



Linda Ronstadt

BY JOHN ROCKWELL

The queen of seventies rock was first and foremost a singer with a golden voice as well as a musical omnivore.

NEARLY TWENTY YEARS AFTER SHE BECAME ELIGIBLE, Linda Ronstadt was finally nominated for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and, of course, was elected on the first ballot. Linda herself (I call her Linda because we've been friends for nearly forty years) has never been much for awards ceremonies – Hall of Fame, Grammys, whatever. “I don't want to seem ungracious,” she told me, graciously. “But I've refused all comment about this.” ✿ One tricky aspect of her relation to the Hall of Fame is that Linda (b. July 15, 1946) has long since gone beyond rock in her madly diverse musical career. When she became eligible, she was already well into her standards and Mexican albums. To the disappointment of her rock fans (who, to judge from her recent book tour, remain a devoted, warmly affectionate lot), she gives the 1970s relatively short shrift in her lovely memoir, *Simple Dreams*. To read her now, she felt her musical range to be confined; her concerts all lonely dressing rooms and bad arena acoustics and onstage unease. Indoor sports stadiums and big crowds cause her discomfort. ✿ To discuss Linda's remarkable musical career would be to place equal emphasis on all the kinds of music she has sung, from folk and folk rock, to country and country rock, to pop rock and hard rock, to Gilbert and Sullivan and Puccini, to American songbook standards, to Mexican ranchera, to Afro-Cuban, to jazz. It's kind of amazing. ✿ Looking back on her rock career now, beyond all the success on the charts (with singles, albums, rock, country, R&B, adult contemporary, jazz, Latin), Linda's self-analysis corresponds with many of the rock critics who rated her a stiff and unspontaneous singer. Linda has always been a perfectionist; her greatest musical pleasure, I think, aside



ABOVE

With the original Stone Poneys: singer/guitarists Bobby Kimmel (left) and Kenny Edwards, 1967

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



LINDA RONSTADT, STONE PONEYS AND FRIENDS, VOL. III
Capitol 1968



HAND SOWN... HOME GROWN
Capitol 1969



SILK PURSE
Capitol 1970



DON'T CRY NOW
Asylum 1973



HEART LIKE A WHEEL
Capitol 1974



PRISONER IN DISGUISE
Asylum 1975



SIMPLE DREAMS
Asylum 1977



TRIO (WITH EMMYLOU HARRIS AND DOLLY PARTON)
Warner Bros. 1987

from singing in private with her family and friends, was working in the studio – getting the pitch and the phrasing and the harmonies and the arrangements and the postproduction details just right: what the composer and critic Virgil Thomson used to call *tiny craft*.

Though her records have been produced by the likes of Peter Asher and George Massenburg, and her bands led by Andrew Gold and Waddy Wachtel, Linda has remained a strong, decisive voice in all artistic decisions. Asher was initially warned when he contemplated becoming her manager and producer that her assertiveness made her hard to work with. Just another cross to bear for a “chick singer,” as she referred to herself and her peers, in a man’s world. If a chick singer implies a docile songbird controlled by macho instrumentalists and producers, it strays a long way from this particular reality. For all her charm and grace, she has always been strong-willed, a determined feminist – and her outspoken progressive political activism in recent years only reinforces that point.

Her perfectionism, however, meant that some of her rock singing sounded stiff. She had a beautiful voice in an idiom that prizes roughness, and her struggle to get the phrasing right clashed with the improvisatory spirit of many admired rock singers, female and male.

The fact that with a couple of exceptions she was an interpreter, not a songwriter, covering songs by others who had already put their imprint on them, complicated her problem. Her critics prized originals by the likes of Doris Troy and Smokey Robinson. Then and now, she tends to agree with those who fault her rock singing. “I never came out of the blues,” she told me recently. “My roots were in Mexican music and country music – and classical music, though that didn’t help me one bit with rock!” Her admirers still prize many of those records from the apex of her rock fame; I’m particularly partial to the live version of “Tumbling Dice” on the *FM* soundtrack (1978), looser and fiercer than the excellent studio-recorded version on the *Simple Dreams* album (1977).

DESPITE ALL HER DIFFERENT MUSICAL explorations, Linda was still making rock records close to when she was forced to retire from singing. “My best rock & roll singing happened after I made the Mexican records,” she said. She mentions the albums *Winter Light* (1993) and *We Ran* (1998) as containing what she thinks of as some of her best rock work, particularly the songs “Anyone Who Had a Heart” and “I Just Don’t Know What to Do With Myself” on *Winter Light*; and “Ruler of My Heart” and “Cry ‘Til My Tears Run Dry” on *We Ran*. She credits her emersion in ranchera and the African rhythms on her Afro-Cuban album *Frenesí* with freeing her as a rock singer – ironically, long after her rock stardom had crested. Nonetheless, following her success as Mabel in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Pirates of Penzance* in 1980 (Central Park, Broadway, a feature film), she became better known for musical styles other than rock. She still sold millions of records (especially the standards and Mexican albums), but she had happily evolved away from rock.

