



# Long Playing

Rose Marie McCoy is still churning out the tunes at 92

By GUY ARSENEAU

SHE GREW UP in an age when racial discrimination was backed by the law. She was marginalized because of her gender and faced the challenges of crushing poverty on a daily basis. But Rose Marie McCoy endured, going on to become a prolific songwriter with a career that has spanned six decades.

Her works — crossings genres from rhythm and blues to pop, rock, country and gospel — have become anthems for an eclectic group of singers. Johnny Mathis, Nat King Cole, Big Maybelle, Eartha Kitt, Aretha Franklin, Bette Midler, Patti Page and Sarah Vaughan all recorded her songs. Among her most notable works, “I Think It’s Gonna Work Out Fine,” by Ike and Tina Turner, was awarded a Gold Record and was nominated for a Grammy Award.

A well-known resident of Teaneck since 1955, McCoy, now 92, lives in a comfortable, unassuming home she characterizes as “filled with reel-to-reel tapes, cassettes and old records. I’ve got boxes and boxes of songs — country, gospel and pop. I keep all the old tapes of music. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with a new song in my head.”

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for retirement, McCoy collaborated with her current songwriting partner, Billy Joe Connor, on his 2013 CD, eponymously titled "Billy Joe Connor." Melding pop and country music, McCoy and Connor consider these works among the best songs of their respective careers.

Fiercely independent, McCoy resisted numerous invitations over the years to join major record labels. Motown, Atlantic and Stax Records sought out her talents to no avail. Al Bell, the former head of Stax and Motown Records has said about McCoy: "She realized, at some point, that her power was in the pen. She's just one of those rare persons who wants to be free to write her own songs her own way."

And McCoy has lived life on her own terms, as well. Arlene Corsano, who describes herself as McCoy's "full-time friend and part-time publicist," is writing a biography of the songwriter, scheduled to be published at the end of the year. The songwriter also has been honored for contributions to black culture and entertainment by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. And a 2009 NPR documentary, "Lady Writes the Blues: The Rose Marie McCoy Story," continues to air on public broadcasting stations across the country.

Born in a tin-topped shack, McCoy grew up on a farm in the tiny backwater community of Oneida, Ark. "It's the kind of place you pass through without even knowing you're passing through it," she says.

Scratching out a living on the proverbial 40 acres, McCoy spent her childhood helping her parents and siblings cultivate cotton and corn, and raise chickens.

"My whole ambition was to get enough money so my parents could stop working in the fields. I didn't know anything about singing or the songwriting business at that time. My brother-in-law gave me a big surprise when he told me, 'When you're a professional singer, they pay you.'" Aware that hardscrabble rural Arkansas

was no place to begin a music career, McCoy traveled to New York City in 1942 at the age of 19. "I had \$6 to my name and felt lucky getting a job ironing shirts in a Chinese hand laundry," she says. "On weekends, I sang in nightclubs all across New Jersey."

She eventually realized, however, that her talent as a songwriter, not a singer, would be the catalyst for a career in the music business. She began at Manhattan's iconic Brill Building, the epicenter of American pop music songwriting known as "The Hit Factory."

"Many of the songwriters, such as Rose, who worked at the Brill Building, met at a nearby restaurant. People would scribble song lyrics on napkins and paper bags," says R&B singer Maxine Brown. "A lot of the songs people heard back in the early '50s were written that way."

It was during this period when McCoy and her then-songwriting-partner, Charlie Singleton, wrote a song that became part of pop music history.

The ballad, "Tryin' to Get to You," which had been written for '50s R&B group The Eagles, also caught the attention of a young singer who was eager to add the tune to his repertoire. He signed with RCA Records only after the company agreed that "Tryin' to Get to You" would be his first recording on the label.

But McCoy was not impressed when she

heard the singer's interpretation of her song. "We thought he was terrible because we didn't believe he could sing that well," she says.

The album that included "Tryin' to Get to You" spent 10 weeks at No. 1. The singer was Elvis Presley.

With more than 850 songs to her name, reflecting America's history and development from the mid-20th century to the present, McCoy faces one obvious question:

"Out of all the songs you've written, which one is your favorite?"

Without missing a beat, she smiles and says, "The last one I heard playing on the radio." ▀

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ROSE MARIE MCCOY



★ To read a transcript of "Lady Writes the Blues: The Rose Marie McCoy Story," visit [npr.org](http://npr.org).

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