

THE CARPENTERS: AN APPRAISAL

by Tom Nolan

■ The seeming inevitability that is one hallmark of art. ■ A “seamless” perfection, the result of so much painstaking effort, so well conceived it seems effortless—and hence is criticized as “simple.” ■ “Please Mr. Postman”: Caucasian angst. What we critics call “quodrian sorrow and joy.” ■ I love the Carpenters.

Those unfamiliar with the Carpenters' origins might be startled to hear their atypical debut LP, released as *Offering* and later retitled *Ticket to Ride*. Some of the later elements of the Carpenters' style are present, to be sure—a relatively polished production, Karen's distinctive lead on many tracks, and even a foreshadowing of their subsequent breakthrough single in the lyric of the Richard Carpenter/John Bettis song, “Some-day,” in which Karen sings the very pre-cognitive phrase “close to you”—but the record is unmistakably a product of the pop-rock mainstream of its time.

The a capella “Invocation” beginning side one echoes the choral religiosity of the Beach Boys' “Our Prayer.” “Your Wonderful Parade” is prefaced by Richard declaiming a circus barker's sleazy-surrealistic monologue à la Herman Hesse via Joseph Byrd, leader of the art-rocking United States of America; while the song itself could have been written by Van Dyke Parks for Harper's Bizarre. Other influences discernible throughout include the Mamas & Papas, We Five, and early Nilsson. There is restrained use of the then-*chic* toy, phasing. There are tempo changes; soft but extended jazz-like solos; shimmering Buffalo Springfield-type guitar—and a Buffalo tune, “Clancy”; as well as the folk-rock staple, “Let's Get Together.” *Offering* tends toward being the sort of album many rock critics were encouraging at the time: a post-folk, soft-psychedelic Southern Californian mini-oratorio.

By the second album there has been an enormous change. With *Close to You*, Richard and Karen have become what the world knows as “the Carpenters,” and although they have not yet acquired all the refinements of their style and sound, they are firmly based in them. With two huge singles—the title song, and the even more definitively-Carpenters “We've Only Just Begun”—they have hit their stride, and strongly. With this disc they simultaneously attract the concentrated affection of their newfound fans and the hostility of another segment that has distrusted them from first hearing. They are both loved and hated from the very moment they are noticed at all. Why?

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American popular music has always reflected the aspirations and intended identities of its listeners. The mothers and fathers of rock criticism in the Sixties “discovered” that fans were buying more than music; they were purchasing lifestyles. But it was ever thus: Okies paid for Hank Williams' beatific moonstruck grin as well as for his 78s. Swing nuts must have made some connection between Krupa's goofy gumchewing and those crazy drum choruses; his *attitude* was as attractive as his art. So here are these neatly-dressed kids, a polite-seeming brother-and-sister team, materializing like a weird hallucination in the midst of acid-rock and offering their alternative to “In-a-gadda-davida,” singing of all things a *bank commercial*. The grumbling began, and grew louder in proportion with their success. You'd think they were an arm of the government, the way some people reacted! What was it they thought the Carpenters represented? Domesticity, perhaps? The nuclear family? Saturdays spent shopping for sofas at Sears? Capitalism itself? There were those so turned off by what they thought they detected beneath the music that they spoke of the Carpenters as the enemy.

The enemy. Imagine. Poor Karen and Richard! Just trying to make their music... All this rancor...

The music, though, continued to improve. It reached a new level with the album, *A Song for You*. This was perhaps the first Carpenters LP to receive a *very* great deal of loving care, and it remains their finest over-all effort, as well as being Richard's favorite. The material is excellent, the arrangements and production are faultless, and Karen sings with increased maturity and sophistication.

