



Luciana Souza's new album is titled *Speaking In Tongues*.

KIM FOX

Souza Explores Intriguing Sonic Territory

Luciana Souza figured it was time to throw a changeup. After a series of fine albums with largely the same musicians supporting her, she felt the need to stretch.

"It was time for something new," she said over the telephone from her Los Angeles home, which she shares with her husband (and album producer), Larry Klein, and their young son. "What went before was great, but I needed a clean slate. So that's what the new album is all about."

On the dynamic, overdub-fueled *Speaking In Tongues* (Sunnyside)—what Souza called "a musical inquiry into language and conversation"—the Brazil-born vocalist enlisted artists who hail from different regions of the planet to enliven her wordless vocal excursions. The players included guitarist Lionel Loueke from Benin, West Africa; harmonica virtuoso Grégoire Maret, who was born in Switzerland; Sweden-born bassist Massimo Biolcati; and drummer Kendrick Scott, a Houston native.

"I knew there were lots of possibilities playing with these guys," said Souza, whose voice serves as an improvisational instrument in the mix. "They are all generous, but I needed them to push me. The band offered me more than I had experienced—they were ready, open and unapologetic. Since they had a deep understanding of the limitations of supporting a singer, they poked me and said, 'Don't worry, we'll catch you.'"

After rehearsing in December 2013 and then playing eight warm-up gigs in 2014, they jumped into the studio. The resulting album includes four Souza compositions, Loueke's "A.M.," a Scott tune (co-written with Mike

Moreno), a reflective song by Gary Versace and renderings of Leonard Cohen's poems "Split" and "No One To Follow."

For the sessions, Souza brought in skeletons of compositions with bass lines, melodic phrasings and rhythmic impulses, which were expanded by the band. After that she did something out of the ordinary for her: She baked the tunes further in the studio with the help of Klein and engineer Maxime Le Guil, who added overdubs that extended beyond the boundaries of the original tracks. "I wanted it to be messy, full and dense, but also exciting," she said. "So what we did was clean, select and decide how far we wanted to go. Sonically if it helped the story to be told, I wanted it to be kept in. If the electronics went too far and [something] wasn't comfortable for me, we got rid of it. But there's a big difference between the roughs and the final."

Prior to the recording sessions, Souza spent a lot of time listening to albums by Weather Report. "I was seeking to do what they created," she explained. "They were my muse."

The nine-song *Speaking In Tongues* features such Souza originals as the celebratory "At The Fair," which gets its ebullience from Scott's percussive undergirding and skittering grooves, and the sonically textured "Straw Hat" (a song written for her late father, renowned São Paulo bossa nova guitarist Walter Santos), which soars with a wild harmonica ride by Maret.

Souza often relied upon Loueke as a soundboard in the studio when it came time to make important decisions. In addition to valu-

ing his informed opinion and perspective, she appreciated the guitarist's ability to move freely between acoustic and electric instruments.

"Luciana gave us plenty of room to express ourselves," Loueke said. "We'd record and then add in a lot afterwards to bring it alive more. I just got new equipment, so she gave me the chance to experiment with different sounds, like organ and distortion."

Loueke noted that Souza is willing to take risks and be in the moment. "She jumps immediately wherever you go," he said. "She's not afraid if I play the wrong chord behind her. She's not afraid to get lost. She goes for it."

Souza stumbled onto the introspective, sobering Cohen poems after she had decided that *Speaking In Tongues* was going to be devoted exclusively to wordless vocals. Those two musical recitations give the album another powerful dimension. Souza, in fact, had previously considered devoting an entire project to Cohen's words.

"Leonard is a family friend and had told me once a while ago that he didn't want me to do a whole record of his poems set to music," she said. "So I left that project, but then inside my piano bench I discovered printed versions of his lyrics I had written. I loved them. So I contacted him and he was very generous and sweet and said, 'Do it.' Some people say they don't belong on *Speaking In Tongues*, but I needed to include them because they hit me so deeply. I created simple melodies to let the words speak."

—Dan Ouellette