

# Cindy Walker

Cindy Walker, prolific and influential songwriter, was born on July 20, 1918 near Mart, Texas. Her father was a cotton-broker, but music ran in the family on her mother's side. Her maternal grandfather, who composed hymns, may have been her earliest influence as a songwriter, and her mother was a singer and pianist.

Walker's early interest was in poetry, but she began a theatrical career at age ten, appearing in a traveling vaudeville production called the "Toyland Revue." She taught singing and dancing and began writing songs before she was in her teens. In 1936, she became part of the singing and dancing chorus for Casa Mañana, the immense dinner theater revue mounted by the legendary Billy Rose for the Ft. Worth site of the Texas Centennial celebration. Walker reportedly wrote a song entitled "Casa Mañana," which bandleader Paul Whiteman adopted as the theme for the radio broadcast from the nightclub after he heard her singing it.

Following an unsuccessful marriage, at age 22 Walker returned to her parents, who settled in Phoenix, Arizona. She accompanied her parents on a business trip to Los Angeles in 1940. While driving down Sunset Boulevard, she noticed Bing Crosby's office building and insisted that her parents stop the car so she could run in with her briefcase full of songs. Walker talked the receptionist into letting her in to see Crosby's brother Larry, who agreed to allow her to sing one song for him. Walker chose to play a song called "Lone Star Trail." Larry Crosby took her to Paramount Studios the next day, where she played "Lone Star Trail" for Crosby and music composer/publisher Lester Santly. Crosby asked to record it, Santly asked to publish it, and after recording a demo of the song for Dave Kapp of Decca Records, her vibrant singing voice won her a recording contract. Crosby's recording of "Lone Star Trail" became a top-ten hit.

In 1941, when Bob Wills returned to Hollywood to film *Go West Young Lady*, Walker saw the Texas Playboys tour bus parked on a street. The determined young songwriter, who had intended to mail an envelope of songs to Wills in Tulsa, seized her chance with customary zeal. "I knew he had to be in Hollywood, so I started calling all the hotels," she recalled. Bing Crosby's recording of "Lone Star Trail" had been a success the year before, and so Wills agreed to meet with her, thus beginning a collaboration that would last for decades. In Wills's session on July 24, 1941, he recorded four of Walker's songs, "Bluebonnet Lane," "Cherokee Maiden," "It's All Your Fault," and "Dusty Skies."

When Wills signed with Columbia pictures to appear in eight Russell Hayden western musical films, he hired Walker to provide all of the songs he would perform in them. Off-screen, from 1942 to 1944, he favored Walker's less overtly western contributions such as "Miss Molly" and "That Hot Lick Fiddlin' Man," which he co-wrote. He also continued to record other of

Walker's non-western songs that were not featured in his films, such as "Sugar Moon" and "Honeymoon Trail."

Walker's movie-star looks and dynamic presence made her a natural for film, and within months, she appeared as "Singer Cindy" in two films, Gene Autry's *Ride, Tenderfoot Ride*, and a Don "Red" Barry feature called *Frontier Vengeance*. The Decca recording contract led to Walker recording several songs with Texas Jim Lewis and His Lone Star Cowboys, including "Seven Beers with the Wrong Man" in 1941, for which she also filmed a short musical movie, or "soundie." Although she made one more "soundie" in 1944, Walker's true art and calling was songwriting, and she focused her energies on that, choosing to leave all the "artist work" behind.

Her choice to focus on songwriting yielded significant results, and in addition to writing for film, her songs were becoming more and more in demand by recording artists. In 1948 three of her songs became hits including "Take Me in Your Arms and Love Me," recorded by Eddy Arnold, "Oklahoma Waltz," recorded by Johnny Bond, and "Warm Red Wine," recorded by fellow Texan Ernest Tubb. In 1952 Hank Snow had a hit with her song "The Gold Rush is Over."

In 1954 Walker moved back to Texas, to the town of Mexia, near her birthplace of Mart. She continued writing songs, and in 1955 Eddy Arnold suggested the song-title "You Don't Know Me." Walker composed a song using that title, and Arnold recorded the first of many versions of what has come to be a classic. Recorded by Elvis Presley, Van Morrison, Patti Page, Roy Orbison, Kenny Rogers and Emmylou Harris, perhaps the most widely known version of "You Don't Know Me" is Ray Charles's 1962 recording, from his smash album *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music*.

1962 brought Walker yet another genre-breaking smash hit, when Roy Orbison's recording of her song "Dream Baby (How Long Must I Dream)" topped the charts both in the US and in Europe. She continued to pen hits, and in the 1970s her songs were discovered by a new generation of country artists, including Ricky Skaggs, Mickey Gilley, Asleep at the Wheel, and many more. Never confined to one genre, Walker's songs have been recorded by pop and rock artists including Bette Midler, the Byrds, Cher and Michael Bolton. Willie Nelson released an album consisting entirely of Cindy Walker's songs in 2006.

In 1970 Walker was one of the first generation inducted into the Nashville Songwriters' Hall of Fame. She was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1997, and into the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame in 1998.. In 2001 the Country Music Television network counted her among the 40 Greatest Women in Country Music.

Walker became ill in early 2006, and died at age 87 on March 23, 2006. She was buried in the Mexia City Cemetery, where the songwriter and her work are honored with a memorial sculpture of a pink-granite guitar.

