



# SUZANNE VEGA

ON pop radio today, where the songs are often nearly interchangeable, the music of an artist with an off-center approach stands out. But Suzanne Vega never set out to be a big star with heavy airplay. "Having a hit wasn't something I was aiming for all my life," she told me when I interviewed her last summer during a world tour following the release of her second A&M album, "Solitude Standing."

Vega's tour, ending next month, will take her to Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Europe as well as the U.S. and Canada. Meanwhile, the hit single from "Solitude," *Luka*, rides high on the charts and is often featured in broadcast music blocks along with *Left of Center*, which

BY ELIZABETH COSTELLO

she contributed to the soundtrack of last year's popular movie *Pretty in Pink*, and *Marlene on the Wall*, a hit from her 1985 debut album, "Suzanne Vega."

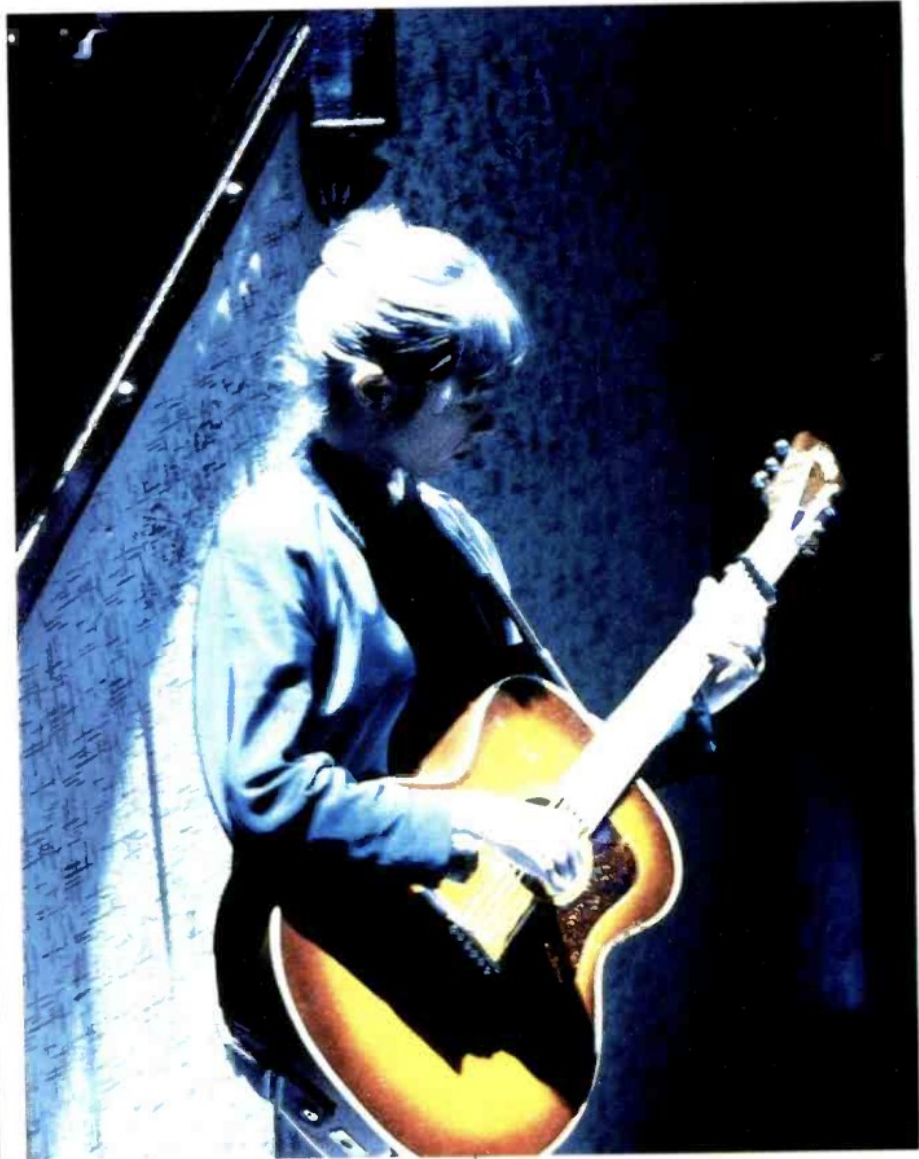
Critic Steve Simels hailed Vega's "spectacular debut" in these pages, calling her "a younger, cooler Joni Mitchell for the Eighties," and she received a STEREO REVIEW Record of the Year Award a few months later. With two internationally successful albums on a major label, four videos on MTV, and a couple of hit singles, the twenty-eight-year-old Vega has come a long way from being "the freshest and clearest new voice on the New York folk music scene," as the *New York Times* described her in 1984. She seems a little taken aback by her success—"It's surprising when I'm recognized in airports," she said.

**V**EGA recalls that her career took off very casually. The turning point came in 1983 when she met Ron Fierstein and Steve Addabbo, who became her managers and advised her to get a record deal. "At that point I was thinking more like Rounder or Flying Fish," she said. But Fierstein and Addabbo went after the major labels anyway.

