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In the preface to *Why Karen Carpenter Matters*, the third instalment in the University of Texas Press series Music Matters, Karen Tongson draws the reader’s attention to two questions originally posed by Victorian aesthete, Walter Pater: ‘What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on *me*?’ (2010: 3). The sentiments evoked by these questions, which represent Pater’s interest in aesthetic experience and artistic autonomy, underpin Tongson’s examination of the transformational effect of Karen Carpenter’s voice and music. Inspired by Pater, Tongson works to account for the importance of Karen—and to a lesser extent the Carpenters as a band—both in the ‘musical mappings’ of her own life and in popular music cultures more broadly (p. xiii). Tongson’s text draws on a biographical framework to elucidate her argument, combining a reflective, memoir style with history, critical and queer analysis, and musical interpretation. Focusing on the movement between contrasting musical geographies—including the band’s enduring popularity in the author’s birthplace, the Philippines—Tongson brings an ‘international outlook’ to the study of the Carpenters to unravel the complexities of the ‘real and conjured histories’ that permeate Karen Carpenter’s iconicity (pp. xii, xiv).

In Chapter 1, Tongson creates two narrative strands that establish the contextual and methodological foundation for her text: one provides biographical details of Karen’s life and another recounts pertinent moments from her own biography. The oscillation between biographical narratives is fundamental to Tongson’s overarching agenda as it enables her to identify points of overlap between distinct historical, cultural and musical moments. This approach also allows Tongson to isolate key themes, concepts and ideals—for instance, the ideologies of normalcy, heterosexuality and the fantasy of white, American suburbia—that have dominated the band’s reception. Drawing into her discussion the complexity of musical genre, production
technique and Karen’s singing style, Tongson identifies moments of tension, aberrance, longing and desire that compromise the polished perfectionism with which the band is typically associated, and she expands upon these contradictory narratives as the chapters progress.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Tongson traces Karen’s musical background, from her ‘discovery of the drums’ to her role as the singer and drummer in the Carpenters (p. 25). She highlights Karen’s virtuosity and the then rarity of female drummers to demonstrate the subversion of music industry stereotypes and the centrality of Karen’s drumming and singing style in the development of the Carpenter sound. Through these explorations, Tongson highlights the complexity of public and private lives, showing how the Carpenters’ home life influenced the band’s dynamic. Amidst these arguments, Tongson offers two striking moments of insight. The first, in Chapter 2, is Tongson’s fictionalized interpretation of the high school crush that led to Karen learning the drums. This ‘jukebox musical’ is testament to the influence of Karen upon Tongson, and its poetic rendering, with each scene interrupting the main body of the text, eloquently articulates the connections that bind artists to their listeners (p. 26). The second occurs in Chapter 3, where Tongson gives a meticulous account of how the Carpenters’ performance and musical style intersect with wider musical scenes. Drawing on Stoever’s work (2016), Tongson identifies a ‘sonic color line’ in the Carpenters’ music, where little reference to musics of black origin permeates their sound (p. 51). The author shows how this delimitation manifests through composition techniques and came to reflect the band’s expression of American suburban life. In recalling the intersections of the Carpenter sound with both her child and adult selves, Tongson shows how their music transcended cultural differences to communicate possibility and hope beyond the expression of a specific time and place.

Allowing her listening experience and personal history to impact her interpretations of the Carpenters, Tongson claims a counter-narrative in the band’s song catalogue, one which realizes that the possibilities of the American dream are impossibilities. In Chapter 4, Tongson elucidates this argument and her account of the song ‘Goodbye to Love’ is particularly salient, specifically its importance in the development of the power ballad subgenre of rock. Tongson draws the reader’s ear to the song’s multiple musical environments to claim it as the ‘quintessential Carpenter song’, with ‘yearning fashioned from genres of the past, yet striving to make its mark on a future’ (p. 70). It is difficult not to be persuaded by Tongson’s argument for the persistent flux between contradictory elements in the Carpenters’ songs; however, it is her personal reflections on seeking the American dream following her family’s move to the States whilst longing for the familiarity of the Philippines that are particularly emphatic. These passages of self-reflection strengthen
Tongson’s recognition of moments that subvert and contradict the narratives of ‘exemplary normalcy’ that surround the Carpenters and impact their reception (p. 61).

In Chapter 5, Tongson expands her previous consideration of public persona and private life through an examination of Karen’s ‘secret struggle’ with anorexia and the perception of her illness both in the media and in fan communities (p. 75). This is one of Tongson’s most arresting discussions and her account is considered and sympathetic. She addresses the common assertion that Karen’s anorexia was triggered by the lack of affection she received from her mother, and in highlighting the misogynist tone of these narratives seeks other contributing factors. Drawing on contemporaneous psychological and medical studies into gender presentation and anorexia, Tongson speculates that Karen’s anorexia was an attempt to reclaim the ‘tomboyish androgyny’ of her childhood and resist the demand for perfection (pp. 83–84). An insightful paragraph compares the media treatment of Karen to that of Mama Cass, highlighting how each artist failed at femininity due to the extremities of excess. Whilst brief, Tongson shows how female artists were often held to ransom by a ‘minutely calibrated’ presentation of femininity that created standards of normalcy and influenced media expectations (p. 91). The material in this chapter is challenging; however, in emphasizing how Karen is embraced by queer listeners, Tongson demonstrates the ways in which a troubled relationship to heteronormative structures of gender can lead to the posthumous forging of musical communities that celebrate diverse expressions of selfhood beyond the constraints of expectation.

In the penultimate chapter, Tongson details the Carpenters’ post-imperial phase, during which their popularity waned with American audiences but sustained international appeal. Tongson’s discussion highlights the complexities of shifting musical tastes versus artistic ambition and the Carpenters’ struggle to move with evolving musical cultures and embrace new song-writing practices. Tongson’s account of Karen’s solo album—which incorporated influences from black music genres—shows how her attempt at musical autonomy was quashed by the expectations of the Carpenters’ legacy and record label management strategies. For the remainder of the text, Tongson further attends to Karen’s afterlife in contrasting geographical and cultural circumstances. Her examination of two ‘Karen Carpenters of the Philippines’ is a compelling illustration of how Karen achieved expressive freedom and reanimation, albeit posthumously, through voices, bodies and communities that negate the white, cisgender middle-class American ideal she was seen to represent. The various examples that Tongson presents in these final chapters illustrate the complexity of artist iconicity, where the fantasies and myths that haunt listeners and fans permeate and disturb history, even after an artist’s death.
More detailed musical analysis could enhance some of Tongson’s interpretations, particularly at moments where she writes of the complexity of the Carpenters sound and the translation of a particular time and space into music (e.g., pp. 10, 20, 21, 52, 69). Similarly, there are several instances where Tongson supports her interpretations with theoretical discourse—for instance Stoever’s ‘sonic color line’ (2016) and Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’ (2011)—which warrant expansion. Understanding that the intention of the Music Matters series is to provide short texts with far-reaching insights, such expansion was likely not possible and it is testament to Tongson’s interpretations that she leaves her readers wanting more. Overall, this is a text to be admired; it is intricate, ambitious and persuasive. Tongson revels in the complexity of her subject, showing how popular music artists nurture their fans to transcend cultural and political divides. It is a humbling experience to be granted access to the dialogue Tongson initiates with Karen, and it is one that reaches beyond the personal to reflect upon the centrality of popular music artists in the formation of individual and collective identities. If, inspired by Pater, Tongson set out to explore why Karen Carpenter matters to her, she has exceeded her goal and has demonstrated why Karen Carpenter should matter to us all.

References