

Knocking on Destiny's Gate

Tish Hinojosa finally hits the big time in Western music

BY ANNE LANG

*It's the way of life in the real West
'Neath a prairie moon that's heaven-blessed
And a tall boot shuffle on a wooden floor.
It's a clean white shirt on a Saturday night
And a long cold beer that's pure delight
And if you heard me say it, well, there's a whole lot more.*



TISH HINOJOSA PENNED THOSE WORDS and set them to a snappy two-steppin' tune while living in New Mexico a decade ago. Transplanted to Taos from a concrete Texas metropolis, she'd fallen in love with New Mexico's mountains, sagebrush, sunsets, and lifestyles, and those emotions found their way into the lyrics and rhythms of many recordings that followed. But *In the Real West* best expresses all the facets of Hinojosa's most memorable Western experience—playing country music for honest-to-goodness Westerners in the rustic desert pubs of Taos and Red River.

*It's the way of life in the real West
Where your time is yours when the sun sets
And the stars rise up to light the Western sky.*

"We played mostly for the cowboys and cowgirls from Cimarron," Hinojosa recalls, "and I came to admire their philosophy of life. They had old-fashioned ethics: You work hard from dawn to dusk, and on Saturday night, you come to town to have fun. I know why the people who work the land out there love what they do. It's a real gift just to live there."

*Laredo up north to Cimarron
If I'm lost, you know I've gone
To where the spurs that jangle are the
working kind.*

*It's the way of life in the real West
And if I were a man I guess
I'd ride and rope and wrangle 'til the day I die.*

During that early phase of her rising career, Hinojosa, who now hangs her hat in her native Texas, actually lived twice in New Mexico—with a three-year Nashville stint in between. A strong country music foundation lies behind her evolution into the nationally acclaimed, bilingual crossover artist that she is today. Ample coun-

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try—and Western—selections still accompany her Hispanic-tinged stylings, and many of those songs also display a happy blend of pop, folk, and swing. A little bit of Emmy Lou, a touch of Ronstadt, a hint of Baez, and a large measure of Tish, her intriguing musical identity happened naturally, if not exactly planned.

The youngest of 13 children raised by Mexican immigrant parents in San Antonio, Hinojosa ("ee-no-HO-sah" in the correct Spanish pronunciation) spent countless hours keeping her mother company in the kitchen, where the radio stayed tuned to the *conjunto* music of local Spanish stations. "Listening to those songs captured my attention for

the non-visual emotions conveyed through music," the 38-year-old singer explains while sitting in her South Austin home, accompanied by her two grade-school children and a new puppy.

"That music is in me, instinctively," she continues. "And although that's not the kind of music I've necessarily chosen to do—I'm not a *Tejano* artist—I do use a lot of those elements in other forms of writing. I love having that foundation, because it's always interesting to go back to."

During those early years, Hinojosa counterbalanced that Hispanic influence with the musical enthusiasms of a typical 1970s American teenager. When she wasn't in the kitchen with Mama, she sat in her room listening to the likes of Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. At 14, she taught herself to play the guitar, strumming along with her favorite performers.

"I never tried to write back then, but I learned songs very easily," Hinojosa says. "I especially liked the vocal, acoustical music. It was after the big storm of the '60s, but you still had the stragglers searching for coffeehouses to play in. I was in that group."

She found local coffeehouses, and performed in them while still in high school. "My parents were a little leery, thinking I was singing in bars. I wasn't a rebellious teenager, really, but I just had this urgent drive to play music." That drive led to a job after graduation, singing jingles for the local Latino music market. Hinojosa went on to record two top-10 regional hits for Lado A/Cara, now a leading Tejano label.

"The owner saw me as sort of a Baez-type folk singer, and at the age of 17, I wore that comparison proudly," she remembers. "But somehow I'd always end up with bubblegum-pop stuff to sing. I felt like I was straying from my starry-eyed goal of going to California. That's when Linda

Ronstadt was doing so great, and she was a hero of mine. I thought, Who's ever going to hear me way down in San Antonio, Texas singing Mexican bubblegum-pop?"

Hinojosa did head west in 1979, but she only got as far as New Mexico. She found work playing with a band, and the region's vivid images inspired her to try her hand at songwriting. After a couple of years, the band broke up; but by then, Hinojosa and the bass player, Craig Barker, were in love. They married in 1982 and started working as a duo, touring the college circuit.

Because they were playing mostly country music, it made sense to move to Nashville where, in 1983, Hinojosa took a job as a writer for Mel Tillis Productions. "I was really more of a glorified demo singer than a writer," she admits, "because they didn't sign very many of my songs."

The following year, she and Barker had a son, Adam, and about that time Hinojosa started to grow disillusioned with the Nashville scene. Her sensitively crafted lyrics just weren't selling. "With a lot of the big publishing companies, if your song isn't the typical kind where you can see the hook line in the first five seconds, it's not considered a real song," she explains. "It doesn't have commercial appeal."

So, in 1985, the family moved to Albuquerque, where Barker had been accepted into law school. That same year, Hinojosa put out an independent cassette, *Taos to Tennessee*—a musical reflection of her Nashville foray—which she also sent out as a demo tape to record companies. In 1988, daughter Nina was born, and shortly after that, the clan moved to Austin.

"It seemed like a lot of renegade things were happening there," Hinojosa offers as their reason for relocating to Texas's capital city, renowned for its eclectic musical scene. "Nanci Griffith, Lyle Lovett, Michael Murphey, Willie Nelson—Austin is definitely a writer's town."

Barker finished law school at the University of Texas; he went on to become an entertainment lawyer, and now manages his wife's career. Hinojosa spent her days writing and tending to her babies, handing them over to Barker six nights a week before going off to sing.

