as one of the world's foremost guitarists, his demeanor was congenial and he had an infectious laugh that was quick to seize the humor in every situation.

Musician's Friend: Most guitar players have an initial influence, some other player who first sparked their interest in the instrument. Who would that be for you?

Larry Carlton: I was so young that I'll be speculating but with a pretty high degree of accuracy. My parents told me that when I was four years old I was fascinated with the guitar that was lying around my grandmother's house but I was too small to hold it. So they told me, "Wait till you're big enough to hold it," which was at six-and-a-half years old, "and then you can take lessons." At that time I think Joe Maphis was probably on TV every Saturday night. Maybe that's who I first caught.

MF: You've talked in other interviews about some of your heroes, who were primarily sophisticated jazz types. Were there any players in-between there in different genres—say rock or blues guys—who influenced you?

LC: I was copping solos from late '50s and early '60s records when I was 12 or 13 years old. But as far as single influences nobody comes



to mind until my discovery of jazz when I was 14. And that's where the others come in.

MF: Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, and all those guys.

LC: Yeah.

MF: So when you were very young you started off with lessons?

LC: Yeah, I started when I was six-and-a-half years old and I studied with the same teacher almost eight years. His name was Slim Edwards in Torrance, California.

MF: Is that where you got your reading chops for later studio work?

LC: Yeah. He exposed me. Every lesson I had to read a certain amount of music and then we would jam a certain amount also.

MF: It's unusual for guitar players to start off learning to read.

LC: [laughs] Yeah. Thank goodness I did.

MF: What was Slim Edwards' background? Was he a jazzer or . . .

LC: No. He was originally from Chicago. He played with no pick. It's hard to describe without you seeing my right hand, but it was a sort of "ga doong ga chuck ga doong ga chuck ga doong ga chuck ga doong ga chuck" with his thumb and fingers in kind of a bastardized version of classical music. Some years later he would teach me "Malagueña." It really wasn't the real deal, but it was close. [general laughter]

MF: Have you seen him since?

LC: You know, he passed away many years ago. But his wife, Dotty, came to one of my shows about two years ago. She's close to 90 years old now. After the show she came backstage and said, "Seeing you up there you looked just like you did when you were sitting in Slim's studio. Having a ball playing a guitar." [general laughter]

MF: Did you play a nylon string guitar back in those days?

LC: No. For the first year I played a steel string acoustic. And then my first electric guitar was probably a '57 Broadcaster [Esquire?]. I was seven-and-a-half or eight. I got it for Christmas.

MF: You don't still have that same guitar, do you?

LC: No, of course not. Every time I wanted a new one we had to trade. We couldn't afford to keep the old ones.



MF: You've got a couple now, though, right?

LC: I've got a few.

MF: You spent a lot of time as a studio guy doing all kinds of sessions. The one that stood out for me was the Partridge Family. I was curious if you could give us your impression of what it was like to play with the Partridge Family, if you even remember it.

LC: It's funny because none of them were there. [general laughter] The producer-songwriter for most of those was a gentleman named Wes Farrell and Wes really had his finger on the pulse of bubblegum music. So he would hire the studio aces and we would come in and do three songs in three hours. Then the kid, David, would come in and sing. And they'd hire studio background singers to do the rest. So the guys were never there. David came by to say hi every once in a while, but nobody else was there.

MF: I read somewhere that back in your studio days you did thousands of dates.

LC: Yep.

MF: What years were those?

LC: Mid 1970 through the end of 1977. So, six and a half, seven years of constant dates. Somebody asked me one time years ago, "How many three-hour sessions do you think you did?" So I went back over my old calendars—date books—and I averaged during that period close to, and sometimes more than, 500 sessions a year. So that's how we came up with probably over 3,000 sessions recorded.

MF: Incredible! It's amazing that you can even remember many of them. What's the weirdest gig you had as a hired gun?

