

August 1994

IF I WERE A CARPENTER

On the surface, the lustrous pop melodies and meticulous arrangements of the Carpenters have little in common with the more primitive, emotionally gnarled alternative rock of the '90s. But beneath Karen Carpenter's velvety vocals and Richard Carpenter's effervescent rhythms dwelled the same type of frustration and emotional turmoil that today's top alternative acts thrive on.

"I grew up with them, and I always felt there was a darker side of what they did. They never really let it show through, but I felt there was a real tragedy to what they did that always appealed to me," say Grant Lee Buffalo frontman Grant Lee Phillips, whose band contributes a faithfully stirring rendition of "*We've Only Just Begun*" to the Carpenters tribute album **IF I WERE A CARPENTER**.

It's been 25 years since the Carpenters first signed to A&M, and 12 years since their last recording session, but songs like "*Superstar*," "*Close To You*" and "*Top Of the World*" still hold up. Even after Karen inspiring and influencing countless numbers of fans and musicians. Artists as prominent and diverse as k.d. Lang, Chrissie Hynde and Sonic Gordon have long expressed their love for the Carpenters, and a growing legion of younger musicians have discovered the magic of the group over the years as well.

Today, the Carpenter's music is as fresh and vibrant as ever, which explains why Sonic Youth, Matthew Sweet, Bettie Serveert, Shonen Knife, Sheryl Crow, cranberries, Redd Kross, Babes In Toyland, Cracker, American Music Club, Grant Lee Buffalo and others jumped at the opportunity to record a Carpenters cover for **IF I WERE A CARPENTER**.

The project was conceived by journalist Dave Konjoyan and producer Matt Wallace. Konjoyan came up with the idea of having alternative artists cover Carpenters songs after conducting an interview with Babes In Toyland, in which drummer Lori Barbero expressed her admiration for the Carpenters. "I remember, as a child singing along with my mother, every single word to all the songs on the **CLOSE TO YOU** record. When I was young my parents had a huge (stereo) console and I used to think that the Carpenters were (actually) inside," Barbero says today.

After a minimal amount of research, Konjoyan discovered that a number of other prominent alternative musicians were also big Carpenters fans. He learned that **CLOSE TO YOU** was the first non-Beethoven album Redd Kross member Gere Fennelly bought; "Bless The Beasts And Children" was the first song Sheryl Crow learned on piano; and Bettie Serveert's drummer Berend Dubbe has a Karen Carpenter shrine in his bedroom, and wore a Carpenters T-shirt in Bettie Serveert's last video.

"I wouldn't have expected these bands to be Carpenters fans, and I thought if they all like the Carpenters there have to be other groups that are into them as well. I just thought it would be a great idea to see all the alternative bands doing these very straight MOR songs," says Konjoyan.

To implement his idea, he called his old friend/producer Matt Wallace (Replacements, Faith No More, John Haibt, Paul Westerberg), who he met in high school while singing Carpenters songs in the boys locker room and the two proceeded to recruit groups interested in the project. "We made a point to tell the bands we contacted that we wanted them to take a song and do it in their own style, whatever that meant to them," says Konjoyan. "So mostly, they just did what came naturally."

And what came naturally was sometimes gloomy, unsettling and emotionally rending. Sonic Youth's version of "*Superstar*" blends sedate, sociopathic vocals with eerie noises, dreary guitars, and a chillingly morose

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rhythm. American Music Club's "*Goodbye to Love*" is equally bleak, numbed by distraught vocals and solemn instrumentation, and Sheryl Crow's stripped down cover of "*Solitaire*" is a testament to loneliness and isolation.

"You can really hear the emotion in a lot of these songs. They come to life because the bands are singing from their guts. I think the Carpenters did a lot to cover up the darkness in their songs, but these groups were completely unafraid to approach a song from a dark angle and explore it," says Wallace, who produced four songs on the album.

Other artists took a more upbeat approach to the songs they covered. The cranberries version of "*Close To You*" is dreamy and serene, lined with chiming guitars and velvety vocals, and Babes in Toyland's extraterrestrial opus "*Calling Occupants...*" is surprisingly melodic. Dishwalla's "*It's Gonna Take...*" is spirited and uplifting, filled with surging guitars and exotic rhythms, and Redd Kross' "*Yesterday Once More*" bursts with soaring vocal harmonies and aggressive guitar riffs.

Then there's Matthew Sweet's "*Let Me Be The One*," a placidly pleasing track that features pedal steel guitar, keyboards and guest vocals and additional keyboards by Richard Carpenter. "It was such an honor to me to even be in the same room with the man," says Sweet. "Doing 'Oo-Ooohs' with Richard Carpenter is kind of an overwhelming thing."

Perhaps the most buoyant, uplifting song on **IF I WERE A CARPENTER** is Shonen Knife's "*Top Of The World*," which resonates with joyous, jangly guitars and endearing vocals. "It's effervescent and amazing. Most people who put it on can't help but play it three or four times in a row," says Wallace.

While most of the bands feature on the record have manipulated and customized the melodic strains of the Carpenters they've done so out of genuine admiration and respect. "There's nothing about the record that's tongue-in-cheek," insists Konjoyan. "A lot of people did fun versions of the songs, but they were very serious about what they were doing."

Many of the artists found that the songs were far craftier and more musically complex than they had realized. Some even had to change the keys they were written in because they couldn't match Karen Carpenter's dynamic vocal range. By the end of the project, a number of groups had developed an even greater respect for the Carpenter than they had going in.

"I hadn't listened to (the Carpenters) in maybe 15 years, and I didn't have a great appreciation for it like I do now. Karen had an amazing delivery, an amazing range," say Sheryl Crow.

To commemorate the Carpenters 25th anniversary with A&M, the label had originally planned to have traditional pop artists cover Carpenters songs, but they decided it was inappropriate to try to out-pop great pop recordings. That's when they decided to take Konjoyan and Wallace up on their proposal to do an alternative cover record. To the casual observer, the idea of alternative rock groups playing classic Carpenters songs might seem a bit absurd. Indeed, Konjoyan and Wallace knew they were taking a risk from the moment they started planning the record, but by the time the pathos and creativity from all the tracks were mixed and mastered Konjoyan and Wallace knew they had created an alluring, innovative record. "We thought it came out better than we possibly could have expected it to," says Konjoyan.

In order to celebrate the release of **IF I WERE A CARPENTER** in true alternative fashion, A&M will release a deluxe box-set edition of the record's 14 songs on seven seven-inch 45 rpm singles simultaneous with the CD release of the record.