

BIOGRAPHY

KENNY ROGERS

42 Ultimate Hits

By now, Kenny Rogers has become such an icon that it's easy to forget how he got there. The songs on 42 Ultimate Hits, bringing together the top songs of his career from the late 60s First Edition years up to his current return to the charts, offers a crash-course reminder that Rogers is a star because he excels at his craft.

Just look at the titles: "Lady," "Ruby Don't Take Your Love to Town," "The Gambler," "She Believes in Me," "Islands in the Stream," "We've Got Tonight," "Buy Me A Rose." Not a ditty among them. Then listen. The sweetly raspy vocals are instantly identifiable as Kenny Rogers - he sounds like nobody else. More importantly, he inhabits each song, making it vivid and tangible. For more than five decades, Rogers has delivered memorable songs, drawing fans among rock, pop, soul and country audiences. .

When one singer makes such an indelible mark, that's not mere luck or even simple talent. "I really, really love what I'm doing," Rogers says. "People survive longer if they love what they're doing. Because you just don't quit."

Houston-born Rogers formed his first band while in high school in 1956 and never quit making music from that point on. The rockabilly group, called The Scholars, got a record deal and released two singles that had local success, and led to a performance spot on American Bandstand. Soon afterward, Rogers joined the Bobby Doyle Trio, playing stand-up bass in the jazz band, and appearing on their album. In 1966 he became a member of the New Christy Minstrels, the popular folk group, leaving a year later to form The First Edition with other members of the troupe.

The spotlight started focusing on Rogers when the group got their first hit, "I Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)." Within a year the band was called Kenny Rogers and The First Edition, and his distinctive voice led the group to both pop and country chart success with "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love To Town," written by Mel Tillis. The double-genre success struck again with "Reuben James," and the group landed their own TV variety show.

In 1974, Kenny Rogers and the First Edition disbanded, leaving Rogers at a crossroads. Disillusioned with the fickleness of the pop world, but not with music itself, he searched for a direction to take his solo career. Impressed by the loyalty of country fans that supported their favorite artists long after they had disappeared from radio, Rogers looked to country. He'd already had some success among country fans with the First Edition and he was drawn to the type of story songs that populated the genre. It was the perfect transition for him. "Love Lifted Me," went Top 20 in 1975, but it was the "Lucille" that shot him into the stratosphere. Tops at country, it also succeeded on the pop chart, was named the CMA's Single of the Year and was certified Gold.

"Daytime Friends," "Sweet Music Man," and "Love or Something Like It" continued his run of success. Then came "The Gambler," a story song so vivid it not only delighted country and pop fans, it also became a TV movie, starring Rogers himself in the title role. The movie spawned four follow-ups, making it the longest running miniseries franchise on television. It started

Rogers on a second career as an actor on television and movies, including another TV movie based on one of his hit songs, "Coward of the County."

Though theoretically a country singer, Rogers dominated the pop charts, consistently finding songs with universal appeal. "I've never considered myself a great singer, but I am a great storyteller," Rogers told *Billboard* magazine, also noting that he feels his strength as an artist is in finding great songs. In the 1980s he came to embody the role of the sensitive male, singing such romantic hits as "Through The Years," "She Believes In Me," "You Decorated My Life," and "Lady," the biggest song of his career. Those songs are classics today, sung at countless weddings, and even engraved on tombstones.

"There are a lot of songs that may have initial success but don't linger the period of time those songs have," Rogers says. "They do take a different value in your heart when they have that kind of staying power that represents your success and represents a feeling and a thought. A song like that becomes a part of your soul."

As the 1980s wound down, so did Rogers' chart success. Gone from the radio, Rogers kept busy in other ways. He would establish himself as a well-respected photographer, publishing several books, and being invited to the White House to shoot a portrait of First Lady Hillary Clinton. He authored several short stories, and appeared off-Broadway in his Christmas musical, *The Toy Shoppe* which he subsequently toured. And he never stopped making music.

In 1999, after forming his own record company, Dreamcatcher Entertainment, Rogers found himself back on the country chart with a touching story song about a young boy playing baseball. When "The Greatest" got radio and video airplay, it was greeted as a sweet comeback from a favorite bygone singer. When the follow-up, "Buy Me a Rose," hit #1 Rogers proved that his talent was just as vibrant and meaningful as it was when he first started out.

On *42 Ultimate Hits*, every great Kenny Rogers song from every phase of his career is included. The collection also has two new songs, "We Are The Same," an anthemic call to focus on what we in the world have in common rather than pointing out our differences, and "My World Is Over," a duet with new artist Whitney Duncan.

"I've always been like a boomerang," Rogers says. "You can throw me away, but you can rest assured that I'm coming back. It's not necessarily about success for me. It's not about being the biggest star in the world. I think for all intents and purposes, if you go back to the peak of my career, I accomplished everything I wanted to accomplish. To do that again doesn't excite me. But to just be there and to be a force and have people care about what you're recording, that's the greatest gift you can have."