Throughout they had remained true to their vision, their identity, their roots. Eventually they paid tribute to the latter with great style, in the extended oldies medley that comprises the entire second side of *Yesterday Once More*. Hearing Richard and Karen interpret the Beach Boys at one generational remove is similar to witnessing the Wilson family cop psychic riffs from Chuck Berry; there is an homage here to truths learned from things of the past, and there is also distance enough for a personal expression to have developed. Through the format of guitarist Tony Pelusso's flawless evocation of the spirit of deejay-dominated Sixties pop radio (as effective in its brief duration as the entire *Cruisin'* series), the Carpenters distill the heady, sometimes comic, but ultimately poignant essence of our adolescent fantasies. Those who criticized this medley for not having the identical production values as a

Ronettes single were very far from an appreciation of its special value. It would be a pointless exercise to recreate these numbers note-for-note; Karen and Richard instead summon up those aspirations and illusions of adventure and happiness that made our sophomore years bearable even as they catalogued our frustrations. (We'll have fun-fun-fun—and our day will come.) The fact that Richard himself is now a skillful producer of pop dreams satisfyingly completes some kind of circle.

Now the Carpenters have finished recording what is in many ways their most ambitious album to date: *Horizon*. The technology alone has consumed a great deal of energy, with scores of separate mixings making the production definitively “state-of-the-art.” But above, before, and beyond the sound—which Carpenters' aficionados will expect to be impeccable anyway—is the music. Some of it is already familiar to us: the hit singles “Please Mr. Postman” and “Only Yesterday.” (Notice how easily and quickly the Carpenters made the transition from the unblinking optimism of “We've Only Just Begun” to the sweet wistfulness of “Yesterday Once More” and “Only Yesterday”; apparently the existential distance was never that great.) Other tracks include a 1949 Andrews Sisters tune, “I Can Dream, Can't I,” which features the Billy May Orchestra; a song Richard's collaborator, John Bettis, considers their best-ever composition, “(Caught Between Goodbye and I Love You”); a four-and-a-half-minute version of Neil Sedaka's “Solitaire”; and—most exciting of all—the Don Henley-Glenn Frey ballad, “Desperado.” Richard is expecting the biggest critical sneers yet when the latter track is released, because of its “underground” popularity (though a highly respected song, it has not yet been a hit single). He may be happily surprised. A critical re-evaluation of sorts seems to have begun with the release in late '73 of *The Singles*, the Carpenters' greatest hits collection.

Whether or not “Desperado” gains the nod from *Rolling Stone*, it certainly will please those attuned enough to Karen and Richard's work to be appreciative of exciting developments in it. Karen's singing on this track is especially moving; she utilizes a hitherto-unheard lower register, with startling effectiveness.

Horizon is about to be released as I write this. I have a hunch it's going to make my summer.



THE CARPENTERS: AN INTERVIEW

*Nearing the end of the sessions for the new **Horizon**, Richard and Karen Carpenter took a few hours to discuss the album and their music in general, as well as matters of image, taste, style, and the like, with several **Compendium** staff members. What follows are excerpts from the conversation, which took place at Hollywood's *Au Petit Cafe* on a late-March evening.*

C: I think a good place to start is with this album, which has been long time in the making, and possibly where it is in relation to your earlier work.

R: We're spending a lot more time, not just in selecting material, but in every last thing that has to do with the album. We're getting into a lot more stereo effects than the other albums had, not gimmicky type things—things that have been happening lately in recordings, like stereo drums. We used to record the drums on two tracks; one track for the kick drum and another track for the rest of the set. We use four tracks now for drums, one for the kick, one for the snare, another one for the left toms, and another one for the right toms. In a lot of our recordings there has been a much thicker snare sound. We've really wanted to get into that and it takes time to EQ each different thing and experiment. Now we spend hours with the drums. We try them in a certain place, use a certain mike, listen to it, EQ it, get another mike, bring it in, try that out. Same with the piano. We played it in Studio D with the top almost down and a cover over it, then we rolled it into a booth that was meant for strings, to keep leakage down to a minimum, and opened up the top to see if the sound would be better, which it was. But all of this takes time.

C: Do you generally have a conception or is this a process of open-ended experimentation?

R: Yes, it's that more than anything. I listen to a lot of records and I try to keep up with what's changing. I like to keep up with it—you don't *have* to, don't get me wrong. You can turn out an album that doesn't sound as good as *Band on the Run* or *Fulfillingness' First Finale*, and it's not going to make any difference whether it will sell or not, but it makes a difference to me.

K: We've just spent a lot more time on everything.

R: For example, I used a Harrison-style guitar part on "Yesterday Once More." Now if we use that effect, we'll record it once then go back and tune the guitar slightly flat, and then double the part—to give you a real nice spread, a fatter sound, and a sound that comes out of both right and left channels, but again, this takes time.

