



LYDIA MENDOZA

"La Alondra de la
Frontera"

- Tres Puñaladas
- Tu Recompensa
- Sin Fe
- Dos Caminos
- Cuando El Destino
- Besando La Cruz
- No Se Ha Perdido Nada
- Viejos Amigos

A promotional photograph of Lydia Mendoza during the 1940s as her popularity grew among the Mexican American people.

LYDIA MENDOZA: HOUSTONIAN AND FIRST LADY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN SONG

BY CARLOS B. GIL*

Standing outside an aging dance hall located on the outskirts of San Antonio, Texas, an amateur singer named Yrma spoke excitedly about Lydia Mendoza. Moments earlier, inside the hall, a number of admiring Mexican American vocalists had presented Lydia with a commemorative bronze plaque. In the cool August night, Yrma's words competed with the galloping echoes of a *norteño* polka band:

Lydia is a model for me because she sings with all her heart. More than that, she sings songs my mother used to sing when I was a little girl in Brownsville. That's why I asked her to sing "Impossible." Each time I hear it I remember my mother. She used to love to hear Lydia Mendoza sing that song.¹

Yrma's words remind us that the name Lydia Mendoza is a household word for most Mexican Americans thirty years of age or older. For the younger members of this group, the name rings familiar, but no clear image may come to mind beyond faint childhood recollections. For older *mexicanos*, however, the name invokes 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 cafe. Lydia Mendoza, known as "La Alondra de la Frontera" ("the Meadowlark of the Border") became the most popular Mexican or Mexican American singer in the 1930s, and has since been revered by Mexican music fans.

This article will place Lydia Mendoza in her deserved historical dimension because in the history of Mexican American music, her artistic career and her songs occupy a very special place. Houston attorney Alfred J. Hernández perceptively commented:

Lydia Mendoza's contribution to the musical taste of the Hispanic community has been one of clearly expressing

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¹Yrma Lourdes García, interview with author on August 23, 1980, in San Antonio, Texas.

the feelings of the woman scorned by the man. She has captured, in human terms, the feelings of the woman who continually sacrifices herself, the Mexican woman who serves the man by offering him her body, her soul, her work, her sweat, her self-sacrifice—usually receiving a token payment in return. In "Mal Hombre" . . . Lydia speaks of the man who is really a bad man yet she continues to give him all she possesses—her body and soul.²

Hernández summarized the subtle significance of Lydia Mendoza's career as well as the element which carried her to national and international fame. Singing primarily about a woman's inner feelings, Lydia has travelled thousands of miles to offer her special talent to Spanish-speaking audiences since her humble Texas debut in 1928. She has recently performed in Alaska, New York, San Francisco, and places in between. She has accepted invitations abroad in Canada, Mexico, and Colombia. During the course of her career she recorded so many 78 and 45 r.p.m. "singles" that she has not kept an accurate count. She definitely recorded no less than thirty-five long-playing albums. Gaining recognition in recent years beyond her ethnic audiences, Lydia was invited to sing at the world's fair in Montreal and for cultural festivals at the Library of Congress and the White House. Today, wherever she appears, adult Mexican Americans shed a tear upon rediscovering her and learning that she sings and plays guitar undaunted by the many years which have elapsed since they first heard her perform.

Details about Lydia's life have rarely been printed. Thus, for her hundreds of thousands of fans, knowledge about her background, her career, and her family life will surely be welcomed information. Likewise, from a personal point of view, an understanding of her life may prove beneficial to the young Chicano who has, for whatever reason, never heard about her. Thirdly, anyone interested in folk music, particularly its Mexican and Chicano variants, should be aware of Lydia Mendoza's contributions. Lastly, the details of Lydia's experience illumine important, broad social and cultural aspects of Mexican American history which all thinking Americans need to comprehend.³

Lydia Mendoza's parents were like many other *mexicanos* during the early decades of this century in the lower Rio Grande Valley. They viewed the border area as one common ground throughout which they easily moved. They felt comfortable in that region because many of the original settlements were

²Judge Alfred J. Hernández, interview with author on August 28, 1980, in Houston, Texas.

