

Carpenters: Voice of the Heart

Richard Carpenter, producer

A&M SP 4954

Even at the peak of their career as hit-singles artists, the Carpenters loomed as pop atavists: Richard Carpenter's sleek, string-washed arrangements, sister Karen's plush vocal style, and the duo's choice of material all echoed the mainstream-pop virtues of a generation that predated the kilowatt alternatives of the day.

American pop has softened in recent years, even with the rising tide of electronic percussion and synthesized instruments. Still, apart from Linda Ronstadt's formal valentine to '40s and '50s pop, "What's New," this posthumous album of Karen Carpenter's final studio performances belies modern comparisons.

Part of that is due to the very quality of her creamy alto. With her deliberate yet heartfelt phrasing and true vibrato-less

delivery, this child of the '60s remains more comparable to '50s stylists like Rosemary Clooney or Margaret Whiting than to any of the Carpenters' own chart rivals. "Voice of the Heart" reinforces that parallel in its emphasis on ballads and midtempo works.

In retrospect, Richard's instincts as writer and arranger seem to yield the often baffling mixture of pure corn and sophisticated pop nuance. As on earlier works, here he often falls back on tear-jerking orchestral swells or too-cute sprinkles of celeste-like electric piano, then rescues the track through a more distinctive device, such as the use of subdued steel guitars as an off-beat replacement for horns and reeds.

Such disparities have always been mitigated by his sister's delivery, which, however bathetic the songs, has consistently been sincere. That directness taps a darker, more adult quality in moments here; a sadder-but-wiser undercurrent once inconceivable for this fresh-faced pop ingenue ripples through two of the set's best songs, *Make Believe It's Your First Time* and *Two Lives*. The latter gets a much more straightforward reading than Bonnie Raitt's cover of the late '70s.

"Voice of the Heart" probably won't win the Carpenters any new fans, but neither is it a half-hearted pastiche of shelf tracks or an unfinished work delivered to cash in on the vocalist's tragic, premature death last year. Some may wish for more uptempo material, or one of the duo's frequent cover versions of past hits, but it's unlikely anyone will dismiss these songs as below the duo's pristine pop standards.

SAM SUTHERLAND