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.”

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?’” 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
“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]
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.”9 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*,
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.”

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. 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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