

Carole King at
the piano, 1971



PERFORMER

CAROLE KING

A PREVIOUS INDUCTEE FOR SONGWRITING, THIS MASTERFUL ARTIST PIONEERED A NEW MUSICAL GENRE IN THE 1970s.

BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

Carole King tried hard to not be a star; in fact, she tried not to be a performer at all. For years, she remained content to squeeze into a cubicle at 1650 Broadway in Manhattan (down the street from the Brill Building) where she and Gerry Goffin cowrote some of the greatest songs in modern musical history. That achievement earned the former married couple their induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1990. But tonight, King becomes one of the first female double inductees for the very career path she'd once sought to avoid: performing.

It took a painful divorce, a cross-country move, a new romance, and a push from close friend James Taylor before King finally embraced the destiny she'd been heading toward since her Brooklyn childhood. A neighbor had even prophesied to the mother of 3-year-old Carol Joan Klein (b. February 9, 1942): "Mark my words . . . someday she'll be famous."

When King decided to really pour her heart and soul into *Tapestry* (1971), her second solo album, she just wanted to make good music with musicians she knew and loved. She did that - in twelve outstanding tracks that seamlessly stitched together folk, blues, rock, soul, gospel, R&B, and jazz elements with sprinkles of honky-tonk sass, all played with relaxed finesse by pros used to syncing together.

But King also made history: The album she crafted is now enshrined in the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry as well as the Grammy Hall of Fame, which also recognized "You've Got a Friend" and "It's Too Late." Those and the other tracks, including "Beautiful,"

"I Feel the Earth Move," "So Far Away," and "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman," still accompany us at milestone events and walks through the grocery store. Mothers pass this album to their daughters; perhaps they also sing along while watching King's 2017 *Live in Hyde Park* concert or the charming *Live at the Troubadour* reunion (2007) featuring King, Taylor, and the backing trio they've shared since their Laurel Canyon days - including guitarist Danny "Kootch" Kortchmar, who introduced them, then recommended her to play on Taylor's career-making *Sweet Baby James*. It was on that very stage, backing Taylor, that King made her first live appearance in 1970. Three years later, she performed for seventy thousand people in Central Park.

Volumes have been written about why *Tapestry* made such a large cultural imprint. It starts with the tunes, of course. On King's seven self-penned tracks, she exposed vulnerabilities and insecurities in ways not many women had before - which also proved incredibly empowering. But she inhabits every song so fully, it's hard to believe that Toni Stern, not King, wrote the lyrics for "It's Too Late." King sings the breakup song as if she's directly addressing her ex-husband. And her version of Goffin-King's "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" so emphasizes its deeply feminine perspective that we still can't quite fathom the fact that Goffin wrote the words.

All of which confirms what a great performer can do with great material. In her 2012 memoir, *A Natural Woman*, King freely admitted she's no Aretha Franklin, Joni Mitchell, or Barbra Streisand. But she added, "I [know] how to convey the mood and emotion of a song



KING'S SOUL-BARING LYRICS WOULD HELP TURN DIRECT, CONFESSIONAL SONGWRITING INTO A GENRE THAT CAME TO DEFINE THE TERM 'SINGER-SONGWRITER.'



with an honest, straight-from-the-heart interpretation.”

She's a master arranger, too, a skill she started developing as a teen. On *Tapestry's* opening track, “I Feel the Earth Move,” King sets the groove immediately, pounding the keys so aggressively, it sounds as if she's trying to wear them out. (In her memoir, King says she did indeed develop her style by banging out her emotional turmoil as her parents' marriage fractured.)

Brandi Carlile, who credits King as an influence, noted in a recent interview, “I'm not a fan of delicate piano players. I like people that really get calluses from it. And I love how heavy-handed she is.” The song's attitude is bold, too; an unambiguous ode to sexual attraction, it also serves notice that King doesn't care what anyone might think about that – any more than she cared what anyone thought when she skipped the 1972 Grammys, which she swept, to stay home with her baby daughter.

King had already learned to ignore musical judgment as early as 1962, when then-boss (and Hall of Famer) Don Kirshner released “It Might as Well Rain Until September” from a demo she made for Bobby Vee. Talked into lip-syncing the single on *American Bandstand*, King got such a low rating that she swore she'd never do anything like that again – but figured she wouldn't have to, because she'd obviously killed all hope for a performing career she didn't want anyway. Then it hit Number 22 on *Billboard's* Hot 100 chart. That was her closest brush with performing success until *Tapestry*.

