



# SEBASTIAN AROCHA MORTON:

From **SONGWRITER** to **PRODUCER** to **REMIXER**

INTERVIEW BY LORENZ RYCHNER

## Where did you find her?

She was recommended to me by a friend. She's got a beautiful voice, she's a bit like Sade, kinda mellow, but with a bit of jazz and soul.

## Tell me about your work with Yuridia.

She's a huge superstar in Mexico, she won the Latin American version of the American Idol, it's called La Academia, that's a big deal. Sony signed her and she went multi-platinum with both of her records.

Most of her songs are romantic, pop ballads, so they wanted to take her in a direction that could establish her in Europe, in the States, with a sound that could work in the Dance clubs, but that could also be played on BBC Radio 1 or Sirius, places where a pop ballad in Spanish is just not their taste.

So we did it, it charted on the Billboard electronica chart, she was like the only Spanish-language singer on the charts. I basically took her greatest hits from her last two records, my friend at the label came up with the concept and he's like, "I'd like you to make an album that could be enjoyed as an album, meaning you don't necessarily have to know that it's just a compilation, but where you could actually listen to it, and if you didn't know the original tracks you would think that this could be the original."

## Did you have the freedom to pick songs from the two albums?

No, they mostly picked it by success, they wanted *the* greatest hits. There are some covers on there, too, that Robbie Williams song 'Angel', and 'This Ain't A Love Song' by Bon Jovi (in Spanish 'Como Yo Nadie Te Ha Amado').

## From talking to some of our readers I get a sense that some might wish to branch out—they like writing songs, and they have gotten quite good at recording them, but some feel they could do more with the equipment and the experience they have built up. Hearing you describe what you do creatively with an established singer and her songs, doing remixes that give the songs a new life, makes me wonder—how does one start out doing that?

I could tell you the way I started in remixes. It's actually one of the most proactive things you could do. I have a friend who was in a huge band from Mexico called Molotov, they got a couple of Grammys, and he would constantly send me tracks.

## Just to listen to?

Yeah, just as a friend. One time he sent me a video and said, "I can't send you this track yet because it's the new single, but I can send you the video. Just don't show it to your friends."

This was before you could tape DVDs, this was 1998. Pro Tools was 8 tracks I think... maybe 16. So he sent me the video and at the time I was really interested in Dance music, I always have been because I love synths, and I love drum machines, you just kinda get into it. I asked him "Hey, you know, maybe I could do a remix of this, because it's such a cool groove." It was a song called "Voto Latino", which became a huge hit, it's almost like a cha-cha. He basically said "Yeah, but I got to see if I can give you the parts from the label"... I didn't have any credits at the time, so the label wasn't gonna give me a chance. That's one of the problems these kids face, like a Catch-22.

So I took the output from the VCR, recorded the whole track into Pro Tools, filtered the track so that there was basically only the

**G**rammy-nominated Sebastian Arocha Morton is a songwriter and producer who's worked with a huge list of talent. *The Who's Who of chart-topping names on Sebastian's website (www.rocasound.com) is testimony to his versatility as a songwriter, producer, and collaborator in many genres: names like Chaka Khan, The Killers, Santana, Seal, and Sting. Much can be learned from his experience that he generously shared when we sat down in his Los Angeles studio earlier this year.*—LzR

## I see you have some old-school synth and keyboards—what do you do in this room?

*Sebastian Arocha Morton:* I'm mainly a producer and composer. I write songs with artists, I program a lot—my sound is a lot more electronic (than live bands), even though it's organic, but mostly programmed. I do a lot of manipulation with sound. I got the full setup with Pro Tools. It kinda starts here, then we overdub in the other two studios. There are four rooms here, we're partners and some projects go from room to room. We're all linked by servers.

The live room over there is a pretty nice room, tuned for drums. It used to be the band Poison's room, with the drummer Rikki Rockett; sometimes when we move furniture we find little souvenirs... [laughs] This room here was Foreigner's, in the Seventies. They really did a nice job with the ergonomics and the tuning of the rooms.

## So if somebody comes to you and says "I want to write some songs with you, I've got some lyrics, some ideas"—at what point do you come into it?

At the beginning.

## Okay, he or she comes in, has something on a little MP3...

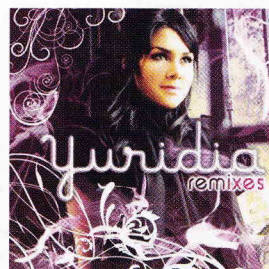
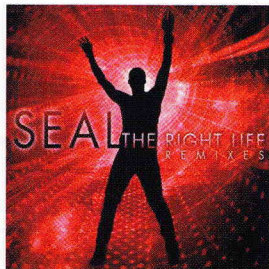
...or even just with a guitar...

## ...What happens next?

I might put up a track, just to get them inspired, and we'll start working on the idea. I get a lot of work from record labels, a lot of the time they'll have a little MP3—everybody has a studio now so they can come up with something—so they'll come up with a concept and then show it to me. And if I think the idea is strong, then we can either take what they've already done in their home studio and kinda replace whatever needs replacing, or start from scratch. It all depends on how we approach it.

And often labels want a remix—I just did one for Seal, on Warner Brothers.

