

This article Copyright 1998 by Daniel Levitin. Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or class room use is granted with or without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, to republish, to post on services, or to redistribute to lists, requires specific permission and/or a fee.

### **Richard Carpenter (b. 10/15/46, New Haven, Conn.)**

In the course of conducting interviews with other producers for this volume, everyone from Paul Simon to Matt Wallace, Stevie Wonder to Denny Diante cited Richard as one of the most brilliant producers of the 1970s, and someone whose work they admired. Richard's contributions to The Carpenters made them one of the top-selling American acts of all time, with over 100 million albums sold. Although Jack Dougherty received credit for producing the first four Carpenters albums, it is widely known that the albums were in fact produced by Richard, and that Dougherty's principal contribution was to book the studio time and pay the bills. The skeptical reader need look no further than the several songs included on "From The Top" (The Carpenters' 4 CD boxed set) that were produced by Richard before he even met Dougherty. All of the elements of the Carpenters sound were there - the lush, multi-tracked vocals, the meticulous arrangements, and the overall gestalt Carpenters sound. Richard was nominated for a "best arrangement Grammy" five times. Artists as diverse as Sheryl Crow, Sonic Youth, Axl Rose, Red Kross and Chrissie Hynde have cited them as a major influence. "They are the best group ever," kd lang says. "Karen inspired me to become a singer, and Richard's production has influenced [co-producer] Ben Mink and me."

The rapid and vast commercial success of The Carpenters catapulted A&M from a small MOR label to a major radio force, ushered in a new era of singings at A&M, and bankrolled a number of artists including The Police, Joan Armatrading, and Supertramp. "When Superstar first went out on the road," Richard recalls, "the then-head of marketing for A&M UK said to them: 'whatever god you believe in, bow down to him before your shows and thank him for The Carpenters - because without them, you wouldn't be here.'"

Richard Carpenter's ability to predict hits is legendary. In 1969, Crocker Bank (since merged with Wells Fargo Bank) featured a Paul Williams tune as part of a statewide advertising campaign emphasizing the bank's willingness to loan money to young couples. When Richard heard the ad one night on television, he instantly knew it could be a commercial hit. "I recognized Paul Williams' voice on the song, and I assumed he had also written the song. I saw him soon afterwards on the A&M lot and asked him if the song had other verses and a chorus. He assured me that it did, and so Karen and I recorded it." Every A&R executive and musician in Los Angeles had heard "We've Only Just Begun" dozens if not hundreds of times; industry pundits had scoffed at the idea that a bank commercial could be turned into a rock single. The Carpenters' version of the song reached #2 in 1970 and stayed on the charts for 3 months.

RC believes that the most important things to bring to a session are the song and the arrangement. "The arrangement is everything that makes a hit record," he explains. "You can have the best singer on the planet and the best song, but if you don't have the right arrangement for that song and singer, the singer's going nowhere and neither is the song."

The best arrangements become inseparable from the song itself. Subsequent artists who cover such a tune find themselves keeping these arrangement ideas, because performing the song without them is unimaginable. Artists who have subsequently covered Carpenters songs tend to stay very close to the original arrangements, as on the Carpenters tribute album "If I Were A Carpenter." One trademark of Richard's arrangement style is the use of "call-and-response" parts (where a horn, violin, or background vocal "answers" a line of the lead vocal). On "Superstar," for example, the violins echo Karen's line "Long ago..." with a parallel melody; on "Rainy Days and Mondays," the background vocals echo Karen's line "hangin' around," filling in the space in the melody.

Another trademark Richard Carpenter arrangement device is the introduction of completely new music to the song. His piano intro to "Close To You" is an example of new music he added to the tune, creating one of the most instantly identifiable intros in all of pop music.

RC has worked more or less continuously since Karen's death. In addition to reorchestrating, sequencing and packaging a number of Carpenters compilation and greatest hits albums, he released two solo albums, 1987's "Time,"

and 1997's "Richard Carpenter: Pianist, composer, arranger, and conductor." Carpenter has also produced the MOR teenage singer Scott Grimes, Canadian popster Veronique, and Japanese pop star Akiko Kobayashi.

DJL