

## **HuffPost Exclusive: The 40th Anniversary of Carpenters / Interview with Richard Carpenter**

Mike Ragogna May 11, 2009

On April 23rd, 2009, literally 24 hours after its release, Carpenters (no "the") had their highest charting record of their careers in Japan. In that territory, *40/40 The Best Selection* was released the day before to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Carpenter's signing with Herb Alpert's and Jerry Moss' independent label, A&M Records. The string of this brother and sister act's now classic hits--including "(They Long To Be) Close To You," "We've Only Just Begun," "For All We Know," "Rainy Days And Mondays," "Superstar," "Hurting Each Other," "It's Going To Take Some Time," "Goodbye To Love," "Sing," "Yesterday Once More," "Top Of The World," "I Won't Last A Day Without You," "Only Yesterday," and "Solitaire"--set a new standard of elegance and sophistication for a new "Adult Contemporary" sound (also branded by the oxymoron "soft rock"), and it was integral for A&M's early seventies financial success and eventual conquering of the pop and rock markets. Albums such as *Close To You*, *Carpenters*, *A Song For You*, *Now And Then*, and *The Singles 1969-1973* were as essential to record collections as LPs by The Beatles, Jefferson Airplane, Carole King, and Simon & Garfunkel. The duo's music effortlessly bridged the gap between generations by offering progressive vocal and orchestral arrangements, undeniably good songs (from composers such as Leon Russell, Paul Williams, Burt Bacharach, and Tim Hardin), and enough unique production elements to engage listeners of all ages.

Creating these charts was music aficionado, Richard Carpenter, whose talents behind the piano and at the conductor's stand and producer's seat steered the pair's "sound" aesthetically. And, of course, there were Karen Carpenter's beautiful vocals, as intimate as a microphone could handle. Before and after her passing in 1983, she has been praised endlessly for her natural gifts (both singing and drumming), and acknowledged for her influence and inspiration by scores of contemporaries and later-generation aspirants. Among many others, Madonna and k.d. lang are especially big fans. In 1994, the tribute album *If I Were A Carpenter* featured acts such as Sonic Youth, Sheryl Crow, Shonen Knife, The Cranberries, Matthew Sweet, Cracker, Red Kross, and Dishwalla, and this roster's creative contributions proved the case that Carpenters' influence spread well beyond merely Pop and AC charts--or even their own era--making them one of the most influential acts in music.

**Mike Ragogna:** Do you remember exactly what happened on April 22nd, 1969?

**Richard Carpenter:** A fellow who had been representing us as a manager in his off hours, Eddie Sulzer, worked his tail off pushing our demos. Through him, and quite a convoluted trail, the tape went from one person to another to another...then, finally, to Herb Alpert. After a few months had passed, when we heard it was a "go," we were handed a contract with the instructions, "Please take this to a lawyer," and it was your basic, standard record contract. We

did, and finally had our appointment. We drove over in Eddie's car--his '61 Ford--and met in Jerry's office. They called the graphics department, Jim McCrary came over with his camera, and we took the picture. Then Eddie said something like, "You think we could meet Herb?" So Jerry arranged it, and Herbie came out and said, "Hi. Let's hope we have some hits."

**MR:** Did you literally begin recording your first album, *Offering*, the next week?

**RC:** Yeah, and in hindsight, we never would have done that. But we were so green and so anxious. There were so many things about that first album that I would have changed. But we turned it in, and the album and single "Ticket To Ride" came out in the Fall. It's creative, there's a lot of great vocal work, and one of the best things about it is it's so much a product of its time. It's so very sixties--experimental pop music.

**MR:** So "Ticket To Ride" is the single, and it stalls at a certain point...

**RC:** Over a six-month period, it always had just enough action in the field that it kept being worked. And it "Bubbled!" I remember we saw that in *Billboard* and went nuts. And then it debuted, and it went up, went down, and went back up again, ultimately, reaching #54. "Close To You" was in the can and wasn't going to be released until "Ticket..." finally gave up the ghost. As A&M wasn't enjoying much chart success with singles at the time, #54 wasn't too shabby.

**MR:** What followed *Offering's* release?

**RC:** The album cost quite a bit, even though it was efficiently done--all the time with the vocals and strings and this and that--it cost about \$50,000, which was pretty hefty for a debut act. I know most of the people at A&M really didn't want to know from us because we were so square, and I heard, years later, that Herb was advised, "Cut your losses on this, it's not going to happen." Actually, even when we were raking in the dough, some really didn't want us on that label. So Herb, in so many words, said he thought we deserved a second chance. But there was interest from agents as well, the William Morris people, and CMA. There were people coming to the soundstage where we set-up and rehearsed.