K: We're into using different mikes for backgrounds, different mikes for leads. There's so much to get into, all the things that we never had time, or stopped to take the time to get into.

C: It must piss you off sometimes, in terms of patience, having to wait for the right combination of elements before you can do the thing that you're really there for.

R: That's one of the things I'm really there for, so *that* to me is as important as the actual performance. It doesn't frustrate me to do that. Also, we're recording at 30 inches-per-second which cuts down on your tape hiss, and we're going with Dolby right from the ground up, where we used to wait until we would go to the two track to use it—it makes for a very quiet recording. We're using 24-track too. Anytime you use Dolbys all the time, anytime you use 24-track all the time, being very sophisticated equipment, you have more breakdowns than you used to have. One breakdown at least per night, with one thing or another. The board, or the tape machine, the Dolbys, a mike, or whatever.

C: And you just patiently go with it.

R: The only thing that's frustrating is that you start worrying about the money you're spending after a while, and the time spent. If we had done this album like we did the other ones, it would have been finished, but we're going through a lot of changes and we're learning a lot of things, and I really find it to be a nice experience.

C: How close are you to finishing it?

R: Oh, we're on a sustained forge, this last week we've picked up, so I would say we're about 85% done. We'll have it done by May 8th. We tried computer mix, we thought that would be a good idea, and it turned out not to be a good idea. But we blew two weeks on one

song, "Solitaire", it just wouldn't go together, and we couldn't figure out why. I've never had that happen before. I've had times where I thought the arrangement was finished, and we'd go into mix, and then I would hear something else, and we'd run into a studio and put it on. But we're past that point. Everything was on it, and it still didn't sound right, and it turned out we just couldn't get the natural flow of the thing with the computer mix. You can just sit there and do one thing at a time. You may be getting two bars of piano that needs to be brought up at the end of the song, and you have to wait and let it go through the whole song, sit there and then raise it up and then start over.

K: It was very boring. We never got the right feel.

R: It took us two weeks to really find that out.

C: It's reassuring to know that human ears are still preferable.

R: There's something spontaneous about doing it all at once. With 24 tracks, you need three people to mix it.

C: And there's still something tactile about sitting there and moving all those things, right? It's part of the process.

K: Panic.

R: The computer mix hasn't worked for anybody that I know of yet, but for somebody it may be great.

C: If you're really concerned with a quiet recording, I think what you really have to do is to supervise the mastering.

R: Well, we have the top guy in town today—Bernie. I would never worry about it. I'll be



there for the mastering, but he's great. The trouble is, after all the trouble and expense of going 30 Dolby and all this, the quality of the disc itself isn't so hot anymore. You get surface noise, even though you've gone through the trouble of making a totally quiet recording.

C: It's really maddening, because that's usually what you hear on a contemporary album. You don't hear the studio hiss in the tape.



R: No, you hear surface noise. I bought an American *Band on the Run* with "Helen Wheels" and when I went to England, I got hold of a British one and the difference in the quality is frightening. The English one is so much better. The American pressings are just terrible.

K: They've gotten worse.

R: Australia makes the best in the world, because they have such a little output, that they're handchecked. I went into the factory, and they have a woman that has a light and takes each album and checks it for flaws. Japan pressings are impeccable, and so are the English. I knew that for years. I had a friend who was going to England years ago, and asked me if there was anything that he could pick up for me, and I said please get me an English *Sgt. Pepper*, on Parlophone. I wanted to hear it next to the Capitol one, and even back then, before we got into the vinyl shortage and the quality trouble that there is now, the British pressings were much better.

C: It varies here from company to company.

R: Yeh, A&M is better than normal. Elektra is very good, I'll tell you, MCA . . . I don't know if you've listened to any newer Elton John things, but the end of "Harmony" on the "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" album, for example. I mean, the level of surface noise . . . I can't believe it.

C: So this will certainly be the most sophisticated Carpenters' album.

R: Yes, technically and performance-wise. Material-wise, I can't really say, unless I'm too close to it, that it will be all that much different. There's a lot of ballads, a lot of love songs, definitely, so that people that don't particularly care for our music, who consider it real sentimental or goey, or whatever, are still going to feel that way, I think.

