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THE STORY OF THE MONTROND TAPES
by Bob Nelson

It was in the Spring of 1959 that the late [Don Firth](#) and I left Seattle and headed south, seeking our fame and fortune. (our fame was fleeting, as was our fortune). As was the plan, we crashed with "Patti" for a few days until we could get our bearings. Patti McLaughlin, Don Firth and I had been a trio in Seattle and she'd headed south a couple of months before us and had landed well in Sausalito, the San Francisco Bay area. Within a few days of our arrival, Patti introduced us to one of the most remarkable persons I have ever met. Her name was Juanita Montrond. She was 48-years old, and the mother of Lola and Benny.

I was a very young 22 and believe me, it was love at first sight. Juanita was the most amazing lady I'd ever met. She was native Mexican, and as she explained to me, she earned her "beans and tortillas" in her early years as a cook and a singer in the border towns "down south." She just exuded what I call the 'Latino passion.' When she greeted you with a hearty "Good Morning" ... you really knew it was going to be a very GOOD MORNING. No doubt about it ... IT WAS GOING TO BE A GOOD MORNING!

Just as she lived her everyday events with passion, it was when she picked up her guitar, closed her eyes and slowly began to strum her guitar, that the hair started to rise on my head and the chicken skin would appear on my arms. TRUE. Her favorite guitar chord was E. All guitarists can play the chord E. Try it right now, and I'll tell you now, without even being able to hear you, you failed to play E as Juanita could. Just a single strum on her old no-name guitar with worn out

strings sent electricity through the room. She held her guitar as a mother does her baby. She caressed it. I can see the expression and smile on her son Benny's face as he reads this, as he'll know exactly what I mean. It was like the power and very energy of her soul came out through her fingertips and entered the guitar. AMAZING !



As Juanita had a larger home than Patti's place, she settled Don Firth and me into her home for a couple of week's of free lodging. It didn't take us long to line up enough gigs in the bay area to afford to move into a cheap apartment in Berkeley. But for the next six months of our California adventure, we maintained our close connection with Juanita and her daughter Lola, and son Benny.

It was when the family trio came together and sang that I received my first learning of what magic music can become. I was 22, and certainly knew my way around my voice and guitar, and could handle any stage I'd encountered, but the music that came from these three family members was stunning. It was like nothing I had ever heard before, and rarely since.

As I listen to these recordings today, they also bring me back to the scene that was happening at Juanita's home. These were the days of "The Beatniks." Everything in the Bay Area was electric: the poets, the street scene, the folk scene at the *Hungry i*, the *Purple Onion*, the *Blind Lemon* in Berkeley, the hoots, on and on. And Juanita was everyone's Grandmother and cared for all of us. Her home became a way stop for many of the best performers that were touring the country. Most Saturdays ran like this: Don and I would sleep late, rise, practice for a couple of hours, go perform our gig that night. Then after the gig, about midnight, we'd head across the Bay Bridge, the Golden Gate Bridge, and go to Juanita's. We'd arrive about one in the morning, at the same time that other traveling musicians would also be arriving. Juanita's home was the place that where many of the traveling folkies of the day usually came to wind down from hectic Saturday night gigs. It was there and then that I found myself in company of, and trading songs with, the likes of Rolf Cohn, Bob Gibson, Jim Brentano and many others. This was all quite heady stuff for this very young Bob Nelson. I often would join Juanita in the kitchen as she started cooking a banquet for everyone. She would cook, we would sing, we would eat, and we'd all go out on the deck over looking Sausalito and greet the Sunday morning sunrise.

These recordings came about because in those days (1959) I lugged a 60 pound WebCor tape recorder with me wherever I went. It was heavy, but look at what I was able to capture! The recording you can now hear on the [University of Washington website](#) happened during a Sunday afternoon rehearsal in September at Juanita's. The family trio had a gig later that evening at a high end supper club in San Francisco. In those days, they could command quite a high performance fee at several supper clubs in the city. They were very popular. I well remember sitting on the floor, holding a small microphone up in the air, as the trio stood above me and rehearsed.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

As you listen to this music, open your ears to the passion that comes through. Listen to the gentle, yet powerful guitar strumming of Juanita, listen to her diction ... don't let a language barrier interfere ... you'll get the soul of the music. When Don and I said goodbye to Juanita, Lola and Benny, they all came out on the deck overhanging the hillside and sang us away with "[Al Morir la Tarde](#)", as we descended the steep hillside to the car. Today this song remains my favorite.

Of course as I [listen to these songs](#) today, my eyes fill, as Don was very much a part of this time and place. He passed away just a few weeks ago.

So, to close this long story of a fifty-four year span, I would encourage all of you not to throw those old tapes away, thinking that no one would be interested in them today. I was contacted by Juanita's grandson just last week. It turns out that I have the ONLY recordings in existence of the trio. What an honor to be able to give them to the family.

[Bob Nelson](#)