Soon after settling in Texas, Hinojosa returned to Nashville to perform in a showcase for budding talent. Lightning struck: She got two recording offers in one night. Polygram Records held out a singing-only contract; A&M Records wanted a singer/songwriter. Hinojosa naturally chose the latter. "To me, being recognized as a writer, not just a singer, was better than anything in the world," she says. "It wasn't near as sweet a deal as Polygram's, but I didn't want to be a flavor-of-the-month country singer, used up within a year."

HINOJOSA ON DISC

Tish Hinojosa's album offerings are available through most major record stores nationwide.

- **HOMELAND** (A&M Records, 1989). A rich sampling of Tex-Mex creations, punctuated by *West Side of Town*—an uplifting ballad about the lives of her Mexican immigrant parents. Also memorable is *Voice of the Big Guitar* (a Johnny Harris piece), celebrating the cowboy's primary form of musical entertainment on the range; and the bouncy country tune, *Till You Love Me Again*.
- **AQUELLA NOCHE** (Watermelon Records, 1991). Its title translating as *That Certain Night*, this all-Spanish collection was created as a tribute to the Mexican holiday of Cinco de Mayo.
- **MEMORABILIA NAVIDENA** (Watermelon Records, 1991). Another all-Spanish production, initially released independently at Christmas 1990 as a special seasonal thank-you of "Christmas Memories" for family and friends.
- **CULTURE SWING** (Rounder Records, 1991). A vivid showcase of Hinojosa's many talents, serving up some satisfying Western fare including *In the Real West*, *San Antonio Romeo*, and *By the Rio Grande*. The rousing *Flag of the Sun* celebrates patriotism among all nationalities, while *Something in the Rain* sorrowfully dramatizes the effects of pesticides on migrant farm workers.
- **TAOS TO TENNESSEE** (Watermelon Records, 1992). Though only five songs on this 12-track album were written by Hinojosa, the collection was actually her first recorded effort, originally released independently in 1987. Her writing skills shine especially well in the title song, with its rhythmic harmonies and a flavor more Western than country, and in the sweetly lyrical, toe-tapping *Let Me Remember*.
- **DESTINY'S GATE** (Warner Bros., 1994). Primarily a collection of love songs, displaying Hinojosa's multifaceted musical stylings. *Looking for My Love in the Pouring Rain* rings out distinctively Western. Several songs pay tribute to her country and Mexican influences. For those who wax nostalgic for the '60s, *What More Can I Say in a Song* has a distinct John Lennon-ish quality.

Her debut album, *Homeland*, was released in 1989. The tracks were a typical Hinojosa-style blend of country tunes, poignant love ballads, and all-Spanish melodies. Although the release triggered an avalanche of publicity and numerous accolades, Hinojosa sensed a fragility to her relationship with A&M. "I always knew there was danger in taking their offer, because it was experimental. There's always a chance that someone will say at a board meeting, 'Forget the art—this thing's not making us any money.' And sure enough, that's what happened a year and a half later."

Hinojosa had just finished recording her next album, *Culture Swing*, when, without warning, A&M was taken over by Polygram—the very company she'd initially rejected. Known for its conservative management, Polygram considered her a commercial liability, and gave her the ax.

Further insult came when Polygram tied up the master tapes of *Culture Swing*. The only way

Hinojosa could use those songs was to re-record them with another label. She began to shop around, and a year and a half later she accepted an offer from Boston-based Rounder Records. *Culture Swing*, take two, was released in 1992.

"At that point, I was ready for a clean slate anyway," Hinojosa says. "And I really loved the way the album turned out the second time around." Besides *In the Real West*, highlights include *San Antonio Romeo*, a playful response to Bob Willis' *San Antonio Rose*; *The Window and Drifter's Wind*, both haunting tunes about lonesome Western nomads; and *By the Rio Grande*, a song that pays lively tribute to the river that separates the two cultures with which Hinojosa identifies.

Hinojosa wasn't the only one who liked *Culture Swing*. In September of last year, just as she was in the midst of putting together *Destiny's Gate*, a second album for Rounder, Warner Brothers Records offered her a deal. She'd hit the big time, and Rounder's executives were happy for her—giving up their rights to *Destiny's Gate* with the understanding that Hinojosa would still meet her commitment of two more albums for them.

The Warner Brothers contract, meanwhile, calls for the singer to produce eight albums within no specific time span. "If they get tired of me, they can always drop me," Hinojosa says philosophically, "but I feel really good about this. I've always been cynical about major companies. But hey, there's nothing better than getting signed by the head of the record label."

Destiny's Gate, released late last spring, is filled with what Hinojosa describes as "a lot of my musical fantasies, including string arrangements for several songs." There's no arguing that, with its elaborate instrumentals and multiple-tracked harmonies, this album is a slicker package than any of the singer's previous ones. Yet, Hinojosa's unassuming Western roots shine through in such tracks as *Looking for My Love in the Pouring Rain*, set to a distinct two-step beat with some fine fiddling. And her country-music background comes across loud and clear on *I'm Not Through Loving You Yet*.

The title track, meanwhile, has an upbeat, jangly '60s sound to it, with lyrics that speak of life's experiences coming full circle. Tish Hinojosa honestly believes she's reached that gate of destiny. "Actually, I feel like I've already 'arrived,'" she remarks, affectionately pulling 9-year-old Adam and 6-year-old Nina down on the couch beside her. "I don't have any platinum albums on my wall or anything, but I'm certainly at a very comfortable place. I feel like whatever dues I've paid, some of it's already coming back to me."