"Steve took a tape and worked it around, and I think he had the impression that there were some people who were interested, but they were afraid of it because it was a folk album. Then I started to get some good reviews, and we ended up with A&M. I thought, well, if we can go for it, why not?"

Vega said she did not see herself as fitting the mold of pop stardom. "I wasn't someone like Madonna, who calculatedly went after being a big star. She's cheerful, she's bright, she's energetic, she shows a lot of skin in her videos. I felt like I was doing the exact opposite thing." She did admit, however, that doing *Left of Center* for *Pretty in Pink* was something of a calculated move toward commercial success. "And it went nowhere on the charts," she said. "I figured, 'Well, I've done my one pop tune, now I'll go back to doing what I like.'"

She doesn't expect pressure from her managers or A&M to keep putting out Top 10 hits. "I get very stubborn under pressure like that, and my record company was not



PHOTOS BY HARRIS SAVIDES

really expecting Top 10 hits from me. They turned me down twice before they signed me. They knew what they were getting. And A&M has a reputation for really sticking by people, like Joan Armatrading, who has had twelve or thirteen albums without a Top 10 hit."

Having a Top 10 record like *Luka* can even be a nuisance, Vega said. "It's meant that I've spent more time promoting and talking about what I do and I spend less time doing it."

Despite all that has already happened in her career and all the public exposure, Vega doesn't think she has changed very much. "I feel there's a part of me that's extremely private no matter how many interviews I do. I don't feel like I've given myself away or that I'm overexposed." And, since she rarely writes about herself, her songs don't reveal that private side. She does consider

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them personal, however. "I think I write about subjects that mean a lot to people," she said.

Vega's lyrics are very contemporary, often about the darker side of everyday life. They are shadowy, solitary, and image provoking, which may be why Philip Glass chose her to provide lyrics for two tracks on "Songs of Liquid Days."

Reviewing "Solitude Standing" here in August's "Best Recordings of the Month," Mark Peel described Vega's lyrics as "real poetry, not just street poetry or pop-music poetry." *Cracking*, from her first album, is about a woman walking in a park in the dead of winter who is emotionally falling apart as the ice cracks under her feet. In *Ironbound/Fancy Poultry* from "Solitude Standing," she describes a Portuguese woman on her way to a poultry market who is passing a school yard: "Kids will grow like weeds on a fence/She says they look for the light/They try to make sense/They come up through the cracks/Like grass on the tracks. . . ."

Her songs seem to work in the same way she does, Vega said. "Even with myself it's hard to tell what I'm feeling sometimes. It's more like I have to deduce it. For example, if I'm hungry I think to myself, 'Oh, my stomach is growling, I'm feeling sort of lightheaded, therefore I must be hungry.' It's not like, 'Give me that hamburger.' It's an assessment of facts."

Although Vega has taken vocal lessons, her voice has a direct, untrained quality. "I've always disliked a lot of vibrato," she said, "so I've always kept it out of my voice. And the people whose voices I really love tend to be clear and straight, like Astrud Gilberto, Lou Reed, or Lotte Lenya. All of those have pure voices that sort of just spring out of their mouths—almost like speaking voices."

A straightforward singing style makes the characters in her songs more believable, she feels. In *Luka*, for instance, the protagonist is an abused boy. "I can sing *Luka* convincingly," she said, "because I don't sound like a twenty-eight-year-old woman. I sound like something else, something pure."

Vega puts great emphasis on making her music work with her lyrics

to shape the mood of her songs and give them emotional weight. Meaning is important to her. The music in *Luka* comes across as very spirited, almost triumphant. "I really did not want it to be about a boy sitting on the stoop feeling sorry for himself," Vega said. "What I tried to do was take a tone that was matter of fact. So I used major chords, and when I had the band play it, I didn't want them to sort of wimp out. I wanted them to play really hard."

The music behind *Luka* and a lot of the other songs in her second album is more rock oriented than most of her first album, in which an acoustic guitar served as the musical base and studio musicians played back-up. Vega now works with her own full-time band, and its members helped write some of the music in "Solitude Standing." Steve Addabbo said that although the focus is still on Vega, the arrangements rely on the band a little more, and as a result the songs in the second album have a "stronger feel to them" than the ones in the first.

Vega said that her songwriting has changed as well. "I think it is becoming more streamlined, more abstract, and more condensed. And I think it's becoming more melodic. I'm more likely to change a melody now, whereas before I would just take whatever came out naturally."

Working with a band, Vega said, relieves some of the pressure she previously felt trying to do everything. "Instead of covering the rhythm and the bass and everything myself, I can just say, 'Look, I'm having trouble with this bridge. Why don't you guys just fool around with it and see what you can come up with?' But I'm still the editor of the piece. I still have to decide whether I like it or whether it says what I want it to say."

After Vega finishes up her tour in December, she plans to start working on a third album. "I'd like to keep mixing elements and mixing different styles. To begin the last album *a cappella* with *Tom's Diner* was a lot of fun for me, and I'd like to keep on that kind of a trend."

However she mixes elements and styles on her next album, though, we can be pretty sure it will say what Suzanne Vega wants it to say. "If they want to play me on the radio, I'll be happy for that," she said. "But I'm not going to change my style to suit the format." □

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