

## Sapphire Blue Release Note

In a way, this album is long overdue. Fans have gotten used to hearing Carlton play the blues at his shows. In fact, he admits that these performances are a high point as much for him as they are for his audience.

"It doesn't matter what they've come to hear," he explains. "When I play the blues, that's when I most passionately connect with them and with my guitar."

Sapphire Blue proves the point. Backed by a crisp rhythm section and buoyed by Jim Horn's razor-edged horn arrangements, Carlton stretches out on a set of original, groove-driven tunes with that unique blend of melodic inventiveness, singing tone, and swing that define his style as well as the best elements of playing the blues.

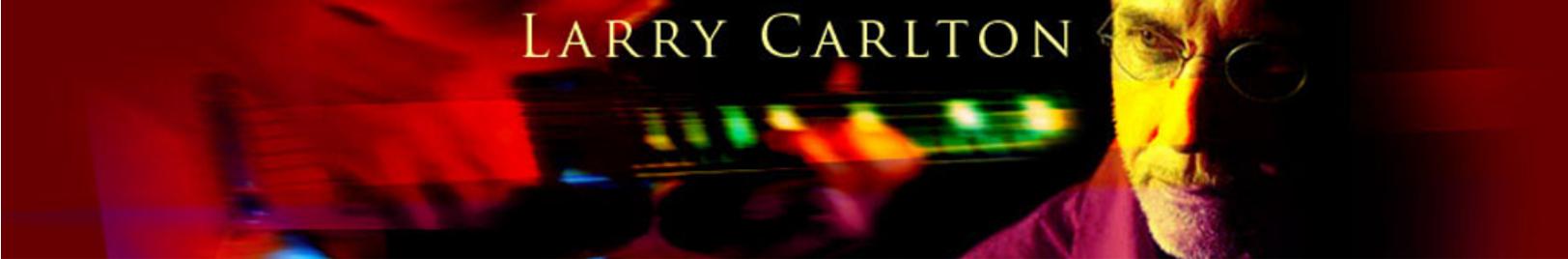
"There are some sophisticated harmonies in these compositions -- after all, I was born in 1948, not in 1920," he points out. "But Sapphire Blue is mainly about saying more with less, with making major statements in a basic format. I've always admired that quality; even when John Coltrane was doing his most advanced harmonic things, you could break his statements down to something elegant, something you could easily hum."

Like the music itself, the story behind Sapphire Blue is both simple and sophisticated. Step One involved writing the material; the challenge here was to stay close to the form while tweaking it just enough to make it fresh. "A few of the tunes were pretty traditional, like 'Friday Night Shuffle' or 'Just an Excuse'-- the name says it on that one," he laughs. "But most of them have little extensions or elaborations that help push the performances along. On the title track, for instance, the backdrop is pretty harmonically advanced. I got that from listening to Ray Charles; he would alter the chords in his ballads so that they came from more of a gospel place, and that would actually enhance his blues singing. So the blues doesn't have to stay simple, as long as you can play soulfully over it."

Step Two meant building the perfect band. This took a while, given everybody's busy schedule, but as soon as the right guys were available at the same time, Carlton gathered them into the Sound Kitchen in Nashville. It took just two days to lay down all of the bedrock tracks -- but when you look at who was in the rhythm section, that should come as no surprise.

"First, there's the drummer, Billy Kilson," Carlton says. "He works with Dave Holland and Bob James, and he has that high degree of musicianship to where even when he plays the simplest thing, it's so

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meaningful. On bass, there's Michael Rhodes, a deep, deep groove guy. Matt Rollings? He's just the best young keyboard player I've ever heard, and I've heard a lot of them. When Reese Wynans starts playing on that B-3, his spirit cannot be denied -- and I just love that big smile on his face as he contributes to the feel. And rounding everything off is the soulful sax sound of our friend Mark Douthit."

Beyond their individual gifts, these players share that same respect for playing together that has always been a Carlton trademark. "This was one of the most honest records I've ever made," he says, "in terms of how I play and what I write. It's easy to be honest with the caliber of musicians we have on this CD. I like to surround myself with people who do what I always try to do, which is to check their ego at the door. I'm not out there to impress anyone; I'm out there to express myself. That's a big difference, and these guys understand that completely."

With the horns added two weeks later, *Sapphire Blue* is an extremely important milestone in Carlton's career.