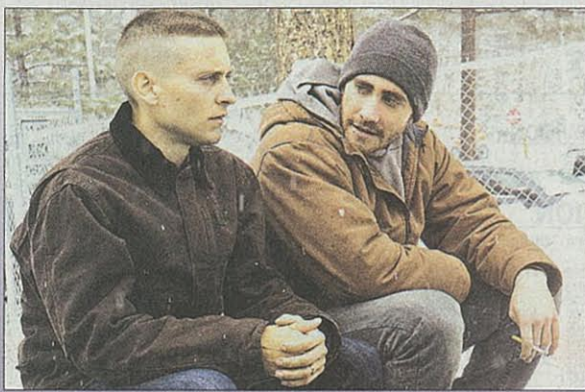


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IN PERFECT HARMONY

Larry Carlton-Tak Matsumoto collaboration spans genres, languages

By Stevie Glasgow

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

Collaborative musical ventures tend to be something of a hit-and-miss affair, with many falling short of their seeming promise, while others fail to find the target at all. Thankfully however, some enterprises occasionally hit creative pay dirt, with both parties raising their game to fashion something that stands apart from, or even transcends the work of each in isolation.

Step forward U.S. guitarist Larry Carlton and Osaka-born 6-stringer Takahiro Matsumoto. Their newly forged album, *Take Your Pick*, is a sassy yet cerebral 12-track offering, the multi-layered inventiveness of which only becomes apparent after repeated listens. Style-wise, the songs effortlessly straddle multiple genres including jazz, blues, rock and pop, and though occasionally redolent of jazz fusion from the 1970s and '80s, the material still rings with a fresh and contemporary zest.

To tie in with the album's June 2 release, the renowned axemen are playing a series of shows in Japan throughout June and into July.

Carlton first came to public attention in the '70s thanks to his work with The Crusaders and perhaps more notably, multiple album outings with jazz-rock sophisticates Steely Dan, including a now-legendary solo on the Dan's "Kid Charlemagne." In addition to a highly successful solo career and a 13-year stint with smooth-jazz mainstays Fourplay, he's also notched up credits on more than 100 gold and/or platinum records. As a veteran of the L.A. studio scene, the California native has dipped his musical toes into practically every genre known to fan, and a cata-

logue of his full discography—a veritable who's who of popular music—would likely tower over "War and Peace."

"Tak" Matsumoto, meanwhile, is primarily known for being one half of Japanese rock-pop lions B'z. Formed in 1988, B'z is the biggest-selling band in Japanese history—by a country mile—notching up domestic sales of more than 80 million units (a pretty impressive figure when you consider Japan only has about 50 million households). To his credit, Matsumoto has never been content to rest on his domestic laurels and has often reached beyond the confines of his native land to satisfy his creative urges, including work with guitar ace Steve Vai and the Tak Matsumoto Group, featuring Jack Blades from Night Ranger and Eric Martin of Mr. Big. In addition to a buoyant solo career, Matsumoto has also penned songs for vocal phenom Misia and boy-band KAT-TUN.

Though the two men may seem an unlikely match—session ace-cum-jazz-rock icon and Budokan-filling superstar—scratch the surface and you'll find a couple of down-to-earth guys who, despite having reached the pinnacle of success in their respective musical worlds, retain a teen-like enthusiasm for their craft.

In a phone interview from his Nashville, Tenn. home, Carlton explains how the partnership transpired: "It was initiated by my camp. You know, Tak is the only Japanese artist to have his own Gibson signature-model guitar and I have the Gibson ES-335 Larry Carlton model. My manager was talking to one of the CEOs at Gibson about my next tour for Japan, or possibly my next project for Japan, and the gentleman from Gibson said, 'Well, maybe Larry and Tak should do something together.' My manager and I set up a meeting with Tak and his people about two years ago, and we decided yes, we'd like to do a project, but B'z had their 20th anniversary tour, so we couldn't do it that year, so we waited until 2009."

Matsumoto rounds out the story during an in-

terview at his plush Tokyo offices: "I first met Larry when he came to Japan to do some gigs in 2007," he says, speaking in Japanese. "Originally, a Gibson representative had told me Larry was thinking about a new collaborative project, and that my name had come up. So when Larry came to Japan, we met for lunch and a chat. I suggested that if we were going to work together, it would be cool if we could both write new material, but it was Larry's idea for the project to take album form."