LC: Let's see what comes to mind today. Maybe "weird" wouldn't be the word, but one of my most scary dates was one of my very first sessions late in 1969. It was for Quincy Jones. I don't know how he got my name, possibly from Louie Shelton. But it was on the lot of Universal Studios for, I think, the cartoon series Fat Albert. I was subbing, obviously. I got there in the afternoon and the band was already playing and had been playing all morning. And it was all these heavyweight guys from Jerome Richardson to Ray Brown to Tom Scott. Tom and I are only one month apart in age. Quincy had little mini scores: flute part, guitar part, piano part, bla bla bla. And after we'd do a cue he'd say, "OK, now guitar take the flute part, baritone play the bass part . . ." So I had to read this stuff that scared the heck out of me. Your first date and all of a sudden it's like "Play the flute part."

I made it. But I went away thinking, "Oh God, did I barely make that!"

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MF: [chuckles] Real challenge, huh?

LC: Yeah it was a real challenge and I was very inexperienced at the time. Many years later—I think when I was working with Quincy on the Michael Jackson album—I reminded him of that because I never forgot it. He said, "Larry, all I remember is you came in and did a great job and that was that." [General laughter]

MF: When you were growing up did you play in the school band, any instruments that might have helped doing that flute part?

LC: Yeah, a little bit. I played trumpet one semester in high school. Then I played French horn and cello in college. Until I went to Long Beach State College.

MF: It probably helped that you knew how to read already.

LC: Yeah. And I sang in the choir all the time, so I could read bass clef. I was pretty well-rounded.

MF: When did you get into your first recording where you were part of the group or when you did your first solo recording?

LC: When I was 16 or 16-1/2 years old I lived in the South Bay area of Los Angeles. And surf music was the big deal back then. Somehow I met surf music guys. One of them was a drummer-producer named Richard Delvy. He had a group called the Challengers. I think they actually had a little hit record there in the mid '60s. Anyway he was functioning as a producer. He was maybe three years older than me. He called me to do some sessions. He was doing The Challengers Play the Hits. It was "Tequila," "The Taste of Honey," all these hits from the '60s. I go to the session and I was the only non-studio guy there. It was Hal Duane, Larry Knechtel, Joe Osborne—all the heavyweight guys. My take on why Richard called me to do that was two things—I still sounded very young, but I also could read anything that he would have. So he put me in with these heavies and I played lead guitar on the whole album.

MF: Do you have that recording around?

LC: I don't.

MF: Did you get into the club scene, playing out?

LC: Oh yeah. Actually when I was in junior high school—my ninth-grade year—I was playing Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday



afternoon at a dinner club. It was a bar but they served food. I was playing with guys that were 21 or 22 years old. We were just a pop band. My mom would go and sit all night while I played five sets. And she'd drive me home.

MF: Years later you played at the Baked Potato.

LC: Yeah, that was in the mid '70s just as something to do to break up the studio stuff.

MF: I used to see Joe Pass down at Dante's a lot. Did you ever play down there?

LC: I did. I played Dante's before the Baked Potato was open. And I still played Dante's for a year or so after the Baked Potato opened.

MF: So you started out with more rock 'n' roll gigs than jazz gigs, up until you were how old?

LC: I got turned onto Joe Pass at 14 and was very hungry for more of that vocabulary. I continued to play pop gigs all through my teens, but at home I was looking for jazz licks and studying chords.

MF: When was the first time you got to actually play with a big jazz hero—one of these guys you'd learned to idolize?

LC: The first time I was close to doing that was when I was 20 years old, 1968, I got a call to sub for Joe [Pass]. It was with Bill Elliot and the Disneyland Datanighters at the Carnation Plaza at Disneyland. That was like a 12-piece band. Joe and Herb Ellis used to do that gig when they were in town. Joe couldn't make it and he gave them my name. I ended up doing that gig for over a year.

MF: They had good music at Disneyland.

LC: Oh, they had great players. I know Graham Young, the lead trumpet player used to play with Gene Krupa. They had all these guys that could really play.

MF: How did Joe know you to recommend you for the gig?

LC: I had called him when I was 16 years old. Somebody had told me that he gave private lessons sometimes. So I got his name out of the book in Santa Monica and called him. I went over and took a lesson from him. Then I went back one more time and took another lesson when I was 18.

MF: And he remembered you two years later to recommend you for a gig? You must have done something right.



