

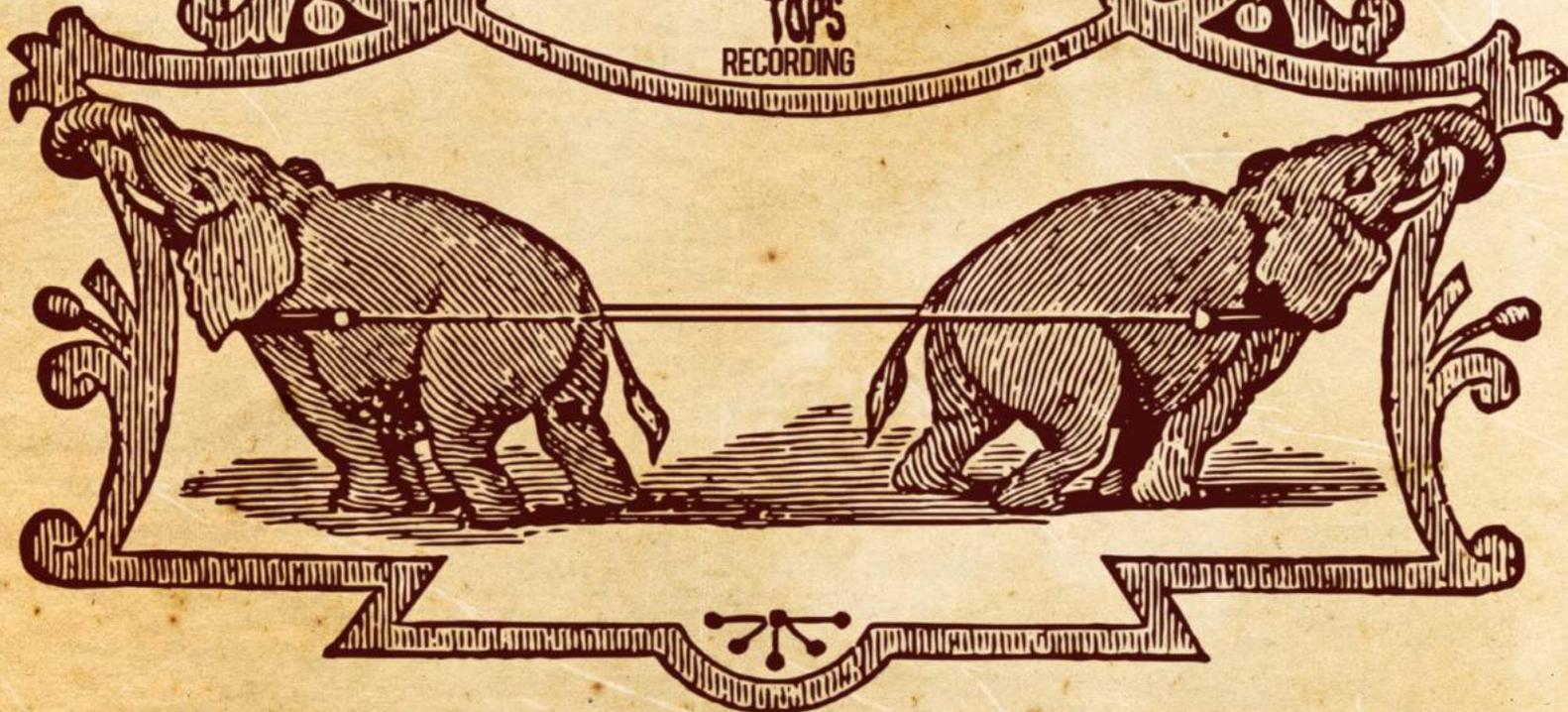


**THE  
ELEPHANT  
IN THE ROOM**  
*—The Singing of—*  
**ROBBIE BASHO**

*An essay by  
Rob Caldwell*

*Published by*

**GRASS-  
TOPS  
RECORDING**



## The Elephant In The Room: The Singing of Robbie Basho

An essay by Rob Caldwell  
Published by Grass-Tops Recording

It's been called "demanding", "eerie", "unsettling", "overzealous"; over the years people have struggled to find the right word to describe Robbie Basho's unique singing style.

