

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. Today, she is generally considered the greatest female songwriter of country music. But when she and fellow tunesmith Harlan Howard were both inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1997, he offered even higher praise, calling her country music’s “greatest living songwriter.”

Walker was born July 20, 1917, on a farm near Mart, Texas, and 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.” Walker began composing songs on a guitar at age twelve, and by her teens, she was performing on stage professionally.

In 1940, the twenty-two-year-old Walker accompanied her parents on a business trip to Los Angeles and auditioned one of her songs for Bing Crosby, one of the most popular singers of the twentieth century, and Crosby bought the song. It was all the encouragement Walker needed, and she soon moved to Hollywood to pursue her career. More sales quickly followed, particularly to Bob Wills, the “King of Western Swing,” who recorded more than fifty of Walker’s 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, who was her music arranger, moved to tiny Mexia, Texas, where Walker continued songwriting. The two made lengthy visits to Nashville to pitch her songs, which Walker 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 explained. “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.”

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LISTEN

The artists noted below recorded definitive versions of these Cindy Walker songs:

“You Don’t Know Me” (Ray Charles), “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)

CINDY WALKER: TRAILBLAZER FOR WOMEN (CONTINUED)

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

Walker died March 23, 2006, at age eighty-seven, 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.”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In the seventh paragraph, what does the word “dwelled” mean in this context? Circle the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning, and on the lines below, define the term in your own words.

2. In your opinion, what did Lydia Hutchinson mean when she wrote that Walker’s songs were “plucked whole from the ether?” Explain in your own words.

3. How did Walker explain her success as a woman in a male-dominated field? Explain her perspective.
