

January 04, 2014

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Luciana Souza: A Bossa Nova Baby Makes Her Mark in the Jazz Realm

In 2013, Luciana Souza gained a place among the world's top contemporary jazz singers by earning not one but two Grammy nominations, for *The Book of Chet* (for Best Jazz Vocal Album) and *Duos III* (Best Latin Jazz Album). The 47-year-old Brazilian vocalist now has a total of six Grammy nominations, a distinction that has gone largely unrecognized in her native country. She has also appeared on Herbie Hancock's Grammy-winning *River: The Joni Letters* and works by Bobby McFerrin, John Patitucci, Till Brönner and Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov, to name a few, and performed with several symphony orchestras. Souza sings with a quiet intensity and -- in *The Book of Chet* and *Duos III* -- favors spare, stripped-down arrangements. Her voice is clear and perfectly in tune, with a beautiful tone, and her phrasing is often daring, even startling. She's a vocalist who once said "each phrase for me has a certain gestalt" and she invites you to savor both the notes and the spaces between them. Souza is spectacular in a João Gilberto kind of way -- you have to listen attentively to fully appreciate all the nuances.

Souza's artistic influences include Gilberto (who invented bossa nova's guitar beat and introduced a low-key vocal style) and singers like Chet Baker, Carmen McRae and Joni Mitchell. She's a child of bossa nova and jazz in more ways than one. Souza was born in São Paulo to songwriter parents (Walter Santos and Tereza Souza) who were part of the bossa nova scene in their city and later founded Som da Gente, a small independent record label dedicated to Brazilian jazz and

instrumental music, which included the great composer and multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal on its roster. At home she was surrounded by the music of her parents and their musician friends. "Music was everything, music was the bread maker, music was the dream, music was hopeful; it was humor, it was the language that was spoken at the house. My father being a guitar player, he never left his guitar; he was constantly playing. It was happy, it was fun," Souza recalls.

Walter wrote commercial jingles to pay the rent, and he started using little Luciana in the recordings when she was just three years old. She says:

I think they detected early on that I could sing in tune and I was musical and I had a facility for learning melodies and learning language. So they encouraged me and the recording studio was like the living room to me. It was an extension of everything we did. We sang at home, we sang in the studio. They would teach me a melody, and I just loved it.

At age 18, Souza moved to Boston to attend the Berklee School of Music. There, she developed her talents as a singer as well as her abilities as an educator -- she eventually joined Berklee's faculty and after that taught at the Manhattan School of Music in New York. Since 1992, she has released 11 albums, and won her first four Grammy nominations with *Brazilian Duos* (2003), *North and South* (2004), *Duos II* (2006) and *Tide* (2010). She has interpreted Brazilian standards, recast songs by great American songwriters as bossa nova (*The New Bossa Nova*) and boldly devoted entire albums to musical interpretations of poets (*The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop and Other Songs* and *Neruda*). Along with way she married bassist-producer Larry Klein, with whom she has a young son; they moved to Los Angeles in 2006. He produced both *The Book of Chet* and *Duos III*. Souza has now been living in the U.S. for nearly thirty years, and is glad about her choice. "I came here -- to Berklee, to Boston, to New York, and L.A. -- because this is the music I want to make. I want to be in the environment, I want to be with the musicians, I want to speak this language; I need to be here." She adds, "As much as I miss Brazil, I find that here I can really be myself."

Her two recent Grammy-nominated albums reflect Souza's musical vision and her versatility. *The Book of Chet* is an homage to jazz trumpeter-vocalist Chet Baker (1929-1988), who was a major influence on many bossa nova musicians, and includes songs recorded by him such as "The Thrill is Gone," "Oh You Crazy Moon," "The Very Thought Of You," "You Go To My Head" and "Forgetful." The song choices were an attempt to capture the breadth of his career, rather than to compile his biggest successes.

"I was obsessed with him when I was in graduate school at the New England Conservatory," Souza comments about Baker. She says:

And then twenty years later I came across one of [his] biographies and then his autobiography and *Let's Get Lost* [the 1988 documentary about Baker]. And it came back to me -- why did I love him so much? And I got all the records out. His voice moves me so deeply...the way he sings...It's so pure, so direct, so unadorned. To me, there's an incredible, quiet, calm sadness. He's like a kindred spirit, musically and vocally.

On *The Book of Chet*, "The Thrill Is Gone" (not to be confused with the B.B. King song of the same name) is particularly haunting, with Souza's rather somber vocals over hypnotic repeating figures on bass and guitar, while "The Very Thought of You," with Souza's luscious rendering, is another of the album's many high points.

The Book of Chet and *Duos III* were released the same day and both were direct live recordings with few instruments. However, while the former album is consistently understated and introspective, with slow tempos that push the envelope, *Duos III* ranges across a variety of genres, including bossa nova, baião, some lively sambas (like "Tim Tim Por Tim Tim" and "Doralice," both with impressive scattling) and the wordless singing of "Dona Lu," written for Souza by Pereira.

On *Duos III*, the third in a series, Souza performs duets with three renowned Brazilian guitarists -- Romero Lubambo, Marco Pereira and Toninho Horta -- as she interprets Brazilian compositions, most of them standards, from composers like Antonio Carlos Jobim (four

selections), Haroldo Barbosa, Dorival Caymmi, Gilberto Gil, Ivan Lins, Djavan, Dominginhos and Cartola, as well as Pereira and Horta.

Souza likes the combination of voice and guitar "because it's how I grew up and because of my dad doing that." She adds:

The guitar doesn't sustain and the sound decays and dies; it allows for silence. The guitar can be very percussive, very melodic, and very harmonic, obviously. All these different possibilities in terms of orchestration can happen with just one instrument. So it is my favorite instrument but also it comes from the Brazilian tradition. A lot of these songs were written on guitar, we can do them in the original keys, and it just colors the music in a certain way, gives it the right color, the right timbre.

She adds, "and the people that I play with are very able and agile and most of them really have this sensibility in terms of improvisation." Each of the three guitarists has a quite different approach, technically and artistically. "You take the same exact guitar and give it to Romero or Marco or Toninho, for example, and they sound completely different. Marco is almost an intellectual with the guitar; he's a romantic, so he brings that kind of heavy heart, but is full of technique and thought" while "Romero is all fire, all rhythm, completely improvisatory."

Regarding Toninho Horta, she comments that in "the lineage of Brazilian music, Toninho gets a chapter as a songwriter, as a lyricist, as a guitarist. He's innovative in every way. His sense of harmony is unlike that of any other Brazilian -- the most refined, advanced and modern thing in Brazilian music that I know of." She teams with Horta, known to many Americans for his work with both Milton Nascimento and Pat Metheny, on four songs, including his own "Pedro da Lua" and "Beijo Partido."

Duos III and *The Book of Chet* were recorded after a nearly three-year break while Souza focused on being a new mother. "At this point in my life it was very important to put out those two records because I hadn't made a record [in a while] and it just made sense to come out very quiet and very strong." About her six total Grammy nominations,

Souza says, "It feels good. It talks about all the possibilities for small artists. Only one [album] was done for a major record label [Verve], and five others for independents. It's sort of an homage to my parents, because they were an independent record company."

The Luciana Souza Quintet -- with guitarist Lionel Loueke, harmonica player Gregoire Maret, bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Kendrick Scott -- will perform Jan. 17 at the Acadiana Center for the Arts in Lafayette, LA, Jan. 18 at the Carver Center in San Antonio, and Jan. 23 at Duke University in Durham, NC.