

Bio for *Bittersweet* by Sumitra Nanjundan :

Sumitra Nanjundan's September 2019 release, *Bittersweet*, is a work of rare distinction. Joined by bass master Carlitos del Puerto and the iconic drummer Brian Blade, Sumitra fully reveals her mastery as a multi-dimensional artist — a vocalist, pianist, lyricist, composer, and arranger. Produced by Alex Machacek, the recital features seven of her melodic originals, a song adapted from the corpus of Béla Bartók, and personalized interpretations of the American songbook standard “The Way You Look Tonight” and “Freedom,” by former Young Disciples singer Carleen Anderson.

It's a breakout album for Sumitra, who over the last decade has steadily raised her profile around Los Angeles, where she and guitarist Machacek, her husband, have lived since 2004. Her conception, like her fluid, richly hued contralto voice, is individualistic and immediately identifiable, as she refracts into her own argot elements gleaned from such stated signpost figures as Annie Lennox, Kate Bush, Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Stevie Wonder, Al Jarreau, and Chaka Khan. Her partners, each a world-class listener, complement, guide and propel the flow with sublime taste and musicality. Machacek, who contributes two string arrangements, augments several tracks with his pellucid guitar tone.

Sumitra chose, wrote and rewrote the songs for *Bittersweet* from the summer of 2017 through the March 2018 recording date. She presented the music to del Puerto, with whom she'd previously performed in a trio context in 2010. He accepted the invitation. Then, at Machacek's suggestion, she sent the music to Blade, whose uncanny ability to serve the music with apropos rhythm-timbre combinations on the drumkit has enhanced important albums by, to name a short-list, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, Norah Jones, Joe Henry, Laura Veirs, Shawn Colvin, Sarah McLachlan and Joe Jackson. He liked what he heard, and signed on. The band spent three days rehearsing and another three in the studio with engineer Morgan Stratton.

In a sense, on *Bittersweet*, Sumitra presents a spiritual autobiography, pulling together her experiences, twists and turns into a collection of stories that, in various ways, reflect the contradictory emotions implied by the title. Not least of these vignettes is the title track itself. Composed in December 2017, three months before the recording, “Bittersweet” juxtaposes memories of her mother's December death, of their mutual December birthday, of her December wedding anniversary. “After my parents' departures, I've been given a new definition of self,” she says. “I've learned that grief and joy can and do coexist side by side, in harmony — and it's good.” She cites [bestselling author] Brené Brown's descriptor, “holding the tension,” adding: “To me it seems that this quality (which you could also call ‘holding the balance’) is what life — and making music — is all about.”

Complemented by Machacek's evocative string arrangement, the 1998 song "Make Me Whole" depicts an impressionistic template of the breakup of Sumitra's first marriage; "Funny" — the music is an adaptation of one of Bartok's *Roumanian Dances*, which Sumitra was then working through — depicts the origin story of her second marriage. "See You Again," written in 2008, traces her 5 a.m. frame of mind just after her mother had concluded a month-long visit. "Take The Reins" portrays a close friend, who suffered from depression and eventually took her life, and other people close to Sumitra who suffer from mental illness — as a kind of coda, Del Puerto uncorks a brilliant solo that showcases his spot-in intonation and melodic gifts..

Sumitra describes the context of "Settle Down" as coming to terms with the implication of laying down roots after buying a house in Los Angeles, while "Recall" is a wry, observant portrayal of how L.A. star culture inflects social interactions with fellow musicians and composers with a superficial dimension. She conceived both the languorous, erotic, yearning treatment of "The Way You Look Tonight" and the declamatory reading of "Freedom" for an early 2017 solo tour. The program concludes with "Another Day," whose three-line lyric offers room for Blade to cut loose with a florid, creative drum feature.

Born in New York City to Indian parents, Sumitra was 2 when her father, a United Nations employee, was posted to Vienna, where she attended an English-language school. She doesn't remember a time when she wasn't singing. She began her piano studies at 5, and piano would remain her primary focus until she was well into her teens. At 10, she went off to a girls' boarding school in England.

"Ingrained in Indian culture is that everybody was extremely good at academics," Sumitra says. "I did well, but I was very independent, the school was restrictive, and I fell out of that pattern and got into a lot of trouble. But I had music, and I had really good teachers — our music department was fantastic. We had a big choir. We had private practice cells, where I began to write songs in a secretive way. I never imagined then that music or writing could be a career, but people I've reconnected with during the last ten years remember me that way. They say, 'Of course you're doing music; what else would you do?'"

