

# "Goodbye to Love:" Remembering Karen Carpenter

by David Deaton

Seven years have passed since the sweet, sad voice of Karen Carpenter was stilled.

She died, aged 33, of a heart attack brought on by *anorexia nervosa*, that slow, wasting disease of female adolescence.

What remains of her life is the legacy of her songs, which she sang and recorded with her brother, Richard.

To the extent that they're remembered, however, the Carpenters have been dismissed as a musical joke. From the start, rock critics trashed them alongside the Osmond Brothers, the Partridge Family, and all such merchants of mush. The more successful such "acts" became, the more they were reviled.

Few groups endured such scorn as the Carpenters. Back in the early '70s, everything they sang tuned to gold. When the Carpenters scored their first chart-topper, "Close To You", Karen was not yet twenty.

What, apart from the nostalgia they instantly induce, makes these songs so memorable? Why have they aged so well?

In a word, *harmony*. As perhaps only a brother-sister duo could achieve, their voices flow wondrously into one, a diapason of delight. Through the use of over-dubbing, Karen and Richard Carpenter became a choir of two.

It's little known that the Carpenters were pioneers of the process. If they didn't invent over-dubbing, they surely popularized it, making groups such as Queen possible. (For this only may they be cursed!)

It took them years to perfect their trademark style. Imagine a teenage boy and his kid sister, fiddling around for hours in their basement "studio", trying to blend their voices on tape.

"Please, Richard. I'm tired now. And I've got so much *homework* to do! There's a geography quiz tomorrow!"

"One more time, Karen. I think I've got it."

The result was sheer artistry, not artifice.

Consider their first greatest-hits album, *The Singles 1969-73*, a seamless rendering of their best-loved work. (Do not confuse it with any other K-Tel repackaging. *Singles* has a plain brown cover. Accept no substitute!)

How many greatest hits collections begin with an overture in miniature? Richard Carpenter studied classical piano at Yale, and it shows. These first 30 seconds are sublimity itself, wafting you into the unspeakably lovely, serenely confident apos-

trophe, "We've Only Just Begun".

You can hear Karen Carpenter part her lips to sing:

We've only just begun to live.

White lace and promises,

A kiss for luck and we're on

our way . . .

This song is for, and about, newlyweds. Remember *them*? Ardor blends with innocence in this paean to conjugal love. How much expectant joy is knowingly conveyed in the line:

And when the evening comes, we smile.

So much of life ahead.

"For All We Know", on the second side, covers the same territory no less memorably. It opens with an oboe melody so rhapsodically beautiful it surely must have been swiped from a Bach cantata. Wherever it came from, behold: *classical music*.

## The result was artistry not artifice

Once again, a bride addresses her husband:

Love, look at the two of us.

Strangers in many ways.

Let's take a lifetime to say,

"I knew you well."

For only time will tell us so.

And love may grow

For all we know.

The choral chorus consists of one word — "La" — stretched out so exquisitely as to sound like the blessing of angels.

Sometimes the Carpenters tried to temper their ethereality with something approaching homeliness. It didn't work. When their guitars twang, as they do on the country-junk "Top Of The World" (Ma?), it's hard not to cringe.

But for all its blatant hokiness, something profound is being described:

*Su a feeling's comin' over me,*

My goodness, what is this song about but the onset of puberty?

*There is wonder in most everything I see.*

Wonder, indeed, for sexuality to be awakened by romantic love!

Naturally, this being a happy song, the wish is father (sister, rather) to the fulfillment:

Everything I want the world to be

Is now coming true especially for me.

And the reason is clear, It's because you are here; You're the nearest thing to heaven That I've seen.

Oh, but there was a dark side to the Carpenters, the B-side of romantic love, if you will. Love becomes loss, hope turns to hurt, and for the two nuptial numbers on this album, there are twice as many anthems to the love-lorn.

Side one ends with the tragic trilogy of "Superstar", "Rainy Days and Mondays", and "Goodbye to Love". Each song leads inexorably into another; there is no escape. Collectively, they stand as the ten most haunting minutes in rock history.

"Superstar" is a groupie's lament for her one-time rock star lover. Here the tone is unabashedly sexual, arch with betrayal. Its chorus is the half-taunt, half-plea: "Don't you remember you told me you loved me, baby?" There'll be no wedding today.

"Superstar" trails into the beguilingly homey harmonica of "Rainy Days and Mondays". With three short sentences, the lyrics belie the lyricism:

Talking to myself and feeling old.

Sometimes I'd like to quit.

Nothing ever seems to fit.

This time, however, the singer has someone to run to, "the one who loves me". Everything's OK. But why, then, does the song end on the note of being down? What about her sweetie?

"Goodbye to Love" has no such outlet. It begins with the funeral chords of a piano and ends with a guitar solo that approximates a chainsaw. In between are words that read from a suicide note:

I'll say goodbye to love.

No one ever cared if I should live or die.

Time and time again the chance for love has passed me by.

And all I know of love is how to live without it;

I just can't seem to find it.

There is nothing of self-pity in the voice, only stoic resignation.

## The lyrics read like a suicide note

You have to look for the bitterness:



Karen Carpenter, circa 1972. Proof that you can be too rich and too thin.

All the years of *useless* search Have finally reached an end.

The pathos reaches its height when the singer tries to be bravely cheerful:

Surely time will lose these bitter memories

And I'll find that there is someone to believe in and to live for;

Something I could live for.

Karen Carpenter lived the songs she sang. Perhaps her sincerity accounts for the peerless purity of her voice. Her premature demise, however, has glazed her songs in morbid, poignant irony: "So much of life ahead"; "Let's take a lifetime to share . . ."

Or, more cruelly: "There are no tomorrows for this heart of mine."

What on earth happened? The Carpenters suffered a long decline, artistically, then commercially. The flashes of brilliance on their next greatest hits album were largely from rhinestones.

After that, tinsel. Their songs grew more and more anemic — and finally, cynical. Instead of vanilla frosting, saccharine and strychnine.

As they struggled into adulthood, Karen and Richard Carpenter found it impossible to sing with the same hope and conviction.

How long could they evoke nuptial bliss? After all, they were brother and sister, not husband and wife!

Karen, apparently, took that disappointment the hardest. Whatever her hopes were, at least, they seem to have gone unfulfilled. Her own marriage collapsed within a year. In time, she grew prone to exhaustion, then *anorexia*, then dying.

*Anorexia*, it has been said, represents an unacknowledged death wish. Whether or not that was true of Karen Carpenter, evidently more than rainy days and Mondays got her down. As if prophetically intentioned, the drift of Side One — from rapturous hope to suicidal despair — mirrors her own life. White lace and promises ended for her in white lies and thrombosis.

Alas, poor Karen. Just whom was she singing to all these years? Who was the "you" she addressed in her songs? Did, in the end, "the one who loves me" and "something I could live for" become equally hopeless abstractions?

If art constitutes the secret notation of the heart, one could do worse than listen to the music of the Carpenters. The joys and woes of youth, sweet youth, have rarely received better airing.

Or more earnest. "Sometimes I'd like to quit," sang winsome Karen Carpenter. Quit she did, and we'll miss her.