Lower standard of Living in the U.S.A.

By Joel West

Linda Ronstadt could be considered a successful female vocalist; her latest album, Living in The U.S.A., has an initial shipment of 2 million copies — double platinum. The four previous albums, Simple Dreams (1977), Hasten Down The Wind (1976), Prisoner In Disguise (1975) and Heart Like A Wheel (1974) sold over a million copies each, not to mention the 1976 Greatest Hits album, which also went platinum.

One could surmise that Ronstadt is not hunting for more, neither is producer-manager Peter Asher, who produced these five previous albums (in addition to those of James Taylor). Anyone who buys Hasten Down The Wind is struck by three questions: “Why did Ronstadt make this record? Why did Asher make this record? Why did I buy this record?”

With the exception of a few cuts on Hasten, Ronstadt has not written any of the material on her albums; nor does she know of the instrumental parts on her albums; nor does she hasten to pursue a solo career (“Lonely Boy”) whose “Simple Man, Simple Dreams” was equally needed on last year’s album. Unfortunately for concertgoers, this cut is pure studio: both Ronstadt’s duetting of backing vocals and her effortless transition to falsetto are unlikely to be heard in live performance. The only other cut that succeeds is Warren Zevon’s “Mohammed’s Radio,” in this case the writing of Zevon, who also wrote the title track for Hasten Down The Wind. Ronstadt has not written any of the instrumental parts on her albums; nor does she hasten to pursue a solo career (“Lonely Boy”) whose “Simple Man, Simple Dreams” was equally needed on last year’s album. Unfortunately for concertgoers, this cut is pure studio: both Ronstadt’s duetting of backing vocals and her effortless transition to falsetto are unlikely to be heard in live performance. The only other cut that succeeds is Warren Zevon’s “Mohammed’s Radio,” in this case the writing of Zevon, who also wrote the title track for Hasten Down The Wind.

The failure of this album is that, unlike last year, there are no good up-tempo numbers on the record. “Back In The U.S.A.” is the dismal last cut of Ronstadt’s obligatory rock-shouters, preceded by the forgettable “Poor Pajama’d Me” (1977) and “That’ll Be The Day” (1976), evidently her success with “Heat Wave” (1975) is what prompted Asher to have Ronstadt scream this third cacophonous single. The failure of “Back In The U.S.A.,” both as a title cut and the first cut of the album, foreshadow’s the album’s mediocrity — on the five previous albums, both the first and title cuts were among the strongest on the album, with most better than any cut on this album.

Also missing from this album is the “vibe” — neither the country fiddle of Don’t Cry Now nor the lush string orchestra of Hasten are heard here. The greatest disappointment, however, is the quality of the vocals. The backing vocals (except as noted) are far too polished or schmalzy — those on “Oh Baby Baby” one would expect on a Carpenter’s album. Ronstadt herself is a disappointment: at 32 her voice should not be going, but she insists on singing material that makes her sound ready for her second retirement testimonial. The worst part is that she doesn’t seem to be aware of it — interviewed for recent Rolling Stone, she commented that it only took one take until “Back In The U.S.A.” was “fine,” one less take would have been even finer.

To add insult to injury, the first copy of Living In The U.S.A. reviewed featured, at no extra charge, liberal amounts of surface noise sprinkled on a warped disc that was drilled (or stamped) off-center. Even the picture isn’t as good as last year. For an unknown artist, this would be an interesting album on the way up; for Ronstadt, it’s a tedious album on the way down. Let’s hope that her move from L.A. to New York will bring new influences to stop this distressing decline.