Such possibilities began to seem palpable during Sumitra's time at the University of Massachusetts, where she encountered such faculty luminaries as Max Roach and Archie Shepp, and heard concerts by jazz superstars Dizzy Gillespie and Sarah Vaughan. After two years, unhappy with her

chosen business major, she left school and returned to Vienna to prepare for the entrance exam at the Vienna Academy of Music, but became distracted from classical pursuits after unexpectedly joining her first band, Satu, as a writer and lead singer. It was an 11-piece unit “with a horn section, backing singers, percussion, along the lines of what was happening in the late 1980s — Sade, Working Week, all that ‘new jazz’ as they called it in England. I had the occasional encore where I’d play a song on the piano alone, but mostly it was my instrument to write.”

After leaving Satu, Sumitra began working with jazz pianist Peter Josel, who brought into the mix guitarist Peter Legat (currently leader of Count Basic), who linked her to other jazz musicians with whom she formed the first band under her name. Later, during the early 1990s, Sumitra became a regular performer at the just-opened, now well-known Vienna jazz club Porgy & Bess, which held midnight sets that featured “bands like mine, which didn’t fit into the jazz standard repertoire.” She continues: “We had what people called an ‘acid jazz’ touch, though I was never comfortable with that description. But it was a big, positive turn in my life.”

Indeed, from then on, Sumitra says, “almost everyone I worked with had more or less a jazz background; I sought out musicians who could improvise, who gave me that sound in the context of my songwriting, who could bring ideas to the table that I could never come up with. This has been my ‘school,’ my music education, and continues to be to this day — only now, I know more, I feel more confident, I am able to express what I want. For me, jazz is a language that keeps evolving and growing, like any other language. It is ultimately liberation, innovation and freedom, as it gives you freedom to make a choice.”

In 1995, Sumitra released her first full-length album, *The Secret Of Our Souls*. This led to “a major record contract, which was an absolute disaster in the end,” and a year-long stay in London. There she functioned mainly as a studio singer, but also jammed with dance bands, and later on, after returning to Vienna in 1997, sang in gospel formations. That year in Vienna she met Alex Machacek on a gig; they fell in love, soon thereafter they became a duo, and then, in 2003, a married couple. “Meeting and working with Alex most of the time during the first ten years we knew each other opened up a whole new world of music for me,” Sumitra says. “Our duo became the core of everything that followed. Alex can think like a pianist on the guitar, with extensive knowledge of harmony. His music is very different than mine, but he knows just what I want, and it’s understood without having to be spoken. He’s introduced me to a lot of music that I would never otherwise have heard of.”

In 2004, Sumitra and Machacek recorded the voice-guitars-bass-and-drums album *Indian Girl*. That same year, they decided to move to Los Angeles. “Vienna was a great place to grow up and do all your homework, but we felt limited,” she says. “We gave ourselves three years. I didn’t know anyone there, but Alex had already collaborated with the drummer Terry Bozzio, and they started working together again, which opened things up for him. I soon got a job teaching piano, and we started getting gigs together as a duo at cafes and small clubs.”

There ensued a 12-year gap between recordings. “I’m a perfectionist, which can be a big downfall, because I’ve stopped myself from doing things, or been afraid I won’t be good enough,” Sumitra explains. “In Vienna, I kept writing and performing and releasing, having my different constellations of bands and trying out different musicians. But I had a five-year period in L.A. where I didn’t even want that. I wanted to get better at my playing. I was teaching a lot. I continued to write, but those pieces somehow were never ready. My music was there, but I was not present, not connected, not ready to put something out into the world, not able to express or produce anything that sounded remotely like anything I was hearing in my head. I was looking for love and recognition. What other people thought was far more important to me. I wondered if a piece would be accepted, or if it was ok that I sing in a low range. During this time when I wasn’t publicly putting out my music, as I faced my demons from the past, and practiced music I hadn’t played in over 20 years, I realized that now I was getting it — I was playing better and my understanding of the music had evolved. I could do this. I wasn’t going to boil it down to ‘it’s too late now’ or any of this nonsense. Then I started looking through my catalog and thinking one piece or another was worth pulling out again, and that I could do it some justice now, and give it my best shot.”

Sumitra finally broke through with *Still*, a wonderfully layered 2016 release on which she deploys her considerable pianistic skills to weave the piano parts with the words through a 12-song (9 originals) program. On this project, Sumitra says, she fulfilled the dream that first emerged within her at age 14, “to be able to play and sing my music, and all the music, on my own; to create arrangements for just voice and piano and not depend on anyone else to do it.” During the ensuing house concert tour, she adds, “I went completely solo for the first time in my life and took full responsibility for all of it! It was scary and yet so fulfilling at the same time.”

On the meta level, Sumitra says, *Still* and *Bittersweet* represent her response to Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s adage, “*It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.*” In her capable hands, such sentiments are not merely a notion.

“For me, sharing my stories is about the connection to our authentic selves, to and with others,” she says in an accurate piece of self-description. “Here I’ve kind of taken back my story — I’ve hopefully reached the point where I can show what the music is telling me about these songs, and can give them the right respect, treat them as they deserve to be treated.” The personal growth and maturation of this restless, brilliant spirit is the listener’s gain.

Ted Panken

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