

Lydia Mendoza: Houstonian and First Woman of Tejano Music

By Aimee L'Heureux



Lydia Mendoza, shown at age fifteen, always had a deep love for music. She often got reprimanded as a small child for taking her mother's guitar without asking.

All photos courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Lydia Mendoza was born in Houston Heights on May 21, 1916, to parents who had fled the Mexican Revolution. Rising to fame in the 1930s in the Southwest United States, Mendoza became known as the Queen of Tejano and the first icon of Mexican American pop culture. Despite her popularity at the time, discrimination against Mexicans remained strong. Many motels and restaurants posted signs warning “no dogs or Mexicans allowed.” The Mendoza family overcame these challenges often staying in Catholic churches and taking their own cooking equipment on the road with them. Despite the challenges she faced, Lydia gained widespread fame, earning the nicknames *La Alondra de la Frontera* (the Meadowlark of the Border) and *La Cancionera de los Pobres* (the Songstress of the Poor).¹ “For older Mexicanos,” one scholar claims, Lydia Mendoza brings back “vivid memories of a musical artist and of their own youth, of the struggle to grow up Mexican in the United States, of having to fight just to be served a cup of coffee in a downtown Texas café.”²

Like other Mexicanos during the early 1900s in the lower Rio Grande Valley, Lydia's parents felt comfortable in the borderlands. Many settlements were originally Mexican, and many people in the region spoke Spanish. Lydia's father, Francisco, worked as a mechanic on both

sides of the border and took his family with him. Often taking extreme measures to cross the border, Francisco is said to have impersonated a woman, a priest, and even Capitán José David Contreras Torres in Pancho Villa's army to get back and forth.³ Thus, the Mendoza children—Beatriz, Lydia, Francisca (Panchita), María, Juanita, Manuel, and Andrés—were born at the end points

of travel in either Monterrey or Houston.

In 1920, Lydia and her family entered the United States through Laredo. Four years of age at the time, Lydia remembers being taken behind the immigration station and washed with gasoline. “They told us that we were infected with lice . . . It wasn't just me; there were several other children, all Mexicans.” The gasoline got in her eyes and made her ill. Thankfully, Lydia only had to experience this one time. “Afterwards they stopped doing it,” she remembered.⁴

Lydia's mother, Leonor, devoted her time to educating her children. Lydia recalls, “My father never sent my sisters and I to school. He used to say, ‘Why send girls to school if all they do is get married and move away?’”⁵ Both parents played guitar and enjoyed singing. This love for music rubbed off on Lydia who took up the guitar at age seven. At age ten, Lydia played the mandolin, Leonor

“Mal Hombre”

Era yo una chiquilla todavía
cuando tú casualmente me encontraste
y merced a tus artes de mundano
de mi honra el perfume te llevaste.

Luego hiciste conmigo lo que todos
los que son como tú con las mujeres,
por lo tanto no extrañes que yo ahora
en tu cara te diga lo que eres.

Mal hombre,
tan ruín es tu alma que no tiene nombre,
eres un canalla, eres un malvado,
eres un mal hombre.

A mi triste destino abandonada
entablé fiera lucha con la vida,
ella recia y cruel me toturaba;
yo más débil al fin caí vencida.

Tú supiste a tiempo mi derrota,
mi espantoso calvario conociste,
te digeron algunos: “¡Ve a salvarla!”
Y probando quien eres, te reíste.

Mal hombre, [refrain]
Poco tiempo después, en el arroyo,
entre sombras, mi vida defendía;
y una noche con otra tú pasaste,
que al mirarme sentí que te decía:

“¿Quién es esa mujer? ¿Tú la conoces?”
“¡Ya la ves!” respondiste, “una cualquiera.”
Y al oír de tus labios tal ultraje,
demostrabas también lo que tú eras.

Mal hombre, [refrain]

“Evil Man”

I was but a young girl
when, by chance, you found me
and with your worldly charm
you crushed the flower of my innocence.

Then you treated me like all men
of your kind treat women,
so don't be surprised now if I
tell you to your face what you really are.

Evil man,
your soul is so vile it has no name,
you are despicable, you are evil,
you are an evil man.

Abandoned to a sad fate,
my life became a fierce struggle
suffering the harshness and cruelty of the world;
I was weak and was defeated.

In time you learned of my downfall,
how my life had become a road to hell,
some people told you: “Go save her!”
And proving who you really are, you just laughed.

Evil man, [refrain]
A short time later, in the gutter,
amidst shadows, I was fighting for my life;
one night you passed by with another woman,
and upon seeing me, I heard her say:

“Who is that woman? Do you know her?”
“You can see for yourself!” you replied, “she's a nobody.”
When I heard that insult fall from your lips,
you proved once again what you really are.

