

Karen Carpenter's Second Life

By Rob Hoerburger New York Times October 6, 1996

THE TAPE HAD BEEN BURIED for three years, behind the colonnades of stuffed animals, Disney memorabilia and "I Love Lucy" videos that lined Karen Carpenter's luxe Century City condo. These were the appurtenances of a time when she was pop music's own cuddly toy: as one-half of the Carpenters, she was queen of the lovelorn, an Edith Piaf in Tricia Nixon's clothes, and for a few years in the early 70's practically the most popular singer in the world. But now it was the 80's, and the Carpenters -- Karen and her older brother, Richard -- and their toothsome ditties had become fodder for David Letterman jokes. A trade-paper review of their last single even absent-mindedly referred to them as "Richard and Linda." And so Karen retrieved the cassette that until then only a roomful of people had heard, a solo album that she made in 1979 and that was conceived as her exit visa from a stultifying goody-two-shoes image.

She was talked into abandoning the album on the eve of its release, the first blow in a three-year series of career and personal disappointments: a bad marriage, dwindling record sales, a protracted battle with anorexia nervosa. As Karen played the tape for friends during the early weeks of 1983, though, they sensed that she had finally passed the point equidistant between the last happy time in her life and the next. On Feb. 2, a month before her 33d birthday, she called her friends Karen Ichijji and Phil Ramone; talk inevitably wound around to the solo album, which Ramone had produced.

"Can I use the F-word?" Karen asked.

Ramone replied: "You're a grown woman. Say whatever you want."

"It's a \$(expletive\$) great album."

She died 36 hours later. Anorexia, in the end, claimed victory over her body and her name, which became practically synonymous with the affliction. And the solo album went back on the shelf behind Mickey Mouse.

ON TUESDAY, A&M RECORDS WILL release "Karen Carpenter," 16 years after she delivered it to the label and 13 years after her death. Rumors have swirled about the content as the album continued to be withheld, including one on the Internet that claimed she was bumping and grinding like Donna Summer, the reigning dance diva at the time. But despite the toe-dippings into disco and new wave, "Karen Carpenter" is no "Bad Girls": its 12 tracks are still love songs, only leaner and less naive than her previous hits. The last of America's great virginal sweethearts was even, in her own polite way, singing about the joys of sex, and finally catching up to women's liberation.

Releasing the album in 1996 can seem like an exercise in necrophilia. But it's a retro world, in which "Brady Bunch" movies generate robust box-office and bands like R.E.M. and the Gin Blossoms continue to reposit 70's riffs and stances, and so "Karen Carpenter" makes a lot of sense. It will almost certainly be the crowning prize for what has become a Cult of Karen; lambasted by the pop elite during her life, she has become a mascot to the pop underground.

First, the avant-garde director Todd Haynes cast Barbie as the tragic singer in "Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story," which became something of an outlaw hit, traded back and forth on bootleg video. (The film was withdrawn from theaters because Richard Carpenter refused to authorize the use of the music.) Then, in 1994, bands like Shonen Knife, Sonic Youth and Dishwalla lent their grungy guitars and voices to "If I Were a Carpenter," a tribute album that revved up and amplified the duo's dulcet hits. And the 1995 Off Broadway comedy "Party" ended with seven naked gay men swaying to the gossamer strains of "Close to You." As with the "Brady" movies, part of the appeal is kitsch nostalgia, the acute geekiness of the brother-sister act; overriding the high-yuk quotient, though, is an identification with the profound melancholy in Karen's singing. "She had," says one of the "Party" boys, "the voice of an angel." For a few months in 1979 that angel slipped onto more earthly ground, recording songs like "My Body Keeps Changing My Mind" and "Making Love in the Afternoon." But her halo, like her brother, would prove impossible to shed.

"THIS WASN'T JUST AN ALBUM," SAYS FRENDA Franklin, who was Karen's best friend. "It was her Emancipation Proclamation."

