

Ken Carson (1914 - 1994)



Ken "Shorty" Carson was born in a buckboard in southeastern Oklahoma on November 4, 1914, to Herbert and Jessie Carson who were in the process of moving at the time. His father played the fiddle and his mother the guitar at local "socials" and, even as a child, Ken loved to see people enjoying music so he picked up a small harmonica and a Jew's harp. He wasn't very old when the family moved to Los Angeles.

Ken began his career with appearances with Red Barton on KGFJ radio and joined Stuart Hamblen's radio show for a year. He then joined the Beverly Hill Billies' San Francisco group, The Tarzan Hill Billies, with Shug Fisher and a yodeler named Chuck for Tarzana Mineral Water. The next year he formed The Ranch Boys with Curley Bradley and Jack Ross and made their debut on the Norman Neilson Happy-Go-Lucky Hour in Los Angeles. The Ranch Boys moved to Chicago in 1936 and signed a one-year contract with NBC which stretched out to 5 ½. They sang on WENR and WMAQ in Chicago and, when they could, at the hotel at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

In 1938 they suggested to their Sponsor, Miles Laboratories, that they ride on horseback from Los Angeles to Chicago, be picked up by remote radio and broadcast every Saturday night over WLS. They started out on May 10, 1938 and rode through to Chicago. Once there, they decided they might as well go on to New York City and rode right up the steps on City Hall to deliver a big plaque to Mayor LaGuardia. "I tell everybody it's 3975 miles on horseback," he used to say, "and I have the calluses still to prove it!"



Shortly after that wearying trip, Ken starred on his own radio program on WGN in Chicago where he met the Sons of the Pioneers. When Lloyd Perryman was drafted into the Army Air Force

in 1943, Ken was asked to replace him in the Sons of the Pioneers and he accepted. He was part of the trio that recorded for Decca and RCA Victor and remained until late 1947, recording with them even after Lloyd returned. "Lloyd would do tenor and I'd do lead or vice versa."



The Wartime Lineup of the Sons of the Pioneers

Back: Hugh and Karl Farr

Front: Ken Carson, Tim Spencer, Bob Nolan and Shug Fisher, Bob Nolan and Ken Carson



Bob Nolan And Ken Carson

Portions of a letter from Ken to Michelle Sundin on April 15, 1990 are printed here with her permission:

"I received your nice letter recently and therefore I'm forwarding a few thoughts & trivia that you might enjoy. The man: Bob Nolan!! To know Bob Nolan was to know a very special piece of history. Those of us who were privileged to know him and be as close as I was to him is a most treasured period I shall long cherish.

"Bob was a special "one of a kind" man, a loner to some who really never knew him. A silent man, thoughtful in every respect toward his fellow man. Never once did I ever hear an unkind, malicious word from the man who composed two of the greatest all-time western songs, "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" and "Cool Water".

"One thing I discovered about Nolan; he had no aspirations toward becoming a great Star though I know he had at one time been considered ... as a potential candidate for a series of his own

"Bob and I got along extremely well. He could not write the music to the songs he composed and that's where I was able to help him, having studied harmony & composition before I joined the group. When he got an idea for a song he had dreamed up, he'd get on the phone & say, "Hey, Carson, bring your guitar & some paper and come on over" even if it was 1:00 a. m. and I had been in bed three hours. "Oh, this won't take long," he'd say. Well, three hours later, we had it down on paper.

"One song I especially remember I wrote down for him was "From Half Way Round the World" which Lloyd later recorded ... and what a beautiful rendition he did of the song. Bob was a master of utilizing words that made the perfect marriage of music and lyrics come together.

"There won't be another Bob Nolan around in this or any future lifetime. He truly was one of a kind. I still treasure a picture taken in Madison Square Garden on one of our trips to the rodeo there, of Bob and myself. Ah, memories.



"Scan of original photocopy from Ken Carson, courtesy of Michelle Sundin.



Courtesy of Lois Spencer.

"So Dear to My Heart was a part live, part animated film starring Luana Patten, Bobby Driscoll and Burl Ives. Ken Carson was the voice of "The Wise Old Owl" in the animation sequences and sang several songs including County Fair with lyrics by Mel Torme and music by Robert Wells. The most popular song from the picture was 'Lavender Blue' which was recorded by many artists but, the rare fact is, the person who sang the song at the Academy Awards (it was one of the nominees) was Gene Autry, and he never recorded the song. nor have I found any performance of it on his Melody Ranch program." (Lawrence Hopper)

After his years with The Sons of the Pioneers, Ken joined the staff of NBC Los Angeles and appeared on numerous shows, made commercials, etc, before he was given his own program where he was backed by Nelson, Riddle and his orchestra. That lasted for only a few months before he moved back to CBS to continue with staff commercials and appearing with Roy Rogers, Andy Devine and the Sons of the Pioneers. In 1948 he became part of Tom Brennan's Breakfast Club on NBC Hollywood until Gary Moore took over the program. Moore moved over to CBS and invited Ken to be part of his show. Ken moved on with the show to New York and remained there until 1958 when he was given his own television program in NYC.

