

SUZANNE VEGA

On **Beauty & Crime**, Suzanne Vega's Blue Note Records debut, the Manhattan native uses New York City as the backdrop for a collection of eleven new songs that juxtapose acoustic guitar-driven melodies with coolly synthesized beats; intensely personal lyrics with compelling, short story-like narratives; images of today's scarred cityscape with memories of Vega's old Upper West Side 'hood and Lower East Side haunts. The past commingles with the present, the public with the private, familiar sounds with the utterly new, just like the city itself. Making her first new studio album in six years, Vega says, "I feel like I really stretched my limits. I pushed myself out of my comfort zone--to sing in keys I wouldn't have sung in before, to work with different textures, to be unafraid of doing what ever sounded good to me. I wanted to make a modern classic."

For fans that have grown up with her, *Beauty & Crime* is a revealing look into Vega's continual evolution as songwriter and recording artist. For newcomers, it affords an opportunity to discover a unique voice that has, much like fellow die-hard New Yorker Lou Reed's, been shaped by keenly observing urban life, glancing down the side streets and peering into the shadows, empathizing with the outsiders and dreamers, the helpless and the hopeful. Reed isn't a far-fetched comparison: Vega, a fan, has said she'd been listening to his *Berlin* the day she wrote "Luka," the economically arranged, emotionally devastating story of domestic abuse from her second album, *Solitude Standing*, which became a surprise worldwide hit in 1987.

In Vega's new material, New York City emerges on its own as subject and setting. As she explains, "My last album [*Songs in Red and Gray*] came out two weeks after September 11 th . That particular album was really personal and it felt really weird to be talking about all these personal songs at a time that wasn't like any other in New York... I spent a lot of time thinking about things in the last six years, being in New York with my daughter, walking around. It seemed natural to write a bunch of songs that were about New York or little stories that had New York as a character."

The songs that open and close *Beauty & Crime*, as well as "Ludlow Street" and "Angel's Doorway," are among the most personal for Vega, triggered in part by remembrances of her brother Tim, who passed away in early 2002. It was at Tim's memorial that Vega connected with his friend, legendary graffiti artist Zephyr. Like Vega, Zephyr had hung out on the Upper West Side's West End Avenue in the seventies, when displaced teenagers turned the street into "the youth mall of America." "Zephyr & I" has a lean, upbeat, almost Velvet Underground-style rock arrangement, softened with layers of vocal harmonies by KT Tunstall. "Ludlow Street" is a darker, more contemplative tune, featuring strings and synths, about the layers of time that one can sense in a single spot. Ludlow Street, on the Lower East Side, is where Vega had gone to memorable parties when she was on the way up in the local music scene and where she would later return, under very different circumstances, to collect her brother for rehab.

In "Angel's Doorway" Vega writes about her cousin's husband, a cop named Angel Ruiz, who was stationed down at ground zero right after 9/11. The idea of the song came from

a dinner conversation. "Anniversary," which concludes *Beauty & Crime*, is an understated evocation of that time in the fall of 2002, when New Yorkers first commemorated the Twin Towers tragedy and when Vega recalled her brother's recent passing. It's more inspiration than elegy, though: "Make time for all your possibilities," Vega sings at the end, in that beautiful, hushed voice. "They live on every street."

On "New York is A Woman," she sees those possibilities through the eyes of a man she met overseas, who recounted to her his first amazed visit to the city: "I know a lot of people feel the same way as he did, they're knocked out flat by the seediness of it, the bigness of it, the beauty and the glamour and how gritty it can be." On "Edith Wharton's Figurines," she considers the urban heroines of the classic New York author's time--their intelligence and artifice, their vanity and fear--and contrasts them with the life of novelist Olivia Goldsmith (*The First Wives Club*), who died suddenly after a routine plastic surgery procedure. Vega elaborates, "Goldsmith had written a style book about using your natural beauty. I really liked it and her death made me sad. It made me think that the world hasn't really changed that much since Wharton's time. We do so much for beauty that we can't really attain."

She includes a gentle, elegantly arranged song capturing an image of her daughter at age nine ("As You Are Now"), a meditation on the impossible/irresistible relationship between Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner ("Frank & Ava") and a turbulent, string-driven number ("Bound") about the fated reunion with the man who would become her second husband, a street poet turned civil rights lawyer. He re-entered her life more than two decades after he had originally asked her to marry him: "He was someone who had impacted the flow of my life, and I had thought about him often. There had been songs about him on other albums, and a few songs that didn't make it onto any album, so he was somebody who had lingered in my life in various ways. He came to New York once he realized I wasn't seeing anybody. I had just broken off a relationship. He asked if I wanted to go ice skating and within two weeks he asked me to marry him again, and this time I said yes. It took 23 years to get from 'I'll think about it' to saying yes. And that song is about that moment."

