

October 1991

CARPENTERS

The lyrics are indelibly lodged in our memories: "talkin' to myself and feelin' old"... "don't you remember you told me you loved me baby" ... "white lace and promises, a kiss for luck and we're on our way."

Two decades have passed since the **CARPENTERS** ruled the airwaves with "*Rainy Days & Mondays*," "*Superstar*," and "*We've Only Just Begun*." In that time, hundreds of acts and dozens of musical styles have come and gone, but the Carpenters' music continues to touch audiences all over the world. **ONLY YESTERDAY**, a 1990 greatest hits collection, spent seven weeks at No. 1 in the U.K. and also reached the Top 15 in Australia and throughout Europe.

And those albums were just the warm-up for **FROM THE TOP**, a definitive, four-CD boxed set that is being released by A&M Records in October. The collection is a tribute to the timelessness of the Carpenters' music and a lasting memorial to the depth of Karen and Richard Carpenter's talent. The material runs the gamut from Bach's stately "*Ave Maria*" to a pair of sprightly jingles for a Japanese soft drink, Suntory Pop; the settings range from a lovely reading of the Beatles' lullabye, "*Goodnight*," to the lavishly produced 1977 space fantasy, "*Calling Occupants Of Interplanetary Craft*."

FROM THE TOP features all 12 of the Carpenters' Top 10 hits. But Richard Carpenter, who personally assembled the set, omitted numerous other singles to make way for 14 previously unreleased tracks and six alternate takes. Among the songs being heard here for the first time: an instrumental version of Duke Ellington's "*Caravan*," recorded in the Carpenter family's Downey living room in the summer of '65; both sides of Karen Carpenter's first single, released on the tiny Magic Lamp label when she was just 16; and two songs from Karen's unreleased 1979 solo album, including a bluesy, image-defying version of Paul Simon's "*Still Crazy After All These Years*."

The collection is especially comprehensive in the early years. The album includes 14 selections recorded prior to the Carpenters' breakthrough in 1970, which allows the listener to hear the evolution of the group's sound. The box includes "*Iced Tea*," a jazz instrumental which brought the "Richard Carpenter Trio" top honors at the Hollywood Bowl Battle of the Bands in 1966; songs by Summerchimes and Spectrum, early groups featuring Karen and Richard; and demo recordings that made their way to Herb Alpert, who along with Jerry Moss signed the Carpenters to A&M Records in April 1969.

A sprinkling of oddities and obscurities gives the retrospective a sense of personality. Among them: "*Canta*," a Spanish/English version of the Carpenters' 1973 smash, "*Sing*," an obviously scripted (and humorously dated) 1970 radio interview; and "*Good Friends Are For Keeps*," a 1975 radio jingle for AT&T which distills the essence of the Carpenters' sound into 60 seconds.

Though it's been nearly 10 years since Karen and Richard Carpenter made their last recording ("*Now*," which concludes the set) and nearly nine years since Karen's tragic death, the Carpenters' music continues to affect listeners worldwide. A new generation of fans discovered the Carpenters through the TV movie "The Karen Carpenter Story," which was No. 1 in the ratings the week it aired

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in 1988. Clearly, the Carpenters' music has stood the toughest test of all, the test of time. Artists as diverse as Axl Rose, Michael Jackson and Sonic Youth have said that they are fans of the Carpenters. And such top singers as Luther Vandross, Gloria Estefan, Chrissy Hynde and Madonna have praised Karen's singing.

Critics, too, have upgraded their appraisals of the Carpenters. In a 1987 essay, Stephen Holden observed: "Carpenters hits like '(They Long To Be) Close To You,' 'Rainy Days and Mondays,' 'Superstar,' and others stand as tiny gems of romantic middle-of-the-road pop. Many years before Linda Ronstadt and Nelson Riddle's explorations of '50s white-gloved pop elegance, Karen Carpenter recorded the '40s standard, 'I Can Dream, Can't I,' with a gossamer Billy May arrangement. I still find it to be a definitive example of the retro-pop romanticism that became fashionable a decade later."