What’s interesting about her rock career, from her family singing in Tucson to her first Stone Poneys recordings starting in 1967 and her solo albums from 1969 on, is the stylistic diversity underneath the broad tent of what we call “rock.” Linda was an eager participant in the Troubadour scene that favored



**CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT**

Ronstadt in her early twenties at New York City's Fillmore East, 1968; on 'The Johnny Cash Show' with the Man in Black himself, 1969; with a later incarnation of the Stone Poneys, Shep Cooke (left) and John Keski on the cover art for their 1967 album, 'Evergreen Vol. 2'; with George Jones and Bonnie Raitt at the Bottom Line in New York City, 1980; live in 1977.





On 'The Tonight Show,' 1987

folk rock and country rock. Her rock albums contain examples of all that, plus the exquisite ballads her admirers adore, even though they showed up less often on her greatest-hits albums than the uptempo rock and R&B songs. Close-harmony singing (especially the Trio sessions with Emmylou Harris and Dolly Parton) alluded to her love for the American vernacular that preceded both standards and rock, but which can be suitably honored in a rock hall of fame.

What tied this all together was her ear (nobody was better at working out harmonies, which Linda did for most of her duet and trio arrangements); her exquisite control of pitch (losing that control was an early sign of her eventual diagnosis with Parkinson's disease); her willingness to master the rhythms and styles of every kind of music; but above all, her personality and her voice.

Linda Ronstadt was always first and foremost a singer with a golden voice. When I asserted that in a long essay about her in 1978, at the height of her rock fame and commercial ascendancy, some laughed. Linda in the seventies was a sex symbol and an American sweetheart, a duality that explains the diversity of her fan base, from horny teenaged boys (and horny older men) to girls and women, who loyally turned out in droves on her recent book tour. With her bottom-

less eyes and almond face and dazzling smile, Linda was such a beauty that some critics simply assumed that she owed her success to her looks. But it was her voice – its purity, lush beauty, and adaptability to any kind of music – that made her a star. "I first saw Linda at the Troubadour in the sixties when she was with the Stone Poneys," Neil Young wrote in his autobiography. "So young and beautiful! She blew everyone's mind with her big voice. Can you imagine sitting in the audience, seeing this girl walk up onstage, looking amazing in her short shorts, and then hearing that huge voice? It was earth-shattering." The feeling was mutual: Linda opened for Young on a 1973 arena tour and sang on numerous Young records.

Technically, Linda's voice is a soprano with an underdeveloped top extension. Her main rock voice was her lower register, her "belting" register (not a "chest voice" as in an operatic contralto). Music teachers in Tucson encouraged her as a teenager to study classical technique – they heard operatic potential – but she was already wedded to folk, country, and popular music. Had she trained classically, she would have strengthened that upper register, which is actually a female falsetto, and learned to knit it into her lower register. She used the falsetto extension tellingly as a coloristic accent on some of her rock recordings (for

example, "Blue Bayou"), and in Mabel's coloratura piping in *The Pirates of Penzance*. But when she took on Mimi in *La Bohème*, which demands sustained lyrical singing in the upper register, she sounded weakly unsupported.

Her lower register was her glory, and she was the full master of it. She could bend it to her will, shade pitches, float ballads, belt imperiously, and blend with most anyone in harmony singing. People may have loved her looks, but they bought her records because of the sounds she made.

There was more to her rock career than her hit records and her concerts, in which her onstage awkwardness usually translated into an appealing vulnerability. There was her bubbly personality as it emerged in interviews – charming, gracious, frank, and sharply intelligent. There was the string of famous boyfriends and liaisons, despite her efforts to keep her private life private. And there was her role as a centerpiece of the whole Los Angeles folk-rock scene, from the mid-sixties to the late seventies. Linda was the queen of female rock singers then in terms of fame and fortune, but she was also the focus of a warm and supportive circle of women singers and songwriters, local, national, and international. Kate and Anna McGarrigle sang their own music wonderfully, to be sure. But Linda sang "Heart Like a Wheel" and others wonderfully as well, and made them a lot of money and certified their own fame. There were Karla



BELOW

Back at San Francisco's Fillmore in 2008

"My best rock & roll singing happened after I made the Mexican records."

Bonoff and Valerie Carter and the Roche sisters and Phoebe Snow and Nicolette Larson and many more. Men, too: Warren Zevon, J.D. Souther, Randy Newman, Lowell George, Eric Kaz, Jimmy Webb. Linda sought out the best songs wherever she could find them, but she was also generosity itself. Her love for collaboration, for singing with others on their behalf, is attested to by statistics: More than 45 albums have come out under her own name, but she has appeared, by one count, on more than 120.

Then again, the McGarrigles were not exactly "rock" singers in any normal definition of that amorphous word. Which brings me back to my point, that Linda's post-1980 stylistic explorations were foreshadowed in her rock career, given the diversity of idioms on every album and from album to album. From the very beginning, she was and remains a musical omnivore.

What constitutes suitability for inclusion in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame? Musical excellence. Linda may have stumbled a bit in terms of rock-critical respect, though there were some of us! Otherwise, she's a Hall of Famer for sure. It may have taken a long, long time, but she's in now where she has long deserved to be. Welcome to the club, Linda. 🍷

