

Unsung Heroes - Mary McCaslin

In the self-penned liner notes of her almost decade old Philo recording "**Broken Promises**," Mary McCaslin confided "*I am proud and happy to say that I am adopted. Being adopted, means being wanted - and loved.*" Mary drew her first breath in the Indianapolis, Indiana suburb of Beechgrove, at St. Elizabeth Nursing Home. It was seventy-two hours prior to Christmas Day 1946. When she was aged six, her [adoptive] parents moved west, to Los Angeles. Mary developed an affection for *television westerns* at an early age - hardly surprising, since *that genre* was at saturation level on prime time television during the fifties. The lore of cowboys, Native Americans and the wide open, unblemished plains became *her world*. What's more, McCaslin imagined *that world* still existed somewhere in California, though not in the heavily populated suburbs of Los Angeles.

Although there were no professional musicians in her adopted family, concurrently, Mary fostered a love for country and western music, and during the early sixties, pop music. The music of The Beatles and Tamla Motown became indelibly imprinted on her psyche. McCaslin purchased her first guitar, a Stella, at the age of fifteen. Three years later she was performing in public, the venue being The Paradox - an Orange County coffeehouse. Mary's mother had arranged for her to work with a telephone company, but the teenager persevered with her music career and became a regular on the West Coast listening club and coffeehouse circuit. Aged 21, McCaslin cut a Nik Venet produced single for the Capitol label, that teamed folkie interpretations of Lennon & McCartney's "Rain" with Michael Nesmith's "This All Happened Once Before." An album was also recorded, but never released.....until decades later.

Larry Murray was one of many west coast musicians Mary met at the venues she played. In the early sixties, Murray had been a member of The Scottsville Squirrel Barkers. Other alumni included, Chris Hillman, Kenny Wertz and Bernie Leadon. By the mid-sixties, Murray and Leadon were members of the seminal country rock band, Hearts & Flowers. Their two Capitol albums, produced by Nik Venet, "**Now is the Time For**" [1967] and "**Of Horses, Kids & Forgotten Women**" [1968] were reissued as a "2 on 1 CD c/w outtakes" by Collectors Choice Records during 2002 and was reviewed in Folkwax [[link to archived review](#)]. Murray went on cut a solo album titled "**Sweet Country Suite**" for Verve Forecast, and then pursued a career in songwriting and record production. In 1969, he produced Mary's debut solo album "**Goodnight Everybody**" for the now defunct Barnaby label. "You Keep Me Hanging On," a mid-sixties chart hit for the Supremes and Vanilla Fudge, was included among the eleven songs that McCaslin covered. Although a long deleted rarity, in 1980 the Piccadilly subsidiary of the Washington state based First National label, reissued the disc as "**Blue Ridge Epitaph**."

Mary was an integral player in the burgeoning Los Angeles contemporary music scene of the late sixties and early seventies. For instance, the liner of the "**Happy Is The...**" 1967 album by Sunshine Company features the credit "*A special thank you to Miss Mary McCaslin for her guidance on "Rain" and "I Need You".*" It is a testament to Mary's strength of character and resolve, as well as her vision, that she turned her back on the contemporary scene and ploughed, instead, a considerably less commercial furrow in the field of folk/country music.

In the summer of 1972, while performing at California's Sweets Mill Folk Festival, Mary was introduced to a fellow songwriter, Jim Ringer. Jim and Mary soon became a regular, performing partnership, an alliance that lasted for the ensuing decade. In 1973 Mary cut her sophomore solo album, for the *then* new Vermont based folk label, Philo. "**Way Out West**" was the first of a trio of solo discs McCaslin recorded for the imprint during the seventies, and the eleven track collection featured eight McCaslin originals.

Co-produced by Mary and label co-owner, Bill Schubart, her "Music Strings" opened the set, and is an exploration of her deep love for music. It's segued with "Oh Hollywood," penned by friend and kindred spirit, Bob Simpson. Maury Manceau, former leader of The Sunshine Company, co-wrote "Waiting." "Way Out West" closed Side One and included the line "*My first love was a member of the Hearts and Flowers scene.*" Mary's childhood expectations of what lay *way out west*, became a recurring theme in her work. Other themes found on that first Philo release include, life on the road [from a joyous and positive perspective], an outlaw's life in the Old West, and the necessity of having friends one can fall back upon.