When “I Feel the Earth Move” arrived in early 1971, women weren't singing so directly about their libidos or emotions. But by moving from suburban New Jersey to Laurel Canyon, L.A.'s laid-back folk-rock mecca, King planted herself in a vortex of alternative psychology and sexual exploration.

Still, she balances that boldness with “Will You Love Me Tomorrow” turning the Shirelles hit – Goffin and King's first Number One – into more of a melancholy plea than a hopeful question, perfectly conveying the tug of war between growing sexual freedom and centuries-old slut-shaming conditioning.

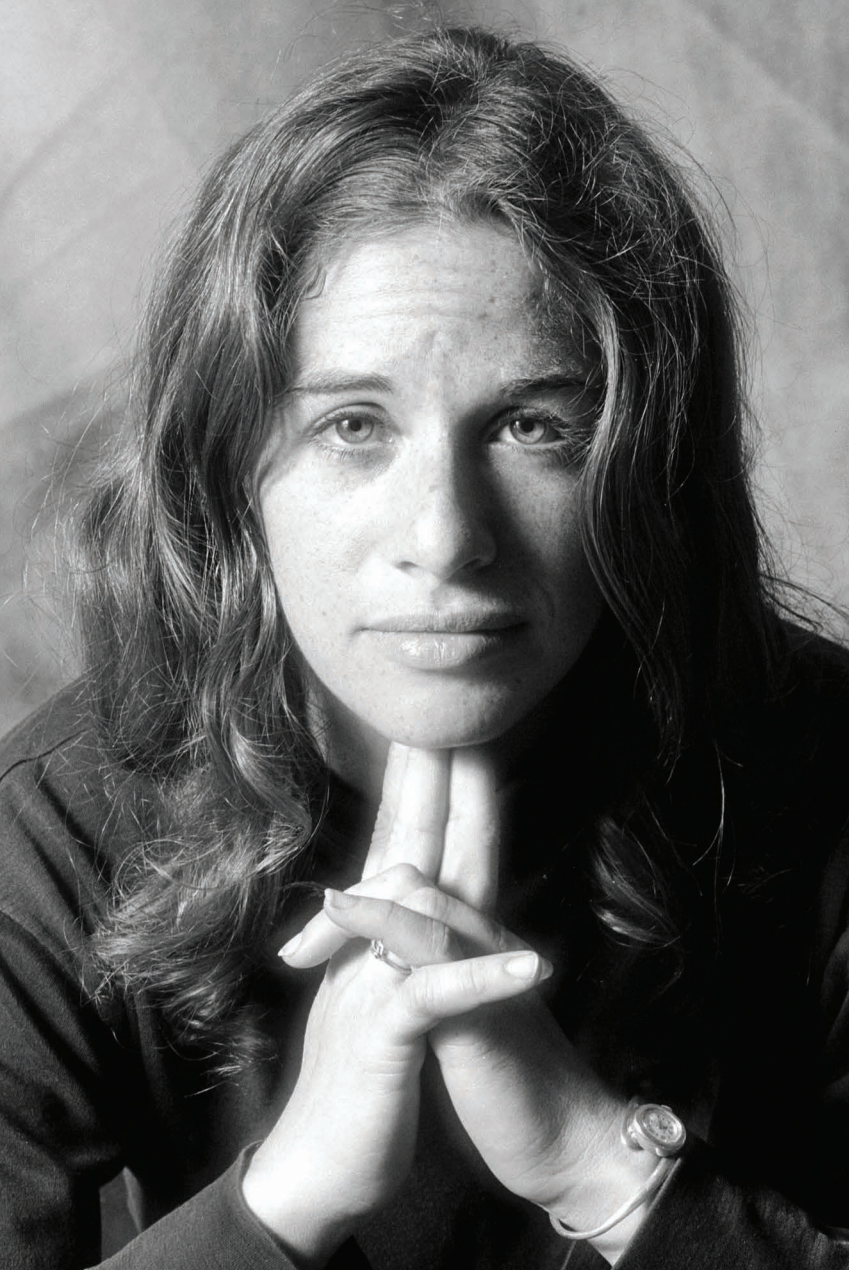
She closes the album with another statement that gains more impact when viewed through a wider lens. On “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman,” King strips Aretha Franklin's hit to its essence, augmenting her voice and piano with just the string bass played by new husband Charles Larkey. With her soulful gospel-blues voice, King easily convinces us she is a natural woman, as non-artificial as it's possible to be in civilization. (Which she would later leave altogether, wintering in an Idaho cabin without indoor plumbing or electricity.)

