

Berklee Today Cover Feature - May Issue, 2008

Luciana Souza Wherever the River Flows

by Mark Small

From the wellspring of a Brazilian musical heritage, Luciana Souza's course has led her into choice jazz, classical, and pop music territory.

"I like the idea that music is a large river, like the Amazon, that branches out into smaller streams that go through the whole country," says vocalist Luciana Souza. Given the trajectory of her career in music, the metaphor of a river is fitting. Souza's course has followed several divergent musical tributaries that have taken her through territory she probably never imagined she would encounter while growing up in Brazil. The journey has been as exciting as it has been unpredictable. Since her start in music as a teenage jingle singer in São Paulo, she's transcended the boundaries of style and genre and has performed and recorded with such diverse artists as Herbie Hancock, Paul Simon, John Patitucci, Hermeto Pascoal, the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, Fred Hersch, Osvaldo Golijov, and dozens more. On a given night she might be singing in a club with a lone guitarist accompanying her or in larger venues with jazz ensembles ranging from a trio to jazz orchestra or in prestigious concert halls with the New York Philharmonic, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, the Boston Symphony, or Hollywood Bowl orchestras, to name a few.

At the age of 18, Souza came to Berklee to study jazz composition. Until that time, she'd sung by ear and sought formal training to master the written language of music. After graduating, she earned a master's degree from New England Conservatory (NEC) and joined Berklee's Ear Training department faculty, where she worked for three years. Like many ambitious musicians, Souza produced her first record, *An Answer to Your Silence*, herself. She has since issued discs that delve into Brazilian songs, jazz standards, and original settings of poetry by Pablo Neruda and Elizabeth Bishop. To date, her recordings have earned her three Grammy Award nominations.

In 1996 contemporary classical composer Osvaldo Golijov heard her voice and invited her to sing the concert and recorded premieres of his cantata *Oceana* and *La Pasión Segøen San Marcos* (The Passion According to St. Mark). The worldwide embrace of these works offered Souza additional opportunities in the classical field, including an opportunity to tour with the New York Philharmonic, a featured spot on the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet's Brazil CD, and an American tour with the group.

In 2006, Souza married producer and bassist Larry Klein. He produced her 2007 recording *The New Bossa Nova*, her first for Verve/Universal Jazz France. Klein also produced Herbie Hancock's latest CD, *River: The Joni Letters*, for which Souza sang the Joni Mitchell chestnut "Amelia." After the disc won Album of the Year honors at this

year's Grammy Awards, Souza and Klein appeared with Hancock on various television shows.

At the time of this writing, Souza had performed her own music in San Francisco, San Diego, and Los Angeles, and was gearing up to perform Golijov's *Pasión* in Italy and sing with Paul Simon for a five-night stretch in New York. And this year holds opportunities for Souza to break new ground. In addition to preparing to record her eighth album in November, she and Klein are also preparing for the birth of a child in the summer. I caught up with the elegant and ever-upbeat Souza in New York in between an appearance on *The View* with Hancock and rehearsals with Simon.

Your parents were involved in the first wave of popularity of bossa nova, so understandably, you have deep roots in Brazilian music.

I do. My father worked in a jingle house in São Paulo where he and my mother wrote jingles day in and day out to make a living. My dad also sang the background vocals with Antonio Carlos Jobim and João Gilberto on the original recording of "Chega de Saudade," the song that is credited with being the start of bossa nova. There was always music in our house. My dad played guitar constantly, and at dinnertime he'd put on all kinds of records he'd borrow from the radio station that was next to his studio.

I spent the first 18 years of my life in Brazil. We have a very musical culture there, very rhythmic. The language has a certain rhythm and even the way people walk is rhythmic. These things stay with you. My parents knew that I liked to sing and noticed that at a young age I could sing in tune. I went to the studio with my father and started singing on jingles when they needed a child's voice. By the time I was 15, I was doing sessions at six or seven major studios around São Paulo. I learned to sing harmony and blend by working with some really great musicians there.

Geography figures prominently in my musical development. When I was 18, I came to Boston to study at Berklee and later went to New England Conservatory. After that I lived in New York, and now I live in Los Angeles. Each place has been educational, but I didn't realize how much I'd learned just being around my parents and the musicians that came to our house in Brazil.

Did you come to Berklee specifically to hone written-music skills?

Yes. All of the singing I did in Brazil was by ear. I think if I had just stayed in Brazil, I would have felt limited musically. My brother Eduardo, who studied film scoring at Berklee, told me when I went to Berklee that I shouldn't just study singing, so I majored in jazz composition. It was great to study the music of Ellington and write big-band charts. I had classes with assignments to transcribe solos. I was lucky to have been at Berklee when there was so much emphasis on jazz.

I learned the written language so I could communicate quickly and effectively with other musicians. Steve Prosser, Bob Stoloff, Hal Crook, and other teachers I had were at the top of their form and very generous in sharing what they knew. I was a real sponge for the knowledge I was getting and found the Berklee environment healthy and exciting. I

went to NEC for my master's degree, and that was great too. It was a much smaller school, and I was writing string quartets-very different from the things I wrote at Berklee.

