

Interview between Suzanne Vega and Lenka Kabrhelová:

Biography: Suzanne Vega was born in 1959 and raised in New York City. She is a singer and songwriter, who reached international audiences with her 1987 album *Solitude Standing*. In 2006, while on tour in the Czech Republic, she was contacted by then-president Václav Havel, who asked her to perform for his birthday. The pair struck up a friendship thereafter, which spanned the last five years of Havel's life. Havel attended concerts Vega played in both the Czech Republic and New York City, while Vega recalls attending Havel's last play, *Leaving*.

Vega describes Havel as having had a “mystique” for her and her peers in New York City around the time of the Velvet Revolution in 1989. She suggests that her conversations with Havel deepened her understanding of human rights, a cause for which Vega has long been an advocate. Vega reflects that the playwright's life was so inspirational that Havel “could himself be a character in a play.” She commends Havel's “joyfulness” and counts herself fortunate to have been “part of that great group of musicians and people that were around” the late Czech president.

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Chapter I: Context – 00:00:26

Lenka Kabrhelova (LK): Thank you so very much for finding time for this interview. Let's start from how you met Václav Havel. Do you recall the circumstances, and when was the first time?

Suzanne Vega (SV): Ah yes, very clearly. The first time I had any contact with him directly was for his birthday, and I believe it was his seventieth birthday. I was in Olomouc, in the Czech

Republic, and I was there attending a film festival. And suddenly I got a request, would I sing for his birthday party? And I couldn't go, because I had a show that night, so we filmed it, and it was broadcast into the Castle. And so I could see him and he could see me, but it was on a big screen. And it was very weird! I have never done anything like it, before or after. But he seemed really nice, and he seemed to really like it, and I sang *Tom's Diner*, because I knew he was going to Columbia University later that year, and Tom's Diner is right there. So that was exciting for me, and I thought 'Well, maybe that's the end of it.' Then I got an invitation to have breakfast with him, and I don't remember how much time later it was. But that was the first time we met face to face.

LK: ... And what was it like?

SV: Well, I bought a new dress for the occasion, I remember. I had time enough to buy something. And I had thought that it was going to be just me and him, for some reason. And it was a table of 20 people. But I sat across from him, and it was lovely getting to know him a little bit. Very different hearing him speak than reading his texts, because his texts are so beautifully translated that you feel as though he speaks English naturally – you know, you feel as though he is speaking to you. So, the language was a little bit of a problem, but not too much. And he had a funny, for some reason, this mannerism that he had... He picked up the fork and he began to draw lines in the table-cloth with his fork. So, I remember thinking... Just not being sure 'What is the meaning of this?' But I think it shows a little bit of his character, this kind of wanting things to be in a certain order; even though he always surrounded himself with artists and bohemians, he himself, I think, had a gift for protocol and he would like things to be correct, which was why he was so well-suited to what he became.

LK: Did you have some sort of anticipation about what he would be like?

SV: I thought he would be more... He seemed shier than I had expected, and reserved. And he had a very heavy way of speaking. His voice could be very deep, and very... Had a certain rhythm and tone to it that I was not expecting. I was expecting him to be much lighter in his speech. So, there was a tone that was different. But, I don't know, I quickly got used to him, and then we... He started to come to a lot of different shows. Whenever I came to Prague, he would come to the show. Sometimes he would give me a book, he attended a show I did here in New York. I went to one of his plays, you know, we started to really communicate and be friends, and it was about a five-year period.

LK: So how did it feel then and – of course it is a little bit of a private question – but what did you talk about, and what were your thoughts about him?

SV: [Laughs] We talked about different things. He liked telling stories, and he would tell sometimes the same ones, which I don't mind, because I do the same. So, one night he gave me his book, which I think I already had, but I really appreciated that he gave me his copy, and he began to tell me again the story of how he had carried the guitar for Joan Baez and had, in that way, gotten through the guards before the revolution. And he was so pleased that this really worked out. And he had told me it before, but I didn't mind. And the funny thing is that I have a friend in the Czech Republic and she has a band, and at that moment in time I had made some changes in my own band. And she came over to me afterwards and said 'What were you talking about? Were you talking about the changes in your band and how you have Dougie on drums now?' And so she thought that we were talking all about me and my music and the changes to the music, and I said 'Not at all!' We were not talking about the band; we were talking about the time that he carried the guitar for Joan Baez.

