

# Marijohn Wilkin

Country Music Hall of Fame songwriter and publisher; b. Marijohn Melson in Kemp, Texas, July 14, 1920; d. Nashville, Tennessee, October 28, 2006. She was dubbed “the Den Mother of Music Row,” because she helped so many younger songwriters during her career. Wilkin was the daughter of Ernest and Karla Melson and grew up in Sanger, Texas, just north of Dallas, where she learned to play the piano at an early age.

Wilkin’s father, a baker and musician, died of cancer when she was only thirteen years old. After graduating from high school, she attended Baylor University in Waco. However, she soon transferred to Hardin Simmons University in Abilene, where she joined the renowned Cowboy Dance Band, thereby giving her the opportunity to travel around the country. While in Abilene, Wilkin also met and married Bedford Russell, although he died soon afterward during World War II.

After earning a B.A. in English in 1941, Wilkin moved to Lovington, New Mexico, where she became a schoolteacher. She also remarried and had a son, John Buck, whom she nicknamed “Bucky.” However, she soon divorced and moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she worked as a teacher, began writing songs, and eventually married Art Wilkin.

In 1955, Red Foley, a musician and talent scout from the *Ozark Jubilee* network TV show, heard Wilkin’s son, Bucky, playing the guitar and helped book him on another TV show called *Junior Jubilee*. The family soon relocated to Springfield, Missouri, where the show was taped. While in Missouri, Marijohn began working in a piano bar and singing with Red Foley’s road show.

In 1958, a booking agent named Lucky Moeller heard Wilkin performing in the piano bar and persuaded her to move to Nashville. At first, she performed in the Voo Doo Room piano bar on Printers Alley but then began working for Cedarwood Publishing Company, owned by Jim Denny. By 1959, Wilkin had made a name for herself as a songsmith by writing or co-writing numerous hits, including “Long Black Veil,” “Cut Across Shorty,” “Grin and Bear It,” “P.T. 109,” and “Waterloo.” By 1963, she managed to have an average of one of her songs per week recorded by other artists.

In 1964, Wilkin started her own publishing company, Buckhorn Music, named after her son. In 1965, she signed a relatively unknown young songwriter named Kris Kristofferson to the publishing firm. After divorcing her third husband, she met record producer Clarence Selman, who helped her form the Nashville Songwriters Association in 1967. However, after writing only a couple songs with Selman, the couple divorced.

The stress of long hours at work, coupled with alcohol and substance abuse, left Wilkin depressed, and she twice tried to take her own life. By the late 1960s, she had fled to Europe to escape the career pressures she faced in the United States. When she returned to Nashville a few years later, she decided to confront her problems through religious faith, rather than drugs and alcohol. In 1974, she and Kris Kristofferson co-authored the tune "One Day at a Time," which became a Number One hit for Christy Lane in 1980 and has since been recorded by over two hundred artists. Wilkin's success with "One Day at a Time," helped her launch a successful stint as a gospel music songwriter.

Throughout her career, Wilkin wrote songs for a diverse group of musicians, including Lefty Frizzell, Stonewall Jackson, Patsy Cline, Jimmy Dean, Eddie Cochran, Johnny Cash, Rod Stewart, Joan Baez, LeAnn Rimes, and others. In 1975, Wilkin was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in honor of her achievements as one of the most successful early female publishers and songwriters. In 2005, she was honored by the SOURCE Organization as a pioneering Music Row businesswoman.

Following a series of heart problems, Wilkin underwent triple bypass surgery in 2003. However, the procedure failed to correct the condition and left her ineligible for a subsequent operation. On October 28, 2006, Wilkin died of heart disease in Nashville at the age of 86. She is buried at Woodlawn Memorial Park in Nashville. Survivors include her son, John Buck Wilkin.

*Erinn Park*