

FEATURES

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2008

PAGE 13

Once a rock star, now a matriarch of mariachi

When Linda Ronstadt abdicated the throne of rock Venus-dom, she became a champion of mariachi music

BY PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO



Even now, lounging around her apartment at the age of 62, wearing Mephisto slippers and a far-from-revealing hoodie, Linda Ronstadt is thinking back to a summer in Guadalajara when she was 12, and a light-haired Mexican boy named Mario. "I would flirt with him," she recalls wryly, her come-hither eyes and heart-shaped lips still echoing the days when she was decreed Rock's Venus by *Rolling Stone*. "One night I heard music and ran to the window. I peeked through the curtain, and there was Mario with two taxis full of mariachis serenading me with firecrackers."

To Ronstadt, whose roots are deeply embedded in Mexican soil, it was the ultimate seduction. "These are big-voiced songs, filled with the exuberance of nature, the fertility of the earth, love and romance," she says of mariachi music, the focus of much of her artistic passion since she abdicated the throne of rock Venus-dom in the early 1980s. "They're about growing the land, and romance blooming in that context. The songs are more complex sexually, I think, than the romantic love we grew up on."

A mistress of self-reinvention who likens her resolve to "a Mexican crossed with a Sherman tank," Ronstadt's post-*Heart Like a Wheel* career has included pop standards with Nelson Riddle, Gilbert & Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* onstage for Joseph Papp (she was nominated for a Tony), twangy Appalachia (with Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris), French Cajun (her recent *Adieu False Heart* with Ann Savoy) and of course, with *Canciones de Mi Padre*, mariachi — which reconnected her to her Tucson, Arizona, childhood as the granddaughter of a German-Mexican mining engineer and rancher whose mariachi band serenaded the populace from a now-defunct bandstand in the city's central plaza.

Today Ronstadt, whose zeal for eclecticism extends to her decor — a cross between the Hubbell Trading Post in Arizona and Mario Buatta — is transforming herself again, this time as the consulting artistic and educational director of the Mexican Heritage Plaza's 17th Annual International Mariachi and Latin Music Festival in San Jose, California. Next Saturday, she will perform there with artists like Lila Downs and Aida Cuevas as part of a tribute to three dead mariachi divas, including her own musical heroine, Lola Beltrán.

The event, which runs through Sept. 28, is one of dozens of mariachi festivals and conferences that have flourished around the country since the San Antonio International Mariachi Conference was founded in 1979. Since then the festivals have become a Latino cultural phenomenon, drawing thousands of fans annually to places like Tucson; Albuquerque; Fresno, California; Wenatchee, Washington; and the Hollywood Bowl. Most



Top: Linda Ronstadt at her townhouse in San Francisco. Left and below left: Mariachi players and dancers. Since the San Antonio International Mariachi Conference was founded in 1979, dozens of mariachi festivals and conferences have sprung up across the US.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

notably they have become a mecca for young Mexican-American musicians dressed in *trajes de charro*, traditional spangled outfits with butterfly-shaped ties and sombreros, who come for hands-on workshops with celebrity masters like Nati Cano and Randy and Steve Carrillo of Mariachi Cobre. For young mariachis it is the equivalent of studying guitar with Keith Richards and vocals with Mick Jagger.

"There's a totally different energy exchanged," Ronstadt says of the mariachi scene, which draws entire extended families, as opposed to single-generation rock audiences. "There's not some drunk yelling out *Heat Wave* when you were singing *Heart Like a Wheel*."

Though its precise origins are sketchy, mariachi

emerged in northwestern Mexican state of Jalisco in the late 19th century, sung by musicians who traveled from village to village for saints days and fiestas. During the Mexican revolution mariachi soldiers played corridos to Pancho Villa and other heroes; afterward the rousing melodies incorporating indigenous rhythms became a patriotic symbol of Mexican nationhood.

Despite its prominence, including the "singing charro" movies and radio broadcasts of the 1930s, the genre was viewed as slightly declassé, its musicians as "human jukeboxes regurgitating whatever tune the customer requested," in the words of Daniel Sheehy, acting director of the Smithsonian Latino Center and director of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

It was in America, unexpectedly perhaps, that the image began to change. Almost 30 years ago the San Antonio conference, spawned by the Chicano movement, helped legitimize the musicians as marquee performers and inspire inclusion of mariachi in national music education. Today some 500 public schools offer mariachi classes along with choir and orchestra.

