

Larry Carlton: Still reelin' in the years

By Tinnie P. Esguerra
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Three notes, and you know it's him.

With his distinctive style and touch, it's hard not to recognize the playing of guitar legend and studio heavyweight Larry Carlton. Ranked as one of the most recorded pop and jazz guitarists in history, he has released more than 20 solo albums, done more than 3,000 studio sessions and picked up a few Grammys within the course of an illustrious career that spans four decades.

The angular bends, haunting volume swells, lyrical phrasing and superimposed triadic approach are stamped all over his works which range from his early stints with the Jazz Crusaders, Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell, Michael Franks, Mike Post (of Hill Street Blues fame) to collaborations with fellow axe-slingers Lee Ritenour and Steve Lukather (of the rock supergroup, Toto).

In retrospect, it's amazing how Carlton managed to steer clear of the short-lived fads and gimmickry that most of his contemporaries refer to as the "fusion era excesses." He didn't pick up on the whammy bar craze when Eddie Van Halen, Steve Vai and the other rock gods made it part of their staple sound during the early '80s.

Neither did he resort to the flashy two-handed tapping techniques popularized by Allan Holdsworth or Stanley Jordan; or the frenzied sweep-picking razzmatazz of Australian fusion god Frank Gambale.

But that's not saying that Carlton's playing is nothing short of wimpy. Even during his early studio gigs with Steely Dan during the '70s, he could easily out-rock his peers with nothing more but his trusty 1968 Gibson ES-335 and Boogie amps. As a sidelight, it was his legendary guitar solos in the Steely Dan's Royal Scam and Aja albums that got him his biggest share of guitar fans - making him also one of the most-imitated players even to this day.

Rolling Stone magazine even called his Kid Charlemagne solo (from Steely Dan's Royal Scam album) "one of the three greatest rock guitar solos ever."

And if the adulation of his fans wasn't enough, a more fitting icing on his cake then was getting the nod of the ever-critical, nitpicking tandem of Walter Becker and Donald Fagen. In an interview with author Brian Sweet for his 1994 book, *Reelin' In The Years*, author Brian Sweet quoted Becker as saying, "With Larry, every pass through

a tune he made was something good. 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."

Becker continues, "If Royal Scam is the definitive Steely Dan guitar album, then Larry Carlton is the reason why. There would be a lot of volatile musical styles in the room, and in a lot of cases, it seemed to me that Larry, more than anyone else, was holding things together rhythmically and in other ways."

But the fabled Steely Dan sessions are only the tip of Carlton's musical iceberg.

Since studio work required a thorough working knowledge of most guitar styles, Carlton kept up with most any challenge hurled his way - even if it meant playing saccharine melodies for Barbra Streisand and Partridge Family dates, or a more raunchy approach for Joni Mitchell's Court and Spark, Michael Jackson's Off The Wall, or Billy Joel's Piano Man albums.

Carlton attributes his well-rounded guitar style to early lessons with guitar teacher Slim Edwards - a chain-smoking, guitar shop regular who started off his lessons with a furious jamming session and then settled into a more systematic lesson for the day.

It was Larry's mom, Maebell Carlton who was also largely responsible for encouraging him on to take guitar lessons at an early age - even if it meant spending the family's only disposable income of \$5 each week for Larry's lessons.

Of his more famous solos, Larry reminisces, "For the Kid Charlemagne solo, we were just in the studio that night and we played around with it for a couple of hours. The first part of the solo - more than half of it - came out in one take. They started again and I finished it up in the next pass. So, basically it was two takes."

"As for the Don't Take Me Alive solo," he continues, "that was Donald's idea to open with the big guitar chord. They didn't have an intro. So, I remember standing in the middle of the studio by myself, in front of my little tweed amp, just playing that one chord until we got one they liked."

Although Carlton has chalked up more than close to two dozen solo albums, perhaps his best work can be culled from his late '70s to early '80s efforts, from his self-titled record to the more aggressive Strikes Twice and Sleepwalk.

Not surprisingly, one of his more popular songs Room 335, sounds

LARRY CARLTON

uncannily close to Steely Dan's Peg. Of this quirk, he confesses, "The chord progression is partially borrowed from Steely Dan. I loved the sound of the particular chord changes. At the time, that was a very fresh sound."

To this day, even in the wake of frustrated guitarists scratching their heads as they try to top Carlton's tone and technique, his playing stands out as a testament to real guitar artistry - a fitting reminder that tone, after all, doesn't come from a guitar or amp but from the fingers and the heart.