

“Mal hombre”--Lydia Mendoza (1934)

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Essay by Yolanda Broyles-González (guest post)*



Lydia Mendoza

Lydia Mendoza (May 31, 1916-December 20, 2007) was born in Houston, Texas, to musically-inspired Mexican parents. During Mendoza’s first ten years the family migrated back and forth between Texas and the Mexican city of Monterrey in the state of Nuevo León, as part of her father’s work with the railroad. In the 1920s, when Lydia Mendoza’s father left the railroad, the Mendoza family eked out a living doing musical performance, first in the lower Rio Grande Valley, and then singing for pennies and nickels on the streets of downtown San Antonio, Texas. The ten year-old Lydia Mendoza began her recording career--singing and playing mandolin--in the 1920s and 1930s with the Mendoza family who recorded for the Okeh, Odeon, and Bluebird labels. As a teenager in 1934, Lydia Mendoza did her first solo recording. The recording she made that day was of the song “Mal hombre” (“Evil Man”), which she popularized and which became closely identified with her throughout her long singing career. In her later years, she recorded with DLB records (San Antonio) and, in 2001, issued her last concert recording as part of her published life story, “Lydia Mendoza’s Life in Music.” Mendoza’s performance career stands as one of the longest in American music history, spanning from the 1920s to the 1980s when a stroke ended her performing life.

Following upon her early success with “Mal hombre,” Mendoza continued to tour with her family as an itinerant performance unit that offered a variety of acts. They followed the agricultural labor routes where most of the Mexican-American population worked: north to Michigan, back south to the Rio Grande Valley, later to California. Her closeness to her audiences earned her two epithets--“La cancionera de los pobres” (“The Singer of the Poor”) and “La alondra de la frontera” (“Lark of the Border”). As a grassroots idol, she was loved for her ability to articulate a working-class *sentimiento* (sentiment and sentience) through song and through the breathtaking visual spectacle of her flashy hand-sequined, hand-beaded performance attire whose symbolic designs announced her ancient cultural roots in the Americas. She publicly marked the enduring presence of indigenous Mexican culture even throughout historical periods (from the 1930s to the 1960s) in which public displays of Mexicanness targeted you for governmental harassment and/or deportation by Euro-American officials. Along the migrant agricultural worker routes she affirmed and celebrated Mexicanness during those

decades when eating establishments regularly featured signs that read “NO DOGS, NO MEXICANS.” Lydia Mendoza manifest the social powers of music: her natural speech-like voice, her striking physical presence, and her songs, so beloved among the communities she sang for, symbolically reclaimed and remapped a Mexican America. Mendoza always enacted a space of popular collective expression, an audible Mexican American homeland.

Throughout her performance career Lydia Mendoza adhered to the oral traditional practice of singing by popular demand: she sang what her audiences requested. That traditional practice meant that audience members called out each song and they tended to call out traditional songs associated both with that singer and with the broader *norteño* cultural matrix. The repertoire of songs was not unchanging, and “Mal hombre” is testament to that. Once Lydia Mendoza recorded the song--a song not originating in the US-Mexico borderlands, nor of a borderlands rhythmical style--audiences welcomed it into the changing body of “traditional songs.” Thus “Mal hombre,” whose rhythm and cadences mark its origins in distant Argentinian tango or *milonga* repertoires, became one of Lydia Mendoza’s signature songs; audiences requested it from her throughout her performance life. It should, however, be noted that in the course of the several decades of repeated performance, Mendoza indigenized the “foreign” rhythm “Mal hombre” into the borderlands rhythms of the *canción* Mexicana. Still, after Mendoza’s performance life ended, “Mal hombre” also vanished from the borderlands circle of songs and has not been recorded by any borderlands singer since then.

