Linda Ronstadt on her new fall shows, modern life â?? and getting older

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Last week I had the opportunity to interview Linda Ronstadt at her home in the Richmond District. Her home is not rock star huge as might befit a legendary singer of the â??70s and â??80s, but is cozy and warm, even in the fog.

Linda Ronstadt, queen of the â??Blue Bayou.â?? and dozens of other hit songs. Image courtesy of KTVU.

She met me in her living room and immediately organized the making of tea Ââ?? properly, in a teapot. lhow the Queen likes her teaâ?• She brought a teapot and cup and saucer on a tray with a silver creamer and sugar bowl. We tried to remember whether the royals put milk or tea in the cup first. (Google â??how the queen likes her teaâ?• for the definitive answer.)

Ronstadtâ??s conversation ranges from Henry James and 19th century literature to a 12-year-old composer and piano-violin prodigy she has been following lately in the U.K. named Alma Deutscher, to the perils of parallel parking in the city. Sheâ??s lively, funny and very smart.

Her light and airy living room is relaxed and feminine, with large comfortable furniture suitable for lounging. The long wall opposite the couch is one big bookshelf. Flowers abound â?? on the coffee table, in the guest bathroom and around the garden outside.

The dining room table is covered with laptops and headphones. Iâ??ve come in during a session with her manager, John Boylan, whoâ??s working with her on a presentation for a trio of Bay Area speaking appearances in September. Tucker, a long-legged, elegant cat rescued from the mean streets of L.A., prowls the room.

Ronstadt stopped giving concerts when she was no longer able to sing. After consulting numerous doctors, she finally received the diagnosis of Parkinsonâ??s disease five years ago. Her new career as a public speaker came about after the success of her 2013 book tour for â??Simple Dreams: A Musical Memoir.â?•

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When did you notice there was something wrong with your voice?

Iâ??d been seeing doctors since 2000, mostly for a lack of energy. One doctor gave me amphetamines, which I refused to take. He said they gave them to airline pilots! No one picked up on the Parkinsonâ??s until about five years ago when I saw a neurologist.

By the time I was diagnosed, I couldnâ??t sing at all. I knew it was systemic, not age. I know what aging voices sound like (she makes a sound like an engine trying to catch). When you sing, your vocal chords flap together. A manâ??s chords flap together 350 times a second. When a woman sings, in the upper register, her chords flap together 1,000 times a second. At the end, I donâ??t think mine got up to even 40 flaps, so I gave it up. It was just like shouting. Now Iâ??m glad to have anything of a voice left at all!

What will your shows this fall be like?

Itâ??s a slide show, basically, using Powerpoint. John runs the laptop and Iâ??m cued by each slide to tell the story of that photo and what it means. I did so many different kinds of music, we couldnâ??t talk about all of them, so we concentrated on the kind of music that was played in my household before I was 10 years old. I just go with the culture and the kind of music I was used to as a child. And, of course, I talk about the Eagles and what that scene was like in theâ??70s. *(Eagles lead singer Glenn Frey once played guitar in Ronstadtâ??s band, the Stone Ponies.*)

Are there video clips as well as slides?

Yes, video clips we found on YouTube! YouTube went around picking up all the video they could find early on because they knew YouTube would be invented someday. I hated seeing it because they have everything youâ??ve ever done, looking terrible, with bad sound!

How do you advertise the show so that people know youâ??re not singing?

Itâ??s billed as â??A Conversation with Linda.â?• We had to do that with the Mexican show, too, to let people know it was all in Spanish. So there wouldnâ??t be somebody in the audience yelling for â??Blue Bayou.â?•

The funny thing about the Mexican audiences is they donâ??t buy tickets in advance, they wait till the day of the concert. On that tour we thought we were failing every show and then weâ??d get there and the hall would be full with grandmas and babies and three generations. I love it when the generations are tied together.

Speaking of generations, how do you feel about the word â??oldâ?• as applied to you?

Well, I apply it to myself frequently. I have stark evidence of it being true every day when I look in the mirror. You know Iâ??m astonished by how short a time it took to get here. I thought it would take a very long time. But then your perception of time changes as you get older; it does go faster as you age. My childrenâ??s lives went by in a blink it seems to me, though not to them. To them it was many blinks.

