Cari Lee Merritt often admonishes herself when she quite lightly describes her demeanour as simply "dizzy blonde". Although by appearance Cari might seem like a muddled stand-in for Lucille Ball on 'I Love Lucy', in reality nothing is farther from the truth. The gal knows what she is doing and by her own musical unravelling voyage of discovery she knows where she wants to go. There are no boundaries. The world of vernacular music is her oyster and nothing is going to stop her from interpreting every genre in her own effective and personal way.

Born Cari Lee Donovan (her mother wanted to make one word of her first and middle names) on August 3rd 1970 of Irish, French and Cherokee heritage, she spent her childhood in Boulder Creek, a sizeable mountain community north of Santa Cruz, California prone to earthquakes and winter mudslides. Her mother, Barbara Jean, was born in Kentucky and raised in San Francisco. Her father, Dan Donovan, a general contractor by trade, was born and raised in San Francisco.

The family acquired a home that was once a bunk house for a logging camp, then used as a summer home, and remodelled it to suit their needs. Family members included Cari's three half sisters and one step-sister. None of the family showed any propensity for music, and Cari's first ambitions were to become a Hollywood movie star. Although she was blessed with the looks and most certainly the drive to attain his goals, her inherent curiosity led instead to adventures in music.

It all started with a box of popular 45rmp's her mother had collected in her teenage years. Mom was into Creedence Clearwater Revival, Motown and the blues of B.B. King. As a teen, Cari picked up on Blue beat and early Ska as she hung out with a bunch of Vespa-riding Rude Boys. At age 18, she struck out on her own and moved from the family home in Boulder Creek to a studio apartment in downtown Santa Cruz, California, where she was hired to perform as a member of an improvisational comedy troupe. Her radio listening interests centred around a station located on the AM dial. 'Nifty 10-50' was a radio station with syndicated programming focusing on original '50s music. She became interested in post-war doo-wop, R&B and '50s soul, and also had a passion for gospel music. After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed the home she was living in, she spent a year on a sheep ranch in Petaluma, California, before moving to San Francisco where she eventually met and married Saddle-ite guitar player, Steve Merritt. Cari settled in the Bay Area, teaching pre-school and singing with a racially mixed Pentecostal-based church called Cornerstone Family Fellowship.

When her daughter was born, Cari stopped singing with the church and focused on her family and teaching career. It would be two years before she would pick up an acoustic guitar at husband Steve's prompting. Steve had played guitar since the tender age of thirteen and was well into the mastering of pre-war and Delta blues. He also fostered a love for gypsy
jazz, be-bop and western swing. Steve needed rhythm guitar support so that he could concentrate on the development of his lead work, playing melody.

So Carl began learning the rudiments of rhythm guitar. Steve was playing in a rockabilly band called The Stilltime at the time. In 1999, everything seemed to come together rapidly for Carl. One night, Steve and Carl took a trip over to the Club De Luxe on Haight Street in San Francisco to listen to the venue’s all-night jam session. The band was made up basically of anyone who wanted to play for fun, and the club’s promoter, who knew the couple were musicians, asked if they would come up and do a song. They wound up singing and playing the rockabilly standards ‘That’s All Right’ and ‘Blue Moon Of Kentucky’ in the Presley Sun style.

When they stepped off the stage, the promoter asked if they had a band, as he wanted to book them. That was when Carl and Steve, at a moment’s notice, began to recruit ‘pick-up’ musicians out of those at the jam session. The first of these was steel guitarist Billy Wilson, who had been playing regularly with Motor Duth, Zedeco and Johnny Dick’s Visitation Valley Boys. Billy’s passions were Cajun, bluegrass and western swing. Then came drummer and percussionist Rick Quisol who played “more solidly on the offbeat than any drummer known to man”.

Steve, of course, played lead guitar and mandolin; he was often seen in public with his mandolin on a strap with his guitar slung low beneath it. Bass player Mark ‘Dickle’ Hanses, an R&B aficionado and friend, joined the outfit later. Mark was originally a drummer, but quickly picked up bass-slapping to meet the combo’s needs. Steve continued to play with The Stilltime at this time, and in May 1999 the group were invited to appear at the famed Hemsbys Rock n Roll Weekend in the UK. Carl went along with Steve for the ride.

