

Rod McKuen

Rodney Marvin McKuen (April 29, 1933 – January 29, 2015) was an American poet, singer-songwriter, and actor. He was one of the best-selling poets in the United States during the late 1960s. Throughout his career, McKuen produced a wide range of recordings, which included popular music, spoken word poetry, film soundtracks and classical music. He earned two Academy Award nominations and one Pulitzer nomination for his music compositions. McKuen's translations and adaptations of the songs of Jacques Brel were instrumental in bringing the Belgian songwriter to prominence in the English-speaking world. His poetry deals with themes of love, the natural world and spirituality. McKuen's songs sold over 100 million recordings worldwide, and 60 million books of his poetry were sold as well.

Early years

McKuen was born on April 29, 1933, in a Salvation Army hostel in Oakland, California. He never knew his biological father, who had left his mother. Sexually and physically abused by relatives, raised by his mother and stepfather, who was a violent alcoholic, McKuen ran away from home at the age of 11. He drifted along the West Coast, supporting himself as a ranch hand, surveyor, railroad worker, lumberjack, rodeo cowboy, stuntman, and radio disc jockey, always sending money home to his mother.

To compensate for his lack of formal education, McKuen began keeping a journal, which resulted in his first poetry and song lyrics. After dropping out of Oakland Technical High School prior to graduating in 1951, McKuen worked as a newspaper columnist and propaganda script writer during the Korean War. He settled in San Francisco, where he read his poetry in clubs alongside Beat poets like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. He began performing as a folk singer at the famed Purple Onion. Over time, he began incorporating his own songs into his act. He was signed to Decca Records and released several pop albums in the late 1950s. McKuen also appeared as an actor in *Rock, Pretty Baby* (1956), *Summer Love* (1958), and the western *Wild Heritage* (1958). He also sang with Lionel Hampton's band. In 1959, McKuen moved to New York City to compose and conduct music for the TV show *The CBS Workshop*. McKuen appeared on *To Tell The Truth* on June 18, 1962 as a decoy contestant and described himself as "a published poet and a twist singer."

Discovering Jacques Brel

In the early 1960s, McKuen moved to France, where he first met the Belgian singer-songwriter and chanson singer Jacques Brel. McKuen began to translate the work of this composer into English, which led to the song "If You Go Away" – an international pop-standard – based on Brel's "Ne me quitte pas". McKuen translated Brel's song "Le Moribond" loosely into "Seasons in the Sun", and British folkbeat group The Fortunes charted with the song in the Netherlands in 1969. In 1974, singer Terry Jacks turned McKuen's "Seasons in the Sun", into a best-selling pop hit, and also charted with a cover of "If You Go Away." McKuen also translated songs by other French songwriters, including Georges Moustaki, Gilbert Bécaud, Pierre Delanoé, Michel Sardou, and others.

In 1978, after hearing of Brel's death, McKuen was quoted as saying, "As friends and as musical collaborators we had traveled, toured and written – together and apart – the events of our lives as if they were songs, and I guess they were. When news of Jacques' death came I stayed locked in my bedroom and drank for a week. That kind of self-pity was something he wouldn't have approved of, but all I could do was replay our songs (our children) and ruminate over our unfinished life together."

Poetry

In the late 1960s, McKuen began to publish books of poetry, earning a substantial following among young people with collections like *Stanyan Street & Other Sorrows* (1966), *Listen to the Warm* (1967), and *Lonesome Cities* (1968). His *Lonesome Cities* album of readings won a Grammy for Best Spoken Word Recording in 1968. McKuen's poems were translated into eleven languages and his books sold over 1 million copies in 1968 alone. McKuen said that his most romantic poetry was influenced by American poet Walter Benton's two books of poems. McKuen sold over 60 million books worldwide, according to the Associated Press.

Songwriting

McKuen wrote over 1,500 songs, which have accounted for the sale of over 100 million records worldwide according to the Associated Press. His songs have been performed by such diverse artists as Robert Goulet, Glenn Yarbrough, Barbra Streisand, Perry Como, Petula Clark, Waylon Jennings, The Boston Pops, Chet Baker, Jimmie Rodgers, Johnny Cash, Pete Fountain, Andy Williams, the Kingston Trio, Percy Faith, the London Philharmonic, Nana Mouskouri, Dusty Springfield, Johnny Mathis, Al Hirt, Greta Keller, Aaron Freeman, and Frank Sinatra.

In 1959, McKuen released his first novelty single with Bob McFadden, under the pseudonym Dor on the Brunswick label, called "The Mummy". The McKuen-written song reached No. 39 on the *Billboard* pop chart. In 1961, he had a hit single titled "Oliver Twist". He co-wrote it along with Gladys Shelley and the Spiral label-issued single reached No. 76 on the *Billboard* pop chart. His hoarse and throaty singing voice on these and other recordings was a result of McKuen straining his vocal cords in 1961, due to too many promotional appearances.

