

A Night With Larry Carlton & Spyro Gyra Never Disappoints

Celebrity Theater, Phoenix, AZ

Concert Review by: Mary Jo Conniff

Venue: Celebrity Theater (Phoenix, AZ)

How many can say that they have heard great music, met a guitar legend's family, met some of jazz's royalty, and seen one of the greatest sax players of all time perform an entire show with his fly down, all in one night? Well, last night, the crowd of folks who were lucky enough to be at the **Celebrity Theater** in Phoenix, Arizona can. The affair saw a sparse crowd because of the local PGA tour extravaganza in town, but it made it incredibly intimate for those of us who could care less about golf. The performers who made it such a wonderful experience were none other than *Larry Carlton*, and *Spyro Gyra*, who split the bill at the main venue for Phoenix jazz concerts.

The show started off with a solo *Larry Carlton* who chatted up the audience like we were old friends. Larry has always had an uncanny way of making his fans feel that way, and this appearance was no exception. I had met with Larry prior to the show and asked him if "**The Lord's Prayer**" was on the set list, and after a millisecond pause he said, "It is now!" And sure enough, he played the masterpiece alone on stage for his second song. He even mentioned to the crowd that I had requested it. I thanked him from my seat, and he actually said, "You're welcome." Oh, Larry. You win my award for being the most genuinely caring and loving of all jazz musicians....for what that's worth!

I was ready to make a marriage proposal immediately after he performed the song, but it was then that he brought his gorgeous wife, Christian Contemporary vocalist *Michele Pillar*, onto the stage. Drats. If it wasn't that she seemed as genuine as Larry is, it would have been more tragic. Michele regaled us all with the story of their recent trip to Bangkok, Thailand, where they played for *H.M. The King Bhumibol Adulyadej*.

The way that Michele told the story, we could almost see Larry bowing in respect after his show, where he and the band performed songs written by the King himself. The visual, and Michele's playful comment about "never believing she would see Larry in that (bowing) position again," was a wonderfully comic moment, made more humorous by Larry's reply. After laughing, he looked puzzled and asked, "What did she mean by that?" In a priceless moment, Michele covered her face, laughing and apologizing. Michele then sang a beautiful and pure version of "Over the Rainbow" to a hushed crowd. With a soaring yet simple vocal style, she is a breath of fresh air in a world of vocal histrionics.

After Larry commented, "I know....how do you follow THAT?" he introduced the band that included his son, *Travis Carlton*, on bass. We were pleased to hear classics like "**Smiles and Smiles to Go**," and "**Minute by Minute**," as well as new songs from his recent Grammy-nominated release, "**Firewire**," a raucous album of rock, fusion and melody, that as Larry commented will never be heard on the radio because of its eclectic song choices. As a band, the gang was incredibly good, but it was Larry's

graceful and melodious guitar work that brought me to my knees, thanking God for such an entertainer.

When *Jay Beckenstein, Tom Schuman, Julio Fernandez, Scott Ambush and Bonnie B.* took the stage as *Spyro Gyra*, I was amazed to see these veterans as energetic and fun as they were when I last saw them in '88. Jay danced in an old school way throughout, while Tom's signature keyboard sounds were accompanied with an energy usually reserved for young rockers. The quiet reserve and grace of Julio and Scott (one of the best guitarist/bassist duos in music today) along with the frenetic drumming of Bonnie B. rounded out the gang who delivered new stuff from their Grammy nominated new release, "**Wrapped in a Dream**," as well as golden oldies and favorites like "**Morning Dance**." Jay dipped and squatted through the hour-long set, at one time playing two saxophones at once! The crescendo, though, had to be the drum solo of my lifetime. Drummer Bonnie B. is a newcomer to the band (and will be featured on their next release) who blew us all away with his accomplished musicianship, vocals, and sense of humor. He received a well-deserved standing ovation with no one left in their seats! We were fortunate enough to meet with the band after the show, where we asked Bonnie how long it took him to perform well in this established band. His answer stunned me. "The first time I played live with these guys I had charts to follow. Unfortunately the outdoor venue had no music stands I could use. So from the first performance I played from memory." Incredible.

Oh yeah. Remember the comment I made at the beginning of this review about someone playing music with his fly down? That was the incomparable and seemingly modest Jay Beckenstein. Nearing the end of the show, Jay exclaimed that had played the whole show with his fly down and asked, "Why didn't anyone tell me??" In a perverse kind of way, it put this jazz superstar on my level. This intimate night was made more so by Jay's dilemma. And let me tell you, playing with his zipper down did not make one bit of difference. He is still part of the sound of *Spyro Gyra*. No matter what style of jazz the band chooses to record, their sound is always unmistakable.

*Larry Carlton and Spyro Gyra have both been nominated for a Grammy this year in the category of "Best Pop Instrumental." Larry's work with **Fourplay** has been nominated in this category as well. I would hate to be on the Grammy committee, wouldn't you?*

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