

...And Oh So Far Away

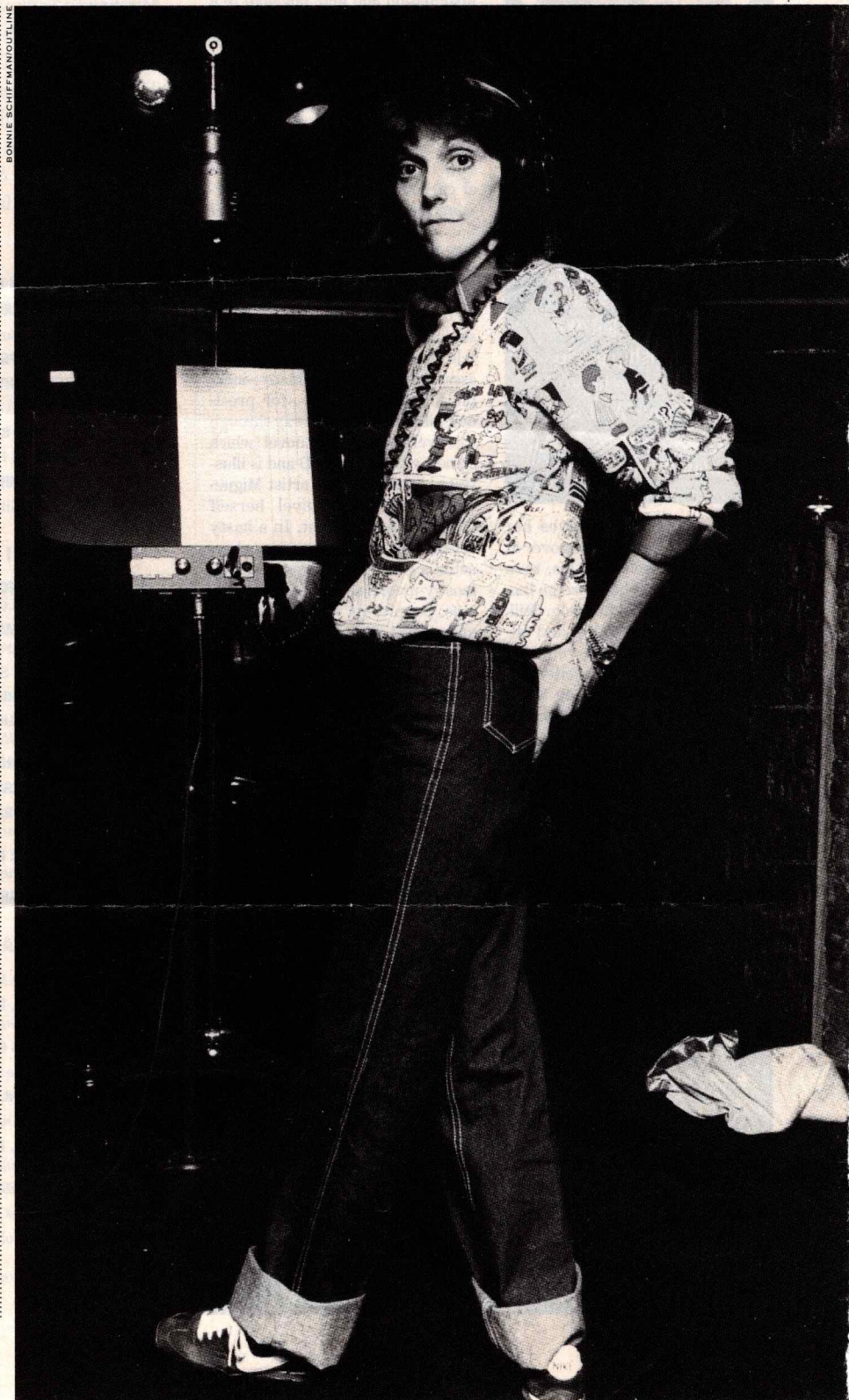
Long after it was recorded and shelved, Karen Carpenter's legendary solo album finally emerges—and with it, an ever sadder portrait of the tragic singer. **BY DAVID BROWNE**

FOR ANYONE accustomed to hearing her virginal delivery on mope-pop standards like "Goodbye to Love," few things will be more disconcerting than the sound of Karen Carpenter loving to love you, baby. "My body says love you tonight/You drive me out of my mind," she swoons on **KAREN CARPENTER** (A&M), the late singer's aborted solo album. Elsewhere, on a song with the uncharacteristically racy title of "Remember When Lovin' Took All Night," she sings, "I feel your arms starting a fire all over me/Baby, I know what your arms can do." For the first time in her brief career, Carpenter wanted to be the temptress, instead of the girl, next door.

The record, Karen's first project without her Dutch-boy-haired older brother and partner, Richard, was recorded in 1979 and early 1980 while Richard was recovering from an addiction to pills. Soon after its completion, it was shelved, for reasons still unclear. (Richard's liner notes say it was her decision, but Ray Coleman's biography *The Carpenters: The Untold Story* claims that Richard and A&M executives decided the album was not up to par; indeed, Coleman suggests Richard took the very idea of the album, produced by Phil Ramone, as an affront to the pristine production style he had perfected on the Carpenters' oeuvre.) Several of its songs have appeared on earlier compilations, but *Karen Carpenter* marks the first time the project has been released in its entirety.

