

Remembering Rita



"In 2001 we were producing an homenaje to Lydia Mendoza at the Plaza del Zacate by Market Square. Out of nowhere, a 70ish year old woman came up to me and said she was Rita Eden." —That was the beginning of a comeback for Rita Vidaurri, *La Calandria*. The rest is history.

By Graciela I. Sánchez

Editor's note: The following tribute was delivered by Graciela I. Sánchez, Director of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, at the rosary for Rita Vidaurri Eden held at Castillo Mission Funeral Home on Thursday, January 24th.

You've heard me say this over and over again, but I'll say it again—the Westside es el Corazón de San Antonio, but for most of its/our history, the Westside has been portrayed as the bad side of town. And since I grew up in the Westside, I know that the story told by our visitor's bureau, our politicians or by our own internalized racism is a lie.

So how do we change the story. We tell the truth. We research, write, produce and present the voices, images, histories of the people themselves. We let the people tell their own stories. We search for the treasures.

And in that quest for the treasures, our tesoros del Westside, I ran into a story in *La Prensa* around 1999 or 2000, about two singers, Rosita Fernandez and Rita Vidaurri, two Mexican American singers who had just produced their own audio tapes. Their question to the community? "Do you remember me?"

That article was hard to read. Do you remember me? These

once beautiful stars had been forgotten by San Antonio and the world. They felt abandoned. They wanted and needed people to remember them. They wanted to be back on stage, or at least Rita did.

Unfortunately, we do forget our elders. They get in our way because they're slower, because they can't hear, because they complain about their aches and pains, because they need people to love them and hear their stories over and over again.

But my parents taught me differently. We don't throw away our elders. We respect them. We honor them. We love them. So, I went on a search for the audio tapes that these women had just self-produced hoping that I would find information in order to track Rita and Rosita down. This was no easy task. I listened to the tapes, and sadly, I could tell that whoever helped Rita produce

her tape, had swindled her because it wasn't a very good tape at all. You could hear other voices talking in the background while she sang in the foreground. Why would someone take advantage of her?

I learned that Rita Vidaurri hung out at Rita's Restaurant on Bandera. I wondered if she was the owner. But no, her *tocaya*, Rita, the restaurant owner of the



Rita was finally inducted into the National Hispanic Music Hall of Fame in 2004 after recording a new CD as an elder. Ten years later, at 90 she released her last CD, *Celebrando 90 años*, both produced by the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center.



Rita singing with Las Alteñas, an all women mariachi group, at Estela's Restaurant on Martin St. on the Westside (now closed).

same name, told me that I should look for Rita Eden (her married name), not Vidaurri. Well, Rita was nowhere to be found.

In 2001 we were producing an homenaje to Lydia Mendoza at the Plaza del Zacate by Market Square. Out of nowhere, a 70ish year old woman came up to me and said she was Rita Eden, una comadre de Lydia Mendoza, and she wanted to sing her a song to pay her homage. All I could do was give Rita a great big hug. Finally, Rita had found me and the Esperanza. She belted out Los Laureles and from then on, Rita became part of the Esperanza familia.

During these earlier years of our involvement in her life, Rita was still working as a home health care provider. I couldn't understand how this famous Westsider had to work until her mid-80s taking care of other old people. She complained about having to carry and wash this viejito or otro viejito, all elders who were bigger than she was. But she never talked about quitting. This was her job and she was proud she could still work at her age.

And when she couldn't take care of any more elders, she started caring for the little children at the hospitals and at the VIA daycare. The fact that she worked until her mid-80s was about survival. This money allowed her to be able to live in her own home, pay her bills, and make ends meet because performers like Rita never got paid royalties for all their musical recordings in the 1940s-60s. And so while others around her retired, Rita worked.

In 2004, Esperanza honored Rita on her 80th birthday at the Plaza Guadalupe. Hundreds showed up including Rosita Fernandez and Beatriz Llamas, La Paloma del Norte. Beatriz would later join Rita, Blanca Rodríguez and Perla Tapatía to become the performing legends Las Tesoros de San Antonio.