LK: How did it feel for you as an artist talking to an artist who became a president and, at the time when you met him, already was a president? Did it somehow influence the conversation?

SV: Not really, because he was so kind. It only influenced the conversation when, say, we had an event to go to – from time to time he would invite me to an event – or when we had the big concert. I remember going to some events with him, and there was a police escort, and we were all crammed into the little car and that was not the usual thing. But it never influenced our conversation with each other. He was always very friendly, a bit formal, but down to earth, and never made you feel that you were talking to someone too important to talk to. You know, he was always very friendly.

LK: It is very interesting from the point of view of context, right... Do you think that it shaped him that he was all the time in this political context? As opposed to before, when he was viewed as a playwright – and you knew him through his artistic works...

SV: Back in the '80s I didn't know him so well, I knew of him. There was a group of us in New York that was sort of following what was going on. They – my friends who told me about him – were more politically sophisticated than I was. I grew up in a very political family, and they were always taking us to demonstrations, which was not my favorite thing. So, these were not things I would do on my own. I felt myself to be not apolitical, because I grew up as a Democrat – a liberal Democrat – in a very impoverished part of the city, and we depended upon government programs, so I still have those roots. But it is not my nature to be radical, or to go to demonstrate and all of that stuff. So, you know, I was interested because my friends were interested, and this man was in jail because of what he had said, and what he had written. And so I kind of knew about him from a distance, and then when he became president it was just amazing – it was amazing! Everyone in the United States was awed that an artist could become president, and especially one who had suffered that way, and his reversal of fortune happened so quickly, it was really kind of stunning.

So, we all thought it was so cool, and we all knew that he was a fan of the Velvet Underground and of Lou Reed, and I was a big fan of Lou Reed for years. So all of that kind of created this mystique about him when it happened.

LK: And so when you later on went through his works, what left the biggest impression on you? What was the one that most inspired you, maybe?

SV: The book that really... Besides *To the Castle and Back* which... I love it because it's his private writings, it's very personal. It has these sorts of repeated refrains of, you know, 'Where's the cutlery?' and these sort of intimate thoughts that he has while he is struggling to make sense of this new regime that he has to begin, that he has to set the tone for. So I love that book, but the other one I really loved is *Letters to Olga* because of what it is. You know, before I bought it, I read on Amazon some of the reviews, and some of them were very critical – you know 'This is so stuffy! I don't understand!' You know, you think you're going to read a book of love letters, 'Dear Olga, I miss you so much...' And it's not really like that at all. He is setting forth his thoughts, his needs, his wishes, some of the activities of the day. He's very censored, so what you see is this document of a man trying to maintain himself and his integrity under this intense pressure. And he's only allowed, I think, to write to one person, so he chooses Olga, his wife, to do this. But it's very unromantic, and she's not always responsive. So you really feel for him, because sometimes she doesn't answer his letters, or sometimes she won't come and visit him. So he is begging her to come and visit and to bring chocolate and tea. So it is both a personal document and at the same time you have to read between the lines and see what it is he's really saying. And there's a philosophy that comes through by the end of the book, you see what he believes, and you see the tenets of his philosophy – that comes through later.

LK: So all these things that he believed in and that you understood throughout the book, did they strike a chord with what you understand, and what are your main values?

SV: Umm, yes. I felt a very strong chord of sympathy with him. There have been times in my life... I don't really talk about myself that often, my own childhood or my own... You know, a lot of times in my songs I pretend to be other people, it is just easier that way for me... But there were times in my life where I was censored, where I was struggling with very difficult issues with no one to turn to. I myself in some of the songs kept a sort of code, wrote in a kind of code to be true to myself, even though I felt that I was being censored. So I understood this, that this was a parallel situation, in a sense, which I tried to express to him, in my way. And I think he understood it. And we were always going to go and have a beer – this was always like this promise that was held out, 'Oh, we'll go and we'll talk about these things in a more private setting.' Which never came, because his health was bad, and so...

LK: But there is a major similarity when you say that you are trying to take upon another role in your works, so he was also taking many roles in his life – he was a playwright, he was a dissident, he was a jailed person, then he was president, then he was a major political figure – do you think you had this in common?