"It was a cultural and educational breakthrough, putting a new frame around an old music and Mexican culture on the main stage of American society," Sheehy said. Ronstadt used her stardom to raise the profile of Mexican music. *Canciones de Mi Padre*, released in 1987 and her first album of traditional mariachi music, became the biggest selling non-English album in US history at the time, with sales of more than 2 million copies. The next year it was adapted for a Broadway show, in which she appeared in full Mexican costume, complete with fake braids.

"She put us on center stage," said Cano, 75, a national heritage fellow who recently performed with the mezzo-soprano Suzanna Guzman and the Mexico City Philharmonic in Los Angeles. "After Linda mariachi became popular in concert halls, not just at the cantinas and the pinata parties."

Through the music of her father and grandfather, Ronstadt seemed finally to inhabit herself, like Peter Pan finding his shadow. On the radio the soulful melodies of traditional mariachi ensembles still lie under the radar, though individual artists accompanied by mariachi bands, like Vicente Fernandez, regularly top the Latin charts. For many Mexican-Americans, mariachi remains the emotional sound track of daily life, performed at baptisms, weddings, birthday parties, funerals.

[WEEKENDER]

NSO should throw caution to the winds

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON AND DIANE BAKER
CONTRIBUTING AND STAFF REPORTERS

Wednesday's concert by the National Symphony Orchestra under Gunther Herbig had had its heart torn out before it even started. The young Russian pianist Alex Kobrin, scheduled to play Mozart's *Piano Concerto in D Minor, K.466* — perhaps his most ambitious exercise in the medium — was unable to fit the concert's revised date into his schedule (it was to have taken place on Sunday afternoon but was moved to Wednesday because of the typhoon). Beethoven's two violin romances, and another for two violins by Pablo Sarasate, were substituted, giving Taipei the same program Kaohsiung was due to hear the following Saturday [20 Sept.].

The result was an airing of exclusively 19th-century works, all of them extremely well-known. Is this really what the NSO, currently experiencing low ticket sales, really should be offering? Next July's *Carmen* will also be something no one will be hearing for the first time, replacing Debussy's *Pelleas et Melisande*, an opera by a composer young Taiwanese instrumentalists I know are often enthusiastic about.

I admit my limited receptivity to these three charming but slight violin works, *Wagner's Meistersinger Prelude* and Brahms' First Symphony was influenced by having spent the earlier part of the day listening to Janacek's dynamic and highly original opera *From the House of the Dead*, vital music that has probably never been heard live here in Taiwan.

But I was prompted to wonder, nonetheless, whether this kind of extremely cautious programming was the right fare to offer Taiwan's generally open-minded, well-educated and well-informed concertgoers. But at least November's homegrown opera premier, *The Black Bearded Bible Man*, remains in the NSO program to challenge audiences with the promise of novelty.

U-Theater (優人神鼓) began its performance of *The Walk* at the National Theater with a short documentary of their 12,000km walk around Taiwan. One memorable shot was of an exhausted walker laying on a children's slide, his head at the foot and his legs resting on the slope, red cap over his face. Given the quick pace at which was the company traveled, such exhaustion was merited.

The Walk moves for the most part at a much slower pace, but proved to be a very rewarding journey. Though there are some fast-paced segments, the image that lingers is of walkers moving single file, lifting each foot and putting it down ever so slowly, each muscle contraction and release a meditation in itself.

It's always hard to describe U-Theater to someone who has not seen them. "A Zen drumming group" is the usual definition, but it is so much more. Each of the group's productions is built around drumming, but company founder and director Liu Ruo-yu (劉若瑀) started off as an actress and her sense of showmanship helps keep audiences riveted, even during set changes.

Abstract images of the ocean, leaves and forests were projected on the backdrop and a small drop scrim was artfully used both to conceal and to highlight the performers. In section four (晚風紅日), a bright sun blazed on the screen, while the sound of the small drums carried by the performers epitomized the sun beating down on your head on a hot day. The sun was replaced in section five (山谷溪流) with shifting ocean waves of teal blue, turquoise and sky blue, while the incredible voice of Aboriginal singer Inka Mbing helped carry some of the women on their journey, much as Iki Tadau's singing began the show.

