

laughter. Letterman's banter did not suit the seriousness with which Yma typically approached herself and her music, yet she managed to accept it in good spirit, and even though she was on for only about five minutes, and late in the show at that, her appearance was surely a sort of success. The studio audience evidently enjoyed her novelty and cheered her singing.

As far as audiences were concerned, all was hunky-dory with Yma's Ballroom appearances. Behind the scenes, however, there were some rough patches. They arose because Yma's manager, Alan Eichler, who had come to New York to be with Yma, had to return to the West Coast soon after Yma opened. Alan would not be able to return for a number of weeks. Realizing that someone would need to manage Yma, he enlisted the help of a friend, Freeman Gunter, a free-lance writer and former editor-in-chief of *Mandate* magazine. Fortunately, Freeman had time on his hands and been a long-time fan of Yma's. His story of the weeks during the 1987 Ballroom engagement is full of humor, candor, affection and occasionally anger and frustration. I interviewed Freeman in New York City in 1988.

Freeman had originally met Yma in the early 1970s when he was writing an article on the *Miracles* album for *Michael's Thing* (at the time one of the small, upscale publications that dealt with the New York club scene). He met her again at a press conference she gave on February 12th, the Thursday before her opening at The Ballroom for this engagement. Freeman has vivid memories of the press conference.

"It was fascinating. Most of the time she told the same disjointed story—and she is not a good storyteller. But now she was saying that she had written some 5,000 songs—which makes Cole Porter like some kind of amateur!"

Alan re-introduced Yma to Freeman after Freeman agreed to take care of Yma. Freeman remembered Yma as "charming."

Alan explained to Freeman what his duties would be. It had been decided that Yma would autograph copies of her recordings and sell them to patrons after her shows at The Ballroom. Originally, the management of the club told Yma that she couldn't sell her records and tapes at the club. "She pitched a fit!" Freeman laughed, "She was screaming at me—'You go tell them I sell the records!' and I had to act as a mediator between the two. Filipe liked Yma, and he said, let her sell. So we did. Yma was happy because she got her way."

It was decided, however, that no records would be sold after the first show each night, or after the last show on Saturdays because it over crowded the dining room and the waiters had difficulty setting-up and taking-down the tables. Also, Saturday diners at the last show, who had paid top dollar for the food, would complain when they were mobbed at their tables by ardent Yma fans.

Freeman was to hang on to any moneys received from the selling of records. He was to count the money and enter it into a little notebook that he had made up for that purpose. Alan told Freeman not to give Yma any money unless she specifically asked for it because he preferred to have it all accounted for rather than having Yma spend it all shopping. This last stipulation also had to do with the fact that Yma owed Alan money, since he had advanced her the cash to buy crates of her recordings and tapes from Capitol Records, on the assumption that they would be allowed to sell her recordings at the club.

To help Freeman adjust to his new temporary job and as part of the training period, Alan took him to the final rehearsal Yma was to have with the band on the Sunday before her Tuesday opening. Although technically it would have been considered a "dress rehearsal," Yma does not usually have a real dress rehearsal. (A dress rehearsal is when a program is run straight-through as if for an audience. This gives the artists an idea of

the pacing needed to keep energy levels up and how the program runs in general. Opening night was usually Yma's dress rehearsal.)

Freeman was understandably excited about going to the rehearsal and saw at once that the band was going to work very well with Yma. Yma was excited too, although not for the same reason. She was excited because she was wearing a pair of chino pants she had bought for \$10.00 on 14th Street and was very pleased that she had found such a bargain.

"I learned very quickly that she loves little bargains, and buying little tchotchkes," commented Freeman, "like a little clock that looked like a teapot that she had in her apartment. When I first went there she showed it to me and said, 'Isn't it wonderful?' It was the ugliest thing I had ever seen. But, she loved it."

Dressed casually for the rehearsal with a hat pulled down to cover her hair, Yma put the band through their paces. "She didn't really sing, but every once in a while she would do a phrase here or there to show how something was to go, or for tempo changes. When she did sing out she sounded stupendous. I was very excited. I thought she sounded better than she did when she gave her Town Hall concerts in 1975. She seemed to work well with the musicians; there was no 'star' stuff. She'd correct them if necessary but if she liked something they did, she would say, 'Oh! That's wonderful, do that!' She was just one of the boys when she rehearsed with them."

Opening night, however, found Freeman disappointed. "I felt the show was sloppy and obviously not tightly rehearsed. There were many pauses when Yma couldn't remember what she was singing next. And she sounded odd—not what I had expected after hearing the bits I had heard in rehearsal. But now it seems that Yma sings better when she doesn't have the pressure of a performance. The bottom voice was OK, but the middle was all blown out. The top was OK too, when she went up there."

The second show of the first night was added at the last minute because the first had sold-out. Because of the haste with which it was added and the lack of advance announcement, the room was only about half-full.