C: You're taking more time finding the tunes, right?

R: Oh, yeah. Far more time.

C: What prompted you to do that?

R: I just got into this thing where I wanted every song to be strong enough to be a single. We've already got two on *Horizon*. "Solitaire" is a single, "Desperado" is a single, "Goodbye and I Love You" is a single, and I think "Happy," which we didn't think was until it was finished, is strong enough to be a single. What I'm getting at is that there is six or seven songs that could be singles. They aren't going to be, but that makes for a damn good album.

C: Is that your prime criterion in selecting the tunes?

R: I like things that don't sound like fillers, throwaway cuts or whatever. I like to find songs that I can do a decent arrangement on, that I can feel inspired by when I hear the tune, and tunes that the people who buy your records are going to like. The Bacharach-Davids aren't together, the Williams-Nichols aren't together; people we used to get some material from, they're not writing together anymore, so it makes selecting harder.

K: There was a period when we were looking and there just wasn't anything we wanted to cut.

R: Then all of a sudden, two or three things came along.

K: So that's why it took so long.



R: I've selected a lot of songs that really go down into Karen's lower register, because I think she really sounds good that way.

C: The first note on "Only Yesterday" is low.

R: And "Solitaire" has a rather big range. That's a Neil Sedaka tune.

C: I was real impressed with the single, because it is so free of any sort of gimmick, it's just a real straightforward song.

R: I was trying to write a song that had the feel of the Sixties. The castanets, the chimes, and yet part of it has a sound of the Seventies, the spread of the guitars, the saxophone through tape delay.

C: Who's the sax player?

R: Bob Messenger. He's played on all our records. He's in our backup group. The guitar is Tony Peluso.

C: He's terrific. The solo on "Mr. Postman" is nice . . . Richard, I recall that you had a really interesting definition of soul, in reference to some criticisms about your music, and other people's music, for that matter.

R: To me, soul is a word that can be applied to all forms of music. Soul is feeling. And soul doesn't have to necessarily mean black feeling. So a critic may not like our music and say it has no soul. It sure as hell does have soul in its own way. It doesn't have, maybe inflected black soul, like Gladys Knight or whatever, that type of thing that soul has come to mean.

What I'm getting at is Joan Sutherland has soul when she sings opera. Tchaichovsky had soul, he most definitely did when he composed. So did Rachmaninoff or Fats Waller, or it can go on into a hell of a lot of different directions. And our music, in its own way, has as much soul as Gladys Knight or Stevie Wonder, it's just not the same type. What you're referring to is that article that said that Olivia Newton-John is so lacking in vocal definition that she actually made us sound like we had soul. It's a ludicrous statement. Soul isn't just something black. To me, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Burt Bacharach, Paul Simon have plenty of soul.

C: The word has just been overused and misused, which is something the critics have missed in your music, extending the meaning of soul.

R: I think so. A lot of our music is judged by rock standards. It shouldn't be compared to rock. It's pop. It's not pop like Muzak pop. See now that's another thing. If you're going to put us down, that's okay. People are entitled to their opinions. One of the English pieces said, and it's a tired cliché by now anyway, that we sounded like Muzak. That's really tired stuff, to call somebody you don't like who's easy-listening Muzak. I think somebody mentioned about David Gates' first album that it's the same old Muzak stuff. That's not true. Muzak, if they're going to get into saying that, doesn't even have any vocals. It's all instrumental. We have some fairly strong backbeats and a lot of things that would definitely not get played over that at all. Maybe next to Grand Funk, or Led Zeppelin, or whomever, it seems very quiet, but next to Muzak, it sure as hell isn't quiet.

K: It's the same as us being termed easy-listening.

R: It may be true, but it's progressive in its own pop way. In other words, we introduce



songs. Easy-listening artists will cover whatever's been done. You'll get three or four easy listening albums a year that are nothing but covers of what's been in the Top Ten the past two or three months. They're thrown together, some arranger does them. A producer picks the stuff, they get an arranger, the vocalist comes in and puts the whole album together in two or three days, and they throw it out and call it "Tie A Yellow Ribbon" or "Rainydays and Mondays" and "Sing." Songs that John and I wrote—like "Yesterday," "Goodbye," "Top of the World"—got a lot of covers. It's not your average easy-listening act by any means.

