

Rod McKuen: Cooler Than You Think



[Keith E. Lee](#)

[Apr 20, 2016](#) · 4 min read

Rod McKuen died of respiratory arrest in Beverly Hills, California on January 29, 2015. And although his passing was widely reported, it was not so much celebrated or acknowledged by the usual pop culture experts and aficionados. McKuen was one of the best-selling poets in the United States during the 1960s, but mostly forgotten by later generations — indeed, the only memory I have of his work is a book of poetry my mom kept in the bathroom.

Throughout his career McKuen produced a wide range of recordings, including; popular music, spoken word poetry, film soundtracks and classical music. He earned two Academy Award nominations for *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*, and won a Grammy for Best Spoken Word Recording for *Lonesome Cities* in 1968. He recorded over 200 records, wrote about 2,000 songs and 70 books. He has sold over 100 million records and 60 million books worldwide. But for all his popularity he was derided ruthlessly by elitist critics and taste-

makers (“McKuen, The Cheeseburger To Poetry’s Haute Cuisine” was NPR’s obituary headline). At the height of his popularity in 1969, *Newsweek* magazine called him “*the King of Kitsch*.” Writer and literary critic Nora Ephron said, “[F]or the most part, McKuen’s poems are superficial and platitudinous and frequently silly.” [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning US poet laureate Carl Shapiro said, “It is irrelevant to speak of McKuen as a poet, but whatever he was, Rod McKuen sold millions.”

Of his relegation to America’s cultural junk heap, McKuen said, “Before the books were successful, whether it was *Newsweek* or *Time* or *The Saturday Evening Post*, the reviews were always raves.” And “I don’t think that somebody should have to have a [a large] bookshelf to understand a poem I’ve written. I think that poetry or music or any of the arts...should be accessible. Any writer that tells you he’s writing for himself...that’s probably bullshit. I write to find out about myself, definitely, and I’ll probably never need a psychiatrist. People write to communicate.” He was a loner who claimed that one had to earn solitude.

Rodney Marvin McKuen was born in a charity hospital in Oakland, CA, on April 29, 1933. Running away from home at age 11 to escape a violent alcoholic stepfather and familial sexual abuse, he drifted along the West Coast, supporting himself as a ranch hand, surveyor, railroad worker, lumberjack, rodeo cowboy, stunt man, and radio disk jockey. In order to make up for a lack of formal

education he began to keep a journal, which resulted in his first poetry and song lyrics.



McKuen and friend.

He eventually settled in San Francisco where he read his poetry in clubs alongside Beats Jack Kerouac and [Allen Ginsberg](#). He began performing as a folk singer at the famed [Purple Onion](#) night club. In the late 1950s he released several pop albums incorporating his own songs. By the mid 1960s established artists, such as; Barbara Streisand, Perry Como, Petula Clark, Waylon Jennings, Chet Baker, Andy Williams, Johnny Cash, Dusty Springfield and Johnny Mathis began covering his songs, and then his own

records and books began to sell. Frank Sinatra, a close friend, commissioned an album of poems and songs called *A Man Alone: The Words and Music of Rod McKuen*. He would collaborate with composers Henry Mancini, Anita Kerr and John Williams. McKuen chalked his success up to luck, but the man was a prolific hard worker.

If the Beat writers were to words what jazz was to music, then McKuen was easy listening. But if not considered hip, he was a part of his times, and wrote a great anti-war song called “Soldiers Who Want to Be Heroes” which eschewed the radical elements of the anti-Vietnam War movement in favor of a more universal, timeless lyric. His success — or selling out — was likely an impediment to being considered cool. And most hip people into the Beats found reading William S. Burroughs’ tales of shooting dope and buggering boys more engaging than McKuen’s soothing poems about love, the natural world and spirituality. Disdained by those who valued anti-bourgeois “authenticity” above all else, McKuen was in fact much more authentic than all the Beat writers combined. How can one *not* admire a man who came from such grim circumstances yet accomplished so much? As it turns out, McKuen was a far more pervasive influence on bohemian culture than most realize.

In the early 1960s, McKuen met Belgian songwriter and chanson singer [Jacques Brel](#). McKuen began to translate the work of this composer from French to English, giving Brel his first real

exposure to an English-speaking audience. The fact that Brel's songs often dealt with subject matter considered taboo in pop music, such as prostitution, homosexuality and drug use was in marked contrast to the "mawkish, gooey schmaltz" McKuen was known for. English translations of Brel songs such as "My Death", "Jackie" and "Amsterdam" would be hugely influential on Scott Walker, David Bowie and Marc Almond.

Without asking permission he adapted Brel's "Le Moribund" into "Seasons in the Sun". In 1974, singer Terry Jacks spun McKuen's "[Seasons in the Sun](#)" into soft rock gold when he replaced the original sardonic lyrics with sentimentality, producing a massive worldwide hit.

McKuen also produced Beatnik parody records. In 1959 Bob McFadden & McKuen, using the pseudonym "Dor", released a track called "The Beat Generation". In 1976 Richard Hell first released the seminal punk song "Blank Generation", which was directly influenced by "The Beat Generation". Hell's music (especially "Blank Generation") and look would go on to be one of the defining influences on English punk. The Sex Pistols were inspired to write "Pretty Vacant" after hearing "Blank Generation". So in a way Rod McKuen was a godfather of punk.

Originally published in Stomp and Stammer magazine March 2015.