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Molina Is a Singer Who's in Tune With Her Horses

By Diane Pucin

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Maria Molina has a deep, passionate singing voice, a first album titled "Maria Molina, Unmixed & Unmastered," a Beverly Hills agent and the dream of a long and international singing career. Maria wears perfect makeup, a perfect pout and a look with her eyes that make it impossible not to fall deeply into the music.

Celina Molina is a ranch girl. Celina has ridden horses from her toddler days in Nogales, Mexico. Her father, Inocente, and brother, Cesar, trained quarter horses. Her grandfather was killed in a riding accident, her cousin paralyzed in a riding accident, and yet Celina has always loved to ride a horse, to caress a horse, to look deeply into the eyes of a horse and fall in love.

Maria and Celina are the same 26-year-old impetuous, talented, crazy woman. Four years ago Celina (who took her mother's name of Maria for her singing so as not to be considered trading on the name of Selena, the award-winning Latina singer who was slain by a fan) found out a way to be a singing horse trader. She bought a quarter horse at the Vessels Schvaneveldt sale for \$42,000. That horse has made more than \$600,000 so far in purses and breeding fees, and the money has helped Celina finance her fledgling music career. In 1997 Celina went to the sales here again and bought another horse. It has made a profit of nearly \$200,000.

And last week at the annual Vessels sale, Molina bought her third horse, a sorrel filly by the name of Odoul. She spent about \$40,000 again. She stood on the grass at the Vessels farm here wearing worn jeans and a denim shirt and giggled as if sharing a gossipy secret with a high school friend. She gave up her secret for picking quarter horses.

"I pray about it," she said, "and I talked to Cesar and I look into the eyes of the horse and then I do what my heart tells me."

Always Molina has done what her heart tells her. As a 3-year-old in Nogales, she would sing in front of the mirror and beg her mother who, she said, "has the most beautiful voice in the world," to sing duets. When the family moved to Tucson, Molina grew quickly eager to try out for all the grade school and high school musicals. She would beg to perform at every local singing pageant in her close-knit, Mexican-American community even as she was becoming the first high school graduate in her family.

Partly as a reward for that, and to honor Molina as the youngest daughter of the family, Inocente made a gift of the family ranch in Nogales. It was this ranch Molina sold to purchase her first horse four years ago. Molina followed her heart, of course. "My father didn't approve," Molina said, giggling again. "I don't think he gave me the ranch so I could sell it off. And certainly not so I could sell it off and buy a horse. I listened to my father, but then I listened to my heart."

The horse Molina wanted to buy was named Corona Cartel. "I said, 'Dad, in my dreams I see me owning Corona Cartel and I see the horse winning. I really want Corona Cartel.' My dad told me he thought I was a little crazy. I said, 'Dad, please be with me.' He said OK.

"I think it worked out OK, don't you?"

Yes, it has.

Molina entrusts her horses to Jaime Gomez, a soft-spoken, soft-handed trainer at Los Alamitos.

Whenever her horses race, Molina is there. Whenever she can spend a day, a week, or only an hour, Molina will go to Los Alamitos in her scuffed boots and riding jeans. If she can only give the horse a hug, then that's fine.

Molina was bareback riding with her cousin, Celia, about 15 years ago on the Nogales ranch when Celia's horse threw her and Celia ended up paralyzed. "We are best friends, Celia and I," Molina says, "and it was so hard but never, ever did I change my feeling about horses, and Celia has never wanted me to. My grandfather was killed taming a horse. It is dangerous, yes, but it is also a beautiful thing, to have a quarter horse, to watch them being trained and to be part of that."

The singing career has not become so financially lucrative as the horse-buying career. Molina would like to sing some songs she has written as well as some songs another cousin has written, but on her first album she is singing other people's songs. And if Molina never becomes a singing star, "I'll be happy singing duets with my mother at church and for our family."

But that is not how it is in her dreams. Molina's dreams tell her that her voice will be heard on the radio, that her albums will begin to sell, that she will be performing in clubs and maybe even big arenas and not just in church and at home.

And so far, let's be honest here, Molina's dreams have been awfully accurate.