A Lesson With Larry Carlton

A Breakdown Of The Style And Technique Of Virtuoso Guitarist Larry Carlton

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Introduction

If you have been following my teaching or are familiar with me in any way, shape or form, then you know that Larry Carlton is my favorite guitarist. It all started back in 1978 when a friend of mine handed me an album and said, “You need to listen to this.”

I put in on the turntable and fired it up...and yes I am dating myself taking about albums and turntables! I was instantly blown away. I remember thinking...This is how the guitar is supposed to sound!

If you want to hear what I heard then check out this link...

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Wq1i409CVU

If the song sounds familiar Larry freely admits that it is a rip of Steely Dan’s song, Peg. There were a combination of things that stood out on this record for me.

1. Larry’s tone - Carlton has always been recognized for his killer guitar sound.
2. The combination of rock, blues and jazz type ideas.
3. The melodies - I don’t think there is a guitarist anywhere with more taste than Larry.

From that point on I went on a Larry Carlton frenzy. I learned almost every solo off of that recording note for note. I bought every recording as they were released. I went to see him live. I think you get the point.

As the years progressed Carlton started to get back to his roots and explore his blues side. He was always quick to point out that B.B. King is one of his major influences. In 1983 B.B. joined Larry on his album friends and played on the track Blues For T.J.

I decided to make a study of B.B. King’s solo on that recording as a study to see if I could spot the B.B. Influence on Larry. It is available under the title, A Lesson With The King.

While it is a complete course of study on it’s own, it did not feel complete to me without the Larry Carlton solo...so, in the following pages I would like to present, A Lesson With Larry Carlton. If you like the blues, you will love this. It’s a veritable treasure chest full of ideas. Let’s get to it.
Blues For T.J. is your basic 12 bar blues in the key of C with a quick change. If you don’t know what that means a blues with a quick change goes to the IV chord in measure 2. See below.

### 12 Bar Blues

12 Bar Blues

I am going to assume that you are already familiar with the basic 12 bar blues at this point so I am not going to go any deeper into this for now. I want to stay on task and talk about what can be learned from Larry’s solo in this song!

I will be referring to each snippet of the solo as a loop and you will be given the audio files in corresponding sections. This should help keep you organized as you work through the solo on your own.

**Loop 1**
The main points of interest here are the 2 step bend up from Eb up to G and the opening 3 notes. As you will when loop 2 comes around, Larry repeats the opening 3 notes. This has the effect of tying the first 2 loops together and gives continuity to the solo.

On the bend, one would normally expect a whole step bend from Eb up to F. By bending 2 steps up to the G Larry creates a match with the C7 chord spelled C, E, G, Bb. Most great players always find a way to “play the changes.”

Here is an alternate fingering for loop 1.

**Loop 1 A**

I also have to take a moment to talk about Larry’s picking technique and touch. It’s almost like he just coaxes the notes out of the guitar.

Check out the exercises that I recommend on the video to help you get control over your picking. The first one simply helps you get control over dynamics. The second one has you explore the different sounds available by changing the angle of your pick.

This is definitely an over looked facet of guitar playing. There are lots of different tonal colors available...even if it is just a piece of plastic hitting some steel strings!
Now take a look at loop 2.

Loop 2

Loop 2 has more of the classic Larry phrasing that we talked about in loop 1. In addition, check out the control that Carlton demonstrates on his bending. He has the ability to bend perfectly in tune and hit all of the micro-tonal variations in between.

When doing a transcription like this, you have to make several choices, fingering being one of the most important. Often, it’s difficult to pinpoint but you can use the timbre of the notes to help. I point this out on the video.

Here is an alternate fingering for loop 2.
Loop 2 A

Loop 3
Loop 3 is short and sweet but I think it clearly demos the B.B. King influence on Carlton. Be sure to work on the first finger bending.

TIP...let the lower strings slide over the top of the bending finger to make it easier.

**Loop 4**

Once again all of the classic Carlton elements are present in this one...the picking touch, the precise control of bending, the choice of notes, vintage Larry through and through.