At 29, Karen Carpenter was, for the first time, working without Richard Carpenter, her producer, arranger and frequent songwriter -- part Pygmalion, part Gepetto, the master carver of her sound. She had become a musician only as a tagalong to Richard, a piano prodigy three and a half years older. When they started out, she was the drummer; her deeply pining contralto was discovered almost by accident, when it became clear that her brother's voice wasn't commercial enough. "Richard's contributions were enormous, and underrated," says Herb Alpert, who signed them to A&M Records in 1969, when Karen was 19 and Richard 22.

Karen's opinions -- or the inclination even to have them -- were subsumed not just by Richard's but by the duo's success. With songs emphasizing melody over beat and washed by sudsy strings and four-part harmonies, the Carpenters appealed to a country disenchanted with the Vietnam War, campus unrest and the generation gap. These were songs that were played at weddings and graduations; when "We've Only Just Begun" or "Rainy Days and Mondays" came on the car radio, kids and parents would turn it up. (Hipster fans, especially college students, had to be discreet; more than a few smuggled Carpenters albums into their dorms under their Led Zeppelin T-shirts.) This was musical white bread, to be sure, but it was feeding masses of a biblical proportion.

Karen was suddenly being painted as the poster girl of the young, gifted and square -- and as she was squeezed out from behind the drums she found her appearance under constant scrutiny. Big-boned and tomboyish all her life, she cracked under the pressure and developed anorexia. Complicating matters was her troubled relationship with her mother, Agnes, who, according to friends, unabashedly favored Richard. "Karen's mother never told her she was a good singer," Franklin says. If anorexia has classically been defined as a young woman's struggle for control, then Karen was a prime candidate, for the two things she valued most in the world -- her voice and her mother's love -- were exclusively the property of Richard. At least she would control the size of her own body.

Strangely enough, it was Richard's illness, not Karen's, that prompted Karen to try a solo album. Around 1976, his divining rod for hit material started coming up dry. Americans would continue to be sucked in by love songs but had started to forsake the snail's-pace,

hyperglycemic Carpenters for harmonic disco groups like Abba and the Bee Gees. Richard became addicted to Quaaludes and by the end of 1978 was unable to perform. When Karen told him she wasn't interested in remaining idle, he considered it practically an act of treason, especially when she asked for his blessing. After months of pleading, and tugging on his sleeve like the loyal little sister she had always been, he finally gave in. There was one caveat, according to his biographer, Ray Coleman: "Don't do disco."

This was wishful thinking at best. Like cars at the gas pumps that spring and summer, pop singers were lined up around the block, waiting for their turn at the disco trough -- everyone from Cher to Johnny Mathis, Barbra Streisand to Ethel Merman. Soon Karen was on a plane, flying into the land of Studio 54.

PHIL RAMONE, NOW APPROACHING 60, is ever the music-biz hipster, draped from head to toe in basic black but with a silver mane that lends him an avuncular, Walt Whitman cum Grandpa Walton air. Based on the polished pop records he produced in the late 70's for Barbra Streisand, Billy Joel and Paul Simon, he seemed the perfect choice for Karen Carpenter. Though he had been a fan of Karen's voice, he was not interested in making any sexually clueless songs like "Sing" and "Top of the World."

'I said to her: 'A lot of your fans aren't teen-agers anymore. Why don't you grow up with them?' " Ramone says. From the outset Carpenter agreed that a sexier approach could help win those fans back; her good friend Olivia Newton-John had, after "Grease," transformed herself from pop Kewpie doll into a kind of slut-next-door and was ringing up the charts. So Ramone recruited a bunch of relative ruffians (Billy Joel's backup band), as well as Rod Temperton, who wrote Michael Jackson's "Off the Wall." The songs they chose had come-hither titles like "Make Believe It's Your First Time" and "Remember When Lovin' Took All Night." Some of the grooves were disco, some were rock-and-roll; the few ballads, like Simon's "Still Crazy After All These Years," avoided the syrupy choirs and string sections favored by Richard.

Meanwhile, Karen Ichiuji, Ramone's wife and a glamorous, street-smart singer, became Karen Carpenter's cultural compass. "This really was the girl next door," Ichiuji says. "She didn't know how to hail a cab, wasn't comfortable even ordering for herself in restaurants." Russell Javors, who wrote two of the raunchier songs on the album, says Carpenter "had this very sexy voice, but she wasn't a sexy person at all."

