

# Suzanne Vega

## *Flying With Angels*

Ever since Suzanne Vega's late-80s hits made her synonymous with eloquent, incisive songwriting, she has been fusing reality with the texture of dreams. The New Yorker's tenth studio album *Flying With Angels* reinforces this signature synthesis. In 10 poised songs made of earthly emergencies and interior landscapes, of beauty and brutality both, *Flying With Angels* is a profound testament to dimensions beyond and within: the refuge we seek in imagination, and how it steels us for living.

*Flying With Angels* is Vega's first album of new songs in 11 years, if not counting her 2016 record based on her one-woman play about Carson McCullers, or her excellent 2020 live album. In that time Vega's considerable influence has continued to bloom across a new generation of vanguard artists who remain inspired by her artful narrative songwriting, like Dev Hynes, Caroline Polachek, and Weyes Blood—all born just as Vega was emerging as a leading figure of the '80s folk revival, as her clear, resonant voice became a radio fixture with hits like "Luka" and "Tom's Diner."

Vega worked on *Flying With Angels* with her longtime music director and guitar player Gerry Leonard, also the album's producer, at GB's Juke Joint in Long Island City. They began with Vega's lucid, inimitable folk rock sound but soon incorporated R&B, punk, prog, and rock. "Any preconceived notion of



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what I thought this album was going to be went flying out the window," Vega said of the eclectic but sharply cohesive collection, which showcases her expressive voice and wise lyrics. As Vega and Leonard cast a wide net

stylistically, they worked with a tight circle of collaborators on a more condensed timeline than usual, and those limitations worked in the album's favor. Vega's songwriting breathes anew on *Flying With Angels*.

She describes the lead single “Speakers’ Corner” as a “California, driving-down-the-highway-type song,” though its urgent subject matter belies that breeziness. Its prescient narrative acknowledges the increasingly political nature of communication today, when the ability to speak one’s mind is easier than ever on social media, and yet that privilege is often misused. “Speakers’ corner, there it stands / In politics and song / I guess we better use it now before we find it gone,” Vega sings in the final chorus. She elaborates, “That’s something you don’t want in democracy: the shutting down of the Speakers’ Corner where people get a say. This is a moment in time where people are saying a lot, but sometimes they’re not making sense or not telling the truth. People should be accountable for what they say. They can’t just lie. One would think that that would be self-evident.” Originally, “Speakers’ Corner” was incited by a more personal emergency: In 2023, Vega’s husband, a spoken-word poet and First Amendment lawyer, was recently recovered from COVID-19 when he suffered two strokes that left him nonverbal and having to relearn to speak. The negotiation of voice, of speaking and not speaking, became a recurring motif on *Flying With Angels*.

Suspended aloft, the title track is about caregiving. “I felt this sense of being supported by energy in the middle of an emergency... this idea that you’re being born aloft by something stronger than you,” Vega said. Perhaps befitting a song about inner strength, there’s a tinge of Vega’s enduring influence, Laurie Anderson, in her delivery over the impressionistic guitar riff, which she likens to “the steady hum of an engine.” Approaching Vega’s dilemma from a more

otherworldly angle, “Witch” tells the story of a man who is rendered unable to speak by a witch. Sonically inspired by Pink Floyd as well as the “bone-chilling feeling” of experiencing the solar eclipse, “Witch” features samples of two spoken word poems performed by Vega’s husband, who worked under the moniker Poez the Poet.

The politic of *Flying With Angels* plays out exquisitely, and somberly, in the first song Vega wrote for the album. The spare folk ballad “Last Train From Mariupol” responded to the beginnings of the war in Ukraine, right after the Russians took Mariupol in May of 2022; many of its lyrics came directly from the nightly news. A consummate Manhattanite, Vega also addresses matters close to home. Inspired by the Ramones and modern Irish rock heroes Fontaines DC, the delightfully dissonant “Rats” was released as a 2024 single surrounding the city’s Urban Rat Summit, confronting the rodents who dominated New York’s streets during the pandemic. “They did take over, which was kind of horrible—funny, yet really awful,” she says. “COVID was such a destructive force, and a lot of this album takes place in that landscape.”

