

“Tapestry”—Carole King (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Loren Glass (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Carole King

Carole King’s “Tapestry” was released on February 10, 1971. Its iconic gatefold cover, with Jim McCrary’s classic photo of the calmly confident and casually barefoot singer-songwriter comfortably seated with her tapestry in her lap and her cat, Telemachus, on a pillow in the window seat of her Laurel Canyon home, provides a perfect visual and verbal complement to the songs, whose lyrics are featured on the back in a practice only recently inaugurated by “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” and then made *de rigueur* for the singer-songwriters of the seventies. Countless fans--of all genders and ages and ethnicities--have read these lyrics as they listened to this album, etching them into our collective memory. Inside the gatefold is a photo of the tapestry itself, subtly signed with a curling c-shaped length of yarn and featuring a small country house and side building surrounded by trees and animals, a bucolic fantasy King would later rustically realize in the mountains of Idaho. If you look carefully, you can see the words “Thank You” unobtrusively stitched into the bottom right-hand corner; they are addressed to producer Lou Adler, to whom King gave the tapestry as a token of her appreciation. It is flanked by photos of King and her musical collaborators, bassist Charles “Charlie” Larkey, guitarist Danny “Kootch” Kortchmar, drummers Russ Kunkel and Joel O’Brien, back-up singers James Taylor and Joni Mitchell, engineer Hank Cicalo and producer Lou Adler. The inner sleeve is ostentatiously dominated by an enlarged image of Adler’s Ode records trademark, an enormous “O” spiraling into a smaller “D,” which in turn encircles a lower case “e.” The trademark is designed to look like a spindle adaptor, felicitously signifying King’s career move from singles in the sixties to albums in the seventies (indeed on the center label it figures as the “0” in the number 70).

The production of “Tapestry” was a simple affair. Adler wanted to capture the spare clean sound of King’s already legendary demos, which he had been sharing with his friends and colleagues for years. The idea from the beginning was to foreground King, her voice and piano; most tracks were recorded live and few overdubs were done. The atmosphere in Studio B was California casual, with candles and incense burning and (one imagines) the scent of cannabis in the air. King’s daughters dropped in regularly with their friends, creating a comfortable family atmosphere. But if the environment was casual and comfortable, the work ethic was serious and

strict; King knew what she wanted and got it. The entire album was recorded in two weeks and cost about \$26,000 (Adler's accounts vary).

The process was entirely analog, with the sound first being recorded onto multi-track reel-to-reel tape and then cut into a master disk that, in turn, is used to make multiple "mothers" (discs with ridges instead of grooves), the inverse medium from which the vinyl record gets pressed. As King humbly and eloquently summarizes the process, "My job was to create a song and perform it, and then watch in awe as highly skilled people used technology to convey music from microphones to tape, then to a master, a mother, and ultimately a vinyl disc with a label and a hole in the middle." It seems somehow appropriate that the matrix in the middle of this resolutely analog process is called a "mother."

After consulting with King, Adler took the masters to Mexico for sequencing. In order to make an album into a work of art, sequencing is crucial, and Adler had learned from John Phillips how to coordinate the ends and beginnings of songs such that the order feels natural and necessary, the whole becoming more than the sum of its parts, thematically unified and, ideally, telling a story. According to Adler, he sequenced "for the person who was listening at home, alone." The album tells an intimate, personal story, making the listener feel as though the voice is singing to them alone and in confidence.

"Tapestry" is an iconic reminder of the Album Era, of that relatively brief but eventful period between the mid-sixties and the mid-seventies when long-playing records dominated the industry, deeply informing our relationship to popular music. Insofar as it indexes King's graduation from pop singles to (soft) rock albums, "Tapestry" chronicles the inception of the album as a mature work of musical art in which songs are sequenced and covers are designed to tell a story, frequently about growing up. Indeed, rock music itself grew up during this era, and "Tapestry" was an icon of this new cultural maturity and seriousness.

It is also an enduring symbol of and testimony to the women's liberation movement with which it historically coincided. "Tapestry" legitimated women as creative subjects and economic agents in the popular music industry, inspiring and empowering innumerable subsequent careers, from Madonna to Mariah Carey to Lauryn Hill to Amy Winehouse. And, as one of the bestselling albums of all time, it proved that there was a robust and reliable market for these artists, that women were relevant as both producers and consumers of popular music. Just as second-wave feminism irreversibly, if incompletely, transformed personal and professional experience on a global scale, "Tapestry" revolutionized the music business, inaugurating a multi-generational and multicultural cohort of women producers, performers, and purchasers whose solidarity it continues to signify.

And this significance has been part and parcel of a wholesale reappraisal of the female lifecycle. If, before "Tapestry," mainstream understandings of female development focused on marriage and childrearing, girls and women can now envision the varieties of achievement and experience previously restricted to men. Indeed, if "Tapestry" helped to establish the word "woman" as a signifier of sexual maturity and economic agency, it also contributed to reinterpretations of the term "girl" from object to subject, as in "riot grrrl" and "girl power." King's awareness and ownership of this significance is evident in her 2007 composition, "Girl Power," written in

celebration of Mia Hamm's Olympic Gold Medal and performed at the Women's Singles Tennis Final of the 2007 US Open. A testament to Title IX, King has also periodically recirculated it online to remind people of the continuing pay gap in professional sports.

From friendship to feminism, "Tapestry's" legacy endures. If, on the one hand, it is very much of its time, it is also timeless. As a grassroots political movement, women's liberation lasted only a few years, and as a musical movement, the singer-songwriter sound lasted only slightly longer. Both were essentially "over" by 1975, after which Carole King retreated to the mountains of Idaho. But insofar as the struggle for equality continues and the need for love--both erotic and platonic--is never sated, "Tapestry" continues to find friends for whom its messages are both politically and emotionally relevant and resonant.

Loren Glass is Professor of English at the University of Iowa, with a joint appointment in the Center for the Book. He is the author of "Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States" (2004) and "Counter-Culture Colophon: Grove Press, the Evergreen Review and the Incorporation of the Avant-Garde" (2013), and co-editor of the Post45 series.

NOTE: Portions of this essay have been previously published by Bloomsbury Academic.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.