

Factiva

Dow Jones & Reuters

TELEVISION

TODAY

Carpenters bio is built on music

Al Brumley

966 words

3 December 1997

The Dallas Morning News

HOME FINAL

1C

English

(Copyright 1997)

Long ago and oh so far away, Karen Carpenter was chubby, and she and brother Richard were two parts of a jazz trio.

We're talking serious jazz, with Richard on keyboards, Karen on drums and Wes Jacobs on bass, jamming their way to victory at a mid-'60s Hollywood Bowl Battle of the Bands.

Close to You: Remembering the Carpenters, airing at 8 p.m. Thursday on KERA-TV (Channel 13), is a reminder that long before the granny dresses, the cashmere coats and Paul Williams, these two wide-eyed kids worked their way into A&M Records simply by being excellent musicians.

Or, as Richard points out, they won the Hollywood Bowl contest "without Karen singing a note."

Close to You, a rich, satisfying musical biography, gives closet Carpenters fans plenty of reasons to out themselves and makes it almost impossible for sneering cynics not to take a second look.

But don't expect anything more. Close to You spends most of its hour focusing on the music. Karen's death in February 1983 from anorexia nervosa is discussed but never analyzed and comes off almost as a sidebar.

On the other hand, Richard produced a surprisingly frank TV movie about his sister's death in 1988, The Karen Carpenter Story, so maybe he feels he's said all he can.

But let's get back to the show.

As a young teen, Richard Carpenter knew he wanted to be a musician. He and his younger sister, Karen - quite chubby, indeed - spent hours in the basement listening to their father's collection of old 78-rpm records.

The family moved from New Haven, Conn., to Southern California in 1963, when Richard was 17, in part to help further his musical career.

Karen took up the drums, and two years later she and Richard were jamming in the Richard Carpenter Trio. A home tape recording made around that time reveals how quickly, and well, Karen had taken to the drums.

Soon after winning the contest, they were backing up a trumpeter at the home studio of a friend, Joe Osborn. "Sometime during the night, Karen sang," Mr. Osborn says, "and I thought, 'Wow! What about her? You know, forget the trumpet player. This chubby little girl can sing.' "

Fast-forward to 1968 and Your All American College Show with host Dennis James: "They rock, roll and they play jazz, and they play blues, you name it. Right now, they're going to play 'Dancing in the Streets.' From California State in Long Beach, the Dick Carpenter Trio. Here they are."

And there they were, with a slimmer Karen jamming on the skins and singing - her one visible leg clad in a white go-go boot - Richard on a Wurlitzer electric piano and Wes looking hip on bass.

One more band later, the Carpenters decided to go it on their own. Herb Alpert at A&M Records finally caught on.

"When I got the demo tape for the Carpenters, the minute I put it on I had this, that feeling, you know?" Mr. Alpert says. "When I heard Karen's voice I just, I was charmed. It had a real unusual quality to it. And when I found out that she was not only singing, but she was playing drums, and Richard was playing keyboards, and they were doing all the vocal parts, it was love at first hear."

From there you know the story: the incredible list of hits, the TV specials - probably ill-advised at the time but

invaluable for this documentary - and the truly tragic end.

Close to You rarely misses a beat. Just at the point that you start wanting to hear a particular song, you hear it. It includes a feast of vintage footage, from music "videos" to film of the Carpenters in the studio to a classic Grammy Awards presentation (look closely for a young Linda Ronstadt, still carrying a little baby fat herself).

On camera, Richard speaks to an unseen person on a set that looks like it's been borrowed from an info-mercial for piano lessons.

He says he understands why he and his sister were such easy targets for critics. "We were getting, by now, skewered by the critics, not only about our music, but . . . the goodie four-shoes image," he says. "But if you look at the album covers, you can't quite blame them."

Music journalist **Daniel Levitin** says A&M didn't know how to market the group.

"The whole campaign was a little bit screwy," he says. "Back in 1970 there was free love, and there were lots of drugs. Contrast that with, you know, the Pepsodent Twins image."

And through it all, nearly every picture of Karen reveals a barely concealed melancholy, a deep, bone-tired weariness that, as the cliché goes, seemed to disappear only when she was playing.

"There was a kind of a shadow . . . that fell across the smile in all the recent pictures," says lyricist Paul Williams, looking frighteningly like a shadow of his former self.

The Carpenters gave Mr. Williams his first big break by making a hit out of "We've Only Just Begun," originally written for a bank commercial.

He recalls the time that someone called the Carpenters "vanilla."

"And I went, 'But what an exquisite flavor vanilla is,' " he says. "They made great records. They took our songs and gave them a life."

PHOTO(S): 1. (A&M Records) Richard and Karen Carpenter were musicians first, pop stars second. 2. (A&M Records: Claude Mougín) Close to You deals only briefly with Karen Carpenter's death. ; LOCATION NOTE: These photos were not sent to the library for archiving.

Document dal0000020011006dtc301qyy