

Superstar

Claire Christoff

1. Karen Carpenter was born on March 2, 1950.
2. She died on February 4, 1983.
3. She was 5'4".
4. Karen weighed 91 pounds in September 1975.
5. Mary Gaitskill, in her book *Veronica*, wrote of Karen that "starvation was in her voice all along. That was the poignancy of it." After the lush, eerie orchestration on the intro to "Superstar" evens out and Karen's voice breaks—keens, wails—through the empty space, you can feel that longing. It is piercing at its entry points and soft, pulsating, everywhere else.
6. Don't you remember you told me you loved me, baby?
7. You said you'd be coming back this way again, baby.
8. In a picture taken three months before she died, Karen is sitting cross-legged, like a little kid, in front of a homemade needlepoint banner. It says YOU WIN—I GAIN. She's smiling a kind of smile that looks like it hurts. Like she's trying to convince herself that she really does believe the message written above her in bad 1970s blackletter script.
9. Delaney & Bonnie first came out with "Superstar" in 1969, but it was Bette Midler's rendition of it on *The Tonight Show* that caught Richard Carpenter's attention. After he and his sister released their cover, Midler made jokes at Karen's expense and did not apologize until after Karen was already dead.
10. In the Carpenters' version of the song, the line "I can hardly wait to sleep with you again" became "I can hardly wait to be with you again."
11. Maybe Karen's voice was too clean, too wholesome, to sing about sex; maybe she transcended it.
12. Todd Haynes directed, wrote, and co-produced *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* in 1987, while he was still a film student at Bard. It barely lasts 43 minutes, but even that seems too long to bear. Karen and Richard are Barbie and Ken dolls, and in bootleg copies of the film—the only versions available to the public—their voices are muffled, and their faces are cast in black shadows. Richard Carpenter sued Haynes and won, but there's something about the movie that feels far more insidious than a copyright infringement issue. It's creepy and dark and unsettling in an uncanny-valley, '70s-via-the-'80s way. As if it's portraying the closest thing to reality that there can be.
13. Two years later, *The Karen Carpenter Story* aired on CBS. The actors playing Karen and Richard look like they're going to a Halloween party dressed in bad Carpenters costumes, and the whole thing is laughably bad in a way that only a 1989 made-for-TV movie can be. Karen faints during a performance; a drug-addled Richard takes a tumble down a flight of stairs. An unconvincing happy ending is tacked on at the end of the two hours. No copyright infringement

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lawsuit was ever filed.

14. Karen's vocals on "Superstar" were recorded in just one take. There is nothing practiced about pouring honey out of a jar; you simply do it.
15. Your guitar, it sounds so sweet and clear.
16. But you're not really there.
17. It's just the radio.
18. There is a symmetry, an anachronistic-feeling precision to the sounds of the oboe and the drums on "Superstar." The recording feels round, smooth, full, if a song can be described by words like these.
19. Karen was not cool.
20. She was a choirgirl in college. She collected Disney memorabilia and did not believe in women's liberation.
21. Performing "Superstar" on *The Carol Burnett Show*, Karen is wearing yellow taffeta and blue eyeshadow, and her hair is stacked like a small-town bride's. Her mother could have dressed her. Perched behind the drums, she looks flung out of space and time, but once she starts singing, this all falls away, and you're under her sad, dreamy spell.
22. Karen was married for a year and two months. She wanted children, but she never had any. In her wedding pictures, she's smiling like a little girl in dress-up clothes.
23. In 1994, Sonic Youth released their own cover of "Superstar." Thurston Moore sings in that husky whisper of his, cool and cocky and knowing, almost like he's doing a parody of Karen's silky-voiced naïveté. Kim Gordon, perfectly coiffed, looks like she's playing at a high school dance.
24. Years later, when Terry Gross asked Richard Carpenter on *Fresh Air* what he thought of the cover, he said, "Why would I like it?"
25. In a photograph from 1976, Karen is wearing high-rise jeans and a T-shirt that says LEAD SISTER. She's smiling, but this smile is fierce, joyful. Her hair is flying as she absolutely goes to town on the drums, giving her the appearance of a ragdoll.
26. Around this time, Karen's brother was dealing with addiction. Quaaludes, known for their sedative and hypnotic effects, were Richard's drug of choice. This seems strange, considering that he was always in close proximity to a voice famous for the very same things.
27. In 1971, Lester Bangs wrote, in *Rolling Stone*, that the Carpenters had "the most disconcerting collective stage presence" of any band he'd ever seen. I don't know exactly what he meant by this, but I think I agree with him.
28. Karen walks onstage, mic in hand, dressed in red. Her hair, cut into bangs that fall across her forehead in a single shiny piece, seems like a failed attempt at keeping with the times.
29. She's the winner of the talent show, the winner of the beauty pageant, the prom queen, singing her song into a void as deep as purgatory.
30. Baby, baby, baby, baby, oh, baby.
31. I love you.
32. I really do.