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JEFF BENDER

YESTERDAY ONCE MORE: Sonic Youth, left, Cracker and the Cranberries pay tribute to the music of the late Karen Carpenter, below, and her brother Richard.

Trust Us, This Is Real

Fourteen alternative-rock groups have recorded versions of their favorite Carpenters songs. Is this a joke? Not to them. The dark side of the Carpenters' American Dream isn't joke material.

By Paul Grein

The Carpenters were called a lot of things in the '70s, but *hip* was never one of them. The brother and sister from Downey were known almost as much for their squeaky-clean image as for their poignant ballads.

But a lot of certifiably hip acts have been singing Karen and Richard's praises lately.

And now 14 alternative rock acts—from Sonic Youth to the Cranberries—have recorded an album in which they perform Carpenters hits in their own styles. "If I Were a Carpenter," which is set for release Tuesday on A&M Records, was conceived as a heartfelt yet irreverent tribute.

Alternative acts liking the Carpenters? The same Carpenters that the Rolling Stone Record Guide long dismissed as "bubbly and bland"?

That incongruity is what intrigued Matt Wallace, who has produced records by such acclaimed alternative acts as Faith No More, the Replacements and Paul Westerberg.

"That was the interesting rub about this project, taking very commercial, pop, melodic songs and marrying them with bands that don't tend to do very melodic songs," said Wallace, who served as executive producer on the album with music journalist David Konjoyan.

Konjoyan notes that, despite the obvious musical differences, the Carpenters have a lot in common with these alternative acts.

"In their own time, the Carpenters were probably as alternative as any alternative band is today," he said.

"They were certainly taking their own path. I think anybody who bucks trends, anybody who does their own thing



CLAUDE MOUGIN

despite what's going on around them, earns respect for that."

Larry Hamby—vice president of artists and repertoire at A&M Records, which released all the Carpenters' records—agrees.

"I think Karen was sort of emblematic of an alternative type of soul," he said. "It's there in her story, her presence, her voice. There was always this sad, melancholy quality to her voice—even in the happiest, most up-tempo songs that she

sang. And I think a lot of these alternative artists have picked up on that."

□

Do these acts really like the Carpenters—or is this some kind of sendup?

That's the first question people invariably ask when they hear about this album—which also includes performances by Babes in Toyland, Shonen Knife, Cracker, Sheryl Crow and Johnette Napolitano with Marc Mabreland.

Richard Carpenter and executives at A&M acknowledge that they were concerned the album might be "tongue in cheek" when Konjoyan and Wallace first presented the idea a year ago.

They needn't have worried. The artists' affection for the Carpenters seems genuine. There may be some nostalgia at play here, but the attraction isn't camp.

The second question people usually ask is more complex: How much of this fascination is due to the tragedy surrounding Karen Carpenter? The singer was just 32 when she died in 1983 after an eight-year battle with anorexia nervosa.

Even Konjoyan says, "I don't think we can extract the Carpenters' lives from their music and have it really mean the same to all these bands. I mean, there is a very tragic story behind their career, and I think that's added a lot of depth to what they're about."

Alternative acts seem to be especially intrigued by the disparity between the Carpenters' sugarcoated image and the darker reality of their lives. Some even see the Carpenters' story as a metaphor for the dark side of the American Dream—the underside of success, beauty and family ties.

"They're so American—they have the light and the dark," said Kim Gordon, bassist and singer for Sonic Youth, a leading underground band that performs "Superstar" on the album.

"I just find the whole family aspect fascinating," she added. "It's like the Beach Boys family. They're supposed to be the ideal American families—the success dream, and all that."

But underneath were problems and conflicts, as in any family—only magnified by the pressures of stardom.

Sonic Youth co-leader Thurston Moore added that those undertones of darkness color across in the Carpenters' music.

Photo by Page 91

ALBUM REVIEW

★★½
VARIOUS ARTISTS
 "If I Were a Carpenter"
 A&M

Earnest, guileless affection for these songs provides a thread through performances of Carpenters hits by artists as disparate as Sonic Youth, Cracker, 4 Non Blondes and Sheryl Crow.

Sonic Youth's postmodern pop-culture irony is perfect for "Superstar." Redd Kroos' unironic love for '70s kitsch fills "Yesterday Once More" with heart, and the Cranberries' Dolores O'Riordan's Irish pronunciations renew the love-struck innocence of "Close to You."

And nearly all the tracks revel in the Carpenters' undeniable song-craft—save for Babes in Toyland's flat "Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft," an obscure, Kisuu-originated number that was just a Carpenters novelty to begin with.

Yet this all comes up just

short of the concept's promise in that there aren't really any revelations about the songs or performers. Only in Grant Lee Buffalo's closing "We've Only Just Begun"—with sweet Beach Boys-ish vocals—does an act push beyond its own expected approach.

Still, there may be enough feeling here to turn a new generation on to a body of work that has survived some of the strongest ridicule ever in the pop world. —Steve Hochman

New albums are rated on a scale of one star (poor), two stars (fair), three stars (good) and four stars (excellent).

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Carpenters

Continued from Page 5
 music—and are part of what makes it so alluring.

"There's a certain sort of dark mystery to the music that we always found so potent," he said.

John Bettis, who teamed with Richard Carpenter to write such hits as "Goodbye to Love" and "Yesterday Once More," said that what Moore and others hear in the music was real.

"The dark side, the melancholia, was as real as they feel it was. They're responding to the emotional truth, not the image, which is what I always wanted."

When Karen Carpenter died on Feb. 4, 1983, many pop fans hadn't given the Carpenters much thought in years. The duo's last album, in 1981, and last TV special, in 1980, had both bombed.

Karen's death drew heavy coverage, in part because it was so unexpected and she was so young. But an album of previously unreleased material released later that year met with only modest success.