"But, I can remember" said Freeman, "sitting there and thinking, 'Well, here we are in this half-empty club—and she sounds awful.' Then the next night, it took off. The reviews, by some miracle, were good. I mean, I had seen the same show as the critics, and I thought it was pretty grim—even if she did do cute things like pointing up in the air—to make you think she was singing really high—it was still pretty bad."

At first, the Ballroom waiters hated Yma's show. They had never seen her before opening night and a couple of them were heard to comment, "Oh God! We have to put up with that for three weeks?" "But," counters Freeman, "that was before anyone realized she was going to be such fabulous business. Later the waiters became big fans. They worshipped her. When Yma and I would be selling and signing records, they would bring us free drinks—fresh orange juice for Yma and Scotch for me. They were really wonderful."

Near the end of the first week Alan left, and Freeman was on full duty, alone.

There was a definite routine for the evenings when Freeman accompanied Yma to the club. First, Yma insisted that he call her at her hotel, which was several minutes away in Greenwich Village, to let Yma know he was on his way.

"I *always* had to call first, I couldn't just arrive at a pre-designated time. When I would get there she would already have her makeup and her sunglasses on. She put her face on in the apartment—a little studio with a Murphy bed."

The apartment belonged to a girlfriend of one of the managers of The Ballroom, who had been persuaded to sub-let it to Yma. Freeman would then collect Yma, her coat, and a series of bags which contained things she took with her to the club, and go outside to catch a taxi.

“I’ll never forget the first night,” said Freeman. “We had this Cuban cab driver who recognized Yma immediately. This didn’t seem to surprise her at all. She really acts as if the whole world should know her because she is such an enormous star. Yet we all know that she lives anonymously in a little court apartment in Los Angeles. Her neighbors just think of her as Mrs. Vivanco, a divorcee. They don’t even know she was a singer. ‘Perita’ is what her friends call her. That’s her real nickname. It’s short for Emperatriz. That is what I was to call her in public when she didn’t want to be recognized. If she’s not being Yma Sumac, she doesn’t want to be recognized as Yma Sumac because that takes too much energy.

“Anyway, after the driver recognized her they began to talk to each other in Spanish and I was able to follow most of the conversation. He was saying things like, ‘You’re a great star and I’m just a cab driver’ and she was saying things like ‘You must be the best you can be, no one is unimportant.’ Yma was in a good mood and she was really very sweet with him. While they were talking, I noticed there was a Spanish newspaper on the driver’s seat next to him opened to an article of Yma with a beautiful 1950s picture of her. It was a wonderful send-off for Yma that night.

“When we arrived at the stage door of The Ballroom, I saw that that there was a group of people waiting for Yma. Every night before the show, at least ten people would be waiting outside the club hoping that Yma would sign autographs before the show. She was unfailingly sweet to fans wanting autographs.”

(Joel Kudler, who took photographs from side-stage of The Ballroom while Yma was performing, was amazed at Yma’s willingness to stay and sign autograph after autograph. “She talked with each person,” he said, “and listened to what they said. And she looked them straight in the eye. I can’t tell you the number of people that wanted their picture taken with her. And all the fans wanted to touch her. That didn’t seem to bother her at all. She could be very physical with fans. Once, when she and I were just standing and waiting, she took my hand and squeezed it. It is very unusual for artists to do things like that.”)

“I really think she loved them as much as they loved her, and she appreciated their devotion,” Freeman continued. “Anyway, we got out of the cab and Yma was standing in the street talking to the driver through the side window in the front. Finally, she said (rather dramatically) to him, ‘Would you like to see what Yma Sumac looks like today?’ The driver excitedly nodded and said, ‘Oh yes!’ So she whipped off her sunglasses and stuck her face in the window. The cab driver dropped his jaw in shock, crossed himself and said ‘Madre de Dios!’ It was just fabulous!”

Yma usually got to the club around 7:15 or 7:30. At that time, Blossom Dearie, a much-admired cabaret singer, very popular with Ballroom audiences, was finishing her show and so Yma and Freeman would tiptoe up the back stairs to the dressing room—which was only inches from the stage area. “Blossom is very temperamental” Freeman explained, “and she demands absolute silence during her act.” At first Yma was irritated at having to sneak around and asked sarcastically, “Who is this woman? She puts me to sleep.” But, after hearing Blossom a few nights, Yma changed her tune and commented quietly to Freeman, “Her voice is very pure,” and she became fascinated with what Blossom was doing on stage.

When settled in the dressing room, Yma would usually have some soup. At first, she had decided the soup at the club was too fatty and creamy. Actually, it was nothing more than pureed vegetables and the club management was finally able to convince Yma of this. If, however, Yma decided that she did not want the club’s soup, Freeman would go out and buy some Chinese won ton soup. Yma would eat the won tons, but leave the broth, which she felt was too salty. “She is very health conscious,” Freeman explained,