³Lydia Mendoza, interviews with author on August 22-29, 1980, in Houston and San Antonio, Texas. I use the term "Mexican" interchangeably with "Mexican living in the United States" and *mexicanos*. I apply the term "Chicano" only to persons who would probably prefer that term to any other. Lydia considers herself *una mexicana*.

Mexican, and Spanish was the common language. Moreover, the mesquite-covered terrain looked the same on both sides. By 1910 important railroad lines existed which allowed people to travel from one side of the border to the other. Thanks to Mexico's rapid economic growth during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, the Ferrocarriles Nacionales, for example, had connected the city of Monterrey, Nuevo León, with Laredo, Texas, as early as 1884. Francisco Mendoza, Lydia's father, earned his livelihood as a mechanic on the rail line. He was assigned to work on both sides of the border, and he rarely left his family behind. This explains why the Mendoza children—Beatriz, Lydia, Francisca, María, Juana, Manuel, and Andrés—were born either in Monterrey or Houston, end points on the line of travel. Lydia was born in 1916, in a modest home in the Houston Heights. Francisco's job allowed him to indulge his wanderlust, his inborn gaiety, and his love of music. All these bright elements of his personality profoundly influenced Lydia.

Lydia's mother, Leonor, stood firmly by her fun-loving husband. Old family portraits reflect the face of a woman beset with heavy responsibility. The daughter of a dedicated school teacher, she devoted her knowledge and life to the artistic education of her children. She could have reached for personal stardom, but instead invested her time and talent at home.

Although her practical training was more than adequate, Lydia nonetheless had little formal education. This was probably the case with most girls at that time, especially those of Mexican families. Lydia remembers that:

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? It's better that you help your mother." So, one day my father asked me, "What do you like to do?"

"I like to wash dishes!" I liked being in the kitchen so they gave me those chores. My eldest sister announced she would keep the house clean and take care of the smaller children. So, each one of us received specific chores to do.⁴

Unwilling to challenge her husband's decision on this matter, Leonor responded quietly and unobtrusively to the situation. She educated her children at home with the aid of pencils, paper, books, chalk, and blackboards. By the time each of the Mendoza children reached the age of five, they had learned to read and write.

Beyond attending to kitchen chores and acquiring the rudiments of learning, Lydia soon discovered a passion for music. It was stimulated by the

⁴Lydia Mendoza, interviews with author on August 22-29, 1980, in Houston and San Antonio, Texas.

home-spun artistry of her parents. Both played the guitar and enjoyed singing very much. Lydia clearly recalls that she felt a strong musical impulse when she was four years old. She remembers that while living in Ennis, Texas, her father and mother would sing and play after dinner as she sat at their feet listening intently.

Lydia's desire led her to play guitar by the age of seven. She considers that her first public performance took place in 1926 at her father's birthday celebration. She was only ten. In front of her family and friends she sang "Todo Por Tí," one of the songs taught to her by her mother. Childhood fantasy already loomed clearly in her mind; she yearned to become a star.

The repertoire of songs which carried Lydia Mendoza to international fame contains a variety of types popular among *mexicanos* of the 1920s, and she learned these at a very early age. One is the *corrido* or Mexican ballad.⁵ Indeed, Mexican American college students often ask Lydia to sing *corridos*, a request which she always honors with charming modesty. The *corrido*, however, is not her favorite musical form and, thus, it may not have been as dominant in popularity among border Mexicans as some scholars believe.⁶

Perhaps her favorite type of song is the *habanera*. Her greatest hits like "Mal Hombre" and "Celosa" are constructed on its languid cadence.⁷ Lending itself to the "latin" style of strumming and plucking a guitar, the *habanera* is a syncopated 4/4 rhythm accompanying a pleasing mixture of minor and major chords. This form is popular in Mexico to this day and is often identified with the *musica criolla* of Yucatán. The numerous compositions of the romantic Guty Cárdenas best exemplify this song-type.

