

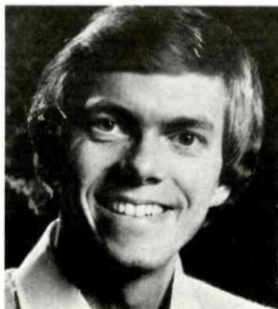
# DIALOGUE

THE VIEWPOINTS OF THE INDUSTRY

## Richard Carpenter—No Tags, Just Music

By ELIOT SEKULER

■ Since being signed to A&M Records in 1969, Richard and Karen Carpenter have been responsible for fifteen gold records and a total of twenty-five million records sold. Their popularity in the United States has been matched by the reception they've received in such disparate markets as Japan and the United Kingdom, where the duo's success has been well substantiated on local charts and in concert hall box offices. In this Record World Dialogue, Richard Carpenter discusses his music, his audience and some plans for the future.



Richard Carpenter

**Record World:** Do you think your audience has changed or broadened over the past six years?

**Richard Carpenter:** It's hard to say, really. I doubt that the people who were originally into our music have changed musical tastes at all; I don't think we've lost that audience, and we think that our appeal has broadened somewhat. One favorable review that we saw recently was written by someone who had seen an ad for the "Now and Then" album and had wanted to buy a copy, but felt that going into a record store and asking for it would make him feel like a teenager going into a pharmacy to buy his first rubber. He was afraid that everybody would stop talking and zero in on him buying a Carpenters album. He was saying that lightly, of course, and it turned out he loved the album. We've been hearing of more and more closet Carpenters freaks, people who may like our music but are afraid to admit it openly because of the image associated with us. That sort of new thinking started with the "Now and Then" album because of the oldies and "The Singles" did quite a bit for us in terms of broadening our appeal.

**RW:** Do you have a feeling for what kind of age group your audience consists of?

**Carpenter:** It was all ages, right from the beginning. We saw that immediately at our concerts.

**RW:** A while ago you were quoted to the effect that the success of the Carpenters in the early '70s had something to do with a backlash against the acid rock of the '60s. Do you still feel that way?

**Carpenter:** There was a lot of talk about that, but you have to understand we weren't thinking in those terms at all. We certainly weren't reacting against acid rock or heavy metal music because, in fact, I like a lot of it. It wasn't like I had the thought that there had to be a market for another kind of music. We just record the kind of music we do the best. We took a demo tape to Herb Alpert, who signed us and then we just went into the studio to do what we could. With the success of "Close To You" and "We've Only Just Begun," people began to put a tag on us, as people will always do. They asked, "Who are you? Are you soft-rock? Folk-rock? What is it that you're trying to do?" I really hadn't thought about it and I'm still not sure that there's a tag for what the Carpenters are doing. Why is it important, anyway?

I didn't think that our success was due to people craving music other than acid rock. Right in the middle of the acid rock era, out came "This Guy's In Love With You" in 1968 and it went straight to number one. The Tijuana Brass had been successful from the early sixties. Rock and pop sell to two different markets with some overlap—even though they both get played on top 40—and there will always be a lot of people around with varied taste in music. A song like "Close To You" or "This Guy's In Love With You" could have been a hit in 1943, 1953, 1963 or 1973; it's that kind of music. Singers like Karen, Patti Page or Jo Stafford have been around for years and have had lots of success, but immediately people decided that the Carpenters were something very new, the result of people being sick of hard rock. Hard rock music will be around for a long time and we have nothing

against it at all. But there was that immediate conclusion drawn by certain hard rock fans that we were "the enemy." They started tagging us, "vitamin swallows" or "squeaky clean."

**RW:** Did that bother you?

**Carpenter:** Yeah, because it's not true. I don't drink milk at all, never mind it being my whole diet, and I don't squeak either. I believe in a lot of things that people who like us don't want to hear. It can get really distorted on both ends. We did one interview with a woman who asked us about our attitude towards premarital sex and grass and I said that I had voted yes on the marijuana initiative and favored premarital sex. She was really shocked. She said her editor wouldn't let her print that, at which point we called an end to that interview. The point is that media images really get blown out of proportion and we do get a little upset when things are said about us that really aren't true.

**RW:** Do you follow the business part of the music business very closely?

**Carpenter:** Absolutely; I always have. I call our office at A&M every Wednesday whether I'm at home or on the road to find out what our chart listings are. I check to see what stations have added our songs, where the records are selling, all of that.

**RW:** Do you listen to a lot of other pop music?

**Carpenter:** Yes. Rock, pop and classics.

**RW:** What new artists do you find yourself listening to?

**Carpenter:** I like the new Eric Carmen album, among other things. It's interesting that part of "All By Myself" is actually the theme from the second movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. It really grabbed my ear the first time I heard it. I like that album.

**RW:** To what extent do you work together in selecting the material you'll record? Is it a mutual decision or do you select the material?

**Carpenter:** I make the selection.

**RW:** Is the decision usually agreed upon?

**Carpenter:** Karen usually likes everything that I select. It took her a while with "Superstar," which surprised me, but that's her favorite as well as mine now. The first couple of times she heard it, she didn't like it but it grew on her and it worked itself out. Usually there's no arguments at all with the material.

Even if we get involved in other things,  
scoring movies, producing, whatever,  
I wouldn't ever want to stop recording.

