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IN CONCERT: Original Guitar Hero More the Humble Sort

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“How many guitar players do we have in the crowd,” Larry Carlton asked the packed SOhO crowd during his show there on Wednesday. A healthy smattering of hands went up. “And how many of the ladies were dragged here by their guitar player friends, asking ‘Larry who?’” A humble sort of guitar hero and a nice guy to boot, Carlton flashed a grin.

Of course, “Larry who” is in fact one of the most influential guitarists alive, and also one of the most oft-heard in public, thanks to his work as a first-call studio player in the ‘70s. His sound on both standard brand pop records, artistic recordings by Joni Mitchell and Steely Dan, and film and television work were graced with the Carlton sound, usually with his signature Gibson 335. His own solo career has carried forth for three decades, popping up occasionally on smooth jazz radio, but mostly registering with a humbler but earnest following (yes, a population enriched by guitar players of varying seriousness).

Fast forward to 2008, and Mr. Carlton, at 60, is again playing the Gibson 335—now his own custom model—and was recently presented a Lifetime Achievement Award by Guitar Player magazine, and now has his own record label. But is Mr. Carlton resting on laurels and old crowd-pleasers from the songbook? Not at SOhO, where the guitarist put in a fascinating set in the revealing format of a trio.

After opening with a lyrical solo guitar piece, then a blues duet with his gifted bassist son Travis Carlton (who we heard at SOhO recently playing with another important guitarist, Robben Ford), the guitarist was boldly backed by bass and rock solid drummer Doug Balote. Mr. Carlton performed a show full of new songs we’ll presumably hear on a forthcoming album, swerving skillfully between jazz, blues, funk, rock and other familiar touch points in his music. Overall, he made an implicit statement this night that his creative fires are still burning after all these decades, and he’s not about to coast.

In the middle of the set, Mr. Carlton pulled out his acoustic guitar to play his ear candy smooth jazz hit from 1990, “Smiles and Smiles to Go,” stretching out into some nimble fretwork on his solo, hardly the model of smooth jazz glibness. After the tune, he shrugged, “everybody

likes a showoff.” Somehow, even when Mr. Carlton is “showing off,” an abiding sense of taste is intact. For one thing, he bends strings—one or more at a time—with a special fluid flair.

As heard on his latest albums, “Sapphire Blue” and “Fire Wire,” Mr. Carlton has been exploring the feistier and bluesier side of his playing lately. While that side emerged in short, hot portions on Wednesday, he also explored other corners of his diverse musical palette.

A new tune called “Walk with Me” found his son laying down a walking bass part. Other new tunes hinted at the influence of early John McLaughlin—a bent blues form with extended chords and stacked fourths—and a more common reference point in Mr. Carlton’s playing, the late, great Wes Montgomery.

For an encore, Carlton called up the most familiar tune of the evening, Steely Dan’s hit song “Josie,” in a short but punchy rendition. Nerdy trivia-hounds know that Mr. Carlton played the distinctive rhythm part on that recording, but not the solo—by Walter Becker. Mr. Carlton’s solo on Steely Dan’s “Kid Charlemagne,” on the other hand, is possibly the greatest guitar solo even on a pop hit.

Maybe next time, he’ll play that one. Or maybe he’ll have another batch of new tunes to present. Either way is fine by us.