Reviewers tend to focus on his innovative guitar playing, and rightly so. Melding East Indian ragas, Scottish airs, Japanese and Persian music (just for starters), his guitar was a vehicle for virtual world travel. Basho, who died in 1986, was also influential on contemporaries such as Leo Kottke, John Fahey and William Ackerman - some of the giants of the instrument. His sound can still be heard in the newer generation of artists expanding the range of the acoustic guitar, such as James Blackshaw, William Tyler, Nick Jonah Davis, and Sean Smith.

In retrospect, his fellow ground breaking acoustic guitarists (Kottke, Fahey, Davey Graham, Peter Lang, Peter Walker, Sandy Bull, etc.) were not known for their vocals, if they sang at all. The guitar was the highlight and the drawing card, the tool they used to make their names. Even Kottke, who has sung the most of all of them, referred to his own voice as sounding like "geese farts on a muggy day."

In short, many have been influenced by Robbie Basho's guitar playing, but none his voice. Yet no discussion of Robbie Basho can be complete without a mention of that unusual singing voice; that "elephant in the room". It's something you can't get around once you start delving into his music. Sooner or later, you have to come to terms with the vocals and decide if you love them, hate them, or can just tolerate them.

There were very few, if any, contemporary comparisons or antecedents for the way Basho sang. Though his recording career began in the 1960's and paralleled the rise of psychedelic rock and the singer/songwriter, his vocals were much more theatrical and operatic. The singing of other cultures- Persian, East Indian, and Native American primarily - was an influence on his style as well.

