



# Louie, Louie

US session player **Louie Shelton**'s credits range from The Monkees to The Jackson Five and John Lennon. Now living on the Gold Coast, the prolific guitarist and producer talks to Michael Fix.



**O**VER the past several decades you'd have heard Louie Shelton's signature riffs and solos on more hit records than any other session guitarist in history. Some of his classics include Boz Scaggs' "Low Down", Lionel Richie's "Hello", Neil Diamond's "Play Me", The Jackson Five's "I Want You Back", "ABC" and "I'll Be There", and The Monkees' "Last Train To Clarksville" and "Valerie".

Other artists Louie has recorded with include John Lennon, Whitney Houston, Barbra Streisand, Marvin Gaye, Diana Ross, The Carpenters, Joe Cocker, Kenny Rodgers, The Mamas & Papas, James Brown, and Ella Fitzgerald. As a recording artist himself, he's released five albums to date: *Touch Me, Guitar, Hot & Spicy, Urban Culture* and *Nashville Guitars*.

Louie has spent much time in Los Angeles and Nashville as a session guitarist, recording artist, record producer, and composer, playing on countless movie scores and television shows, and working with composers such as Henry Mancini, Dave Grusin, Quincy Jones and Lalo Schiffrin.

In 1984, Louie made his first move to Australia, where he opened a recording studio in downtown Sydney. Within the first year he produced an album for Peter Cupples and also developed one of Australia's most successful bands, Noiseworks, for whom he secured a major record contract with Sony.

He's since continued to produce several bands, including Southern Sons, Mother Hubbard, The Wolverines and Bleu Tongue, and was involved with such artists as Tommy Emmanuel, Rick Price and Human Nature. The veteran guitarist and his family recently returned to Australia to live on the Gold Coast, where Louie has established a new studio.

#### **How and when did your love affair with the guitar start?**

I can remember as far back as three years old, dragging an old guitar around the house and imitating playing it. It didn't survive. I received my first new guitar for my ninth birthday, a \$13 Stella. That would have been about 1950. In the beginning I was a very big Chet Atkins fan. I bought every record and sat for hours learning his tunes by ear. I first met Chet when I was 12 years old and was able to remain friends and visit with him many times over the years. My last visit was in Nashville talking about the good old times two weeks before he passed away. I also became a fan of Jimmy Bryant, a very clean, fiery, fast player. Every guitarist should hear Jimmy Bryant play. By age 12 I was playing Chet and Jimmy's instrumentals at the local Jamboree in Little Rock, Arkansas, where I was born. It was then I joined a local country band that was doing a live-to-air radio show five days a week, as well as a Wednesday-night TV show. At that point I was able to buy my first real guitar, an early-'50s Telecaster. I wish I still had that guitar.

#### **How did you get into the session scene?**

After playing in clubs six nights a week from age 14 to 21, my dream was to go to Los Angeles and become a session player. I moved to LA in '63 and it took a few years of working in clubs and playing on publishing demos before I had the opportunity to play on The Monkees' "Last Train To Clarksville". That record went to #1 and soon all the record producers in LA were calling me to play on their sessions. Motown had just moved out to LA from Detroit and I became their guitar player, which was very exciting for me, as I had enjoyed all of their records over the years. A typical day for me in those days would be show up for a 10am session for Motown, lunch break, 2pm session with Neil Diamond or [The] Mamas and [the] Papas, quick dinner and head for a 7pm session with Barbra Streisand or someone of similar stature. It was a tough gig, but someone had to do it!

#### **What gear were you using then?**

For "Last Train To Clarksville", I had an early-'60s Telecaster and a Super Reverb amp, which was what I had been using in the clubs. I soon bought a Fender Princeton amp, which was easier to carry, and all I needed for the studio. To this day that little amp sits right next to me in my studio. I also have an old Fender Bassman, a Boogie, a Vox, a Peavey and a Line 6. I used the same Tele on all the Jackson Five records - "I Want You Back", "I'll Be There", "ABC", etc. I also had a Gibson Byrdland for the R&B stuff and that's what I used on Seals and Crofts' "Diamond Girl". For the solo on Lionel Richie's "Hello" I used my Strat with EMGs. For the Boz Scaggs' *Silk Degrees* album I used the Tele. I use my Tele with the three EMGs most of the time because with the five-way switch it's just so versatile. I have two Strats, one with EMGs, the other with stock pick-ups, except a Seymour Duncan at the back.

