

The Boston Globe

Luciana Souza provides some Brazilian heat

The Luciana Souza Quintet has already found the kind of mutual gravitational attraction that some bands work much longer to achieve.

By Jon Garelick

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 27, 2014

CAMBRIDGE — There was a moment during “Aqueas Coisas Todas,” the fourth song in the Luciana Souza Quintet’s performance at Sanders Theatre Saturday night, where guitarist Lionel Loueke and harmonica player Grégoire Maret began trading two-bar phrases. As the intensity rose, Maret crouched and crab-walked across the stage toward Loueke, as if pulled by a gravitational force. Souza announced that this Celebrity Series of Boston concert was only the fourth performance by the band, but they already have found the kind of mutual gravitational attraction that some bands work much longer to achieve.

Souza, 47, has impeccable bona fides. Born in São Paulo, she holds degrees from both Berklee and New England Conservatory. Her three “Duos” albums cover the history of Brazilian song. And she has proven herself adept at singing jazz standards, singer-songwriter Americana, and also at setting poetry (most notably by Pablo Neruda and Elizabeth Bishop) to music.

But the quintet is another thing altogether. Although she did sing Brazilian standards (Toninho Horta's "Aquelas Coisas Todas," Cartola's "As Rosas Não Falam") as well as her own compositions, Souza also drew pieces from her band members. Most of the vocals were wordless so that Souza was, in effect, the horn player in the band.

Each player's personality contributed to the quintet's unique collective sound world. The Berklee-educated Loueke, a rising star in his own right, is from Benin, and on his "Ouidah" he sang and conjured West African percussion, note patterns, and timbres. The Swiss-born Maret basically plays bebop harmonica (he brought much of the flashy heat to Saturday's show), but with uncommon lyricism. One of the most attractive effects of the night was the way he often doubled Souza's vocal lines. Drummer Kendrick Scott's "A Pebble in Still Water" had a samba-like beat, and as Souza sang the arcing melody line, it came across as some long-lost song by the Brazilian singer-songwriter Milton Nascimento. Bassist Massimo Biolcati was a compass for the band's quicksilver shifts.

At the center of this, of course, was Souza, moving in and out of the music among her bandmates, demonstrating the "straight tone" she attributed to Chet Baker before singing a song associated with him, "The Thrill Is Gone." She has a beautiful, earthy middle and lower register, but she also knows how to place a high note and let it hang, as if unsupported. And she was clearly digging this band.