Though it could seem that Carpenter traded one Svengali for another, even moving into Ramone and Ichiuji's home in Pound Ridge, N.Y., Ramone sees it differently. "I didn't feel like her mentor," he says. "There wasn't one part of this album that she wasn't involved in, when she didn't have the reins." It was Karen, who had often been photographed with Richard in a matching outfit, who encouraged the glam photo sessions for the album cover. When she saw the proofs of one shot, which showed her elegantly coiffed and made up and wearing an oversize white sweatshirt (a precursor of the "Flashdance" look), she ran to Ichiuji in a rare outburst of self-worth. "Look at me, Itch," she said. "I'm pretty. I'm really pretty."

After four or five songs were completed, Carpenter flew back to Los Angeles, tape happily in hand. "She was so in awe of Phil and these cool, hip musicians, who were treating her like an equal," Franklin says. "She wasn't used to that." (Richard Carpenter told Coleman that he

sometimes wouldn't even tell Karen what she was going to sing until she got to the studio.) "She told me that working on this album was the happiest time in her life."

Ramone remembers that Karen looked good during the early sessions and ate like everyone else. (He had been warned about Karen's illness but was unschooled in the wiles of the anorexic.) But when she returned to New York in the fall of '79 to resume recording, Ramone says he was faced with an 80-pound "Auschwitz figure" and then started finding laxatives all over his house. He suspected that Karen had played those first tracks for her parents and that they had disapproved. "She had too much class to say, 'My parents think you're screwing me up,'" he says. As Franklin explains, it offended them to hear their daughter, who a few years earlier had been hailed by President Nixon as "young America at its best," singing a line like "I remember the first time/I laid more than eyes on you."

Carpenter's anxieties were compounded by the excessive overtime on the project. She had spent the standard \$100,000 allotted by the record company, plus almost half a million of her own money. As her anorexia intensified, she became too weak to travel, and so Ramone had to fly to Los Angeles to complete production. "It was almost militaristic there," he says. "She would meet Richard at the same restaurant at the same time for breakfast every day -- you know, Belgian waffles at 0800."

They finally finished in January 1980, delivering 11 of the 21 songs they recorded. Karen chose the white-sweatshirt shot for the cover, and Olivia Newton-John invited Karen to sing on her latest TV special. All that was left was the routine playback for the label presidents, Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss, the A and M of A&M. Also in attendance, at Karen's request, was Richard Carpenter.

THE SILENCE WAS DEAFENING. "SHE was expecting them to come up and hug her after every track," Ramone says. "But they just sat there."

Alpert remembers liking the album but not loving it. "It just didn't ring my bell the way a Carpenters album would," he says between heavy pauses. A friend of Karen's recalls a management meeting in which she was accused of trying to sound "like some black chick." It's unclear what everyone was expecting, but what they clearly weren't hearing was wedding songs.

'It was an attempt to get as far away from the Carpenters as possible," Rod Temperton says. "Some of it didn't ring true."

John Bettis, Richard Carpenter's longtime lyricist and no fan of the solo album, agrees: "Everybody knows how great a producer Phil Ramone is, but in the end I think Karen missed the chemistry." Lost amid the carping and strategizing was what Karen herself felt. Alpert says she vacillated between loving the album and hating it, but the Ramone camp doesn't buy this. "This wasn't a woman given to tears," Ramone says. "When she was upset, she just wouldn't eat. But when we got out of that meeting and far enough away, she just crumpled in my arms." Ramone set up another listening at the home of Quincy Jones, but A&M wouldn't budge: the record still had to be "improved." And then there was Richard, who was out of drug rehab. His criticisms of the album were the sharpest. According to Coleman, he said that the songs were weak and that the keys were too high for Karen's voice. At another point he accused Karen of "stealing" the Carpenters sound, because of some Carpenters-like harmonies on a

few of the songs. "Nobody is saying Richard had to like the record," Franklin says. "But he could have supported her. When he didn't, I think it forever put a division in her mind about him."