The *habanera* not only has an enchanting rhythm but its own lyrical style as well. Like the other *canciones*, the style of the *habanera* reveals a delicate and poetic simplicity. It expresses love relationships in a rich allegorical manner. Moreover, its imagery is urban rather than agrarian as in the *corrido*. Indeed, Lydia's songs have always reflected the urban Mexican experience.

The story of the origin of Lydia's lasting hits—the songs most often requested by her fans—is as simple as it is intriguing. Her explanation fits better than any historian's interpretation. She notes:

My problem was that I wanted to learn song lyrics. Since in those years there was no television nor radio, you couldn't hear anything [that could be considered new]. Less so where we lived. At that time we lived in

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Vicente T. Mendoza, *El romance español y el corrido mexicano, estudio comparativo* (Mexico City, 1939).

⁷*Habanera* is a rhythm probably introduced into Latin America from Cuba.

the Bellavista district of Monterrey. There was nothing there although once in a while a travelling circus would pass through for the benefit of the children. . . .

I remember that there was a corner grocery store nearby—they sold everything there. And, on Saturdays, a small group of musicians would gather to play there—they had a *bajo sexto* [six string] guitar, a string-base and a flute. This was all the music available to us at the time. The musicians would ask the owner of the grocery store permission to play for whatever pennies customers would be willing to give.

One day, while on an errand I noticed they were tuning-up and I decided to take advantage of the moment. I had by this time already collected special gum wrappers each printed with a popular song of the day. The wrappers contained the lyrics to "El Rancho Grande," "El Adolorido," "La Adelita," and, I believe, "Mal Hombre" too. . . . So, on that day the musicians asked me to sing and I did.

This is the way I learned a lot of songs, listening to those musicians at the corner grocery store and memorizing the songs on the gum wrappers.⁸

By the time Lydia was ten years old, Leonor had taught her to make music with the family. Leonor played the guitar and her husband the tambourine while sister Francisca played the triangle and Lydia the mandolin. As the Mendoza children increased in number and their fingers grew and strengthened, the parents reassigned instruments. When Lydia was twelve, she took up the violin and passed the mandolin to yet another younger sister, Maria. This stage in the Mendozas' musical development permitted the family to make a major decision. They became migrant singers.

Francisco and Leonor decided that the family group sounded good enough to begin accepting invitations to perform before local friends. Eventually they graduated to larger, less familiar audiences. Soon, Francisco quit his railroad job and, with his family, began to travel and earn a living through song. Often times hitch-hiking, they began making the hundreds of journeys that would eventually take them to the large and small Mexican communities spread throughout the western United States. The Mendoza family came to embody a Mexican working-class version of the transient Trapp Family Singers of Austria.

⁸Lydia Mendoza, interviews with author on August 22-29, 1980, in Houston and San Antonio, Texas.

Their search for Spanish-speaking audiences took the Mendozas to San Antonio in 1928. There, Francisco discovered officials of the OK Record Company interested in entering the Spanish language music market. He signed a contract with them at the Gunter Hotel which committed la familia Mendoza to record ten numbers for fifteen dollars per song. These included the old favorite, "Cuatro Milpas."

After the recordings, the Mendozas resumed their migrant experience. They decided to follow their migrating audiences north in hope of earning a livelihood with their music. Francisco even contracted himself to work in the beet fields of Michigan alongside other Mexican stoop laborers. Indeed, they eventually settled for a time in Pontiac, Michigan. Abandoning farmwork at the first opportunity, they began to support themselves by singing to small Mexican audiences in local homes, restaurants, and barbershops.⁹

The grave economic conditions associated with the Great Depression had the effect of making Mexican workers no longer welcome in the United States. Governmental agencies combined forces in 1929 to encourage the repatriation of supposedly undocumented aliens from Mexico.¹⁰ As a result, scores of Mexican workers in the north, including Francisco Mendoza and family, started their trek south. It was a pathetic scene of apprehensive families en route to the border carrying all their meagre worldly possessions. The Mendozas took part in this migration; however, they stopped in Houston to stay with friends and relatives.

