

Suzanne Vega



photo credit: Ebru Yildiz

“I was talking to Jimmy Hogarth, the producer of my 2007 album, *Beauty and Crime*. We were discussing who had seen the biggest rat. After that conversation, I kept reading about or hearing various rat stories, all of them true. I took careful note and set it all to music, inspired by The Ramones and Fontaines D.C.” Suzanne Vega’s latest offering, “Rats”, chronicles the infamous rat population of her hometown, the September 17 release of which coincides with New York’s 2024 Rat Summit. Accommodated by an animated video from filmmaker Martha Colburn, “Rats” offers a glimpse at a forthcoming 2025 album.

Widely regarded as one of the foremost songwriters of her generation, Vega emerged as a leading figure of the early 1980s folk revival when, accompanying herself on acoustic guitar, she sang what has been called contemporary folk or neo-folk songs of her own creation in Greenwich Village clubs. Since the release of her self-titled, critically acclaimed 1985 debut album, she has been known for performances that convey deep emotion, with *NPR Music* noting that she “has been making vital, inventive music” throughout the course of her decades-long career.

Bearing the stamp of a masterful storyteller who “observes the world with a clinically poetic eye” (*The New York Times*), Vega’s songs have tended to focus on city life, ordinary people and real-world subjects. Notably succinct and understated, her work is immediately recognizable—as utterly distinct and thoughtful as it was when her voice was first heard on the radio over 30 years ago.

Vega’s most recent album, *An Evening of New York Songs and Stories*, was released in 2020. A live recording, it incorporates familiar songs like “Luka” and “Tom’s Diner”, deep cuts from her catalog and a cover of “Walk On The Wild Side” by her late friend, Lou Reed. The mix of repertoire also features “New York Is My Destination” from *Lover, Beloved: Songs from an Evening with Carson McCullers*, Vega’s 2016 album from her one-woman play about the Southern gothic novelist Carson McCullers. A filmed version of Vega’s play had its world premiere at the SXSW festival in March 2022 and features songs by Vega with music by Duncan Sheik.

Vega was born in Santa Monica, CA, but grew up in Spanish Harlem and the Upper West Side of New York City. She was influenced by her mother, a computer systems analyst and her stepfather, the Puerto Rican writer Egardo Vega Yunque. There was a heady mix of multicultural music playing at home: Motown, bossa nova, jazz and folk. At age 11 she picked up a guitar and as a teenager she started to write songs.

Having studied dance at the High School for the Performing Arts, Vega later attended Barnard College where she majored

in English Literature and minored in theater. In 1979, after attending a concert by Lou Reed, she began to find her true artistic voice and distinctive vision for contemporary folk. A receptionist by day, she would hang out at the Greenwich Village Songwriter's Exchange by night. Soon she was playing iconic venues like The Bottom Line and Folk City—the word was out and audiences were catching on.

At first, record companies saw little prospect of commercial success. Vega's demo tape was rejected by every major record company—and twice by the very label that eventually signed her. Her self-titled debut album (A&M) was finally released in 1985, co-produced by Steve Addabbo and Lenny Kaye, guitarist for Patti Smith. One million records later, it was clear that Vega's voice was resonating around the world. "Marlene on the Wall" was a surprise hit in the U.K. and *Rolling Stone* eventually included the record in their "100 Greatest Recordings of the 1980s."

1987's follow-up, *Solitude Standing*—again co-produced by Addabbo and Kaye—elevated her to star status. The album hit #2 in the U.K. and #11 in the States, was nominated for three Grammys (including Record of the Year) and went platinum in the U.S., selling three million copies worldwide. "Luka" is a song that has entered the cultural vernacular—likely the only hit song ever written from the perspective of an abused boy. Vega continues to support children's and human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Casa Alianza and Covenant House.

The opening song on *Solitude Standing* was an a cappella piece, "Tom's Diner," about a nondescript

restaurant near Columbia University. Without Vega's permission, it was remixed by U.K. electronic dance duo DNA and bootlegged as "Oh Susanne." Suddenly Vega's voice was showing up in the most unlikely setting of all: the club. She permitted an official release of the remix of "Tom's Diner" under its original title, which reached #5 on the *Billboard* pop chart and went gold. In 1991, she brought the remix and other unsolicited versions of the song together in a compilation called *Tom's Album*. Vega also holds the distinction of being christened "Mother of the MP3" by the technology's creator, who used her recording of "Tom's Diner" to refine its compression algorithm.

Vega co-produced her follow-up album with Anton Sanko, 1990's *Days of Open Hand*. The album featured a string arrangement by composer Philip Glass, for whose song cycle *Songs from Liquid Days* she had penned lyrics years earlier. Continuing to battle preconceptions, she teamed with producer Mitchell Froom for 1992's *99.9F*, the sound of which instigated descriptions such as "industrial folk" and "techno folk." Certified gold, *99.9F* won a New York Music Award as Best Rock Album. Vega was also the first of an elite group of women, joined recently by Billie Eilish, to land three consecutive singles in *Billboard's* Alternative Top 10, beginning with "Book of Dreams," followed by her featured spot on DNA's "Tom's Diner" and concluding with her own "Blood Makes Noise."

In 1996, Vega returned with the similarly audacious *Nine Objects Of Desire*, also produced by Froom, who by then was her husband. Over

the years, she has been heard on soundtracks including *Pretty In Pink* ("Left Of Center" with Joe Jackson) and contributed to such diverse projects as the Disney compilation *Stay Awake*, the Grateful Dead tribute *Deadicated* and the Leonard Cohen tribute *Tower Of Song*. In 1999 *The Passionate Eye: The Collected Writings Of Suzanne Vega*, a volume of poems, lyrics, essays and journalistic pieces, was published by Spike/Avon Books. In 2001, she returned to her acoustic roots for her first new album in five years, the critically lauded *Songs In Red And Gray*.

In 2007, Vega released the Grammy award-winning *Beauty & Crime* on Blue Note Records, a deeply personal reflection of her native New York City in the wake of the loss of her brother Tim Vega and the tragedy of 9/11. Vega's love for the city shines through as both its subject and its setting, and she mixes the past and present, the public with the private, and familiar sounds with the utterly new—just like the city itself.

In 2010, Vega released the first of four volumes known as the *Close Up Series* on which she rerecorded songs from her catalog and arranged them thematically as "Love Songs", "People and Places", "States of Being" and "Songs of Family". The four volumes will be released on vinyl in as special box set in March 2022.

Recently Vega was a member of the cast of the Off-Broadway production of *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*. *The New York Times* said of her performance, "As our polymorphic host, the brandy-voiced Vega... is a delightful, smoothly sardonic presence... a discreetly entertaining font of omniscience."

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