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Kenneth E. Behring Center

AL RENDON

Interviewee: Al Rendon

Interviewers: Kathleen Franz and Amelia Thompson

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Thompson and Franz: When and why did you become a photographer?

Rendon: I started taking pictures at a very young age. My mom was one of those moms that took pictures of every special occasion; every Christmas, every New Years, every birthday, every Easter, every Halloween, every graduation, every anniversary, my mom always was taking pictures and recording what we were doing. As she got older she had trouble taking pictures because, I don't know if you remember, those old Kodak instamatic cameras, the little view-finder was this tiny little thing you had to look through and she wore glasses and she started, like, cutting our heads off. You know, she just couldn't see through there anymore. So, I kind of took over the duties of taking pictures at our little events for the family. It wasn't something I thought seriously about but once I got to the high school level I participated in the photography department to take pictures for the yearbook and the newsletter and from one thing to the next I ended up being a photographer. I never went to college to be a photographer. I went to college to take business courses for accounting but I soon realized that's not what I wanted to do and I was much happier doing photography so I just worked my way into that.

Thompson and Franz: Why have you focused on the Tejano or Mexican American experience?

Rendon: I had started my business back around 1979-1980 and I had been mostly doing simple public relations, black and white photography back then and running a photo lab and in 1985 I got an opportunity to be the photographer for the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center which is a Latino arts organization here on the west side of San Antonio where it's a predominately Mexican American community and I was very much exposed to Conjunto music and Tejano music and I rediscovered my Hispanic roots through that. I did that for them for over 10 years. At the same time as doing that I was also taking pictures for the Fiesta Commission and one of my favorite events during Fiesta every year was the Charreada, which is the Mexican rodeo and I identified very well with that culture and before I knew it, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to document, not just Hispanic music culture, but other things as well.

Thompson and Franz: Had you worked with Sosa, Bromley and Aguilar and Associates prior to the Selena/Coke campaign?

Rendon: Yes, I already had a working relationship with them. The thing that was happening back in the '80s was Hispanic advertising coming into its own. Sosa, Bromley, Aguilar was one of the largest Hispanic ad agencies, not just in San Antonio, but in the country, producing TV commercials, print ads, all kinds of things. When these large corporations hired them, they also wanted them to use Hispanic talent. So being one of the few Mexican American commercial photographers in San Antonio I got to work with them on some of their other projects, not just Coca-Cola. They used a lot of different photographers in San Antonio. I didn't do a lot for them but I did occasional projects. By the time they came along and were doing the Coca-Cola account and got Selena involved I had already been doing work for Selena. They recognized that I had a good rapport with her and it would probably be a good idea to work me into doing the work that they needed with Coca-Cola.

Thompson and Franz: Had you photographed Selena before this? How did that shape your approach to this particular photo shoot?

Rendon: This particular shoot came about kind of quickly. They had signed her up for a special promotion where they were going to do life-size cutouts and point of purchase posters and all kinds of different materials to promote Coke using Selena's image. As part of that promotion, they had a contest where people could enter to win a trip to one of her concerts and get to meet her backstage and be photographed with her. It was a big promotion. Apparently, the ad agency had used another photographer to take some pictures for this promotion and Selena and her family were not happy with the photos and so they needed a re-shoot. The family, Selena particularly, made it pretty clear to the ad agency they wanted them to use me because they felt comfortable with me. They felt that, like, I could get the kind of pictures that they wanted. They knew I had a way of working with her to make her feel comfortable in front of the camera. It was just one of those relationships where she liked the way I worked with her when I did a photo shoot.

Thompson and Franz: Was this a one-day photo shoot or done over multiple days?

Rendon: It was a one-day shoot and it was kind of interesting because I had already booked a shoot that day in Eagle Pass and they needed me in Corpus Christi the same day. So I had to do my photoshoot in Eagle Pass very early that morning, it was a sunrise shot for another Tejano artist for their CD cover. As soon as I got done there I raced over to Corpus. In the meantime, I had one of my assistants drive to Corpus with all of my studio equipment and set everything up and start getting things ready. By the time I got there [it was] a little before lunchtime. Selena showed up shortly after and we started going through all the wardrobe and what she was going to wear, what outfits; got some direction from the art director from the ad agency. Also, there was a representative there from Coca-Cola. We all put our heads together and decided what we were going to do and what order we were going to do things in. We started shooting and I think we got done in about four hours.

Thompson and Franz: Selena looks like the "all-American" girl in the Coke photos, can you talk about how you tried to capture a certain image of her for Coca-Cola?

Rendon: I think they were actually going for that look. I couldn't say that we honestly talked about it consciously, I know that there was a lot of outfits to choose from. She was always making her own outfits and always very interested in how she looked in different outfits. We didn't want her to look like a glamour shot and we didn't want her in clothing that looked like something she had just stepped off stage. We wanted her to look more "everyday" so that the consumer could relate to her better. That's why in the life size cut-out she's wearing jeans with just a simple white top and a jean vest. We didn't overdo her on the make up. She wasn't as made up as she would be if she were on stage. We started in that gold lame outfit and then we went from there to a different outfit. It kind of got distilled down to where we ended up with that nice jean ensemble that ended up being the standup cutout.

