

Luisa Ronstadt Espinel, Music Ambassador to the World

By: Christine Marin. 2009.

Luisa Ronstadt Espinel inherited her love of Mexican and Spanish music, dance and theatre from her father, Federico José María Ronstadt, who established a successful blacksmithing, wagon-making and carriage factory and a hardware enterprise in Tucson. He is also known to have provided the leadership of Tucson's first symphonic institution, the *Club Filarmónico Tucsonense* in 1889. Luisa inherited her beauty, grace and love of Hispanic culture from her lovely mother, Sara Levin Ronstadt, who died at the age of thirty-two of heart failure, brought on by a bout of typhoid fever in 1902 when Luisa was only ten years of age. Two years later, Luisa's father married Lupe Dalton, daughter of Winnall A. Dalton and María Jesus Vásquez Dalton. A young and attractive twenty-two year old woman, Lupe was employed as a bookkeeper at Federico's place of business, "F. Ronstadt Company." The Ronstadts held the admiration and respect of Tucson's elite and middle-class Mexican and Anglo citizenry and were well-known within their community for their love of music and cultural sophistication.

Early photographs taken of Luisa as a young woman capture her soft, oval face, high cheekbones and dark eyes, along with her flair for the dramatic in both style and dress. She was instructed in private schools and learned to appreciate the depth, power and beauty of her Hispanic culture and Spanish language. While in her mid-twenties, Luisa's parents sent her to San Francisco, where she received advanced formal training in music, dance and drama. Life in the city exposed her to new avenues of expression and creativity and introduced her to the world

of theaters, opera houses, musical performances, and concerts. Eager to enhance her talents in singing and dancing, Luisa travelled to Paris and Madrid and soon began her international musical and acting career and achieved praise as a performer of Spanish folklore. When she returned to the United States, she toured Texas, California and the Pacific Northwest, performing Spanish dramatic monologues on stage in theatres and on college campuses. In 1927, Luisa made her debut at the Edyth Totten Theater in New York, winning new audiences and praise from theatre critics and writers for her performance. She was soon labeled as the “glamorous Spanish Disease”, a professional entertainer known for her recitation of Spanish monologs and skilled in story-telling.

When Luisa performed at the Temple of Music and Art in Tucson, she spoke of her beloved parents and childhood memories of Tucson and her love of the desert, and the frontier life she left behind. She recalled the summer evenings, when her father “would accompany his songs on his guitar and later tell us marvelous stories of when he was a little boy.”

Luisa Ronstadt Espinel never returned to live in Tucson. She settled in Los Angeles after her career and performed at the famous Olvera Theater, where she taught music. In 1946, she published *Canciones de Mi Padre*, a collection of Mexican folk songs dedicated to her father, Federico José María Ronstadt. Her niece, the famous Linda Ronstadt, would perform and record a similar collection under the same title as a tribute to her own father, Gilbert Ronstadt, in 1987.

Luisa Espinel Ronstadt’s Tucson roots made her more than an international entertainer of Hispanic folklore and culture. She became the symbol of what is good about the history and

culture of Arizona's Mexican borderlands—a region made special because of the songs, traditions and stories of her father's journey north from Mexico.

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