When producer Dick Clark included a brief tribute to Karen on his American Music Awards program in January, 1984, it was like remembering someone from another era.

And with Karen dead and unable to add to her legacy, it seemed that there was little chance of a popular revival or critical reappraisal. It appeared that the Carpenters were destined to be permanently undervalued as simply an engaging middle-of-the-road pop group like, say, the Fifth Dimension or Bread.

That was frustrating for Carpenters fans who thought all along that Karen Carpenter deserves to be considered among the best female vocalists of the modern pop era, who have who could (and, for

few years, did) give Barbra Streisand a run for her money.

Chrissie Hynde, the lead singer of the Pretenders—and a longtime favorite of critics—may have been the first major rock artist to challenge the critical consensus that the Carpenters were a pleasant but insubstantial act.

In March, 1984, in the midst of a Pretenders show at the Universal Amphitheatre, Hynde dedicated a number to Karen, saying she had "one of the greatest voices of all time."

Over the years, numerous other artists—as varied as Michael Jackson, Axl Rose, Luther Vandross and k.d. lang—have spoken fondly of the Carpenters.

An important step in the reappraisal of the Carpenters came in 1987, when Todd Haynes, an avant-garde New York filmmaker, made the dark and unsettling "Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story." The critically lauded film showed sympathy for Karen as a person and respect for her as an artist.

And the film didn't just preach to the converted: It played on the underground art-house circuit, where it made fans of the very sort of people who had previously scoffed at the Carpenters.

Even Rolling Stone came around eventually. In 1990, the magazine ran a positive review of "Lovelines," a collection of previously unreleased Carpenters and solo recordings.

"Voices like Karen's never really go out of style," wrote critic Rob Hoerber. "Lovelines" reveals just a few of the avenues that would have been open to her. But sadly . . . she died before she could shed the goody-two-shoes image that shrouded her immense talent."

A rave in Rolling Stone? The irony was not lost on one reader who wrote in: "I found the review

Carpenters

Continued from Page 91
 for the latest and last Carpenters album to be bittersweet. To have the publication that made it a stigma to enjoy their music finally extol its virtues proves that we cannot appreciate what we have until it is lost forever."

The editors ran the letter under an illustration of a three-star rating taped to Karen's forehead.

Many of the acts on "If I Were a Carpenter" have been Carpenters fans since they were kids.

• Christa Hillhouse, the bassist of 4 Non Blondes, still has the ticket stub from a 1972 Carpenters concert that she attended when she was 11.

• The members of the acclaimed Dutch band Bette Serveert once rented a car to drive to the Carpenters' family's first home in New Haven, Conn.

• Thurston Moore, the Sonic Youth guitarist, has hours of Carpenters TV appearances on video—what he calls "a gold mine of Carpenters glory."

Like most of the artists on the album, Kim Gordon points first to Karen's voice when asked why she is drawn to the Carpenters.

"There was this girl-next-door image with this incredibly soulful, and at times sexy, voice," Gordon said. "Even though Karen didn't write the songs, she really made them her own—in much the same way that a singer like Billie Holiday did. With both of them, the words came right from the heart."

Gordon said that she became a fan just five years ago. Before, she was put off by the Carpenters' Establishment image. "It was music your parents would like you to listen to," she said.

But when Moore brought in a Carpenters tape, she ignored the image and simply focused on the music.

In 1990, Gordon went public with her affection for the Carpenters. She co-wrote and sang lead on "Tunic (Song for Karen)," a dark-edged but sympathetic song that was featured on the band's album "Goo." The song depicts Karen, happy at last, speaking to her family from heaven.

Initially, some Sonic Youth fans took it as a joke.

"I'm sure a lot of people just thought, 'Oh, they're into it for the kitsch factor,' but it was a sincere song," Gordon said.

"I really think the Carpenters have transcended kitsch because the music is so good."

In the years since Karen died, Richard Carpenter, 47, has spent much of his time comparing compilations of Carpenters songs for release around the world. The composer-pianist, who was married in 1984 and has four children, also served as a consultant on a top-rated TV movie about the Carpenters in 1989 and cooperated on an authorized biography about the duo that was published earlier this year. On Oct. 1, he will present



A&M Records

HEARTFELT: The tribute album was "done from the heart," says Richard Carpenter, with Karen.

Richard and Karen Carpenter Performing Arts Center at their alma mater, Cal State Long Beach.

And what does the man who produced and arranged the Carpenters' long string of hits think of "If I Were a Carpenter"?

"I'm impressed with the whole project," he said. "I find the fact that they wanted to put this project together touching and a real testament to the Carpenters and Karen in particular."

Carpenter, who played piano and sang background on Matthew Sweet's version of "Let Me Be the One" for the new album, said his initial concerns that the collection might be tongue in cheek were quickly dispelled.

"I can hear that . . . it was all done from the heart," he said.

Bettis, Richard's longtime lyricist, especially likes the fact that the album isn't "precious" about the Carpenters.

"I had the feeling for a while after Karen passed away that there was almost a handle-with-care attitude about it," he said. "I'm kind of glad—and I think Karen would be glad—that the kid gloves are off."

Herb Alpert, who signed the Carpenters to his A&M Records in 1969, thinks the resurgence of interest in the duo is linked to the death of classic pop songwriting in recent years—years in which the music scene has been dominated by rap, hard-rock and dance music.

"Good melodies have become a unique commodity in the last several years," Alpert said. "The Carpenters' songs are speaking to a lyrically starved community of artists."

Beyond that, Alpert downplays all of this analysis.

"I don't think one needs to probe deeply for the answers," he said. "People respond when they are moved." □

Paul Grein is a Los Angeles freelance writer who specializes in pop music. He last mentioned the Carpenters for Calendar in 1981.