**RW:** For a while you were doing other people's songs for the most part . . .

**Carpenter:** It just happened to work out that way. The first album had 10 songs on it that were written by John Bettis and me. Then I started hearing a lot of things that I liked before we started to record the "Close To You" album, so we had only four original songs on that album, along with things by Paul Williams and Roger Nichols and Burt Bacharach and Hal David. After that, we found ourselves out on the road quite a bit. I didn't have much of a chance to write. Every now and then, something would happen; we wrote "Top Of The World" and "Yesterday Once More" and they happened to be singles, right in a row, that did extremely well—over a million copies each. We think that one of the new ones we wrote is going to be our next single.

**RW:** Are you a prolific writer?

**Carpenter:** I can't call it that, although I used to be and could be again. With everything else, putting together a new show, rehearsing and performing and listening to all the new stuff that comes in, there's still not much time to write. I'm happy if we get several things on one album that are written by us.

**RW:** Are there any writers that you lean towards especially now?

**Carpenter:** No. Bacharach and David just got back together and I have some of their new songs, although I haven't had time to listen to them yet.

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**RW:** Do you think that your own writing and arranging has taken any kind of direction of the last few years? Has it progressed in any particular way?

**Carpenter:** Not in any particular direction, but I'm always trying to do something different with our albums, whether it be arranging, writing or whatever.

**RW:** Was it initially difficult to familiarize yourself with the process of recording?

**Carpenter:** Well, the engineers took care of a lot of that. I knew what I wanted as far as instruments, vocals and balance. If I said that I wanted more echo or less echo or whatever, the engineer took care of that; they would simply compensate. We picked up the mixing fairly easily, not that it's all that easy to mix but we didn't have very many problems in bringing out what we wanted from the track. We just went over it again and again until we got what we wanted.

**RW:** Are you more involved with the actual recording of your albums now?

**Carpenter:** Definitely. There's a certain sound I look for, a bass sound, a piano sound, everything. When we first went into the studio, I just figured that the engineer was competent and didn't pay too much attention to those kind of details. Fortunately, the engineer was competent, but now the sound is far more important to me than before.

**RW:** Doesn't that affect your music?

**Carpenter:** Oh, sure. On our first album, we sang much differently; Karen sang a lot harder in the early days than she does now, and I did too. The drums were far busier on the first album than they are now, and I hear a lot of little things that we've changed since then.

**RW:** Do you do very much behind the board these days?

**Carpenter:** In terms of producing, yes. Engineering, no. Nowadays, we get into the studio early, before some of the musicians do, and we go directly to the board. Ray, our engineer, knows the sound I want. We use Jim Gordon on drums, and he comes in an hour early, too. We start with the kick drum, get a certain sound we want and then go to the snare, etc.

**RW:** Do you get involved with equipment, like microphones, etc.

**Carpenter:** I talk with the engineer. I tell him the sound I'm looking for, but I don't tell the engineer, "I want such and such a microphone." I just say, "this is what I'm looking for and that's it or not it," until we come up with what we want.

**RW:** Have you considered producing other artists?

**Carpenter:** I've thought about it, but our own performing, producing, rehearsing, recording and selecting material really takes all of our time. It's not like we have somebody producing our material, doing the vocal charts, with somebody else doing the rhythm chart and the orchestral charts and another person listening for new material. We do it all and it takes time.

**RW:** Do you think you'll find time for it in the future?

**Carpenter:** What I definitely want to do is to cut down on the concert tours. We've been doing a helluva lot in the past five years and it's really getting to the two of us. I love to perform, but five weeks of one-nighters, or even five weeks of anything in a row gets to be too much. We want to remain a performing group, but not to the same extent that we used to be.

**RW:** How much time do you spend on the road these days?

**Carpenter:** Last year, for example, we were scheduled for an April tour, a May tour, two stints in Vegas, a Japanese tour that called for 28 shows in as many days and a European tour that covered 51 or 52 shows in something like 30 days. Then there was a summer tour that lasted five weeks. We had been keeping a schedule like that in years past, but it caught up with us last year and with Karen especially. So we're going to cut down. We'll do the Japanese tour and the English show that we had committed ourselves to but had to cancel, but we'll cut back on some of the extended American tours. The problem is that it all happened so suddenly, from the time we were dying for a job until we had a hit, when we were besieged by offers, deadlines and interviews. When you're starting out, you can't imagine what it involves.

**RW:** How fast did all that happen?

**Carpenter:** Compared to some people, it didn't take all that long. We ran around with the first tape for a couple of years before signing with A&M in 1969. Our first album didn't do too much and for the next year we were putting a back-up group together and starting in on the "Close To You" album. "Close To You" went to number one

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in six weeks, then the album started happening and all of a sudden, we were reading things that said "overnight success." It wasn't an overnight success; it took three years. Then came the tours, the new album, Vegas, Tahoe, TV shows, interviews, photo sessions and all of a sudden, we went from being unknowns to the Ed Sullivan show, Johnny Carson show, Andy Williams etc. and it's hard to believe that it's all happening.

**RW:** The Carpenters have done a lot of television appearances. Have there been any offers or interest on your part in doing a regular series?

**Carpenter:** I don't want to do a regular show. We're primarily a recording and performing act and I feel that doing a good weekly TV series would take valuable time and effort away from what we like the most, which is recording.

**RW:** Are there any other media that you're interested in working in? Scoring films or theater?

**Carpenter:** I wouldn't mind scoring films at all. Our agency is currently looking into that.

**RW:** Do you think that the Carpenters will be recording together for a long time to come?

**Carpenter:** Definitely. I think my selection of material, arranging and orchestration is very well suited to Karen's voice and vice-versa. The brother and sister aspect is kind of different. I do a lot of background singing but I don't have a solo voice like Karen's. On the other hand, she doesn't write songs so we complement each other very well. It works together fine, and even if we get involved in other things, scoring movies, producing, whatever, I wouldn't ever want to stop recording.