



## That Was Then

### Recent years have been unkind to Alejandra Guzman

Tabloid gossip, not music, ruled her life: She impulsively married a gringo (and months later divorced him) in Miami. Her ex-husband's conviction for drug dealing further damaged the reputation of a star who had had her own drug problems (she swore off them in 1997). An attempt to kidnap her daughter Frida Sofia was mercifully thwarted, but her foray into a business venture, a Mexico City clothing boutique, was botched. And finally, her career stalled.

Gritty Mexican rocker and engaging balladeer Guzman, often more American-sounding than many of her U.S. counterparts, grew up in a media fishbowl (her parents are veteran actress Silvia Pinal and Latin rock pioneer Enrique Guzman) and rode her own rocket of fame and notoriety in the early Nineties. Toward the end of the decade, however, after too much partying, ill-fated affairs, and skin-baring publicity (she posed in the Mexican edition of *Playboy* in 1994 and every once in a while would flash her chest at audiences in concert), she seemed on the verge of crash and burn.

Her 1999 release, *Algo Natural* (Something Natural), bombed -- despite a nomination for a Latin Grammy Award and a boost from the writing talents of Bacilos' Jorge Villamizar on the title track -- mainly owing to a lack of support by the Mexican branch of her record label, BMG, and to the Mexican entertainment media's new object of titillation: fellow fallen rocker/alleged cult slave/pregnant inmate in a Brazilian prison, Gloria Trevi.

What a difference two years and a good manager make. Her October 2001 release, *Soy*, has earned mostly glowing reviews and already gone gold. Guzman serves as guest-star anchor for Mexican TV giant Televisa at the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, and she will begin a full-force U.S./Mexico/Puerto Rico concert tour in March.

Guzman's rise and fall and rise again can be traced to the slow but steady emergence of women rockers on the Latin-American scene. Alejandra Gabriela Guzman Pinal began her career as a teen acting in telenovelas and theater. Her first album, *Bye Mamá*, was an instant hit followed by a new production almost every year. But soon her wild behavior onstage and off began to chip away at her credibility. Guzman admits she's guilty of excess but adds that the tabloids had a field day embellishing stories about her.

"It was I who chose to be the bad girl, I who have to withstand the pressure," Guzman acknowledges one afternoon on Lincoln Road, her petite yet curvaceous figure hugged by tight leather pants. Her many tattoos look even darker against her white top and deep tan. Her raspy voice is unmistakable, making others turn around and take notice.

She owns up to her commercial flop as well. "[*Algo Natural*] didn't flow," says the thirtysomething star. "It just didn't flow. It was a very difficult project, one that took a lot of time and showed the turmoil I felt inside. The producers and I never defined where it was that I was going. I mainly showed up and sang."

Still, when Guzman thought her record label was dragging its feet, she promoted the disc herself. "I did tour Mexico and the U.S., and somehow I showed the company that if we all really wanted, we could move my career forward," she says.



Diplomatically Guzman attributes the lack of promotion of Algo Natural to the reorganization undertaken by BMG at that time that left her working with no one in particular. Nobody there seemed to be in charge of her career. "We spent a lot of money on that record, and then it just languished," she observes, "until my last concert, in Puerto Rico, in February 2001."

That concert proved a turning point in her career. A favorite of Puerto Rican youth for years, beloved for songs such as "Mala Hierba" ("The Weed"), "Eternamente Bella" ("Eternally Beautiful"), and "Mírala, Míralo" ("Look at Her, Look at Him"), Guzman was booked by veteran promoter Cesar Sainz to do a one-night show at the finest concert hall on the island, the Centro de Bellas Artes Luis A. Ferré in Santurce. But the demand was such that two more shows were added; even members of the Mexican media attended the event. Guzman put on a performance unlike any other.

"I wanted to show my label that I could go on," she explains. "At that moment I changed my management. I restructured it from the bottom up. Then I invited my lawyer of the past six years, Alfredo Castellanos, to be my manager. And he brought me to a higher level."

A high-powered, handsome 37-year-old entertainment lawyer in Puerto Rico (his roster of clients reads like a who's who of Puerto Rican talent: Olga Tañón, Son by Four, and even Marc Anthony use or have used his services), Castellanos brokered a deal with BMG that put Guzman back on top of the company's list of priorities. "I always thought of her as a great star, with a lot of unfulfilled potential," says Castellanos one afternoon from his offices in San Juan. "I saw [it fulfilled] when she packed Bellas Artes with little promotion and no singles on the radio."

To stage her comeback, Castellanos suggested Guzman spend more time in Miami, where it would be easier for the two to collaborate. He founded Cast Entertainment exclusively to represent her, and in a rather unusual move, retained the services of Guzman's former manager in Mexico, Luis Olmos. "He's been a friend for many years, someone whom I trust. He represents Alejandra in Mexico so that I don't have to be there physically," explains Castellanos.

According to him, the wheeling and dealing with BMG was not as painful as it might have been. "I think I went in with such enthusiasm, so convinced that Alejandra would once again be the "Queen of Rock," that it just rubbed off on everyone," laughs Castellanos.

The deal also was a lucrative one. Although neither Castellanos nor BMG would reveal exact figures, Castellanos admitted he got Guzman what is probably her best contract ever, worth millions. And it is secure for three albums, to be fully promoted by the label.

Business taken care of, Castellanos turned to Desmond Child -- the Cuban-American music veteran who made a name for himself writing and/or producing for Aerosmith, Bon Jovi, Cher, Kiss, Hall & Oates, Bonnie Tyler, and Michael Bolton, among many others -- for creative direction. Child's forays into the Latin-music world had been rare, yet very, very successful. It was he who collaborated with Puerto Rican Robi Draco Rosa on the hit song that made Ricky Martin a worldwide hip-shaking phenomenon, "Livin' la Vida Loca."

"That was essential. To find someone with a name, who could give me back the sound of pure rock," says Guzman. "To show that we could make good rock in Spanish. It was a matter of going back to basics, of doing whatever had to be done to put out a good product. And Desmond gave me that chance."



Child didn't know much about Guzman at first. He did believe enough in her voice and delivery, however, to make her his first project entirely in Spanish. "Alejandra is an intense woman. Intense in everything she does, and she has given all she's got for this album," said Child at a press conference held in his North Miami Beach mansion last summer, when both artist and producer discussed their collaboration on Soy. With nary a hint of modesty, he added, "My goal is to put her back on top."

Easier said than done, perhaps. "Alejandra Guzman has come back strongly because of who she is," observes Diego Aguilar, of the Miami offices of Broadcast Data Systems, which monitors radio airplay in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. "The problem I see to sustain that, especially in Miami, is radio. There are not enough stations that play pop rock music, the kind of music she sings."

For her part Guzman has no intention of slipping again. "I have learned from my mistakes, and I am never going to let this ship sink," she vows. "It may be damaged at one time or another, but I will keep it afloat."