LC: Joe called me out of the blue when I was in my second year of junior college, so I was 18. And he said, "I'm leaving the George Shearing Quintet and I thought you might want to audition for it." I couldn't because I was staying in school to stay out of the draft. But I was very flattered that Joe remembered that there was this young kid with some potential. Very cool.

MF: Before the Steely Dan days, you played with the Jazz Crusaders.

LC: Crusaders started in 1971. I did about 13 albums with them. Also I was still doing sessions because they didn't tour very much. The Steely Dan stuff started late '75 or early '76.

MF: And throughout that time you were playing Gibson ES-335s?

LC: Correct.

MF: When did you get your first ES-335?

LC: I think it was late 1969 when I was starting to get some demo dates. And I started becoming the arranger on these demo dates. I was in the studio two or three days a week. I needed a guitar that was pretty versatile. Because back in those days there was no cartage for guitar players. So I thought about the 335. I think I was taking a Les Paul to the sessions but was not really happy with it. And I also had a 175.

MF: So the draw was that you could go between blues and jazz and rock with the same guitar?

LC: Exactly.

MF: Often a big factor in making the right kind of impression to keep getting called back for dates is attitude. Do you think that's been a factor for you over the years?

LC: I would hope so, personally. And I know that when I'm around other musicians or looking for players that's definitely high on the list—"How's their attitude?"

MF: You want to be around people you like to be around.

LC: Yep.

MF: I'm a big Clapton fan and I was taken with your interpretation of "Layla."

LC: Oh, yeah. That was 1984. It was interesting because I innocently

did "Layla" because I dug the lyric and thought my fans would enjoy an arrangement. And you would be surprised how many other musicians—probably all guitar players—over the next couple of years after that release came up and said, "Man, you had a lot of \*\*\*\*s covering Layla!" [general laughter] And I didn't even give it any thought. But I guess I was kind of touching the holy grail there for a minute. But I'm glad you enjoyed it.

MF: You added what you do to it. So it was totally different than Clapton's. You made it yours, and I thought it was great.

LC: Thanks.

MF: You were just at the Crossroads Festival.

LC: Yes. That was wonderful!

MF: I saw you on the DVD, but they just have excerpts. How much did you play?

LC: We played a full hour set. And they used one tune for the DVD. [laughs]

MF: You were rubbing shoulders with a lot of musicians. Did you get a chance to play with Eric, or have you ever?

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LC: That's interesting. Eric and I have never sat with the guitars together. I've been to his gigs; he's come to a few of mine. But never has the time come when we can just sit down with our guitars and play. I hope that happens some day before either one of us gets too old.

MF: That would be a nice blend of styles. It would be nice if that event were recorded as well, so the rest of us could enjoy it. Do you do much writing these days?

LC: I only write for my projects or for Fourplay. I've been so fortunate over the last 20-plus years to have my solo career that I've actually not pursued any more of the television or motion picture stuff. Because I enjoy playing so much.

MF: What's your creative process when you're writing? Do you have any sort of regular process you go through coming up with a tune?

LC: I've been consistent since starting my first solo projects. I write when it's time for the project. I don't write year-long and then have a stockpile of songs.



MF: It's a deadline thing.

LC: Yeah. Yeah, usually a month before I'm going to go into the studio.

MF: Well, that's not a very tight deadline.

LC: Just recently I've been doing kind of a jam project Chubber Petos is producing for me. In April we had cut eight things, Chubber and I. I had two weeks before we went back to finish, and I wrote 10 more songs to go in with. Some of them were just heads and a B section. But I was humping it pretty good.

MF: What do you do to get those creative juices flowing?

LC: [laughs] Usually I walk into my little bedroom ProTools studio and pick up the guitar—especially on this jam album I'm doing. I wrote everything on the guitar. A lot of my smooth jazz stuff I write at the keyboard. For this one I'd just come in and start noodling. If I got any kind of germ at all I'd set up a click real quick. And I'd just start playing. For a couple of the tunes I just played my idea twice and that was it. I wrote the last tune for the album while I was in the hotel at Sportsmen's Lodge in L.A. the day of the first session. 'Cause Chubber said, "Can you give me one more like that other one that you do?" So I wrote that, that morning. Pressure.

