Carole King

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She is one of the most successful female songwriters of all time. Even before her two-sided hit of "It's Too Late" and "I Feel the Earth Move" went to number one in 1971, Carole King had already written eight other number one records. They were co-written with Gerry Goffin, whom she met in 1958 at Queens College in New York. Together, Goffin and King churned out an amazing flow of hit records, inspiring the likes of the Beatles with their success.

Born Carol Klein in Brooklyn on February 9, 1941, she took piano lessons from her mother when she was four and started writing her own music only a few years later. She met a young songwriter at Queens College named Paul Simon, and the two of them teamed up to make demos for others, with Carole covering piano, vocals and drums. She also met Gerry Goffin at Queens, and when they started dating, they found more excitement at the piano than anywhere else, "even the movies," Carole said. So they started to write songs together—Carole generating most of the melodies and Gerry most of the words—and wrote about 150 "bad songs" (according to Gerry) before coming up with their first hit, "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?"

It was when they began working for Don Kirshner's Aldon Music that their success blossomed, writing hit songs for a myriad of artists, including the Drifters, Bobby Vee, the Animals, Herman's Hermits, the Monkees, the Righteous Brothers, and Blood, Sweat and Tears. The Queen of Soul, Aretha Frank-

lin, recorded the classic "Natural Woman," while the Beatles paid a tribute to their idols by recording "Chains" in 1963.

Carole has never been the type of songwriter who pays attention to trends, knowing after all these years that a great song transcends them all. Even at the inception of rock and roll, when most writers were using a variation on a blues progression, she brought a sophisticated harmonic sense to their songs that few other writers were using. And Gerry, brought up on writers like Cole Porter, and Rodgers and Hammerstein, brought traditional lyrical values to the songs, such as the use of inner rhymes. The combined results are deceptively simple songs like "Loco-Motion" (the only song in history to have gone to number one four times) and the eternally jubilant "Up on the Roof."

In 1968, Carole and Gerry ended their collaboration and their marriage, and Carole moved to Los Angeles, where she began to reluctantly perform her own songs. "I never wanted to be the performing artist," she recalled. "I was always the vehicle through which the songs could be communicated to a *real* singer. The switch occurred when I moved to California in 1968. I was encouraged by Danny Kortchmar and Charles Larkey to perform with them as a group, and we made an album called *City*. I didn't have any intention of going out and performing live. It was a way to make a record while hiding behind a group situation. Having done that, the next transition was to do a solo album. I still had no idea about performing live. I was just gonna do the same thing I always did, make demos, only instead of having them go to a real singer, we just figured we would put them out with me singing."

Although the idea of being a recording artist seemed like a natural progression to her from inside the studio, the thought of performing live was horrifying. But thanks to James Taylor, she was eased into it gradually. "Just around the time of *Tapestry* I met James and watched him perform, and he made it look so easy. And he invited me onto the stage to play piano. And then one night he said, 'Why don't we let you play one of your songs?' I think it was 'Up on the Roof,' which he always loved. And I did, and I was pre-loved because they already loved James. And then they knew the songs, so it was really a no-lose situation. I could have been terrible, and they probably would have dug it that I just did it anyway."

In 1971 *Tapestry* emerged an instant classic. Packed with hit after hit, many of them written while still with Gerry, it outsold *Sgt. Pepper*, became one of the best-selling albums of all time, and quickly erased any doubt as to the viability of Carole King as a recording artist.

Do you remember writing your first song?
Not really. Young. Nine?

You were playing piano at that age?
Yeah. I was classically trained but periods of lessons on and no lessons.

Do you remember what it was at the time that made you want to write songs?
I didn't think of them as songs. I thought of them as melodies, I guess. They weren't whole songs. I would just put melodies together and make music.

When I was about fifteen I started writing my own lyrics, and they were so bad that I didn't want to write songs again for a while. Until I met Gerry.

Did you and Gerry have any kind of regular songwriting routine? Would he give you a finished lyric?
It varied. All of the above. It varied then; it varies now.

Was your song "You've Got a Friend" written for anyone in particular?
No. That song was as close to pure inspiration as I've ever experienced. The song wrote itself. It was written by something outside of myself through me.

Is that an unusual feeling for you?
It happens from time to time in part. That song is one of the examples of that process where it was almost completely written by inspiration and very little if any perspiration.

Does that give you the feeling that these songs come from beyond you?
Absolutely.

Can you give us any advice about how to get in touch with that source?
Songwriters, both lyricists and melody writers, are often plagued with the thing most often known as writer's block. All writers are, writers of prose as well. I have found that the key to not being blocked is to not worry about it. Ever.

