

# “Heart Like a Wheel”—Linda Ronstadt (1974)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



*Original album*



*Original label*



*Peter Asher*

Linda Ronstadt’s 1974 album “Heart Like a Wheel” was her fifth as a solo artist. And though she had previously enjoyed some chart success with the group The Stone Poneys (their recording of “Different Drum” was a hit in 1967) and achieved some success as a solo artist in 1970 with the song “Long Long Time,” “Heart Like a Wheel” is considered her breakthrough album and, to some, her career masterwork.

Considering Ronstadt’s “Heart” success, musically and commercially, it is not surprising that it was this album that also marked the first time Ronstadt had an entire album steered by music producer extraordinaire Peter Asher.

Asher, a former performer (he was the Peter in Peter & Gordon), began managing and producing other performers in late 1960s. One of his first clients was a young troubadour named James Taylor. In the early ‘70s, after an introduction by Taylor’s sister, Kate, Asher began managing and producing Linda Ronstadt.

Once joined up with Ronstadt, Asher and the California-based singer soon became something of a dynamic duo. “Heart” marked the beginning of a long and extraordinarily successful collaboration; every subsequent album Ronstadt would ever record with Asher—all 13 of them-- would eventually be certified either gold or platinum.

Since her debut on vinyl with the Stone Poneys and as a solo act via her early albums “Hand Sown...Home Grown” (1969), “Silk Purse” (1970) and “Linda Ronstadt” (1972), Ronstadt had been working steadily in pushing the country genre toward the pop mainstream. And the musical contents of “Heart Like a Wheel” would continue in that vein. The album featured covers of songs by Hank Williams, Paul Craft, and Phil Everly.

The album also contained songs written by Paul Anka, George Lowell (of Little Feat fame), and James Taylor. But, for Ronstadt, the key and defining track of the album—in fact, to her, its reason for being—was the title tune, the plaintive ballad “Heart Like a Wheel” written by Anna McGarrigle.

In her 2014 autobiography, “Simple Dreams,” Ronstadt recounted her first exposure to the song while in the back of a taxi cab in New York City:

At dawn, Jerry Jeff [Walker] and I shared a cab back uptown. Jerry’s face was barely visible in the gray light when he turned to me and said, “I heard these two sisters from

Canada sing at the Philadelphia Folk Festival. They wrote a beautiful song you should hear.” He bent his head low, closed his eyes, and softly sang for me all that he could remember of the song....

It felt like a bomb had exploded in my head. Even in those few lines I could tell that the song, both plainspoken and delicate, had a highly original approach to describing the deadly peril of romantic love.... It rearranged my entire musical landscape.

The song “Heart Like a Wheel” would become the closing track of side one of the album.

As would become the norm for Ronstadt’s career, the rest of the album shows a careful ear for song selection and a complete aversion to anything that could be considered album “filler.” Two of the album’s selections became major hits when released as singles. The lead off track, “You’re No Good,” written by Clint Ballard, Jr. and previously recorded by Dee Dee Warwick and Betty Everett, became, via Ronstadt’s version, a major hit. That song’s tough, declarative title and Ronstadt’s full throttle delivery (which included a wail or two) certainly directed the singer towards a rock audience and stood in contrast to Ronstadt’s then resounding (and accurate) wholesome image.

The album’s follow-up single was equally successful. Phil Everly’s “When Will I Be Loved” had been a hit for the Everlys back in 1960, rising up to number eight on the Billboard chart. Ronstadt’s version, however, performed even better, going up to number two in early 1975.

A third single “I Can’t Help It If I’m In Love With You,” written by Hank Williams, which teamed Ronstadt with her friend Emmylou Harris, became a success on both pop and country radio.

In her 2010 memoir, “Composed,” Rosanne Cash wrote of “Heart Like a Wheel’s” influence on her as a young singer/songwriter:

“Heart Like a Wheel” had profoundly affected me as a young girl, and I had studied it assiduously as a great example of a feminine point of view concept record, the best one since Joni Mitchell’s “Blue,” I thought, and equally important in the template I was creating for what I might do in my life. I especially admired [Ronstadt’s] thoughtful song selection, which resulted in a very well-balanced album....

In his liner notes for “The Best of Linda Ronstadt: The Capitol Years,” a Ronstadt compilation that was put out in 2006, Barry Alfonso stakes the success of the “Heart Like a Wheel” album on “[pulling] together the disparate influence and influences of Ronstadt’s music into a synergistic whole.”

Certainly, as mentioned earlier, the combination of Ronstadt, Asher and the country-rock genre would prove deeply successful; they would mine it spectacularly for the next several years until Ronstadt grew restless and began to explore other musical styles including new wave, American standards and Latin American music. It also proved highly influential. “Heart” and Ronstadt’s follow-ups to it solidified the California rock/country rock sound that would later become the milieu of the Eagles (who were once Ronstadt’s backing band) and, in time, become the template of almost all later contemporary country music.

In her (belated) 2014 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, former Eagle Glenn Frey stated:

From the first rehearsal, I thought we were working on a style of music none of us had ever heard before. Two years later, people called it “country-rock.”

1974 was the first of many magic years in Linda's career. When she found herself in a place that all artists dream of. When the producer, the material and the players all come together and something other-worldly happens in the recording studio. This was "Heart Like a Wheel." An album for all time.

The haunting title track...Linda's deceptively simple arrangement of "It Doesn't Matter Anymore"...the Hank Williams classic "I Can't Help It If I'm In Love With You"...and the smash "You're No Good," kept this album in the charts for 51 weeks. And Linda became a star.

Sonically, Ronstadt's voice seemed to harken back to some of the singers of the Big Band Era where "pretty" and pleasing to the ear were a requirement. Unlike many other female vocalists of rock, there is no scratch in Ronstadt's voice, no breathiness or rough-hewn edge. Hers is all tone but equipped with a full-bodied, robust sound and power that is pure rock and roll. Which is not to say that she cannot elicit great emotion from her stylings; she wrings a host of pain from both "Heart Like a Wheel's" title track and from the album's closing number "You Can Close Your Eyes."

Eventually going double-platinum signifying sales of two million units, "Heart Like a Wheel," as noted earlier, is considered by many to be Linda Ronstadt's opus. Yet that's certainly an arguable statement considering some of Ronstadt's later, equally impressive output includes the albums "Simple Dreams" (1977), "Living in the USA" (1978), "Get Closer" (1982), and such latter career offerings as "Cry Like a Rainstorm, Howl Like the Wind" (1989), "Winter Light" (1993) and "Feel Like Home" (1995), not to mention her two "Trio" LP's (1986 and 1994) which partnered her alongside Emmylou Harris and Dolly Parton.

Regardless, "Heart Like a Wheel" was certainly the album that delivered Ronstadt fully into the American mainstream and, even today, over 40 years after its making, it's a recording that stands as a singular achievement, and a golden showcase for one of the most magnificent voices in the history of recorded music.

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