#### **You must have been a good reader.**

Having learned to play by ear and never having any formal music lessons other than chord charts, I was pretty much a non-reader when it came to music. I sort of went to the studio every day hoping no one would throw a chart in front of me with a lot of notes. One day it finally happened. I got to my 2pm and look at the first chart and see this stupid solo written out with a million notes. I thought, "What stupid idiot put that there?" So I plugged my guitar in and sat down and started trying to figure it out. Everything written above the staff. How many sharps? How many flats? Anyway the conductor was banging on the podium saying, "Come on, guys, we need to get going," and I was sure I had the first three notes of the solo figured out. As luck would have it Larry Carlton showed up as the second guitar player. He was new on the scene. I had helped him get started

by recommending him for sessions so we had become good friends and had a lot of fun working together. Anyway, he was running late and was just sitting down as the conductor was counting off the first tune. It was then I had this great idea - switch charts with Larry. So I took the simple chord chart from Larry and gave him the solo chart. He knew what was up and with a smile on his face played the solo perfectly first time through without missing a note. Needless to say, I was very impressed.

#### **Any tricks or ideas that have proved useful?**

I never had what I would consider tricks when it came to my session work, but I did feel well prepared. By that, I mean I had really listened and learned all the different styles and sounds. At the time I broke into the session scene I'm sure I was the most versatile player there. This was very important. Producers would refer to certain sounds or styles that they wanted, so you had to know what they were asking for and how to get that sound. Or sometimes you might suggest a style or sound that would add to the record. Arrangers never wrote for guitar like they do for string and horn players. Guys like me were there to come up with stuff that wasn't taught in school. But a very important part of that was having a good sense of when to play, what to play and how much.

## **The Motown sessions were highly charged, but I knew the end result was always going to be something special**

#### **Any favourite artists or producers you've worked with?**

All the artists I've worked with throughout my session career have been nice, appreciative, and fun to work with. Even Barbra Streisand, who has been known to chop heads, was very respectful when working with musicians and just wanted to be one of the guys. Lionel Richie was probably one of the nicest people I ever worked with, always complimenting and loved everything I played. The Motown sessions were usually highly charged and sometimes raised voices between

artist and producers, but because I was such a fan of their musical history I knew the end result was always going to be something special.

#### **With a career spanning five decades, you'd have seen profound changes in the music industry.**

I've been around since mono recording. I remember when they gave a demonstration of "stereophonic" sound at my school in the mid '50s. It was the sound of a train going across the stage from one speaker to the other. By the time I got to LA we were up to eight-track recording and soon went to 16 tracks. My first production success, the Seals and Crofts *Summer Breeze* album was recorded on a 16-track machine through a converted eight-track desk with rotary knobs. That was the Sound Factory in Hollywood, where all the Motown stuff was recorded. A year later we went back to record the *Diamond Girl* album and they had gone to 24-track with a new API console. The last Lionel Richie record I did, there were two 24-track digital and two 24-track analogue machines. Anyway, I've gone through all of that and thank God for Pro Tools!

Before moving back to Australia I lived in Nashville for nine or 10 years. They still make records there like we used to in LA, with all the musicians playing together. I was amazed at how great the musicians are there - guys like Dan Huff and Brent Mason. I produced a CD there called *Nashville Guitars* that I'm very proud of. It features myself and 10 of Nashville's top session players, each featured on an original tune. The most you ever hear of these guys is an eight-bar solo here and there, so I thought it would be a good idea to feature them.

#### **What do you think of the music scene in Australia?**

The music scene here is very much alive, more so than Nashville and a lot of other places I could mention.

#### **What are you working now?**

I have set up my studio here on the Gold Coast and am currently producing some of the new artists and helping to secure record deals for them. I'm always interested in new talent and finding good songs. I'm also working on a new guitar CD for myself. You know, this has been a great journey for me to have a career where I can still get excited over a new guitar or amp or a new piece of studio gear.

#### **Advice for young players?**

Listen and learn from as many different players as you can. That will become your style and bag of tricks that you can draw ideas from in different situations. Don't be afraid to explore jazz. Jazz is just improvising over the chord changes to songs you know. And develop your blues chops. A good blues foundation makes you sound better, whether your playing jazz, rock or country. It worked for Hendrix, Clapton and Page. 



# LAST TRAIN TO

**FROM THE MONKEES TO MARVIN GAYE, '60s SESSION MASTER LOUIE SHELTON PLAYED THE RIFFS THAT LAUNCHED THE HITS**



It was, quite literally, the lick that launched a career. The year was 1966, and a pair of up-and-coming L.A. songwriters named Tommy Boyce and Bobby



Hart had signed on to pen tunes for a made-for-TV pop group. Knowing that would mean a day-in, day-out session grind, Boyce and Hart convinced Louie Shelton (who had been commuting from his Las Vegas club gig to

cut their demos) to leave his band and anchor their team full-time. As the crew settled into a rehearsal room with the first rough-sketch song, Shelton fiddled with a simple intro riff on his Telecaster. In short order, "Last Train to Clarksville" was in the can, the Monkees

had their first Number 1 single, and Shelton had become an A-list session player.

