

Newsday
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Martin Johnson,

"I was pretty darn skeptical when I saw that the singer-composer Luciana Souza had been booked for a month of Friday nights at Joe's Pub. Much as I love Souza's work, especially her interpretations of poetry - such as 10 works by Pablo Neruda set to her music on the recent release "Neruda" (Sunnyside) - it didn't seem like Friday night fare. I could go somewhere pretty exotic if I had a dollar for every time some promoter or performer gently hinted that they were dumbing down her show since, hey, it's a Friday night crowd.

Still, it was hard to imagine Souza just performing some light sambas. Sure enough, word began to seep out after the first gigs that she was doing the Neruda material and her art songs were transfixing audiences. I had to see for myself.

My skepticism rose again when I saw the line in front of the Public stretching halfway down the block. But once everyone was inside and settled in, pianist Edward Simon came onstage, and a hush fell over the place. Simon's tender piano chords had the gentle feel of drizzle on a quiet country afternoon. Then Souza arrived alternately singing and reciting words in a voice that was both opaque and slightly husky. Neruda's poems lack simple rhyme schemes, yet they worked as lyrics. For the most part the music was impressionistic, grounded more by implied rhythms. Yet, it really was all transcendent and were it not for the additional percussion from drinks being poured over ice at the bar, it would have been easy to forget that we were amid a frenetic Friday night in lower Manhattan.

Perhaps for that reason, too, Souza had to explain that there would be no encore after the crowd cheered so loudly and at such length. There already was a crowd forming outside Joe's door waiting to indulge in more traditional Friday night fare."