

“Especially For You” 1996–2007

A key word of the career of Yma Sumac is “longevity”. On March 5, 1996 a division of Capitol Records called The Right Stuff re-released all six of Yma’s Capitol recordings on CD with original album art and liner notes and budget priced (about \$12.00 a disc). By late March there was also a super-budget-priced sampler that featured one track from each album. The impetus for these new re-releases was the fact that Capitol had finally settled the lawsuit Yma brought against them for unpaid royalties. Thanks to the hard work and persistence of Alan Eichler, Yma was now getting accurate royalties for her recordings, including retroactive ones that dated years back. The suit took six years to work itself out.

Not surprisingly, a new generation of Capitol employees had discovered the mysterious allure of Yma. Tying it in with the then burgeoning return and popularity of “lounge music,” they released the CDs with much fanfare. Part of this fanfare included a celebrity signing which Capitol arranged for Yma at Tower Records in Los Angeles. Yma’s signing broke all records at that Tower for the biggest turnout and longest lines of people. Thousands lined up for hours to see and have Yma sign their disks.

Many of them were amazed to find out that the singer who originally recorded *Voice of the Xtabay* some 46 years earlier was still singing. She stayed all day to sign. Celebrating Capitol’s decision to re-release the Sumac legacy, a number of West Coast newspapers and magazines printed articles that helped introduce Yma to an entirely new audience.

While praising the re-release of Yma’s disks, Curtis Ross of the *Tampa Tribune* described the impact of the initial, 1950, release of *Voice of the Xtabay* with bemusement and irony: “It stunned and titillated listeners with its pagan passion. It was the first musical flowering of postwar America’s infatuation with all things ‘exotic’ and ‘Voice of the Xtabay’ was de rigueur for suburban stereos as faux-African art deco pieces were for the walls and coffee tables. These passions were, of course, tempered for the benefit of tender, civilized ears. For every native rhythm and jungle grunt in the grooves, there was a tonic of silky strings, plucked harps and Sumac’s airy soprano. This was the Sumac/Vivanco team’s master stroke. They made the exotic accessible. Serving the foreign on a bed of the familiar gave the music appeal beyond the anthropological. And Sumac’s regal bearing gave the Incan princess affair an air of authenticity.” Ross summarized Yma’s newfound appeal by noting: “The beauty of Yma’s re-emergence is its broad appeal. The world’s music crowd can savor Sumac’s sound-stage interpretations of Peruvian melodies. New-agers can bask in the drowsy mist of her more ethereal material. And the lounge movement should recognize her as its high priestess. What could better complement a space-age bachelor pad more than a dose of Sumac’s tribalisms? And now a whole new generation gets its chance to bow before the Sun Virgin.” (Friday, May 3, 1996)

Although most writers reiterated the usual Capitol fantasy biography created over forty years earlier, occasionally an interview was intertwined. And within those interviews one occasionally got a glimpse of “the real Yma.” In an article called “Bird of Par-

adise,” Yma was asked about her reputation for being difficult. “I never let people get fresh with me. I’m not a cheap woman. They know Yma, they say she has two personalities. If you have more than two personalities, you are sick. My mother was very strict, and I am like my mother. She had one terrible look (does the stern look) then she was tender. Once I did that look to my son when he did something bad. He said, ‘Mommy, I prefer that you spank me because when you get mad, your eyes become all green and your whites become with blood and then your veins are swollen. You scare me!’” (*LA Weekly*, May 10–16, 1996)

Libby Molyneaux, in the *LA Weekly* issue quoted from above, found it hard to believe that Yma was once branded as haughty and temperamental “She’s warm and vibrant, and though her favorite subject may be ‘Yma,’ not only is she happy to talk about her extraordinary life and even give out skin-care tips (spend several weeks in the Andean heights of Machu Picchu), she doesn’t bristle when that darned Amy Camus subject is brought up.” (ibid.)

