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Live Jazz: Luciana Souza at the Broad Stage

By Michael Katz

Luciana Souza opened the Broad Stage season Saturday night in Santa Monica, celebrating the release of two CDs, *Duos III* and *The Book of Chet*, the latter featuring the music of Chet Baker. Backed up by a superb California rhythm section of Larry Koonse on guitar, Derek Oles on bass and the Bay Area's Scott Amendola on percussion, Ms. Souza moved seamlessly between the two collections, mixing Brazilian numbers with her interpretations of the Baker-influenced standards.



Luciana Souza

Ms. Souza has a rich, lyrical style that moves beyond the light, airy vocals often associated with Brazilian music. This allows her to explore the nuances of these compositions, as well as interpreting the lyrics, (with some translation beforehand) in a way that goes beyond the bright rhythms of the samba. "Doralice," for example, is a tune I've heard many times, but after explaining that the title character was trying to prod her boyfriend toward a marriage proposal, Souza's delightful reading was musical theatre, reminiscent of Rita Moreno.

The show began with two numbers from *The Book of Chet*. "The Thrill Is Gone," seemed an unlikely way to start the show – it doesn't seem like a 7:30 kind of song to me, though it also opens the CD. But it did establish Ms. Souza's venture into territory unfamiliar to the audience at the cozy Broad Stage. Once again, her rich style added texture to the tunes. Ironically, the very things that she attests attracted her to the music – the kind of asexual stream of consciousness in Baker's presentation – afford her the opportunity to up the ante and weave her own expressionistic style through the songs.



The middle of the program was devoted to Brazilian tunes, mostly from the *Duos III* CD. A few words here about guitarist Larry Koonse. It's possible we in the LA area take Koonse for granted, having seen him in so many combinations with his own groups and others. But Saturday night, up against the ghost of Joao Gilberto and the shadows of Ms. Souza's usual accompanists, Marco Pereira and Romero Lubambo, he shone at every turn, offering subtle support to her vocals on familiar tunes like Jobim's "Dindi" and providing lively accompaniment on a new piece by Pereira, "Dona Lu," as well as a lovely introduction to Paul Simon's "Amulet." On "Eu Vim da Bahia," you could almost hear the tenor of Stan Getz in Koonse's middle tones. All these tunes rippled with the sensitivity of Souza, who communicated the poetry in them with minimal interpretation.

Scott Amendola returned to the stage, hand-drumming the tops of his snares, then switching to soft mallets and finally brushes in his most artistic turn of the night, an introduction to "Circus Life," a Souza original from her *Tides* album. It's a spirited, brightly melodic composition which brought to mind Joni Mitchell.



From there on out, the program centered on music from *The Book of Chet*, including a Derek Oles solo intro to "The Very Thought Of You" and Souza's luscious reading of "He Was Too Good To Me." Like the earlier "Forgetful," these songs allowed Souza to augment the Baker songbook but by now, having heard her more familiar Brazilian melodies, the audience was attuned to the change in perspective. As she switched to mainly English lyrics, Ms. Souza showed a complete command of the language, projecting only the barest Brazilian inflection as she explored this music.

The nominal end of the program was "Adeus America, (Goodbye America)," somewhat ironic in that she now resides here, and the crowd brought her back for an encore from the Chet Baker oeuvre, "I Fall In Love Too Easily."

It's hard enough these days for an artist to put together one collection of inspired material for a CD, much less two programs of quite different emphasis. It's equally difficult to bring together a quartet on short notice that can perform the music as sensitively as Luciana Souza did Saturday night with the backing of Larry Koonse, Scott Amendola and Derek Oles. All in all, a delightful opening to the Broad's new season.

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