King's unadorned *Tapestry* cover shot reinforces her unpretentious, earthy appeal. But at the time, “earth” and “natural” were becoming more than lyrical references; such terms also were gaining prominence as awareness about environmental issues began to increase. The notion of getting back to the garden was another manifestation of the full-frontal, naked-truth Woodstock ethos King and her contemporaries embodied. Like Joni Mitchell and James Taylor (both heard on *Tapestry*), Laura Nyro, Jackson Browne, and Carly Simon, King's soul-baring lyrics would help turn direct, confessional songwriting into a genre that came to define the term *singer-songwriter*.

And the messages clearly resonated: Recorded in three weeks in January 1971 and somehow in stores by February 10 (a day after King turned 29), *Tapestry* topped the *Billboard* album chart on June 18, staying there for fifteen consecutive weeks – a record for solo female artists that remains unbroken. And that was without promotion.

Tapestry stayed on that chart for a mind-boggling 302 consecutive weeks, then added sixteen more. King also made history at the 1972 Grammy Awards, becoming the first woman to sweep Album, Record, and Song of the Year (for “You've Got a Friend”), the first solo female to win Record of the Year (for “It's Too Late”), and the first woman to win Song of the Year. To grasp the magnitude of that achievement, consider the other nominees: George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass*, Isaac Hayes' *Shaft*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (London production),

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
King at her Laurel Canyon
home, 1971; at Madison Square
Garden, New York City, 1971;
in A&M Studios, 1970.





and *The Carpenters*. Then consider what didn't get nominated: Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, the Who's *Who's Next*, Joni Mitchell's *Blue*, John Lennon's *Imagine*, the Rolling Stones' *Sticky Fingers*, and Janis Joplin's *Pearl*. For starters.

Rather than basking in glory, King simply plowed into her next effort. She knew she'd never equal *Tapestry's* lightning-in-a-bottle success, but each of King's next five albums hit the *Billboard* Top Ten. Between *Music* in 1971 (Number One) and *Thoroughbred* in 1976 (Number Three), she released *Rhymes & Reasons* (Number Two), *Fantasy* (Number Six), and *Wrap Around Joy* (Number One). Among their hits: "Sweet Seasons," "Jazzman," "Nightingale," "Been to Canaan," and "Only Love Is Real."

Despite her success – which even earned her a 2013 jukebox musical, *Beautiful* – King still doesn't consider



PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Recording *Tapestry* at A&M with
Danny "Kootch" Kortchmar, Russ Kunkel,
Charles Larkey, and Ralph Schuckett
(from left), Los Angeles, 1971; with four
Grammy awards for *Tapestry*, 1972;
with James Taylor and Joni Mitchell, 1971.
THIS PAGE: A shot from the iconic
windowsill shoot, 1971.



herself a star. To her, celebrity is a useful tool for environmental and political activism. But her music still bridges generations, sometimes through pop-cultural connections, such as her 2000 reconfiguring of “Where You Lead” with her oldest daughter, musician Louise Goffin, as the theme song for the TV show *Gilmore Girls*. She also appeared in a few of the show’s episodes and has acted on Broadway and in film.

The accolades keep coming. In 2013, King became the first woman to win the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song; in 2014, she was named MusiCares Person of the Year. She’s also earned Grammy Trustee and Lifetime Achievement awards and induction into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. When King received Kennedy Center Honors in 2015, Aretha Franklin sang “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman”; even watching on TV, the moment felt like history: two titans sharing a song that changed both of their lives. And so many of ours.

On *Rolling Stone*’s third “500 Greatest Albums of All Time” list, published in 2020, *Tapestry* was elevated to Number 25 from Number 36, where it stood in 2003 and 2012. For an artist who helped launch a genre and influenced countless others who followed where she led, it’s one more affirmation that King’s impact has only increased with time – and will resonate for ages to come.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



Tapestry
1971 (Ode)



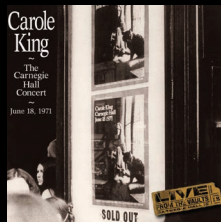
Music
1971 (Ode)



Really Rosie
1975 (Ode)



Pearls: Songs of Goffin and King
1980 (Capitol)



The Carnegie Hall Concert: June 18, 1971
1996 (Legacy)



Live at the Troubadour - Carole King and James Taylor 2010
(Concord/Hear Music)



PREVIOUS PAGE: At the *Today* show's Summer Concert Series, New York City, 2005. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Singing with actor Jessie Mueller, who portrayed King in the musical *Beautiful*, at the Tony Awards, Radio City Music Hall, 2014; as a Kennedy Center honoree, with First Lady Michelle Obama and President Barack Obama, 2015.