Lydia recalls that upon their return from Michigan her family took up residence in a house on Avenue L in Magnolia Park, a subdivision a few miles east of Houston. Standard histories about Houston and its environs rarely mention this community, much less its Mexican residents, even though by the 1930s Magnolia's Hispanic working population had become an important source of labor for the metropolitan area.

While serving as a cheap non-union labor pool, the people of Magnolia enjoyed their own cultural and social life. Indeed, Lydia's earliest experiences in Houston revealed the warmth and protective character of the working people of this community. They provided the Mendozas with plenty of opportunities to continue developing their musical talent. Taking advantage of the social webs thriving in this Mexican *colonia*, the Mendoza family entertained and delighted their Spanish-speaking patrons in a manner which only Chicanos, bombarded with modern American culture and English language radio, could appreciate. Magnolia's Mexican barbershops, bakeries, restau-

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression, Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974).

rants, and evening *salones* welcomed the Mendoza singers. Sponsored by various local mutualist groups, the Mendozas performed before working-class audiences at popular family meeting places such as El Salón Juárez and El Salón Hidalgo. However, Lydia's wistful voice would not be "discovered" in the Houston area.¹¹

Lydia's discovery by a Spanish language radio announcer took place in San Antonio, the focal point of Texas Mexican culture. The Mendozas moved there in 1932 to pursue their musical fortune when Lydia was sixteen. They joined the swelling ranks of Mexicans who earned their living as itinerant artists in the Alamo City. These people enjoyed performing, but also they simply could find no other means of employment. Unfortunately, much information has been lost regarding these working class performers. Lorenzo Caballero, however, who acted as a fill-in for a musical group directed by Santiago Jiménez, remembers the following popular artists in San Antonio during the 1930s: accordionist Narciso Martínez ("El Huracán del Valle"), the singers Los Madrugadores and Los Hermanos Chavarría, the legendary blind violinist of the border, "El Cieguito" Melquiades, Eva Garza (who later became a star in Mexico), and the singer Antonio Montes.

Caballero recalls that some of these artists appeared on the same programs with radio and screen favorites from Mexico City. These appearances took place at two theatres—Teatro Nacional and Teatro Zaragoza—located near the corner of Santa Rosa and Commerce streets, and included distinguished Mexican performers like Ramon Armengod, David Silva, and Agustín Izunsa.¹² Besides various bars, restaurants, *salones*, and the two theatres, there existed another site for local musicians and vocalists to entertain audiences. This was La Plaza del Zacate (or Haymarket Square) where area farmers brought their crops to sell.

The *plaza*, or the central park square, has for centuries been the heart of the Hispanic community. The Laws of the Indies, issued by the Crown of Spain in the sixteenth century, initiated the important role of the *plaza* in its New World possessions. The most significant edifices, such as the church and the office of the municipal president, were built around the town square.¹³ In the *plaza*, *compadres* gathered to discuss life and politics; or sweethearts got together to lay plans for a blissfully-married future. Because all community members attended official functions or enjoyed hours of leisure there, food vendors appeared with portable open-air *puestos de comida*—especially on weekends and holidays.

¹¹Lydia Mendoza, interviews with author on August 22-29, 1980, in Houston and San Antonio, Texas.

¹²Lorenzo Caballero, interview with author on August 24, 1980, in San Antonio, Texas. Santiago Jimenez is the father of "El Flaco" Jimenez, *Norteño* accordionist.

¹³Zelia Nutall, "Royal Ordinances Concerning the Laying Out of New Towns," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, V (1932), pp. 249-254.

This civic pattern flourished in San Antonio until the early twentieth century when a city hall was constructed on the central *plaza*. Prior to this, "chili stands" crowded the square. With the erection of this building, the food vendors were forced to relocate beside the Alamo. Opposition arose "to undertakings so humble existing in a locale so exalted," and the Mexican *puestos* and their "chili queens" moved to Haymarket Square. By the time that Lydia Mendoza and her family came in 1932, La Plaza del Zacate was a thriving concern.¹⁴ It became a cradle of native, twentieth century Texas Mexican culture. Julia Nott Waugh captured its flavor in the following description:

Haymarket Square...[was] the second largest outdoor market in the United States. It was crowded with trucks from Oregon, from California, from Idaho and Colorado and Florida and Louisiana, from the valley of the Rio Grande, and from the fields of outlying San Antonio. There were masses of carrots and beets, of oranges and grapefruits...mountains of peppers red and green, there were chrysanthemums and dahlias and yellow marigolds.

