

Larry Carlton

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Guitarist Larry Carlton certainly wasn't guilty of loitering onstage at Blues Alley on Monday night. His quintet's opening set compressed the essentials, including old hits and new album tracks, into a show that ran just over the one-hour mark.

Still, lots of guitar-heads in the club got an up-close chance to hear Carlton use his flat pick and fingers on a colorful variety of tunes. Originally best known for his stellar studio session work with Steely Dan, Joni Mitchell and other pop artists, Carlton became a lite-jazz radio fixture two decades ago and now seems eager to shake things up.

Much of Monday's show featured tunes from his most recent albums: the lean and pummeling "Fire Wire" and its more soulful predecessor "Sapphire Blue." "The Prince," from "Fire Wire," saluted Prince with the requisite assortment of extended chord chops and funk beats but ultimately seemed just too derivative. The same album's "Goodbye," however, proved a charmer from the outset, resonating with slack-key tones and a slinky pulse. Carlton didn't bring the "Sapphire Blue" horn section to the club, but lone tenor man Mark Douthit helped compensate with his brawny sound. Another big asset was keyboardist Greg Mathieson, who conjured both Fender Rhodes backdrops and Hammond B-3 organ grooves.

Carlton's remarkably fluid handiwork was always evident, and not just when he was playing one of three electric guitars, each of which featured a different tuning. An extended acoustic-guitar arrangement of "Smiles and Smiles to Go," for example, was intricately laced with shimmering harmonics and single-note flourishes.

-- **Mike Joyce**