When did it become clear to you that you would become primarily a jazz musician?

[Laughs.] I'm still deciding if I will be a jazz musician, I'm still developing. I've found people striving for excellence in jazz as in classical music. Improvisation involves a sophisticated language, intuition, fearlessness, and a devotion to the history of the music to find what your contribution will be. Even if I am singing background in pop music, I still bring that spirit of striving that I found in jazz with me. As I look at the different musicians I work with, most of them have it too. The great classical musicians that I've been fortunate to work with, like conductor Robert Spano, have it as well. Even though they are not jazz musicians, they are improvisers too. They prepare so much. Like a jazz musician who memorizes the changes, looks at the melody and form, and checks out other recordings of the piece, these musicians ask themselves what they can say or contribute to the music. Someone like Spano - who may have played a particular symphony lots of times - still asks himself, "How am I going to do it with these musicians in this hall?" Even though he deals with written music, there is still the moment.

You say you are still developing. How so?

I still study and take vocal lessons and coaching-the same things I was working on 20 years ago. I'm also writing a lot of songs with my husband, Larry, and that feels a bit like going to school. He's much more experienced writing lyrics in English than I am. I'm always studying the works of poets. In the past, it was Elizabeth Bishop and Pablo Neruda; now it's E.E. Cummings, William Butler Yeats, and Gary Snyder, a poet who lives in San Francisco.

How did your first recording, *An Answer to Your Silence*, come about?

I produced my first album myself at Blue Jay [Recording] Studio outside of Boston. [Berklee Assistant Professor] Mark Wessel engineered the record. I brought some musicians up from New York and [saxophonist] George Garzone, who I'd studied with at Berklee, to play on it. I ended up licensing that album to Mike Mainieri and NYC Records. Even though the record didn't really go anywhere, connecting with Mike's label in New York opened things up for me, and everything sort of started from there. I wrote a lot of strange, complex, and dense things for that first album. It was good to get that out of my system. I started out writing with polychords and hybrids that were so thick; now I'm barely using triads.

It must have been quite a different experience to sing Osvaldo Golijov's new classical music in some of the world's major concert halls.

It was and still is something very different for me. Sometimes I'll walk out onstage and think, "What am I doing here? There are so many other singers they could have called for this, yet they called me." I'm going with Osvaldo to Europe for some concerts in a few weeks. That music demands more power and expression than the soft singing I usually do. When I get home from New York, I will start calibrating my instrument for those concerts.

Has Golijov written any new pieces that feature you, or are you primarily performing his *Pasión* and *Oceana*?

It's usually those two. We would love to do something new, but he has gotten very busy with tons of commissions. He's really one of the hottest names in classical music right now. I enjoy doing these pieces periodically. The last time we did this music was at Lincoln Center in New York in August of 2007. As with any pieces I revisit, through living each day differently, I feel I become a different person. So I try to figure out how to approach the music again. I see so much depth in this music. I start studying the score; familiarizing myself with the notes, words, and phrasing; thinking of what I will be singing about before I ever vocalize. Then I start to sing and think of what I want to say with it.

How did the opportunity to premiere Golijov's pieces open up avenues to the classical world for you?

It's been my experience in music that one thing leads to another. I met Robert Spano through this and was invited to sing music by Manuel de Falla in Central Park and elsewhere with Brazilian conductor Roberto Minczuk. I've also done a lot of things with the Los Angeles Philharmonic through my connection to Osvaldo.

Your New Bossa Nova album contains primarily love songs. How did you choose the material?

Larry and I wanted to do an album with him producing. We had recently met and become romantic. I told Larry that I wanted to do a recording of music by great songwriters like James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Randy Newman, Leonard Cohen, and others. I wanted to take songs by others and make them my own. We had so many to choose from. Larry told me to sit down with a guitar and sing them, and whatever songs felt natural with my voice in that setting we'd record. After that, we made demos at home, with Larry playing bass and Larry Koonse playing guitar. From the 25 or 30 we demoed, we made the choice of 12 and some bonus cuts. We weren't trying to make a record with a love theme; it just turned out that way.

How did James Taylor end up singing with you on his song "Never Die Young" on that album?

That was a dream. I've been listening to him since I was a child. James had heard me sing Golijov's *Pasión* at Tanglewood with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and came back afterwards to say hello to the performers. When we planned the album, I told Larry that I wanted to see if we could get James to sing, and he thought we should go for it. Larry had played with James, and he made a call, but we didn't get an answer back. I'd met someone who was a personal assistant to James, and we made another inquiry. Coincidentally, James was going to be in New York as we were finishing recording. We got confirmation only the day before the session. We had recorded the rhythm section tracks, and then James and I added our parts later. He walked in and listened as I recorded my guide vocals, and said, "I get this, it floats and it's really mellow." When we sang and I heard that voice, I kept looking at the engineers in the booth in disbelief. James sang absolutely in tune and added so much. He was done in just a few minutes.