If you are sitting down and you feel that you want to write and nothing is coming, you get up and do something else. Then you come back again and try it again. But you do it in a relaxed manner. *Trust* that it will be there. If it ever was once and you've ever done it once, it will be back. It always comes back and the only thing that is a problem is when you get in your own way worrying about it.

I'd like to say that I almost never have worried about it. Because when it seemed to be a problem, when I seemed to be . . . I don't even want to say "blocked" because it seems like too strong a word. But when the channel wasn't open enough to let something through, I always went and did something else and never worried about it and it always opened up again. Whether it was an hour later, which is often the case, or a day later or a week later or sometimes a few *months* later, I just didn't worry about it.

So when you're at the piano and it's not flowing, you don't force it; you just get up and come back to it at a different time?
Right. Another thing that I do is I might play someone else's material that I really like and that sometimes unblocks a channel. The danger in that is that you're gonna write that person's song [*laughs*] for your next song. It's just sit down and, again, if you're a lyric writer, read something that you really like, enjoy something that you really like. Or sometimes I'll play something of my own that I really like, something that is already existing that is *fun*.

Do you find that your hands go to old familiar patterns at the piano? How do you avoid repeating yourself?
I *don't* think about it. If I'm writing something and it sounds too much like something I've already written, I might consciously try to change it but, again,

I don't worry about it; I'm not overly concerned with the mechanics of how it's going to work.

Once the inspiration comes, that directs where the perspiration goes, where the work goes. I don't mean to sound like it's some hippie philosophy of [*in a high, fairy-like voice*] you just sit down and it's *all* flowing through you. Because there's a lot of hard work involved in songwriting. The inspiration part is where it comes through you, but once it comes through you, the shaping of it, the *craft* of it, is something that I pride myself in knowing how to do.

I like to be unpredictable. For example, in the songs on my album, *City Streets*, the A&R man looked through them and said, "Each song has a different structure. And not one song has a structure that is recognizable." There isn't one song that's AABA or ABAB. They all turn left somewhere. [*Laughs*] And that's something that I work at.

I do not like to do the predictable thing. That's not to say that it's invalid to do that. Just for me, the challenge and the fun is when you start to write a song that might go AABA, and you might take your B section and go somewhere else before you come back to A. Or you go AA-B-C and then you go back to A. Because one of the things that I try to be conscious about in writing a song and crafting a song is the concept of bringing it home. That is, there's a beginning to a song, and there should be an end of a song, and of course there's a middle. And I like to take the middle any place it wants to go. But whenever I take it to the end, I like to bring it somewhere familiar, someplace that people feel it's resolved, it's settled; it comes back *home* at the end, whatever home means.

Do you ever feel limited by the song form?

No! The song form is limitless. You can do anything you want. Given the fact that a song is generally something that takes between three to five minutes on a record. But if you feel like going seven minutes, you can go seven minutes. If you want to write a really short song, you can do that. I think it's kind of nice because you're given a task to make a statement, musical and lyrical, and you do it and you don't have two hours to do it in. That's kind of nice; but I don't think it's limiting at all. I think it's liberating.

Is there any kind of musical signature you would consider your own, any set of chord changes that defines the Carole King sound?

[*Laughs*] Well, it's been widely quoted back to me that a four chord with a five bass has been one of my signatures. I guess I still use it. It's one of those things I guess I got known for doing. Musicians have called it the "Carole King chord" although I'm sure I didn't originate it. But I did use it a lot.

I try not to overuse it since it's sort of become a thing you expect. I try to be unpredictable, in my life and in my work. [*Laughs*]

Is there a single song of your own that is your favorite?

I can't say that there is because they're like children. There are some songs that I know are better than others. There are some that I still think about and I still like, and there are others that I've basically forgotten, although sometimes I'll listen to something and say, "You know, that wasn't bad." But, I don't know, the ones that are standards, the ones that hold up longest I don't want

to say I'm proudest of, but they've stood the test of time. You know, "Natural Woman," "You've Got a Friend," "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" The first and the last I mentioned were written with Gerry but ones I've written myself hold up, too. To my everlasting surprise.

I want to say something about my writing of lyrics. When you write with Gerry Goffin, you become intimidated, like why bother to write your own lyrics when you have a Gerry Goffin to write with.

But when our marriage ended and our relationship changed a little bit at the time, in terms of ability to work together easily—it was a temporary condition that we weren't able to work together for a little while, and it was only for a little while—that was when I sort of thought about doing it again [writing lyrics] and I really didn't like what I was doing that much, but suddenly it clicked into place for me at that time. It was just before *Tapestry* I guess. By the time we wrote *Tapestry* I was writing with Gerry again but it just didn't click into place, and that's what sort of what motivated me to try doing it myself.