SV: I'd like to think so, I'd like to think so. I think he had more of a wide-angled vision of society. I did see his last play, which was called *Leaving*, so I always had the sense from him that he had the wider perspective, partly because of how he grew up. He grew up in a wealthy family – was it wealthy or upper middle class? Well, with lots of money and a way of doing things. It is possible to have a lot of money and be chaotic and crazy in your thinking. But you know, some families, if you have a lot of money, it means there's a way you set the table, there are servants, there is protocol. And so he had a much wider angle than I would say I have. I tend to see more individual

stories, individual people in certain circumstances; it is sometimes harder for me to see the wider picture.

LK: And so in what role was he closest to you? As a playwright, or as a writer of eloquent essays, or as a thinker? Because you are close to the theater yourself, so were his plays in any way inspiring for you?

SV: Well, I just saw the one. And I was a little surprised by it. I thought some of it was very funny. If I had any criticism, it was only that there was a tiny little stripe of cynicism, which I was not expecting from him. And it came out in the role of the assistant. The assistant is devoted to the man in office, who is leaving, and he is leaving with great reluctance. And you sort of know by the end of the play that even though she is devoted to him, she will be as devoted to the next person that comes into the office, and she really has no principles. So, I felt a bit sad about that. You know, I don't like it when people assume that women have no principles, that they have no ideology of their own, that they are only doing... That they are like animals, you know, that they have no... So I would have, if I had had the opportunity, asked him, you know 'Is this true? Why did you do that?' But I didn't have the opportunity. So I wouldn't say that his plays were inspirational. But I felt that his writing, and his life – what he did as a figure – is so unusual. He himself could be a character in a play.

One time I did an interview with Philip Glass, and I've seen all of his operas, and he very often will have a figure, a male figure usually, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and I said 'How do you choose your characters that you write about?' And he said 'Oh, that's easy! It's the ideology – if I am attracted to their ideology, I put them in.' And I thought that's really great. And that's what gave me the idea, I was like 'Where are the operas about women and their ideologies? Except for

Joan of Arc, she seems to still be the one that people still think about.’ So, he himself could be a person in a play, in an opera.

LK: So when you look at him and his legacy now: if you were to explain to a young American what his legacy should be, or why is he relevant today?...

SV: I feel he is very relevant. Now, the problem is that there are many young people who don’t understand what happened; they don’t understand what could happen in a society. They have gotten, we have all gotten a little careless – we’ve gotten a little comfortable. So, there are tons of people who don’t see the danger, they don’t believe it. They are starting to discover it again through the literature, because of our current administration. So, suddenly you have books like *1984* by George Orwell, or you have *Animal Farm*, and these things suddenly pop into relevance again. Because we’ve had these wonderful years where we’ve made advances, and things got... You know, people have become comfortable. And I think a lot of young people don’t really believe it. You know, you see it in old news reels, but it is not something that they know. So yes, we need to study his life, we need to know what he suffered in jail and why he suffered. And what the whole thing was all about, and why the whole thing that he did was so heroic, even though he might not have looked like the kind of hero who runs around... He was very methodical in what he did, but what he did was still remarkable, because of what he suffered and what he overcame, and what he did for the people of his country.

LK: He is, because of everything that you say, understood as a person and a politician of great moral value. When you look at the world today, do we need politicians of moral value, or do we see politicians of moral character?

SV: That’s a good question. We need politicians of moral character, certainly. What kind of man do you want to lead the country? And yet, you can look at someone like Bill Clinton, or you can

look at someone like Václav Havel, and look at their private life... Some people would say that Bill Clinton, for example, was not moral because he fooled around with other women while he was in office. You could say the same about Václav Havel, who, it has been said, was not always true and faithful. So you have to look at it that way – some people might condemn him for that, but I don't. I feel that what he achieved, what he did morally and philosophically, I think it outweighs whatever he had going on with his wife. And the other thing is that people who run for office are human, no one is perfect, we don't have saints running for office, so there is a kind of margin for some humanity there. But overall, yeah – you want someone to at least pretend, or try... Someone who has some sense of ideals. I mean, I'm going to be blunt here, but that was one of the things that was shocking to me about Trump; he was not even pretending to be good, moral, kind, thoughtful. You know, most people pretend to be good, and then they are found out, and he was not even pretending, and he was elected, which was really shocking to me.

LK: Let's talk about this more in detail later, definitely. You mentioned that human rights have been for you an important topic, and you are a long-term member of Amnesty International and support it.

SV: ...And others, yeah.

LK: So how did Havel's thinking on human rights and his whole concept of understanding human rights influence you, and how was it relevant for your understanding of human rights?