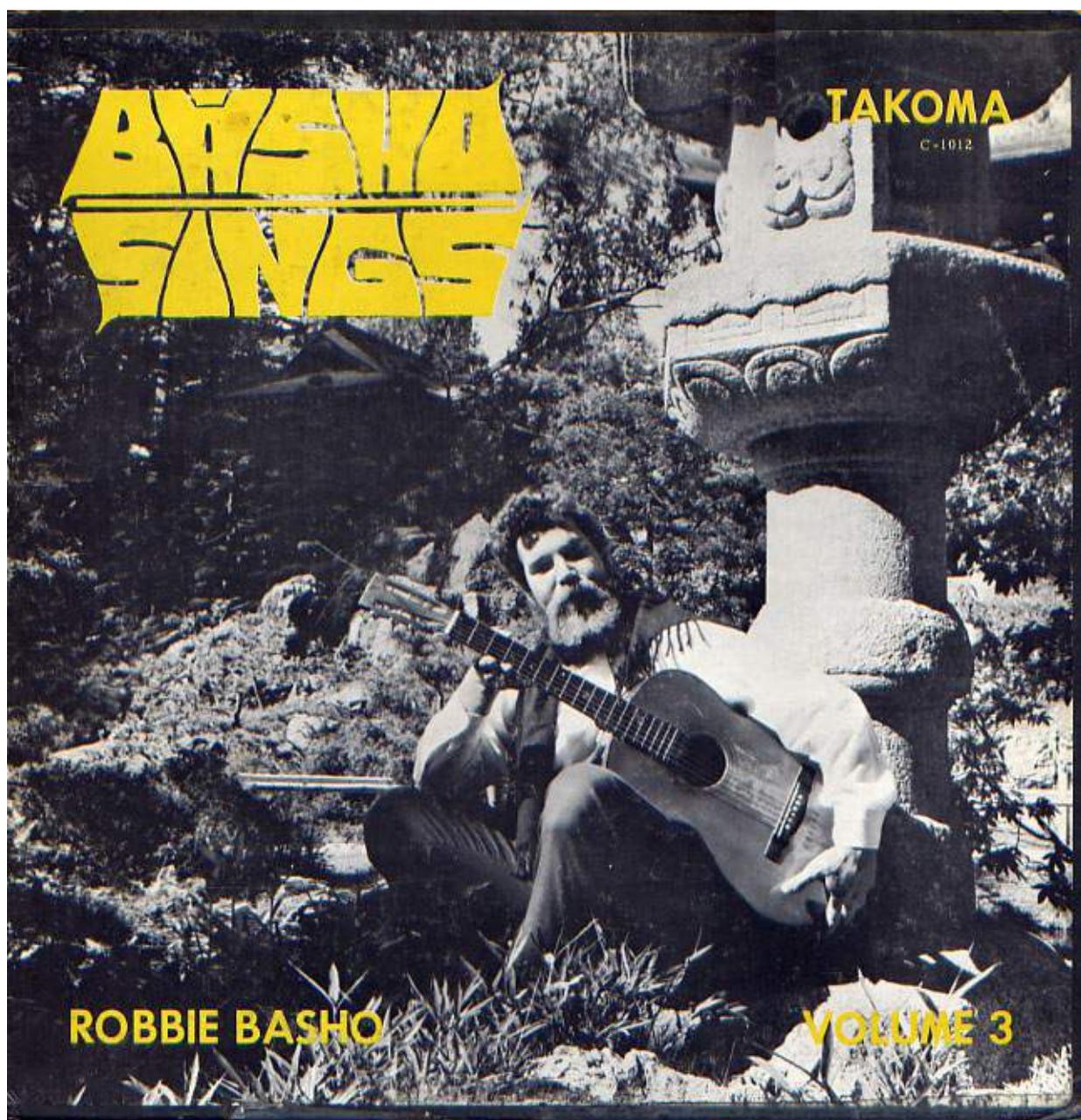
To find some parallel to describe and explain what Basho's voice sounds like, attempts have been made to compare it to other singers. Tim Buckley, Irish tenor John McCormack, avant-garde "anti-art" artist/musician Henry Flynt, composer and traditional folk ballad singer John Jacob Niles, Lebanese singer Fairuz (whom Basho expresses an admiration for in a 1974 KPFA interview): all have something in common with his style. Yet, none comes as close as Yma Sumac, a Peruvian singer who attained worldwide fame in the 1950's with her five octave feats of vocal acrobatics.

While sitar player Ravi Shankar was Basho's self-proclaimed prime guitar influence, Sumac was his favorite singer. There's a story that as part of a fraternity initiation when he was in college, Basho was locked in a closet for hours and forced to listen to Sumac records. Yet, rather than a torturous experience, he enjoyed every minute and it became one of the formative experiences of his musical life. Much later, he dedicated the haunting piano and whistling piece "Leaf in The Wind" (from *Visions of the Country*) to her.

He professed, "I'm very fond of Yma Sumac and some of these things, because it's the heart of this country. It's very important. The music I hear today is like they're just roughing their fingers through the grass on the surface. Nobody has gotten to the real depths of this country, and I think we should before everything goes." (KPFA, 1974)

Like Sumac, Basho's voice was not constrained by gravity. There were leaping highs and plummeting lows, and though his vocal range was not as wide as hers, he made up for any deficiencies with enthusiasm and not a small amount of natural talent. There was a power and clarity present, which shown through whether he was intoning a Native American legend or praising a divine muse.

It wasn't actually until Basho's third album that he "went vocal". When he did, he did in a big way with the audaciously titled *Basho Sings*. From there, there was no turning back. Most future albums had at least one sung track, and some albums such as *Voice of the Eagle* and *Bouquet* featured vocals throughout.



It's as if, once he reached a certain point, he just had too much to say solely through the guitar. And the self-written, detailed song explanations in his albums only went so far in conveying the emotion and feeling he wanted to convey with the music. He couldn't contain himself in just those ways, and singing provided an outlet for the bursting passion he felt. So he let forth his booming voice with no restraints. If the right words weren't available, he'd utilize his musically adept whistling instead, as he did on a number of songs going all the way back to his first album.