I was always mindful of things that Gerry had taught me about writing lyrics. Above all, try not to be corny. [*Laughs*] Umm, internal rhymes—have fun with internal rhymes. My lyrics are vastly different than his but there's a simplicity about my lyrics that I strive to emulate Gerry in his utter simplicity.

I think that my lyrics are a little more—I want to say childlike—and not born out of so much pain. I think his lyrics reflect either his own pain or the pain of the persona that he's writing for. He has been able to be in touch with a gut level of emotion that I'm only beginning to approach in my lyric writing now. I still look up to him. He's just the best, and I really look up to him as a lyricist very much. He's been of enormous help in guiding my melodies, the direction my melodies take.

Often when we would write, he might actually sing a melody to me along with his lyrics, and I would probably have taken almost the exact melody he sang and just made it so it was more musical sounding. 'Cause he's a singer with guts but he's not a singer that you listen to for the melody of it. You listen to him probably, more for the soul of it. Nobody sang "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" better, ever. But I was able to melodicize what he gave and maybe make it more accessible to people who wanted to hear it sounding like a singer was singing it.

That's interesting, because so many of the songs that you and he wrote together sound like they were written by one person; the words and music fit so perfectly together.

We always talked about marriage. It's not a new phrase; many songwriters talk about it. The marriage of the music to the lyrics is key. And our personal marriage was an outgrowth of that, and it was hard to tell which was which. But the marriage between our words and our music continues to this day.

When we're connected, which is most of the time when we write together, the magic is still there; the marriage of the music and the lyrics is an understood thing that requires very little discussion. It just happens. And there's just a little fine-tuning done between us. But when we write, we write like one person.

An example of that would have to be your classic song "Natural Woman," which doesn't seem like a lyric a man would write.

The title was Jerry Wexler's, which is why his name appears as writer on the song. But Gerry took the title and ran with it.

I know that when Lennon and McCartney started writing songs together for the Beatles that they wanted to be the next Goffin and King—

I was actually told that by them. They were very much aware of us as writers and I was extremely complimented.

I love that process as well because then the Beatles, who having been influenced by myself and Gerry, came back and made such an impact and, of course, left their mark on me as somebody to aspire to and emulate.

Did you like the Beatles' version of your song "Chains"?

Yeah!

They were listening to your songs when starting out; which songwriters were you listening to at the start of your career?

Jerry Leiber and Mark Stoller, primarily. They had a huge impact on us, a major influence in our early songs. The idea of taking street rhythm and blues and combining it with classical music, like "There Goes My Baby" with the timpani by Ben E. King; "Spanish Harlem" with the violins and the entire string section arrangement. That was amazing because my background and Gerry's was in classical; it was pretty strong. But we also loved rock and roll and street music. So to have them put together was like, yeah!

***Tapestry* became one of the biggest selling album of all time. Did you have any idea that it would be that huge?**

No.

Do you have any idea what made it such a popular album?

Right time and the right place.

Is that all?

I think so. I mean, good tunes. But there's been lots of albums before and since with good tunes.

It seems to be one of the few albums in which every song is a potential single.

I like to believe that. [*Laughs*]

So many great singers, from James Taylor and the Beatles through Aretha Franklin, have performed your songs. Do you have a favorite?

Oh, not at all. I love singing my own songs, but I'm always the first one to sing my songs anyway. So it goes to someone like Aretha. One of my highest moments in time is to have heard what the consummate gospel singer did to one of my songs. To hear the Beatles do it, to hear Springsteen sing "Going Back" and James Taylor's versions of "You've Got a Friend" and "Up on the Roof." The Byrd's versions of stuff, the Monkees' versions of stuff which are kind of fun to go back and listen to. What joy to hear what someone else brings to something of mine. I mean, I throw it out there and they run with it.

In a couple of cases, and I will not ever mention a name, there has been a time or two where a singer has interpreted my song in such a way that I was

really let down, that I said, "That is so wrong. I hate this." But it's only happened maybe once or twice in my career. And those times it's probably just a misunderstanding; the person just didn't get it, you know? [*Laughs*] For the most part, the joy of being a songwriter is to hear your song interpreted by somebody else.

The other joy is to hear what the musicians do with it. The band, you know? I come in to a session, and I play it down for the band, and the ideas they bring to it make it coalesce and come together. Because I hear in my head generally what I want it to sound like. But they bring in things that are either true to the vision or not true to the vision. Generally, it takes just a second and they know right where I'm going with it. And that's the magic for me, to have really excellent musicians play on my songs.

So songwriting is still a joy for you?

Yeah! Songwriting is always a joy.

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