A BANDHOUSE GIGS TRIBUTE TO LINDA RONSTADT
PROGRAM NOTES

When I met Linda Ronstadt in 1974, she was recording what would become her first No. 1 album, *Heart Like a Wheel* at Silver Spring, Maryland’s Track Recording Studio. Little Feat’s Lowell George brought her along to the WHFS station when I invited him to my show. Lowell was helping her with the album, in particular her version of his best-known song, “Willin’.” She sang the chorus “And if you give me...weed, whites, and wine, and you show me a sign; I’ll be willin’.” Linda’s version of the song always makes me smile.

Unlike many musicians, she’s not a party animal, Linda doesn’t drink. She’s allergic to alcohol. She may, however, have sipped a taste of Sauza Conmemorativo, the Tequila of rock stars in the early 70s, but generally avoids drinking. There’s also that great rhythm alliteration in the song “Willin’” with the line “I’ve been from Tucson to Tucumcari, Tehachapi to Tonopah.” These are names and places Linda knew well—towns in Arizona that Lowell had hitchhiked through as a kid.

The two of them spent 90 minutes with me talking and singing over the air. Linda was 27, and I don’t think she envisioned future retirement from music, ever. The emotion and honesty of her songs translated into her rather quiet, almost shy speaking voice. It was wonderful watching her watching Lowell. Great musicians are very often drawn to each other. Fortunately, the ungovernable chaotic forces of music biz success that have caused so many casualties didn’t ruin her. She took all of that volatile energy and learned to channel it. Her voice has launched a thousand heartthrobs and heartaches.

Three years later, in 1977, I spent time with Linda again at the televised Inaugural Concert at The Kennedy Center on the eve of Jimmy Carter’s Inauguration, where she performed with Aretha Franklin and Loretta Lynn. We chatted pre-show at a quiet table backstage in the green room as guests mingled with Jimmy and Roslyn Carter, John Lennon, Yoko Ono, Paul Simon, and Gregg Allman. The next evening at the Inaugural Ball, celebrants danced to The Charlie Daniels Band and The Marshall Tucker Band while sipping Dom Perignon with chicken Kiev. We shared some laughs as we people watched!

Over the years, she has experimented in a wide-ranging fusion of musical styles in a rich landscape of emotions and cultures—a hybrid of strong, relentless vocals that just won’t let you go. She has an intuitive musical intelligence and has made great choices with impeccable songwriters and musicians to back her up. Linda’s strong voice and memorable onstage performances helped define the California folk-rock sound. In between bands and albums on her risk-taking career, four of her backup musicians (Randy Meisner, Bernie Leadon, Glenn Frey, and Don Henley) left to form the Eagles.

As a kid growing up, the music that mattered to Linda was popular folk music like early Bob Dylan; Peter, Paul, and Mary; and traditional stuff, like the Carter family. When Linda heard The Byrds’ version of folk-rock, she loved it so much she decided that was what she wanted to do.

In 1967, after hearing the song “Different Drum” by the Greenbriar Boys, she recorded her rendition of it with her early band, the Stone Poneys. They recorded it as a kind of shuffle, but the record company didn’t care for the arrangement but did like the song. She went back into the studio, re-recorded it with their musicians and their arrangement, resulting in a radio-friendly hit. It’s an essential LP to every record collection, and I still have a pristine vinyl copy.
In the late 1960s and early 1970s, roles were being redefined. It was being expressed in music from many of the artists Linda saw at the Troubadour in West Hollywood. Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Carole King, and The Byrds... artists and songs that defined a time and a feeling with strong examples of where you could go and that everything was possible.

Because Linda is a singer, not a songwriter, much of her artistic expression shows in her choice of material that stay with you like her great songs “You’re No Good” and Kate and Anna McGarrigle’s “Heart Like a Wheel” from her breakthrough album of the same name, in addition to Jackson Browne’s “Rock Me On the Water,” Carole King’s “Will You Love Me Tomorrow,” “When Will I Be Loved” by the Everly Brothers, “Different Drum” by Mike Nesmith, “Desperado” from The Eagles, and “Get Closer” written by Washington, D.C.’s own Jon Carroll.

In a life that mirrors the zeitgeist of the second half of the 20th century, she is one of the premier interpreters of contemporary music. In 1977 at the request of the Los Angeles Dodgers, she sang the National Anthem (not an easy song to sing) at Dodgers Stadium opening the third game of the World Series. After gathering 10 Grammy Awards and numerous platinum records for millions of album sales, her 1978 album “Living in the U.S.A.” was released with an initial shipment of 2 million units, or, in music industry parlance, the album “shipped double platinum.” Heavy man, very heavy!