"There was no waiting for an album to come out—just instant exposure on network TV," recalls Shelton. "All of a sudden, my phone was ringing off the

The man of 1,000 hooks: Louie Shelton today with custom Mark Lacey archtop.





# LUCKSVILLE



BY RUSTY RUSSELL

wall with session calls. Everyone wanted to get the guy who played that Monkees thing. Almost overnight, I went from doing a few demos and a lounge gig to being one of the busiest guitar players in town—sitting next to guys I'd admired all my life. It was *un-real* the way things took off."

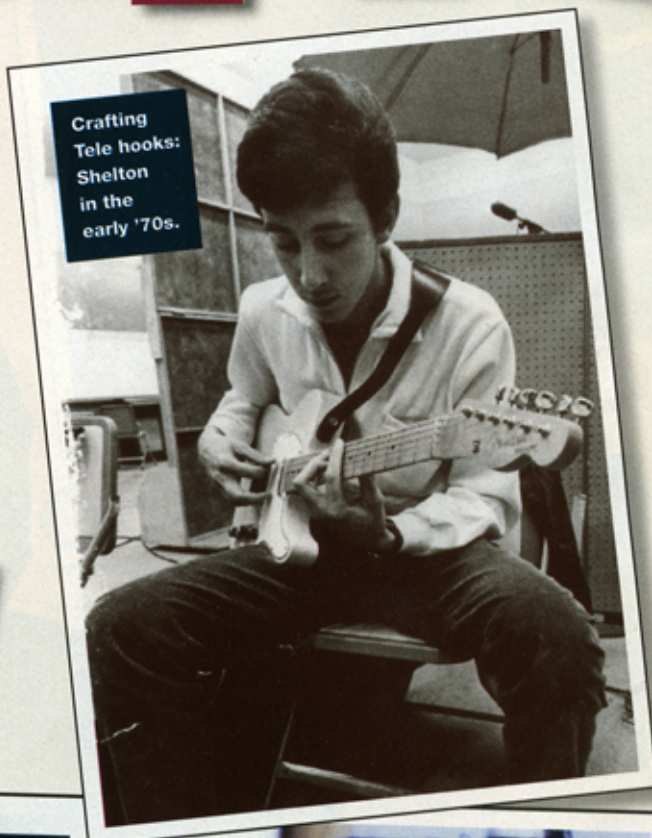
Shelton played on many more Monkees tracks, and he was a natural for another "put together" TV group, the Partridge Family. But over the next dozen or so years, he would also lend his inventive lines, tasty solos, and well-conceived rhythm tracks to hundreds of albums—from mellow acts such as the Carpenters, Seals & Crofts, and England Dan & John Ford Coley to soul faves like the Jackson Five, Gladys Knight, and Marvin Gaye. That's also Shelton backing Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes on "Up Where We Belong," soloing on Lionel Richie's "Hello," and burning '70s-style on Boz Scaggs' "Lowdown." And if his name isn't as recognizable as those of peers such as Larry Carlton, Lee Ritenour, and Dean Parks, it's mostly because his arrival predated theirs by a few years. However, Carlton credits Shelton with laying the foundation that others built on.

"The guy I patterned myself on was 'sweet' Louie Shelton," Carlton said in a recent interview. "As far as tone, taste, and knowing what to play and what not to play, he was the man. We all learned how to do it from him."

