

RECORDING REVIEWS

Carole King. *The Legendary Demos*. Hear Music HRM-33681-02, 2012.

Singer-pianist-songwriter Carole King's new release consists of thirteen demonstration recordings (demos) that she made between 1961 and 1970. During that time, King had yet to break as a solo artist, but she was one of the most commercially successful composers of the Brill Building scene, the rock era's version of Tin Pan Alley. Throughout the 1960s, King used multi-track studio techniques and recorded demos of songs that she wrote with lyricists such as her one-time husband, Gerry Goffin, and others. Sometimes recorded with King performing all of the vocal and instrumental tracks, and sometimes with the assistance of studio musicians, these demos were used to shop songs around to various artists, producers, and A&R (artists and repertoire) representatives. Unlike demos made by some of her contemporaries, King's recordings tended to provide full arrangements (occasionally including elaborate multi-tracked vocal harmony arrangements and distinctive instrumental accompaniment figures), and in some cases were so meticulously put together that they could have been released as finished commercial recordings. King's demos therefore went well beyond simply providing the melody, harmonies, and lyrics of the songs (like an aural lead sheet); they provided arrangers and producers with concrete ideas that often were incorporated on the later commercial recordings of the songs.

Copies of King's demos made the rounds of the pop songwriting community throughout the 1960s. They served as examples of solid, successful pop songwriting, but also showed emerging writers how the demo record could be used to influence future arrangements of their songs. Although some of the recordings on this new album were among those that were available to King's peers, and some have appeared from time to time on bootlegs, *The Legendary Demos* is their first commercial release.

Eight of the thirteen tracks date from 1961–67, whereas the other five are 1970 recordings of songs that were issued soon thereafter on King's iconic breakthrough album, *Tapestry*. In most cases, comparison of the demo with the finished product—be it by Bobby Vee, Aretha Franklin, the Monkees, the Everly Brothers, or the Righteous Brothers—reveals few major differences of style, tempo, or arrangement. For example, King's two-part vocal harmony on "Crying in the Rain" both captures the style of earlier Everly Brothers recordings and seems to have served as a strong guide for the Everlys' Top 10 recording of the song. Similarly, the influence of King's multi-tracked, gospel-inspired backing vocals and her lead vocal on "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" can be heard both in Aretha Franklin's hit 1967 version and in King's later version on *Tapestry*. What perhaps is most notable about the relationship between the demos and later released versions of King's compositions is the extent to which the early versions of "You've Got a Friend" and "It's Too Late" resemble the final versions on *Tapestry*.

The one major surprise of this CD is the demo for "Pleasant Valley Sunday." King's version of the song is acoustic guitar-based and in more of a folk-oriented style than the quicker version that became a significant hit for the Monkees. The

famous introductory electric guitar riff from the Monkees' recording was created by producer Chip Douglas and in part defines the song. Even though the guitar figure was not part of Carole King's original vision for "Pleasant Valley Sunday," it is interesting to note that she adopted it when she included the song on her 2004–05 Living Room Tour.

Although the lyrics of the songs are not included, David Browne, a contributing editor for *Rolling Stone*, provides extensive liner notes for the *The Legendary Demos*. Browne discusses King's career as a songwriter during the years 1959–70, her process for creating her demonstration arrangements and recordings, the history of these demo recordings (including studio personnel and other details), and the relationship of the demos to the finished commercial recordings.

Ultimately, the greatest importance of *The Legendary Demos* is as a historical document. The audio fidelity on some of the earlier tracks is not entirely up to snuff—occasionally some of the non-piano instrumental work (e.g. drums) on several of the tracks lacks the clarity, precision, and power that one would expect to hear on a finished commercial recording of the day—and some of the material King composed for other singers is not particularly well suited to her voice and singing style. However, as a document of the detail she provided to producers and artists, as an example of her enormously successful brand of instrumental and vocal arranging, and as a demonstration of her skill as a backing singer, Carole King's *The Legendary Demos* is a success. The April 2012 release of this album roughly coincided with the release of King's memoir, *A Natural Woman* (Grand Central Publishing), and the audio recording is a useful companion to the book, particularly in demonstrating King's work as a composer and arranger during the most successful part of her career.

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Scott Joplin. *Treemonisha*. Paragon Ragtime Orchestra and Singers; Rick Benjamin, conductor. New World Records 80729-2, 2011, 2 CDs.

Readers of music news in 1907 might have been surprised to learn that Scott Joplin, the renowned ragtime composer, was writing an opera: "Scott Joplin has been working a considerable time on a grand opera which will contain music similar to that sung by the negroes during slavery days, the music of today, the negro ragtime, and the music that the negro will use in the future."¹ On completing the opera in late 1910, he tried, unsuccessfully, to interest various publishers in issuing his 230-page work of twenty-seven numbers. Finally, he published it himself, copyrighting

¹ "Scott Joplin," *American Musician and Art Journal*, 17 June 1907, 35.