A few blocks south at the Taipei Guiling Street Avant-Garde Theater on Saturday afternoon there was a journey on a much smaller scale, as Sun Chuo-tai's (孫悅泰) 8213 Physical Dance Theater (8213肢體舞蹈劇場) explored cross-cultural differences and identity in *Boundless: My Bliss* (無國界！我的天堂).

Sun allowed each performer to showcase their talent, even though at other times they were competing for attention — from one another and from the audience, physically and verbally. Mimi Cave's dialogue on global warming and how practicing yoga and being a vegetarian made her a better person (so why should she have to worry about turning off lights and turning down the air-conditioner?) was spot-on.

PLANETPOP

In his first interview since being acquitted of child pornography charges, **R. Kelly** dismissed allegations that he ever preyed on young girls, saying in an interview: "I don't like anyone illegal." In the interview with Black Entertainment Television, Kelly said he was relieved when the trial was over, and that his upcoming album would feature less of the sexually charged material that has come to define his multiplatinum career.

"I'm really trying to make this album ... a little bit different," he said in an interview that aired on BET on Tuesday.

"Take a little bit of the edge off, you know? And you know, clean up a few lyrics if I can, you know?" Kelly, 40, was acquitted in Chicago in June of multiple child pornography charges. The verdict ended a six-year saga that began when a videotape surfaced of a man looking like



Kelly having sex with a girl believed to be as young as 13. Kelly denied he was the man in the videotape, and the girl in the video never testified.

Kelly spoke to the network for about a half-hour last week.

Though the interview did not specifically address the child pornography charges, Kelly was asked about the perception that he is attracted to young girls (Kelly was married to the late singer Aaliyah when she was 15, but the marriage was quickly annulled).

When asked if he liked teenage girls, Kelly replied: "When you say teenage, how — how old are we talkin' ... 19?" "I have some 19-year-old friends," he added. "But I don't like anybody illegal, if that's what we're talking about, underage." Kelly said he was worried that he might be convicted.

"But at the same time I was very prayerful," he said. "Verdict day ... I couldn't describe it and I wouldn't wish it on — if I had a worst enemy, which I don't." When the not guilty verdicts were announced, Kelly said he felt relieved that he would be able to see his three children

Like father, like son: Actor Ryan O'Neal, left, and Redmond O'Neal were arrested and charged with possessing methamphetamine.

PHOTO: REUTERS



British singer George Michael has been caught with his pants down, again.

PHOTO: EPA

— two daughters and a son — once again. "I couldn't wait to get home to hug them and hold them," he said.

Despite the charges Kelly faced, he still managed to maintain a successful career, notching several platinum albums and hits during that period. His new album, *12 Play 4th Quarter*, is scheduled for the fall.

British pop star **George Michael** has been cautioned by police after being arrested in a public toilet in London in possession of drugs, police said late Saturday.

"A 45-year-old man was arrested on Sept. 19 on suspicion of possession of drugs in the Hampstead Heath area," a Metropolitan Police spokesman said.

The singer was taken to a police station and given the caution for possessing class A and class C drugs, police said.

Under British law, class A drugs can include crack cocaine.

Michael, 45, has admitted using drugs in the past.

In 2006, he was found slumped over the wheel of his car and last year he was given a two-year driving ban after pleading guilty to driving while unfit through drugs.

Michael has sold more than 100 million records worldwide, with seven US number one singles, 11 number one singles in

Britain and six number one albums.

Last month he wrapped up his first tour for 15 years with concerts in London and Copenhagen and said they were his last ever arena and stadium shows.

On the tour, he wore a police uniform to perform his number one hit *Outside* which refers to his arrest in 1998 when he made lewd advances to an undercover male police officer in a public toilet in Beverly Hills, California.

Actor **Ryan O'Neal** and his son, Redmond, were arrested and charged with possessing methamphetamine on Wednesday following a search of their home, officials said. They were taken into custody at their home in Malibu after a pre-dawn check by officers, said Sergeant Diane Hecht, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Actress **Katie Holmes** won praise for her debut on Broadway on Thursday night, where she was cheered on by actor husband **Tom Cruise** and shouted at by anti-Scientology protesters outside the theater. The drama started before the curtains went up in the Gerald Schoenfeld Theater with a group of about 20 protesters, some masked, chanting "Scientology is a cult" and "Free Katie," according to the *New York Daily News*.

— AGENCIES