

A Legacy Lost

Elm City's forgotten music superstars: Karen and Richard Carpenter

BY JOEL SAMBERG

While her brother stayed inside practicing the piano and analyzing musical arrangements, Karen Carpenter much preferred to be outside playing a scrappy game of softball in front of her house on Hall Street, just around the block from the Nathan Hale School.

Was it a foregone conclusion back in those early New Haven days that Richard and Karen would end up leading the most successful pop group of the 1970s?

Not by a long shot.

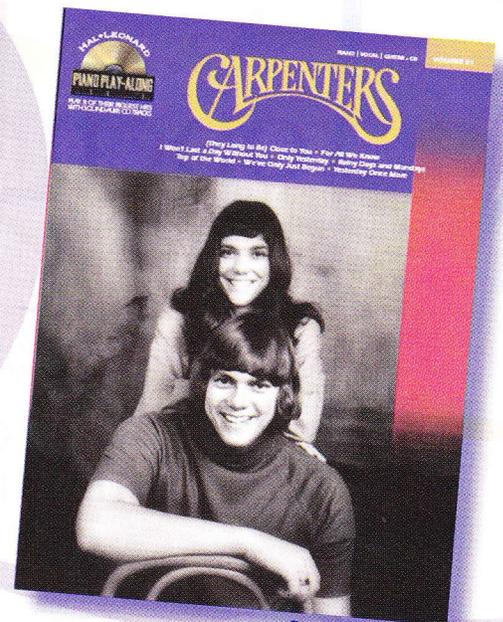
Despite her penchant for sports, Karen idolized Richard, who was three and a

half years older, and eventually listened to many of the records he played over and over in the house. But according to Randy Schmidt, who wrote a 2010 biography called *Little Girl Blue: The Life of Karen Carpenter*, her childhood dreams were to become an artist or a nurse—not a pop star.

Was it a foregone conclusion that Karen's voice would soon be regarded as one of the most beautiful and distinctive in the history of recorded music?

Not a chance.

But when you mix immense talent with incredibly hard work, throw in some good



timing and a little luck, there *can* be an inevitable conclusion. In the case of Richard and Karen Carpenter it was a group that would sell more than 100 million records, win several Grammy Awards, tour the world, perform on many highly rated television programs, and make two twenty-something kids from

New Haven fabulously rich.

Paul McCartney once said of Karen Carpenter that she has “the best female voice in the world — melodic, tuneful and distinctive,” and Madonna called it “the clearest, purest voice” she ever heard. What’s more, just about every baby boomer can hum “Close to You,” “We’ve Only Just Begun,” “Rainy Days and Mondays,” “Superstar,” “Only Yesterday” and a half-dozen other hit singles by the Carpenters.

But the city that in its own small way played a part in this remarkable musical trajectory has few if any tributes or retrospectives to Richard, who lives in California and generally shuns the public spotlight, and Karen, who died 30 years ago at the age of 32. There was a musical homage in New Haven in the not-too-distant past, but that’s about it. If there *were* any additional ideas, plans or proposals, they were apparently misplaced, forgotten or deemed an unnecessary expense.

“I grew up on the East Shore, a few blocks from the Carpenters. Karen and Richard were several years older than me, so while I knew of them, I did not know them personally,” says New Haven Mayor

John DeStefano Jr. “That being said, it is hard not to know of them now and their contributions to American popular music.” But when asked why Carpenter heritage seems to be lacking in town, the mayor, through his public-information office, had no comment.

Richard and Karen’s parents, Harold and Agnes Carpenter, moved the family to Southern California in 1963 so that Richard, who had just turned 17, could have a better shot at a professional music career. He formed several bands, including a jazz combo called the Richard Carpenter Trio, in which Karen played drums. Richard then formed another band called Spectrum, which played in clubs all around Los Angeles and came to the attention of several record executives. What many people don’t know is that it was Karen who was first signed to a recording contract, as a solo artist. The label also signed Richard as a songwriter for its publishing division, but there are many indications that his signing was merely a way to keep him and his mother happy. After all, without Richard, Karen may not have had the impetus to sing professionally in the first place. As far as their mother was concerned, she was far more interested in her son’s career than

