

Life and Times of Rita Vidaurri

*Editor's Note:
This brief biography of Rita Vidaurri Eden was written at the request of her family and delivered at the Rosary for Rita after her passing in January.*

Rita Vidaurri, the Golden Age ranchera singer known as "La Calandria" (the Lark) and La Voz del Campo (The Voice of the Fields) who achieved fame throughout Mexico and Latin America on stage and screen in the 1940s and '50s died in her hometown of San Antonio, Texas on Wednesday, January 16, 2019 after a brief illness. She was 94 years young.

Rita, the matriarch of a family that spanned five generations, is survived by her only daughter, Linda Alvarado, her grandchildren, great grandchildren, great great grandchildren and many friends and colleagues in the music industry. In addition she is survived by her sister, Henrietta Rodríguez; four stepsisters, Sofia, Rita, Yvan and Ellena Vidaurri; and a stepbrother, Rubén Vidaurri. She was preceded in death by her husband, Hillman Edward Eden and three sons, Leo Palewich, Rogelio (Roger) González and Hillman Eden Jr. (Eddie), each of whom died as young men in tragic deaths in unique circumstances. Rita would sing a heart wrenching edition of Amor Eterno in memory of her sons at many of her concerts and always carried with her a laminated photo of them. Named after St. Rita of Cascia, the patron saint of the impossible, for those in mourning and for the lonely, Rita said her name suited her.

Musician, actor and businesswoman, Rita was born on May 22, 1924 in San Antonio's Westside at her home on Callejón de Montezuma. She was the oldest of three children born to Juan and Jesusita "Susie" Vidaurri. Her father, Juan Vidaurri, owned a gas station at the corner of Guadalupe and Brazos where the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center is now located. He kept a punching bag at his shop where the dynamic Rita learned to box in an effort to please her father. She attended the local neighborhood school, "La 21," now J.T. Brackenridge and later attended night school at Lanier High School. She also played softball in her teen years.

In the evenings, when her parents would go to bed, Rita would listen to the radio late into the night dreaming of becoming a singer and learned the songs she heard on radio sung by the likes of popular singers like Maria Luisa Landin and other Mexican singers. Her mother was



Rita continued singing as an elder.

aware of Rita's talent for singing and regularly took her to sing at the nuecerías (pecan shell-ing factories) and carpas, popular vaudeville tent shows like the García y Cubana carpas. There Rita picked up a unique style that would serve her well on stage in her later years as she would captivate her audience not only with her singing but with her "chistes" (jokes). At 12 years of age, she began singing in contests at the Teatro Nacional and Teatro Zaragoza where her mother would take her unbeknownst to her father who disapproved of her singing, at first. Rita would sing tangos in the competi-tions and won most times. After winning first place 18 times, she was barred from continuing to compete.

Rita's sister, Queta and she would perform together as Las Hermanitas Vidaurri for five cents in the 1930s. Little by little, she and Queta would tour the small towns of Texas singing. In 1938, at age 14, Rita recorded "Alma Angelina," her debut 78 rpm single, accompanied by her sister. Her second record, "Atotonilco," was recorded at Tomas Acuña's garage studio. Queta tired of singing, but Rita continued on her own. One of her first public triumphs was winning a \$50 prize at a contest sponsored by H & H Coffee. Her mother kept encouraging her shy daughter and paid a neighbor to teach her to play the guitar. Unfortunately, her mother would not live to see Rita's success as a radio star and performer as she died of tuberculosis when Rita was 14 years old. By 1941, Rita was a featured performer on José Dávila's popular radio program "La Hora Anahuac" in San Antonio. In 1942, Rita would help christen the Guadalupe Theater.

One of Rita's early sup-porters was singer-songwriter Lorenzo Barcelata who became her padrino giving her his own guitar which he autographed for her. Barcelata also gave Rita her songbird nickname, "La Calandria." In 1943, Mario Moreno, "Cantinflas," saw Rita singing at the Teatro Nacional and convinced Rita's father to take her to Mexico City to sing.



Queta and Rita (right) with their father, Juan.



The many faces and ages of Rita Vidaurri, La Calandria: An early childhood photo (top right) and at left described as “La Nena Rita”. At right below, she graces a television guide in Spanish. She was often called, “La Ranchera.”