MF: I guess all those years in the studio paid off that way.

LC: I'd have to agree. I edit pretty quickly.

MF: You say you usually write on your guitar. Are you writing on your new Gibson signature 335?

LC: Actually there was one sitting here the whole time that I was writing, yeah. Sitting in my room.

MF: But were you playing it?

LC: Yes, I was playing it. But I don't have the final version yet. I just have two prototypes.

MF: When's that guitar due for release?

LC: I don't have all the details. I know Gibson's already taking orders. And I think our first run was going to be 500 because I personally signed 500 of those orange inserts that go inside the guitar with the serial number on it. And I saw on my website that some guy in Canada has already ordered one.



MF: What makes your signature model different from other 335s out there?

LC: I know it's been common knowledge within the recording industry that by luck my 335 sounds better than any we had ever heard in the '70s. My high E string is just as fat as the G string. I used to go with my buddies—Dennis Budimir and a couple of other guys—when they wanted to buy a 335. I would go with them with mine. And we would compare it to mine. So over the years people have always complimented me on my tone. But I know that guitar has a lot to do with it. It just has a unique evenness and fatness that isn't dark. I think the size of the neck has something to do with that. We copied my neck precisely. And obviously the looks of it are exactly the same. We came really close. For a new guitar it's pretty special. I'm pretty happy.

MF: Did you find that the neck dimensions were significantly different from most of the 335s out there? What year was your original one?

LC: '69. There's just something about the way mine feels and the way it sounds. I made sure they copied it very closely.

MF: Was yours originally a trapeze tailpiece? Or did you . . .

LC: Oh, yeah.

MF: So you added the stop later on?

LC: Sure. Once we discovered that the pitch could be better with the stop tailpiece, everybody did that.

MF: Probably the guys at Valley Arts did that?

LC: Yeah, Mike did it.

MF: Do you know if he added a block in there when he added the stop tailpiece?

LC: You know, I don't remember.

MF: Speaking of guitar sound, yours does sound fat on the recordings. And I've spent time trying to figure out what pickups you're using. When you go for a solo do you use the front pickup, rear pickup, or a combination?

LC: All of the above. Just depends on what mood I'm in and what's going on. On the Steely Dan solos, that's rear pickup with my tone control rolled off to about three-and-a-half. What I discovered by doing that is that obviously the guitar signal is hitting the front end of

the amplifier with less highs. Which makes the preamp react differently than if it was getting hit with full tone. So it gets more of that tight distortion, rather than a spread distortion. Over the last 13 years or so I'm using less effects. I'm going for just straight guitar tone with the amp and a little reverb.

MF: Do you still have your little TC Chorus pedal?

LC: [laughs] No. I don't have any pedals, I don't think. I use a TC Chorus in my rack.

MF: When you play live, are you playing through Dumbles?

LC: Yeah.

MF: A pair of them?

LC: No, one's a spare.

MF: So you're just going straight into the amp live?

LC: I'm going through a volume pedal that Mr. Dumble has made a hybrid of so there's no loss of highs for me. And I use a Korg tuner on the pedalboard and in my rack. And some kind of reverb unit in my rack. I use just a smidge of that. And that's it.

MF: For your acoustic guitar what are you playing these days?

LC: The same Valley Arts acoustic that I've played for over 20 years. But Gibson is also coming out with the Larry Carlton acoustic model in early 2005. I have four prototypes here now. So it's going to be very exciting when we finally nail it. We haven't quite nailed it yet. That's why they're not out.

MF: They make some great guitars there in Montana.

LC: Yep.

MF: How elaborate is your home studio?

LC: It's pretty basic. I have ProTools and I'm still running 5.1 on that. I have a little Mackie mixer that my sequencer stuff comes up through. And two sets of speakers—self-powered Mackies and my old Tannoys that I've loved forever. And that's pretty much it.

MF: What's your sequencer?

LC: I've been using Cubase forever, but I'm slowly making the transition to ProTools sequencing. I'm getting a handle on it. It's not



as sophisticated as Cubase but it's sure easier to do everything in one program.

