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✓ Exclusive interview with Linda Ronstadt

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LINDA RONSTADT

Grand Marshal of the 1991 Cinco de Mayo Parade

Photo: Peter Asher Management

Linda Ronstadt:

"When we start paying for teachers instead of bombs, we aren't going to have problems in our school system, or eventually in our society."

Championing the revival of traditional Mexican ballads, the world-famous female vocalist discusses the origins of her love for the mariachi style

An interview with Linda Ronstadt, Cinco de Mayo Parade Grand Marshal

Linda Ronstadt's fame is secure. With a score of hit albums of pop music and a loyal following of fans, the fair-faced Ronstadt surprised many when she released an album of traditional Mexican music.

Ronstadt will be in her musical element as the Grand Marshal of the Mission's 25th annual Cinco de Mayo parade. What follows is an exclusive Mission Life interview with Linda Ronstadt.

Mission Life: What prompted you to do "Canciones de mi Padre?" It was a mainstream departure, and not the kind of album a major star usually does.

Ms. Ronstadt: Actually, I don't think it's ever been done before. I guess that was the reason I did it. I knew those songs. I looked at the songs that were being written at the time, and I said "Hmm, I knew a song that was better than that when I was four." There were also all kinds of songs I knew from growing up Catholic.

ML: Was there any resistance to your doing this kind of an album?

LR: There were several questions raised! I don't know what to say to something like that. I really don't know how to go about choosing songs that will play well on the radio. If I did, I guess every song I put out would end up being a top 40 hit.

In the beginning of my career, I was fortunate enough to work with record companies that stayed out of my way. When I went to do the Nelson Riddle project, the president of my record company was a huge Sinatra fan. He said "Okay, we may lose money, but you can do it, as long as you let me sit in on the sessions." So I said okay, and the record turned out to be a success, too, which I thought it might.

With the Mexican record, I didn't know if it would sell or not, but I had to make it because the music was too good. Until then I had only sung the music on an amateur level, in the living room with my family. I wanted to take the time and learn it on a professional level. Only

by putting out an album, booking the band and going into the studio to refine it and refine it could I do that. It's hard work.

My sisters and brothers helped me out. They have been in and out of the studio over the years, singing on my albums. My brother Pete was visiting me recently in San Francisco. He helped me work out the boys' choir parts. He sang the Ave Maria for Mass when we were children.

ML: Do you think your career is departing from mainstream music into "Hispanic music?"

LR: "Hispanic music" is such a misnomer to me. It's another one of those generic terms that doesn't really mean anything. Mexican music is completely different from Peruvian music, and that's different from Afro-Cuban music, which is more related to the New Orleans style.

People say "Oh, I heard your Spanish album," and I'll say "You mean, my Mexican album?" and they'll say "I just love that 'salsa' music."

If you talked to them about "salsa" in Cuba they'd look at you like you were crazy. Mexican music is based, really, on native American Myan rhythms somewhat integrated into European instruments and chord structure, but it really is very Indian.

ML: What has motivated you to go into new areas of music in your most recent albums?

LR: You say new areas, but I would say old areas. I prefer doing things I know how to do, things I'm more comfortable with. Both my parents were very musical, and we had Mexican music in my house when I was growing up—on the radio, on the piano, and singing it ourselves.

As my musical tastes developed I recognized things for their quality, like the arrangements of Nelson Riddle, which were absolutely brilliant, or what was really going on in traditional Mexican music. By the time all that stuff got swept off the charts in the '50's I was still hearing it in my house on the piano. I don't want to say I took it for granted—I didn't. I absolutely loved it. But it was second nature to me.

At some point in my career it occurred to me I could spend time doing something I actually wanted to do, not just recording one more pop song. I've always recorded the things I liked, and even on my pop records I've done odd bits and pieces,

like cowboy songs that my father taught me. He grew up on a ranch. I've also recorded traditional bluegrass music.

ML: Where do you see Mexican music going in the future?

LR: Well, I don't listen to the radio in English or Spanish except for a little classical now and then. People ask me about contemporary artists and I've never heard of them. I've only heard the stuff that was right under my nose when I was growing up.

It was mostly written in the 40's and 30's, and some from the late 1800's, the stuff that my father and grandfather heard, loved, and played on the guitar.

There are a lot of little pockets all over Mexico of different musical styles. My father would go on business trips down there and bring back records, and when he returned we'd play them and have a little family celebration.

He kept making those business trips into the early 60's when the Mariachi were still regularly featured on the radio. But then they got the same kind of weird invasion that this country suffered after World War II, and their pop music turned into something that I couldn't relate to.

I really don't know what kind of music people listen to today, but if people come to one of my concerts, they listen to traditional Mexican music.

ML: You've been producing a lot of your own albums, and even some for other people lately. Do you see yourself moving in that direction?

LR: I'm very involved in the production of my own records, and in the years that I've learned how to do it. I recently produced an album for David Linley. I also learned a lot about production on the album Trio, with Emmylou Harris and Dolly Parton. I'm finishing up an album now, and it will probably be released in May or June. It's called "Louisiana." But I consider myself a singer.

ML: Who would you say your role models were when you were growing up? Did you follow up on anyone's music?

LR: When I was a little girl my brother was singing in a world class choir. He was their soloist. We still have scratchy old tapes of his performances in 1958. He has one of the finest boy soprano voices I've heard anywhere. He was the one, I

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Linda Ronstadt

Cinco de Mayo 25th Silver Anniversary Celebration

MECA, the Mission Economic and Cultural Association proudly announces 1991 is the 25th year of celebrating Cinco de Mayo (the 5th of May, 1862), in San Francisco, **THE CINCO DE MAYO SILVER ANNIVERSARY PARADE & FESTIVAL** will attract 150,000 people throughout the Bay Area and will be the largest Cinco celebration in Northern California.