Vega began working on *Beauty & Crime* at home, with guitar and Garageband, but soon enlisted the help of engineer Britt Myers to help with her work on the computer. They moved to his studio, exchanged ideas and developed tracks before British musician-producer Jimmy Hogarth (Sia, Corinne Bailey Rae, KT Tunstall) came on board and Vega resumed work at larger studios in New York and London. Hogarth, whose work with Sia particularly impressed Vega, "had a sure sense of instinct. He was so young that he was open to different ways of making a record, he didn't have a formula. I liked that he recorded in analog then fed it into the digital machine. The album has the warmth of analog but the technology of the digital world." Among the players joining Vega and members of her touring band are guitarists Gerry Leonard (David Bowie, Rufus Wainwright) and Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth (those are his ringing guitar lines on "Angel's Doorway"); Scottish singer-songwriter KT Tunstall contributed background vocals and vocal arrangements. Longtime collaborator Tchad Blake mixed the album.

"I had a clear image in my mind of what I wanted," Vega admits. "I wanted something that did have a slight nostalgic feeling, which you get at the beginning of 'New York is a Woman' with the clarinet and saxophone, a certain horn sound. But I didn't want to lose all the textures and rhythms that are going on today, all the effects and things that you could do. I wanted to take bits and pieces and put them together in a collage kind of way, which is what feels modern to me right now."

Vega has always been an adventurous artist, stretching the boundaries of the singer-songwriter format. When British producers DNA famously remixed her "Tom's Diner," giving the originally a cappella tune an ongoing life as a sought-after sample by many dance music and hip hop artists, they were simply responding to something Vega herself had done: "They felt the rhythm was already in the song and they just added to it. When I approved it, I felt that they'd expressed a part of my life that I was not able to do for myself at the time." Similarly, German programmer Karlheinz Brandenburg, the key developer of the MP3, found that Vega's voice was the perfect template when he began to work on the audio compression that would revolutionize music distribution, earning her the nickname "The Mother of the MP3." Last year Vega herself ventured into the internet world by becoming the first major recording artist to perform live in avatar form within the virtual world Second Life.

As fascinating as the New Yorkers she has been inspired by, Vega herself is full of stories and surprises: the everyday revelations, the grabbed-on-the-run wisdom, the strange, random, miraculous stuff that make up a singular career - or maybe just another life in the big city.

MARC COHN

Marc Cohn JOIN THE PARADE

In the years that preceded the release of his new Decca album *Join the Parade*, Marc Cohn passed through several life-changing events. These events are what enabled him to reconnect with his songwriting muse, and they are in large part, what make *Join the Parade* an artistic, insightful and soulful statement.

Despite his time away from the recording studio, the acclaimed singer/songwriter, winner of the 1991 Grammy Award for Best New Artist, has continued to perform live and his audiences have remained steadfast. He endured the pain of divorce, but in 2002 he married news anchor Elizabeth Vargas. He struggled with writer's block and sought to break through it with a month-long tour in the summer of 2005. The gigs went great until the night of August 7, 2005. That's when Marc Cohn was shot in the head during a random attempted carjacking after a concert in Denver.

Even though the bullet was lodged near his left temple, Marc never lost consciousness and walked out of the hospital the next day. Three weeks later, while recovering at home in New York from post-traumatic stress disorder, Cohn watched the city of New Orleans destroyed by flooding in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"I got home a couple of days after being shot," said Cohn. "And then Hurricane Katrina hit a few weeks later. I'm in the middle of my own crisis, and now I'm watching all these haunting images on television of thousands of people suffering through a far more horrific event. And then something I never could have predicted happened. It was like my song writing receiver got flipped into the on position. Everywhere I turned, in conversations I overheard, even in get well emails I was receiving, song ideas started coming. For several weeks, I'd be working on 2-3 songs simultaneously. And these songs weren't polite about their sudden presence either; they insisted on being written."

Out of all this, and all that came before, comes *Join the Parade*, a recording that is being called Marc's most accomplished and compelling album to date. Cohn has translated some of his most complex and private emotions into lyrical song-poetry and then set those words to music of remarkable depth, toughness, and complexity. In doing so, Marc has created a work that is certain to touch a universal chord of memory and feeling.