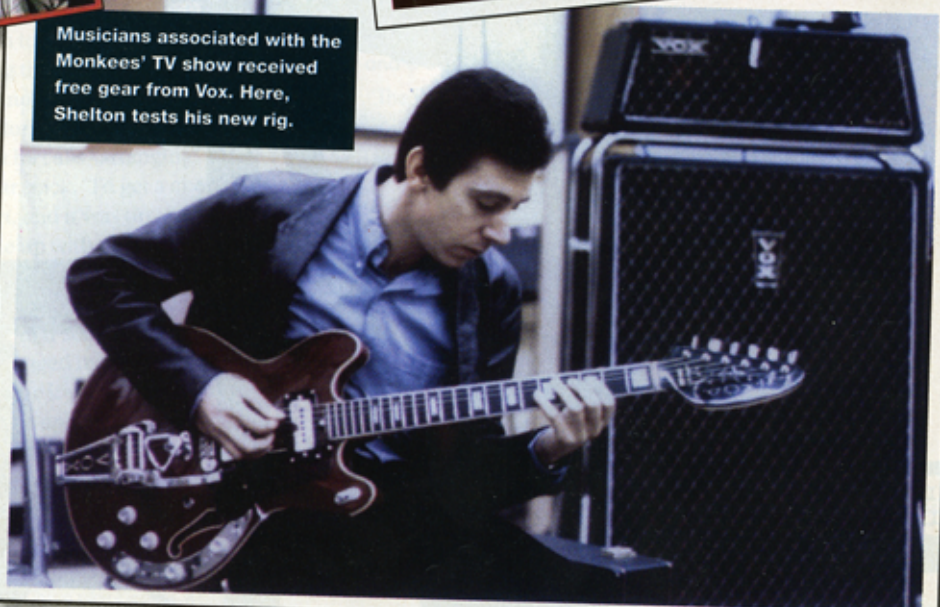
Obviously, Shelton was ready when opportunity knocked. Raised in Arkansas,



Crafting Tele hooks: Shelton in the early '70s.



Musicians associated with the Monkees' TV show received free gear from Vox. Here, Shelton tests his new rig.





# LAST TRAIN TO LICKSVILLE

he had been something of a whiz kid. By age 12—already hip to the likes of Jimmy Bryant, Barney Kessel, and Chet Atkins—he was playing club gigs around Little Rock, and backing singers on weekly radio and TV shows. Barely out of his teens, he left home for a house gig in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"Glen Campbell—who was also from Arkansas—worked a gig just down the road from mine," Shelton explains. "We'd get together and jam, and we got to be pretty good friends. Glen headed for L.A. at least a couple years before I did, and by the time I got there, he was doing records with Frank Sinatra, the Beach Boys, and Dean Martin. He introduced me around and recommended me for sessions. Later on, when his singing career took off, I worked on his TV show for a couple of years."

Shelton moved to L.A. in 1963, and took a road gig with Joe & Eddie, a popular folk duo. At this stage of his career, Shelton's gear amounted to a guitar and case. "I'd never owned more than one guitar at a time," he recalls. "I'd been through some Fenders and a couple of Gibsons. I traded an L-5 for a Martin acoustic when I went with Joe & Eddie. After that, I got a Tele with a rosewood fingerboard. That was in about '62, but I don't know how long it had been in the store. That was an amazing guitar—it sounded just great on everything, from the rock stuff to Wes Montgomery tunes."

Shelton would need that versatility on his next gig—the cover band that took him to Las Vegas. Among its members were Jimmy Seals and

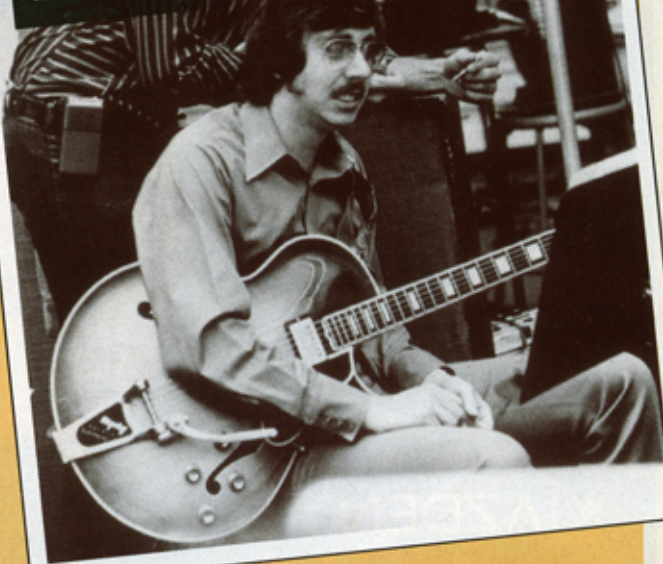
Dash Crofts, who Shelton produced years later when the duo became known as Seals & Crofts. But Shelton's session career not only kicked off his meteoric rise to mid-'60s prominence, it represented a pivotal point in the way studio players worked.

"It was a little embarrassing at first," he explains. "Because I was never quick with notation, and here I was sitting beside monster sight-readers like Tommy Tedesco and Howard Roberts. So the producers would say, 'Louie, you take the solos.' It felt kind of strange. I was there to come up with the licks and the hooks. The other guys handled the reading and utility work. As skilled as they were, rock-type intros or solos just weren't their bag. My thing was versatility. For years, I copped everything that came out, from Chuck Berry to Eric Clapton to Hendrix—the licks, the sound, *everything*. That way, I could play an honest version of what these players did. You can trace that kind of session playing to Glen Campbell, as well. He didn't read, but everyone called him because he had such a great vibe and could come up with the licks that would make a track. Then I broke in, and all of a sudden Glen had moved on. He wasn't doing sessions anymore, and for a while it was pretty much down to James Burton and me filling that role."