After this event, Rita wanted more. So I went with her to buy her a guitar. She wanted to start playing again and needed a guitar

and pick to practice. We (Esperanza) also bought her a microphone, mic stand, and a speaker big enough so that she could be heard by audiences when she performed at senior centers and nursing homes, but small enough to carry if she had to go out on her own, which she often did.

Initially, we had no musicians backing her up, but she explained all she needed was her pistas. She had a few of her favorite songs that were recorded without a voice and she used those pistas everywhere she went.

Next, I took her with me to Estela's Restaurant on Martin St. on Sundays to see if we could get Las Alteñas, an all women's mariachi group, to let her sing a song or two with them. No surprise—the mariachis and the public adored her.

Then she said, "Graciela when are we going to record my CD?" But I had no experience on what it meant to record a CD. How much does it cost? What about royalties? How do you know if you're not being taken by the recording studio? Well, Rita found us Salomé Gutiérrez from Del Bravo Music to record the CD for free. And then once we had 1000 CDs, how to sell them? Off we went to Janie's Record Shop and Rita sang and autographed copies of the CD. We went to KEDA and KCOR and anywhere that she remembered from her past. But times had changed, and radio stations were no longer owned by local folks. It was hard to convince radio stations to help us sell her CDs or interview her. But Rita didn't give up.

"Graciela, when are you going to book me somewhere else?" "Graciela, here are people you should call in Alice, Texas, get them to invite me to play down there again." "Y Graciela, when am I going to have my own concert?"

Finally, we started putting together concerts at the Esperanza where she performed with all-women mariachis like Las Alteñas, Las Erendi-



Rita with Graciela I. Sánchez, Director of Esperanza.



Rita singing at Guadalupe Plaza celebrating her 80th birthday where Beatriz Llamas showed up.

ras and Las Coronelas. The young women were surprised that Rita had been performing on stage 60 plus years before they were even born. But they could see she was an entertainer with class and real style.

Rita regained popularity because we put pressure on all the media to recognize her, but also because individuals like Yvette Benavides, Dave Davies and Hector Saldaña helped to write stories or produce radio and TV programs featuring Rita. And much to their surprise, the San Antonio public responded and requested that they rebroadcast her radio and TV shows several times.

I could go on and on about my adventures with Rita, but I do want to say that while I worked with the Esperanza to highlight this Tesoro to our San Antonio, South Texas and world community, I also gained so much knowledge about San Antonio, female singers and musicians from the 1940s-60s and just being a woman in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Rita was my teacher.

Walking the streets of the Westside or downtown suddenly is different to me because those buildings are no longer empty. I now imagine Rita walking downtown with her guitar by her side, climbing the stairs to the second floor to get to one of the many clubs where she sang. I see the Alameda and know that Rita sang there, also. And I imagine the Nacional, Zaragoza and the many other theaters she graced in San Antonio, Mexico, Colombia and Cuba.

Thank you Rita for a wonderful time together. Initially, it was just the two of us figuring out how we were going to bring you back to your adoring fans. Now, thousands throughout the world love and respect you and miss you so very, very much. Keep singing your heart out and telling your jokes con todo los santitos y angelitos and everyone else you meet along the way. You never did discriminate. You loved us all.



Nuestra Querida Rita

Hemos perdido una joya muy valiosa. Es triste esta separación pero como creyentes sabemos que ahora ella está nuevamente joven, sana y alabando al Señor con su bella voz— nuestra querida Rita Vidaurri. Pero, como creyente, sé que ahora ella está cantando en el Cielo, joven, bella y llena de salud! Como cubana, estoy orgullosa en saber que, visitando mi tierra, ella compartió su música con grandes voces como Olga Guillot, Toña La Negra y Celia Cruz.

...Ahora yo soy la que conserva esta foto como "Un Tesoro." Nos veremos en el Cielo Rita... Descansa en Paz Rita, siempre vivirás en nuestro recuerdo...

—Pilar DeCamp

Me siento muy privilegiada en haber tenido la oportunidad de compartir esta foto en una feliz ocasión con nuestra querida Rita Vidaurri. La foto fue tomada en la celebración de Día de los muertos, en la Calle Colorado. En la foto están Blanca Rodríguez, Beatriz Llamas, Rita Vidaurri y Olga (en el walker).