SV: So, at one time (and I don't remember when exactly), I started to research the idea of human rights. And I think we find it for the first time... I think it was coined during the 'Declaration of Human Rights' in 1949, which happened after World War II, and I think that is the first time it was used in any kind of public sphere. Which is interesting to me, because it is halfway through the century. So, from the second half of the last century we have this concept of human rights,

which becomes more and more important. And by the '80s, we have Amnesty International, and concerts to promote this idea. So, I wouldn't say he changed my idea of human rights, but he certainly deepened it. And it is one thing to know it, and one thing to put it into words, but it is something else to actually be able to change the world around you, which he did with *Charter 77*. You know, to suddenly put all this pressure on a single point and then have it give way and suddenly have all this freedom, that is the truly remarkable thing.

LK: You mentioned that you grew up in a very liberal environment, was *Charter 77* something that people referred to? Did they know about it?

SV: You know, that's a good question. I was wondering that myself. I don't think that we did talk about it. My father – my stepfather, who raised me – was very aware of a lot of different politics happening all over the world. I don't think we discussed the Czech Republic specifically, I know we discussed Puerto Rico, because he was Puerto Rican, and we discussed situations in South America. So, they were probably aware of it, and I am sure that our friends were aware of it, but he [Havel] is not someone that I got to know until the '80s.

LK: And so the concept that even in the government, power should always... When Havel was in power he was emphasizing human rights, and that of course reflected in the foreign policy of the Czech Republic, and before that Czechoslovakia. Is that something that you think, as a person who is active in this sphere, a government should be emphasizing? Because we are getting to the period when that is slowly dropping out of politics, unfortunately...

SV: Umm, yes – I feel that human rights is part of politics. It should be part of anybody's administration, it should be part of the priorities that someone has when they run for office. Here's something that I thought was very interesting: when Václav Havel became president, he could have turned around and punished the previous regime. He could have spent a lot of time hunting

people down, putting them in jail, threatening them, punishing them, and he didn't. That is not how he wanted to spend his time; he wanted to look forward, he wanted to put this other philosophy in action. And I thought that this was very interesting, I thought that this was the right thing to do. Some people I know have felt that this was a mistake, because then these people are still running free and they are unpunished, and they can still put down roots and their philosophies can grow. So maybe in the long run, who knows whether it is the right thing or the wrong thing? But I felt that it was consistent with his character, which was not by nature a punitive, punishing one. He loved – he loved life, he loved women, he loved bohemians, he loved art, he loved good wine. He loved, his whole nature was positive. So I appreciated that, and I understood it, when Obama had become president, he also did not punish the people who had done this thing in the government with the money, when the economy crashed. And I remember thinking 'Oh, that's interesting, there's a similarity there in the approach of those two presidents.' Whether or not it was the right thing or the wrong thing to do, we'll see over time, but I felt I understood it.

LK: So, exactly as a concept, do you think it is feasible, and does it work eventually? Of course we need to wait, maybe, a little bit, but isn't this sort of a complete backlash, what happened with the elections here in the US?

SV: It's a complete backlash, and the thing is, I feel it is all wrong. When I see what is happening, and I see the energy being put into punishing and dividing, and we're going to have a wall, and [Trump's] rage and his anger at his own staff, and at the media, at the courts – there is not anyone, except his own daughter, that he is not furious with. And I just think what way is that to run anything, a country? But it just creates all this kind of hateful energy which is so against everything I've been brought up to believe. You know, I grew up in the '60s, I was a child in the '60s, I was taught you love your neighbor, you practice tolerance, you practice acceptance, you practice

empathy, you practice these things, and that's what we aspire to, we don't always achieve it... But to have someone who doesn't even pretend to aspire to any of that is really shocking.

LK: What do you think happened to American society that we are sort of in this different world now?

SV: I think at its core that it's racism. Two things: one is that Donald Trump is a rich white man, so if he were not rich, no one would care, no one would listen to him, he would be one more person talking in the street. But the fact that he has a lot of money at a time when a lot of people don't have a lot of money. And they feel that this is something they want; this is a very American ideal, to be on television and have a lot of money, we've been taught that this is the answer to everything – celebrity, and lots of money!