Because of the continued growth and attendance from all cultures throughout the Bay Area MECA has moved the festival site from the Mission District to Civic Center at the foot of City Hall providing access to BART within 3 blocks.

The Battle of Cinco de Mayo took place in Puebla, Mexico and commemorates the defeat of the powerful French Napoleonic Army by a small, poorly-equipped Mexican force under the command of General Ignacio Zaragoza. The battle had more significance round the world particularly in France as a sign of freedom, strength and spirit for Mexico and all of Latin America. Today the symbolism is even more important when we look at the aggression and the ongoing struggle for freedom throughout the world.

This year's celebration consists of several outstanding events.

The Festival May 4-5, time 12 noon-7 pm.

The Civic Center will be enclosed with a gazzling fiesta atmosphere. You can select from a variety of gourmet foods from all the regions of Latin America such as Enchiladas, Chili Verde, Tamales, Tacos de carne asada, Pupusas and other tasty treats. You will be able to get exotic foods like hot dogs, pizza, hamburgers and soft drinks too.

There will be three stages of entertainment with a wide variety of Latin American music and dancing. Sunday's headliner will be Los Lobos. Admission is \$3.00 for teen and adults for each day of the Festival. Young children will be admitted free.

The Healthy High Five - May 4

We will highlight sports with a five mile course that starts from the Mission District at 8 am and ends at the Festival Site at the Healthy High Five Pavilion. We stress the value of keeping fit and emphasize the need to take care of ourselves. Participants of all ages can compete in one of several ways e.g. run, skateboard, rollerskate, power walk, etc.

Anyone attending the Festival can visit the health pavilion where exhibitors focused on health services and products will provide samples, examinations, demonstrations and information. Contact Katie Reeve (415)776-1274 for advance registration and information on the races. \$10 Registrations fee in advance.

The parade May 5

On Sunday Linda Ronstadt, international recording star, will be the Parade Grand Marshal. The Parade starts on 24th Street in the Mission and will finish at Civic Center. The Parade will feature floats with musicians dancers the King and Queen, marching units and charros in traditional costume.

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Linda

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guess, who got me to realize that in our family, we sang. I didn't have enough time for school. I love learning, I'm a bookworm, but sometimes I felt like school interfered with my time to read and my new profession that was taking shape.

While I was in school, I couldn't stop singing. My attitude as seen from the eyes of a child didn't really change. Eventually I went to Los Angeles, because there were a lot more clubs there. Otherwise I would have been happy to stay in Tucson.

ML: According to the 1990 census, a huge influx from Latin America has vastly increased the Hispanic population in the U.S., but the drop-out rate remains high among Hispanics. What would you say to one of these young people considering dropping out of school right now?

LR: I don't think kids are motivated properly in the U.S. educational process, and I can understand why they feel like dropping out. Unfortunately there's a lot to compete with school, including the total non-reality of drugs. I also appreciate the plight of the educator—that their rules are made by committee. Still, I think it's important for kids to stay in school if they can possibly stand it. There really are some good schools. In the end, it depends on how motivated you are.

ML: What do you think of bilingual education?

LR: I'm a real advocate of regionalism. I think you should sound, act and dress like where you come from.

I don't think there should be any pressure on you to change. My feeling is, you should be able to speak the languages of all the countries that border yours, and also preserve the regional dialects. And it's also important to be able to use proper standard English so that when you use slang, you resort to it, in quotes.

ML: In Europe you must regularly meet people who speak multiple languages, but in this country English is the be-all and end-all. Do you think English should be the official language here?

LR: I think we're experiencing ethnocentrism in a huge, huge invasion of our consciousness right now. It's not a good thing. I think it's a kind of arrogance. It's the reason I didn't learn how to speak Spanish when I was young.

At my school, you got your hand spanked if you spoke Spanish. It was a forbidden language, a language of privacy, spoken only with my grandparents. Of course, the older people liked the idea that they could speak freely to the children.

My mother didn't speak Spanish, and she was the one who was home with us all day. And the housekeeper's family didn't speak Spanish or English, they were from India, so they spoke their own language. I learned to pronounce Spanish and I learned the songs, but didn't encounter it in school until high school Spanish classes. And do you think you're going to learn to speak Spanish from that? Good luck!

If you are motivated to do it, even within this educational system, you can really achieve anything. But my hairdresser makes *so* much more than any schoolteacher I have ever met. He deserves every penny, but it shows that our culture values beauty and power way above education. When we start naving for teachers

instead of bombs, we aren't going to have problems in our school system, or eventually in our society.

ML: When you are touring to promote your albums, how do you keep from getting burned out?

LR: I'm so sick of looking at my suitcase I never want to see it again. I didn't get into this business to be in a different country every week. I really like the music—it's very inspiring and I find some renewal in it, but I don't want to travel anymore.

ML: Do you have any plans for more film projects?

LR: You mean like "Pirates?" I was never interested in that. I only did the film because I did it on Broadway. Film acting would be a monumental waste of my time. I admire the people who can do it, but for me, it would be like asking an electrician to become a plumber or something.

ML: Will you be putting out another album of Mexican music?

LR: Yes. More trios. Some with Mariachi, some with old-fashioned guitar accompaniment. My favorite arrangement is 3 violins and trumpet. It's the sweetest sound to me. I also like 3 violins and a guitar. There are all kinds of ways to do traditional music in traditional settings. People don't realize that the Mariachi comes from Jalisco. As a traditional form, it sprang from there, and spread to other parts of Mexico. Just like further down south, they use the harp, and I'm interested in investigating that.

I have a ton of material to look into! ■

This interview was possible thanks to Ed. Vargas Associates