

Cindy Walker: Trailblazer for Women

Cindy Walker's remarkable songwriting career is all the more extraordinary because she built it during the 1940s and 1950s – an era when the field was virtually closed to women. Even today, Walker, who died in 2006, is generally considered the greatest female songwriter of country music. But when she and fellow tunesmith Harlan Howard were inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame together in 1997, Howard offered even higher praise, calling her country music's "greatest living songwriter."

Walker was born July 20, 1918, on a farm near Mart, Texas, and she was taught how to sing and dance by her mother, a skilled pianist. "But," Walker recalled, "she didn't need to teach me much because it was just sort of natural with me." She began composing songs on a guitar at age twelve, and by her teens, she was performing on stage professionally.

When she was twenty-two, 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. It was all the encouragement Walker and her parents needed, and they moved to Hollywood so she could pursue her career. More sales followed quickly, particularly due to Bob Wills, the "King of Western Swing," who recorded more than fifty of her compositions.

"Her songs are simple and elegant, and sound like they were plucked whole from the ether," music journalist Lydia Hutchinson writes. "Waltzes, jaunty western swing numbers, clever pop tunes, tear-stained ballads—whatever she wrote had a rightness about it, matching conversational lyrics with memorable melodies."

In 1954, Walker and her widowed mother moved to tiny Mexia, Texas, where she continued songwriting, but the two made lengthy visits to Nashville so Walker could pitch her



songs, which she called her "babies." She often customized songs according to singers' requests. "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."

Walker notched dozens of hits on the Top Forty country and pop charts, and she had a Top Ten hit in every decade from the 1940s through the 1980s. "You Don't Know Me," perhaps her signature song, has been recorded by more than seventy-five artists.

Walker died at age eighty-seven on March 23, 2006, in Mexia after a long illness. Though considered a hero by the thousands of women who have followed in her career path, Walker never dwelled on 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)

READ:

Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music 1800-2000 by Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann (The Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 2003):

The authors describe Walker's success as a songwriter and film star in Hollywood, as well as her close relationship with her mother, Oree.