The music leads us on: Indeed, its deep grooves, layered textures, and soulful singing make this journey a sensual pleasure. Marc and album co-producer Charlie Sexton (Bob Dylan, Lucinda Williams) have enlisted an exceptional supporting cast that includes members of Cohn's road band (guitarist Shane Fontayne, drummer Jay Bellerose), top session players (drummers Jim Keltner and Charley Drayton, guitarist Danny Kortchmar), and such bold-face "name" guests as Tom Petty keyboard ace Benmont Tench and vocalists Shelby Lynne, N'Dea Davenport, and the Holmes

Brothers. *Join the Parade* was recorded at studios in Los Angeles, Austin, and New York with chief engineer Jim Scott, and was mixed by Joe Blaney in New York.

"Before heading into the studio, Charlie Sexton and I spent time discussing two things," Cohn recalls. "The first was making a wish list of the players we thought were best suited for each song. The second was my desire not to make a traditional singer/songwriter album in the sense that I didn't need whatever I was playing or singing to be at the center of every track all the time."

"Dance Back From the Grave," a song whose lyric was inspired by Pulitzer-prize winning author Rick Bragg's article on post-Katrina New Orleans, features Cohn's spoken narrative over a track that evokes not only the Crescent City, but John Lee Hooker as well. "Listening to Levon," the album's opener, with its thumping drums, plangent mandolin and haunting melody is not only strongly reminiscent of the music of The Band, but is in part, an homage to one of that group's great singers, Levon Helm. "If I Were an Angel," is a divorce song set to a Hi Records groove. "Let Me Be your Witness," is a beautiful gospel ballad and a song that Cohn describes as "the centerpiece of the record."

As a whole, *Join The Parade* is a poignant, spiritual and moving piece of work. While the songs themselves seem to somehow connect the dots back to Cohn's best work, the tracks, earthy and raw, are a noticeable departure from the sound of Cohn's previous records.

In the song "Live out the String," Cohn not only writes openly about his own brush with death, but seems to be setting a new agenda for himself artistically:

"Fate is kind,
Fate is cruel,
Fate is terminally cool
It's a random interruption
In the middle of your groove.
But sometimes you gotta
Get down on your knees
Sometimes you better
Get down on your knees
And find yourself a deeper groove."

With Join the Parade, Cohn finds that deeper groove.

Marc Cohn was born July 5, 1959, the youngest of four boys. He grew up in Cleveland, where he began playing guitar in grade school. Through the local rock radio stations, Marc was introduced to the music of Van Morrison, Joni Mitchell, and Jackson Browne, all of whom remain among his most enduring influences.

"I remember buying Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush* in 1970," said Cohn. "It had a lyric sheet that you could fold out in Neil's own writing, with stuff crossed out or words put back in. It was at that moment that I first realized: This is his living. Somebody works at this.

"Right then, the idea of being a songwriter became appealing, even obsessive, I loved those Neil Young songs so much that I counted the number of words in 'Tell Me Why.' I'd write that number on the top of the page, by the title, and then try to write a song with that many words, thinking that this was some kind of portal into brilliance."

Cohn attended Oberlin College, where he taught himself piano and later worked straight jobs, played clubs and coffee houses, wrote songs and sang demos for songwriting legends like Leiber and Stoller and Jimmy Webb. After moving to New York, he led a successful 14-piece R&B band called The Supreme Court. "Almost everything I did from the time I was sixteen, was geared towards getting a record deal."

A chance encounter in an Arkansas honky tonk with a 70-year-old black pianist and singer named Muriel Davis Wilkins inspired the song that launched Marc Cohn's career. "Walk-ing in Memphis" became the breakout hit from Marc's self-titled Atlantic debut album, released February 1991.

Author and critic Dave Marsh wrote of the song: "Its perfectly written narrative takes into account the whole history of American music, from where it begins in storefront church gospel and W.C. Handy's blues to where it shoots out into Elvis and Al Green and, at the climactic moment, Marc Cohn himself."

"That night, at The Grammy Awards, when my name was called, was an out-of-body experience. It took me months to be able to realize how huge it was, a culmination of everything I'd worked towards for so long."

In May 1993, Marc released *The Rainy Season*, which included notable guest appearances by David Crosby, Graham Nash, and Bonnie Raitt. It would be five years before a new album, 1998's *Burning the Daze*, but Cohn continued to tour and write.

In 2005, Cohn compiled and self-released a solid live album, *Live 04-05*. But the decade that elapsed between *Burning the Daze* and *Join the Parade* was "not only longer than most people's music business careers," Marc notes with laughter, "it was long enough to have the record business disappear."

Mainly, Cohn is just excited to have an album out. He hopes that *Join the Parade* is a set of songs that people might want to hear, but it is in truth, a set of songs that people need to hear.