Yma Sumac retains timeless magnetism after 30 years

YMA SUMAC
At the Theatre on the Square, San Francisco, August 12.

By BILL CODERRE

I remembered a little over a year ago, I borrowed a tape from my friend Tom. I was interested in music for 18 Musicians, and as I was digging the percussion and sliding rhythms, another friend walked up, picked up the tape box, and nearly dropped it. "Eenam," he shrieked, and I wondered if there was a cockroach on it or something. I looked at him with that special look I reserve for people who come up to me on the street and ask to lick my toes. "Yma Sumac!?" he cried. Still getting the look, he slowed down and began his explanation.

Seems that in 1950 there was the Peruvian female singing sensation named Yma Sumac. She astonished audiences with her tremendous vocal ranges and effects that rivaled harpyard livestock; bird chirps and dog growls couldn't have come from that buxom young lady standing at the microphone. They called her a "vocal wonder," a "myth from the Andes," and a "Peruvian NIGHTMARE." They talked of the Peruvian legend of "The Bird that became a Woman."

Her first album, Voice of the Xtabay, con- vena Edith Massey and Bing Crosby, topping the billboard best-seller list for two years. It is still in print, the longest to be continuously printed by a single record company. Still, her best hit finding a copy is like a yard sale, at least until it becomes available in CD format.

The record itself featured traditional (i.e. 2000-year-old Incan) love songs, war chants, and religious music, set to 1950s studio orchestra manner, with plenty of "exotic" percussion and instrument. The closest match is the little studio orchestra maambos, with plenty of chants, and religious features (a Russian love song sung in Spanish, for example), and some of her own compositions. Almost all of the selections are slow and sad, sung in a very melodrama- tic and operatic style. The few that were upbeat were set in a speedy Latin Be-