In junior high school, she sang “H.M.S. Pinafore” and learned operettas that her mother and sister practiced at home. When she heard of The Pirates of Penzance, she knew what that was all about and went on to star in that Broadway show in the 1980s. Then, at the height of her rock goddess stardom, Linda decided to do Gilbert and Sullivan. She was tiring of the rock scene, singing loud in halls that were built for sporting events, not music. She liked the idea of a traditional theatrical proscenium stage. Theatre architecture is built to focus your attention and allow you to dream. A proscenium theatre frame allows you, in a way, to be hypnotized, and the person onstage is your champion, telling your story. I think she found emotions she didn’t realize she had and was very comfortable with the transition.

Linda has always enjoyed taking musical risks. After recording a collection of American standard songs on the album What’s New (1983) with The Nelson Riddle Orchestra, she opened at Radio City Music Hall, and suddenly realized, people might hate it and not show up. Opening night, Linda was so nervous she could barely stand when she got onstage. She held hands with Nelson Riddle in the wings—he was nervous, too. He told her, “Don’t let me down, baby.” Linda said, “I’ll do my best.” Nelson Riddle was the best of old school arrangers—worked with Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra, and Ella Fitzgerald. Ronstadt and Riddle worked well together, and Linda’s NYC shows were a huge success, blazing the trail for Lady Gaga to record a standards album with Tony Bennett and Elvis Costello doing the same with Burt Bacharach.

She released Canciones de Mi Padre (1987), an album of traditional Mexican songs, which went on to be the best-selling non-English-language album in American history. Linda returned to her roots during the time of this album. Mexican music has always played a vital, often under-appreciated role in popular music, bringing a balance of heart and artistry with gifted vocalists, instrumentalists, and composers. Her Mexican grandfather was a bandleader, and as a little girl growing up close to the border in Tucson, Arizona, music was part of Linda’s DNA.
Her father, Gilbert Ronstadt, a prosperous rancher and civic leader of Mexican, German, and English ancestry, introduced Linda to the rancheras, huapangos, and mariachi of Mexican folkloric music. Her mom, Ruth Mary, of German, English, and Dutch ancestry, introduced her to the standards. After gaining U.S. citizenship, her grandfather became a gifted blacksmith with customers on both sides of the border. He went from forging tools in his shop to establishing his Tucson business, Ronstadt Hardware. It prospered nearly a century until the 1980s when national retail hardware stores put many mom-and-pop operations out of business. Driving on a road trip through the Southwest with my travel-reporter wife Susan in 2005, we spotted a windmill in southern Arizona with the Ronstadt name on it. It gave me a new perspective on the era-defining art of Linda’s rich heritage.

Ronstadt uses her one-of-a-kind voice to speak loud and clear. In December 1979, Linda appeared with The Eagles and Chicago at a concert for the presidential campaign of California governor Jerry Brown, who also was her boyfriend. The show, at San Diego Sports Arena, was followed by a similar benefit at the Aladdin Theater, Las Vegas. Then, over 85,000 people gathered at the Rose Bowl, Pasadena for the antinuclear rally “Peace Sunday: We Have A Dream.” Linda, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Jackson Browne, C.S.N., Stevie Wonder, Dan Fogelberg, Bonnie Raitt, Stevie Nicks, Tom Petty, and Gary ‘U.S.’ Bonds played at this event, kicking off a Peace Week of benefit concerts and rallies across the country.

It’s been 11 years since Linda Ronstadt, once the most highly paid woman in rock and roll, sang her last show, finalizing a musical career that was a huge part of creating the enduring sound and style of the classic-rock era and beyond. In the new CNN Films documentary Linda Ronstadt: The Sound of My Voice, Linda says, “I can sing in my mind, but I can’t do it physically.”

Linda has a rare brain condition similar to Parkinson’s Disease that doesn’t respond to standard meds. It’s called Progressive Supranuclear Palsy. It gradually affects movement, gait, and balance, speech, swallowing, vision, mood, behavior, and thinking. She says that she has to stay home a lot. There’s no treatment or cure. She’s accepted it.

Linda Ronstadt sang as a fierce romantic, one who is hip to how desire always brings thorns with its rose. A glimpse into a woman who has a lot of layers, a lot of depth with a voice that speaks volumes about life and vulnerability. Jagged beauty and edgy truths. She has recorded and worked with some of the most exciting and innovative talents of our time. She draws from a range of roots, and her singing is so outstandingly beautiful that you want to hear it again and again. That is the definition of a hit song. We love you, Linda.

--Cerphe Colwell