

# COUNTRY MUSIC PEOPLE (March 2002)

Karen Taylor-Good

*By: Arthur Wood*

Karen Taylor-Good's life has embraced a number of clearly defined phases. Initially a club performer, she went on to become a sought-after vocalist in the field of commercials. Later, she became an integral part of Nashville's A Team of backing vocalists, and also made the lower rungs of the chart on her own label during the 1980s. In the 1990s, real success came her way as an award-winning songwriter, penning hits for **Patty Loveless** (How Can I Help You Say Goodbye) and **Collin Raye** (Not That Different).

Her story begins in the West Texas town of El Paso, where she was born Karen Berke in the early 1950s. Her musical education began with piano lessons at the age of five and she joined the orchestra of her elementary school, later becoming a chorister in high school. At age 17, Karen went to college in Austin where she became enamored of the music of Simon & Garfunkel and Judy Collins and took up guitar.

Two summers later, the college choir, which she had joined, undertook a tour of Europe. Karen fell hopelessly in love with it and took the decision to stay on.

"I concluded, when am I going to get over here again? I waved goodbye to the other 65 members of the choir in Brussels and stayed for another year."

Equipped with her guitar, Karen played for the U.S. Armed Services, mainly in Germany, although she also visited Greece, Turkey and Italy. Performing as a solo act, however, wasn't new to her. In Austin, she had sung in the opening spot at the Chequered Flag, a long gone, legendary club owned by Rod Kennedy, founder of the Kerrville Folk Festival.

Returning to the States, Karen decided her college days were over - her European adventure had proved she could survive by making music. Back in El Paso, she joined a local folk quartet, the Hamilton County Players, of which songwriter **Hugh Prestwood** was a member (Prestwood would go on to gain fame as a hit writer, penning number one songs for Randy Travis, Trisha Yearwood and others. Judy Collins, one of Karen's influences also covered a number of Prestwood's songs). Shortly afterwards, Karen and Prestwood formed a duo, **Hugh and Me**: "We got an agent who booked us farther afield. We played in places like New Orleans and Houston. Hugh was the songwriter, and I was the chick singer."

Combing the local area for musicians, Hugh and Karen subsequently formed the **Medicine Band** which recorded a demo tape in an El Paso studio, *Bill Taylor*, had moved to Memphis, but when he heard the tape he invited the group to Tennessee to make an album.

Karen recalls, "We fell madly in love. I ended up leaving the Medicine Band, moving to Memphis and marrying Bill. So that's where the Taylor in my name comes from. He taught me so much."

Taylor was also a songwriter and Karen began composing melodies for her husband's lyrics. "Back then, I thought I could never do the words." Bill was an engineer at Hi Records, where Al Green recorded many classic tracks. Out of hours, the duo would go to the studio and demo their songs. Having been a club singer for much of the previous five years, Karen admits "Bill taught me how to sing. I used to be really rigid. He taught me how to sing over the tracks."

Concurrent with those initial attempts at writing, Karen auditioned for a job with Pepper-Tanner, an international advertising agency. She was successful: "I punched a timecard every morning and went in the studio. They would put music in front of us, and we would sing lots of radio IDs and jingles from 8.30 till 3.30 every day." Perfecting her studio craft at Pepper-Tanner, Karen went on to sing backing vocals for Al Green.

Having made a couple of business contacts in Nashville, Bill and Karen moved there in 1980. Borrowing \$25,000 they started the label, Mesa Records. In 1982, Karen's record, *Diamond In The Rough*, made the country Top 40. "We actually charted nine singles. It was amazing because two of those songs went Top 40 on the Billboard charts." (Actually, the second of those, *Tenderness Place*, made #42.)

In the meantime, however, Karen and Bill's marriage had come to an end, and the pair decided to divorce. "We thought we would be better as friends. We still are," Says Karen.

She was soon in demand for session work: "I slipped into the spot that **Janie Fricke** vacated. She'd signed a deal as a solo artist." Karen became the latest recruit in the Lea Jane Singers. (Coincidentally, Fricke had also left Pepper-Tanner and moved to Nashville just prior to Karen's arrival in Memphis.)

Now part of Lea Jane Berinati's A Team, Karen worked in the studio with **George Jones**, **Barbara Mandrell**, **Willie Nelson** and **Waylon Jennings**. There were more: "I got to be one of the background singers on *Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*, and worked with **Dolly (Parton)** which was a thrill. She is incredible. A wonderful human being."

