

CAROLE KING

“You can get to know me through my music”

By Robert Windeler

THE unquestioned queen of the singer/songwriter phenomenon that has already led to some quieter sounds and more thoughtful lyrics in the music of the 1970's is Carole King. (The question of kingship remains highly debatable and must be taken up another day.) And where Carole has led, others have followed. In fact, the disc jockeys and record buyers of the United States haven't had such an array of female voices to choose from since the days when Patti Page, Jo Stafford, and Rosemary Clooney were singing about sand dunes on Cape Cod, jambalaya and crawfish pie in New Orleans, waltzes in Tennessee, and pyramids along the Nile, and that was so long ago that it only cost a nickel a song to hear Teresa Brewer on the jukebox. However, there is a crucial difference between now and those earlier times: most of today's women write their own material.

Carole King was a successful songwriter for a dozen years before she released, at the age of thirty-two, her second solo album as a performer. The record was called "Tapestry," and the songs on it do weave a highly subjective view of life. They have also kept Carole King and half a dozen other singers at the top of music surveys ever since. "Tapestry" at last count had sold more than 5,500,000 copies in this country alone and has long

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since surpassed the movie soundtrack of *The Sound of Music*, the original Broadway-cast recording of *My Fair Lady*, and Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge over Troubled Water" as the best-selling record album of all time. Carole won three Grammy Awards at the 1972 ceremonies of the Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences in Hollywood. Such artists as Peggy Lee, Barbra Streisand, and James Taylor sing Carole King songs, as do Blood, Sweat and Tears and Dionne Warwick, but so far no one sings *You've Got a Friend*, *I Feel the Earth Move*, or *Where You Lead* as successfully as Carole herself does.

She is a near-recluse who is married for the second time and the mother of three. She didn't attend her triple-win Grammy ceremonies because she was still nursing her latest baby. When not rehearsing, performing, or recording, she keeps house in Laurel Canyon, West Hollywood, and still considers herself a writer rather than a performer.

Carole's long climb to the top has been dazzling, but she is most reluctant to talk about it. She likes her three dogs, her privacy, and most other musicians. She dislikes interviews, and even the very rare one she grants will have to take place after a whole long list of other more

important things get done, such as taking empty soda bottles to the recycling center. The young woman who stuns audiences whenever she appears on tour, and sits at the piano nearly mesmerized by her own music, says simply "I want my music to speak for me. You can get to know me through my music." Music industry insiders have been doing just that since 1959 when she wrote (ironically, with her ex-husband) *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?*, a Shirelles hit then and a standard now.

She was born in New York, went to high school in Brooklyn, attended college in Manhattan (City) and Queens (Queens), married her high-school sweetheart, and had two children (her third was not born until November 1971). Carole and her husband-collaborator, Gerry Goffin, had a string of hits, including a song they wrote and produced for their maid, who billed herself as Little Eva when she performed her employers' *Loco-Motion*. Goffin and King survived rather than participated in the brasher sounds of the 1960's, and created songs in their own style for Aretha Franklin (*Natural Woman*), the Drifters (*Up on the Roof*), and others. The marriage did not survive, however, and in 1968 Carole left New York for Los Angeles. "I needed to get together a new identity," Carole says. "It's very hard to maintain a marriage writing together." But the Goffins found they were occasionally able to collaborate after their breakup.

As early as 1961, Carole had auditioned as a recording artist, doing a demonstration record of her own *It Might as Well Rain Until September*, which was eventually recorded by Bobby Vee. And Atlantic Records' president Ahmet Ertegun says he remembers "this little Jewish girl constantly hanging around begging me to let her make a record." But Carole didn't really get the chance to record until she joined with guitarist Danny Kootch and a drummer in a Los Angeles group called the City in 1968. James Taylor came to L.A., and Kootch, who had worked with him in New York, introduced Taylor to Carole. Taylor played guitar in jam sessions with the City, and they produced a nice, straightforward sound that was slightly ahead of its time.

