

## **Carmen McRae Biography**

Carmen McRae always had a nice voice (if not on the impossible level of an [Ella Fitzgerald](#) or [Sarah Vaughan](#)) but it was her behind-the-beat phrasing and ironic interpretations of lyrics that made her most memorable. She studied piano early on and had her first important job singing with [Benny Carter](#)'s big band (1944) but it would be another decade before her career really had much momentum. McRae married and divorced [Kenny Clarke](#) in the 1940s, worked with [Count Basie](#) (briefly) and [Mercer Ellington](#) (1946-47), and became the intermission singer and pianist at several New York clubs. In 1954 she began to record as a leader and by then she had absorbed the influences of [Billie Holiday](#) and bebop into her own style. McRae would record pretty steadily up to 1989 and, although her voice was higher in the 1950s and her phrasing would be even more laidback in later years, her general style and approach did not change much through the decades. Championed in the 1950s by [Ralph Gleason](#), Carmen McRae was fairly popular throughout her career. Among her most interesting recording projects were participating in [Dave Brubeck's the Real Ambassadors](#) with [Louis Armstrong](#), cutting an album of live duets with [Betty Carter](#), being accompanied by [Dave Brubeck](#) and [George Shearing](#), and closing her career with brilliant tributes to [Thelonious Monk](#) and [Sarah Vaughan](#). Carmen McRae, who refused to quit smoking, was forced to retire in 1991 due to emphysema. She recorded for many labels including Bethlehem, Decca (1954-58), Kapp, Columbia, Mainstream, Focus, Atlantic (1967-70), Black Lion, Groove Merchant, Catalyst, Blue Note, Buddah, Concord and Novus.