So, I think a lot of people felt angry that we had a black man who was in office. I think we will never know what Obama suffered while in office, because he was a person who showed grace under pressure – he and Michelle both were very graceful, and we'll never know what they experienced on a daily basis. But I think the fact that America did what they did is partly because they could not tolerate someone of his race being in power for eight years. It doesn't matter if he did a great job or maybe if he was somewhat disappointing, that has nothing to do with anything. It was a backlog of old feeling, old feeling that grew and grew because it had no outlet, and then it had this outlet in this election.

LK: At the same time we see the same things happening in Europe, it is pretty much global by now. And of course, it is speculation, but what do you think – considering everything you know about Havel and how you understand him – he would think about what's happening today and these shifts in society?

SV: I think he would feel that it was something to fight. I think he would probably be very deliberate in his targets and I think right up until the very end he wrote letters, he wrote articles demanding accountability: he might have retired, but he never really retired completely. So, I think he would just have continued to speak out and to protest in his way.

LK: There are endless discussions about what is happening to society and how should we face it, and how should we reconcile... Do you find in Havel's works and thoughts an answer to this?

SV: Well, I've been thinking about it lately. And obviously the era is different, and of course here in America it is not quite the same as it was in the Czech Republic – at least, we hope, not yet. But I've noticed the difference in the climate. For example, one thing that keeps coming back to me is that... And I can't remember what essay it is, but there's the idea of the greengrocer who puts his sign in the window, and he puts the sign in the window not because he really cares, it's not really an expression of his true feeling, he's putting it up there to be left alone, and it is his public demonstration that he is going along with the administration, but it has nothing to do with his own real self. And I have to say that after this last election, I have found myself suddenly nervous about expressing myself in public, you know, if I'm talking to my family or something and I want to talk about the election, I suddenly look around to see if there is anybody staring at me, or there is someone who is going to judge me, or even fight with me. So, you put up a smooth front so that people won't interfere with you. And that, I find... So, there are these little prickles of similarities.

LK: He talked a lot about conformity and conforming to power in his works – do you think that could be a sort of parallel for what is partly happening right now, in terms of transition of power over here, and exactly the situation that you are describing, that people are sort of backtracking and not really sure how to react? Could that be called conforming?

SV: Not yet, because here in America we are still allowed to say... We are allowed to demonstrate, we are allowed to call our representatives, there are all kinds of groups that you can join. I myself am part of one called 'Daily Action,' and she sends you a telephone number and a script and you call these people and you say 'I don't like this person and I don't like what they are doing.' And if you go on Facebook then it is just constant, constant, constant expression of feelings. So, it is not... You know he may say, Trump may say that the *New York Times* is not allowed into the press conference, but I mean, people complained about it, but the *New York Times* is still publishing, and they are publishing everything, and they are not in jail. You know, he is not really taking any punitive actions against them, it is more like setting little fires to distract people, at least at this moment in time. So we are still allowed to say what we want, we might feel a little weird in a diner, but ultimately we are allowed to say... This is part of America, to protest, to protest and keep doing it, every day.

LK: But even what you mentioned, it looks as if the boundaries of freedom and the sense of freedom...

SV: They are being tested.

LK: How much do you think this is being influenced by technological shifts and how we use different media – you mentioned Facebook, for example. Doesn't it backfire in many ways, as well, because there is this hateful reaction, many times, on these online networks and social media?...

SV: So what is your question?

LK: So, the question is how much does this new space where we can experience freedom change our understanding of freedom? Does it for you?

SV: You're talking about the internet? Cyberspace? Um, I don't – myself personally – I don't treat cyberspace as a place where I express my innermost thoughts. I'm used to keeping myself private, even in my daily life. So, I don't go on Facebook going 'Blah, blah, blah' about my innermost thoughts, I don't pretend that everyone is my friend. I make a clear distinction, but I know that not everybody does, and I think that we've reached a limit, where we really have to bring back a sense of civility. And that word 'civil' is so interesting, because there is also the word 'civic' – your civic duty – to be civil to someone else, and that includes on the internet. That includes the internet! There are ways to address other people where you still feel them to be a human being – that issue of human rights still applies on the internet, so these derogatory things that people feel so free to express themselves... I've think we've reached a limit, and I think it is both degrading and kind of corrosive to allow it to continue, all of this eating away at the human feeling between people.

LK: Well the divides are clearly huge and there is all this discussion about how the media should bridge the gaps between people who are closed off in these secluded communities, for example online. Do you as an artist see a way to bridge the parts together?