He collaborated with numerous composers, including Henry Mancini, John Williams, and Anita Kerr. His symphonies, concertos, and other orchestral works have been performed by orchestras around the globe. His work as a composer in the film industry garnered him two Academy Award nominations for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) and *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* (1969), and his other film scores have included *Joanna* (1968), *Me, Natalie* (1969), *Scandalous John* (1971), *The Borrowers* (1973) and *Emily* (1976). McKuen's contribution to *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*, the first feature-length animation based on Charles M. Schulz's comic strip, *Peanuts*, also included singing the title song. McKuen also earned a mention in the *Peanuts* strip dated October 3, 1969, in which Sally Brown expresses her frustration that she was sent to the principal's office for an outburst in art class, opining that Pablo Picasso and Rod McKuen surely must have had trouble drawing cows' legs when they were young.

In 1967, McKuen began collaborating with arranger Anita Kerr and the San Sebastian Strings for a series of albums featuring McKuen's poetry recited over Kerr's mood music, including *The Sea* (1967), *The Earth* (1967), *The Sky* (1968), *Home to the Sea* (1969), *For Lovers* (1969), and *The Soft*

Sea (1970). Jesse Pearson was the narrator of *The Sea* and its follow-ups *Home to the Sea* and *The Soft Sea*, while most other albums in the series had McKuen narrating. In 1969, Frank Sinatra commissioned an entire album of poems and songs by McKuen; arranged by Don Costa, it was released under the title *A Man Alone: The Words and Music of Rod McKuen*. The album featured the song "Love's Been Good to Me", which became one of McKuen's best-known songs.

McKuen performed solo in a half-hour special broadcast by NBC on May 10, 1969. The program, billed as McKuen's "first television special", featured the songs "The Loner", "The World I Used to Know", "The Complete Madame Butterfly", "I've Been to Town", "Kaleidoscope", "Stanyan Street", "Lonesome Cities", "Listen to the Warm", "Trashy", and "Merci Beaucoup". It was produced by Lee Mendelson, producer of the *Peanuts* specials, and directed by Marty Pasetta. James Trittipio designed a set that was "evocative of waterfront pilings" and Arthur Greenslade conducted the orchestra. In 1971, he hosted a series, *The Rod McKuen Show*, on BBC television in the UK.

McKuen's Academy Award-nominated composition "Jean", sung by Oliver, reached No.1 in 1969 on the *Billboard* Adult Contemporary chart and stayed there for four weeks. In 1971, his song "I Think of You" was a major hit for Perry Como. Other popular McKuen compositions included "The World I Used to Know", "Rock Gently", "Doesn't Anybody Know My Name", "The Importance of the Rose", "Without a Worry in the World", and "Soldiers Who Want to Be Heroes".

In 1971, McKuen became popular in the Netherlands, where the singles "Soldiers Who Want to Be Heroes" and "Without a Worry in the World" reached number one in the charts, as did the album *Greatest Hits, Vol. 3*. All three discs earned him gold records; in 1971 he was voted the Netherlands' most popular entertainer by Radio Veronica's audience.

During the 1970s, McKuen began composing larger-scale orchestral compositions, writing a series of concertos, suites, symphonies, and chamber pieces for orchestra. His piece *The City: A Suite for Narrator & Orchestra* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Music. He continued publishing a steady stream of poetry books throughout the decade. In 1977, he published *Finding My Father*, a chronicle of his search for information on his biological father. The book and its publicity helped make such information more readily available to adopted children. He also continued to record, releasing albums such as *New Ballads* (1970), *Pastorale* (1971), and the country-rock outing *McKuen Country* (1976).

McKuen continued to perform concerts around the world and appeared regularly at New York's Carnegie Hall throughout the 1970s, making sporadic appearances as recently as the early 2000s.

Later years

In 1973, at forty, McKuen radically changed his outward appearance: he no longer bleached his hair and he grew a beard.

McKuen retired from live performances in 1981. The following year, he was diagnosed with clinical depression, which he battled for much of the next decade. He continued to write poetry, however, and made appearances as a voice-over actor in *The Little Mermaid* and the TV series *The Critic*.

2001 saw the publication of McKuen's *A Safe Place to Land*, which contains 160 pages of new poetry. For 10 years he gave an annual birthday concert at Carnegie

Hall or the Lincoln Center. He released the double CD *The Platinum Collection* and was remastering all of his RCA and Warner Bros. recordings for release as CD boxed sets. In addition to his artistic pursuits he was the Executive President of the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA), a post he held longer than any other man or woman elected to the position.

McKuen lived in Beverly Hills, California with his partner Edward, whom he called his "brother", and four cats in a large rambling Spanish house built in 1928, which housed one of the world's largest private record collections. He died of respiratory arrest, a result of pneumonia, at a hospital in Beverly Hills, California, on January 29, 2015.