

**This interview with
LINDA RONSTADT
was conducted by the Library of Congress on July 29,
2015.**



LOC: Of all your albums, what stands out most, to you, regarding “Heart Like a Wheel”?

I’m the last person to know; it was such a long time ago and I never listen to my old records.

I always liked that song [“Heart Like a Wheel”] rather than the more trendy or commercial stuff. I wanted to record it for years. But everyone said it was “not commercial, forget it, it’s too corny.” [But] it’s an art song, a true American art song.

I really wanted to do it on piano and cello and I finally met the person who wanted to produce it--Peter Asher. We debuted it at our Carnegie Hall concert. We were rehearsing the night before and my piano player, Andrew Gold, knew the song. And I said, “Let’s put that in the show tomorrow night.”

We did and the audience LOVED it. That convinced Peter.... Serendipity.

LOC: This was the first time you worked with Peter Asher for a full album, what did he bring to the process that was missing before?

He’s such a solid craftsman. He really knows not to go into a muddle. He knew how to steer the artist and the musicians.

He was really good at taking the best bits of the ideas and discovering how they go together to make a clear story. He’s organized, thoughtful. Clarity is what counts. If you can make it clear.... If you can make it clear then it can be funny or sad but if you try to make it funny or sad or whatever, then it’s not. But if it’s clear, then it will work. It’s almost like a side effect.

LOC: Throughout your career you have recorded just about every type of music there is but you often seem to return to country music. What draws you there?

I heard it growing up. I heard a lot of country music from the radio and the jukeboxes. Not like the country music today that is suburban music--shopping mall music--it sounds contrived to me--but the original country music that came out of the Ozarks and the Appalachians. That’s what always appealed to me--the music of people from agrarian lifestyles.

Of course, what I really love is Mexican music.

LOC: Can you tell me a bit about the song selection process that went into “Heart”?

Well, you are always scrapping frantically for songs! I can’t remember what was on that album....

LOC: For example, “You’re No Good.”

That was an afterthought. I still had a club act and you always want to start with something up-tempo when you go on stage and something up-tempo when you come off stage. Then, in between, I would do ballads. I’m basically a ballad singer.

It’s a good song. But not good for my voice. Like I said, I like ballads, something with a big melodic reach.

We changed the arrangement from what we had done on stage. The band truly came up with it, the guitar player came up with the riff and the bass player doubled it.

Andrew Gold built a great guitar solo into it.

I call [rock songs] “short-note songs.” I like the track better without my singing on it.

LOC: Are you one of those artists who is never pleased with their work?

I’m never happy with it. I think that’s normal. When something like that is frozen in time.... I like it better when it’s not. When I’m on stage, it’s a work in progress.

LOC: What about “I Can’t Help It If I’m Still In Love With You”? I assume you knew that one from your childhood?

Yes. I knew that off the jukebox from when I was a little kid. We used to go to this place called the Halfway Station, halfway to the border. It had a great jukebox and fantastic food. Still the best burritos I’ve ever eaten in my life.

I loved Hank Williams. I would get a dime or a quarter or whatever I could from my parents and go to the jukebox and play country and Mexican music.

My sister loved Hank Williams’s music and used to play it at home on the guitar so I knew the chords. When I put my own shows together, it was a natural for me because it only had three chords and I could play it.

LOC: Some of the songs on the album were originally recorded by men and others--like “Willin”--are written from a male point of view. How did you approach these songs as a woman?

I’m the narrator. It’s like the song “I dream of Jeanie with the light brown hair.” A woman would sing that. It’s from the point of view of someone that sings it but I don’t think she’s necessarily saying “I’m in love with Jeannie.”

As for “Willin’,” well, I identified with life on the road! I lived like a truck driver. We traveled in buses. Stopped in truck stops to get them fixed. Stopped at truck stops for food.

And I loved Lowell George. So great.

LOC: To many the “Heart Like a Wheel” album solidified the “California sound.” How do you define the so-called “California sound”?

California was just a lens that focused so many things from around the country, that brought things into focus from other.... It’s like that show “All in the Family,” it was made in Los Angeles but set in the East and then sent out to the rest of the country.

We were all transplants. I think the only original was Brian Wilson. The Eagles were transplants—Glenn was from Michigan; Don [Henley] was from Texas; Bernie [Leadon] was from Florida; Randy [Meisner], from Nebraska; JD [Souther] was from Texas. Joni Mitchell was Canadian. But we all found a common cause in LA. I mean Neil Young is as different a singer from Joni Mitchell as I am from Taylor Swift.

We converged at The Troubadour. That was a place where you got a job. No matter who you were you played the Troubadour. Carole King had had a hit with “Tapestry” on the charts and she still played there for a week.

You would go and see these people. If you worked there, you could go in for free. I’d go see every show.

LOC: Did the artistic and commercial success of “Heart Like a Wheel” influence the approach you took to your follow-up album “Prisoner in Disguise”?

I had a rock and roll hit, so I had to find another. And now I played big arenas, not little clubs.

“You’re No Good” changed my audience. I had to do a lot of big, bolder stuff.

But I’m a ballad singer, I like sensitive arrangements. Violins and cellos. It was a fight I didn’t always win.

LOC: Two singles were released from the album to radio “You’re No Good” and “When Will I Be Loved.” Did you have a voice in selecting those two or was that a record company decision?

Well, we also had B-sides in those days and the B-side of “You’re No Good” was “I Can’t Help It If I’m Still In Love With You.” “You’re No Good” was on the R&B and pop charts and “I Can’t Help It If I’m Still In Love” went onto the country chart. I made all three charts and that was the first time anyone had done that.

The record company decided [the songs to be released]. I figured they knew what they were doing. I mean they were the ones going around to the stations with the drugs and hookers, so they got to decide [laughs].

LOC: I read once where you said if “Heart Like a Wheel” hadn’t been the success that it was, you might not have gotten a chance to ever make another record. Is that true, do you think?

Yes, but it didn’t occur to me at the time. I just always got these songs I wanted to do and then hoped to find a sympathetic producer to help me do them.

It wasn’t until I worked with Nelson Riddle that I landed on my natural singing voice and started learning how to sing. You know you spend a lifetime learning how to do something and then another lifetime trying to do it.