



Richard Carpenter, right, helps Cynthia Gibb and Mitchell Anderson, who play brother/sister team.

A TV Movie He Didn't Want

Brother Richard Guides CBS' 'Karen Carpenter Story'

By DIANE HAITHMAN,
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If I'd had my druthers, it wouldn't have been made at all."

Those words come from Richard Carpenter, who spent most of his professional life as half of that 1970s pop music phenomenon known as The Carpenters. He is talking about "The Karen Carpenter Story," a CBS made-for-TV movie for next season based on the short life of his sister Karen, who died at 32 after a 7-year battle with anorexia nervosa.

"Look, I've been ambivalent on this from the word go," Carpenter said tersely, watching Cynthia Gibb as Karen and Mitchell Anderson as Richard re-enact a Carpenters concert rehearsal during filming at downtown Los Angeles' stately Embassy Theater.

It comes as no surprise that Richard—or any member of the Carpenter family—might have reservations about such a movie, particularly in light of the ghoulish tabloid reports that followed Karen's death. What does come as a surprise is that Carpenter is co-executive producer of the film.

So why is "The Karen Carpenter Story" being made—with Carpenter at the helm, no less?

"If it has to be made, we're the people who should be making it," Carpenter said. "When Jerry Weintraub [the other co-executive producer of the movie] proposed the idea to me, his reasoning was that for all celebrities, there are parts of our private lives that are matters of public record. And



Karen, Richard Carpenter.

somebody else could do this without our blessing. If [Karen's story] wouldn't have been as well told [by someone else], it just wouldn't."

And though five years have passed since Karen's well-publicized death in 1983, Carpenter said he believes someone else would have made her life into a film eventually, without the family's permission.

The CBS movie, filmed at the Carpenter family home in Downey and at other Los Angeles-area locations, was written by Barry Morrow and Cynthia A. Cherbeck and was directed by Joseph Sargent. Peter Michael Goets and Louise Fletcher portray Karen and

Richard's parents, Harold and Agnes Carpenter.

As added evidence that his motives are not exploitative, Carpenter, 42, who continued to release albums and produce other artists for A & M Records after Karen's death, said he has turned down numerous offers from publishers to write a book.

"What would it have accomplished?" he asked philosophically. "Maybe in 20 or 30 years . . ."

Carpenter did, however, write about his sister's death for People magazine in 1983 for the same reason he said he is producing the movie: to set the record straight.

"There were certain things that I was reading that really weren't true, and I wanted it to be stated as accurately as it could be, but without being able to button up exactly what happened," he said.

So too with the movie. "I'm not for a second going to say this is exactly the way it happened," he said, "because it's not. [But] I think that, considering the genre we're dealing with, it came off as well as it can."

Carpenter wrote in his People article (accompanied by a cover photo of a skeletal Karen smiling) that his sister's collapse from heart failure at the family home in Downey came as a shock. She had recently returned to California after hospitalization and months of therapy in New York and had seemed in good spirits. Her weight, which had dropped as low as 80 pounds, had risen to about 110, not much below normal for her 5-foot-4 frame.

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CARPENTER: Film About Karen

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Carpenter denied in the article that any of the factors that some journalists suggested had caused Karen's illness—her brief and unhappy marriage, career pressure or her family—could be held responsible.

Carpenter believes the script succeeds in not pointing an accusatory finger at anyone in particular, even though family disagreements figure into the story.

"I don't have an answer for it. I never will. No one does," he said. "It would be easy to pin it on her career; it would be easy to pin it on our mother. To me, [blaming Karen's illness on mother Agnes] gets back to the old psychoanalyst's routine that whatever's ailing the patient, it's the mother's fault. And I don't think it's all that black and white and all that easy. I know it isn't in Karen's case."

One revelation in the script that never came out in any of the publicity at the time of Karen's death: Richard Carpenter developed a dependency on Quaaludes when urged by Agnes to take them

to relax and sleep better. He went into treatment and kicked the habit in 1979. Although the script clearly depicts Agnes offering him the drugs, Carpenter does not believe the movie lays blame on his mother for that, either.

"I don't think it's all that bad, really," Carpenter said. "No one's an angel; I've never met one. My mother is a damn good woman, and like all of us she has her fortes and her shortcomings."

Carpenter said he did not go public with the details of his own drug addiction earlier because "in 1979, the last thing the world needed was another celebrity on the talk-show circuit with a story about licking drugs. I had to do it, I wanted to do it, I did it. Fine. Why make a big deal out of it?" he asked with a shrug. "I'd rather get on with my music."

Carpenter allowed the first few drafts of the script to be written without mentioning his problem, then changed his mind and asked that it be included.

"I didn't think it was fair to make

it look like Karen was the only person who suffered with anything, like I cruised through life without a problem. It's nothing that I'm happy about, but I'm proud of myself for having gotten over it, so I can live with it just fine."

Carpenter turned down an inquiry about interviewing his parents for this story, saying he preferred to do the talking for the family.

Writer Morrow said of Carpenter's drug problem, "In those days, Quaaludes were a common prescription for people with sleeping problems." But he declined to speculate on the reasons for Karen's illness.

"I don't know for certain what killed Karen; I never knew her," Morrow said. "I only know what her friends and family told me, and I could come to an approximation of what happened. I think we encapsulated all the reasons we could find."

"I think if you really want to know about Karen Carpenter, though, you have to listen to her music. It's all there—the pain, the longing, the despair. She sang songs of unrequited love, but she also lived it."