

A guitarist who plays jazz his way

Studio stalwart Larry Carlton showcases his distinctive sound on solo projects and with Fourplay.

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Larry Carlton, guitarist for contemporary jazz favorites Fourplay, has lived multiple musical lives since he first picked up a six-string 52 years ago, at age 6.

He has dabbled in rock, jazz, pop, blues, country, TV themes and fusion, with artists from Steely Dan to Dolly Parton.

"I always say I'm a jazz-influenced guitarist," Carlton says. "Just yesterday I was watching a DVD documentary on Ray Charles, made in 1976. The way Ray put it was, 'I'm a singer who can sing jazz my way, a singer who can sing country music my way.' I really liked that. I'm a guitar player who can play jazz my way."

Carlton's role in Fourplay, he says, is to add his distinctive sound to that of keyboardist Bob James, bassist Nathan East and drummer Harvey Mason, all of whom have done their share of recording-session work.

He joined the group in 1998, taking over from Lee Ritenour, the group's original guitarist. The latter's silky sound defined such fan favorites as *Wish You Were*, *Between the Sheets* and *Elixir*.

"They were very clear when I got the call," Carlton says. "They wanted me to come in and do my thing. There was no notion that I would do what the guy before me did. They wanted my voice."

A one-time Los Angeles studio stalwart, Carlton played a string of albums with Joni Mitchell, including 1974's *Court and Spark*. He notched an acclaimed turn on Steely Dan's *Kid Charlemagne* and recorded with John Lennon, Michael Jackson, Jerry Garcia, Barbra Streisand, Dolly Parton and other superstars.

Carlton was heard on Mike Post's bluesy theme for *Hill Street Blues* and contributed to 13 albums by the Crusaders. As "Mr. 335," a purveyor of high-energy fusion (performed on his Gibson ES 335), he gained a following as a solo artist beginning in the late '70s.

LARRY CARLTON

He released an all-acoustic album in 1986, survived a near-fatal shooting near his Hollywood Hills studio in 1987, and since has dipped his toes in blues, smooth jazz and occasional straight-ahead projects.

Carlton's heart first belonged to jazz, he says, then later turned to blues.

"Every day after high school I would put on a Joe Pass record or a John Coltrane record and listen and analyze and steal licks. Then I got turned on to the blues and I listened to Albert Collins and B.B. King. I had a lot of time to develop those different styles."

His skills as a well-rounded guitarist paid off in droves when he played the sessions for Kid Charlemagne. Rolling Stone lauded his solo on that song as one of the three best rock guitar solos of all time. At the time, though, the session simply felt like another hard, productive day's work in the studio, he says.

"I enjoyed the process of making those records with no expectation of getting the recognition I did get for it. I looked back and thought, 'Gosh, I just went there and did my gig and look what happened, the world agreed'. That's the blessing part of it."

The soft-spoken musician and his wife, contemporary Christian singer Michele Pillar, have lived on a 100-acre farm in Franklin, Tenn., since 1995. Carlton has continued to tour on his own and record solo CDs, including *Fire Wire*, released last year in Japan and six months ago in the United States.

Fourplay's music, on albums such as the just-released *X*, featuring a guest appearance by Michael McDonald, is a sedate if well-crafted blend of jazz, pop and R&B. The quartet, although not exactly a favorite of jazz critics, offers contemporary instrumental music that's surprisingly complex, Carlton says.

"Where the band Fourplay goes musically is very deep," he says. "The music is so sophisticated yet so accessible. The average listener can enjoy it at a very light level if he wants to but if a musician wants to listen, there are a lot of sophisticated harmonies and arrangements going on."