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She breaks down musical boundaries
Luciana Souza sings with no fear, winning respect of her peers

Three of Luciana Souza's four most recent CDs have earned her Grammy nominations, including "Duos II," which this year was edged out for best jazz vocal album by Dianne Reeves and the "Good Night, and Good Luck" soundtrack. But Souza's not a big star yet by any means. What popularity she has remains largely confined to the jazz cognoscenti and her fellow musicians, the latter of whom seem uniformly to adore her.

High on the list of things they admire about Souza is her willingness to take risks. Consider the rapid-fire unison lines she sings with guitarist Romero Lubambo on "Duos II," the album they'll likely draw heavily from in their Bank of America Celebrity Series double bill with Joe Lovano tomorrow night at Sanders Theatre.

Souza, 39, and Lubambo have been playing together for a decade. But while they've built up a large repertoire of material over the years, they rarely have occasion to practice together beyond sound checks. It can sometimes come back to haunt them in concert, Souza admits.

"We have a way of doing them that hopefully comes out clean," Souza explains, laughing. "Some nights we get into trouble, but even that is exciting for the audience. You try your best, and sometimes it succeeds. Sometimes we fail miserably, and we go back and go, 'Here we go one more time,' and just try again in front of people. We always do it with great spirit."

Souza's musical fearlessness was instilled early in childhood when, growing up in Sao Paulo, she had the advantage of having Hermeto Pascoal as her godfather. "He would say to me, 'Don't fear it. It's only music,'" Souza recalls. "That's a phrase he said to me over and over and over again. He'd play a melody on the piano for me, and I'd sing back and say, 'Oops.' I'd make a mistake or something -- 'break my teeth,' like we say in Portuguese. And he'd say, 'No, no, no -- don't worry. It's only music.' So I grew up with this spirit."

Souza's love of jazz stems from her father bringing home borrowed albums from a radio station record library he passed on his way to his job writing jingles. "He would bring home these records that were just amazing," says Souza. "I listened to Bill Holman and Stan Kenton on big band records -- things that I would never go toward naturally growing up in Brazil. . . . A lot of Sinatra, a lot of Carmen McRae."

In 1985, Souza followed her guitarist brother Eduardo to Berklee College of Music. She spent most of the next dozen years in Boston, earning her master's at New England Conservatory and returning to Berklee to teach until joining the faculty at Manhattan

School of Music in 1998. Her recorded work as a leader began around the same time, with five of her six CDs coming out on Sunnyside Records since 2000. Her Grammy nominees include Brazilian standards ("Brazilian Duos" and "Duos II") and North American and South American standards ("North and South").

Souza's side work also tends to push past boundaries. Lately it has included her wordless vocals with Maria Schneider's orchestra and classical work with Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov. Such boldness in her choice of projects earns Souza added respect from critics and musicians.

Esperanza Spalding, who'll play bass with Lovano's quartet tomorrow, says she is constantly wowed by Souza's work. "I'll hear an album -- anything from Hermeto Pascoal to Danilo Perez," Spalding says, "and I'm like, 'Man, that singer's so killin'.' And it's always [Souza] -- every time when I hear something crazy, and the voice blows my mind."

That Souza's music impresses Grammy nominators is great for her career. But she says it's important for other reasons.

"I don't record for a major label, I don't do straight-ahead jazz, and I'm not a famous artist," Souza explains. "So that says a lot. It gives a lot of hope, I think, to younger musicians coming up."