**MR:** So, word was out that you and Karen were an act to check out. Who else discovered you early on?

**RC:** Burt Bacharach heard "Ticket To Ride" because it was being played on KMPC. Burt randomly mentioned that he heard this nifty cover of "Ticket..." and Jerry (Moss) said, "That's our act!" That led to Burt asking us to do a Bacharach medley that I would fashion to open the show for an appearance he was doing for the old Reiss-Davis Clinic at The Century Plaza in February of '70. While I was working on it, Herbie comes along with a lead sheet of this song, "They Long To Be Close To You." I thought I knew at least a few of the lesser known Bacharach/David songs, but I didn't know this. He said, "I have a recording of it that I'll let you have, but not now, I don't want anything influencing your arrangement." It turned out to be on Dionne Warwick's third album. He mentioned two piano quintuplets at the end of the first bridge and said, "I would like you to keep that, but do anything else you want." So, I took it and sat it on the top of my Wurlitzer 140B electric piano and came up with the opening, the modulation, the idea of the trumpets, the tag, and the slow shuffle as opposed to the straight eight on the original.

**MR:** You guys did a lot of work on the soundstage. **RC:** We lived on that soundstage.

**MR:** After "Ticket To Ride" ran its course, "Close To You" was released and is one of the best pop standards ever. At the time, how did you feel about its release?

**RC:** In the hallway outside the studio, I remember saying to Herbie, "This is really coming together, we may have another 'Ticket To Ride,'" and he said, "Let's hope not." [Laughs] But it was done by this time. Now, in those days, some people would just walk right into the studio, especially (A&M's) Studio

C. People heard "Close To You" as it was nearing completion, and they just pushed the door open and came in, saying, "What is this? I've never heard anything like this." We got a lot of that. So, Herbie asked, "How do you think it's going to do?" To me, there was no middle ground with it. I said, "This thing's either going to number one or it's going to be one of the biggest misfires ever!"

Right around the time we finished recording "Close To You," I heard "We've Only Just Begun," and created the arrangement. We were now putting together the album, and I was having serious thoughts about holding up "Close To You" and putting out "We've Only Just Begun." "Close To You" was just so different and understated for Top Forty radio that I worried. That track...we had to revert to a "click" because it was just so deliberate. (Bassist) Joe Osborn and Karen were like metronomes, (drummer) Hal Blaine and I tended to rush a little. But I remember Hal Blaine saying, "That's the one," about "We've Only Just Begun." It turns out both of them were the ones.

**MR:** And now you were recording the second album.

**RC:** Well, as far as doing another album, Herbie said we could just do a couple tracks here, have a listen, a couple tracks there... Well, the first ones were "Love Is Surrender" and "Mr. Guder" in Studio C. We were in a hurry, why, I don't know, we didn't have a tight schedule yet. In the midst of all of that, "Close To You" came out, and it pretty much "happened" overnight. Then we get the call from Jerry (Moss). "Album! Need an album!!" From that moment on, the schedule was never relaxed.

**MR:** What about some of the other tracks on *Close To You*?

**RC:** For years, I liked "Reason To Believe," and we did some version of it previously at Joe Osborn's studio. "Maybe It's You" is something Bettis and I had written in '68...that's one of my favorite ones; "Crescent Noon" is something else we wrote back in '68, and "I Kept On Loving You" was shopped by Roger (Nichols) and Paul (Williams). "Another Song"--very sixties--we came up with that piece of nonsense in '67. It was SO sixties with the wah-wah, the mystical stuff, and the recitative lifted from Handel. Though they differed in approach and sound from *Offering*, there was a little bit from that period of time in "Another Song," "Crescent Noon," and all. "Baby, It's You," I love--the arrangement, Karen's vocals, (Bob) Messenger's sax solo, Osborn's bass playing, "cheatin'"'s perfect fifths--everything about it, even the intentionally hokey major seventh ending.

**MR:** What are some of your favorite Carpenters recordings?

**RC:** I think "Close To You" is one of the best pop records ever made. I like "Superstar" a great deal, but not the way it's produced. Because we'd "hit" by then, we didn't have the time to lavish on each track, the way we did with "Close To You," since we were "famous" by that time. I always liked "For All We Know," "Reason To Believe," and "Crystal Lullaby" a great deal; I love "This Masquerade." And I think "Merry Christmas, Darling" is a terrific record, as well as "Ticket To Ride."