At three o'clock all this beauty and abundance departed. Then...the chili stands took over. Trucks rolled up crowded with *mamas* and *papas* and babies and the teen-aged daughters who were the famous queens; with trestles and boards and benches and chairs; with rudimentary stoves and piles of wood and baskets of dishes and cans of food. Skilled through much doing, the men quickly set up on either side of the plaza a row of restaurants, each consisting of long tables... [The women laid out] bright-colored, badly worn oilcloth, set out the necessities for eating and drinking, put coffee to boil, chili and tamales and frijoles to heat, arranged onion and lettuce and cheese in such wise that *enchiladas* and *tacos* could be made in a flash, and settled down to regard the world and to serve all comers until one in the morning...

While it was yet light, while there was still color in the western sky, the musicians arrived: an old man with an accordian, boys strumming guitars. Two children in the costume of the *charro* and the *China Poblana* sang brassily...¹⁵

¹⁴Julia Nott Waugh, *The Silver Cradle* (Austin, 1955), p. 142.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

It was only when Lydia performed at La Plaza del Zacate that she came into her own. There, in 1932 she adopted the distinctive twelve-string guitar which has become her trademark. Lydia spied local Mexican musicians using the *guitarra doble* and decided to imitate those instrumentalists. Her first twelve-stringer was reconverted by a friend of the family that year from an aging *bajo sexto* (six-string bass guitar) that her father purchased for three dollars. Also, since Lydia did not like the ordinary string arrangement of the *guitarra doble*, Francisco had them rearranged. The twelve strings are usually placed in pairs of the same note, but Lydia wanted the top four pairs in alternate notes. This gave birth to her unique guitar sound.¹⁶

At age seventeen, Lydia was "discovered" while she and her family played and sang at the Plaza del Zacate. Manuel J. Cortez, one of the many part-time Mexican radio announcers struggling to introduce Spanish language programming in Texas during the 1930s, heard her singing a solo amidst the vegetable stalls. He liked her voice, and invited her to enter an amateur contest on his thirty-minute program, "La Voz Latina," which was broadcast from the Teatro Nacional. After some family debate over the merits this opportunity might present, Lydia was permitted a single appearance. She handily won first prize.

Her radio debut stirred up such a positive listener response that Cortez pleaded with Lydia's mother for a repeat performance. Lydia remembers his words well: "We have received many phone calls, Mrs. Mendoza! The public keeps asking for her! They want to hear her sing again!"¹⁷ Cortez felt impelled to keep Lydia out of the market square and on the airways. He arranged appearances for the family in expensive restaurants and secured a commercial sponsor willing to pay Lydia \$3.50 per week for her radio performances. Lydia reflects that at that time the family was paying ten dollars a week for house rent. So, they could not afford to turn this offer down. Lydia's first sponsor was the manufacturer of *Tónico Ferrovitamina*, a vitamin tonic popular among Mexicans in San Antonio. From this time on, her popularity quickly grew.

Lydia's radio debut attracted the attention of the Bluebird Record Company, an affiliate of R.C.A. Victor. In 1936 they contracted her to record a handful of songs taken from her gum wrapper collection and from her mother's rich repertoire. This session included "Mal Hombre," the song that would forever be linked with Lydia Mendoza. Other tunes which she recorded at this time were "Deliciosa," "No Puedo Dejar De Quererte," "Pajarito Herido," and "Pero Hay Que Triste."

¹⁶Lydia Mendoza, interviews with author on August 22-29, 1980, in Houston and San Antonio, Texas; "La Alondra de la Frontera," Television Documentary by Tony Bruni and Joe I. Torres (1978).

¹⁷Lydia Mendoza, interviews with author on August 22-29, 1980, in Houston and San Antonio, Texas.