C: I don't think your music has been characterized that way because of a lack of artistry but because of its accessibility. The kind of music you are alluding to is accessible to people because of a familiarity with the tunes. And your music, even though it's fresh material, has an immediate engaging quality. You're working with conventional forms.

R: Oh sure. It's standard type stuff. I never said it was all that different.

C: There's something to be said for working within the limitations of convention or a particular form.

R: It has a sound. You know it's us as soon as you hear it.

C: I think the fact that your records are so successful established them as an institution better and faster than any other artist in the world. When you put a record out, within three months, it's an established part of our culture.

R: Most become standards. Granted, "Postman" isn't going to be, and maybe this new one won't be either. Take a look at "Close To You," "We've Only Just Begun," "For All We Know," "Rainydays and Mondays," "Hurting Each Other," "Sing," "Yesterday Once More," "Top of the World," "Won't Last A Day," they've become standards. The

least successful went to 12. "Ticket To Ride" didn't do well, but since "Close To You," there hasn't been one that's gone below 12. And ten of them so far have been million sellers. And ten of them have gone top three. "Superstar" didn't get too many covers, because of the lyric content, I guess. I know Vicki Carr did it. But there weren't that many vocalists that did "Superstar".

C: Did you ever really get annoyed or fed up with the whole critical thing, the misconception of you, and said well, if that's what they want, I'll do a rock and roll album.

R: Hell, no. I don't take critics seriously. We couldn't do a rock & roll album that would sound right. That's not our thing. I love rock. It's not like you can turn around and say, okay lets do a rock and roll album, because there's no way we could do it justice. It wouldn't sound right.

C: Your music has undergone a dramatic re-evaluation by the rock press. When the *Singles* album came out people were calling us up and asking for a copy of the album. They were embarrassed at first because they liked rock & roll, they liked things that they could talk about in print without going out on a limb. And then the reviews of that album, when they came in, were much more positive. I think what happened was all those songs were a part of everyone's lives because



they were on the radio in the cars. Together they made a very deep impression on people. And they said, "Oh, yeah, some of that stuff is really good." The *Singles* album revealed a technical efficiency of arranging and writing, and with a series of singles. But when it was all there on a record, that brought together a lot of different elements, which the reviewers began to understand.

You made a comment, Richard, about putting all the singles on one album, which hadn't really been done up until that time.

R: Yeah. First of all, if you're lucky enough to be able to split it up and actually have an album with everything on it a hit, which very few people have, it would be divided into two volumes. Bread, two volumes. Creedence Clearwater, where they could have had an album beautifully done with all hits, had two albums. We were the first to put them all on one.

C: Did you remix any of the songs?

R: Oh yeah. We recut "Ticket To Ride" from the ground up. Remixed "Hurting Each Other", most of them.

C: Do you think the critics understand the

complexities of what it takes to put out a Carpenters song?

R: No. Because they always say our music is not complex. I still don't know what they're getting at. They should be there when we're putting it together. It's anything but simple. There is a hell of a lot going on in something like "Only Yesterday". Arrangement wise, different colorings, it would get technical and boring to explain how many different things are on that record. And how much time is put into it. Not only the engineering, but in the arranging as well.



After the mistake of doing the *Calendar* piece, we made another mistake in doing the *Bowl*. And that Channel Seven Barney Morris thing, I turned it on, and it said "Coming up, the king and queen of the bubblegum music world, the Carpenters". This guy had no idea. This music isn't bubblegum music, whether you like it or dislike it, it sure as hell isn't the 1910 Fruitgum Company.

C: Have you ever wanted to produce someone else?

R: No, I don't have the time, so I don't give too much thought to it.

C: What are your own musical tastes in records, either sonically or in terms of the aesthetic in pop music and rock and roll.

R: My favorite group is the Beatles. American group—Beach Boys. Mothers of Invention, I've always liked. Steely Dan and a lot of others. I know I'll leave out someone. Doors. David Gates. I think some of his things are incredible. His voice is incredible. Not really heavy music, but damn nice pop music. Elton John, although I like his earlier stuff better. Neil Diamond. Always a Nilsson fan. Randy Newman.