**MR:** When I was a kid, there was this commercial, I don't remember the product, but there was a beautiful song in the background. I remember being shocked to hear it on *Now And Then*, as "Heather"!

**RC:** [Laughs] It was used as underscore, if you will, to a Geritol commercial! Obviously, it was a soft sell because you heard that in the background. So, we tracked it down, it was written by Johnny Pearson, a popular band leader and composer in England, and it was originally called, "Autumn

Reverie." We asked him if we could change the title. He was delighted we were doing it, and John (Bettis) came up with the title "Heather."

**MR:** Any career choices other than recording "There's A Kind Of Hush" that you might have changed?

**RC:** I said if I had it to do over again--of course, we all can say that--there are so many things I'd have done differently. First off, there was all that touring...I needed to spend more time on the music. I always said we were a recording act first and foremost. So you did certain things that you think will be a hit, but wished you'd never done, like "Please Mr. Postman." It's really an extremely well-performed and produced pop record. But we shouldn't have been doing any of those things (oldies) by that time. With side two of *Now And Then*, that should have been it. And beyond that, the very few times that I chose to use a synthesizer, I have regretted it. Every last time.

**MR:** Would Karen have had any do-overs?

**RC:** Karen never cared for "Solitaire"...and I'm not that crazy about it either! What I liked about it, more than anything, is that it shows off her voice so darned well. But, no, she never cared for that song.

**MR:** With that much success in the early days of A&M, your records funded much of the label's later projects that went on to become hugely successful. Were you conscious of that at the time?

**RC:** Yes.

**MR:** Did you feel the pressure of always having to deliver hits?

**RC:** Yeah, but it doesn't matter if you have a hundred hits...you want 101! **MR:** What do you feel was your contribution to music through your records?

**RC:** Along with the gift of Karen's voice, musical and impeccably made examples of American pop.

**MR:** And Karen's vocals, especially on tracks like "Superstar," were unusually intimate for the era.

**RC:** So many people have said to us, "We can understand every word to your songs," which, with all the pop and rock records at the time, was difficult to do. When we were mixing, I remember saying, at least once, "Just a little more lead." The engineer looked at me and said, "More lead?" I made it a point to really feature Karen's voice. She was born to be recorded.

**MR:** Now in 2009, forty years later, Carpenters still are having big international hits. That's huge, I don't think any group, even Abba, can claim that. What's the story on this latest collection for Japan?

**RC:** It debuted at #3 on their domestic chart, it's the highest debut of our career in Japan. *40/40* is a new compilation for their SHM (Super High Material) CD format. It's got forty tracks celebrating forty years with A&M Records. After all these years, the music Karen and I made is doing really well!

**MR:** There are many countries around the world, especially England and Germany, that still go nuts over Carpenters collections. *Carpenters Gold* is a modern classic in many European countries, and the U.S. version sold incredibly well. What in the creative process of this compilation differentiates it from the others?

**RC:** The project's concept was put out to the fans, the Japanese people, and they would vote on their favorite tracks. Obviously, it had to have core titles included.

**MR:** I imagine you had to help decide what made the final cut.

**RC:** Sure, because it had the subtitle, *The Best Selection*. Of course, if I had it to do over again, I'm like most artists who wouldn't have done over 50% of what they did. I really believe that. So, there are certain recordings like "There's A Kind Of Hush" that are very well made, but pop fluff. Love the song, but we never should have made it.

**MR:** Beyond the quality of the music and the love your fans still feel towards you and Karen being at the heart of its success, how did Universal Japan market the package?

**RC:** As far as promotion, they absolutely wanted me over there by April 22nd, the date we signed with A&M. So I flew over and did some really big TV specials. Some of the biggest ones hadn't even aired by the time the album came out. I visited record stores and met the fans. It was really marvelous, and the next day, it was #3.

**MR:** With the music industry in the shape it's in, I imagine Universal Japan wants to strike while the iron is hot. What are they putting out next?

**RC:** On May 27th, they're going to release a box set with the core catalog, the studio albums, all on SHM CD with a much more deluxe approach. This thing's as big as a breadbox, and each album has its own hard cover book.

**MR:** I imagine each book is fleshed-out with lots of photos. What was the discovery process like?

**RC:** Between going through not only my photos, but those from the A&M archives, exhaustive. I did find a few I hadn't seen before, and had copies made; dated for posterity or...just in case...the 50th!