

Richard Carpenter

22 January 2019 Record Collector



“I appreciate Karen’s voice more now than ever,” says her brother, Richard Carpenter. “And that’s saying a lot, because I was her biggest fan. She was a remarkable singer. There was never anyone like her, nor will there ever be again. She possessed everything that a great singer needs. And in addition, whereas not every great singer enjoys the recording experience, she loved it. She never lost that. Even when she wasn’t in the healthiest of conditions, it never affected her voice. Ever. She was just a natural.”

It’s a story often told, of how The Carpenters’ rise to mainstream “adult contemporary” glory across the 70s (they existed from 1969 to Karen’s death in 1983) with a peerless run of smooth, heartbreaking ballads saw them dismissed as apple-pie goodie-goodies, and castigated by the cool, counter-culture cats as a bland cop-out; only for posterity to prove that there was more ache, angst and raw emotion in their “easy listening” than in the music of a thousand posturing “rebels”. Karen’s voice was one, incomparable factor. She was a handy drummer, too. Her brother’s music and arrangements, sometimes less celebrated, were subtle and sublime: perfectly gauged in their blend of restraint and emoting. The Carpenters’ sound is that of the need to be in love cracking open rainy days and Mondays to let the light in.

Born in Connecticut, the siblings moved to California in their teens, where Herb Alpert snapped them up in ’69, giving them free rein. Within six months, *Close To You* was the first of many US No 1s. Karen’s tragic death aged 32, from heart failure related to her anorexia nervosa, raised awareness of then little-discussed eating disorders. It also caused their music to be perceived in a different light. Subsequent generations, hearing the music without the contemporaneous criticism, responded viscerally, any resistance melting. A 1994 tribute album, *If I Were A Carpenter*, featuring the “alternative” likes of Sonic Youth, Babes In Toyland and American Music Club,

recast their credibility, but even without that the shift was irreversible. The Carpenters remain hip today, because their songs hurt so good.

Such kudos is, in the real world, a mere sidebar. Global popularity dominated their peak decade and has sustained, with sales now over the 100 million mark. Those who feel their feather-light magic won't be put off by crass TV tie-ins or dubious repackagings. Christmas 2018's "new" offering, *Carpenters With The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra*, was an interesting if inessential refashioning of classic tracks. After previous Royal Phil team-ups on the music of Elvis, Beach Boys, Roy Orbison and Aretha became big box office, there's a logic to asking Richard to rearrange and orchestrate his music with them. It's the first time the original artist – or at least the surviving half of the double act – has been actively involved with such a project. Did the 72-year-old, taking this task on at Abbey Road, find it challenging to tweak perfection without going overboard into sacrilege?

"I had to give it a little thought," says Carpenter, who last winter had to evacuate his family's home for a day ("frightening, almost beyond comprehension") during the California fires. "There are things you really don't want to change at all. And then there are others where, through the years, I've thought: well, if I could have another crack at that, I would've done this, that, or the other. It turned out to be something I'm enormously happy with. I'm proud as a peacock. I hadn't listened to some of the separated tracks in years, so to be taking little noises out like room ambience, rumble, hiss... I could listen to Karen all by herself for a while, y'know? I'm still noticing things she did. That's the mark of a great artist, where you think you're fully familiar with something but there are still moments... Aw, I just wish she could sit down and listen to this. I think she'd have beamed."

Is there a danger, though, that by dabbling you mess up a masterpiece? Put blusher on the Mona Lisa?

"Sure," he replies. "You have to get the balance right. You have a full orchestra in front of you, should you need it. Of course, a lot of these songs don't call for that. But it's always richer to have a full string ensemble. Remember, we did a lot of these back then on 8-tracks or 16-tracks so you had to combine the overdubbed vocals of Karen and myself to make room for other things. You couldn't have, say, the violins on the left and the celli on the right. So now, on *We've Only Just Begun*, we've got all the strings it asked for. We can spread out, the way it was live. It's larger. The listener is enveloped. I put a little bassoon line in *Superstar* which I've been imagining for years. And a piccolo trumpet in *Goodbye To Love*. Just little things. Nothing just for the sake of it."

While it's well-known that The Carpenters' golden years ended in grief, lending their songs an added mystique and melancholy, their time on top of the tree with twinkling smiles was, in fact, a dizzying, disorientating... I won't use "rollercoaster" because Richard does.

"It was, though," he exclaims. "It *was* a rollercoaster! *Close To You* was an overnight hit, and within a week we were household names. And then it went on, with the next hit, and the next... it was a heck of a lot to deal with. We were out on the road, playing endless theatres, and then we broke worldwide. So we go to Japan, Australia, the UK, and at the same time I had to do my day job as effectively our A&R man, selecting new songs, or writing them. And arranging, producing. It was madly busy. For the most part, it was enjoyable. But, you know, when you're touring, a new town every night, it can get old..."

Do you feel that, if you'd taken some time out to recharge your batteries, you and Karen might have survived the exhaustion?

"Yeah, that's kind of how I'd put it," he allows. "We needed to recharge. But...it happened the way it happened. And that's pretty much it, y'know? You look back, as we all do over our lives at times, and say: I should've done this, or if only I'd done that. It would've been a hard thing to just simply put a stop to, though. Because we had a large number of full-time employees, as I'd arrange the music around each musician. I wanted it to sound onstage as close as possible to the records. So we had to do a heck of a lot of concerts just to break even. It was big business."

There's wonderful footage online of a Carpenters 1976 TV special, where you segue seamlessly between your classics, climaxing in *Goodbye To Love* and *that* guitar solo courtesy of Tony Peluso...

