

**KATHARINE
LAVERNE
STARKS
1922-2016**



**JAZZ
SINGER
KAY
STARR**

Kay Starr, whose career began when she was a teenager and continued into her 80s, was a rarity: a singer who blossomed in the big-band era of the 1930s and 1940s, hit it big as a pop and country artist, and scored one of her biggest hits in the emerging rock scene of the mid-1950s.

Starr was born Katharine LaVerne Starks in Dougherty in July 1922. After moving to Dallas with her family, she began signing to the chickens in the backyard, catching the ear of an aunt, who entered her in a local radio talent contest. Katherine became a local radio sensation at age seven and eventually had her own fifteen-minute show twice a week, earning \$3 a performance.

At fifteen, her family moved to Memphis, where she landed her own radio show, along with being a featured singer on the station's popular Saturday Night Jamboree program. The station frequently received fan mail misspelling her name so management asked Katharine and her father to change her name to one that listeners could easily remember. Katharine soon became Kay Starr.

In 1937, Starr was chosen to sing with the violinist Joe Venuti's orchestra during an extended engagement at the famous Peabody Hotel. Her parents insisted that she be home by midnight. Starr sang with the band each summer for the next two years. In June 1939, on Venuti's recommendation, she was hired by the Bob Crosby's Orchestra for their Camel Caravan radio program in New York but lasted only two weeks because the show's sponsor thought her "too earthy".

Within a few days, Starr was hired by the famous Glenn Miller Orchestra. After her two weeks were up, she returned home to finish high school in 1940. After graduation, Starr moved to California to work with Venuti until the war's draft call-up broke up his band. In 1943 she was hired by Charlie Barnet to replace Lena Horne but she was forced to retire for a year in 1945 when she developed pneumonia, losing her voice as a result of fatigue and overwork. After her vocal nodes were frozen for three months, Starr recovered with a deeper and huskier voice that soon became her trademark.

Her big break came with her recording of the country song "Bonaparte's Retreat" shortly after Pee Wee King's instrumental version became a Top Ten country hit in 1950. She contacted Roy Acuff, who owned the song's rights, to write some lyrics. Her rendition sold a million copies, and her crossover into country music continued with four duets with Tennessee Ernie Ford.

In 1952, Starr recorded "Wheel of Fortune", earning her first gold record, becoming the song most associated with her. Kay was versatile, recording jazz, country, pop, spirituals, Broadway tunes and R&B hits, earning the title of "hit maker" for her multiple Top-Forty hits.

As musical tastes changed in the 1960s, Starr's popularity waned until a 1985 profile in Village Voice showcased her "brassy fusion of urban swing and country twang" and placed her among the "very small pantheon of great working jazz singers". Billie Holiday once said, "Kay Starr was the only white woman who could sing the Blues". Starr died in November 2016 at age 94.

Kay Starr always told a story with each song, and was recognized for the power and emotion of her singing style. Long respected by the jazz community, Starr was truly a gifted and unique performer who made a success of every musical genre she tackled.