On the plane over, Steve met one of the Hemsbys headliners, rockabilly hero Glenn Glenn and his long-time guitarist, Gary Lambert. Gary was accompanied by his wife, Joan Smith Lambert, who had supplied background vocals on Glenn’s teen-rock ballads ‘Kathaleen’ and ‘Laurie Ann’ back in the late ’50s. Carl met Jean at the weekender’s public relations reception and the two hit it off instantly. Jean, who had quit singing when she married Gary in 1959, was asked to join Glen and Gary on stage to recreate the backing vocals on the two Era Records tunes. Jean requested that Carl join her in creating the needed harmonies.

Thus Carl made her second post-Pentecostal big time public performance in front of the huge Hemby audience. With Glenn, Gary and Jean, Carl sang harmony on ‘Kathaleen’ and ‘Laurie Ann’ as if she had been doing so all her life.

Once back in the States, Carl, who had become fond of songwriting, was encouraged to record a couple of her songs for a vinyl 45 on Star Tone Records. So, with Steve on guitar, Gary Daly on drums, Billy Wilson on steel and Lloyd Tripp on bass, the group cut ‘Church Bell Boogie’ and ‘Rockin’ All Night Long’ - the first release by Carl Lee & The Saddle-ites (see NDT 222). ‘Church Bell Boogie’, a hot and fast, good-time romper with calls, cackles and cow-town whistles, sounded like Rosie Maddox singing with Bill Haley’s early ’50s band, The Saddlemen. (Although inspired by Haley’s western swing/hillbilly sound, the group borrowed the title The Saddle-ites from a 45 released by a band called Clint Mamm & The Saddle-ites on the West Coast radio label.) ‘Rockin’ All Night Long’ sounded a tad more vintage with its frantic tonti-quivering vocal. Scotty Moore-style licks and tasty riffs.

The idea was to create a primitive sound using old tube amps and a two-track recording process. Carl wanted to evoke the innocence of an age long vanished under a wattle of electronic samples and overdubs. Her musical vision was to take the frantic-like energy of rockabilly and present it in a raw, hillbilly, sawdust floor format. Not long after the record came out, Carl & The Saddle-ites were booked to perform at the fourth Viva Las Vegas weekender alongside Wanda Jackson, Marvin Rainwater and The Cadillacs.

It was not long before the band caught the notice of Carlos Diaz’s El Toro Records in Barcelona. Recognised for its eclectic rhythm and blues CD collections, El Toro launched its hillbilly series in 2000 and issued Carl’s first album. For this project, the band cut live to two-track at The Studio That Time Forgot in San Francisco, with The Saddle-ites comprising Steve, Mark and Billy plus Leor Beary and Rick Quisol sharing the drumming duties. In addition, Steve Welz was elected to play second guitar and provide harmony vocals. Both Stevens produced what was to turn out to be the ‘Red Barn Baby’ collection, visually designed to look like a Bear Family release (see NDT 219).

Here we had hillbilly swing music guaranteed to wear the varnish off the floor. The title track is ear-pleasing in every way. The revival of Rose Maddox’s ‘Stop Whistlin’ Wolf’ is a nifty frettling novelty and ‘How Do You Like That’, a solid stop-rhythm bounce, will not fail to lose laps. ‘Don’t Ever Leave Me’ is a foot-draggin’, mid-tempo rambling piece well known to Patsy Cline fans, and ‘You’re Gonna Be Sorry Some Of These Days’ jumps joyously at a roll-rapping rate. ‘Green Tree Boogie’ is a fine version of the early Bill Haley classic and ‘Hadacol Rhythm’ will not only cure all your ills but get rid of what you thought you never had. ‘Red Barn Baby’, issued during the spring of 2001, sold well and went into a second pressing after only two weeks on the market. Eight of the twelve songs were penned by Carl herself.