New and old readers alike learned that when Yma was not working she liked to embroider, read philosophy and psychology, and that her favorite singers were Doris Day and Neil Diamond. When asked when she first began singing she told an interesting story that had an obvious kernel of truth. “I first noticed my voice when I was about 9. My voice was very thin. . . . My inspiration was the nature. The farms in the north are very beautiful. It’s cold, but a dry cold, and you hear sounds from the big mountain covered by forest. In the mountains you have very strange sounds that inspire you. I heard the birds, all kinds of birds. I remember in the afternoon, there were two birds singing ready to go to sleep. One sang to the other one; to me is sounded like ‘Quien? Quien?’ meaning ‘Who? Who?’ The other answered, ‘Yo. Yo.’ meaning ‘I. I’. I said ‘I wish to sing like that.’” (ibid.)

“Mister Lucky,” on his Internet review page (www.mrlucky.com) was pleased with The Right Stuff’s releases: “(They have) done a wonderful thing in releasing five great Capitol titles. There are no bonus tracks or additional liner notes but the albums are complete and the sound is fine. Who could ask for more?”

“Yma Sumac is not for everyone but if you like her, you’ll really want to get all five volumes on The Right Stuff. If you’re dubious, there’s a sampler CD available. The next release to watch out for is her early ’70s title with Les Baxter, *Miracles* . . . it’s beyond description except to say that it tries to cash in on the acid rock trend and Yma somehow manages to sound musical.”

More succinctly, The Loud Bassoon Record Guide on the World Wide Web (www.poly-holiday.com) proclaimed: “The Right Stuff’s 1996 reissue series of five Yma Sumac albums remains one of the best things to come out of the lounge music craze of the mid-90s.”

Coinciding with the resurgence of interest in her work by record buyers, Yma received an eloquent tribute from the Award-winning French author and poet, Albert Russo. That year he published a series of poems in a book called *Painting the Tower of Babel*. One of the poems is called “Peruvian Goddess.”

Born in Zaire, Russo is extremely versatile, writing fiction, poetry and essays in English and French. He is fluent in Spanish, Italian and German and has a working knowledge of Swahili, Portuguese and Dutch. Residing in Paris, he is a member of the jury of the Prix Europe as well as the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Racial, cultural and social conflict, form the substance of much of his work. James Baldwin has said of Russo: “I like your writing . . . it has a very gentle surface and a savage undertow. You’re a dangerous man.”

Among the poems to be found in *Painting the Tower of Babel* is this remarkable paean to Yma, given here in its entirety by the kind permission of the poet:

THE PERUVIAN GODDESS

when he replays the cassette
 and hears his own voice
 he winces
 feeling the blood rush to his temple
 slightly high-pitched
 a bit tremulous
 with a touch of hysteria
 it's not what others would think
 rather the way he perceives himself
 it's not either that he wishes
 he were someone else
 no, it is at once simple
 and terribly ambitious
 like the swish of grass blades
 in a simmering July afternoon
 where he can't tell whether
 it is a sound at all
 or the foreshadowing of danger
 the senses are so exacerbated
 and suddenly, to his delight
 he re-enacts a scene
 that took place decades ago
 bending over his parent's gramophone
 a little boy sits mesmerized
 the voice coming out
 of the scratched 78 rpm record
 is that of Yma Sumac
 if there is a creator
 then she must be a goddess
 with her notes scaling the rainbow
 from the whispers of genesis
 to the explosions of the heart
 he can't put a face to this voice
 in spite of the cover photograph
 even consciously blurs its features
 the jungle spills out of those grooves
 drawing him into its magic
 and the scratch seems to be
 that which binds him to the miracle
 so frail and yet so timeless

With the emergence of the World Wide Web as an important communication tool Yma Sumac was brought into the 21st Century.

In 1994 Don Pierson, a devoted Sumac fan, opened the first Yma Sumac web page: (www.sunvirgin.com). It soon became the main meeting place for all Sumacians. Since that time a number of other Sumac fan sites have sprung up as well.

On May 29, 1996, with the blessings of Alan Eichler, who was representing Yma at the time, it became the *Official Authorized Yma Sumac Homepage*. While refining the page over the years, Don came in contact with Sara Cloudwalker (aka Sara Cunningham