"Ah, yeah, that was our first TV special of our very own," he recalls. "Hits Medley '76, we called that section – ha ha, imaginative! And that's the group I'm referring to. Of course, *Goodbye To Love* is my song, with John Bettis' lyrics. And the idea for that guitar solo was mine. They say it invented... the power ballad? The rhythm ballad? How to term it? Anyway, I was arranging it and could hear, in my mind, this fuzz solo. I knew exactly who I wanted to play it. He was in the backing group for the guy who opened the show for us. I'd registered that he played melodically, not just a bunch of fast notes. Tony didn't read music; didn't have to. I sang him the part where he enters, and said, 'From here on, do what you hear, what you feel. Burn it up! Soar!' And he knocked the whole thing out in two takes. It was marvellous."

That song played its part in giving you a crossover to previously sceptical "rock" audiences. It became clear that your music wasn't necessarily squeaky-clean and family-friendly... "The thing was," Carpenter reflects, "A&M didn't know how to market us. Nobody did, really. I was railing against it all the time. I didn't like the photographs, the album covers... but as far as picking what to record, that was all up to me, so... you win some."

Inevitably, perhaps, Carpenter fell prey to the strain, becoming addicted to Quaaludes. He naïvely thought they were nothing more serious than sleeping pills until, increasingly disorientated, he fell down a staircase backstage before a show. He spent January 1979 in rehab in Kansas. Was this drug problem, and the subsequent spell in recovery, a reaction to being presented as so pristine and perfect?

“Hmmm,” he pauses and ponders. “I had my struggles, yeah. But I think I was a little ahead of the curve, you know? Going into rehab and all. This was back before, when you didn’t want it known. Nowadays it doesn’t matter at all – in fact, it should be part of your press bio.”

So you were a pioneer?

“Ha ha, let’s say that!”

The irony is the Carpenters story has almost as many genuine classic tropes of rock’n’roll mythology as that of Iggy or Keef...

“Oh, well, not exactly,” he demures. “I mean, I can’t say I’m not ‘clean-cut’, because I am. I think most of us are. But I was certainly not *square*. Despite what our detractors made us out to be.”

Since Karen’s death you’ve become the curator as well as the architect of The Carpenters’ sound and legacy. A task you’ve taken seriously.

“Correct. Through the years I get requests to use the songs, and there are certain things that I don’t think are appropriate. Others I do. I make sure any compilations are put out in a way that’s dignified. Even down to this song following that song... I like to look after it.”

Is it true that Japan fell so hard for the Carpenters that there were scenes of hysteria and mayhem at airports?

“Oh, yes! Close To You started it, but by the time Superstar and then Yesterday Once More – which sold a million there, which is like 10 million here – hit, something clicked with the masses. It went through the roof. It was manic! Screaming crowds as you got off the plane. Sometimes your car would get surrounded and you’d get rocked around – and, y’know, I’m not particularly wild about that feeling, I have to tell you. It was unsettling. But they’ve been staunch and loyal. Music’s the universal language. Whether they understand the words or not. Did you know that our songs are used in English classes there? Karen’s enunciation was so pure, and so well-recorded, that they use our songs and lyrics for teaching English. Especially, of all things, Yesterday Once More – so you have Japanese people reciting ‘sha la la la’ and ‘shing a ling a ling’...!”

The 1977 single Calling Occupants Of Interplanetary Craft broke the Carpenters mould and freaked out fairweather fans. Bordering on trippy prog, utilising 160 musicians, giving a cosmic shout-out to UFOs, it was most extraordinary.

“Yeah, well... the recognised anthem of World Contact Day. People then kept asking us what World Contact Day was. Something to do with telepathy, I think. Tony Peluso was the voice of the DJ on that. You’re familiar with the Klaatu original, I would imagine? I heard that and thought it was a damn good album. They were this group of Canadian studio guys, named after *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. I got a big kick out of Calling Occupants and thought it’d be fun to do it with real instruments – theirs was mostly synthesised, because of budget constraints, no doubt. I wanted the whole thing OUTSIZED. It was done as a lark, actually, for an album track, but then did pretty well for itself. Did it surprise people? Well, it surprised *us*, I can tell you.”

Something of an impossible choice, this, but: what’s your personal favourite Carpenters moment?

“Ticket To Ride may be it,” he decides. “With all those overdubbed vocals it just works as a beautiful ballad. I’ve made it a little bigger on this album, added little answers on the strings. It’s very plaintive, isn’t it? And so different from The Beatles’ original. I’d heard From Me To You early: I had to special-order it, it was hard to find. They caught my ear, right off the bat. So then Ticket To Ride, I thought: this could be so pretty, so sad.”

There follow 30 seconds in which Richard Carpenter, always working, experiments with various vocal lines for Ticket To Ride, asking your interviewer to join in on harmonies. Being Karen for half a minute is quite a thrill. I won’t be erasing that recording in a hurry. Paul McCartney once described Karen’s as “the best female voice in the world”.

“I agree with him,” says her brother, happy, even by proxy, to join the echelons of the hip elite. “I don’t know why anyone wouldn’t. Hard not to like her voice, isn’t it? And we did this album in Abbey Road, with its atmosphere. It seems like any time of day or night there are people on that crossing, yet it doesn’t seem to cause much trouble. In America there’d be security guards and barbed wire.”

Carpenter reveals that he's finishing off some new songs. "I can't say it's a new album at the moment, just four or five numbers. We'll see." So the muse still visits you? "Every now and again, she shows up. But the last year seems to have gone by so quickly. They seem to go more and more quickly now, as you get older. You hear that all your life, and it seems to be absolutely true, even though you know it can't be."