

## The Monday book review



Carole King tells the story of her music career, from child singer to bestselling songwriter and performer, with a modesty that belies the brilliance of her achievements, writes **Cerys Matthews**

# A rich and talented tapestry of a life

**Y**es! yes! no! NO! yes, NO! It was like the sounds of a cheap motel liaison when reading *A Natural Woman*, the memoirs of the American singer-songwriter and pianist Carole King. In my mind that is, as she took me through the major chapters in her life, three marriages, four children, an abusive relationship with a drug addict, I couldn't help but be encouraging the good decisions while willing her to say "no, no, no" to the not so good. I suppose it can hit so close to home when you go figure how this talented, intelligent, financially solvent female songwriter could get relationships so wrong.

King's book is an honest account, sometimes so humble that it becomes easy to lose sight of the wonder and distinction of her writing gifts — hits from Little Eva's (and Kylie's) *Locomotion*, Aretha's (*You make me feel like*) *A Natural Woman*, the Drifters' *Up on the Roof*, the Byrds' *Wasn't Born to Follow* to *Will You Love Me Tomorrow?* and all the other songs on the classic album *Tapestry*. This is how she explains away her role (beautiful and perfectly imagined chords and melody) on the song *A Natural Woman* "... a recording that moves people is never



*A Natural Woman*  
Carole King

VIRAGO  
496PP  
£20\*



On song:  
Cerys  
Matthews

just about the artist and the songwriters. It's about people like Jerry [Wexler] and Ahmet [Ertegun, Atlantic Records], who matched the songwriters with a great title and a gifted artist; Arif Mardin, whose magnificent orchestral arrangement ... Tom Dowd, whose engineering skills captured the magic ... She goes on to credit everyone else, including the marketing people. I wanted to say: "Carole King! Yell it from that rooftop! You wrote those incredible chords and melody, take the credit, it's your due!"

Gerry Goffin, Carole's first husband and father of two children, was responsible for the lyrics of this song, and one of the most poignant moments comes with the dignified account of their split. Carole, on returning to their marital home after the divorce, and reflecting on the space where their furniture used to be, heard the door bell ring one last time. It played the melody of the hit they'd written together. *But will you love me tomorrow?*

So few females have achieved this level of songwriting and respect that it gives an unusual perspective for a musician's autobiography. Where some come soaked in testosterone, a rock'n'roll, smoke-addled, hungover, groupie-loving, party-animal, boasting kind of bark, this book, despite taking us through the free love and drug-experimenting 60s, has a very cosy Jewish moma's voice: the naming of the family's fat cat, and



Carole King recording a demo, circa 1959

counting the fingers and toes of her first grandchild, "ten, twenty, yes, all there!" At times it feels as if you are present in the hypnotherapist's room, hearing the childhood memories, of her being a four-year-old at the piano, of discovering that she had relative pitch and of her dad enjoying this talent and showing it off to visiting friends. Then there came her first kiss, and her visits to watch performers such as Screamin' Jay Hawkins and Little Richard as a teenager.

We move with her family from

Brooklyn, to New York, to LA, to Idaho. We move back to LA, and somewhere we get to feel small under the giant Californian redwoods, but then there are those stories. If you've ever wanted to walk alongside a world-class musician as she writes, arranges, records, mixes, masters and tours, here's your start point.

Here you'll learn about writing as a record company team member, about pre-show rituals, about jamming on pot and how it affects your ear. How it feels to hear the greatest singers in the world singing your songs. You'll hear tales of Herb Alpert, the Doors, Jerry Wexler, Ahmet Ertegun, Dizzie Gillespie, Jimi Hendrix. There's the account of falling off stage after a Bob Dylan show in Dublin, of sharing a favourite chord with Brian Wilson, of David Crosby biking around Laurel Canyon with cape flying, and of studio time with James Taylor, the Carpenters and Joni Mitchell.

So well worth the read. Just be wary not to be found singing too loudly, too badly and in public, as you are reminded of those songs ... "You just call out my name, and you know wherever I am I'll come running, oh yeah baby, to see you again ... all together now? ... YES! Yes! NO! NO! Yes? Well, erm, maybe later. Cerys Matthews presents Cerys on 6 on BBC Radio 6 Music, Sundays, 10am-12pm, [bbc.co.uk/6music](http://bbc.co.uk/6music)

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