Karen met her second husband, *Dennis Good*, in 1982. "He was this cute horn player that I kept seeing on sessions. The horn players would be leaving as the singers were coming in to do their part. We were really good friends to begin with. Our daughter, Rachael, was born in 1983."

In 1984, Karen received an **Academy of Country Music** award nomination as *Best New Female Vocalist*. "At that time I didn't consider myself a songwriter. I was dabbling in it. I thought I was going to win. I thought I should win. Back then, that category was for independent artists." **Becky Hobbs** and **Katy Moffatt** had also been nominated; the award went to the late **Nicolette Larsen**, a major label artist.

Disappointed at failing to win, Karen suffered a depression for months. "I hurt so much that I started writing stuff down. Otherwise, I thought I was going to explode. I started looking at the words and thought; I wonder if this is a song? I'll be darned if they weren't songs. Out of that whole depression I like to think of it as God slamming one door - painfully - and opening up a better one."

Following her last **Billboard** entry in 1986 with *Come In Planet Earth*, her label Mesa Records folded. Concurrent with finding her feet as a real songwriter, Karen returned to jingle singing. Every few weeks, she'd fly to Chicago where "I started doing big time jingles. Taco Bell, United Airlines and Peter Pan Peanut Butter. Doing national jingle can be huge bucks. For years that was the biggest part of our income."

Various early '90s attempts to secure a song publishing deal proved fruitless. However, through a friend at her local church, she met an actor from Los Angeles called Burton Collins who wanted to do some songwriting.

"I thought, I'll have him over, give him a cup of coffee and send him home. He turned out to be a great guy."

Their first collaboration was *How Can I Help You Say Goodbye?*: "That song absolutely changed my life. It opened the doors that had been slammed so tightly before."

At the 1992 **Kerrville Folk Festival New Folk Songwriters** competition, Karen was one of the six winners. Her performance at the Winners Show the following weekend was an emotion-filled event. "During that week – of camping for the first and last time in my life – I got an amazing call," she explains. "I had joined (performing rights organization) SESAC and sent a cassette of How Can I Help You Say Goodbye to my rep in New York, who sent it to **Atlantic Records**. While I was at Kerrville, this woman at Atlantic had listened to the song and freaked out. They wanted me to fly to New York to talk to them."

Atlantic's plan was to make Karen the Carole King of the Nineties. A few weeks later, however, in New York, the excitement and anticipation initially came to naught. The label bosses were expecting an 18-year-old performer. While she didn't sign a record deal, within 24 hours her other dream did come true, though. Karen became a Warner/Chappell songwriter. The relationship lasted seven years.

From 1991 until 1993, Karen self-released a series of cassette recordings of her songs, respectively titled 1 – Real Men Cry, 2, 3, and Real. In the early '90s, she began performing her material at concerts in Unity Churches, initially in the Nashville area. Soon, she was being asked for recordings of her songs. By the end of 1999, she was performing in Unity Churches throughout the United States, spreading her message of peace and understanding through her songs.

Her first CD, *One Mile Apart*, a reference to the distance between the border towns of El Paso and Juarez, appeared in 1995. The previous year, **Patty Loveless** had taken *How Can I Help You Say Goodbye* to #3 on the country charts; the song was subsequently nominated for three CMA awards, two ACM awards and a Grammy. Two years later, **Collin Raye** also went to #3 with Karen's song, *Not That Different*, a paen to racial understanding and co-existence. In 1996, Karen was named SESAC Songwriter of the Year. Her songs have also appeared on albums by **Diamond Rio**, **Laura Branningan**, **Al Jarreau**, **Melissa Manchester** and our own **Sarah Jory**.

Through the latter half of the '90s, Karen's string of self-released solo albums continued with *Still Small Voice*, *Healing Hands of Time* and *Perfect Work of Art*. In 2001, she released two albums. The first, *Kinder*, was a self-release, while the nationally distributed Scream label issued *On Angel's Wings*, a 14 track compilation that drew material from Karen's five previous CD releases, plus the previously unreleased *Life Is Good*. In a story that has been filled with countless twists and turns, the latter album – which contains many songs inspired by the process of healing – was officially released in the United States in September, 2001.