Thompson and Franz: Did she had a stylist with her? I read that she and her sister did a lot of her styling.

Rendon: They did, they did. I don't recall her sister, Suzette, being around too much for this shoot. Mainly it was just me and her and the makeup artist and the art director. At this point they were kind of relying on me more than anything because they had already gone through one shoot. They wanted to let her and me make a lot of those artistic decisions so that she would be happy with the finished product. All through the process we were taking Polaroids and looking at them and dissecting them and trying different things. There are some things we tried that we didn't even put on film because when we looked at the Polaroids it was obvious it wasn't working or something. Selena had very, very good taste. She was always very conscious of her image and the image she was projecting. She always wanted to keep up with what the latest styles and trends were as well as create her own individual style, especially for what she wore on stage.

Thompson and Franz: Do you think she also retained her Tejano image in the photos and that could be communicated to the consumers the agency was trying to reach?

Rendon: I think very much so. At that point she had quite a following. There were just tons of fans that would show up at her events. She attracted a wide audience of Tejanos; young girls wanting to look and dress like her, of course a lot of young men that were attracted to her. She had a very charismatic presence. You would have had to have been around her, especially when she was on stage and performing. By this time she had already been doing this since she was twelve. She had really matured as a performer and as an artist. She had a lot of confidence about herself on stage and really projected such a strong personality. I don't think it gets lost in that "all-American" girl photograph. I think the fans by that point were really with her. I think Tejano music in general had its own look. It was, kind of a Spanish/country western look. She had boots on and in a previous campaign for Coke we photographed her in a black duster with a black cowboy hat that went over real well too. You look at that picture and you kind of think "all-American" girl but to me it's more western.

Thompson and Franz: What are your memories of working with Selena?

Rendon: I remember her being very much the opposite of a diva. You know, she was very humble. She was not stuck up at all. She was very easy to work with, very friendly, very gregarious. She just had a lot of personality. She just came in and lit up the room.

Thompson and Franz: The Coke images and the photo you took that is now at the National Portrait Gallery capture two very different aspects of her as a popular icon. Can you talk about the formal portrait and what you hoped to show in that image?

Rendon: Well the portrait at the NPG was part of a photo session I had done a year prior to the Coca-Cola shoot. It was for a live album that she was recording in Corpus and we went down the day before. The day of the concert, we of course photographed all the live shots of her performing. Then we made arrangements to use the venue the next day to just do some studio shots there on stage and backstage in the Corpus Arena. I think it was called the Corpus Civic Center at the time. She would always give me a lot of different looks when I would be photographing her. I had also brought a stylist with me, Henry Deleon, and he was helping me by talking to her while I was taking pictures and maybe directing her on some poses. We were getting some great shots but we didn't get too many pictures where she wasn't smiling. I wanted a couple of serious pictures and that's how I got that shot. Even though I knew that's not a shot that the record company wanted or you know that they would probably use for anything. I took that picture more for me because that was kind of my image of how I saw her. To me, she was a very serious artist. I have another picture of her in that same outfit where she's got a big, broad smile and she autographed it to me and everything. It's a beautiful picture. They used it for PR for a long time after that. They were just 8x10 glossies for her to give away and sign and stuff. That photo for me is a special photo. I mean, the other photos, were done for Coca-Cola and they had a certain style and look they wanted to go with.

I want to add, that particular photo at the Portrait Gallery, I also made a copy for her and on hers I hand-tinted it and she really loved it. At the same time I presented her with that one I had, a small 8x10 I made of her smiling that I also hand-tinted and that's the one she autographed for me.

Thompson and Franz: Anything else you would like to share?

Rendon: I let my pictures do the talking for me sometimes. And I was very lucky and fortunate that I got to work with her when I did because she'd already been performing in the early '80s. I didn't start to hear about her until about 1988-89. I got to see her perform at the Tejano Music Awards when she was still like 16, 17 years old and I was just amazed at how well she performed and projected. And she wasn't even doing a lot of original material back then she was mostly doing cover material. The whole band sounded so good. They just gelled so well. I had been doing all these CD covers for Capital EMI. They had signed Selena and I kept asking, "When am I gonna get to work with her? When am I gonna get to do a photo shoot with her?" It seemed like they always had somebody else do the photos until finally somebody did the photos for her *Entre A Mi Mundo* album and they rejected them. So I got a chance to shoot her pictures. It seemed like I was always the guy they would turn to when something didn't go right. Then after that second time they were just calling me all the time for whatever was coming up. I'm sure we would have done some great photoshoots if she had lived longer. I have quite an archive of photos.

Even in the short period that I worked with her from about 1992 to the time she passed away; I probably had 100 rolls of different pictures I took of her. I did a lot of photos of her concerts and her in action and backstage and some other events that were sort of promotional events for the record company or the Tejano Music Awards or for Coca-Cola. Meet and greet with the fans, signing autographs; that sort of stuff. I mean, everybody wanted to be photographed with her.

[Transcribed by Amelia Thompson]