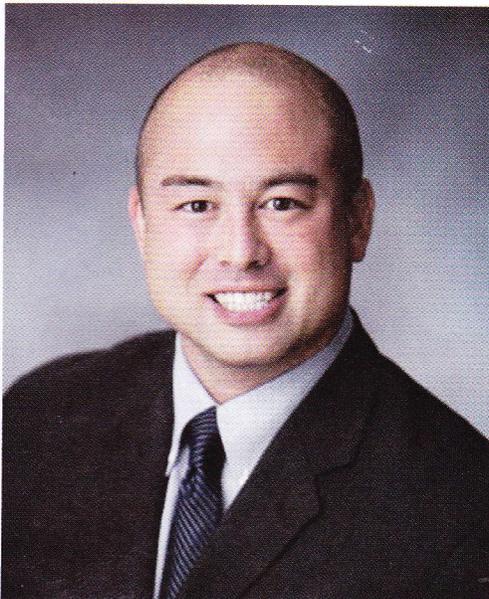
her daughter’s.

Legendary trumpeter Herb Alpert, who co-founded the record company called A&M, heard a Carpenter demo tape in 1969 and had Richard and Karen signed to the label. He instantly recognized Richard’s prodigious talents as an arranger and was mesmerized by Karen’s pristine and emotive contralto singing voice (which actually spanned more than three octaves). “It’s like she’s sitting in your lap and singing just for you,” he once said.

“They left New Haven with talent, but not with fame,” says Lucia Paoella, the current principal at Nathan Hale School, where Richard and Karen had been students. That, she speculates, may be why there isn’t much Carpenter heritage in town.

According to Jay Stevens, manager of Foundry Music in New Haven, even though their popularity and record sales were astronomical in the 1970s, the Carpenters hardly ever come up in conversation among customers or staff at the print music shop on Audubon Street. Stevens isn’t aware of any acknowledgements in town, either, and says, “I wouldn’t really expect there to be, any more than for Artie Shaw, who

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also grew up in New Haven. The music is what matters."

That's certainly another plausible scenario. A third is that despite their enormous success, for every loyal Carpenters fan there are perhaps two or three other people who considered them out of place, out of touch and musically bland. While it's true that their multi-tracked harmonies were superbly rendered, their songs imminently hum-able, their orchestrations full of surprises, and Karen's velvety voice very plaintive (*Rolling Stone* called it "chocolate cream"), their image as a squeaky clean, joined-at-the-hip duo probably worked against a broader appeal. Also, they were lackluster performers: Onstage and onscreen Richard and Karen were not nearly as polished and enjoyable as they were on LPs and 45s.



Still, their musical catalogue is unpredictably rich. The Carpenters recorded more than 200 songs, well

beyond the million-selling hits, including sultry ballads like "This Masquerade," curious oddities like "Calling Occupants of Interplanetary Craft," Great American Songbook standards like "When I Fall in Love," bouncy up-tempo like "Jambalaya (On the Bayou)," even a few Lennon-McCartney covers and other surprises.

Perhaps if Karen had lived, and if the Carpenters had been able to make music well into the 1990s and 2000s, there would have been a bit more of a desire for New Haven to have played up the connection. But Karen's personal problems turned the volume down for good after less than a dozen years on the road and in the studio.

Karen was known to many as a funny, silly and giddy young woman, and a very loyal and loving friend, but she also had issues of self-esteem and self-image that plagued her throughout her brief adult life. One major milestone on her downward spiral concerned a solo album she recorded in 1979. Richard wasn't involved. He had taken a year off from making music to deal with a Quaalude addiction. Karen very much wanted to do some exploration

as a singer and to carve out an identity of her own. Her producer on the project was the legendary Phil Ramone. But her brother and the executives at A&M didn't like the results, and the *Karen Carpenter* album was abandoned. This was a huge disappointment for Karen. (Richard finally agreed to release it in 1996, 13 years after his sister's death.)

A few months after that she met a handsome real estate developer by the name of Tom Burris, and they were engaged to be married. But as Karen was soon to find out, in many ways Burris wasn't quite what he claimed to be. Also, he neglected to tell Karen — who more than anything wanted to have children — about the vasectomy he had had years earlier. Karen cried to her mother that she didn't want to go through with the wedding, but Agnes Carpenter said to her, "You made your bed, Karen. Now you'll have to lie in it."

Karen obeyed. There was a wedding. But the marriage, like the solo album project, was a big disappointment.