Released in 1975, Mary co-produced "**Prairie In The Sky**" with Jim Ringer, and the singularly acoustic instrumentation employed on her debut, was fleshed out by the inclusion of a pedal steel guitar. This

augmentation lent a country feel to Mary's songs. Of the dozen tracks, Mary penned four and co-wrote, with Jim, "Ballad Of Weaverville," the tale of a gambler who woos and wins the girl of his dreams against all the odds. The remaining tracks included the western standards "Pass Me By" and "Ghost Riders In The Sky." In "Last Canonball" McCaslin yearns for the steam trains that once plied the old west. The title track proves to be a eulogy to freedom, particularly in terms of possessing the capability to travel, wherever and whenever you want. Marty Robbins "My Love" closes the album, and lyrically encapsulates Mary's western philosophy.

As hinted by the album title, **"Old Friends"** which appeared in 1977, brought together some of Mary's favourite songs by other writers. Except that is, for the self-composed title track that closed this ten-song set. Side one opened and closed respectively with Lennon & McCartney's "Things We Said Today" and Pete Townshend's "Pinball Wizard." The latter may appear to be an odd choice musically for this folk/country artist. McCaslin places her stamp indelibly on the songs. Three tunes that loosely shared a *western theme* were wedged between the latter titles - the timeless "Oklahoma Hills" by Woody Guthrie, "Wendigo" a focus on the Spirit of Death, while Bob "Sons of the Pioneers" Nolan's "Way Out There" described the loneliness experienced while crossing a desert. Thematically, *freedom* pervades the song lyrics on the second half of the recording. There's Tex Ritter's 1956 chart success "Wayward Wind," while "Blackbird," yet another Lennon & McCartney cover, featured stunning banjo work by Mary. The depth of feeling and breadth of description that Mary attained with "Old Friends," marked the song out as one of her best. For newcomers to Mary's work, this album is probably her most accessible.

During 1978, Mary worked on the soundtrack of the documentary **"Of Babies And Banners."** The film charted the rise of the American Woman's Movement. It was subsequently nominated for an American Academy of Motion Picture Arts Award. During that year, Jim and Mary were married. At the ceremony, they performed the Barbara Keith tune, "The Bramble & The Rose." It provided the title of the Philo album they cut together as a duo. Boasting a cover portrait of the duo by the multi talented, painter, writer and musician, Eric Von Schmidt, the album was the brainchild of their manager Mitch Greenhill, and Philo's Bill Schubart. It featured material that the pair regularly performed in concert, and **"The Bramble & The Rose"** remains, in my opinion, one of the finest duo albums ever released. Its success as a recording, lies in the alchemy that merges Jim's gruff and gravel sounding bass with Mary's lighter alto, and no original compositions were included on this 1978 recording. The work of contemporary composers, Michael (Martin) Murphey and Herb Pedersen, lie side by side with Ralph Stanley's "Rank Strangers" and the traditional "Canaan's Land." The sombre, traditional lament "Oh Death" is given a haunting treatment, only to be followed by the up-tempo rhythms of "Hit The Road, Jack," and yet as a collection the dozen songs gel wonderfully.

During late 1978, Philo took the rare step of releasing a single of "Things We Said Today," a track from the **"Old Friends"** album. It charted in a number of the North Western states, particularly strongly in Oregon. As a result, **"Old Friends"** began to sell in, what was for Philo, relatively large quantities. With Mary's popularity at an all time high, Philo signed a production deal with Mercury Records, for the recording and release of her next solo album. Titled **"Sunny California"** and co-produced by Mary with Michael Couture, it appeared in 1979. These days, it is still available from Philo on cassette. Although her previous work was generally acoustic, strings are prominently featured on **"Sunny California."** Due to a lack of promotion by Mercury, the album was not a commercial success. Mary performed at The Roxy in Los Angeles, in support of the release as the opening act for Orleans, hardly a billing that was targeted at followers of her music.

None of the latter should detract from the fact that **"Sunny California"** is another classic McCaslin creation. The title track lyric, explores the myth that California is a *land of milk and honey*. Her affection for sixties music manifests itself again, with The Drifters' "Save The Last Dance For Me" and Sam Cooke's "Cupid." In her "Dust Devils," the passage of time is exquisitely and poetically equated to those violent dust storms that traverse the American plains. As if to prove that her taste in music was neither blinkered, nor catholic, Loudon Wainwright's amusing "The Swimming Song" is given the McCaslin treatment.