**You signed Samantha James. [The title song of the CD that Sebastian produced for her, *Rise*, on Om Records, reached Number 1 on the Billboard Dance charts.—Ed.]**



midrange left, where you don't have the bass or the drums, it sounds like Beck, that kind of lo-fi. I cut it up, I added a beat, and just made it cool and sent it to the band. I worked on it for like two weeks, and it was really hard because we didn't yet have all these incredible programs like Ableton Live...

#### And you didn't have stems or an a cappella to work with...

No, so it was very slow going. I chopped up every vocal part, time-stretched it, fit it and then basically triggered it back with a sampler over wherever I wanted the part to be. It came out kinda lo-fi and cool, the sampler cut off certain things. They liked it, they *really* liked it, so they showed it to Gustavo Santaolalla, the Oscar winning producer who is their producer.

Next thing you know he's calling me saying, "Hey, can we use your track for—funny enough, I don't know if you knew this was going to happen, but we're putting together a remix of the band's greatest hits!" And that was my first paid remix. They said that they realized that my equipment wasn't the best at the time, so they had me give them the parts and they worked on it a bit.

It was so gruelling to go through making a remix like that, after that I could pretty much do any kind of thing. Like if someone were to send me the correct files it would be a breeze, I had done it the hard way, learned from doing it, and it worked.

So I guess, talking about how to get started, you have to get creative. As to how—do what you can; the way I saw it was, my easiest "in" was that I had an "in" with the band.

#### Some artists give a cappellas away, and some bands even hold remix contests...

Yeah, that's one way to do it. The problem with that, though, is that your chances of actually doing something with it are slim, because of the competition factor. I still think that seeking out people is best, and maybe convincing them, whether it's the artist or the manager, to give you at least a chance to let you do something for them for free. If they like it then you can talk about it.

The "spec" is very common in the industry, especially with remixes, they'll spec out 20 remixes but they only keep eleven. But at least if they give you the chance on spec, even if it doesn't work, doesn't get released or whatever, you still have it as a demo.

#### How do you translate your songwriting chops into this Dance and remix scene?

There are certain sounds that become staples, you have to know them. Satellite radio is a must-have for producers, I think, because the way they classify the stations is very interesting. There are mainly four, Sirius Chill, Sirius Area, The Beat, and BPM. It's a matter of degrees of how hard you hit it.

Chill is more for vocals, or more like landscapes, ambient. Area is for a kind of thing with a lot of vocals, not necessarily things they play in clubs, but more Dance music on its own without necessarily being remixes. BPM and The Beat are more like Dance remixes of artists like Beyoncé, Kanye West, and they all have certain requirements to fit into the genre.

DJs choose according to their own likes and dislikes—this Yuridia remix I showed you, some DJs will not play it, others will. It has a lot of vocals, some don't play that. That's why on the back I label the tracks with different names. One is just a

ROCAsound mix, one is a dub, that helps DJs pick whatever they need and what I think they'll like. Dub means it doesn't have a lot of vocals, you just throw in the hook here or there.

#### Can you aim your production at a certain type of venue?

Even though the trends do move, they stay within three major things. There are what they call the Big-Room Clubs, which is like festivals, fifty thousand people, you have to play a certain tempo because otherwise the DJs will lose their set if it doesn't fit. There are DJs that are superstars in that genre, like Paul Oakenfold, Paul Van Dyk—the guys who play gigs like the Olympics.

Then there's the middle of the road which I think is more like specific concert places and smaller clubs, and those tend to be a lot more funky, remixes like San Francisco style, New York, Chicago, what they call House. You won't really play House at a stadium or a festival, people just won't react.

Then there's the smaller type, which is Lounge or Chill-Out, more like the W Hotel Penthouse, Berlin top restaurants, almost background music. Samantha James is a bit more in that genre, we're in all the W hotels, the Buddha Lounge in Paris.

So it's interesting, it's almost like everything is marketing, at the end of the day you don't come in and say, "Today I'm gonna do a so-and-so dub track". You do what you do and DJs will figure it out, but you have to figure out who to give it to so that they will play it. If I give my stuff to Paul Oakenfold, it's too slow for him. But it actually has too many vocals for some other DJs. It sets you in a certain genre which is your niche.

#### Is that limiting?

Well, I'm a musician and a producer before I'm a remixer, so I rarely sell myself as a remixer. I think when labels give me a remix it's because they actually want the people to buy the song as a new version and listen to it at home and in their car. I'm not really a guy that will bang the clubs up.

Why? Because I don't really like that music to begin with. I'm not a hard House or Trance hitting guy, I come from listening to Sting and Peter Gabriel and I love Duran Duran and electronic and fused things like Seal. So when a label gives me somebody like Yuridia, yes, they'll get some club play, but also we do really well in regular sales, and radio. Most remixes don't sell well because not a lot of people listen to that.

#### So your remix, your new song production would be just a livelier version of the original, but it's still *that* song?

It's still that song, and I keep every lyric and I keep the verses and the form, but I make it uptempo; where they had live instruments I'll program everything, with electronic drums, even some Kraftwerk kind of things. Or Moby.

What I do is a little more Electronica than Dance, because even if you go to iTunes, people who are in Dance are mostly DJ this and DJ that, people that are in Electronica are more like artists, like Moby, Air, Zero 7, Thievery Corporation, it's people that you actually go and see in concerts where they've got a band. I'm more in their league because I love song forms. ☺

Learn more about Sebastian Arocha Morton's projects at [www.rocasound.com](http://www.rocasound.com).