C: Do you like the Byrds?

R: Oh, I think they were terrific. Cat Stevens. Again the earlier things better than the newer stuff.

C: What singers do you like, Karen?

K: As vocalists, I think Streisand is unbelievable. Dusty Springfield. Ella Fitzgerald.

R: You see, I'm leaving people out like Oscar Peterson, Spike Jones. Red Nichols.

K: Bing Crosby, Perry Como. Dionne Warwick.

C: So you have a well stocked record cabinet.

K: Very wide selection. Well, Rich, from the very beginning, would sit and listen to music. I didn't get into music until I was 16. (Almost forgot earlier Presley.)





C: Those records are a good example of intensity over technological precision, because they're *really* primitive.

R: But they have *it*. I really got off on "Surferbird" by the Trashmen. "Dancin' in The Streets."

K: My taste naturally evolved from what Richard liked, I was totally into whatever he listened to. But my dad was into classics and pop, not rock. He was more into vocalists, like Crosby, Como, crooner types.

C: When did you first start writing?

R: I started when I was in the eighth grade. Started writing with John [Bettis] in 1967. A lot of things that were on the first couple of albums were written by us back into the Sixties.

C: Do you feel like you're into a highly creative period of time now as a writer?

R: Absolutely not. It's nice that everything we've written from "Goodbye to Love" on has become a single, and a hit. But there haven't been that many new songs. But back in the late sixties, we didn't have albums to record or roads to go on. We had this gig at Disneyland, and we used to spend time there writing songs.

We got fired from our gig at Disneyland. We weren't very company oriented. The songs are now more commercial than they used to be, but they aren't being turned out in numbers like they used to. Between production, touring, and all the business, I find it really hard to write.

C: What are your reviews like of your concerts?

R: Fifty-fifty. They very rarely even get into the music at all. The reviews concern themselves with audience dress, the fact that there aren't that many blacks there, etcetera. They complain about the way the stage looks, which is ridiculous. One person showed up at the sound check in the afternoon, and did a review of the sound system.

C: Do you like performing?

R: Oh, yeah.

K: We know what's right and what's wrong with our performance. There are some nights that no matter how hard you try, it just doesn't go right. Ninety percent of the critics you run into, they walk in and they have already judged you before they've even seen you. They might as well print the article before coming. They print what they think we will say, it doesn't matter how we feel, what we do or say.

R: Oh yeah. Squeaky clean ivory babies. Things that were said that weren't true, things

about being asked to do "The Way We Were" on the Academy Awards and turning it down. We were never asked to do anything on the show.

C: Has it changed any in the last few years?

R: No. Only the *Rolling Stone* piece. Finally, someone presented a nice—not all pro, but not snide—objective article. I couldn't believe it when I read it. I really felt that it was good.

C: How do you feel about being one of the top five guaranteed acts in the country?

R: I'm proud of it. We work hard at our career. I think it's something to last five years. The new album and single are doing really well. All the concert business is doing fine. Things in Japan are even better than when we went over there. It's bigger in England than before.

C: You probably rank higher getting a record on the Top 40 than anyone.

R: I think it's Elton John and us. I'm really proud of that.

K: It's an unbelievable feeling to have things like that happen. We never look at it as a sure-fire thing. We never take it for granted that anything will make it.

R: I read an article on Elton John where he's really on his singles and what is happening with them. I sure as hell do worry about that too. He calls radio stations and checks chart listings. And that's the way we stay on top of it. I love the business end of it. I really like singles. I think the single is really an important thing, even though it doesn't make you the kind of money an album does.

C: The magical thing about singles is that they are so concise—you have two or three minutes to say something different—to have an impact on people. It's one of the most concise mediums of expression.

R: There are not that many artists that have had one hit single after another. When the price of singles went up, the sales went down. Singles are made out of such crappy material that it's unbelievable. Distortion, everything. It's trash compared to albums.