Evil man, [refrain]



When Lydia Mendoza married Juan Alvarado on March 3, 1935, the family continued to perform without her. This photo, taken in 1935, reflects Lydia's absence. Shown from the upper left to right: Panchita (Francisca), Leonor, and Maria; and seated on the floor: Juanita and Manuel.

played the guitar, Francesca, the triangle, and Francisco accompanied on the tambourine. As the family grew in number and skill, the parents reassigned instruments. When Lydia turned twelve years old, she began playing the violin, giving her younger sister Maria the opportunity to play the mandolin. At that point, the Mendoza family became migrant singers.⁶

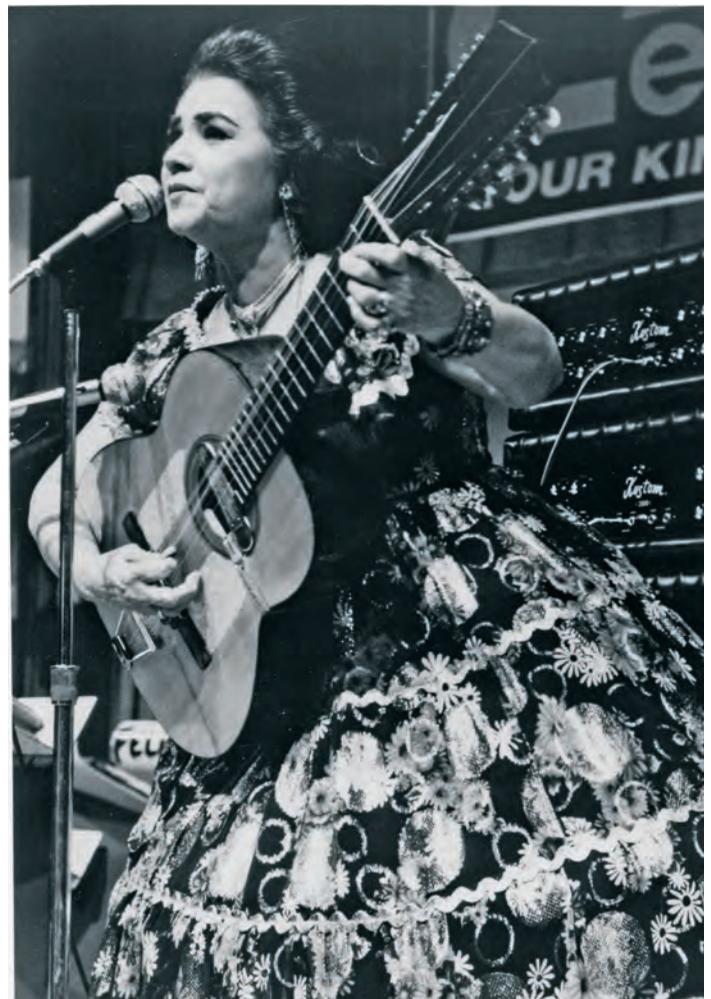
During the Great Depression, government agencies encouraged the repatriation of supposedly undocumented Mexicans. Faced with growing discrimination against Mexicans in Texas, many workers headed north in search of jobs. The Mendoza family followed this migration and settled in Michigan, where they sang to small Mexican audiences in restaurants, barber shops, and homes. When the family moved back to Houston, they stayed in a house on Avenue L in Magnolia Park in the East End. Residents of Magnolia Park served as an important source of labor for the Bayou City, while enjoying a distinct Mexican cultural and social life. Welcoming the Mendoza singers, working class audiences in Magnolia Park were entertained at Mexican barbershops, bakeries, restaurants, evening salones, and popular family meeting places like El Salón Juárez and El Salón Hidalgo.⁷

At age seventeen, Lydia got her big break in San Antonio. She and her family were performing at the Plaza del Zacate, when Manuel J. Cortez, a part-time radio announcer heard her solo. He invited Lydia to take part in an amateur

contest on his radio program, “La Voz Latina.”⁸ In 1934, she recorded her first solo single, the tango “Mal Hombre,” which quickly became her signature song. “Lydia sang in the vernacular, which means in the peoples’ way of singing, not the [way of] highly trained or theatrical performers,” according to Chris Strachwitz, owner of Arhoolie Records. Lydia Mendoza released two albums on Strachwitz’s label. Mendoza differed from many musicians of the time because she performed solo with only a guitar, and Mexican female solo performers were a rarity.⁹

Lydia retired from her musical career in the 1940s to raise her three daughters. In 1947, she decided to begin touring again. It surprised her to find packed venues. She then returned to recording, usually backed by a Mexican orchestra—creating a richer Tejano sound that appealed to America’s Spanish speaking population. In 1950, she debuted in Mexico, playing to 20,000 people a night. She then began touring more regularly and recorded in Mexico, Cuba, and Columbia.

Lydia’s pioneering recordings were re-issued in the 1970s, introducing her to a younger audience and leading to her employment as a music teacher at California State University, Fresno. Les Blank’s 1976 documentary about border music, *Chulas Fronteras*, which focused on Texas Mexican culture, featured Lydia Mendoza singing and cooking.¹⁰ Chris Strachwitz co-produced *Chulas Fronteras*,



*Shown in a promotional photo, Lydia appeared in the 1976 documentary film *Chulas Fronteras* about Mexican border music.*



Taken in June 1950, this photo shows Lydia, center, in Chihuahua, Mexico, where she was awarded a key to the city.

in which Mendoza spoke about her approach to song. “It doesn’t matter if it’s a corrido, a waltz, a bolero, a polka or whatever,” stated Lydia. “When I sing that song, I live that song.”¹¹

Lydia Mendoza went on to sing at President Jimmy Carter’s inauguration in 1977 and became the first Texan to receive a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship at the inaugural awards ceremony in 1982. In 1999, she received the National Medal of Arts at a ceremony at the White House—sharing the stage with Aretha

Franklin, Norman Lear, Michael Graves, and George Segal.¹² Lydia Mendoza died on December 20, 2007, bringing to an end a musical career that spanned eight decades. Even though Lydia is no longer with us, her music lives on in the memories of her fans, perhaps even more so for those from the Bayou City. [↪](#)

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