Be sure to check the little demo on the video where I talk about the power of dynamics. You can take the simplest of phrases and turn it into a masterpiece by applying dynamics. I really encourage you to explore this and add it to your playing.
Loop 5

Short, sweet and simple...not much more to say about this one.

Loop 6
Once again you hear the B.B. King influence on Larry. Listen to B.B.’s solo on this track and you will hear this exact lick. And, notice once again the effect that Larry’s use of dynamics has on this lick!

**Loop 7**

On this one it’s more wide bending. Focus on staying in tune and holding that first bend for the duration. And, listen to the speed of the bends. Notice the release speed on the first bend and how quickly Carlton does the 2 step bend. There can be lots of variation in bending when it comes to how quickly you push the note up and release it.

**This Area Intentionally Bank**
Loop 8 is pretty much straight ahead blues. Here Larry is playing good old box 1 of the pentatonic/blues scale.

There are 2 spots here where he alludes to the chords being played, both in the second measure. The first one is the note E at the 9th fret, 3rd string. This is the third of the C7 chord and clearly matches the harmony at the time.

The last note G, at the 10th fret, 5th string occurs at the exact moment the tune hits the five chord.

As I mentioned earlier, this is one of the signs of a seasoned player. Even though the lick is primarily blues, Larry still manages to target the chord tones.
Here’s another nod to B.B. King. This lick is very similar to some of the ideas that B.B. played in his solo. Once again I refer you to the recording.

It’s interesting to note that even though players might play the exact same ideas, they will sound different. B.B has sort of a rough edge and Carlton is “smooth.” This is where all of the different elements of phrasing show up.

That’s why it’s a good idea to learn licks and use them in your own playing immediately. It’s not cheating...improv is not some sort of magic conjured from thin air. Eventually the licks will become part of your vocabulary and start to sound like you.
This is probably my favorite lick in the whole solo. Great note choices, bending, a slip into the major pentatonic scale and the octave C’s at the end.

When memorizing a lick like this one be sure to take it a few notes at a time. It will be much easier that way. Once you have it memorized it will be much easier to focus on what you are playing.
Transcribing a solo like this is not an exact science. If you look at different interpretations from various sources you are likely to find some differences. In doing the video for this lick I discovered an error that I made the first time around. Above is the way I first heard it and below is the modification.
Loop 12

```
\[ \begin{align*}
\text{T} & \quad 12 & 14 & 16 & 18 & 18 \\
\text{A} & \quad 13 & 15 & 14 & 18 & 18 \\
\text{B} & \quad & & & &
\end{align*} \]

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{T} & \quad 14 & 13 & 18 & 18 & 18 & 18 & 18 & 18 & 14 & 13 & 18 & 20 \\
\text{A} & \quad 14 & 13 & 18 & 14 & 13 & 18 & 18 & 18 & 14 & 13 & 18 & \\
\text{B} & \quad & & & & & & & & & & &
\end{align*} \]
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hold bend ---
This is a longer but due to the bending theme Larry has going here I felt it all fit together. Check out the cool stretch at the end of the second measure. The bend is at the 18th fret and the fretted note with the pinky is at the 20th. This might be a challenge but worth the effort.

Loop 13

A cool little sequence of notes and a chance to work on the picking again. Even though this seems easy, the phrasing makes it a challenge.
Here’s a repetition of an earlier idea and another nod to B.B.

Another test of your bending ability. Be sure to check out the video for this one. Take note of how you can take advantage of bending multiple strings at once. In this one Larry plays both notes together, but you can separate them too.
It's back to the blues to take it home. Notice the similarity between this line and the one that ends the first chorus. Coincidence? What do you think?

Starting on the next page you will find the tab for the entire solo.
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hold bend---

19

T
A
B

20

T
A
B

21

T
A
B

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There you have it. I hope that you enjoy the licks and ideas presented in this course and the video...I know I sure have. And, I had another chance to dive even deeper into the playing of my favorite guitarist.

The most important thing is to take what you like and put it to use immediately. Make the ideas a part of you and your playing.

If you have any questions be sure to drop me a line. I am happy to help.

Best Wishes,

Bob