

CINDY WALKER

TRAILBLAZER FOR WOMEN

Cindy Walker built her songwriting career in the 1940s and 1950s—an amazing feat at a time when men were the leading songwriters. When she and fellow songwriter Harlan Howard entered the Country Music Hall of Fame together in 1997, he called 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 Oree. At age twelve, Walker began composing songs on guitar; by her teens, she was performing on stage professionally. In 1940, Walker accompanied her parents on a business trip to Los Angeles. There, she talked her way into a meeting with Bing Crosby, one of the most popular singers and actors of the twentieth century. She sang a song she wrote for him called “Lone Star Trail” and an impressed Crosby recorded it. The family soon moved to Hollywood so Walker could pursue her songwriting career. One of her regular customers was another Texan: western swing artist Bob Wills, for whom she wrote more than fifty songs.

In 1954, Walker and her mother moved to tiny Mexia, Texas, where she continued songwriting. Each year the two made lengthy visits to Nashville so Walker, accompanied by her mother on piano, 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.”



Walker often tailored her compositions to fit the musical styles of specific singers. Dozens of Walker’s songs made 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. Though considered a hero by the many women who have followed 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.”

In her will, Walker left her songs to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Her typewriter is displayed on the museum’s third floor.

SOURCES

Encyclopedia of Country Music; the New York Times; Performing Songwriter; Texas Monthly