If you want to make money off a record, you should make it off an album. Not a single, save them for promotional things. Never think about royalties and money coming from a single. Even though we sell quite a few. To me, it's to help the album. The *Song for You* album did two million and *Close to You* did more like four. If "Top of the World" had come out instead of "It's Gonna Take Some Time", the *Song for You* album would have done another million units. It was a stronger single than "Goodbye To Love" was. *Close to You* had two monster hits on it to promote it. And the *Tan* album was one of two that had three gold singles off of one album. *Blood, Sweat and Tears* second album, with "Spinning Wheel," "You Made Me So Very Happy," and "And When I Die" was the other one. *A Song For You* had "Hurting Each Other" but "Hurting Each Other" came out four months before the *Song for You* album came out, so it was already an oldie. "It's Gonna Take Some Time" went to 12, which is nice, but not compared to what our other records did. "Goodbye To Love" went to seven, which again was nice, but wasn't a million seller. It

took up to "Top of the World" to get a smash record off of that album. And it upsets me because that's my favorite album of ours. I wish it had done better. If "Top" had just come out at the release time of *A Song for You*, it really would have sent that album higher than it went.

C: Don't you think it's all a point of timing, in getting the single out at the right time?

R: Absolutely. The single got Elton John back. The *Elton John* album and *Tumbleweed Connection* did very well but *Madman Across the Water* didn't do as well. Same with Neil Diamond and the *Stones* album. They didn't go top ten. Elton and Neil fell a little less with each release. Neil Diamond went and put out *Stones*, which went to 14 or something. The *Stones* album had "I Am, I Said" in it, but again, like "Hurting Each Other," "I Am, I Said" was released months before the album, so it was an oldie by the time *Stones* was released. Neil Diamond was like us. He would sell a certain amount of albums but if he had a hit single, he would sell more albums. Then he came out with "Song Sung Blue" and that did it. That came out and then the album. *Moods* went number one. The *Elton John* live album didn't do well. The *Friends* album didn't do well. And he had several singles, like "Levon" and "Friends" and "Tiny Dancer" and "Border Song" and ones that weren't doing well at all. I mean they were long and they



weren't getting too much airplay and they didn't go top 30. I liked *Madman Across the Water*. I really thought it was terrific. But it didn't do all that well, compared to some of his other things. Because he hadn't had a top-ten record or a top-20 record since "Your Song". He went a hell of a long time without a hit single and then "Rocket Man" came along. "Rocket Man" went to seven, which is only as high as "Your Song" went. Compared to his new records, that's really nothing. Like "Lucy" or "Don't Let The Sun" or "Philadelphia Freedom".

K: Was "Daniel" right after that?

R: No, that was during his streak, which hasn't stopped. But no, up until "Rocket Man" he hadn't had a top-20 record since "Your Song." And boom. *Honky Chateau*, "Rocket Man" was from that. "Honky Cat" next and then came "Crocodile Rock" and etcetera-etcetera.

C: "Crocodile Rock" was the one that got him the crossover play.

R: But album-wise, *Honky Chateau* went sailing right up to one because of "Rocket

Man." Look at Roberta Flack. "Killing Me Softly." She had this huge big hit with it, but she waited months before she got the album out, and it went to three. I'm not saying that's bad, but I'm saying if it came out as "Killing Me Softly," the single, was peaking, it would've done better. Now she's putting out a *Feel Like Making Love* album, when the single, "Feel Like Making Love," was a hit six months ago.

C: You might say that you guys do the same thing.

R: Sometimes. I wish we had had the *Song For You* album when "Hurting Each Other" was one, but we didn't. "Postman" was number one in three trades at the same time. The ideal thing would have been to put out the *Horizon* album the week that "Postman" went to one.

C: So your greatest success has been in developing the single both as an art form and as a commercial entity.

R: Yeah. How many people can you name—and I'm not on an ego trip, this is a fact—that have had hit singles one right after another after another? It's a type of thing where it takes a certain talent to be able to pick something that becomes a hit single. You used to hear "Well, you've gotten to that point that no matter what you put out..." Bullshit. Harry Chapin followed up a number-one smash with a number 43 without-a-bullet record. Neil Diamond would do it consistently, top ten and he'd put out "Sou Lai Mon" and it would go to 30. Then he'd put out something would go top three, then he would put out "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother," which would go to 20. Then he would put out something that would go top five, then he would put out something that would go to 14. Each record has to stand on its own. The Beatles did it. Creedence did it until they split. The Jackson Five did it for a while. But we've been going now for five years, with 14 consecutive top-12 records, and I really am proud of that.

