



The Michael Landau Group: Organic Instrumentals (2012)

By [JOHN KELMAN](#), Published: March 16, 2012

What do [Joni Mitchell](#), [James Taylor](#) and Neil Diamond have in common? Well, aside from being amongst the more important singer/songwriters of the past forty years, they've all recruited Michael Landau at one time or another. Between hundreds of recordings and plenty of high profile tours, it's more than a little surprising that the guitarist hasn't become a household name. Still, success needn't be measured solely on popular recognition; Landau's already achieved plenty as a guitarist's guitarist—a musician's



musician whose broad vernacular makes him capable in virtually any context. As a leader, his discography is admittedly light, but he's ramped up recently with *Live* (Tone Center, 2006), from his own fusion/blues-oriented group, and the similarly rock/vocal-driven *Renegade Creation* (Tone Center, 2010) collective, with guitarist [Robben Ford](#), bassist [Jimmy Haslip](#) and drummer [Gary Novak](#). What Landau's discography has been missing, however, is an all-instrumental record, and with *Organic Instrumentals*, he's righted that serious wrong.

And what a stellar record it is. Landau shuffles the rhythm section amongst a bunch of largely well-known friends, but what lends *Organic Instrumentals* its consistency, strength and authenticity—beyond the guitarist's tasty playing, effortless control over effects and verisimilitude across electric and acoustic instruments—is organist [Larry Goldings](#). No stranger in the jazz world for his work with guitarists [John Scofield](#) and [Peter Bernstein](#)—but first hooking up with Landau in James Taylor's touring band—Goldings' helps define *Organic Instrumentals'* overall tenor on all but two tracks: "The Big Black Bear," where Landau's whammy bar-driven chords and sweet Fender tone work a space somewhere between guitarists [Derek Trucks](#) and [Jimmy Herring](#); and "The Family Tree," a roots-driven solo that, moving seamlessly from acoustic to tremolo-driven electric guitar, provides a gentle coda to this largely incendiary set.

Between Goldings and Landau's own inestimable chops, *Organic Instrumentals* could have been a more clearly defined jazz recording, but that would misrepresent the guitarist's multifarious interests. Instead, not unlike Herring and the legendary [Jeff Beck](#), *Organic Instrumentals* is more rock instrumental—but, with its greater harmonic sophistication and chops, one that simply could not have been made by anyone living solely in that world.

The grooves are deep, but this is more than just a collection of contexts for soaring solos;

Organic Instrumentals is also a writer's record. The dobro-driven "Delano," thundering "Sneaker Wave," sneakier "Spider Time" and fusion-centric "Karen Mellow" all possess memorable themes and changes to navigate, but at their core sits Landau, who—with rare features for Goldings and, on the album's most jazz-informed track, "Big Sur Howl," flugelhornist/[Frank Zappa](#) alum [Walt Fowler](#)—grabs nearly all the solo space.

Landau stretches out considerably, but decades of studio sessions with inherently limited space mean that every note of every solo counts—each part of an overriding and spontaneous form. That would be enough to make *Organic Instrumentals* a success, but Landau's compelling writing, coupled with a terrific cadre of players, makes it more than just Landau's best solo album to date. Deserving to push his visibility to the next level, *Organic Instrumentals* is an early contender for one of the year's best rock-infused instrumental records.

Track Listing: Delano; Sneaker Wave; Spider Time; The Big Black Bear; Karen Mellow; Ghouls and Goblins; Bug Sur Howl; Wooly Mammoth; Smoke; Family Tree.

Personnel: Michael Landau: guitar; Larry Goldings: organ (1-3, 5-9), piano (3), Estey reed organ (9), carillion (9); Jimmy Haslip: bass (1, 3); Charley Drayton: drums (1, 8); Vinnie Colaiuta: drums (2); Teddy Landau: bass (2); Gary Novak: drums (3-7); Andy Hess: bass (4, 5, 8); Chris Chaney: bass (6); Walt Fowler: flugelhorn (7).

Record Label: [Tone Center](#)

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