

Souza's Grammy-nominated 'Tide' reflects extreme loss and gain

By Charles J. Gans (CP) – January 20, 2010

NEW YORK — As the emotions of joy and grief swirled around her, jazz singer Luciana Souza found it difficult at times to work on her album. In the space of nine months, the Brazilian artist mourned the deaths of her father and mother while also celebrating the birth of her first child. But she could count on the support of her husband and producer Larry Klein, who encouraged her to keep working on her album "Tide" which finds her emphasizing for the first time her own original songs sung in English.

"I was just not in the mood to go and write songs and he was fundamental really to getting me to the piano and the guitar and to say, 'Keep going,' because music will be in my life no matter what," said Souza of the difficult time, from 2008 to 2009. "It was a tough period to go through with so many emotions and I started using the music ... as a place of comfort to lull and soothe myself."

Now "Tide" is up for a Grammy on Jan. 31, making it the fourth of her eight albums nominated for best jazz vocal album over the past decade. And though 43-year-old has yet to win in her own name, she did take home an album of the year Grammy two years ago as a featured singer on Herbie Hancock's "River: The Joni Letters."

This year's Grammys has become a family affair. Klein, who's won four Grammys for producing albums by Hancock and ex-wife Joni Mitchell, received his first-ever producer of the year nomination for his work on "Tide" as well as albums by Madeleine Peyroux, Melody Gardot and Tracy Chapman, among others.

Souza says her nomination is particularly gratifying because as a first-time mother she didn't do much touring to support "Tide," choosing to stay at home to take care of son, Noah, now nearly 1 1/2 years old.

"To have been chosen this time around, it's even a bigger surprise for me," said Souza, speaking in nearly accentless English by telephone from her Los Angeles home. "As a Brazilian ... to be recognized by my peers as a legitimate jazz singer is enormous and a huge boost for me to continue doing what I'm doing. ... 'Tide' is a perfect representation of what I like to do live best." Souza has distinguished herself from her fellow jazz vocalist nominees by not relying on familiar American standards. Instead, she's put together a distinctive repertoire on "Tide" that reflects the "gravitational pull of both Brazil and America" - mixing her native country's rhythms with the freedom of jazz.

There are love poems by E.E. Cummings set to her original music, classic Brazilian songs such as the expatriate anthems "Adeus America" and "El Quero Um Samba" offered as a homage to bossa master Joao Gilberto, and new songs written with Klein and lyricist David Batteau.

"We wanted to express the sense of ups and downs. How do you keep yourself steady - not rising up and down in the tide - with so many emotions coming, so much joy and grief at the same time," she said.

Souza closes the album with "Amulet," a hauntingly tender wordless song by Paul Simon that he introduced to her when they worked together in 2008 at a Brooklyn Academy of Music concert. Simon says her version of "Amulet" impressed him so much that he's considering including the song as a guitar piece on his next album.

"Lu's got a beautiful tone in her voice," said Simon, in a telephone interview. "She sings with a really fine intonation and clarity and has a great sense of rhythm. ... She's uniquely positioned to straddle both musical cultures - to bring a Brazilian insight into English-language music."

Souza is a true daughter of bossa nova. She began singing jingles at age 3 in the recording studio run by her parents, a successful songwriting team. Her father, guitarist-composer Walter Santos, sang backup vocals with childhood friend Gilberto. Her mother, lyricist Tereza Souza, instilled a love of poetry that inspired her to later record albums with musical interpretations of poems.

Souza left behind a promising singing career in Brazil to come to the United States at age 17, hardly speaking any English, to study jazz composition at Boston's Berklee College of Music. She later became a mainstay of New York's downtown jazz scene, self-produced her own CDs, and explored new classical music.

After a 2005 performance with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Souza met Klein and moved to the West Coast the following year when they got married. He ended up producing her first album for Universal Music France, "The New Bossa Nova," encouraging her to pursue her idea of presenting American pop songs she enjoyed from her youth "through a Brazilian bossa nova lens." Her 2007 album included songs by the Beach Boys, Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, and a duet with James Taylor on his "Never Die Young."

Souza credits her adventurous spirit and willingness to cross musical boundaries to advice offered by her godfather, multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal, who taught her the Brazilian songbook.

"I'm embracing what Hermeto said. I would be afraid of failing, and he would say, 'Don't fear, it's only music.'"