

SPOTLIGHT



SUZANNE VEGA

The eclectic folkie samples hip-hop and explores her spiritual side

IN THE SEVEN YEARS SINCE SUZANNE Vega released *Beauty and Crime*—her last studio album of original material—she released four collections of her songs in reworked forms as the *Close-Up* series. For her latest album, *Tales From the Realm of the Queen of Pentacles*, she changed her tack. “The focus of the new album is wider than the *Close-Up* series,” says Vega. “We tried to get as much production as we could, considering the limited budget.”

The new focus on economy, inspired by releasing the album on her own Amanuensis Productions, also helped Vega branch out in terms of production technique. Though her work has been sampled many times, Vega experimented with sampling for the first time on “Don’t Uncork What You Can’t Contain,” by taking the Arabic-influenced strings from rapper 50 Cent’s “Candy Shop.”

“I’ve always liked Scott Storch’s productions, and he tends to favor those strings,” she says. “Rather than hiring Scott Storch, which costs \$90,000 a track, Gerry Leonard—who wanted the producer’s job—decided to sample it.”

Vega’s appreciation of hip-hop on the song includes a name-drop of Macklemore. “I really loved that ‘Thrift Shop’ track,” she says.

“I’ve been a fan of thrift shops my whole life. I was thinking about how to get an oil lamp into the song. I was thinking, ‘Where would a person find an oil lamp? Ah! Thrift shop!’ Then I thought, ‘I’m just going to throw him in there!’ It was a gamble, but I thought if I thought it was funny, other people would too.”

Though there are humorous elements to Vega’s lyrics, much of *Queen of Pentacles* was inspired by more serious reflections. “All of it has to do with the spiritual side of life,” she says. “I’m getting older, so more people I know are passing on. A natural part of getting older is you start to wonder where we’re all going. That’s why I write the songs, because I don’t understand it, but sometimes it helps me to describe or express it.”

The manner she chooses to express herself changes from album to album. “The last album was less metaphoric than my other albums,” says Vega, 54. “Probably the most confessional album was *Songs in Red and Gray*. I found that very uncomfortable. This album, I was happy going back to the world of “The Queen and the Soldier” or “Luka.” That was what felt comfortable to me. But who knows what that means in the future? Each album has its own flavor.”

—Amanda Farah

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