“Mal hombre” was, from the onset, something of an anomaly within the Mexican borderlands musical landscape. The early sound media--recordings, radio, and later television--as well as the Euro-colonization process of the last 200 years, introduced music from far-flung places to the borderlands. There were various waves that swept through the Texas-Mexican landscape: tango, foxtrot, big band, polka, bolero, country, *canción*, *cumbia*, and more. The Mendoza family repertoire of recorded songs manifests that rich variety of song genres: ranging from the deeply rooted *norteño* song forms to the more fad-oriented recent arrivals. Along those same lines, Lydia Mendoza performed and recorded a rich variety of genres from the oral tradition accompanied by the full gamut of Mexican borderlands instrumentations--including the button-accordion *conjunto*, mariachi, guitar trio, and more. Yet Mendoza’s mainstay ultimately became her performance as a solo singer self-accompanied with her 12-string guitar.

Mendoza notably self-designated as a “norteña” (a Northerner) and as a “Mexicana,” marking her musical cultural geo-regional roots as spanning not only the northern Mexican states of Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Sonora, and Chihuahua, but also what was, until 1848, the northern half of Mexico, today’s southwest United States. As a mature artist, the mainstays of her song repertoire were the hugely popular *canción ranchera* (ranch song) and *corridos* (narrative ballads). The *canción ranchera* genre represents an evolution of the older Mexican *canción*. In the *ranchera* evolution, the love song often tends to be infused with imagery, customs, and symbols from the deep cultural matrix of Mesoamerica. During her last concert tour in 1986-87, Mendoza sang almost exclusively *rancheras* and *corridos*. She offered for sale her most recent cassette

recording “Corridos,” which included, for example, “The Ballad of Joaquín Murrieta” (1829-1853). That *corrido* (narrative ballad) recounts the heroic acts of an iconic California freedom fighter that organized an army to protect Indians and Mexicans against the Gold Rush invasion. There is some common ground between such historic narrative ballads and the appeal of “Mal hombre”: they are songs from underdogs who face powerful odds against them. Singers such as Lydia Mendoza carried the voices of underdogs and thus impart the life lessons they embody.

“Mal hombre” (“Evil Man”) offers a life narrative in the voice of a woman underdog who at a very young age is seduced by an evil man’s “worldly arts.” The narrative voice in the song describes various stages of sexual exploitation: her seduction as a young girl, her abandonment by the lover, her life-and-death struggle, and her eventual downfall. The song’s popularity can only be understood in the context of the rampant sexual violence inherent of our patriarchal society institutionalized since colonialism. One of “Mal hombre’s” most notable features, however, is its beautiful poetics. No sexual act is described per se. Nor does the narrator offer any realism-based specifics of her demise. In the song, a great deal is left to the listener’s imagination, such as when she references “mi espantoso calvario” (“my horrific cavalry”). The female narrative voice of “Mal hombre” embodies a protracted life struggle, a feature shared by many classical *corrido* underdog heroes. The redemptive quality of this song, however, has to do with the victim rising to sing, with her strong indictment of the Evil Man, and with the fact that she has the last word in the matter, hurling loaded terms at the Evil Man with this refrain:

*Tan ruin es tu alma
que no tiene nombre
Eres un canalla
Eres un malvado
Eres un mal hombre*

*Your soul is so vile
It is deplorable.
You are a scoundrel
You are a malicious man
You are an evil man*

Through songs such as “Mal hombre,” Lydia Mendoza defies the subordination of women of color. She takes a womanist self-affirming stance in a number of her signature songs, such as “Mujer paseada” (“Experienced Woman”) or “Celosa” (“Jealous Woman”). Mendoza’s traditional *corridos* similarly praise the deeds of collectively cherished and remembered anti-colonial historical figures omitted from mainstream history books. At all times, Lydia Mendoza expressed in song her existential ties to her people.

In 1982, Mendoza became the first Texan named a NEA National Heritage Fellow. She performed for President Jimmy Carter at the Kennedy Center in Washington in 1975. She was inducted into the Tejano Music Hall of Fame in 1984 and into the Conjunto

Music Hall of Fame in 1991. In 1999, she received the National Medal of the Arts from President Clinton. Lydia Mendoza passed away on December 20, 2007, at the age of 91.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.