

CLOSE TO THEM:
Karen and Richard
Carpenter in 1974



Magic Carpenter Ride

We've only just begun to get sick of all-star tribute albums, but a truly unlikely one—an alternative-rock salute to the Carpenters—is an inspired surprise. **BY DAVID BROWNE**

ANYONE WHO grew up in the first half of the '70s probably has many semifond memories: wearing shirts with patterns that promoted eye strain, tolerating the existence of *The Waltons*, and, of course, lunging for the radio dial whenever a Carpenters single came on. Pop and rock & roll were getting more polished by the minute, but even in that context, the syrup pouring out of Richard and Karen Carpenter's music

could have supplied the International House of Pancakes chain for a year. From Richard's infamous Dutch-boy haircut to the unfashionable string sections and sha-la-la choruses of their songs, they simply weren't cool. My situation was exacerbated by my father, who owned an eight-track of one of their albums. Whenever he put it on, I tried to be in another part of the house.

Then, a few years ago, I came across one of their compilations in a used-record store and, at the urging of a friend behind the counter who insisted that Karen's

drumming was *really good*, I forked over the two bucks. Playing it, I heard what I'd been missing. The arrangements were as impeccable as I'd remembered—you could practically eat off of the LP—but the craft behind them, the way instruments and voices were carefully interwoven, was astounding. Karen's voice was equally pristine, but also dark around the edges, making it the perfect instrument for lyrics that were almost relentlessly downbeat: "Love, look at the two of us/Strangers in many ways," "Hanging around, nothing to do but frown," "We go

on hurting each other...without ever knowing why." (Coincidentally, their perkier records, like the unctuous "Sing," are their most forced; Karen, who died in 1983 from anorexia nervosa, never could convey happiness with quite the same authority.) To this day, there's a thesis waiting to be written on how Richard's pep-pill arrangements contrasted with, and almost seemed to deny, the pain in Karen's voice.

Apparently I'm not alone in my musical revisionism, at least judging from **IF I WERE A CARPENTER** (A&M), a 14-band salute to Karen and Richard's music from the alternative-rock crowd. On paper, such a pairing sounds misguided. Any album that features Cracker, Sonic Youth, and Redd Kross positively reeks of kitsch and sarcasm, and the thought of such an ensemble tackling Carpenters songs sound not only like an irony festival—Smirkstock '94, if you will—but also cruel, almost insensitive. As it turns out, the collection isn't condescending at all. Practically elegiac, *If I Were a Carpenter* taps into the sorrow beneath the tuneful songs, and still treats both elements with respect. It may be Camp Carpenters, but at least it's not campy Carpenters.

The renditions, almost all of them thoroughly enjoyable, range from faithfully lush (Matthew Sweet's "Let Me Be the One," the Cranberries' "[They Long to Be] Close to You") to bone-dry (American Music Club's "Goodbye to Love," Sheryl Crow's "Solitaire"). Squeaky-clean Japanese punk-rockers Shonen Knife are suitably peppy for "Top of the World," with feedback to match; beautifully mopey ballads like "For All We Know" (by the Dutch band Bettie Serveert) and "Hurting Each Other" (sung by ex-Concrete Blonde singer Johnette Napolitano) are now swathed in a comfy blanket of grunge power chords. In no song is the craft of the melodies ever mangled or distorted; you can sing along to each without grimacing.

There are one or two clinkers here, most notably a hammy arena-rock take on "It's Going to Take Some Time" by the Santa Barbara, Calif.-based band Dishwalla. Yet Redd Kross' power-rock version of "Yesterday Once More" seems heartfelt, while Sonic Youth, no strangers to Carpenters lore (they saluted Karen several years ago on

Goo), ditch their usual sardonicism and add a ghostly pallor to the yearning-groupie lament "Superstar" that makes them sound like the cover band from Heaven (with Karen on drums, of course). Beyond showing what a compelling vocalist Karen was compared with the slacker sensibility that permeates these bands (all too well-heard in Cracker's version of "Rainy Days and Mondays"), the album also shows how far pop songwriting has come since the Carpenters' heyday: Next to most of the atonal songs these bands normally write, the traditional, elegantly constructed melodies of Carpenters hits sound like relics from another time, like something you'd hear on a player piano.

It's hard to completely believe that most of these bands embrace the Carpenters with utter sincerity, and that,

as with the baffling Tony Bennett revival, there isn't at least a little snickering behind the smiles. Yet, by the time *If I Were a Carpenter* ends, with Grant Lee Buffalo's straight-faced, un-sarcastic version of one of the duo's sappiest tunes, "We've Only Just Begun," the craft and sorrow of the music are saluted so effortlessly that it's easy to give in to the conceit. You come away realizing that, give or take a gorgeous ballad like Boyz II Men's "End of the Road," the Top 40 may never sound this beautifully, subtly forlorn again. **A-**