The following interview with LINDA RONSTADT was conducted on behalf of the Library of Congress on March 28, 2022

This interview was conducted by Jennie Cataldo of Accompany Studios.

JENNIE CATALDO: Tell me about before you decided to do the “Canciones” album, tell me about the Mariachi Vargas and how you got involved with them.

LINDA RONSTADT: I heard them play because I had heard their records for years and also they would play behind really great singers like Lola Beltran. I knew who some of the musicians were. They didn't have any idea who I was. But I was introduced to them finally at a mariachi conference in Tucson. And it was one of the first ones that they had there. And I was introduced to the guy who's the owner of the band, and he said his name was Ruben Fuentes. And I said, “Would you make a record with me?” And that's how it started. I just thought I'd love to record with them, I loved the music. I didn't know it as a professional. I couldn't. I didn't know the lyrics to a lot of songs. Some songs I learned from my family, I didn't even ever hear records of them, but I took about a year and got myself up to speed by just doing a lot of woodshedding. And I thought the songs were so much better than the songs that I was getting in pop music. It didn't occur to me that other people would like it or not, I just thought I had to do it because I liked it. Very self-indulgent.

JC: That's great. And it seems like Mariachi Vargas has been like a longtime group. Can you tell us about them, for people who have never heard of them?

LR: They made their bones in Guadalajara. They came from a little pueblo, Tecalitlan, outside of Guadalajara in the mountains above there. And [they] started out as a peasant band, and then it got uptown and added horns. It started out with like two violins and guitarron and a rhythm stringed instrument called the vihuela. And the guitarron is a big sort of bass instrument that plays in octaves a lot. And they added harp that plays in octaves with the bass. And the rhythm section
became very particular. And the rhythms are indigenous rhythms. They're not, for the most part, West African or European; they're indigenous rhythms based on the Son and, well, just music from different regions. Mariachi prides itself on being able to play music from all regions of Mexico. They can play tropical music, they can play a Son like “Son Abajeno” or a romantic song. They could play anything really well.

JC: Yeah. Sounds like it. And tell me about Rubén and what was it like the first time you met him?

LR: He is from Mexico City and sort of shaped the mariachi from the ‘40s and the ‘50s has really made it more, I think, made it sort of modern. I like the old stuff. So I kept saying, “Make my records more old fashioned, make them more traditional.” He'd go, “You'll never sell any records.” And I went, “I don't care.” So I kept bringing it up. I wanted it to be like, like rancheras. I wanted to sing rancheras and I wanted them to sound like they came from the country. So I kept cutting out pictures of cows and bringing them up, putting on the walls of the studio to remind him. And he sort of followed my lead finally. I don't think he was used to women singers having opinions in the studio. But he was a good sport about it.

JC: So the cows were for him not for you?

LR: The cows were a hint to him to make my record sound more traditional, more country.

JC: Great. And tell me about when you were learning some of these songs. You've known these songs for so long, but what's the difference when you started to try to sing them?

LR: Well, it was a natural thing for me to be singing one because of listening to Lola Beltran and Amalia Mendoza and those singers. Miguel Aceves Mejia. I'd already sung along with them, even though I didn't know the words, I'd just sort of sing the vowels. Sort of like what I'm capable of hearing now, only vowels and no consonants. Because I didn't have access to the lyrics. You couldn't just type a song name into the internet and Google it to find the lyrics in those days. And not a lot of people knew those songs. They were songs from the ‘40s, ‘50s, ‘20s and ‘30s. And they didn't sound anything like Mexican pop music at the time.

[So] finding the lyrics was the first thing. Getting the lyrics translated so that I knew exactly what every word meant. I'd write the English word above it, because the syntax is different, so that I can invest the right amount of emotion into that word. And then getting the rhythms, [that’s] really hard. They're counted as six, eight, but really six-eight alternated with three...I don't know exactly, I'm not properly trained in music. My music education did not include learning to read music. So I had to find my own way of counting it,... It was crazy, but it took me a couple of weeks to learn how to learn. And the guys were really helpful, the Mariachi was very helpful, they showed me things, they mentored me. I was also working with the Mariachi Los Camperos de Nati Cano out of Los Angeles. They were all from Mexico. There's a couple of mariachi families and they produce these mariachi musicians. And they just trade back and forth between them. They all have these family connections. And they're all sort of from the same pool. So the band in Los Angeles was mainly from Guadalajara. And they were able to trade back and forth, I was able to trade members. But I used the Mariachi Vargas when I toured for the most part and then switched over to the Camperos who were just as good.