Richard began to pressure Karen to start the next Carpenters album, and then, at what Franklin calls her "most vulnerable point," she met Thomas J. Burris, a real-estate developer from Beverly Hills. "He seemed nice," Ichiuji says. "Karen really thought he was going to be her knight in shining armor." With Richard in one ear saying, essentially, "Come back, all is forgiven," and Burris whispering a fast proposal in the other, her conviction on the solo album wavered, and on May 5, 1980, it was officially jettisoned. Karen told all involved that now that Richard was healthy, she wanted to return to the Carpenters. Besides, she was getting married.

The reunion album, and the marriage, failed in short order. Richard later said that anything he and Karen put out was doomed because of their image -- a problem Karen's solo album was designed to fix. The details of the marriage are murkier; she and Burris separated after a mere 14 months.

Faced with a triple dose of rejection in less than two years, Karen finally sought treatment for her anorexia, eventually agreeing to hyperalimentation, an intravenous feeding procedure that alarmed her friends as a quick fix. "I knew something was all wrong when I went to the hospital and saw that she had gained 10 pounds in a week," Ichiuji says.

By Thanksgiving 1982, she was back above 100 pounds and returned to Los Angeles, blatantly gorging at the holidays in front of her family. She gave what turned out to be her final live performance -- at her godchildren's school, two months before she died -- without Richard. The initial coroner's report showed an abundance of ipecac, a common vomit-inducing syrup, in her system. Taken in high quantities, it can cause a potassium deficiency, which can lead to heart arrhythmia. But neither her family nor her friends have ever been satisfied with that explanation. "I talked to the coroner myself," Ichiuji says, "and he said it was only a matter of time. She had just starved her organs for so long."

RICHARD CARPENTER, 49, STILL LIVES in Downey, Calif., near his mother; in 1984, the year after Karen died, he married his cousin Mary Rudolph and is now the father of four. In 1987, he made his own solo album, "Time," a critical and commercial failure, and since then he has spent most of his time overseeing the repackagings of Carpenters recordings -- and making a handsome living. In Japan alone this year, a new greatest-hits set outsold such international juggernauts as Mariah Carey and Celine Dion. But when fans buy that collection, or any other one anywhere in the world, they won't hear the same versions of "Superstar" or "Yesterday Once More" that dominated American radio in the 70's, but doctored versions of those songs, some with new piano or drum parts. Unable to remix or re-record the events of his sister's life, Richard continues to slave over the master tapes of the music they made together, certain that perfection is only one more take away.

Though a few of the songs from "Karen Carpenter" dribbled out on various Carpenters releases, Richard had steadfastly refused to release the whole album. After declining several requests to be interviewed for this article, Richard said through his manager, Sherwin Bash, that he was only respecting what he understood to be Karen's final wish, that she didn't like the album and didn't want it released. "He only acquiesced," Bash says, "when fans and

writers kept begging him for this last piece of her legacy." In a note to The Times Magazine, Richard wrote, "I wish it nothing but success."

When Richard called Ichiuji last spring to say he was releasing the album, he asked if there had been a dedication; she unearthed her notes and found one: "Dedicated to my brother Richard with all my heart."

"Karen knew that the Carpenters needed more of an edge," Ichiuji says, "and by dedicating the album to Richard, she was saying, here, I did this for you and for me. Accept me, because I did this for both of us." Ichiuji says that when Richard heard the dedication, he bawled over the phone.

"Karen Carpenter" may not be the great American pop album, but it holds up with anything that like-minded singers -- Streisand, Newton-John -- were recording at the time, and especially with anything the Carpenters put out immediately before or after. If there is no "We've Only Just Begun" on the album, it doesn't really matter. Fans typically crave an artist's most personal work -- even if it isn't a masterpiece.

"It was a beginning," Ramone says. "I'm not saying that Karen was Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan, but a voice like that could have done anything -- an album of Dylan tunes, country ballads, Broadway. But not from where she was."

Instead Karen Carpenter remains frozen in the 70's, singing gooey love songs with her brother. And for her fans, who never got to judge the album when she was alive, "Karen Carpenter" ends up a cherished souvenir from the collection of a woman who was never allowed more than a vacation from her own image.