"I think it's safe to say that if Richard

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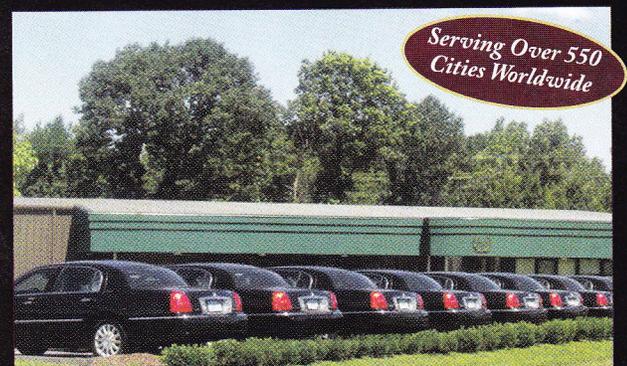


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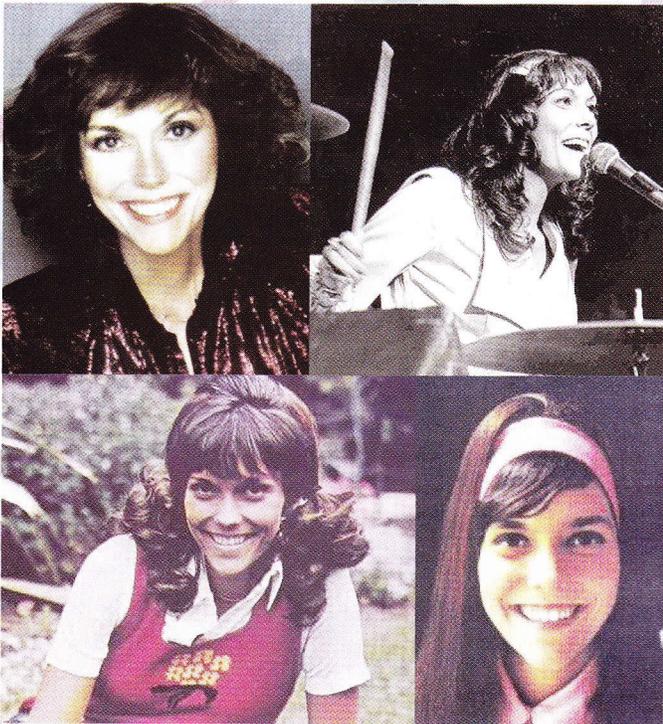
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Carpenter and the executives at A&M had stood behind Karen with the solo album, she would have gained a much-

needed shot of confidence," says biographer Randy Schmidt. "And had that happened, she wouldn't have

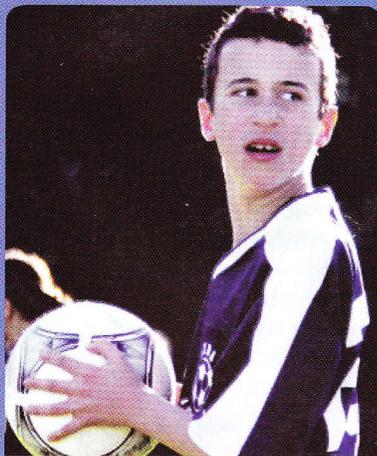
been so crazy about getting married. Together, the solo album and marriage fiasco were the harsh blows that sent her into the deepest depression of her life."

Karen Carpenter began dieting obsessively in the mid-1970s. It was her way of controlling at least one aspect of her life. Toward the end of the decade she sought professional help. But she never really faced the seriousness of her disorder and didn't work hard enough to beat it. On February 3, 1983, she went shopping with her mother, and slept over at her parents' house that night. In the morning her mother called up to the bedroom, but there was no answer. Agnes climbed the stairs and found Karen dead on the floor of a walk-in closet. As was later determined, she had been taking massive doses of ipecac syrup for some time, a drug used to induce

vomiting. Ipecac dissolves a little more heart muscle with every dose.

Personal issues aside, the little girl who played softball on Hall Street grew up to become one of the most successful singers of all time. Comments posted on hundreds of YouTube videos are passionate in their love of her skill and sorrow for her loss. One cannot count how many times she's called an angel in heaven whose effortless, smooth and expressive singing is deemed as being so incredibly soothing. Her style was deceptively simple, and it's one that seems to be lost on the vast majority of female vocalists. Thirty years later, she still inspires.

"Someone told me there was a plaque in Karen's honor here at school, before the relocation," says Lucia Paoletta of Nathan Hale School. "But I haven't been able to locate it." ❁



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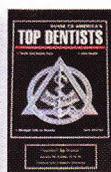
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