

# Ronstadt continues to fall short of expectations

By MARK PEEL

Several years ago I had a friend whose passion of Linda Ronstadt bordered on the obsessive. All of his sexual fantasies (and there were a lot of them) centered around what he would do if he could spend one night with her. As a rule, these were your garden variety fantasies—although he later became a jailer, my friend was not perverted—but they all had one element in common: they were always for just one night.

It was, I think, a fitting reflection on the image that Linda Ronstadt projected early in her career, that of a country girl who'd lost her innocence perhaps a bit too early in life, the kind of girl about whom there was always a good bit of talk. The young Linda Ronstadt had an eager body but a fragile psyche; she was the kind who was taken advantage of easily, and "bound to get hurt."

Of course, in any fantasy like this someone (usually a traveling salesman) always comes along and takes her "away from all this." In this case, the traveling salesman was producer Peter Asher. For Ronstadt, it's been the great American dream come true ever since (with some interesting variations, like farmer's daughter falls in love with governor of California).

Peter Asher (of Peter and Gordon fame) has directed Linda Ronstadt's career since she signed with Asylum records five years ago. In that time Ronstadt has moved steadily away from country-rock, and toward an unmistakable pop style. *Living in the USA* further refines that style. It's tone is a bit more subdued than anything she has done before—and probably more sophisticated. The material is the usual mixture of R&B standards that Asher is so fond of and the best of the West Coast songwriting community which Ronstadt has, for a long time, given voice to.

A singer's selection of material is always criticized when it is bad or inappropriate, and less frequently praised when it is good. Yet Asher and Ronstadt consistently choose tunes which provide lyrical content of a high order of interest or songs with a powerful emotional impact or both. *Living in the USA* contains four such (exceptional) numbers (Chuck Berry's "Back In the USA," Little Feat's "All That You

## records

*Living in the USA*

Linda Ronstadt

Dream," Elvis Costello's "Alison" and Warren Zevon's "Mohammed's Radio.")

To say that Ronstadt has a knack for choosing material that is well-suited to her voice does not do justice to that fine instrument. Ronstadt's voice is one of contemporary rock's very best. She has exceptional control over a great tonal and dynamic range and achieves a high level of expression without affectation. Ronstadt's voice is not just one of the strongest in rock, it's one of the purest. So when one reads on the album jacket that she has included a song like "Alison," there is always a great deal of curiosity about how she's done it.

I often have this sense of being unable to imagine Linda Ronstadt doing a certain tune (there are usually two or three on every album). And yet, when I finally do hear them, I'm always a bit disappointed at her inability to surprise me. It's like knowingly walking into an ambush. This *ex post facto* predictability somewhat dilutes the effect of Ronstadt's music, and Asher is responsible to a great degree.

The arrangements on *Living in the USA* are clean, precisely executed and somewhat stilted. Russ Kunkel is the worst offender: he's unquestionably the least rhythmically imaginative drummer I know of still managing to find regular work. He's adequate on the slower tunes, but instead of propelling the more upbeat numbers, he seems to ride, tentatively, along the tops of them. But the rest of the band, while competent, provides a stiff, too-restrained accompaniment. Two or three sustained chords substitute for guitar fills, and there's not much verve in the rhythm section. Only David Sanborn contributes positively to the arrangements.

I suppose it could be argued that their approach shifts attention to the vocalist by downplaying the surrounding mix. But I think the opposite is true, especially for a singer like



'Living in the USA'

Ronstadt, who can sing over any arrangement. If anything, the dull surroundings take some of the edge off her voice.

Somehow, one can't help but feel the compromise engineered into an album like this. If Peter Asher has one operative word, it is moderation. Not too loud, not too fast, not too sad, not too anything. To bridle a voice like Ronstadt in such a narrow context is not only dull, it's wasteful. Let someone like Rita Collidge, who can't sing, do songs that don't need a singer.

*Living in the USA* is a good album because Linda Ronstadt is a great singer. But great singers should make great albums. Perhaps one day Ronstadt's direction will be a match for her voice and material. Until then, I am going to continue to be vaguely disappointed by her "good" albums.

Mark Peel is music critic for the Daily Tar Heel.

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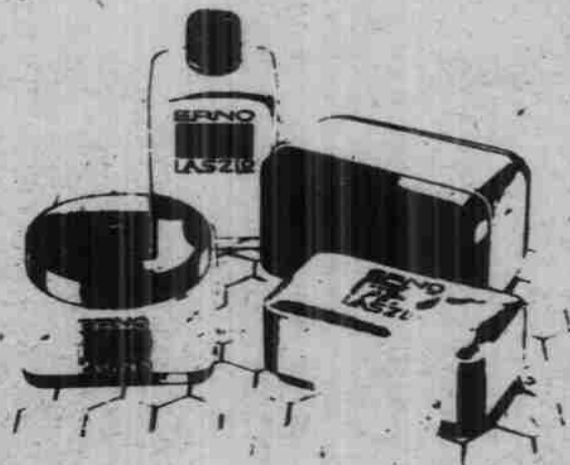
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