Another important skill in Shelton's bag of tricks was what he calls "arranging" the guitar track. "I'd get a chord chart, and it was up to me to come up with parts that would fit the whole arc of the song," he says. "I tried to play something that sounded as though it belonged in the song from the time it was written. That's how we approached all the Motown stuff after the label moved to California in 1968."

Soon, the players that were to define the L.A. session scene made their way into the studios. "Guys like Larry Carlton,

Cradling his Bigsby-equipped Gibson Super 400, Shelton reviews a part with Mark Lindsay of Paul Revere & The Raiders.



In his Nashville studio, Shelton uses a variety of modern digital gear, but many of his best-known tracks were cut with bare-bones equipment. For "Low-down," from Boz Scaggs' *Silk Degrees*, he used a Gibson L-5S solidbody with low-impedance pickups, a Fender Princeton amp, and an MXR Distortion+ pedal. Shelton's memorable solo on Lionel Richie's "Hello" was played on a custom-built Strat-style guitar and a Scholz Rockman.

"The Rockman had just come out," he remembers, "and I plugged into it and then went straight into the board. It was sort of like the Motown days. For tracks like the Jackson Five's 'I Want You Back,' we'd rehearse with amps but record direct, with everyone in the same room separated by baffles. That took some getting used to, because you really missed the sound of the amp."

Shelton cut most of his Monkees and Partridge Family tracks with a late-'50s or early-'60s Telecaster and a blackface Fender Super Reverb amp. Later, he pared down to a Fender Princeton.

While he still owns much of the gear used on those historic sessions, today Shelton relies mostly on a custom archtop made by Tennessee luthier Mark Lacey, an early-'70s Gibson ES-175, and a Fender Telecaster. His main amp for live work or sessions is a recent-model Fender Twin.

—RR

## THE GEAR BEHIND SHELTON'S HISTORIC TRACKS



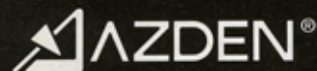
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# LAST TRAIN TO LUCKSVILLE

Lee Ritenour, and Jay Graydon pretty much had everything," says Shelton. "Larry and Lee had a knack for picking the right guitar, the perfect tone, and the best parts for a song. I did a lot of records with Larry—we were sort of a tandem. He is an incredible reader, and there's a funny story about that. We were booked on this session, and I'd gotten there a little early. I was looking over my chart, and about 16 bars in, there was a solo written out with all these black notes way above the staff. I started sweating as I tried to pick out the notes. Carlton comes in—running late—and the leader is trying to get the tune counted off while Larry is setting up his amp. Just as Larry sat down in his chair, I reached over and swapped the charts on our stands. *Bang*—the leader counts the song off. When the solo came up, Larry nailed it—letter perfect, first time. It was just amazing."

According to Shelton, a simple, versatile array of tools was the norm for session players until the mid '70s. Fender Princeton amps ruled—most modified by one of a growing list of tinkering specialists. Effects typically included a wah-wah pedal, an overdrive, and a delay, with MXR being the most prominent brand. (Shelton still swears by his old DynaComp.)

"The pedalboard thing didn't start until later," he says, "although you started seeing more of a selection of amps and so on. Racks didn't come in until *much* later, with guys like Steve Lukather. But an awful lot of big records were cut with just a Tele or a 335, a Fender Princeton or a Deluxe, and one or two pedals."

Shelton remained active in L.A.'s studios well into the '80s, although, by then, he was spending more time producing than playing. By 1984, with children to raise and yearning for a slower pace, he moved his family to Sydney, Australia. His time there was split between playing, scoring films, and producing. Since returning to the U.S. in 1996—and settling in Nashville—Shelton has released *Hot & Spicy* [Sindrome] and *Urban Culture* [Nuance/Lightyear], and produced *Nashville Guitars*, which features session heavyweights Reggie Young, Boomer Castleman, Ray Flacke, Jimmy Olander, and others.

"These days," Shelton notes, "there are really good players everywhere, but Nashville has more than its share. The talent level here is really high, so it keeps you on your toes. Sessions aren't an everyday thing for me anymore, but they're still a lot of fun. And laying down a good part is something you *never* get tired of."

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