

Cindy Walker: Trailblazer for Women

Cindy Walker built her remarkable songwriting career in the 1940s and 1950s—an amazing feat at a time when men were the leading songwriters. Even today, Walker, who died in 2006, is considered the greatest female songwriter of country music. But when she and fellow songwriter Harlan Howard entered the Country Music Hall of Fame together in 1997, Howard offered even higher praise, calling her country music’s “greatest living songwriter.”

Born on a farm near Mart, Texas, on July 20, 1918, Walker was taught how to sing and dance by her mother, a skilled pianist. At age twelve, Walker began composing songs on a guitar, and by her teens, she was performing on stage professionally.

In 1940, Walker accompanied her parents on a business trip to Los Angeles and talked her way into a song audition with Bing Crosby, one of the most popular singers of the 20th century, and Crosby bought the tune. The family soon moved to Hollywood so Walker could pursue her career, and more sales quickly followed.

“Waltzes, jaunty western swing numbers, clever pop tunes, tear-stained ballads—whatever she wrote had a rightness about it,” music journalist Lydia Hutchinson writes.

In 1954, Walker and her widowed mother moved to tiny Mexia, Texas, where she continued songwriting. Each year the two made lengthy visits to Nashville so Walker could show her work to recording executives and performers.

“I wrote until the song was pleased with itself and I was, too,” she said. “If a song didn’t like its words, I’d work until I got it perfect. You have to give every song a face, like a melody or a hookline, so you remember it—just like I’ll remember you by your face.”



Dozens of her songs found a place on the Top Forty country and pop charts, and she had a Top Ten hit in every decade from the 1940s through the 1980s.

Walker died at age eighty-seven on March 23, 2006, in Mexia after a long illness. Though considered a hero by the many women who have followed in her career path, Walker did not give much thought to her pioneering role.

“I have no idea why there weren’t other women songwriters,” she said of her era. “I never did have trouble with the artists because they wanted the same thing I did: They wanted a hit. That’s how they made their living, and they didn’t care who wrote the songs, whether it was a man, woman, or monkey.”

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *The New York Times*, *Performing Songwriter*, *Texas Monthly*

LISTEN:

Some of Cindy Walker’s songs made popular by other artists:

“Distant Drums” (Jim Reeves)

“Dream Baby (How Long Must I Dream)” (Roy Orbison)

“I Don’t Care” (Webb Pierce, Ricky Skaggs)

“In the Misty Moonlight” (Jim Reeves, Dean Martin)

“Sugar Moon” (Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys)

“You Don’t Know Me” (Eddy Arnold, Ray Charles)