

**The True and  
Marvelous Story  
of María Sabina,  
Mushroom  
Priestess.**

La otra vida de María Sabina  
(María Sabina's Other Life), by  
Juan García Carrera.

According to her godson and translator, this is the real, desolately marvelous story of the woman who once lifted her feet from the ground and flew beyond the clouds, higher than anyone had ever gone before. She knew the beauty of light as she climbed on the rays of the sun, went seven times around the Lord Sun, husband of the moon, and bathed in sweat returned to tell the story. She visited the ocean, and knew it for a very solitary place where she saw the dead eating and other

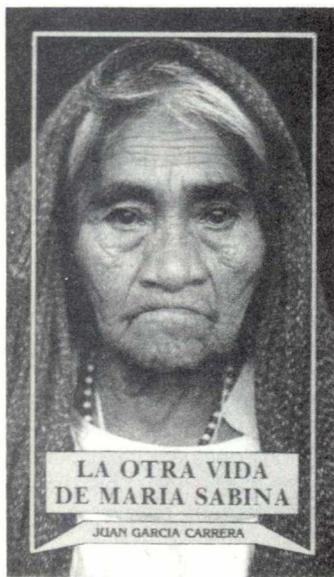
**voices of mexico**

## odds and ends

mysteries that frightened her, but with the help of the wind and mushrooms she crossed the width and breadth of it and then said, "How good it feels to reach the other side of the ocean."

She was born two months before her time in Río Santiago, on a day so cold there was nobody out in the streets. She was named María Sabina Magdalena García in honor of the immaculate Virgin Mary Magdalen, and was so small and thin that she fit into the palm of her father's hand.

She herded goats from the time she was very little, and listened to the ancestral conversations of her elders. While chasing a runa-



way lamb when she was seven years old she saw some "hard flowers", the mushrooms that would eventually lead her to fame and solitude.

She picked the "hard flowers", chewed them and knew peace. María continued to wash the dishes, sweep out the house, spin silk thread and hoe the earth. Like God, on Sundays she took a little rest.

After eating mushrooms -she called them little things, wise children- María would sing, dance, whistle and cry, and remember things she knew about even though she had never experienced them. She also raised chickens and picked coffee, owned six mules and sold fabric.

María married three times and each time she returned to her solitude with the memory of the beatings she received from the husband in turn. She had sons and daughters and grandchildren and was finally alone again with only the mushrooms and the misty Mazatec mountains for company.

She was over half a century old when, after eating 30 pairs of "little things" God personally handed her a book and said: " This book is full of wisdom. It contains truth, life itself and all kinds of secrets for healing. The world is yours, there's no turning back. You are to blame if you don't appreciate this book."

As a good Catholic she loved God and the saints and prayed a lot, yet she was still alone.

But the worst was yet to come, and it arrived in Huautla, Oaxaca, in the form of Gordon Wasson, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Zimmerman-Dylan and many other unknowns from strange and distant lands. María entered 30 years of sleepless nights after Gordon Wasson deceived her and taped her ceremonial chanting. She was accused of being a witch and of selling marijuana. She outlived her former husbands and some of her children and grandchildren.

She continued to communicate with mushrooms, "landslide, Saint Isidore, Little Birds." Films and profits were made out of her life, her songs were recorded and her face was photographed. People wrote books, articles, poems and theses on her and even named a restaurant after María without asking her permission. Many who were looking for some kind of truth, for healing secrets or profits sought her out, found her and used her. And then she'd be left alone again with her sadness and a sense of injustice.

She ended up completely alone, wearing rags and going barefoot, ill and with flies buzzing round her, sleepless and tormented because she had shared her ancestral priesthood with strangers.

And then a Mazatec student arrived at her side, and for four years, between 1981 and 1985, became her helper, translator, godson and adopted grandchild. On the evening they began their friendship, the would-be accountant says María Sabina said to him: "God greets you when you visit this place... Everything is as it was before, no one treads here anymore."

In July 1986 Juan García Carrera, who left accounting for journalism, published 5,000 copies of *The Other Life of María Sabina* out of his own pocket, "without exhibitionism... for the knowledge of Mexico and the world who heard the echos of the renowned mushroom woman."

In his introduction, dated in Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, García Carrera says he writes in good faith. He says he never intended to write a book, but "the chain of injustice, exploitation, manipulation, trickery, etc..." compelled him to tell the story, with his godmother's knowledge.

The subtitle to *The Other Life...* could well be *A report on infamy, sadness, hunger, rage and forsakenness*. The author is categorical when he states that María Sabina ceased to be alone when he arrived. "Our friendship grew and she was happy talking to me," despite the fact that the wise woman continued to eat "tortilla with salt and chiltepe chili." Among them they spoke in the Mazatec language.

*The Other Life...* is written in wild, violent language, and could also be called *María Sabina and her Godson-Translator, Alone Against the World*. There's a passage in the book that perhaps sums this up:

"When María remembered the ingratitude of the authors who churned out books about her life I felt compelled to include a page against those who exploited and defiled her magic world. It's not my intention to attack them, no. I only wish to remind them that the mushroom priestess is still on her feet. This is the real María Sabina, what is left of her. She was no longer the same person they visited when she was still strong and lucid, in full possession of her senses and capable of pleasing and amusing people who had the devil in them. Since her chanting was recorded she no longer chants; she doesn't ingest mushrooms because they've all disappeared; she no longer conducts "highs" because the trips finished her."

The book is organized into 16 disorderly chapter and contains 15 melancholy black and white photographs, and is a trip that leaves you sleepless and with a lingering sense of bitterness. *The Other Life of María Sabina* is a voyage back to the hell and the glory of a desolate sadness that comes to an end at two forgotten moments.

The first is when this humble 96 year-old Mazatec woman dies of chronic acute bronchitis, kidney ailment, moderate dehydration, malnutrition, hypochronic anemia and old age.

The second is when Juan García Carrera, her godson, translator, adoptive grandchild, ethnic

brother and now biographer, is overcome by tears:

"I went to her side immediately. I wanted to give life back to her. I placed my ear next to her heart and the touch of her cold body shook me. I held her hands very tightly and tears flooded over me."



Luis Perdomo Orellana

## Nicaragua's Ethnic Paths