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Jenni Rivera's fame built on gut-level connection with her fans

By Fernando Gonzalez



Lynne Sladky / AP

Jenni Rivera performs during the Latin Billboard Awards in Coral Gables in April.

Mexican-American singer Jenni Rivera, killed when her plane crashed in northern Mexico on Sunday, not only faced a daunting list of real-life issues in her 43 years, but she had the openness and stage presence to sing about it all in a way that connected with her audience.

"The secret to her fame was not that she had such an outstanding, gifted voice, because she didn't," says Los Angeles music journalist and author Agustin Gurza.

"It was that she poured her life story into her songs, with all her faults, downfalls and tragedies, including a teen pregnancy and domestic abuse. The fans made her a star because they saw themselves reflected in her."

Rivera told her story in Norteño and banda music, both Mexican-rooted styles, not only selling millions of records worldwide, by Billboard magazine's accounting, but earning three Latin Grammy nominations.

"Staying defeated, crying and suffering was not an option," Rivera told CNN in 2010, the year she was named a spokeswoman for the [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#). "I had to get off my feet, dust myself off and press on. That's what I

want to teach my daughters."

Rivera "was much more significant as a cultural symbol than as an artist per se," Gurza said in an email interview. "She was the first Mexican-American female singer from Southern California to achieve superstardom on both sides of the border, and that success inspired the legion of fans who shared her immigrant roots and humble working-class upbringing."

In fact says Gabriel Abaroa Jr., president and CEO of the Latin Recording Academy, "for most people Rivera was almost a social singer, an aspirational singer."

In giving a woman's voice and perspective to significant personal and social issues, Rivera made her place in a short honor roll of female voices in Mexican regional music.

"Contrary to the ill-informed commentary spewing in the mainstream media after her death, Jenni Rivera did not break any gender barriers," says Gurza, author of *The Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican and Mexican American Recordings* (Chicano Archives).

"In fact, she fits within a long and respected tradition of successful female singers dating back to the Revolution, including Lucha Reyes in the 1930s and more recently Lola Beltran, Amalia Mendoza, Yolanda del Rio and the late Chavela Vargas."

What's most remarkable is that Jenni Dolores Rivera Saavedra, born in Long Beach, Calif., to Mexican immigrant parents, achieved this "while being caught in a sort of no-man's land: For many, she was not American enough for American audiences or Mexican enough for Mexican audiences," says Abaroa.

"And yet by the force of her talent and personality she did it — and she was massive. She'd just as soon fill an auditorium or a concert hall as she would fill a soccer stadium or a bull ring."

Rivera's presence on television — as producer of the reality TV show *Chiquis & Raq-C*, featuring her oldest daughter, Janney "Chiqui" Marin; producer and star of *I Love Jenni*, a Spanish-language reality TV show on Telemundo's mun2 network, and a coach and judge on *The Voice, Mexico* — magnified her cultural role.

"What set Jenni apart was her willingness to expose her personal life, including those sometimes sordid episodes, as a deliberate career choice," says Gurza. "In this, she was aided by technology that was not available to her predecessors, especially social media and the rise of reality television, where she found fertile ground to expose her life even further.

"This helped reinforce her significance as a media phenomenon, more than a simple recording artist or performer. Fans followed her story like a telenovela, and they rooted for her against all the bad actors trying to bring her down, in reality not just on TV."

Hers was a story of "working-class triumph, of poor people beating the odds, of perseverance and guts in the face of adversity," Gurza said. "... Fans can't get enough of that, because it gives them hope for their own ability to overcome all their hardships and stumbling blocks."