

Luciana Souza sings, if not speaks, in tongues

We chat with the Brazilian vocal great, a 6-time Grammy-nominee, who performs in La Jolla Thursday with her all-star band

By George Varga
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Six tracks on Luciana Souza's Grammy-nominated 2015 album "Speaking in Tongues" are wordless, each an attempt to create a rich and varied soundscape. *Kim Fox*

What's in a word?

This question has long challenged and fascinated singers and songwriters as they strive to articulate both simple and complex thoughts and emotions with maximum impact.

But what if there are no words to sing?

How do performers capture and convey the feelings and stories they want to tell, using their voice, but no lyrics?

That was the challenge internationally acclaimed Brazilian singer Luciana Souza faced — or, rather, embraced — when she made her striking 2015 album, “Speaking in Tongues.” It is the 13th solo release by Souza, whose past collaborators range from Herbie Hancock and Paul Simon to David Bowie saxophonist Donny McCaslin and the Atlanta Symphony Chorus and Orchestra.

Jazz at the Athenaeum presents Luciana Souza: Speaking in Tongues

Six of the nine selections on “Tongues” feature Souza singing, wordlessly, with consistently stunning results. Two of the other tracks, “No One to Follow” and “Split,” are poems by Leonard Cohen set to music, while the Souza-penned “Straw Hat” was inspired by her father, a noted Brazilian singer and composer.

Drawing from jazz, samba, funk, Afro-pop and more, the album delights in any language, with or without words. So does the exemplary musicianship of Souza’s genre-leaping band, which features West African guitar great and singer Lionel Loueke, French harmonica master Gregoire Maret, Swedish/Italian bassist Massimo Biolcati, and ace American drummer Kendrick Scott.

“It’s intentional that each member is from a different country, because I wanted that richness they bring to the music,” said Souza, who performs with her band Thursday at La Jolla’s TSRI Auditorium. “On stage, we used the album as a template to take things farther. It becomes a feast of sound for us.”

With her voice deftly functioning as a shimmering instrument, and her empathetic accompanists elevating each note, “Tongues” ranks among the most inviting and rewarding albums of the past year in any genre. It is a unique addition to her already rich and varied body of work.

“We wanted to create a soundscape that would be very rich and varied,” she said. “The point was to have the freedom to explore, because I’ve never made a record like this.”

Of course, wordless singing is not new in either jazz or Brazilian music. From Ella Fitzgerald to Souza's fellow Brazilian vocal luminary Milton Nascimento, dispensing with lyrics is an honored tradition. But Fitzgerald and others who followed her would usually do so for part of a song, not its duration, often to scat-sing a solo in which they emulated a saxophone or another instrument. Nascimento, meanwhile, uses his heavenly wordless falsetto periodically, never for a full album.

A cappella wizard of awes Bobby McFerrin, with whom Souza has collaborated, is perhaps a more direct antecedent who sometimes uses his voice as a lead instrument. But few have so skillfully integrated their singing as a lead instrument for just a number or two, let alone — like Souza — for the majority of songs on an entire album.

'More than notes'

The titles of some of the numbers on "Tongues" give listeners a good sense of their subject matter, from the album-opening "At the Fair" to "A Pebble in Still Water." Other titles, such as "Straw Hat," are more abstract, although Souza injects meaning and passion into them.

Did the melodies to her songs on "Tongues" suggest the wordless vocal parts she sings? Or did the titles of the songs, or the stories that inspired them, suggest the melodies?

"It's both," Souza, 49, replied, speaking from the Los Angeles home she shares with her husband, producer and bassist Larry Klein, and their son. "Some melodies, depending on their range and what's happening around me, suggest a certain sound. And, then, the melodies suggest a story. I've sung wordless melodies with many bands, since I was a child, but I'm hearing more than the notes."