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## BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Jan Fairley takes a look at Afro-Peruvian singer

# SUSANA BACA

**S**usana Baca was in Boston in September when she heard she had won one of the most sought-after music prizes of the Latin world.

"I was just about to go on stage when a Peruvian radio station called me saying, 'Susana, how do you feel about winning the Grammy?' And I said, 'What?!'" Soon after, President Alejandro Toledo rang her in New York to congratulate her on being the first Peruvian to win such an award.

"Peru's been through frustrating times with serious economic problems and the people are feeling down, so it's been taken as good news. And for me, as a musician, it is the maximum recognition of my work and career and that is wonderful."

Baca is the singer who has introduced Afro-Peruvian music to the world. While many are familiar with Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian sounds, few realise that

enslaved people from West Africa were also taken to Peru. Once freed, they gradually formed small communities, notably on the Lima coast. Their musical legacy is Baca's passion. Her whole life has been dedicated to celebrating her African heritage by keeping the irresistible rhythms of her ancestors alive. To this end, in 1992 she and her husband Ricardo Pereira founded the Instituto Negro Continuo, a cultural centre with archives housed in part of their home by the sea in Chorrillos, Lima.

Baca sings Afro-Peruvian music such as *festejo*, *lando*, *golpe a tierra* and Creole songs, much of which are rooted in percussive rhythms of the key *cajón* box drum whose sound defines the music almost more than the voice. In Baca's group, it is Juan Medrano Cotito who plays the key *cajón* box drum. Originally made by slaves from fruit crates, from a distance it looks like an upturned drawer though it's actually a custom-made box of timbred wood with a hole at the back which Medrano sits astride, beating out rhythms. It's the same *cajón* which has become an integral part of modern flamenco since innovative guitarist

Paco de Lucia heard it at an after-gig party in Lima in the 70s, a party where Baca just happened to be. In Baca's group the cajón is partnered by David Pinto's bass with Hugo Bravo on percussion and, variously, Rafael Muñoz or Sergio Valdeos on guitar. Over the top glides Baca's delicate voice, sculpting lyrics by gently shading them with emotion. Her tender approach to songs about slavery and suffering is shot through with the vulnerable yet redemptive joy of cultural survival in the modern world. While her touch may be gentle, Baca's feelings run deep. "The music of black Peru is still in many ways the music of the ghetto, but now young Afro-Peruvians have discovered a great pride in their African descent. The songs may be sung in Spanish but the rhythms have their roots in Africa." Not that Baca is the first to champion Afro-Peruvian music. Her work builds on the foundations laid in the 60s by pioneers Nicómedes Santa Cruz and Chabuca Granda who formed the group Peru Negro and brought the music to large audiences throughout Latin America. Baca has followed in their footsteps, fusing in jazz influences. Her major contribution to the tradition has been her strong focus on poetic lyrics.

In the mid-90s Baca was signed by maverick David Byrne to his Luaka Bop label. Her second disc for Byrne *Eco de Sombras* (Echo of Shadows), marked a subtle yet decisive shift in her sound. Recorded under the guidance of US producer Craig Street in Baca's own home, the cool edge of her Peruvian sound was enhanced in New York in collaboration with guitarist Marc Ribot, keyboard player John Medeski and bassist Greg Cohen, all closely linked with the city's art-rock avant-garde. This collaboration has been developed further for *Espiritu Vivo* with Medeski and Ribot joining Baca and her musicians to record before a small New York audience. Their presence has undoubtedly contributed to her reaching a larger audience who are spellbound by her sensuous sound and intimate approach. If Baca was surprised that it was *Lamento Negro* which won a Grammy, it was because, although re-licensed in 2001, the original recording dates back to 1986, when its release in Peru was ignored. Recorded in Havana's Egrem studios with Cuban and Peruvian musicians when Baca was known only to the *cognoscenti*, her love for Latin American poetry was given a free

rein: "I've been singing poetry set to popular music since 1970. At that time record companies said, 'Poetry? Change your repertory Señora.' But it was fundamental to me then and I felt they were making a mistake." Now, finally the time has come for these ten songs. They've been taken to heart by Latinos worldwide simply because the exquisite love poetry of Peru's César Vallejo, Chilean Nobel prize winner Pablo Neruda and Uruguay's Mario Benedetti defines the Latin American psyche, its dreams and ideals.

## BEST ALBUMS

1 **Susana Baca** (Luaka Bop/Warner, 2000)



Her eponymous 1996 disc gleams with post-Peru Negro energy, full of catchy melodies from irresistible

Creole classics with upbeat dancing rhythms like 'Negra Presuntuosa' to the wistful 'Hecces'. A timely recording during a continental revival of 20th century *mestizo* songs, Baca's voice is warmly expressive, often working with a chorus and textured percussion.

2 **Lamento Negro** (Tumi, 2001)



Natural passion shines through Baca's voice on this Grammy winner and the lyricism of the disc is unique. A jewel, although it's not without its flaws: today you might question

the orchestrations, yet they never impinge on Baca's beautiful interpretations of love poetry, with musical settings by Greek singer Danai amongst others.

## BEST COMPILATIONS

1 **Vestida de Vida** (Iris Musique, 2001)



*Vestida de Vida* (Dressed With Life) is Baca singing a stirring selection of traditional songs of African origin from Carnival to Christmas. From countries including Cuba, Venezuela,

Puerto Rico, Colombia, Uruguay and Brazil.



Trevor O'Shan

2 **The Rough Guide to Afro-Peru: The Musical Soul of Black Peru** (World Music Network, 2002)



The Rough Guide fills in the broader background of Afro-Peruvian music with vibrant rhythms and gorgeous melodies featuring pioneers like Santa Cruz and Granda alongside Cecilia Barraza, Lucila Campos, Eva Ayllón and a couple of tracks from Susana Baca.

## LIKE SUSANA? TRY...

◆ **Lucy Acevedo: Negra** (Arion, 2002)

A scintillating mix of Creole waltzes, boleros, ballads and festejo and marinera dances courtesy of a young Peruvian from Lima's Callao sea port.

Acevedo exuberantly catches the energy of her material. |