MF: And that's how you guys in Fourplay pass stuff back and forth to each other?

LC: Exactly.

MF: Let's talk a little bit about Fourplay. When you came into that supergroup, you had some super big shoes to fill. Not that you have any trouble filling them, but how'd that feel following after Lee Ritenour?

LC: It was interesting because if Lee is the head side of the coin, I'm tails. But I also had confidence in Bob's, Harvey's, and Nate's decision to call me for the gig.

MF: Had you played with all those guys before in various contexts?

LC: I'd never played with Bob. Harvey and I had played three weeks together in Japan. So we were both able to get a real sense of how the other guy played and how we are personally also. So coming in I knew I wasn't going to try to sound like Lee. That's not where I'm coming from at all—you know, lots of effects and lots of worked-out solos and stuff. I'm a freewheeling kind of a gunslinger. And I think that's why the guys hired me. It's been seven years now and it works and we love each other like brothers. We really enjoy making music together.

MF: It seems like your freewheeling style fits well with those guys because they don't seem like they want to do the same thing every night.

LC: They don't and that's not to say anything negative about the first three records they made. Those were meticulously well-crafted wonderful hit records with a group that had developed its own sound. But yeah, when Lee left they realized they wanted to change or not do the group any more, rather than try to do the same thing.

MF: Nathan [East] told me you don't sign guitars. Now you're signing 500 of them for Gibson. [general laughter]

LC: All through my career if kids came up after a show wanting me to sign their guitar, I would. And three years ago on one of the home-shopping kind of TV shows some guy was selling his guitar collection for tens of thousands of dollars. And they asked him what the hardest one to get rid of was. And he says, 'This 335 signed by Larry Carlton.' It really hurt my feelings that somebody would take advantage of that. So I just quit signing them. But now that my model's coming out, I'll sign every one of them. [laughs]



MF: You have a new solo recording coming out. What's it called?

LC: I don't have a title yet. It's coming out in April. We've just finished all the tracks. I'm going to put horns on it the first week of January. It's more of a jam album. It's not a smooth jazz album. Most of the tunes are power heads. It's a four-piece band. Self-contained in the studio. And I'm going to put some horns on it just doubling some of the power lines.

MF: You've also got the Sapphire Blues band.

LC: Yeah. That's something I've wanted to do for over a decade—to have a blues-oriented band with horns, record it, and then tour with it. The opportunity came almost two years ago and I recorded the whole thing in two days and put the horns on two weeks later. And I've been touring the world with this eight-piece band and just having a ball. And the audience loves it. All of the tunes are blues-oriented. I licensed it to BMG. They described it as a Kansas City blues-oriented album. It's called Sapphire Blue.

MF: It's a little more sophisticated than just straight blues.

LC: Yeah. There's only one three-chord blues in there. And even that's not really a three-chord blues.

MF: Speaking of more sophisticated blues, have you ever played with Robben Ford?

LC: Oh yeah, back in the '70s. We played many nights together at Dante's.

MF: You did a project with Steve Lukather recently.

LC: Right. That was really fun, too, because it was so loose. And Steve and I get along so well personally and musically that we just recorded two nights of our live shows. And we won a Grammy for that album.

MF: Wow, how did that feel? Fourplay was nominated for a Grammy this year, too.

LC: It's always fun. Somebody just sent me an update of my stuff and I've had 13 Grammy nominations and three wins. How blessed am I?

MF: We'll you've worked for it, too. You deserve it.

LC: I did a hundred days on the road last year, which is fine with me because most of it was with the Sapphire Blues band. But I now have two little granddaughters that Michelle and I go see every week when

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I'm home. Life is good.

MF: You have tour plans?

LC: Just finished a tour and Fourplay is going to Seoul, Korea, in January. And I'm doing almost three weeks in Japan with the Sapphire Blues Band in February. It starts back up. I'll do another Sapphire Blues album this year. I'll record it in late summer for an early release in '06 probably.

MF: Good luck and thanks a lot for your time.

LC: Thank you. It's been a pleasure.