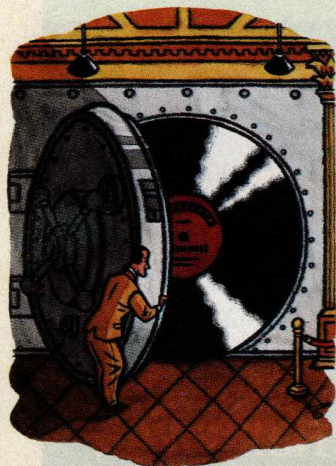
Ramone, best known for adding an upscale, Bloomingdale's sheen to the work of Paul Simon and Billy Joel, decided to take the same approach with his new client. Using New York session pros, he

SUDDENLY KAREN: A solo Carpenter, in 1979, at the A&M Recording Studios in L.A.



BONNIE SCHIFFMAN/OUTLINE

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND



RECORDING ARTISTS whose albums get shelved by the labels that commissioned them might go through Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' stages of death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And then, of course, if the damned thing actually comes out 15 years or more later, shock.

No one decreed that all time capsules should be opened in the fall of '96, but by coincidence, four legendarily buried albums from roughly the same period are just now getting "unshelved": Karen Carpenter's self-titled solo album (from 1980), Donna Summer's *I'm a Rainbow* (1981), Frank Zappa's *Läther* (1977), and Jules and the Polar Bears' *Bad for Business* (1980). Like fine wines, these albums have all gotten...older, anyway.

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"Is it dated?" asks Phil Ramone, who produced Carpenter's album. "Of course. Was '79 a particularly interesting year in music?" He hedges. "It was the height of the Donna Summers, the dance craze. With the two or three tracks that represented that, Karen and I felt it was okay to do that, because she wanted to not be out of step. She didn't want to just be Miss Ballad. Sometimes you try on clothes that others don't see you wearing. But I felt more free about her than other people did. I really adored Karen—it was like an adventure of taking somebody out of Disneyland into the real world."

Jules Shear's Polar Bears broke up after Columbia refused to release their prophetically titled third album. Now an acclaimed solo artist, Shear recently sent a copy of the tape to a pal at Sony who had no idea a former regime had banished it to the vault; the release was easily set in motion. Laughs Shear, "I don't think those people who said 'We're not putting this out because it's too weird' are still in the music business. I don't know if that proves anything, but I'm happy to say I've outlasted them."

Some artists fight to get their unreleased albums back—like critics' fave Tonio K., whose best record, *Persistence of Memory*, was canned by A&M in 1990; he recently wrote the label, imploring "To quote Moses: Let my (record) go!" But some acts do their own shelving—like Sheryl Crow, who had A&M can her too-slick 1992 debut, or Neil Young, who had a '70s habit of pulling projects like *Odeon Budokan* and *Homegrown* before release. "When somebody like Neil or Prince so much as mentions an album and it never comes out, it achieves mythical proportions," notes Pete Howard, publisher of the CD newsletter *ICE*. "Of course, none can live up to their myths. Witness the Beach Boys' *Smile*—if that poor thing ever comes out, there'll be a lot of disappointed fans." —Chris Willman



DONNA SUMMER



FRANK ZAPPA

set Carpenter's voice adrift on light, fluttery disco (heavy on the peppy flutes), mild rock, and singer-songwriter pop. Only a few tracks (the best on the album, ironically) recall the sweet-and-sour sound Richard created for their duo hits. Ramone also sought to dispel her G-rated image—hence a song like "My Body Keeps Changing My Mind," a frothy glitter-ball trifle that, given her anorexia-related death a few years later, seems truly creepy now.

It's easy to hear why A&M was hesitant about the album. Certainly the material was no worse—if not better—than the ditties Richard often saddled her with. But without Richard's lush choral arrangements framing her voice, Carpenter reaches to sound perky and, in doing so, blands herself out. (The beauty of the best Carpenters songs is the way in which Karen's darkly tinged voice seemed to recognize that a trace of melancholy can be found in even the happiest of times.) At moments on *Karen Carpenter*, she's the whitest disco singer imaginable. Pining for physical love, she comes off like an uptight therapy patient trying to talk about her sex life: The sigh she emits at the end of "Remember When Lovin' Took All Night" may be the most chaste moan ever recorded. She does an able reading of Paul Simon's "Still Crazy After All These Years" (changing "crapped out" to "crashed out" in the process). But throughout the album, she seems like the proverbial little girl in the big city—literally, since the album was recorded in New York, away from her home in L.A.'s Downey suburb.

Like too many of the reissues and compilations currently dousing the market, *Karen Carpenter* is something only diehards will want to own. It's also annoyingly typical of the revisionist thinking rampant in the CD era: an album so weak it was canned, back in all its remastered digital splendor! Yet within its slight, dated grooves, you can hear a woman coping with a crippling lack of confidence and an uneasiness with her own body, and her failure to overcome both obstacles almost seems to foretell her death. Maybe *that's* why it hasn't been released for 16 years: For an album meant to be an artistic and career picker-upper, *Karen Carpenter* is a long way from the top of the world. **C+**

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