K: Everybody used to say, "You can't keep releasing ballads."

R: You think of each record for what it is.

C: Your first album, *Ticket to Ride*, is interesting. It sounds like a lot of Sixties groups. Not exactly psychedelic, but sort of ambitious.

R: That album, I had in my mind finished years before we got the contract. That wasn't where I was at the time we signed, and some of it could have been a lot better, but you can hear that the ideas were there. Time-signature changes, extended solos, and things that we don't do now. I should've just forgotten it and gotten down to where I was at at the moment. But it was like I had to do that album, I didn't care if we had gotten signed in 1980, that was what the first album was going to sound like. And that's what we did. And that's why there is such a big difference between the *Close To You* album and the *Ticket to Ride* album. I just happened to hear something from it the other night on KNX and got out the album and listened to it, and it's really different than the other stuff we've done since.

C: People still say around the country that if you redid "Ticket To Ride," it would be a



number-one record.

R: Yeah. We redid it for the *Singles* album and it's right where it should be, but I don't know about releasing anything more that's old, after "Won't Last A Day".

K: "Ticket" is great.

C: Are you going to put out "Desperado"?

R: I don't know yet. It doesn't matter, but I don't think the rock people are going to dig it at all. Our stuff is polished, because I believe in production, and all. They'll probably call it slick.

C: That track has an emotion and intensity that is new to your style.

R: I think so, too. I hope you're right.

K: The same thing happened with "Desperado" that happened with "Superstar". That song had been around and been done by a few people.

C: And lyrically, as far as that goes, people don't remember that "Superstar" is about what it's about.

R: Well, we had to change that one line, or it wouldn't have been a hit. "Hardly wait to sleep with you again", which I think she put in just for shock value. I changed it to "be" with you. It never would have gotten to the top 40 otherwise. Now you can get away with "made love in my Chevy van," and Simon can get away with "making love with Cecelia in my bedroom," but he couldn't get away with "crap in high school." They made Lou Christie recut "Rhapsody in the Rain" because he said "making love in the rain." And "in this car love went much too far" had to be changed to "love came like a falling star." It still got the point across.

C: Remember he used to have a fortune teller to tell him what singles to release? And

he wrote some single about her.

R: "The Gypsy cried". That was right before "Two Faces Have I."

C: They have testing services now.

K: What is that?

R: For "goosebump reaction"?

C: Have they ever tested a Carpenters record?

R: I don't know. See, now they have "goosebump effect." That's the thing that Hilburn is missing. He's into lyrics. He's not into music. I doubt he could ever get a chill from music. Look what he has to talk about. I really like lyrics. Newman's lyrics, and Joni Mitchell's and many more. But hell, it's a chill factor that comes with good music. You can get off on a song for its feel or its raunchiness—like I really got off on "Black Dog", and "Whole Lotta Love." You don't get a chill from that, but you get something else, it's really hard to describe. Like "Bridge Over Troubled Water"—you get a chill. At least I do. But I think that judging from the rock critics point of view, they never get that, the sheer beauty of the music.

C: It's not just the words, "Sail on silver girl," but it's everything that's happening in the song at that moment.

R: I'm glad you brought that line up. It chills—beautiful.

K: The bridge in "Old Friends".

R: Chills in "Something So Right". Maybe you wouldn't get from "Kodachrome" but you still dig it for different reasons. You brought up two lines that got to you, both lyrically and musically. "Desperado" is a chill song, both the music and the lyrics. It's there. It's there in a lot of these rock acts, even though they concentrate on other things. The Eagles, even though they're not a hard-rock act, wrote a song like "Desperado". It's like a spiritual. Something that was written 200 years ago. Or Led Zeppelin would write "Stairway To Heaven." You see it—the chill factor. Or Lennon could turn around and write "Imagine" after "Helter Skelter." Or Mick Jagger, "As Tears Go By". I just think there are people that are just not touched musically and that's what I'm getting at with soul. There's soul in the music we've brought up. Not black soul, but it's soul. It's right there.

