

MUSICIAN



Rody Sarneck

LINDA RONSTADT

One of music's most versatile voices reflects on her genre-defying career

By Jeff Tamarkin

LINDA RONSTADT WILL NEVER SING AGAIN. THAT'S THE unfortunate reality the superstar vocalist has had to come to terms with since being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. "I know I'd still be singing, because I've sung my whole life," she says. "I'd at least be singing in the shower or in my car or harmonizing with somebody. But I can't do any of that now. I'm grateful that I can talk, and I don't know how much longer that's going to last."

Ronstadt's final album, *Adieu False Heart*, a collaborative effort with singer Ann Savoy, came out in 2006. Recently Ronstadt published her memoir, *Simple Dreams*, which offers an insightful glimpse at her musical journey from rock and opera to country and traditional Mexican—music she was exposed to by age 10 growing up in Tucson, Ariz.

"I'm not the greatest singer that ever was, and I'm certainly not the most successful singer that ever was," she says with characteristic

self-deprecation. "But maybe I was the most diverse singer during the period of time I was working. So I wanted to write about why I made those choices and how it was not an arbitrary thing."

Ronstadt's career achievements are stunning. With nearly a dozen Grammys (and more than twice as many nominations), she has released 30 studio albums and sung on more than 100 others—and sold more than 60 million albums worldwide. She's earned 19 gold, 14 platinum and seven multiplatinum albums.

But the stats only tell part of the story. From her first hit "Different Drum" with the Stone Poneys in 1967, to her string of Top 10s including "You're No Good," "When Will I Be Loved," and "Blue Bayou," to her unforgettable standards with arranger Nelson Riddle and her collaborations with Emmylou Harris and Dolly Parton, she's regarded as one of the finest interpretive vocalists of the past century. She will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in April.



'I'm sure my early records would make me absolutely cringe and ruin my week'

Did writing the book come naturally?

I'd never written anything, not even a journal or a diary, and I only had one letter that my parents had saved. Otherwise it was from my memory, which is failing. I had to check with everybody and ask, "Do you remember it this way?" I also had a good copy editor who checked dates. Otherwise, I'd have people dying way before they ever had children.

What's the first music you heard?

It was probably two records by the Trio Calaveras, and Pastora Pavón Cruz. Pastora was a flamenco singer, considered the greatest of the 20th century. I remember when I was very little watching that record spin around at 78 RPM and listening to those songs—they just blew me away.

You're not a fan of records.

People ask me what records I listen to at home, and the dirty little secret is I hardly listen to any records—ever. I go out to hear live music, and musicians come over. All of the recorded music I did was a live experience for me, but then I never listened to it again. Music to me is always a work in progress, especially in the early stages when I'm just learning it, climbing around

was determined, they helped the best they could. But [Elektra/Asylum] didn't know how to sell Mexican stuff. We probably could have sold 300 times more records if they'd known how to sell records in Latin America. And I didn't want to have to go down there to play because some of those venues are dodgy. You have to show up with a gun to collect your money.

Did Peter Asher, your producer and manager, choose the songs?

No—but he had plenty to do. He was an excellent producer and a great troubleshooter, and he really knew how to get the best out of the musicians. Peter was good at hearing the ideas and he could recognize the better ones and string them on a thread. That's what a good producer can do. I did a lot of the arranging myself, and the musicians contributed a tremendous amount.

Producer-engineer George Massenburg was vital to your sound.

George taught me how to overdub. He had a very methodical way of doing vocal overdubs. That liberated me in the studio because I knew that I could sing anything I wanted. I could throw down any vocal with reckless abandon because if we didn't like it, we could edit it out with his surgical precision. He was the guy who pioneered that way of cutting something in mid-molecule and splicing it onto something else and making it sound absolutely natural. After digital recording came into use, we really could fly with those.

What's your personal favorite album?

I did my best singing on [1993's] *Winter Light*—my voice and my musicianship were the best they were ever going to be during those years. I could sing pretty much whatever I set out to do. I'm sure my early records would make me absolutely cringe and ruin my week—I never listen to them, although sometimes I go back to them for reference.

Who was your favorite collaborator?

Emmylou Harris was the longest running, but I couldn't narrow it down to one song because we just fell into each other's vocal groove so beautifully. We sang well together and we made a different sound than either of us did as an individual. I loved singing with Aaron Neville, too. It was like heaven because I can't do the things he can do. I did a lot of duets on the Mexican records, and that was fun. That music has such beautiful harmonies. I was also very happy with the record I made with Ann Savoy. I had just a

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in the rigging and trying to check out the architecture of the song. Then we'd play it night after night and refine it, and I'd learn how to really phrase, and I'd be flying around without even thinking about it.