SV: Well, I can try – I mean, and some of it... I feel like some of the songs that I've written already, I mean without knowing it, I guess... The last couple of projects that I've worked on have this clear goal of a kind of love that is expressed in the songs, one of them is the song that I wrote for Václav Havel called *Horizon*, and it says: 'There is a road/ Beyond this one/ It's called the path/ We don't yet take.' And that means that there is this goal of universal love, which I had assumed was completely obvious, and now after this election I realize that this is not completely obvious, that there are some people who think of their greatest goal as this sort of unifying hatred, and they think this is good. So, I can sing my songs and I hope that people hear them, I hope that they are moved by them, I hope they find them relevant. And that's where I put my politics, in

those particular songs, especially lately. And again, I could not have foreseen the context that these songs would be heard in when I wrote them.

LK: Do you think people are willing to listen – again backtracking to Václav Havel who was a playwright, later on a president – now, when we look at current affairs in America, are artists becoming even more important in their message?

SV: Yes and no. Of course, art is always important and a message is always important, always. Unfortunately, the way that music is being shared these days makes it hard to feel valued. I listen to the radio, I listen to a lot of pop radio – mostly when I'm doing exercises, because it has a good beat – and it's all about sex and the usual stuff, and boasting about how much money you have, or how much money you want. So those messages are... So, the really serious stuff is becoming marginalized, even Bob Dylan, you know, who is such a great poet, you still have to explain to certain people who he is and why what he's done is so great. So, these lessons have to be learned over and over again, and in very difficult ways.

LK: And if I can go back to Václav Havel again, there is some sort of a striking resemblance, he was a marginalized person put in jail, is that again something that you can take inspiration from – from what he has done and how he lived?

SV: Yeah, of course. He was marginalized, and then suddenly he became the center of power. Unfortunately, you can say the same thing about Bannon, you know? He was a man who has always been sort of on the fringes, which is where I think he belongs, but suddenly the rock is lifted up, and he is in the middle of things, and he can put all of his theories into action, which makes him very dangerous. So, it works both ways unfortunately. But yes, we can of course look at Václav Havel's life and how he lived and take inspiration from it.

LK: So as someone who grew up in multicultural New York, and especially in the Latino part of East Harlem, how do you feel about current rhetoric, and the immigration orders, and the discussion of deportations, and the measures?...

SV: It's dreadful. It's dreadful to have people afraid for their lives, it's dreadful to have people who have been here a long time and for whatever reason were not able to become legitimate, to suddenly be picked up and thrown out of the country, separating them from their children. I grew up not just in East Harlem, but then later on we moved to the Upper West Side, which was filled with all kinds of immigrants from everywhere – from Germany, from Spain... And these people found New York a kind of shelter, and this was my neighborhood. So, it's just one more thing that is so wrong about the, about this regime, the way it is, you know?

LK: It seems that there are as many Americas as there are Americans. Because someone from the middle of some secluded community in the middle of America would have said probably something else, and they would understand the experience... Is for you music, theater, the arts, a way, especially now... Are you finding a way to distribute these feelings and share them so that [others] understand this American experience, your American experience?

SV: Yes, I think to some degree I've done that in all of my songs. Either I am trying to share my experience or uncover little stories and say 'Look, this is how this feels' - to teach empathy, in a way. I took a class when I was in school called 'the dramatic monologue,' and I learned there that you can stand on a stage and say these words, and that a poem is not always just a confession of the writer, that you can create a character and, by saying those words, you can step into their shoes and feel what they might feel. And this was kind of a revelation for me. So, there are a lot of the songs which are like these little dramatic monologues – I'm thinking of *Caspar Hauser*, *Calypso*, *Luka* – you know so many songs have these little stories that are uncovered. And what I am trying

to say to the audience is ‘Put yourself in this person’s shoes,’ and that’s what I’ve tried to do from the first album.

LK: How difficult is it? Has the process and the way that people experience your stories, has the feedback that you get, changed over the years, since the time of *Luka*, for example? I’m trying to get back to the whole discussion of the divides, and the fact that people don’t listen to each other. So, have you been experiencing the same?

SV: It’s hard to tell, and the reason it is hard to tell is not so much because of the work itself, but because of the success which came and went. So, in the late ‘80s, you know I had this wild popularity, and I was selling millions of albums, so it is not that I feel the work has changed, or that the response has changed, it is really more that I was sort of a pop star back then, and now I’m just an artist. I’m not a celebrity as much, I’m just writing and doing my things that I do. So, that’s changed, so it’s kind of hard to gauge, that sort of thing.