Tell me about your series of concerts with Paul Simon in April.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music is having a three-week retrospective of Paul's career called "Love in Hard Times." The first week will feature the music from his Broadway show *The Capeman*. I sing the second week in a program he is calling "Under African Skies," covering the music from his *Graceland* and *Rhythm of the Saints* albums. Others who will participate that week are Brazilian singer Milton Nascimento, David Byrne, Hugh Masekela, African singer Kaïssa, percussionist and Berklee faculty member Jamey Haddad, as well as Steve Gadd and Paul's whole band. I will sing three songs by myself and a duet with Paul. I'm also going to play some percussion. We will do the show for five nights. The third program is titled "American Tunes."

In December [2007], someone from his office called me asking if I could sing with him for a week during the retrospective. I'd never met Paul, so someone probably recommended me. The next time I went to New York for concert, I had a meeting with him. We talked for a bit, and then I asked him what he'd been writing lately. He got out a guitar and sang me two of his new songs. They are different from what he has done recently. They were very open harmonically and had unusual form. He told me that he always writes the music first. I'd always thought he would write the lyrics first, that he was a man of words. But he told me he just sings wordless melodies until he finds a vowel that leads him to the words. So he comes from the direction of the sound more than the thought.

How do you manage your schedule with so many different projects going?

Actually, I don't work as much as people seem to think. Maybe I'm just very loud when I do something! I'm lucky that I get to do exactly what I want. The chances I've had to work with my father at first; then Danilo Perez, John Patitucci, Osvaldo Golijov; and now Herbie Hancock and Paul Simon, have been periodic but consistent and have propelled me forward.

People have this illusion I am touring constantly. I love what I do, but I'm not the kind of singer who wants to be onstage every night, going on the road 320 days per year. I'm a homebody, I love cooking, knitting, and entertaining. Now that I am remarried, I have an opportunity to develop a part of my life that needs feeding. I need to do these things to do the singing well. Being on the road is a really hard thing to balance for anybody, but especially for a woman like me who would be perfectly happy being a housewife. Still, I do love the stage. Being out there gives a chance to show your soul. I get to learn about myself, about love, fear, and feelings I didn't know were there. Being onstage is an enormous privilege.

What are you working on currently?

Studying Bach's *Goldberg Variations* became an obsession for me a while back, and now I'm writing music with a lot of counterpoint. I will record my next album in November, and I'm writing songs for that now. The material is groove oriented, back to the Brazilian thing, but faster and stronger. I plan to finish writing by August, look at what I have, and then select the best pieces. The album will come out in April 2009.

I am also expecting a child in the summer. After the baby is born, I will take some time off. I'll make the record in November and go back out to tour in April of 2009. Maybe the baby will be a good traveler and we can go together.

What would you tell a young singer who wants to develop as diverse a musical palette as yours?

My best advice would be to follow wherever their muse is leading at the moment. That may be to the music of a particular artist or poetry. I'd say really dive in and explore the music or words and find what is most honest about it. I have survived for a while. So many musicians have a short moment and then leave. It's as if I'm walking along and the work comes and goes. I say hello to it and then goodbye and keep on walking. Sometimes there are exciting projects and great moments, and other times it's just the work you do. I always try to be honest, and I think that's what people look for when they call me.

When Osvaldo Golijov or Maria Schneider calls me, they want to hear the humanity and frailty of the voice, not something perfect. I have a voice that could sound like I'm from any country. I could sound Indian or Brazilian, I could sound like a child or an older person. So I would recommend that a young singer explore what they have to offer without modeling themselves too much after other singers.

When I came to the States and to Berklee, I wanted to sing like Ella Fitzgerald. I wanted to swing that hard and be as free as I imagined she was. She had a childlike spirit and happiness in her voice as well as depth. I never got close to doing the things that she was able to do with her voice, but what I loved most about her was her honesty. What came out of her throat didn't sound fake. It's the same with James Taylor, Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, or Randy Newman. You hear these people and know that nobody else could do what they do.

Singers are paid or rewarded for being themselves. I'd tell young singers to learn from others but constantly look at the aspects that make them unique and develop those. Singers also need to work on ear training, do research, and find what instrumentation allows their voice to come across.

In a way, you have lived part of the American dream by coming to this country and reaching the career heights you have.

You couldn't have said it better. What I've been able to experience with all of the different kinds of music I've done couldn't have happened in Brazil. It says so much about the opportunities I've been given. I am grateful every day that I can make a living singing. As an immigrant, I think I could be cleaning hotel rooms. I used to clean houses and work as a waitress in coffee shops around Berklee when I was a student. Now, I'm doing exactly what I want to do. I have dual citizenship, and as an American citizen, I vote, pay taxes, and feel that I am participating and contributing to society. I've been lucky to work on so many interesting projects. Whether it was a performance on a television show that went out for millions to see or a gig in a small club in Brooklyn that will never come out on a record, I've had great experiences and gotten pushed to places I hadn't been before.

