

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

## **Brazilian native swings poetry at the Herbst**

Tamara Straus, Special to The Chronicle

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If Luciana Souza lived in Europe during the Middle Ages, she would be a troubadour - those composers and performers of lyric poetry who wandered from patron to patron, singing about life and love.

But Souza was born in Brazil in 1966. So instead she is a poetry-driven jazz singer who has wandered from Sao Paulo to New York to Los Angeles, performing songs about life and love. Since 2004, she has been serenading at Herbst Theatre as part of her residency at San Francisco Performances.

Petite, down to earth, with dark round eyes and large, expressive features, Souza is hard to read. On stage, she seems self-conscious, even uncomfortable, until she closes her eyes, opens her mouth and lets out a sound that can best be described as a bright bird taking flight over a big expanse of water. She also sounds like Astrud Gilberto channeling Nina Simone.

Souza says she has spent the better part of her life refining her voice. The youngest child of songwriter-guitarist Walter Santos and songwriter-poet Tereza Souza (who wrote bossa nova hits for Brazilian stars), Souza initially avoided vocals. At 17 she moved to Boston to study jazz composition at Berklee College of Music and then completed a master's at the New England Conservatory of Music. Souza says her original plan "was to lead a big band. ...

I was going to be like Maria Schneider.

"But then everything started focusing on the voice. I resisted it for awhile, but realized my contribution as a human being was to try to be a good singer."

Souza's eight albums have been nominated for four Grammy Awards - for "Brazilian Duos," "North and South," "Duos II" and the 2009 release "Tide." Still, she has failed to achieve big commercial success.

### **versatile voice**

Her voice is not the reason. She can sing almost anything - pop, jazz, classical - and has. In the classical realm, she has been Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov's main muse since 1996, and has sung with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the New York Philharmonic.

Commercial success has probably eluded Souza because of her aesthetic choices. Although she writes original songs and performs music by American stars like Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell, her greatest passion is to create musical interpretations of modern poetry.

Souza began her recording career putting music to the poems of Elizabeth Bishop. In 2004, she got substantial press when she turned 10 Pablo Neruda poems in English translation into jazz art songs. The Washington Post called the effort "a noble failure."

Pablo Neruda, E.E. Cummings, Robert Frost, Octavio Paz - Souza spends hours with her head buried in books, "sitting with each line." Once immersed, she'll compose music she feels matches the mood, rhythm and ideas of a poem. It's something that, she says laughing, "has become a need. I can't not do it."

As part of her four-year San Francisco Performances residency, which ends this summer, Souza has been bringing poetry songs to our younger citizens.

During a recent visit to San Francisco's Abraham Lincoln High School, she sang her musical interpretation of an E.E. Cummings love poem to an AP English class - and not one adolescent broke into a giggle. She also collaborated with them on turning Matthew Arnold's 1867 poem "Dover Beach" into a somber jazz hymn.

"Am I respecting the voice of the poet? Do I need to respect it? Is this the melody we want?" asked Souza, who with accompaniment from pianist Adam Shulman created a soft wave-like sound over which to sing the melody created with the students.

Souza has been praised and lambasted for her songs based on well-known poetry. She would "love to have the luxury of presenting an album and series of concerts around one poet," she says, but believes it is impossible without foundation support.

She also would like to do an outright jazz project. "That was my dream when I came to the U.S. - to be a straight-ahead jazz player like Ella Fitzgerald. But I would want it to be legitimate,

which would be hard coming from a Brazilian. And the project would have to have weight, the right people, the right repertoire."

### **a chance to grow**

For now, Souza is thankful to have had the chance to grow as a musician under San Francisco Performance's patronage. "Having a regular opportunity to be on a stage, a grand stage like the Herbst, in a town that is a major market in the U.S. with sophisticated listeners, has been wonderful," she says of the residency. "I've felt rescued, in a way, supported."

A lot has happened to Souza since she started coming regularly to San Francisco. She met and fell in love with music producer Larry Klein (Joni Mitchell's ex). She moved from New York to Los Angeles. And with Klein she had a son, who is almost 2. She is performing less - 60 nights a year instead of more than 230, but she is as focused as ever on her greatest passion next to poetry: vocal technique.

"It has to sound effortless," says Souza of singing. "Unique, but also with ease. Technique shouldn't be something that constrains you. It should make you fly."