



McKuen, Rod (b. 1933)

by Tina Gianoulis

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The poems and songs of Rod McKuen express a bittersweet, aching tenderness towards life that has endeared him to millions of fans. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was perhaps the most popular poet in the United States. His songs have been recorded by over 500 artists, and he himself has produced over 200 albums.

Born in a Salvation Army hospital during the Great Depression of the 1930s, driven by brutal abuse to run from his family, and forced to earn his own living at a variety of laborer's jobs from the age of eleven, Rod McKuen could have grown up hard, embittered, and angry. However, without security or education, McKuen managed to uncover in himself a writer's soul and to hone and develop his skills as a poet and a songwriter. Although his work has often been lambasted by critics as cloying and trite, McKuen's poetry is unpretentious and accessible to the average reader, and his songs in particular exhibit a high level of craftsmanship.

McKuen was born in Oakland, California on April 29, 1933. He grew up not knowing the identity of his father, a condition that haunted him for most of his life and led to his 1977 book, *Finding My Father*, which opens with the mordant observation, "Having been born a bastard gave me an advantage over all those people who spend their entire lives becoming one. It's nice to have a head start."

At the age of eleven, McKuen left home and his abusive stepfather and struck out on his own. Except for three years in a juvenile reformatory, his youth was spent rambling through the west, working at a wide range of jobs. He worked as a logger, ditch digger, railroad laborer, cowhand, and rodeo rider, among other jobs. Perhaps most importantly, he also began to keep a journal to record his feelings.

McKuen found his way back to the Bay Area in the early 1950s, where he met such beat generation poets as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. He began to read his own poetry at clubs like the Jazz Cellar in San Francisco, and self-published his first book of poems, *And Autumn Came* (1954).

In 1953, he volunteered for the U. S. Army and spent two years in combat in the infantry in Korea. After his discharge, he returned to San Francisco, where he joined the folk music explosion, singing his own songs along with standards at clubs like the Purple Onion. During the late 1950s, he spent time in New York, singing in nightclubs until his voice was damaged, leaving it weak and reedy for the rest of his life.

During the early 1960s, he journeyed to France, where he met songwriters and performers Jacques Brel and Charles Aznavour and began writing the free-verse poetry that would make him famous.

McKuen was beginning to develop a following, so when he published his second book of poems, *Stanyon Street and Other Sorrows* (1966), it sold well, even though it was promoted only through classified ads. His third and fourth books, *Listen to the Warm* (1967) and *Lonesome Cities* (1968), became immediate best-sellers, and by the end of 1968 McKuen became the first author in seventy years to have three books at once on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

These books of poetry, along with the ones that followed almost yearly during the 1970s and 1980s, earned McKuen a devoted following, but also a reputation for sentimentality and obviousness. Although he is one of the most widely read poets of his generation, his poetry has never been taken seriously by literary critics, who dismiss it as banal. Still, the thoughtfulness and sense of wonder in McKuen's poetry account for its popularity. Moreover, it captures the anxieties and aspirations of the youth movement that came into flower in the mid-1960s.

While McKuen's poetry has been greeted with critical disdain, that is not true of his songs. Indeed, he has earned great respect as a songwriter. He has written more than 900 songs and recorded some 200 albums, 63 of which have gone gold or platinum.

McKuen's film scores for Ronald Neames's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) and Bill Melendez's *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* (1970) were nominated for Academy Awards. McKuen won a Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song for the haunting title song, "Jean," from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

In 1969, Frank Sinatra commissioned McKuen to write an entire album of songs for him to record. The result was *A Man Alone and Other Songs of Rod McKuen*, an album that many consider a superb match of performer and vehicle.

McKuen's songs have been recorded by a wide range of other artists from Glen Campbell to Nina Simone, from Henry Mancini to Dusty Springfield, and from Johnny Mathis to Madonna. But perhaps McKuen's best-known artistic collaboration has been with Jacques Brel, the popular Belgian singer and songwriter. McKuen's English lyrics to Brel's music helped win the composer an international audience. Among their collaborations are the much-covered, wistful songs "If You Go Away" and "Seasons in the Sun."

McKuen has also composed a considerable amount of classical music. His symphonies, concertos, suites, and song cycles have been performed by orchestras throughout the world. *The City: A Suite for Narrator and Orchestra*, commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra in 1972, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Music.

McKuen has used his fame to support progressive causes. Not only has he been an outspoken peace activist (some credit him with coining the phrase "make love not war"), but he has also been a longtime supporter of the gay rights movement.

In 1977, as Florida orange juice spokeswoman Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign vilified gay men and lesbians, McKuen wrote "Don't Drink the Orange Juice" in support of the pro-gay boycott. He released the song on a manifestly gay-targeted album called "Slide...Easy In." The album, which was a sophisticated send-up of disco, featured on its cover a bare and hairy muscular male arm pulling a fistful of white lubricant from a can of Crisco, renamed "Disco."

Though McKuen has been very reticent about his private life, he has continued to support gay causes. He has frequently spoken out against homophobia in his column, "Flight Plan," published on his website. He ended one such column by describing himself as "an adult who practices several kinds of sex and will do so until he gets one right."

One of McKuen's signature lines is "It doesn't matter who you love, or how you love, but that you love." To the question "Are you married?" McKuen's standard response is the coy statement, "I have no legal certificate that says I am, but, let's just say I'm committed."

In 1981, McKuen abruptly announced that he would no longer tour. In 1982, he was diagnosed with clinical depression. As a consequence, he withdrew from the public eye. When his depression subsided, he returned to a more understated career, one that was active but not in the limelight.

For many years he served as president of the American Guild of Variety Artists. He continues to write poetry

and songs and give occasional concerts. He also does voice-overs for movies. He communicates with his many fans through his website.

McKuen has been active in a number of charitable organizations, especially those dedicated to fighting AIDS and child abuse.

McKuen lives in Southern California with his brother Edward and four cats.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.