By 1936 the Mendozas prepared for an extensive touring schedule. Several factors permitted them to do so at that time. First of all, Lydia was gaining recognition as a recording star outside Texas. Secondly, Leonor had an unerring talent in understanding and taking advantage of the changing character of her family's artistic ability. She choreographed their music, songs, and comedy sketches. She also designed stunning wardrobes which capitalized on Mexican folk costuming. Third, Lydia's teenaged brothers and sisters developed as excellent vaudeville performers and delighted Spanish-speaking audiences. Lastly, a rather extensive network of Hispanic theatres and stages had emerged throughout the western United States. These played a crucial role in providing cultural entertainment for hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. As a result of these various reasons, the Mendozas may have been the first Mexican American performing group to tour across the country. Certainly, in terms of popularity, la familia Mendoza had no peers.

In the late thirties and early forties, the Mendozas achieved stardom among the Mexican working classes of the United States. In large and small towns from McAllen, Texas, to San Diego, California, northward to San Francisco, and inland to Denver, Colorado, the Mendoza name appeared on marquees, on printed handbills, and in local newspapers. Instead of relying on public buses as before, they now enjoyed the relative luxury of driving their own automobiles, eating in restaurants, and resting in motels—those, of course, which accepted Mexican patronage.

These early years of rigorous touring brought sadness and sweetness to Lydia. On the one hand her father and one of her younger sisters died. But, on the other, she married a gentle and loving cobbler named Juan Alvarado who fully supported her career. He helped arrange and attended most of her performances. They eventually had three daughters, none of whom pursued a musical career.

The economic restrictions imposed on most Americans as a result of our participation in World War II interrupted the Mendozas' busy schedule. Specifically, it became difficult to purchase rubber tires and gasoline. Their tours did not end totally, however, until 1952 when Leonor died. Things then changed drastically for the other family members. Since their mother had been the organizational genius and a source of inspiration, the Mendoza singers stopped performing as a group. Artistically speaking, Lydia stood as the sole survivor.

In 1961 Juan also passed away leaving Lydia in deep despondency. Her depression increased when her youngest daughter moved away. Lydia emerged from loneliness and despair with the help of her second husband, Fred Martínez, likewise a shoemaker. In the early days of their marriage Lydia expressed her emotional gratitude to him by composing one of her favorite

songs, "Amor Bonito," in his honor.¹⁸ Undoubtedly, her many years of trial and tribulation lend unequalled character to her singing.

"La Alondra de la Frontera" fulfilled her childhood fantasy by achieving fame, but she did not ignore obligations to her family. Lydia has never been afflicted with the narcissism that comes with stardom. She has always placed full value on the simple things in life and on the people around her. Today, with needle and thread she enjoys creating her own elaborate traditional costumes which have become a hallmark; she delights in cooking and never fails to leave fully-prepared meals for her husband before leaving her cottage in Houston for a performance. Lydia still likes washing dishes by hand, and she fulfills her role as grandmother with proper and fitting touch. Her close admirers insist that unscrupulous business agents and record company representatives have contributed to the modest life she has lived. Regardless, she enjoys life and thrills with excitement when preparing to face an audience.

"When the moment comes around of leaving the house for a performance I am transformed," she exclaims. Her arthritic hands suddenly feel no pain when she grips her twelve-string guitar and plays the way she used to more than forty years ago. "My life changes totally. Nothing hurts." Most important are the many fans who await. "I want to respond to their loyalty by singing the songs they request, and I do so with pleasure."¹⁹

Today, Lydia Mendoza sees herself singing to the very end. Fortunately, it is nowhere in sight. "I have always said it, I am going to die during a public performance because I do not plan to retire. . . . Thank goodness I feel a lot of happiness through music. . . . The songs I sing and the public who still comes to hear me—those are my big loves."²⁰

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.* Lydia's music, as well as other border recordings, can be heard on *Una Historia de la Musica de la Frontera, Texas Mexican Border Music*, 16 vols., reissued by Arhoolie Records of El Cerrito, California. Chris Strachwitz deserves special mention for his production of this excellent series. Lydia's songs are included in volumes 15 and 16.