JC: That's great. And tell me about when you got the idea for the album, what was the conversation like with the record company?
LR: [laughs] Utter disbelief. I don't know why I thought it would make sense to them. And my manager and producer, Peter Asher, had no idea about that music. But he has always been very good at following my whim. And to their credit, even though they were disbelievers, they really got in there and tried to help me. Peter co-produced, which he didn't like to do usually, with Ruben Fuentes. And there's a language barrier, but they were both gentlemen. And they were both professional. And I was counting on that to make their relationship work out. And it did. So it's a long way you can go with good manners. So, Peter, very British and very, very stoic, and Ruben, very passionate and sort of Mexican, it was really cool watching them work out. And me bringing pictures of the cows. The second album that we made together, I think, worked better because I was learning so much on the first album. So I wish they'd pick the second album instead of the first one.

JC: What gave you so much confidence when speaking to the record company, did you know it was going to be a success?

LR: I didn't think about whether it would be successful or not, I don't know why. I should have been thinking about it, because if you make a record that stiffs, you don't have a contract anymore. And they don't want to make any more records with you. But I just, I couldn't think of anything but the songs. I'd wanted to sing them so badly for so long. And there was a chance to learn them like a professional, you know, learn how to really sing them, and learn the words which was very important. So I just was determined to do it. It was: I'm going to do this because I can.

JC: It's great, a weaker person wouldn't have had as much insistence as you. I mean, it's a challenge to learn. It's a challenge to learn, to sing it, to learn Spanish too.

LR: I've never worked so hard in my life…. It was really hard. The thing that was so weird is that I didn't get scared about it until the night before we opened our “Canciones de mi Padre” traveling show. We opened in, not Austin, but...

JC: San Antonio?

LR: San Antonio, yeah. And the night before, well, Mexican audiences don't buy tickets in advance. It's all walk-up audiences. It was walk up ticket sales. And the promoter was freaking out because they didn't have a lot of advance ticket sales and I went “Oh, this is going to be the end of me now.” And then I hadn't learned some of the songs very well, so I wrote the lyrics--I had a fan as part of my costume--and I wrote the lyrics and pasted them on the fan. And I couldn't see it in the light. And I was so nervous. I finally went, “Oh my God, what have I done to myself?” I just jumped off a cliff. But I looked out to the faces of the audience, it was packed. There were three generations of families there. They all sang along with the songs. They knew them all. It was really fun.

JC: Did it seem like a lot of new fans?

LR: Yeah, it was audiences that had never been to my rock and roll shows. Same venues, just totally different people. I love that. I love that people brought their grandparents along and brought their kids.

JC: And putting the record out also came with a lot of new experiences like this stage show. Tell me about putting that together and how it was different than your other tours.

LR: Well, there was a great cultural-- people said there'd be a cultural exchange between Americans and Mexicans. And I said nope, it's between the Mexicans and the Mexican-Americans
to see how things are different; the mores were different, that's for sure. And you know, some food differences, but we were exploring each other's cultural, culturally. That was really interesting. There was a lot of camaraderie. We were riding on a regular bus with seats because there were 30 of us and you couldn't get a custom bus for that many people. So we were riding tough. And we would sing, you know, I had a really good time. I learned a lot of music on the bus.

JC: And tell me about riding on horseback while singing.

LR: Oh, that was… I learned to ride a horse by riding on the top with my legs on either side, riding astride. The Mexicans women ride side saddle, which I've decided is an anagram for suicidal because you have both legs on one side of the horse and it's not a very stable position. So I was riding along on this horse. And I'd vetted him before. I took him around the band and I had them play loud trumpet in its ear. It didn't seem to bother him. But when we got in the arena, we got around to a corner that had a lot of feedback. And his little ears are very delicate, they could hear way out of our range. And it was killing him. And he started to jump around and I thought, it's going to buck me off. So I was going, “Oh boy, don't, please don't kill me, please don't kill me!” in English between the lines of singing in Spanish, all of it was going to the audience.

JC: Wow!

LR: I survived that ride.

JC: Was that the last time?

LR: That's the last time I ever rode side saddle. I rode one time in Texas in a show. And I rode bareback with my big skirt, and I don't think that was quite approved of, but it was all I could muster.

JC: Safer anyway.

LR: Yeah.

JC: Tell me about the response to the record. Did it surprise you?

LR: In hindsight, it did, but I wasn't paying attention to that. I don't think I've even found out how many I sold until later on. You know, I just figured that no news was good news. If they weren't coming to put my house up for auction, I was OK. The record company wasn't complaining.

JC: And when you think about your full catalog where does the “Canciones” albums fit in with your collection?