He also recorded for the Longines Symphonette Society in 1962 (Treasury of the Golden West) and received a Gold Record for the album. He was invited to perform at the wedding of President Nixon's daughter, Tricia, and sang a song he and Bill Harrington composed, "From Now Until the End of Time", at the ceremony. Some of the songs he composed were /esert Serenade, In My Cabin in the Carolinas, Lonely Cowboy's Reverie, Moonlight on the Rio Grande, Ridin' Down to Mexico, Ridin' on Across the Prairie, We'll Meet Beneath the Evening, A Cowboy Has to Yodel in the Morning, Cowboy Jubilee, Dreams of a Cowboy, How Can I Ever Forget You, Let Me Keep My Memories, My San Fernando Rose, My Southland, Over the Rainbow Trail, Song of the Open Trail, Tears of Regret, There's a New Moon Over Nevada, The Wondrous Word of the Lord, and / Yes, My Love/ as well as cues for the Roy Rogers' movies, San Fernando Valley, Song of vada, Sunset

in El Dorado and Utah.

Toward the end of his life, he made local appearances in the New York and Florida areas. They moved to Delray in 1979 from Rochelle, NY and continued with trios and quartettes, singles for private homes and country clubs. He became a friend of Fred Goodwin and related many of his adventures with the Sons of the Pioneers to him.

An active man into his 80s, Ken Carson passed away in Florida on April 7, 1994. The following announcement appeared in the New York Times:

The New York Times

April 12, 1994

Ken Carson, Western Singer, 79

Ken Carson, a singer who appeared with Roy Rogers in cowboy movies as a member of the Sons of the Pioneers, died on Thursday at St. Luke's Hospital in Jacksonville, Fla. He was 79. The cause was Lou Gehrig's disease, his family said.

Mr. Carson joined the singing group in 1942* after Mr. Rogers, a founding member, left to act in films. Mr. Carson sang on the group's two best-known recordings, "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" and "Cool Water." His tenor was the echoing voice singing "cool, clear water" on the latter.

He appeared in 22 of Mr. Rogers's movies as a member of the group that backed up the actor when he sang.

He is survived by his wife, Gretchen; a son, P. Scott Carson of Warren, Ohio; a daughter, Coy Brooke Scobie of Umatilla, Fla.; a sister, Mrs. James Berry of Los Angeles, and four grandchildren.

He was one of the finest and nicest people I've ever known. After his time with the Pioneers (whom he was reluctant to join) he worked on the Garry Moore radio show. The success of that show led CBS to transfer the show to New York and turn it into a 5 day a week show on weekday mornings. Ken was the featured male vocalist throughout its long run. Denise Lor was the female vocalist. Howard Smith led the band.

While living in New York Ken kept a busy schedule. He recorded for a number of independent labels, wrote some songs and sang on radio commercials (a very lucrative career). He also sang at private parties including singing at Tricia Nixon's wedding (if I recall correctly). He and his wife Gretchen lived in New Rochelle, New York a very fine suburb outside the city.

When he and Gretchen retired they moved to Delray Beach, Florida. But Ken never really retired. He loved entertaining so he continued doing country clubs, private parties and related work.

He lived about 30 miles from where my mother lived and thanks to Ken Griffis I was able to contact him and ask to meet him on my next trip. He was as nice as possible and we got together each time I visited my mother until the last time. By then Ken was quite ill but they couldn't diagnose the illness. Finally, if I recall correctly, he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease and passed away not too long after the diagnosis.

Ken was always in good spirits. He always had a smile on his face and in his heart. He was warm and friendly. Whenever he called me at my mother's place he always took time to have a friendly conversation with her.

The Pioneers have had some remarkably fine gentlemen as members of that illustrious group. None were finer than Ken Carson. (Lawrence Zwisohn)

* Songs composed by Ken Carson:*

A Cowboy has to Yodel in the Morning, Cowboy Jubilee, Desert Serenade, Dreams of a Cowboy, How Can I Ever Forget You, In My Cabin in the Carolines, Let Me Keep My Memories, Lonely Cowboy's Reverie, Moonlight on the Rio Grande, Over the Rainbow Trail, Ridin' Down' to Mexico, Ridin' on Across the Prairie, There's a New Moon Over Nevada, Wondrous Word of the Lord

Movie Cues for:

San Fernando Valley, Song of Nevada, Sunset in El Dorado, Utah

(Article courtesy of Catlin Cobern and www.bobnoland-sop.net)