When did you feel most confident with your voice?

It was after 1980. When I went to Broadway to do *The Pirates of Penzance* and did the Nelson Riddle albums, I learned a tremendous amount. Singing the Mexican recordings I learned even more. I was able to expand my voice. The Mexican stuff was harder than anything I ever did. By the time I got to [1992's] *Frenesi*, I could learn stuff and just do it.

How did your labels feel about your frequently changing styles?

They didn't want me to do it. They were horrified! But I was lucky and got away with it. To their credit, once they saw that I

ESSENTIAL RONSTADT



Mad Love, 1980

When Ronstadt released *Mad Love*, some of her staunchest fans became her biggest critics. They felt that she was abandoning Southern Cali rock for the then-popular new wave. Nonsense. Her three Elvis Costello covers are sublime, and there's plenty of familiarity to be found.



Trio, 1987

Ronstadt always kept a queen-sized space in her heart for country music, so this first of two teamings with Emmylou Harris and Dolly Parton was a natural. Though each approached country from different angles in their own work, here they found the sweet spot where it came together perfectly.



Cry Like a Rainstorm—Howl Like the Wind, 1989

A fluke notion to record with Aaron Neville led to the collaborative hit "Don't Know Much," which led to this. And what a love affair it is—the two seemingly disparate voices fit together seamlessly, and their material, including four Jimmy Webb tunes, proved ideal.



Winter Light, 1993

It's Ronstadt's favorite, and it's easy to see why. By the early '90s, her voice had matured markedly. The sophisticated arrangements she learned from working with Nelson Riddle are applied to more minimalist settings—and the result is one of the most satisfying pop albums of Ronstadt's career.



Box Set, 1999

Each of Ronstadt's hit albums—especially the '70s classics *Heart Like a Wheel*, *Prisoner in Disguise*, *Simple Dreams*, *Living in the U.S.A.*—stands on its own. What better way to chart her crazy-quilt career than a four-disc set that cherry-picks from them all? Caveat: Some of her best-selling singles are missing.

MUSICIAN



At the Grammys in L.A., 1984

CBS/Landov

'I learned not to read reviews, because if you believe the good ones you have to believe the bad ones!'

tiny piece of my voice left and I could barely sing so we made a very quiet record.

Which recent singers do you like?

I like Adele—she's an amazing singer. Amy Winehouse was that way too—she had a very urgent story to tell and great musicianship. I think Pink is really good. She's a good writer and she's really footed in the blues. And I like Alicia Keys.

Do you pay attention to critics?

No. I learned early on not to read reviews, because if you believe the good ones you have to believe the bad ones. You don't do it for prizes or praise or publicity. You do what you need to do.

What's next for you?

There's a lot of physical therapy in my future, I suppose. *(laughs)* In terms of music, I'm really involved with this little group called Los Cenzontles that has a cultural center in San Pablo, Calif. I've turned a lot of people on to them. I introduced them to the Chieftains and Ry Cooder. Dave Hidalgo introduced them to Taj Mahal. And Jackson Browne has been involved with them. That's where my musical family is in this part of the world. I have my musical family in Tucson and then I have my musical family here. They do a better job of teaching kids how to sing, dance and play than any place I've ever seen.

TAKING FLIGHT

Linda Ronstadt always had access to the best studio musicians in the business—and in 1971 that pool included a couple of guys named Glenn Frey and Don Henley. Ronstadt was not only there at the birth of the Eagles, she was instrumental in their formation. "I'd say, 'Glenn, you've got to meet my friend Bernie Leadon,'" she recalls. "And my manager was telling them, 'You've got to meet Randy Meisner. He'd be good in the band.' The minute Glenn and Don were rooming together, they started writing together. I told 'em, 'Those are good songs—keep writing!'" The nascent country rock outfit took her advice and soon hit paydirt. "I was living with [singer-songwriter] J.D. Souther at the time, and they came over to the house to rehearse," she says. "We went out for a while and when we came back, they had worked out 'Witchy Woman.' It was a four-part harmony song—and it just exploded out of the room. I went, 'My God, that's a hit for sure.'"

WILLIE NELSON | EARL KLUGH | ROSANNE CASH | SWITCHFOOT



THE CRYSTAL METHOD
White hot

LINDA RONSTADT
Looks back

T BONE BURNETT
Studio magic

JOHN LEGEND
Leading a soul revival



TOP GEAR
FOLK ON FIRE
ROAD HAZARDS