In a Rolling Stone cover story on the Carpenters in 1974, writer Tom Nolan observed that "Karen sings like a dream, a wish fulfilled, a sorrow resolved in the telling." Taking in a Carpenters concert, he reported: "Out comes that voice, exactly as on record, expressing fascinating contrasts: chilling perfection with warmth; youth with wisdom."

As **FROM THE TOP** illustrates, Karen was as effective on contemporary, rock-edged material by Leon Russell and Phil Spector as on Tin Pan Alley evergreens by Cole Porter and Rodgers & Hart. Her range is dramatized when her exquisite reading of the classic torch song "Little Girl Blue" is followed minutes later by her lighthearted disco foray, "My Body Keeps Changing My Mind."

The album reveals Karen's spiritual links to other great singers of American popular music. Karen's bluesy version of Paul Williams' "Ordinary Fool" is the female equivalent of Frank Sinatra's classic saloon songs like "One For My Baby." Karen sings "Ave Maria" with the precision and technical brilliance of Barbra Streisand, and recalls Bing Crosby's listener-friendly manner on "White Christmas." On song after song, Karen's warm, pure tones and conversational style are reminiscent of the late, great Nat "King" Cole; like him, she is unforgettable, too.

The album is also a demonstration of Richard Carpenter's estimable production and arrangement skills. Richard received five Grammy nominations for his arrangements, including those for "Close To You," "Superstar," "Sing," and "Calling Occupants Of Interplanetary Craft." In some cases, his arrangements virtually redefined the songs, as on his ballad treatments of "Ticket To Ride" and "Santa Claus Is Coming To Town."

Richard also composed many of the Carpenters' songs, including "Merry Christmas Darling," which, since its introduction in 1970, has become a holiday standard. Richard teamed with college friend John Bettis to write four of the Carpenters' Top 10 hits: "Goodbye To Love," "Yesterday Once More," "Top Of The World," and "Only Yesterday."

Given their combined talents, it's not surprising that Karen and Richard found a responsive audience for their music. What is striking, even in retrospect, is how massive and instantaneous their impact was. "Close To You" shot to No. 1 in just six weeks, becoming the first of six consecutive million-sellers for the duo.

The Carpenters' impact was reflected in the voting for the 13th annual Grammy Awards in 1971. Karen and Richard won Grammys for Best New Artist (beating Elton John and Anne Murray, among others) and Best Pop Vocal Performance By a Duo or Group (beating the Beatles, Simon & Garfunkel, the Jackson Five and Chicago). They won the latter award the following year as well. The duo's songs were also recognized by the motion picture Academy. "For All We Know" won the 1970 Academy Award for best original song; "Bless The Beasts And Children" was nominated for the Oscar the following year.

The Carpenters had millions of fans; after all, they collected eight gold albums and 10 gold singles in the U.S. alone, as well as selling over 90 million units worldwide to date. But they also had their detractors, and they took a lot of flak for being out of step with the times. Writer Tom Nolan

commented on that phenomenon in a 1975 article. "So here are these neatly-dressed kids, a polite-seeming brother-and-sister team, materializing like a weird hallucination in the midst of acid-rock and offering their alternative to "In-A-Gadda-Da Vida," singing, of all things, a bank commercial. The grumbling began, and grew louder in proportion to their success. You'd think they were an arm of the government, the way some people reacted! What was it they thought the Carpenters represented? Domesticity, perhaps? The nuclear family? Saturdays spent shopping for sofas at Sears? Capitalism itself?" Precisely. It was the Carpenters' image, rather than their music, that most critics and naysayers were reacting against.

Fortunately, images fade; the music endures. And the music, when all is said and done, is the reason that fans are still playing these songs and will still be playing them two decades from now.