

SUZANNE VEGA

"This is a good time to look back and say 'Here's what I've done,'" reflects Suzanne Vega, one of music's most distinctive singers and storytellers. "If you had said in high school that this kid who technically couldn't sing and wasn't outgoing would have a 20-year career as a performer and pop songwriter nobody would've believed you. I'm still very much that teenage girl in my room wondering how my music can connect with people, can I put my vision into words, do other people see what I see? There's still a thrill about that for me."

As she looks to the future, her first U.S.-issued anthology summarizes her past. *RetroSpective: The Best Of Suzanne Vega* (A&M/UME), released (April 22, 2003), features 21 career highlights spanning each of her albums to date, including hits, signature tracks and rarities.

"I've had the freedom to do what I wanted, on my own terms and on my own timetable. I'm very handmade," says Vega. "I see my career as a spiral, revolving around the central point of my guitar and lyrics."

When her "Luka" hit #3 pop in 1987, earning her three Grammy nominations, including for Record of the Year, Vega ushered in a female, acoustic, folk-pop singer-songwriter movement that would include the likes of Tracy Chapman, Shawn Colvin, and Indigo Girls as well as the Lilith Fair phenomenon.

"Others thought what I was doing was a novelty. I wasn't overtly pop at a time when the charts had Madonna, Cyndi Lauper and The Bangles. But I don't look at it as breaking barriers. I just wanted to write poetic, complicated, emotional, urban songs. I made the music I wanted to make and expressed myself to the fullest."

Though born in Santa Monica, CA, after her parents divorced she grew up in Spanish Harlem and the Upper West Side of New York City. Influenced by her computer systems analyst mother and Puerto Rican writer stepfather and the multicultural music they played, from Motown, folk and cool

jazz to Beatles pop and bossa nova, she began playing guitar at age 11 and as a teenager began writing songs.

At the High School for the Performing Arts she studied dance but at Barnard College she was a literature major. A 1979 Lou Reed concert proved an inspiration for her vision of contemporary folk. While supporting herself as a receptionist, she attended the Greenwich Village songwriter's Exchange and played folk festivals and Lower East Side coffeehouses, including The Bottom Line and Folk City. Soon after she graduated from college in 1982, she was the local folk scene's brightest hope.

But record companies saw little prospect of commercial success. Vega's demo tape was rejected by every major record company--twice by A&M. She was finally signed in 1984--by A&M. "Acoustic music had gone from the public scene," she remembers, "but not from people's lives. People will always play it because all you need is a guitar. It's a very independent music and I'm a very independent person. I could just get on a Greyhound to any town, set up and sing."

Her 1985 self-titled debut album, co-produced by former Patti Smith Group guitarist Lenny Kaye, was a surprise hit in the U.K., thanks partly to the single "Marlene On The Wall," and was critically acclaimed in the U.S. The New York Times hailed her as "the strongest, most decisively shaped songwriting personality to come along in years." 1987's *Solitude Standing*, again co-produced by Kaye, elevated her to star status. The album peaked at #11 (#1 U.K.) and went platinum. Its "Luka," written from the perspective of an abused boy (with Colvin on backing vocals), was a most surprising hit. "It's a story about a lot of pain and it still moves me," says Vega. "I still get mail about it, people telling me stories of abuse. It's not a hit about love or something benign so that makes it a little difficult to play at times but it has so much meaning for so many people. If I'm only remembered for that song then that's a good thing."

The Vega co-produced follow-up album, 1990's *Days Of Open Hand*, won a Best Album Package Grammy for co-designer Vega. The album also featured a string arrangement by minimalist composer Philip Glass. Years earlier she had penned lyrics for his song cycle "Songs From Liquid Days."

But the album's hit single was even more surprising than "Luka," particularly because of how it happened. Her a cappella "Tom's Diner" was remixed by U.K. electronic dance duo DNA and bootlegged as "Oh Suzanne." Vega then permitted the single's official release under its original title and the track reached #5 pop and went gold. 1991's various artists compilation (Tom's Album) brought together the remix and other unsolicited versions of the song.

Continuing to battle preconceptions, she teamed with producer Mitchell Froom (Elvis Costello, Crowded House) for 1992's 99.9F. The album's sound instigated descriptions such as "industrial folk" and "technofolk." Certified gold, 99.9F won a New York Music Award as Best Rock Album. Says Vega: "It was a chance to stretch out. The music was edgy but still humanly connected." Vega and Froom also connected; they married and daughter Ruby was born in 1994.

In 1996, Vega returned with the similarly audacious *Nine Objects Of Desire*, again helmed by Froom (two years later the pair separated). The import-only *Tried And True: The Best Of Suzanne Vega* was issued in 1998, as was "Woman On The Tier (I'll See You Through)" on the *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack. Over the years, she has also been heard on the soundtracks to *Pretty In Pink* ("Left Of Center" with Joe Jackson) and *The Truth About Cats & Dogs*, and contributed to such diverse projects as the Disney compilation *Stay Awake*, Grateful Dead tribute *Deadicated*, Leonard Cohen tribute *Tower Of Song*, and *Pavarotti & Friends*.

"I've left no stone unturned," she says. "This idea that I'm a fragile waif falls by the wayside when anyone listens to the range of subject matter and style. There is soft and hard, sexy and abrasive, traditional and experimental. My voice is very simple and because of that it fits into different atmospheres, can take on what people might not expect."

In 1999, *The Passionate Eye: The Collected Writings Of Suzanne Vega*, a volume of poems, lyrics, essays, journalistic pieces and more was published by Spike/Avon Books. In 2001, she returned to the studio and to her acoustic roots for her first new album in five years, the very well-received *Songs In Red And Gray*.

"It's an interesting time," says Vega of where she is today. "I have a bunch of songs percolating. Maybe it's a chance to reinvent myself." That future begins in April when Vega hosts the public radio series "American Mavericks," 13 hour-long programs featuring the histories and performances of iconoclastic, tradition-breaking classical composers of the 20th century.

Recently, Vega was invited to speak to a very different audience--a kindergarten class. When she arrived, the kids caught her off-guard by singing the first verse of "Solitude Standing." Even as she continues to record and tour, the best of Suzanne Vega, surely an American maverick herself, will no doubt be rediscovered by many more generations to come.

4/03