



Mercedes Sosa

# Pan-American Dreams

BY ELIZABETH HANLY

**W**hen Mercedes Sosa began singing in her native Argentina, folk music was for old male boozers, women sang nothing stronger than soapy boleros, and most urban Argentines were trying hard to see themselves as Parisian. Right from the start she shook up Latin folk forms. The *nuevo cancionero* movement was just coming together. Drawn by her voice, huge and yearning, the best *cancionero* poets and composers brought Sosa, their

Her music would become increasingly cross-generational even before rock crept into it. The songs of cultural treasures like Atahualpa Yupanqui (Argentina's Woody Guthrie) finally came into their own via Sosa.

This was the '60s, a time of brief cultural renaissance between seesawing political repressions. By the end of the decade, Sosa needed to leave Argentina from time to time; things were heating up again with threats coming from both the right and left. (Sosa was then a member of the Communist Party but didn't always appreciate its directives.) After each exile, she returned more eclectic to the street fairs of the Argentine provinces and the tango crowds of the capital. These audiences, certainly among the world's most cynical, had long since surrendered to this folkie, who sings as if she's gambling for souls. In lovely irony, "the Voice of the Americas" had come from the Latin country most ready to sneer at its roots. (By now Sosa has over two dozen albums available throughout Latin America; about 10 have reached Europe and the States.)

In December 1984, with Argentina's civilian government just a year old, I stood with 45,000 others in Buenos Aires's Velez soccer stadium. It was spring, Sosa was singing, and everything was soft, everything was possible. That night stayed with me in the summer of '86. At the Festival Latino in Central Park there she was, Andean *bombo legüero* in hand, "La Negra"—a tiny woman, fiftyish, of commanding girth, dressed as usual in her blacks and reds. And it all began again, slowly, starkly at first. Sosa opened, as she always does these days, with "Todavía Cantamos (We're Still Singing)." It's an homage to the disappeared—just a bit of percussion that caught between Argentine *chacarera* and Brazilian samba march, words in tight counterpoint to beat—mettle leaving sentimentality in the dust.

Over an hour of songs followed, a pan-Latin-American rhythm mix: the wail of Cuban *guaguancó*, clip-clop *milonga* from the Pampas, flamenco, Brazil á la Milton Nascimento, Chile's fast *cueca*, Paraguay's faster *galopa*, breakneck Andean *huayno* and *carnivalito*. Explicit regionalism had given way to boundary-defying sensibility; driving rhythm opened on itself again and again with unexpected sweetness and crackle. Her accompaniment remained economical throughout—guitars and a range of percussion, and I wished she'd cut back even on that. When occasionally she did, her voice, the poetry, and that drum of hers became at times nearly indistinguishable.

Despite the recent focus on Sosa when the '85 West German film *Sera Posible El Sur* was released here in the summer, her presence up north is rare, which is all the more reason to see her when you can. I'm just sorry this time her voice won't be in open air. ■

Mercedes Sosa will perform at Carnegie Hall on October 10.