

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

Added to the National Registry: 2013

Essay by Rosanne Cash (guest post)*



Linda Ronstadt

“Heart Like a Wheel” is the apotheosis of Linda Ronstadt’s pop/rock albums, and an essential document of the musical explosion at the fusion of rock, pop, and country in Southern California in the 1970’s. Hundreds of artists, continuing on into the 21st Century, can trace the provenance of their work to that moment in musical history, and some can follow the crumbs back precisely to “Heart Like a Wheel”: an album that is a sublime synopsis of Ronstadt’s truly extraordinary voice and superb instincts as a song curator, which elicited the best supporting musicians of the era. She interprets songwriters as diverse as Paul Anka and Hank Williams and reveals nuance and brings depth of feeling that often exceed the songwriter’s original intent. The team she assembled was at the very fulcrum of excellence, and every person involved in the making of the album, from producer Peter Asher, a sonic architect at the top of his game, to exceptional musicians like David Lindley and Don Henley, who went on to iconic status himself, brought their own mastery to coalesce around Ronstadt. “Heart Like a Wheel” almost instantly established itself as both linchpin and muse in the canon of truly great popular record albums and secured Linda’s status as an instantly identifiable and timeless Voice, writ large on vinyl, and permanently in musical history.

For me, “Heart Like a Wheel” was a master class in song curation, a guided tour through the specifics of emotional nuance and vocal mapping as a singer, and a valuable lesson in cutting-edge production values. But most of all, it was Linda. Linda, in all her fullness of spirit, confidence, and complete control of her voice, and the fluidity with which she navigated its curves and hollows, her power and her ability to surrender--it all moved me deeply, and imprinted me at a most impressionable time in my life. I was 19 when “Heart Like a Wheel” was released. I listened to it hundreds of times. I had just begun to write songs, to play guitar, and to consider a future life as a musician and songwriter. In some ways, I spent the next 40 years trying to recreate an album as perfect as “Heart Like a Wheel.” Time is short now. I’ve done good work, and perhaps I’ve made something that means as much to someone as that album meant to me, and for that, I owe a debt to Linda. I dreamed of her early in my career--I dreamed she was speaking with a man called “Art,” and they told me, “We don’t respect dilettantes.” I awoke from that dream shaken, and determined to show “Art,” and Linda, that I was serious. “Heart Like a Wheel” cemented my instincts toward dedication, process, and detail, challenged me to cultivate harmonic relationships in the studio, and to nourish the impulses of inspiration in my own heart. It’s possible that I found the album, and it found me, at the very moment the path I would take revealed itself. If that is the case, it does not diminish its greatness, it only personalizes the impact. I began to understand, just from listening to that record, how to show up, serious and humble, for my own muse.

Rosanne Cash is a multi-Grammy Award-winning singer and songwriter who has had 11 number one country singles, 21 top 40 country singles and earned two gold records. In 2015, she was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. She is also the author of the short story collection "Bodies of Water," and a memoir, "Composed," along with other published works.

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