

“Tapestry”—Carole King (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



Carole King

There are few artists—of any genre, of any era, of either gender—who have had as profound an effect on popular music as Carole King.

Alone or with a co-writer (especially her one-time husband Gerry Goffin), King has written such resounding hits as “The Loco-Motion,” “You Make Me Feel (Like a Natural Woman),” “You’ve Got a Friend,” “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow,” “Oh, No Not My Baby,” “Go Away Little Girl,” “Up on the Roof,” “One Fine Day,” “I’m Into Something Good,” “Take Good Care of My Baby,” and “Pleasant Valley Sunday,” among others.

Considered alone, such a body of work would be enough to make King one of the great, original talents of rock and pop, but, for her, her ample 1960’s songwriting success was only a prelude. In 1971, King crafted one of the most enduring and influential albums of all time, a perfect showcase for her songwriting talents and performing abilities.

Her album, “Tapestry,” was produced by Lou Adler and released on the Ode label. It contained the songs “I Feel the Earth Move,” “It’s Too Late,” “You’ve Got a Friend,” “Where You Lead,” and “You Make Me Feel (Like a Natural Woman).” The album would go on to rank on the “Billboard” album chart for over 300 weeks. Four of its cuts would become major hits. It would win the Grammy that year for “Album of the Year” as well as Grammys for “Best Female Pop Vocal Performance,” “Record of the Year” (for “It’s Too Late”) and “Song of the Year” (for “You’ve Got a Friend”). “Tapestry” has sold over 25 million copies worldwide and has been certified Diamond (more than 10 million copies sold in the US) by the RIAA.

Carole King was born in 1942 in New York City. From a young age, she showed an inclination toward music; she starting playing the piano at the age of four. Neil Sedaka was a childhood neighbor and friend. His 1959 hit “Oh, Carol” was inspired by her. After enrolling in Queens College, King met fellow student and pharmacy worker Gerry Goffin. Romantic as well as songwriting partners, Goffin and King married in 1960, the same year that their composition “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow” was a mega-hit for girl group the Shirelles. Signed as songwriters by Aldon Music, a music publishing firm located in the Brill Building in New York City, the Goffin (lyrics) and King (music) team joined a collective of creative songwriting upstarts that included Sedeka, Barry Mann, Cynthia Weil, Howard Greenfield, Jack Keller, Ellie Greenwich, and Jeff Barry, among others.

Along with classics like “Will You Still Love Me,” the songwriting duo of Goffin and King also wrote “Wasn’t Born to Follow” for the Byrds, “Chains” for the Cookies (later covered by the Rolling Stones), “Don’t Bring Me Down” for the Animals, and “Every Breath I Take” for Gene

Pitney. King herself had a hit when she recorded her own “It Might as Well Rain Until September” in 1962; it made it to #22 on the charts.

In 1968, after an amazingly successful and prolific partnership, and the birth of two daughters, Goffin and King divorced. Their songwriting partnership also came to an end. While Goffin remained in New York and began to work with other writers, King decamped for California and spent the next few years concentrating on raising her children. In 1968, as part of a group she formed called City, King signed with Lou Adler’s Ode label. Two years later, she released her first solo effort, “Writer: Carole King.” Six months after that album, in January 1971, King recorded “Tapestry.”

Produced by Adler, “Tapestry’s” production has been described as minimal--all the better to showcase King’s piano playing and surprisingly confident vocals. Along with her sure and supple singing voice, “Tapestry” also revealed King’s newly unveiled abilities as a lyricist. King’s long-time friend Cynthia Weil would remark after-the-fact about her friend, “I had no idea that Carole could ever write lyrics or was ever interested in writing lyrics; it was a complete shock because Gerry had been so powerful.”

Upon its release, “Tapestry” was greeted with a chorus of critical acclaim. Jon Landau of “Rolling Stone” said, “Conviction and commitment are the lifeblood of ‘Tapestry’ and are precisely what makes it so fine... Carole King reaches out toward us and gives everything she has. And this generosity is so extraordinary that perhaps we can give it another name: passion.” “The New York Times” called the LP “[a] relaxed, softly rocking blend of folk music and gentle soul funk.”

