“I did the record because I loved the songs so much,” said Linda Ronstadt in a November 30, 2022 Alt.Latino-NPR interview about her 1987 milestone “Canciones de Mi Padre” album released on the Elektra/Asylum label. Originally from Tucson, Arizona, Ronstadt had long self-identified as Mexican American and was proud of her family heritage. “I’d say it in every interview. I’d say, I am Mexican American, German Mexican. But I have white skin and a German surname. And so the fact that my great grandfather married into a Mexican family that came in the 1700s didn’t matter to the reporters.” Ronstadt grew up singing Mexican songs in Spanish with her family. “It was Sunday afternoons, and my dad would put on some of those records, and we would all sing along. And it was family, and Sunday, and beautiful music… So I knew all the songs... I had a whole pile of songs with beautiful lyrics.” Recording an album of classic Mexican canciones rancheras (country songs) had long been on her mind, though it was a dream postponed by market resistance to her departing from her ultra-successful career singing rock-and-roll, pop, and country music.

By mid-career, the momentum of her success, her determination to do something drawing from her Mexican family roots, and the support of her producer, Peter Asher, led to a collaboration with Rubén Fuentes, director of Mexico’s renowned mariachi ensemble, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. The recording session also featured top-notch musicians from three other Los Angeles-based mariachis—Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano, Mariachi Los Galleros de Pedro Hernández, and José Hernández’s Mariachi Sol de México. The all-star collaboration was marked by creative tension between producer-arranger Fuentes, who was looking to create a modern, urban mariachi sound, and Ronstadt, who favored the repertoire and simpler arrangements from música ranchera’s heyday in the 1930s and 1940s. Says Ronstadt, “[Fuentes] wanted to do more modern sounding, more city-sounding stuff, and I kept bringing pictures of cows and ancient monaural records I remembered as a kid.” In the end, they compromised, the dream became reality, and the album was released in 1987.

Even with the high caliber of artists and music, the results astounded all involved. The album won a Grammy, went double platinum, and eventually became the biggest-selling non-English album in American history. It sparked Ronstadt’s successful “Canciones de Mi Padre” theatrical tour. But for Ronstadt, the album’s impact went far beyond the strictly commercial. She was struck by how different the audiences were from those who went to hear her sing rock and
country, recalling, “They were multi-generation audiences. Like usually Americans would bring a date, or a girlfriend or something like that [to her rock and country concerts], but Mexican audiences showed up with mother, grandfather, grandchildren. Every generation showed up, and they knew where to yell and scream and where to be quiet. That’s the best thing about singing to a Mexican audience. [Yelling] Ah ha ha hay, at the right place would make the music crescendo. They don’t clap out of time, and they don’t sing out of tune.”

The album’s phenomenal success and Ronstadt proclaiming her Mexican heritage so publicly also raised the visibility and prestige of mariachi music and musicians in general, who in stage events had been typically relegated to the role of anonymous accompanists. Says Ronstadt, “In shows, mariachis were forty feet away. We take the mariachis for granted. We take the songs for granted… Mariachi music was what you heard in a Mexican restaurant.” As Ronstadt’s non-Mexican crossover audiences gained new appreciation for mariachi music through her groundbreaking success, mariachi musicians noticed an expansion of their clientele, with the telltale signs of Ronstadt’s influence at work in how the audiences would request every piece on the album! Business burgeoned for mariachis, as did pride in the music as an important expression of Mexican American heritage.

“Canciones de Mi Padre’s” unprecedented acclaim led to a reprise album, “Más Canciones” (Elektra 1991). Linda has often made her feelings clear that after years of hard work and experience recording the album and singing canciones rancheras in concerts and mariachi festivals across the nation, “Más Canciones” was musically better than its predecessor. In her NPR interview, she implores, “Tell everybody to listen to the second record. It’s better than the first one. I wasn’t ready on the first one.” Ready or not, with “Canciones de Mi Padre,” she left a major mark on American culture, leaving a monument to Mexican American music alongside her signature sound in rock, pop, and country. And over the span of her life and career, she leaves the legacy of an American role model of how to be bicultural.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*