Taylor asked Carole to play piano on his second album, "Sweet Baby James," which introduced the phenomenal *Fire and Rain*. Carole then approached Lou Adler, producer of "Tapestry" and founder/head of Ode Records, Carole's label, to help her do a solo record. She had known him in the late Fifties and early Sixties when she was under contract to Colgems Music Publishing and he was their West Coast manager. Although a fan of Carole's who had often tried to persuade her to record, Adler was still busy with the Mamas and the Papas, so he turned her over to a friend, John Fishback, who produced her first album. "Carole King: Writer," as it was called, contained twelve King songs and ten lyrics by Gerry Goffin, who also mixed the recording. "Writer" sold all of eight thousand copies, mostly to friends and fans in the business who had been collecting her old demos and tapes all those years anyway. But the album was critically acclaimed, and Adler, one of the boy wonders of the music business since his Dunhill days, took personal charge of Carole's second, third, and fourth albums.

Taylor, Kootch, and Charles Larkey (a bass player with a group called Jo Mama and Carole's current husband), played on her first album and all subsequent ones. Carole began touring with Taylor, at first just playing the piano for him, then doing an occasional solo, finally as second act on the bill (with Jo Mama opening the show).

She electrified audiences, but the album remained a dud commercially. Adler, who speculates that it was because "Writer" was soft-sell and had more of a jazz feel than "Tapestry," which managed to be commercial without compromising Carole's basic musical integrity, said, "Nothing discouraged me. I'm a fan and in love with her."

Suddenly it was Carole King, performer, and she, for one, was scared. "As a writer it's very safe and womb-like," is Carole's view, "because somebody else gets the credit or the blame." She was nervous about performing live, and credits the laconic country-tinged singer/composer Taylor with teaching her how to relax. As for the singer/songwriter phenomenon she finds herself such an important part of, "It's a question of everything moving in cycles. In the Sixties, after President Kennedy's death, everything got very 'anti.' The Beatles in all their glorious insolence were the start of anti-heroism, anti-romanticism. Now the cycle has gone back to romanticism. People got sick of the psychedelic sound and wanted softer moods."

She counts herself fortunate to have "happened to be there at the right time." And Carole characterizes herself as not being success-motivated. "I want to play music, but I have no particular desire for the limelight itself.

"I have always written more in the direction of my friends and family," she says. "I like to touch them with my songs; touching a mass of people is a whole other trip—it is a high-energy trip and it's very exciting, but it's another trip. I don't want to be a Star with a capital S. The main reason I got into performing and recording on my own was to expose my songs to the public in the fastest way. I don't consider myself a singer."

Carole's husband Charles is several years her junior (Carole is quite hung up on being 34, an advanced age for a pop heroine, and wishes she were a good deal younger). She lives with him, her two daughters by Goffin, who are now eleven and thirteen, and the Larkeys' own child in her white frame house in Laurel Canyon.

WHEN she writes a song (now often serving as her own lyricist), Carole has a general idea about what she wants, discusses it with Adler, and then sits down with the musicians selected, always including Taylor and her husband. "We play it a couple of times and we learn it just by listening because we are all so close," she says. "Then it's only a question of polishing and refining it, until it has a degree of spontaneity about it but is still tight."

Carole's third and fourth albums, "Music" and "Rhymes and Reasons," have come and gone. Although "Music" did not come close to the sales total for "Tapestry," it sold 1,200,000 copies, hardly an embarrassment in an industry in which \$1,000,000 in sales is recognized by a gold record award. The acceptance she's received as a composer is what keeps her going as a performer. And it is in writing that she really expresses herself, as in her poignant *Child of Mine* (which Anne Murray and others have also recorded), a song written to and rejoicing in her daughter. If others like to listen—and today's increasingly sophisticated and honest audiences apparently do—that's fine too.

"But she's still basically a writer," says Lou Adler. "The performing part is amazing to her. All of those artist trips don't interest her at all. She's a Laurel Canyon housewife. She's always been writing and thinking in much the same way: the only difference is that now, with a different kind of music listener, she's being heard."