

# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



[newspress.com](http://newspress.com)

## IN CONCERT : Still the original guitar hero - Famed for his 1970s session work for Steely Dan and Joni Mitchell, Larry Carlton brings his trio to town

By Josef Woodard, NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

August 8, 2008 10:08 AM

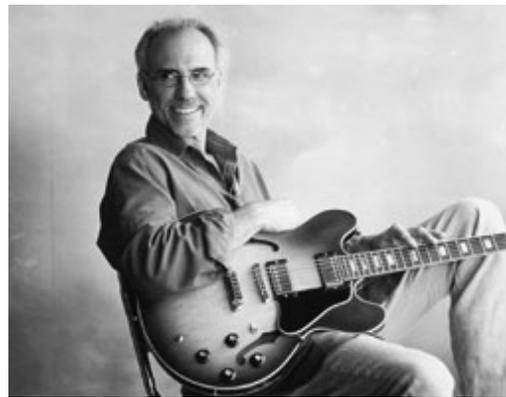
### Larry Carlton

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday

Where: SOhO Restaurant and Music Club, 1221 State St. (upstairs)

Cost: \$35 to \$40

Information: 962-7776, [www.sohosb.com](http://www.sohosb.com)



COURTESY PHOTO

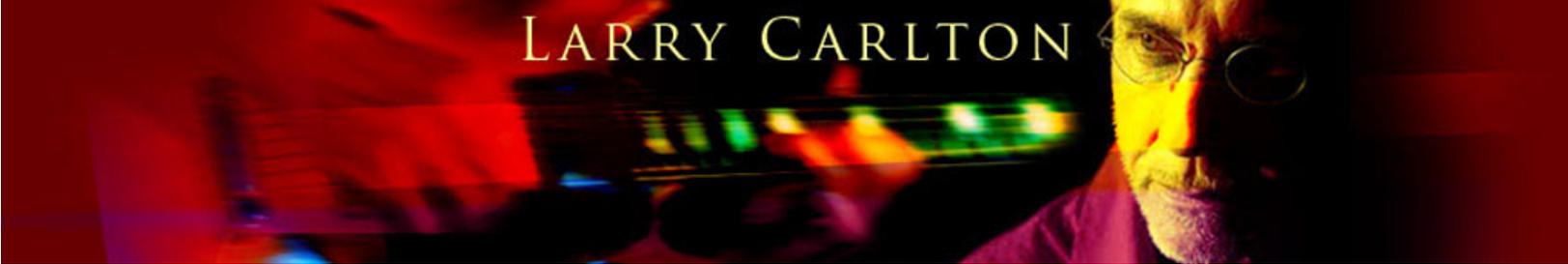
Incurably tasteful guitar hero Larry Carlton is one of those figures in music whose presence is more pervasive than we might imagine. As a solo artist for nearly three decades now, Carlton -- who brings a trio to SOhO Restaurant and Music Club on Wednesday -- has built up a strong following. He's versatile, moving between friendly fusion, blues -- including his fiery 2007 album "Fire Wire" -- gentle acoustic ballads and popped-up jazz suitable for the smooth jazz format (on which his work always stands out as smarter than the room).

But there is another deep layer of cultural recognition in Carlton's work. He's a guitarist, going back to the late '60s, who graced hundreds of records and film and television theme songs (i.e. "Hill Street Blues") and even pushed up the level of art-making in the line of duty. That's him on Joni Mitchell's distinctive "Hejira" and on a few Steely Dan albums, including the now landmark solo on "Kid Charlemagne," quite possibly the most melodic and sophisticated guitar solo ever heard on a pop hit. He talks about the "Kid Charlemagne" solo casually, as he talks about everything. It was just another day in the office.

A decidedly kinder, gentler warrior in the jazz-rock wars, Carlton was part of a seminal group of studio players -- stretching out in L.A. clubs by night -- who more or less defined and guided the wave of a new jazz-informed pop sensibility in Los Angeles in the 1970s. He had his own studio, Room 335, in North Hollywood. Tragedy struck when an assailant shot him in the neck, robbing his ability to play for over a year.

For the past 12 years, Carlton has nicely escaped the L.A. hurly burly, relocating to the rural outskirts of Nashville, with his wife, singer Michelle Pillar. They moved to be close to their two grown children (including Travis, a fine bass player who plays with his dad, as well as guitarist Robben Ford and others). The transition, for Mr. L.A., wasn't as hard as one might think. "Both my parents are from

# LARRY CARLTON



Oklahoma," Carlton says, on the phone from home. "I have Okie roots. We used to eat biscuits and gravy for breakfast every morning. I come from that, even though I was born in Southern California."

Carlton, now 60, views his Tennessee home as a place to come home to, not a place for working and networking. "I'm not really involved in the music scene (here) too much," he says, "except for the benefit concerts that I contribute to when I'm invited. I didn't come here looking for any session work or anything like that. Really, I just kind of fly in and out of Nashville and go to my farm."

This is not at all to say that Carlton is easing into an early retirement. He plays 150 dates a year around the world, both under his name and as the guitarist in the band Fourplay. To thicken the plot, Carlton has recently launched his own label, 335 Records, named after the Gibson 335 model guitar, which he and B.B. King have made famous.

Close to home, Carlton was recently laurelled with a Lifetime Achievement Award by Guitar Player magazine, in a presentation at the Ryman Auditorium -- home of the "Grand Old Opry" -- in Nashville. Carlton comments that, "to get that kind of accolade was very fulfilling. I was very humbled by all that."

Clearly, the '70s were Carlton's greatest heyday and point of influence on the music scene, not only as a guitarist with a new, sweet-spirited take on the jazz-soul-rock merger of the day, but also as one who helped lay groundwork for what became the watered-down smooth jazz format years later. Carlton's work from when he was a member of the Crusaders (who played at the Arlington Theatre in the early '70s) and on his own established a stylistic base from which the "smooth" beast emerged.

He has mixed feelings about the smooth jazz format, even though it has been kind to his music. That format, he says, is "definitely different than what, say, the Crusaders, Herbie Hancock and Bob James were about. Back then, in my opinion, there was a real identity with the artists. Today, on the radio, you can hear a saxophone and think 'well, maybe that's so and so and maybe that's somebody else.' Production seems to be more important than the actual artist.

"That's one main difference that I would disagree with. I think if labels were picking artists, then there would be more distinct sounds and more variables to listen to."

Carlton's most recent official album, the collaboration with Ford, has a particular nostalgic spin. He met Ford in the mid '70s, after L.A. Express leader Tom Scott brought Ford down from Northern California to work in the road band with Joni Mitchell. Carlton had recorded with her, but was too chained to studio work to go on the road. Carlton and Ford ended up playing gigs together at the old North Hollywood jazz haunt Donte's.

"I've been a fan for all these years," Carlton says of Ford. "About two years, we were doing a show in honor of Les Paul. Robben was on the bill and I was there hosting. I asked him if he wanted to do something together. He said 'sure.' It took us about six months, and we put it together."

Funnily enough, Carlton's own long career as a solo artist happened almost accidentally. He had been a busy first-call session musician for seven years, and was starting to arrange and produce records, but got out to play clubs by night. "I wasn't even looking for a record deal, and one night, an A&R guy came up and said 'hey, do you want to make a record?' So that's how it started. It wasn't really a dream or a pursuit. It just happened."

After that point, he dove headlong into his life as a leader. "I realized that first and foremost, I'm a guitar player. There are these other things I'm qualified to do and that I enjoy, but playing guitar is what I really do."