Four of the album’s songs, “It’s Too Late,” “I Feel the Earth Move,” “So Far Away” and “Smackwater Jack,” would all hit the top 20 and “Too Late” would go all the way to number one. Meanwhile, James Taylor’s cover of “You’ve Got a Friend” also went to number one in June of 1971. (Besides Taylor, “Friend” has since gone on to become one of the most covered songs ever. Some who have performed it: Aretha Franklin, Ella Fitzgerald, Petula Clark, Michael Jackson, Cliff Richard, Barbra Streisand, Anne Murray, Barry Manilow, Al Green, Lynn Anderson, Roberta Flack and Alanis Morissette.)

By the middle of 1971, Carole King’s “Tapestry” album was certified platinum (one million copies sold).

Uniquely, “Tapestry” is an album that seemed to have crossed an extraordinary amount of boundaries. Though many primarily familiar with King’s earlier work—the pop-y, feel good music she had formulated with Goffin—found their fix in some cuts like LP lead-off “I Feel the Earth Move,” “Tapestry’s” unabashed focus on real love, real heartache and other natural elements fed a certain hippie vibe, thereby attracting a new and emerging fanbase. (King, posed in front of some home-made Indian curtains, certainly looked very hippie-chic on the album’s cover.) Meanwhile, while white audiences liked the album, many reviewers of it made mention of King’s innate *soul*, thereby possibly attracting African-American listeners. And while the music may have appealed to a large number of men, perhaps most importantly the album spoke to women and their concerns and feelings at this time, a time just after the launch of the modern feminist movement.

In his book, “The Heart of Rock and Soul,” Dave Marsh says, specifically of “It’s Too Late,” King’s song written with Toni Stern, “It might as well be written in a note left on the kitchen table when somebody’s slipped out for good while her partner’s back was turned.... ‘It’s Too Late’ expresses an implicit feminism: She leaves *him*, she sets the terms of her own departure, she provides not mystical wisdom but a hardheaded view of the situation’s practicalities.”

Though there had always been female songwriters active in the Americas, from some of King’s Brill Building contemporaries to such pioneers as Peggy Lee and Dorothy Fields and others, King and her “Tapestry” set a new benchmark and standard for the female perspective in popular

music. Alongside Carly Simon and Joni Mitchell, King helped pave the way for a future generation of female singer-songwriters including Jewel, Lucinda Williams, Taylor Swift, and Sarah McLachlan.

After her epic success with “Tapestry,” topping it with other albums would be nearly impossible. Nevertheless, King recorded “Music” in 1971; it hit number one on the albums chart and its first single, “Sweet Seasons,” rose to number eight. Subsequent albums include: “Rhymes & Reason” (1972), “Fantasy” (1973), “Wrap Around Joy” (1974), “Thoroughbred” (1976), and “Simple Things” (1977). All went gold.

King has never stopped writing or recording and her songs, old and new, are still popular with artists looking for memorable numbers to record. In 1991, Mariah Carey recorded the King composition “If It’s Over” and, in 1997, Celine Dion recorded King’s “The Reason.”

Similarly, “Tapestry” has never stopped selling and its influence has never wavered. A disproportionately high number of “Tapestry’s” songs have become modern-day standards. Aretha Franklin had already hit a career milestone when she recorded “You Make Me Feel (Like a Natural Woman)” in 1967 before King included it on “Tapestry.” It has gone on to be covered by everyone from Mary J. Blige to Rod Stewart and Shania Twain. “It’s Too Late”—arguably the song most identified with King and “Tapestry”—has been rerecorded by Gloria Estefan and the Isley Brothers. “I Feel the Earth Move” has been performed by the likes of Peggy Lee, Martika and even the Muppets. “Where You Lead” has been sung by Streisand and also served as the theme for the TV series “Gilmore Girls.”

Suitably, in 1987, King, and Goffin, were inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. In 1990, she and Goffin were named to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

King’s timeless “Tapestry” was named to the National Recording Registry in 2003.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).