



Sans Souci, Montreal, June 1953. Alejandro Granda, unknown man, Cholita, Hernán

April 1953 found Yma making a long overdue return trip to her Peru. While visiting with her family, she gave a concert in the ruins of Machu Picchu. An unusual event, it was one of the few times that Yma sang without a microphone. Generally, Yma was terrified of not having that instrument with her to aid in her subtle colorations. For the Machu Picchu concert, Yma offered a number of selections from the *Legend of the Sun Virgin* album, performing them for a Peruvian audience who enjoyed the fantasy of her music. Some of the songs, such as “Zana,” “Montana” and “Kuyaway” (Inca Love Song), were recognizable to the audience because the melodies had their roots in Peruvian folk repertoire, though altered with differing titles and slick musical presentation. Other selections, such as “Lament,” “Kon Tiki,” “Panarima” and “Suray Surita” were admired for Yma’s lyrical or bravura singing rather than for authenticity. This concert would appear to have been the only time Yma performed “Panarima” (from *Legend of the Sun Virgin*) live—unless, as in fact I suspect, it was sung in concerts under a different title.

Immediately following the Machu Picchu concert the troupe traveled to Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Mexico, giving performances to stunned listeners. Audiences in Buenos Aires were especially impressed. They had not had the opportunity to hear Yma perform since 1943, a decade earlier, and much had obviously happened to Yma and her music since then.

By the end of May 1953, the group was performing in Montreal’s swank nightclub, Sans-Souci, where Yma broke all attendance records previously set by the French chanteuse, Edith Piaf. Yma’s contract stipulated two shows nightly, at 9:30 and midnight. Also taking part in the show was the 55 year-old Alejandro Granda, who played drums and sang a song written by Moisés. During the May–June performances at the Sans-Souci, Yma reputedly had her own radio show in Montreal. Live, it boasted a narrator who supplied pertinent data on Incan history while Yma warbled her way through her most famous numbers. For the radio programs, she had the support of a full symphony orchestra.

Near the end of Yma’s appearances (which were extended) *The Montreal Gazette* noted “Seldom has a performer had the impact on Montreal audiences that Miss Sumac

has had. . . . She gives her audiences ample opportunity to judge her voice by giving generously of her talent on each show. Particularly outstanding is one number she does called Birds. In it she does abstractions of various bird and animal sounds, combining them all in an off-beat, gentle rhythm that is most effective." H. W. described Yma's singing as going from "a low whisper, through a husky, throaty tone to a high note that is almost felt rather than heard."

By mid-June, Yma and Moisés had returned to New York City to prepare for one of their most important appearances yet, their New York concert debut. This was a Latin American Fiesta that was to be given at the Lewisohn Stadium on the 25th of June. The first half of the program featured Leonard Bernstein conducting the Stadium Symphony in selections by Copland, Guarnier, and Villa-Lobos. This last, the Villa-Lobos "Concerto for Piano and Orchestra #4," was being given its New York Premiere and featured the brilliant Brazilian pianist, Bernardo Segall, to whom the concerto had been dedicated on its composition in 1952.

Yma and her group, Moisés, Cholita, Hernán, and David Revera, had the second half of the program. Yma and Moisés offered to the New York audience a typical Sumacian program of orchestral numbers, solo dances by Cholita and at least eight numbers by Yma, all conducted by David Mendoza. Yma's program included:

Kon Tiki (Wiracocha)—Suite for Orchestra in three movements

Ataipura (High Andes)—Yma

Montana Mama (Lullaby)—Yma

Tumpa! (Earthquake!)—Yma

encore: Vocalise on Claire de Lune by Claude Debussy—Yma (N.Y. Premiere)

Pitu-Serrania—Orchestra

Criollo Waltz—Orchestra

Tuta Wayra-(Chant of the Wind)—Orchestra

Huayno (National Dance of Peru)—solo dance by Cholita

Pachamama (Mother Earth)—solo dance by Cholita

encore: Puccini: "O mio babbino caro" (from Gianni Schicchi)—Yma

Chuncho—Birds—Yma

Taita Inty—Hymn to the Sun—Yma

Cholo Traicionero—Song of Youth—Yma

Thirteen thousand people came to hear the Peruvian singer exhibit her exotic material and reviewers made special note that everyone present certainly received their money's worth. Francis D. Perkins of the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote: "Her voice is hard to label; it runs from what seemed to be a tenor register to the highest soprano altitudes, and has an impressive array of colors and timbres at different points . . . some of the lower notes had a darkly, husky quality which was well suited to the kind of music for which they were implied; the quality of some of the highest notes seemed almost instrumental; at one point, a steadily sustained crescendo told of notable dynamic control in expressively convincing singing . . . The instrumental works . . . were appealing, but Mr. Vivanco's music at times combined them with a rather cosmopolitan atmosphere; the indigenous (flavor) was strongest in the guitar-accompanied songs."