What was he singing about with such zealousness? He sang of God, and also Indian maidens, medieval crusaders, silver singing rainbows, and the "golden footsteps of the sun". He put to music sagas and legends he had read about and some that he invented. The old folk ballad style which drew from legends and romantic stories has similarities. Yet, these were simple constructs in comparison to Basho's lyrics, which were often criticized as flowery, overly romantic "purple prose". And, make no mistake, they were ornate.

Take the following, for example:

"I am the flower of love's unfolding / I sleep in the gentle finders of the heart / Held aloft in the breeze, against the silent breast of the soul" ("Rhapsody in Druz")

or,

"Blue crystal fire: burn brightly in me, my love / Smooth singing sunshine: wrap your blanket around me, my love ("Blue Crystal Fire")

These were not the lyrics of the "meat and potatoes" (as he referred to it) folk music of his early music career. Basho's lyrics were a potpourri of exotic tastes and flavors. And he meant every word he sang. Because no matter how ornamented the words could sound, if nothing else, Basho was sincere and unapologetic about what he was singing about. To him, the words weren't flowery - they told the kind of stories he wanted to tell and expressed his worldview and the emotions he felt. Plain prose wasn't enough for someone who experienced life so vigorously and so much through his senses.

To understand the intention and roots of Basho's lyrics, one must understand that Basho's life was a continual search for God, an exploration of the connections between cultures and religions, and perhaps most importantly an effort to understand himself in relation to the modern world. For, the world Robbie Basho felt he belonged in no longer existed. It was a world of the past.

In a 1980 radio interview he's asked about the nostalgic quality in his works. He responds: "I just feel it deeply in those periods. I can feel there's a certain time in France that's beautiful, there's a certain time in England that's fantastic. I can taste it, I can feel it. And I just feel like a naked child in the 20th Century. There's nothing great happening, really. Everything's going so fast, it's all mechanics; it's all technique going on right now. Whereas there was more space to live and feel *then* ..."

Since he felt a connection with times gone by, he took inspiration from the tropes and styles of older music and folklore. In addition, he felt a kinship with the religious and devotional music of cultures traditionally attuned to the spiritual. This was a natural alliance for him as they, too,

were expressing ideas and concepts beyond the concerns of everyday life. This manifested in his guitar playing as well as his singing and lyrics.

If this all sounds very dour, serious, and mystical, we should note that Basho had a sense of humor as well. This comes forth in interviews and occasionally elsewhere (“Instead of putting forth to clout some poor alien over the head for a bloody cup – one may sit still and dream and find the golden grail inside” – liner notes for the *The Grail and the Lotus*). He never joked about his singing, though, and appeared to have every belief in the power and meaning contained in his lyrics.

So, though he was aware on some level how unusual his singing and lyrics were from reviews, comments and just the fact that nobody else sounded like him (except maybe Sumac), it didn’t make him change his approach in the long run. In a 1978 article in *BAM* magazine he refers to his “art songs” and doesn’t deny that that his music is “esoteric.” Yet, he had the conviction and driving sense of purpose not to be dissuaded from his musical path.

His singing undoubtedly hurt his record sales and it is part of why he’s little known to this day. Yet, you can’t have a true understanding of Robbie Basho without the vocals and the purple prose. It was part of the whole picture of him as a musician. You can choose not to listen to it, to just play the instrumentals, but if you give it some time and approach it with an open mind, there’s a lot to admire and appreciate. You might even grow to enjoy that aspect of his music. If not, there’s enough wilderness in his guitar playing to explore for years.

*Rob Caldwell has written for PopMatters, The Allmusic Guide, and The Cockburn Project. He also runs a website on the 80's band The Reivers ([thereivers.net](http://thereivers.net)) and has a music blog called [Music To Eat](http://MusicToEat.com) .*

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