LR: They don't fit at all! [laughs] And I made a Cajun record after that. Nothing I did fit with whatever I did before. I like different kinds of music. I have eclectic taste. And as long as I heard it before I was ten, ten years old, I can pretty much sing it. But there are a lot of things that I didn't hear before I was ten. Before I was eight, really. If I didn't hear it before I was eight, I don't try to sing it. It's traditional stuff. I think that I'm a product of the Great American Radio, as it was in the ‘30s, ‘40s, ‘50s. Even into the ‘60s, I could hear so many different kinds of music. We lived close to the border, so I heard all the Mexican stations. But I also heard the rhythm and blues stations from Louisiana. And the country stations that brought the Grand Ole Opry, I heard that. And my grandparents listened to classical music a lot, so they always had that on their radio. And the Metropolitan Opera broadcast on Saturday. I listened to that too. The radio's my favorite of all the
mass media. You could have just stopped with radio and I'd be happy. Radio and movies that you used to get in the theater, I like that.

**JC:** One of my favorite quotes from your book on this topic is when you say, “After the surreal experience of being caught in the body snatching machinery of the American celebrity juggernaut, I felt I was able to reclaim an essential part of who I was, a girl from the Sonoran Desert.”

**LR:** Yeah, that's how I feel, who I am. I just tried to write a book [“Feels Like Home”] about it. It's hard to write about it. [Sonoran’s] a region that continues on both sides of the border. And it doesn't change very much. You know, it changes a little bit south of the border, north of the border depending where you're coming from. But really, it's basically the same climate, same vegetation, the same food. The same music.

**JC:** Did you feel like you weren't allowed to be the girl from the Sonoran Desert when you were doing rock shows?

**LR:** Part of me felt that a little bit. The attitude of rock and roll was so defiant that sometimes I got a little tired of that. And I got tired of having to give up the attitude and the image. I wanted to play grown-up music. Which is not to say that rock ‘n’ roll isn't good music. It is, it's some great music. But it just wasn't who I was anymore. I didn't want to be that defiant person.

**JC:** Yeah, it's OK to celebrate traditions.

**LR:** Yeah, yeah, tradition is good…. That's why I stayed around.

**JC:** That's right. Tell me a little more about the stage show and what you put together with all the costumes and the dancing.

**LR:** Well, that was fun. I knew what kind of dancing I like because I'd seen the Ballet Folklorico. And so I wanted that real flashy, just throwing their skirts up. There's a lot of different styles of dancing in Mexico. Some of them they never picked their skirts up. And they danced on a box and the feet are the percussion instrument for the music. The Ballet Folklorico was way more show business than that, but beautiful and graceful and elegant. And I wanted that. And I found some favorite dancers in Los Angeles. I went to see different dancers and hired them. And the costumes were fun. Those costumes are made to order, you can't go buy one. So we had to all decide what our colors were going to be. I picked totally American colors. I picked pastels with pink and blue. They said, “No, you can't have that, that's not right, not traditional.” So I had to change my costumes a couple of times. But it was just fun working the whole thing out from the ground up with the lighting and the sets. I got Tony Walton, who just died in last couple of months. He's an Oscar-winning set designer and costume designer. He didn't have to do the costumes because we had traditional ones, but he did a beautiful job on the sets.

**JC:** There's still a video of the concert on YouTube. It's very beautiful.

**LR:** We took it from Mexican artists that have showed certain styles, you know. Shapes, and especially the stuff from the ‘30s. Mexico in the ‘30s had a great art flowering.

**JC:** And I also like how it was, I mean, when you look out the audience, it was a lot of people who already knew the songs, but you also made it accessible to people who didn't. And I like the stories in between and seeing some of the lyrics translated.
LR: Yeah, it makes a big difference when you can hear the lyrics. The melodies are beautiful, and the harmonies are beautiful. And that's what got me because I didn't know what the lyrics were a lot of the time. I didn't know what they were. I would sing, la la, I didn't know I was thinking about. So it really gave me like a fuel injection when I learned what the words were. It really helps. I think the music stands on its own, whether you understand the lyrics or not because the sentiment is so powerful. But Mexicans are very adept at poetry. The Aztecs valued poetry more than anything. They thought, they said, in order to explain any profound concept like philosophical or religious or spiritual or any great passion, that you had to use poetry. It's the only way to express those things. And they have a rich sort of agrarian poetic imagery in those songs. And I think they're world class songs, I just thought they were better than most of the songs I was hearing in pop music anywhere.

JC: Well, the Library is also putting together a sizzle reel of a few quotes from artists that are being inducted. So they've asked me if you can complete this sentence: “Canciones de mi Padre” is…

LR: “Canciones de mi Padre” is an album I've always wanted to make because of my Mexican heritage. I love the musical traditions that came with it. I always thought they were world class songs. And I thought they were songs that the music could transcend the language barrier.