Robert Bagar, writing for the *New York Post*, was very enthusiastic: "In Part II the sensational (can't help using that word) Yma Sumac, a beautiful Peruvian with an astounding voice, proved the star of the occasion. Miss Sumac, in fact, has several voices, one tacked on to the other from deep and rich contralto to light soprano. In any of these areas she does the most remarkable things—coloratura work, on pitch gargling, lip flutterings, trills of all kinds. She can leap from low to high, switch back halfway in one timbre and rise again in another. She can toss out notes thunderous enough to sound like

broadsides . . . What she does is artistic, it has purpose, the purpose of interpreting the folk songs of the Andes . . . Certainly hers is a most exotic style of singing. It must be judged by standards of its own . . .”

Writing for the *New York Post* on June 26th, Harriet Johnson remarked that the “exotic Ima Sumac . . . not only sang but provided the most sultry growl . . . ever to tax the curiosity of my ear.” Celebrating the singer’s prodigious virtuosity, Ms. Johnson emphasized that Yma’s throat “can turn from vocal depths to heights with the dexterity of a quick-change artist” and that she was “best throughout the evening in music that seemed closest to her ancient heritage. The more contemporary she became the less effective she was. Puccini’s ‘Oh mio babbino caro’ gave the impression she had better stay away from opera. Her loveliest notes are those startling, bird-like high tones which emerge from the vocal stratosphere with more ease and beauty than what comes forth from normally easier registers . . . In addition to music there were colored lights for different moods, and a languorous if non-musical moon, serenaded by Miss Sumac in Debussy’s ‘Claire de Lune’ sung as a vocalise. The . . . drummers were vividly costumed to match their vividly painted tools of expression. They grunted too while they drummed but not so effectively as Miss Sumac during her singing.”

Ms. Johnson’s assessment of the evening’s entertainment was that the Latin American Fiesta “may have splashed more in flamboyancy than historic authenticity but the end result was an intriguing variety show which captured the eye if it didn’t always intoxicate the ear.” Moisés, introduced to the audience by Yma as “a great composer,” was found to be a competent accompanist on the guitar, and Cholita “a fascinating dancer . . . who whirled her plentiful head of hair as well as the rest of her pliant body.”

Yma’s singing, still new to many New Yorkers, was not to everyone’s taste. Douglas Watt, writing for the *New York Daily News* (6/26/53) did not enjoy it at all. “The Peruvian pouter pigeon with a four octave range drew 13,000 bird fanciers to Lewisohn Stadium last night to listen to her exercise her deep guttural tones, her high thin ones and all those in between . . . Her voice, like a human theremin, carried clear over to the bleachers to catch up with me halfway down the 136th St. hill to Broadway. It sounded as if it were right in my ear, where I didn’t want it.”

Mr. Watt conceded that Yma was “strikingly gowned in white and gold” for her first segment, and for her second appeared in “a bluish, billowing affair” but found her musical selections inane. “For an encore she did a piano piece, ‘Claire de Lune’ by Debussy, rearranged for orchestra and inhuman voice. She made it sound something like ‘Carry Me Back to Old Virginny’. Nobody else can do that.” But highest on his list of dislikes was the famous “Chuncho!,” which he described as “a piece about birds, all sorts of birds. It was for the birds all right. It sounded as though she were wringing their necks.”

He also did not care for Cholita’s brand of dancing. “Pretty and small, like Miss Sumac, Cholita turned out to be a kind of tassel dancer. First she did the National Dance of the Peruvian People, which it developed, is a thing in which you Lindy while swinging a rope with a tassel on the end. Next she presented ‘The whirling drama of Mother Earth’, this time using her hair for a tassel and swinging her head as if it were a mop.”

Wrapping up his review Mr. Watt concluded with amusing insight. “It’s probably a nice accomplishment, Miss Sumac’s, but I’m still glad I’m not Vivanco. Imagine coming home late some night and getting told off in all those voices!”

The most discerning comments, however, came from J.B. of the *New York Times*: “Advance publicity had claimed for Miss Sumac’s voice a range of five octaves. Her voice is a remarkable instrument, but not as remarkable as that. The range she displayed last evening, and which probably approximated the useable limits of her voice, descended below Middle C and passed the high C two octaves above. This is of course an unusual vocal