The soundtrack to the 1980 Burt Lancaster film, **"Cattle Annie And Little Britches"** boasted a couple of songs which Jim and Mary contributed. Purporting to be based on the *true* story of two young girls who joined the notorious Doolin' Dalton gang, the movie gained glowing press reviews, but the expected droves of customers never materialised at the box office. The film enjoyed a UK video release during the early

eighties. During the same year, Mary and Jim appeared at the Kerrville Folk Festival. When the **"Live Highlights"** album for that year was subsequently released, their *theme song* "The Bramble And the Rose" was included. In 1981, the pair played the prestigious Vancouver Folk Festival. Mary and Jim were operating from a base in San Bernadino, California at this time. During 1981 they were filmed at home [with their clan of basset hounds] as well as on the road performing, for a sixty minute documentary, that was subsequently screened by the Public Broadcasting Service station WOUB, based in Athens, Ohio.

At the dawn of the eighties, Mitch Greenhill negotiated a one-off deal for Mary to record an album for the Chicago based Flying Fish label, a disc he also produced. Released in the Spring of 1981, the sessions for **"A Life And A Time,"** took place at Hit City West in Los Angeles. Only three of Mary's compositions appear on the release, including a reappraisal of "Northfield" from **"Way Out West."** Mary also re-cut "You Keep Me Hangin' On." The remaining songs include Jim Ringer's "The Band Of Jesse James" and "Some Of Shelley's Blues" by Michael Nesmith. The title track, penned by Mary, recalls through the memories of his family, a beloved father who had passed away, while "Santana Song" focuses on the hardships pioneers endured while working the land during the late nineteenth century.

In 1984 Philo released a **"Best of Mary McCaslin"** collection. Almost a decade later, they followed it with the eighteen-song retrospective **"Things We Said Today."** Through the eighties, Ringer's health deteriorated and their public appearances eventually ground to a halt. The couple separated towards the close of the decade. In March 1992, Jim Ringer passed away. Mary relocated to Santa Cruz, where she worked as a DJ on a local radio station and continues to tour nationally as a solo act. Confirming her status as a respected folk/country performer, Mary's "Way Out West" was included on the compilation, **"Philo So Far... The 20th Anniversary Folk Sampler"** which appeared midway through 1994.

In April 1994, Mary performed at the Philo showcase during the annual South by Southwest Music Conference in Austin, Texas. One month later, Philo released her seventh, and to date most recent solo album. Titled **"Broken Promises,"** for me it was a long awaited fruition. Quoting from Mary's liner notes, *"So much time has passed since my last recording that the possibility of making an album of new songs seemed like a far-off dream."* Thirteen years on from **"A Life And A Time"** I never gave up hope that Mary would record another solo album. Now, almost a decade after **"Broken Promises,"** that dream still burns strong and true.

"Broken Promises," was co-produced by Mary and Steve Netsky, and the recording sessions took place at the Soundworks Studio in Watertown, Massachusetts. Featuring ten new McCaslin songs, at turns on **"Broken Promises,"** her lyrics displayed anger and uncertainty, as well as humility, hope and humanity. There was certainly a powerful maturity to her writing. Considering Mary's experiences through the eighties, it's hardly surprising that her principal focus lyrically should have become relationships ? "There's No Way To Say Goodbye" and "You're Gone" are powerful testaments to lost love, while "Ghost Train" adequately proved that Mary's *original* vision of things *way out west* remained intact.

Early on in this tale, I mentioned that circa 1967/68 Mary cut an album for Capitol Records. In 1999 the German based reissue imprint Bear Family Records, issued an eighteen-track collection titled **"Rain."** In a recording career that has spanned well over three decades, McCaslin's work remains original, valid, fresh and vibrant. During the years that elapsed between **"A Life And A Time"** and **"Broken Promises,"** Nanci Griffith and Iris DeMent became Philo artists and passed on to major label deals, each gaining a degree of fame and fortune in the process. If you are faintly interested in the music of the latter performers, let me offer a piece of contention - musically, Griffith and DeMent can't hold a candle to the folk/country queen, Mary McCaslin - vocally, or in their considerable abilities as songwriters. It is a testament to the quality of her music that eight of Mary's albums, including **"Rain,"** remain in Rounder/Philo catalogue. Check McCaslin's CD's out at <http://www.rounder.com/>

Note.

Ken Irwin and his partners in Rounder Records, purchased Philo from the original label owners during the early eighties. Rounder also now own the Flying Fish catalogue, yet – *hint, hint* – they have never reissued **"A Life And A Time"** on CD.

Arthur Wood.

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