Unsurprisingly, the guitarists had already registered on each other's musical radar prior to their initial meeting. "I'd heard Tak's name for many years, though I wasn't very familiar with his playing, or with B'z," offers Carlton. "So when it was suggested that we do something together, I listened to his music and guitar work, and I was very, very impressed." Matsumoto—13 years younger than Carlton—confesses to being a longtime fan of his: "I used to copy all his licks when I was a teenager," he laughs.

Matsumoto penned six compositions for the new disk, while Carlton contributed five, plus a reworking of one of his most famous numbers, "Nite Crawler." But the American axe-slinger stresses he was keen to avoid a vapid rehash of the '70s original: "Nite Crawler 2010" is quite different," he notes. "I put it in a different key with a different feel, so Tak and I would have our own approach to it." For his part, Matsumoto relished the opportunity to help update the song: "It was a real treat to do that track," he says. "It's one of the songs I used to listen to a lot when I was in high school."

The album opens with Matsumoto's explosive "JAZZY BULLETS" (which, incidentally, received its first airing at a B'z concert earlier this year). "Production for the album originally began in April last year and the plan was to wrap things up in September after tracking the rhythm section in Los Angeles," the Japanese guitarist explains. "The songs I'd written were mostly melody-focused but I'd also been think-

ing about a powerful opener for the album. I spent the whole summer racking my brains in Hawaii, where I finally come up with "Jazzy Bullets." It doesn't sound very Hawaiian though," he adds with a grin.

Many of Matsumoto's contributions percolate with the pentatonic flavors that characterize much traditional Japanese music. Ironically, however, Carlton pilfers a sizeable slice of his collaborator's Eastern thunder, with a koto-based number, titled "Islands of Japan." "I know, isn't that something!" chuckles Carlton. "When I started composing for the album, 'Islands of Japan' was the second song I came up with. I was obviously inspired by the East/West concept, and when that melody came to me I played the demo for my wife, Michelle, and she suggested the title."

So did either man feel pressured into playing differently in consideration of the other's fan base? "I've learned throughout my career that the best thing I can do as a musician is to be honest with my playing, and that's how I approached this album," Carlton says. "On every song, I just played what I thought was appropriate for me to play; what I really felt in my heart. No pressure." Halfway around the world, Matsumoto echoes similar sentiments: "I don't particularly concern myself with what people might be expecting, I just play the way I always have. So even with this collaboration with Larry, I didn't go out on a limb to change my style—I just played naturally."

Communication wasn't a problem either, as Matsumoto explains: "In terms of getting an interpreter involved in the composition process, just because someone can speak English, it doesn't mean they know what's going on musically. When working with Larry, even with my level of English, we had no problems exchanging ideas because our musical communication transcended spoken language. In that kind of situation, you don't need to worry about interpretation."

As for categorizing the album, Carlton ex-

presses caution. "I think it's best not to try," he says. "There are so many different elements of style within each song that it's best just to call it instrumental music."

The duo has earmarked three days for band rehearsals following Carlton's arrival, but the three-times Grammy Award-winner also plans to woodshed before then. "We finished the recording maybe five or six months ago, and now it's time for me to go back and learn exactly which part I played on each song, because I really don't remember. I played harmony for some sections and melody for others. So yes, there's preparation."

Though the new tracks will serve as the foundation for the live shows, fans can also look forward to a few other, unspecified gems. "We've each chosen at least one of our classic songs we can play together that we think the audience will enjoy," Carlton says.

Both parties are obviously happy with the way the project has gone. "I'm very, very proud of this album," Carlton enthuses. "I think Tak and I are a great match." Matsumoto is equally positive. "It's been a great honor and a lot of fun making an album with Larry," he says.

Looking to the future, various options are being mulled, including further dates in Asia and a possible appearance at the Montreux Jazz Festival. So what are the chances of another joint album someday? "I don't know about that," Matsumoto says with a laugh. "I pretty much gave this one all I've got!"

"Take Your Pick" featuring Larry Carlton and Tak Matsumoto is out now on Vermillion Records. They will play Motion Blue Yokohama on June 12-13 (045-226-1919, www.motionblue.co.jp); Zepp Osaka on June 16, 17 (06-6357-4400, www.sound-c.co.jp); Zepp Fukuoka on June 19 (092-712-4221, www.bea-net.com); Blue Note Nagoya from June 22-24 (052-961-6311, www.nagoya-blunote.com); and Blue Note Tokyo June 27-29 and July 1-3 (03-5485-0088, www.blunote.co.jp).