Vega juxtaposes these harsh realities with more hopeful interior scenes on *Flying With Angels*. Two tracks explicitly reference other songwriters. “Chambermaid” took root one morning when Vega woke up in the throes of a cycle of housework, while caring for her husband, and imagined she “was Bob Dylan’s chambermaid,” she said, referencing a lyric on “I Want You.” (“Well, I return to the Queen of Spades / And talk with my chambermaid,” Dylan sings on that *Blonde on Blonde* classic.)

The character study of a trapped dreamer who longs to *be* Dylan “flew out” of Vega quickly as she lightly adapted the ’60s song. “I imagined the chambermaid being kind of like the girl in [Brecht’s] ‘Pirate Jenny,’ but not quite that brutal,” Vega says. “I was interested in her interior world, and what does she do on her day off? She’d go for walks. She’s thinking about her ship coming in. She’s got her own ambitions. In her dreams, Dylan gives her his pen and says, ‘Don’t forget to write.’” A quite opposite process brought forth “Lucinda,” her fierce ode to the great Southern storyteller Lucinda Williams, which was over two decades in the making. Vega and Williams first crossed paths in the early ’80s at Greenwich Village club Folk City, and after seeing Williams play in the ’90s, Vega began writing the song, which she finished after reading Williams’ memoir in 2023.

That Vega would consciously nod to two other songwriters befits *Flying With Angels*, which, in many ways, feels like a testament to the many-layered power of songs, from an artist who, at 65, has been writing them nearly all her life. “Usually it’s actresses,” Vega says with a laugh, alluding to her very first single, the hit “Marlene on the Wall,” which described an interior dialogue with the actress Marlene Dietrich in the poster on her wall—a fantasy, and a confrontation of self. *Flying With Angels* is similarly complex, gesturing towards conflict, sickness, angels, witches, and dreams. “There’s this otherworldly element that is at odds with the real world,” Vega explains. “There are images of flying and wanting to transcend the world we’re in. There’s real life, but also, what’s beyond it? How are we surviving?”

*Flying With Angels* ends with an answer in “Galway,” an ethereal Irish folk ballad that finds a woman looking back on her life and scrutinizing her decisions, but still ushering us towards possibility, towards a new horizon. Vega has herself never visited that Irish seaside town; Galway becomes a symbol of what might lie ahead. “The storyteller’s job,” Vega says, “is to take you somewhere you haven’t been, not just show you what you know.”

Since her voice was first heard on the radio 40 years ago, Vega’s transportive yet grounding music has done just that. Emerging from Greenwich Village folk clubs, Vega has been widely regarded as one of the foremost songwriters of her generation since her 1985 debut, playing sold-out shows around the world. Bearing the stamp of a master 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. Her work remains immediately recognizable, understated and thoughtful.

She grew up in Spanish Harlem and the Upper West Side, raised by her mother, a computer systems analyst, and her stepfather, a Puerto Rican writer, with a heady mix of Motown, bossa nova, jazz and folk playing at home. At 11,

she picked up a guitar, and as a teenager she began to write songs. Vega studied dance in high school before attending Barnard College to study literature and theater. In 1979, after attending a Lou Reed concert at Columbia, her vision of contemporary folk started



album artwork

coming into focus. A receptionist by day, she would hang out at the Songwriter’s Exchange in the Village by night. Her self-titled debut album arrived on A&M in 1985, co-produced by Steve Addabbo and Lenny Kaye of the Patti Smith Group. “Marlene on the Wall” was a surprise hit in the U.K. and *Rolling Stone* eventually included the album in its “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 U.S., was nominated for three Grammys (including Record of the Year) and went platinum, selling three million copies. “Luka”

entered the cultural vernacular—likely the only hit ever written from the perspective of an abused boy. Vega continues to support children’s and human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Children’s Aid 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; suddenly Vega’s voice was showing up in the unlikelyst of

settings, the club. She permitted an official release of the “Tom’s Diner” remix, which reached #5 on the *Billboard* pop chart and went gold. Vega continues to forge new ground creatively, from the industrial-folk innovations on 1992’s *99.9F* to her Grammy-winning 2007 album *Beauty & Crime*, and her celebrated recent work in theater and film.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT  
JOE COHEN OR CARLA SACKS AT SACKS & CO., 212.741.1000,  
JOE.COHEN@SACKSCO.COM OR CARLA@SACKSCO.COM.**