



## People's Choice

### **A brand-new label takes a chance on a little orphan has-been -- and wins**

Things you need to know about Mexican singer and actress Pilar Montenegro: She recently set a record in the music world by topping Billboard's Latin charts for eleven consecutive weeks with her hit song "Quítame Ese Hombre" (literally, "Take That Man Away From Me"); her album *Desahogo* (Release) is a top seller in the nation, according to SoundScan; she has made industry executives' jaws drop from coast to coast by surpassing Chayanne, Cristian Castro, Shakira, and Enrique Iglesias; and, even though you'd never notice from the body she proudly displays, she eats like the world's about to end.

Amazingly, almost three years ago, when Montenegro and her husband/manager Jorge Reynoso were searching for a producer to jump-start her career, practically no one took the bait. And when the couple finally hired renowned Cuban-American hitmaker Rudy Perez to produce her, he encountered the same resistance from the record labels.

In spite of a long and prolific career, Montenegro was seen as a has-been. Her first solo album, 1997's *Son del Corazón*, went nowhere, while her latest one, *Desahogo*, also seemed destined for the dustbins. The album, mostly a collection of love songs and some up-tempo tracks, had the worst possible timing: It was released two weeks after the September 11 terrorist attacks. The first single, "Cuando Estamos Juntos" ("When We're Together"), quickly sank. And that's not all that seemed to be going down. So were Perez's spirits.

"It didn't click on radio, and distributors were returning the album. We were shocked, sweating, but we didn't panic. We just kept moving on, and switched to Plan B," remembers Perez of those gut-wrenching months following the release. "José [Behar, president of Univisión Music Group, the label that launched Montenegro, and itself, with her album] said, 'Why don't we release 'Quítame Ese Hombre'?"

Written by Jorge Luis Piloto, the song had previously been recorded by Puerto Rican singer Yolandita Monge. It just so happened that Perez had produced the track for Monge, and agreed with Behar that it would be a killer cut for Montenegro.

"But he said, 'Do the ballad, then do a norteña version, a ranchera version, a dance version, and I guarantee you it will be a smash,'" remembers Perez, a 23-year veteran in the business.

Behar, the man who had raised eyebrows and fueled a million jokes when, as head of EMI Latin, he signed pretty-boy star boxer Oscar de la Hoya to sing, was right. (Behar declined to comment for this story.) In the remixes of the song, released in February, Montenegro would find redemption.

"Unlike other artists, Pilar went back and reinterpreted the vocal parts to fit each remix," states Reynoso. "Pilar can sing pop and ranchera, and that makes a big difference."

A flabbergasted executive from a major competing record label admits anonymously: "Pilar Montenegro, Rudy Perez, and José Behar have changed the Latin music industry. With her remixes, she has trumped some of the biggest names in the business, coming practically out of nowhere. This has forced us to rush one of our major artists into doing several remixes as well."



The reasoning behind the strategy sounds foolproof. Since more than 60 percent of the Latin radio stations in the U.S. feature regional Mexican programming, by winning over those stations you have won half the game. Win the rest, the tropical and pop, and you hit the jackpot.

"'Quítame Ese Hombre' was originally released in a pop version, and then released as a regional Mexican version. So when Univisión put out the two together, they pretty much got every Latin radio station in the country to play it," explains Diego Aguilar, a representative for Latin music labels in the Miami offices of Broadcast Data Systems, which electronically monitors radio airplay in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. "This is no secret. Everybody at one point or another has tried something like this. But several remixes are no guarantee that the song will work."

In Montenegro's case, it worked.

Sitting at Versailles restaurant in Little Havana one afternoon, accompanied by Reynoso and publicist Joe Bonilla, Maria del Pilar Montenegro is giddy with excitement. She playfully bickers with her husband over remarks he's made about her beauty. "He thinks I look like a little mouse," she explains, laughing. And then proceeds to order a glass of orange juice, a bowl of chicken soup, and a dish of pork chunks with rice and beans and plantains. To top it all, a mamey sherbet.

"When Jorge told me that Rudy was going to produce the album, I didn't believe him," remembers Montenegro. "So he took me to Rudy's house. And Rudy reminded me that we had met years before briefly, when I belonged to Garibaldi."

Ah, Garibaldi.

Created by producer Luis de Llano in 1989, Garibaldi was a group of several photogenic Mexican boys and girls who pranced onstage singing dance-friendly pop songs with a tropical flavor. Sneered at by many, but backed by Mexican TV giant Televisa, Garibaldi became a worldwide success. Some of its members embarked on solo careers, but it has been Montenegro so far who has shone the most.

"I spent seven years with the group," remembers Montenegro, who had entered the entertainment business as a child playing Annie in Mexico. "With Garibaldi we traveled a lot, so I learned the discipline required to do tons of promotion. Like now. For the past nine months, I have been doing promotion nonstop."

When speaking of Garibaldi, Montenegro shows little emotion. But when she goes back to her days as the first Mexican "Annie," red ringlets and all, it's a different matter. Asked to sing "Tomorrow," she chokes up and tears run down her face as the words come out. "It's been so long since I last sang it," she says while the table goes quiet.

In the late 1990s Montenegro's solo career took a back seat to her acting in telenovelas, always cast as a villain. A particularly popular one was *Gotita de Amor* (Little Drop of Love). (Montenegro has recently returned to the small screen, appearing in *Te Amaré en Silencio* [I'll Love You in Silence] -- the first new soap opera produced by Univisión in Los Angeles -- finally playing a good girl.)

Three years ago, a former Garibaldi colleague introduced Montenegro to Reynoso. A businessman from a wealthy family, he became her manager and married her last year.



"And if she hasn't fired me by now, I don't think she will," he says jokingly.

"I trust him completely," adds Montenegro. "We are a team."

While the team counts its blessings at its luxurious condo on Brickell Avenue (where fellow Mexican singing star Cristian Castro also lives), Montenegro and company hope the good times will keep rolling with a new single, "Alguien que una Vez Amé" ("Someone I Once Loved").

Montenegro shrugs off any criticism that her success stems only from blanketing the country with remixes, or that the Univisión TV network cross-promotes her heavily on the air.

"Pilar has worked her butt off," says Perez, who based on the success achieved with his protégé will now be launching other artists. "Throughout all of this she has been a real trouper. She has to get on top of a horse to promote her record? She does it. No complaints. Because she believes in herself. And she believes in this album."

Mark Woodard, Latin music buyer for Trans World Entertainment, at 1100 stores the biggest independent music-store chain in the country (Spec's Music, FYE, Coconuts, and Strawberries), can vouch for Pilar's hard work.

"She does what it takes. Like visiting a store, or letting us know if volume is low. And this is not common in artists, to have this kind of initiative," says Woodard, who adds that orders for Desahogo keep coming in every week. "Sales in New York, Puerto Rico, and Miami are huge."

So what's the appeal?

Part of it, believes Bonilla, is that "men warm up to her, but women too, because she is not threatening."

Perez sums it up this way: "Pilar is very likable, down to earth, and that comes through. She has this raspy voice that is commercial, a voice that anybody can sing along with. She has what we call a 'voz de pueblo' ['a people's voice']."