

As featured in
Philadelphia
MAGAZINE

October 2022 Issue



Gesenia Gerena, lead vocalist for Ronstadt Revue, grew up in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in North Philly. She discovered she had great pipes as a teenager and started singing in English and Spanish — stuff by Linda Ronstadt, Whitney Houston, Celia Cruz. She recorded a salsa album in 2003. In 2016, she advertised for musicians to build a Ronstadt tribute show.

“People were talking about calling ourselves the Stone Phoneys. But it’s not a joke for me,” she says. (Ronstadt’s pre-solo band was the Stone Poneys.) She thinks “tribute band” feels disparaging. “I like to describe us as a celebration of her life and her music. I mean, think about Yo-Yo-Ma, who does a celebration to all these beautiful classical artists. They don’t call him a tribute band,” she reasons. Ronstadt’s biggest hits were cover versions anyway.

On a Friday night in July, the crowd of about 200 for Ronstadt Revue at the Newtown Theatre skews female. The hair skews gray. Gesenia (professionally, she uses her first name) evokes Linda visually but casually: a flowery dress with bell sleeves, knee-high boots, bangs on her forehead. She starts belting out hits with her band.

On “Different Drum,” Dave Hartl, a classically trained pianist who has worked with Smokey Robinson and Aretha Franklin, makes his keyboard ring like a harpsichord. During “When Will I Be Loved,” drummer Tim Reeder crashes his cymbals; bassist Nick Frese and guitarist Bob Leonetti harmonize. On “You’re No Good,”

RONSTADT
R E V U E
featuring Gesenia

Dave Lenat bends strings up his guitar neck for the solo, a riff that to me is the sound of the ‘70s.

Gesenia leads the crowd in singing happy birthday to Linda, who turned 76 in July. Ronstadt, suffering from Parkinson’s Disease, hasn’t sung live in years. But Gesenia’s voice grows stronger through the night. When she hits the high note to end “Blue Bayou,” the reserved crowd cheers and whistles.

In November, Ronstadt Revue will play the New Hope Winery, passing through that essential crossroads on its tour of America. When they reach California, they’ll be joined by John Beland, a guitarist who toured with Ronstadt at the start of her solo career. Beland sat in with the Revue earlier this year and told me “It was déjà vu. I’m sitting up there, and she resembled Linda a little, and there’s a voice in my ear while I’m playing acoustic guitar on ‘Long Long Time’ like I did with Linda. I felt like I was back in 1970.”

Written by Don Steinberg



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www.RonstadtRevue.com/EPK

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