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Some people refuse to be called old; they insist on â??elder.â?• How do you feel about that?

Well, I want to be called accurately. Iâ??ll be 72 now, in July. To me, middle age is 40, 50 and 60. Old age is 70, 80, 90, if youâ??re lucky enough to get there. Or unlucky enough, as the case may be. Although people can be robust in their 60s and 70s. But I never felt I had to establish it one way or the other. You have to deal with everything as realistically as you can. Or you can be a 70-teen â?? there are a lot of people walking around who are â??wannabes,â?• who want to look like a kid.

Although Iâ??ve colored my hair from the age of 17. I started going gray at 16 so I just kept using henna and anything I could get my hands on. I know my hair is all silver now and I want to grow it out like that. Itâ??ll make me look older, I have no doubt, but thatâ??s OK because I am older. Iâ??ve colored the roots purple till I can grow it out, then Iâ??ll just put a purple rinse on it. So itâ??ll look natural. Naturally purple! When I was younger, I lied about my age to play in clubs; I got used to adding two years to my age automatically. Iâ??d done it for so long I had to look at my passport once to see how old I really was!

Whatâ??s good about being this age?

Iâ??m nicer than I was at a younger age. I try harder to be nice, but I donâ??t always succeed. I believe that with wisdom, and especially after having a child, itâ??s easy to look at anybody and think they were somebodyâ??s child once, and then this happened or that happened to make them the way they are. But Iâ??m not as judgmental or as condemning as I used to be.

Except about music! My kids bring music over and itâ??s that weird dance Euro pop stuff. My son likes disco music! Itâ??s back now. I hate that machine bass line; thatâ??s all I can hear through the walls. Iâ??m lying in bed and I hear that bass pattern and it sounds so random to me. Thereâ??s no groove. Electronic dance music: I donâ??t get it. (*Ronstadt has two grown children, who visit often.*)

Have you ever heard of a â??silent disco?â?• My nephew sent me pictures of his friends wearing headphones and dancing to their own private soundtracks.

Iâ??ve never heard of that, but Iâ??m horrified! Thatâ??s not the idea people; get in sync! Get in your tribe and dance! Thatâ??s like bluegrass when they detached the music from the dancers and played faster and faster so thereâ??s no groove to dance to. Same thing with jazz â?? people stopped dancing to jazz because it got too weird. The early guys like Louis Armstrong had a better groove, there was a beat to the music, so people could dance. It had a pulse. Everybody was sharing the music. They were there to dance. That was the point. I feel sorry for those people with their headphones on. They look so solitary.

Is there any songwriting in your future?

No, Iâ?? m not even tempted to write a long email. Parkinsonâ??s takes away your executive function; itâ??s hard to plan, and then make that plan happen. Writing was never my strong suite, anyway. I had to have a song come out of me through my voice but I never was able to write a song. I should have cultivated the art though! The songwriters all came out of the â??70s with a bunch of loot, but the singers just kind of had to rattle along on their own. Roy Orbison liked me a lot. So did Smoky Robinson. I made them a lot of money, but none of it came to me.

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Looking back on your life, what would you change if you could?

Iâ??d love to have been the singer I became earlier on. I donâ??t think I got really good until 50. Or 45 maybe. Definitely after 40. Because I really wasnâ??t meant for rock and roll. There was a lot of yelling and screaming, what I call short-note singing. I donâ??t think I did it very well and I was bored doing it. But I loved singing American standards and I loved singing Mexican music. I liked some Americana music I did with Emmy Lou and Dolly and Ann Savoy. I did like that.

Do you miss the limelight?

No. What I miss is the singing Singing with my family, my friends. Emmy Lou Harris would come over and weâ??d say â??Hi, whereâ??d you get your shoes?â?• and then â??Letâ??s singâ?• and there weâ??d be for the next six hours. Weâ??d sing together over the phone. I used to do that with my dad, too. I miss the musical camaraderie that was my whole life. Now I like sitting around just doing nothing, people coming over and talking. I love seeing Jerry Brown and (wife) Ann Gust. (*Ronstadt dated Brown in 1979, and they have remained friends.*) She is so smart and funny and really supports Jerry. They come over during the holidays, with their dog whom they love.

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