LK: How did it affect you personally, because you mentioned so many times, and you mentioned it in previous interviews of course, that you are a very private person? So, this whole fame and suddenly being a celebrity, how did it influence your own feelings and your own self? Was it hard?

SV: Well, it’s hard, yeah, it was hard to feel judged. Because you can’t be that public without drawing some criticism. Some people will find certain things charming and other people will find them annoying and irritating. So, the criticism that I got was sort of, you know... That made me feel very reclusive, but honestly, after this last election, when I see what people admire and what they despise, I feel I came through relatively unscathed. I feel like I came through it fine!

LK: Is there something like celebrity power? Now, I’m again going back to what is happening right now, and the music awards and the film awards, so there are all these very influential movie stars, film stars, people like you - do you think you have power to change people’s minds?

SV: Honestly I don't really think so. I feel... Sometimes people have asked me, do I feel a responsibility as a celebrity to try and talk about politics? And I always say 'No, not as a celebrity, as a private person, as a civilian, I feel the need to be involved and talk about my beliefs... And to try and influence people with my life and my writing.' But I don't sloganeer, I don't go on Facebook and say 'You must do this!' Or 'I think this.' I do it with my life. I live the way I feel people should live, you know, you can argue with me or whatever. But that's the way I see it, it is not as a celebrity. I, for example... I would never vote for one person because someone I admire voted for them. I look at the person, I see the words coming out of their mouth. I [ask] do I trust this person? Do I like them? I make my own decision directly, and there is something in me that believes other people do the same.

LK: How difficult is it for you to keep optimism in this way, and keep faith that, of course, your work is speaking for you a thousand times, and your life? But in this situation which you mentioned in which people are more and more drawn to this golden world of celebrities, and are not really looking for deeper questions and deeper stories...

SV: What is the...

LK: Is it difficult for you to keep faith in this approach?

SV: It is not difficult, because I have always been in it for the long run. And for a while, and from time to time, I sort of go into that world for a minute, and I enjoy it. But fame and celebrity is not something that I court, and it is not something I rely on. I made a little joke once and it was like: fame is like the neighbor from across the hall, he's handsome, and you say hello from time to time, but if you're desperate in the middle of the night, you don't call him up. You don't rely on this handsome stranger who lives over there. That is my relationship with fame, he's my handsome

neighbor, I see him from time to time, I wave hello. I don't call him on the phone if I'm needy. That's how I feel.

LK: And so back to Trump's America – where do you think this all is going? How do you feel about what is happening right now?

SV: I feel, fortunately, that there are so many people who are outraged. And I see them in the media, and I see them in the little groups that I am part of on Facebook, where women talk about their day-to-day experiences. I am very troubled by the anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim sentiments – I think this is not the America we want to have. This is a kind of throwback; it is a bit of stuff to clean up before we can move forward again. I took some comfort in both, I think, Gloria Steinem and Obama [who] said democracy does not move in a straight line and I think that's probably true. And I think right now we are having a kind of whirlwind of dirt and stuff that needs to come out so that we can clean it up and move forward in a way that really represents the spirit of the American people in its best form, and not just this kind of fearmongering and hatred. So, I think we'll get through it, but right now it's a mess.

Interview Paused

Interview Resumes – 00:47:09

SV: I always felt so privileged to be around him. I loved his way of... His group that he had around him, which was a mixture of politicians, but also bohemians, poets, and beautiful women. I miss the grandeur of his life, and at the same time the down-to-earth nature. I was there at the funeral, and the casket moved up the aisle and then turned the corner and went out, and I felt a kind of sorrow when he left the room. And I think about him and I think about... I feel like a way of life has been lost with his departure. So I think about that, and I try and think to myself that maybe I

could be that somehow, like, live that way, in that rich, grand, way. It's not about the money, and... It's really more about the attention to human culture, emotions, the expression of life and art, and a kind of joyfulness. I loved it, when I was around him, I miss it now, and I try to be that.

LK: But in a way you were a part of it, because he loved gathering people, and sort of watching, right? So you were in it!

SV: Yeah, I was, I was in it – I was part of that great group of musicians and people that were around. And I had varying roles. You know, sometimes I was on the stage, and sometimes I was to the side of the stage, but I always... I just loved being around him, and I was so impressed by his great energy. So, I just wanted to have that on the record: I miss him, I think about him.

LK: Thank you so much!