The band’s reputation was quickly spreading, and soon Carl Lee & The Saddle-ites were off to Detroit to play the Motor City Spin Out at the Carl Lee & The Saddle-ites: Billy Wilson (steel), Steve Merritt (lead guitar), Rick Quisol (drums), Carl (vocals and rhythm guitar) and Dickie Hanses (double bass).
Royal Oak Music Theatre with Bill Haley's original Comets. Their first European tour took them to the Screamin' Summer Festival in Spain and a live appearance on a national TV station, TVE in Madrid (from which two video song clips appeared on their second El Toro CD). Club dates in France, Switzerland, Belgium and Holland followed.

The group also contributed a song to a four-track EP sent out with 'Dynamite!' magazine in Germany, a stomping version of Ruth Brown's 'As Long As I'm Moving' transformed into a swinging hillbilly opus with a nod to Bob Wills. The performance was lifted from a radio show done at KKUP. It works quite well and Cari injects the song with her usual boundless enthusiasm.

Back in the States, Cari took a starring role in 'The Maddox Brothers & Rose Musical Revue', a stage show with the Rowen Brothers at the Spreckles Performing Arts Center in conjunction with the Pacific Alliance Stage Company. Cari portrayed Rose Maddox, with the Rowen boys as the Maddox Brothers, as one would have seen them singing and enacting their madcap stage routines back in the late '30s and '40s. The show was an acclaimed success and ran for ten days. Many reviewers cited Cari as bringing the true character of Rose Maddox back to life.

Last summer saw the release of Cari's second El Toro CD, 'The Road Less Travelled' (see NDT 245). This time round she took us into bluegrass territory with a little blues and gospel here and there to spice things up. She sings well with increased confidence and the overall sound is embroidered to include piano and fiddle at times. It is a departure from 1950s ambience into fresh, colourful territory and was produced by Billy Horton of Hot Club Of Cowtown fame.

Cari wails on 'Nobody Loves You (Like Me)', a Berry Gordy / Harvey Fuqua co-write with a great 'Fever' feel; the plaintive gospel 'I'm A Pilgrim Traveller', rendered as sadly as the original by Wynona Carr; 'I'm Gonna Love You', on which Cari sings beautifully in a higher, more illuminating register; plus 'Move On' and Bob & Lucille's rockabilly classic, 'Eeny Meeny Miny Mo', rocked and ripped infectiously in good fun. This album finds Cari at her best. The collection closes with the two aforementioned video clips which must be viewed on your PC. (The liner notes tell of a compressed version of these two clips at www.Saddle-ites.com - go check 'em out.)

To add to her repertoire, Cari sang for a while in a Bakersfield-type honky tonk band called The Hillside Wranglers. Cari Lee & The Saddle-ites are primarily a West Coast regional territory band and can be seen playing extensively up and down the West Coast and the Pacific Northwest, in much the same way that The Maddox Brothers & Rose made their mark. Recent engagements have included the Mill Valley Film Festival with Rosie Flores, a performance in conjunction with 'Welcome To The Club - Women In Rockabilly', the Grammy Award nominated PBS documentary celebrating the many important female contributors to the genre. Another recent engagement was the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival, a jamboree with over 4,000 people in attendance at which Cari and her band were billed alongside Emmylou Harris, Ricky Skaggs and Willie Nelson, to name a few.

At present, Cari is recording her third El Toro project with The Contenders, a band made up of players such as Johnny Bones on sax, Macy Blackman on piano, Rick Quisol on drums and husband Steve on guitar, plus Brendan Giuek who has recently replaced Dickie Hanses in The Saddle-ites. "I want to do really unique rock n roll and R&B songs," she says, "by long forgotten women like Tiny Topsy, Varetta Dillard and Betty James. I'm influenced by a lot of different musical styles and I want to express a few of them in some of the originals that I've written for the upcoming album. I'm really excited about working with different musicians who will contribute a lot of fresh ideas and concepts to the album. It will be very different from what The Saddle-ites do. The Saddle-ites are a unique combination of talented musicians, and each individual member of the group works with other music projects as well. I think that because we all work with other bands based in different genres, like jazz, Tin Pan Alley, bluegrass, Cajun, rockabilly and honky tonk, each of us can bring a new and different perspective to what The Saddle-ites create. I enjoy that a lot."

Cari wants to continually reinvent herself and has the moxy to do it.