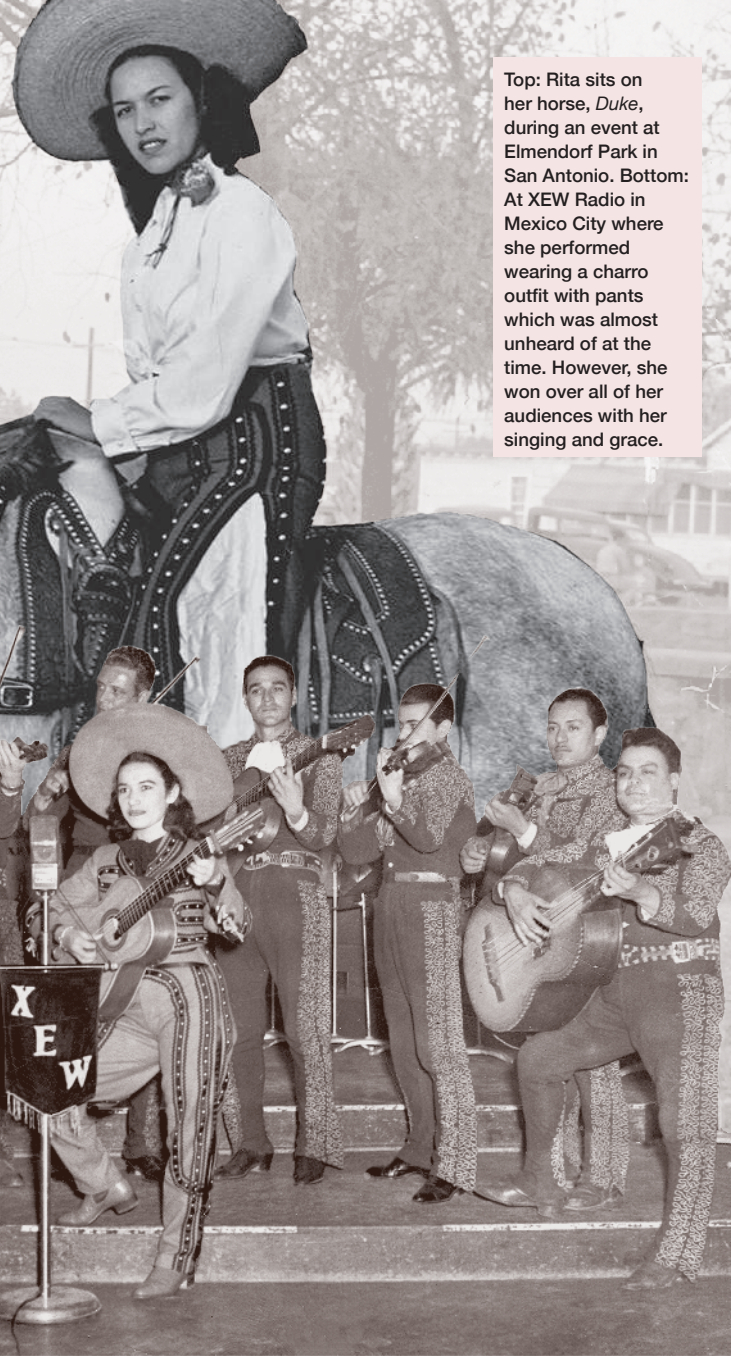
In Mexico City, Rita, who was referred to as “*la pocha de San Antonio*”, blew everyone away with her performances. It was Tin Tán, the famous Mexican actor, singer and comedian, who said of Rita—“*La huerca*” came in like a broom and swept everyone away.

On her first trip to Monterrey, Rita wore charro pants where she was told she’d be a laughing stock, but instead, she received shouts of glee and great applause. In Mexico City, when her father took her to the biggest international radio station, XEW, she was given a show in the evening at 11pm. She was 19 years old. Then when she wore Chinaco pants in Mexico City she was called “*esa Jorge Negrete*” but was well received.

She was hired at the famous Mexican nightclub, El Patio, on the spot, to sing rancheras and she became known there as *La Ranchera*. She even sang in a boxing ring in Mexico City with mariachis— unheard of, at the time—but, once again, well received. Ever popular with the men, Rita met many bullfighters. One, in particular, Pepe Luis Vázquez, wished to romance her but her father would not hear of it. When she was offered a tour in Spain by Pepe Guizar, the famous Mexican composer, her father would not accept it unless he was included in the invite. But for that, Rita would have even sung in Spain. By the mid-40s, Rita was a highly sought-after singer in Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean. She toured Cuba with legends Celia Cruz, *La Reina Azucar*, and Olga Guillot, *Queen of Boleros*. Among the other stars with whom Rita performed were Pedro Vargas, Trío Tariacuri, Lalo González (“El Piporro”), Nat King Cole, and many more. She went on to record three albums and over fifty singles during this period of her life. In the late 40s after returning from a tour to South America, Rita

opened and managed a couple of her own night clubs in San Antonio including Maxim’s at Losoya and Crockett streets downtown. There she hosted international orchestras, singers and local celebrities in the carpa tradition including Beatriz “*La Chata Noloescas*” Escalona and other vaudevillian acts. In 1957, Rita was named as the official Jax Beer poster girl. The poster with her face was seen everywhere throughout the U.S. even on billboards. Her duties took her to New York City where she was given an elegant suite that she did not feel comfortable in alone. She called singer Maria Luisa Landin who lived there and wound up staying with her on a cot. In the U.S., Rita performed in New York City with Eydie Gorme and Trío Los Panchos and she sang at the famous Million Dollar Theater in Los Angeles. In all, during this time, Rita recorded three albums and more than fifty singles.

