

Class ax: Grammy-winning guitarist Larry Carlton got his start in Lomita

By Tony Tranfa
JAZZ CRITIC

Money was tight for Maebell and Orval Carlton when they were raising a family in Lomita back in the mid-1950s. They made things work and they eventually bought a home, but they had only about \$5 extra in their budget each week.

They could have spent it on the movies or a small treat for themselves. They decided instead to pay for guitar lessons for their 6½-year-old son, Larry, a student at Harbor City Christian School.

He had shown an interest in an old acoustic guitar in his grandmother's closet and needed only to wait until he was big enough to hold it to start taking lessons.

When the time finally arrived, once a week for 30 minutes Larry would sit in a small cubbyhole in a Torrance guitar shop with a man named Slim Edwards. Slim would smoke cigarettes and teach Larry to play the guitar, usually spending the first 10 minutes jamming and the rest on a structured lesson.

The lessons paid off.

Larry Carlton is now one of the most recorded pop and jazz guitarists in history. He has worked on more than 3,000 studio sessions, released more than 20 solo albums, won Grammy Awards and appeared on dozens of million-sellers.

Along the way, he has anchored some of the most famous and critically acclaimed albums of the rock generation.

Carlton, now a member of the popular smooth-jazz group Fourplay, will be back home in a sense, Sunday, when Fourplay appears at the Hollywood Bowl.

His solo works may not be household fixtures, and his name may not be instantly recognizable. But anyone who has heard Joni Mitchell's "Court and Spark," Steely Dan's "Aja" or "The Royal Scam," Michael Jackson's "Off The Wall" or Billy Joel's "Piano Man" — or any of the hundreds of other albums he's played on — has heard Carlton at work.



Even in the earliest years of his studio work, his performances were viewed as being above the level of "hired sideman."

He was chosen as Most Valuable Player by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences three years running and was retired from eligibility. That was before he was 30 years old.

Rolling Stone magazine called his contribution to Steely Dan's "Kid Charlemagne" one of the three greatest rock guitar solos ever.

"I'm always humbled to hear such things, but, reflecting back, I had no idea at the time these things would live on. I was just playing the guitar."

He credits those 10-minute mini-jams with his teacher for inspiring him to improvise and keep improving at an early age.

"I learned to play the boogie-woogie in that room," Carlton said. "He showed a lot of wisdom in that approach with a young player. And now, I do remember those first years brought the passion for the guitar that I still feel."

His first gigs, which date back to his schoolboy days in Lomita, weren't quite so grand as his Hollywood Bowl outing. But he had enough work, even from the beginning, that Carlton has never needed another job of any kind. He's always been a professional guitarist.

"Both of my parents encouraged me, my mother especially. She used to shuttle me around to talent shows and supper club jobs. I remember waking up at 3 a.m. so she could drive me to the old Cal Worthington TV talent show, 'Cal's Corral.' "

Back then, much of the music heard in the Carlton house was country. Maebell and Orval came from southeastern Oklahoma and played Tennessee Ernie Ford and Bob Wills, as well as pop stars such as Perry Como. Later came Elvis Presley and Fats Domino.

For a time, he played in the South Bay surf band Eddie and the Showmen, still an obscure favorite among 1960s surf music enthusiasts.

Jazz began to sneak into his psyche when he was young. "I remember getting my first jazz record, by the Gerald Wilson Big Band with Joe Pass on guitar. I ordered it from this old discount store on Torrance Boulevard and had to wait for a couple of weeks before it came in."

Fittingly, the album's title is "Moment of Truth."

As his interests in jazz began to blossom, he would occasionally ask his mom to drive him — he was still too young to drive — to the now-famous Sunday jam sessions at the Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach, the birthplace of West Coast jazz.

“Under-age teens could get in because they served food. My mom would drop me off, sometimes alone, and come back two or three hours later to pick me up. I loved it down there.”

It was during a jazz festival at Harbor College in 1967 that the first sign of success peeked in the door.

“My trio played on the stage and afterward, a man by the name of Harry Mitchell came up to me and said, ‘Do you want to make a record?’ ” Carlton said.

That recording, featuring Carlton playing Wes Montgomery-style jazz melodies while backed by a big band, cost \$5,000. It was recently reissued under the title, “With A Little Help From My Friends.”

In 1971, Carlton joined the Jazz Crusaders, adding the melody line to the group's hit, “Put It Where You Want it.” He stayed with them until 1977.

Carlton started to get calls for Hollywood sessions with big-name musicians. The early 1970s were fruitful times for him as he performed or recorded with hundreds of acts ranging from Barbra Streisand to the Partridge Family. As his reputation spread, session work grew astronomically. The allmusic.com database lists nine pages of credits for Carlton.

Over time, he has played on more than 100 Gold Records.

In the mid-1970s, Carlton started to build a relationship with Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, the hard-to-please core of Steely Dan. It was the classic electric guitar solos on the Steely Dan records of the late '70s that secured his spot in guitarland.

“With Larry, every pass through a tune he made was something good,” Becker told author Brian Sweet for his 1994 book *Steely Dan: Reelin' in the Years*. “If we had something in mind that was even remotely appropriate for Larry, he could do it well. It was never like pulling teeth with Larry, as it could be with other people.

“If ‘Royal Scam’ is the definitive Steely Dan guitar album, then Larry Carlton is the reason why. He contributed quite a bit to the tunes. There would be a lot of volatile musical styles in the room, and in a lot

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of cases, it seemed to me that Larry, more than anyone else, was holding things together rhythmically and in other ways.”

Singer Michael Franks, who has built a 30-year career with such pop-jazz tunes as “Popsicle Toes” and hired Carlton for his earliest records, was more succinct in his praise. He just calls Carlton a “samurai.”

Carlton played electric guitar most of the time in the studios. His sound is easy to spot. He has a cleanly distinctive style with a strong attack and long, pure, sustained tones. His solos bleed notes into each other, bending sinewy lines into true melodies instead of mere tangled riffs placed end to end.

He was among the first to popularize use of the volume pedal, which creates full, swelling chords that seem to come out of nowhere, and sweet, tinkling single notes.

His musical journey took a near-tragic turn in 1988 when he was shot in the neck by a random attacker outside his private studio near Burbank. The wound shattered his vocal cord and caused significant nerve trauma. A long period of recuperation followed, but he recovered and returned to recording.

His solo projects are often high-energy affairs with strong musicians.

Among them are fiery electric works that feature a rock-tinged attitude, some exclusively acoustic albums (such as the 1986 hit “Alone/But Never Alone,” which hit No. 1 on the Billboard jazz charts), a blues album with harmonica virtuoso Terry McMillan, live dates, smooth jazz albums, a few releases with pop vocals done by Carlton and others, and duet albums with guitarists Lee Ritenour and Steve Lukather.

His live recording with Lukather, who played guitar in Toto, won a Grammy in 2001.

These days, Carlton, now a 54-year-old grandfather who lives on a ranch in Nashville, Tenn., continues to pursue his solo career and keeps a full schedule of work with Fourplay, which he joined a couple of years ago when Ritenour left the band.

As his career progresses, he's never far away from his roots.

Though his father died last year, his mother still lives in the same house in Lomita. Carlton's son, Travis, stays there while studying bass guitar at the Musicians' Institute in Hollywood.

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Guitar teacher Slim Edwards died about 20 years ago, but Edwards' wife, Dottie, still keeps in touch with Maebell Carlton. Not too long ago, Dottie attended one of his concerts.

Carlton remembers the moment she came backstage.

"She said, `You know, seeing you up there playing, to me, you still look like you did when you were a little boy learning to play the guitar."