

Vega is happiest thinking outside the box

Suzanne Vega . still doing what she loves. Photo: *Albert Sanchez*

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A jazz label gave the sensitive singer-songwriter the chance to find her voice and exorcise some demons, writes George Palathingal.

To start, yes, it is that Suzanne Vega: the smart, sensitive singer who made an unlikely splash in the mainstream in the mid-1980s. Unlikely? Well, pretty ditties such as *Luka*, a song about an abused child, were hardly the usual air-headed pop song.

The '80s years of multimillion-selling albums a distant memory, Vega has spent much of the time since consoling herself with creative fulfilment and artistic integrity. But she knows she's really just fortunate there is enough interest out there for her to be still doing what she loves.

"I feel that I've had a great career, I really do feel that," Vega says from the Gold Coast, fresh off the plane for an Australian tour. "I feel that I have a good audience. I feel like the critics, for the most part, really get what I do and this is the life [touring the world, playing music] I imagined having.

"I do feel that I'll be writing songs for the rest of my life because it's how I make sense out of my life."

Which implies the 48-year-old New Yorker must have endured some confusing times in the lengthy period between last year's thoughtful, warm and evocative *Beauty & Crime* and its 2001 predecessor, *Songs In Red And Gray*.

"I had no record deal for a while and no manager for a little while," Vega says, "so that made it hard to concentrate on writing - when I wasn't sure if there was any audience.

"Left to my own devices, I'm very slow. I was writing during that time but it was about a song a year. It's very hard for me to focus unless I feel that there's a reason to get it moving."

Her saviour came in the form of Blue Note Records, a label synonymous with jazz, not ageing singer-songwriters who err on the folk side of pop.

"When they first approached me and said, 'We'd like to have lunch with you', I was like, 'Well, do you want me to make a jazz album?' I wasn't really sure what the deal was going to be. But they felt that since the success of Norah Jones they were looking for more . classic pop? Or adult rock? I forget. They had a term for it which was something I felt comfortable, under that umbrella.

"They just let me do whatever I wanted to. There was no expectation that I was gonna be a certain kind of artist or kind of fit my style to the Blue Note label."

The new deal echoed Vega's last one, which resulted in 18 largely happy years at A&M Records thanks to one key clause. At both companies creative control for the artist gave her the freedom to think outside the box - and outside any folk-pop pigeonholes.

After the success of *Luka's* parent album, *Solitude Standing* (her second), Vega refused to simply remake that over and over. In 1992 her album *99.9F°* embraced a surprisingly effective electronic feel.

The elegant, jazzy *Caramel*, from her 1996 long-player *Nine Objects Of Desire*, was no doubt in the back of her Blue Note bosses' minds when they wined and dined her in 2006. And *Beauty & Crime*, her seventh album, weaves in these various musical influences and more without losing its performer's distinctive sound.

"Well, it's not easy maintaining not just your audience but . economies change, record companies change," Vega says.

"A lot of [American] cities are just suffering economically" is Vega's theory for why sales figures for *Beauty & Crime* were disappointing. "That's not the mood where people are gonna take a chance on a record. They wanna hear something that they've heard before, they wanna hear something that's Top 40. They're not going to take a risk on something."

No such place was hit harder, literally as well as figuratively, than Vega's home town of New York City in 2001. *Beauty & Crime*, as her first album since the attack on the twin towers, finally gave the singer the chance to exorcise some demons.

"I did the best I could," she says. "I sort of felt I hadn't really done my part in examining 9/11 and I felt it wasn't something that you can just ignore. I tried to write about it from several different angles - and not just about that but about other things, too, because I wanted a well- balanced record. I do feel like maybe I can go and write about some other things now."

Vega has a few ideas for her next album but she's not revealing them. "I hate to talk about them until they're sort of further along," she says with a sheepish laugh. But she's quietly confident, thanks in no small part to the experience that comes with age.

"It's like now I'm less satisfied with what I write; I really have to write a lot for me to feel that something is really good, whereas when I was younger if I had any idea I thought it was a good one! Now I'm a little more picky about what I want to write about and what I feel actually works."