By the time the 60s began, Rita had given up singing to marry her manager, Mr. Hillman Edward Eden, and dedicated her life to being a wife and mother. She was reintroduced to a new generation in 2001 when she appeared at Lydia Mendoza’s 86th birthday celebration sponsored by the Esperanza at the Plaza del Zacate. She asked if she could sing a song to her comadre, Lydia, and belted out *Los Laureles* accompanied by Juan Tejeda. At the time, Rita had not sung in public for years and was working as a home health aide. Graciela Sánchez of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center encouraged Rita who was in her 70s to return to the stage to



Top: Rita sits on her horse, *Duke*, during an event at Elmendorf Park in San Antonio. Bottom: At XEW Radio in Mexico City where she performed wearing a charro outfit with pants which was almost unheard of at the time. However, she won over all of her audiences with her singing and grace.



Rita's career spanned a lifetime—from global to local venues including Mexico, the Caribbean and Latin America. Above she poses in front of a poster with her name (Cantante Mexicana de Rancheras) followed by the name, Olimpo Cárdenas. At right, in San Antonio, she poses with performers in one of her clubs. The woman in center "La Chata Noloescia" was a popular local comedienne.



sing as part of the Arte es Vida program. Gradually, Rita began her journey to capture hearts in San Antonio and once again perform on stage. On October 29, 2004, Rita was finally inducted into the National Hispanic Music Hall of Fame and by then recorded a new CD, *La Calandria Canta*. Ten years later, at 90 she released her last CD, *Celebrando 90 años, Rita Vidaurri Le Canta A Su Gente*. Rita's association with the Esperanza reignited her career and Rita eagerly became involved with preservation efforts and other issues affecting the Westside, often going before City Council to speak or sing with Esperanza's buena gente. Rita was once again, recognized as a musical icon and she brought along other retired singers who had been forgotten.

At the time of her death at 94 years of age, Rita, was the oldest of a group of elder vocalists that she helped bring together as *Las Tesoros de San Antonio* sponsored by the Esperanza shortly after recording her CD in 2004. The group was so popular that they become known as "The Golden Girls" of ranchera and bolero music. In 2007 when Lydia Mendoza died, *Las Tesoros*, including Rita, attended her funeral and sang at her grave side. In 2016, *Las Tesoros* became to subjects of a video documentary, *Las Tesoros de San Antonio—A Westside Story* by director, Jorge Sandoval. Each one of the singers, like Rita, had had their

own illustrious careers as performers from the 1940s to the '60s. The group originally four mujeres is now left with only Blanca Rodríguez aka Blanca Rosa and Beatriz Llamas aka La Paloma del Norte. Janet Cortez, aka Perla Tapatía, passed away in 2014.

Rita is now revered as a local musical legend who never forgot where she came from—her querido San Antonio, Texas. Tejano music historian and collector Ramón Hernández calls Rita Vidaurri, *La Calandria*, a true pioneer and musical giant stating: "She ranks with the all-time greats and still hasn't received all the recognition she deserves." Shortly before her death, Rita visited a beloved restaurant, *Flor de Chiapas* on Bandera Rd., where she and other elder musicians would gather for weekly impromptu jam sessions on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Those same musicians as well as others gathered at the facility that cared for her on her last days and they sang to her. Vidaurri enjoyed serenades from musicians she regularly performed with—Henry Gomez, Albino Alonzo, Francisco Pérez, Ricardo García and Daniel Gallegos. They played favorites like "Tómame Una Copa," "Cuatro Vidas," "Que Seas Feliz" and "Fue Un Placer Conocerte." She also enjoyed a visit with Beatriz Llamas, aka La Paloma del Norte, and time with Blanca Rodríguez, aka Blanca Rosa, part of *Las Tesoros*. As Rita ascended to another world surrounded by her family and friends, a faint smile would occasionally appear on her face and she would mouth the words of the songs she had sung so many times before on many stages. Her daughter, Linda, recalled that her mom had wanted to pass on while singing and, indeed, she did. She will be missed.