

Luciana Souza's Multi-Directional Approach to Jazz Singing

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By Will Layman

Luciana Souza is arguably the most impressive jazz singer working today. Four of her solo recordings have been nominated for Grammy awards, and she has managed to forge an instantly identifiable individual sound while still working across several disparate musical styles. Late August brings the release of two new recordings—her first in three years—that feature jazz standards on the one hand and classic Brazilian bossa nova on the other.

The operative question with Souza, in many respects, is what makes her a “jazz” singer rather than a singer in the Brazilian tradition. Ultimately, she is neither and both—just a very, very fine musician, of course—but her perspective and approach make answering this question entertaining, indeed.

I spoke to Souza in July about this question, about her perspective on these musical traditions, and about her new music. From the first moment of the conversation, she was bursting with history and humor, opinion and good-natured sass—a mile-a-minute talker who is both incredibly humble and sharply intelligent.

Souza was born and raised in Sao Paolo, Brazil, by parents who were musicians and composers. Literally exposed from birth to the initial flowering of the Brazilian bossa nova spirit, she came to the US at 18, attended Berklee for her BA and then earned a Masters in “jazz studies” at the New England Conservatory. She is authentically Brazilian and utterly jazz, utterly American at the same time.

The Personal and Historical, Brazilian and American, Modestly Put

In conversation, Souza is completely charming. Kind and funny, she knows more about herself and about music than you are prepared for.

She is modest to the point of downplaying her own accomplishments, for example, saying, “I could not get a job teaching music today—I only have a masters,” when one suspects that four years teaching at the Manhattan School of Music and years as Artist in Residence with San Francisco Performances might get her foot in the door. Another example: she will mention in passing that she is still “taking lessons” in her spare time but never mention her incredible background in classical and new music, performing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, among others.

But her soul, you quickly realize, is split between Brazilian and American music. She describes being steeped in both as a child—bossa nova and other Brazilian music through her parents and American pop and rock music through radio, movies, and then her schooling and life in America. Jobim to Joni, you might say.

I asked her about the longstanding link between Brazilian music and jazz – the bossa nova movement and the jazz that grew from it or inspired it. Why do these two forms relate to each other in such an interesting way? Her perspective was both historical and personal. “The connection happened way before I was born. In the ‘30s and ‘40s, musicians like Carmen Miranda were exposing Brazilian music to US audiences, and American music was coming to Brazil too. Both are about rhythm, giving them a quick connection and dialogue.

"In the 1950s Brazilian musicians were listening to tons of US music. Brazilians were very aware of jazz. People like Frank Sinatra had a huge impact. Frank really crossed over because he was an actor. His phrasing is so strong, his musicianship, his intonation... The US international jazz tours made an impact—and, really, the famous 1962 bossa nova concert at Carnegie Hall ignited an interest in the two forms crossing over even more, not just in the US but in Brazil, too."

Souza experienced this period of cross-pollination in the most personal terms. She was born in 1966, and her parents raised her amidst this explosion of Brazilian art infused with jazz. "Bossa nova was the music of my childhood, but American pop music was the music of my youth too. Both were natural to me."

Souza's Fusion in *The New Bossa Nova*

The perfect of expression of this fusion would come in Souza's sublime 2007 Verve recording of bossa nova treatments of, mainly, songs from the rock era. *The New Bossa Nova*, which was Souza's first collaboration with her husband Larry Klein (once the bass player for the Freddie Hubbard quintet), features songs by Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan, James Taylor, Michael McDonald, Brian Wilson, Randy Newman, and Elliot Smith, among others. "I love those songs—I grew up with them, too."

In every case, Souza and Klein give these songs the floating, shifting shimmer of a bossa nova rhythm section. Though rock era music often trades in the bold dynamics of a backbeat and electric guitars, *The New Bossa Nova* works more in the mode of the US singer-songwriter tradition. The focus is on the singing, on the words.

"Bossa nova is a whole different style than the Brazilian samba music that preceded it," Souza explains, making it work for this kind of project. "It is not loud music for dancing or playing in the streets but an intimate music suited to being played in living rooms for listening and for telling stories. The music is very even and quiet, with the instruments creating a pulsing groove over which a very simple story—even just a picture of a person sitting in a room—can be told.

"This is what I do. It's a continuum in my life—I slow a song down and make it quiet, to force myself and the listener to come closer to the song."

So Souza's treatment of McDonald's "I Can Let Go Now" is less obvious than the original, but the serene bed of syncopation that undergirds her approach creates a sinuous accompaniment to a story of romantic dissolution. And Souza's duet with James Taylor on his own "Never Die Young" is hipper than the original because the chorus takes on a more surprising set of rhythmic twists that reinforce the lyric about an idiosyncratic couple "synchronized with the rising moon."

Even on this project, however, Souza was well aware of bossa nova history. Not only does she end the set with perhaps the greatest of the songs by the master of the bossa, Jobim's "The Waters of March", but she leavens the recording with beautiful and short statements on tenor saxophone by Chris Potter—echoing the role that Stan Getz played in those famous, early bossa recordings.

When I tell Souza about my enthusiasm for this record, her pleasure is palpable. “That was an important record for me—my first for a major label and my first really getting into an American tradition.”

Brazilian Singing and Jazz Singing, Connected Through Chet Baker

One of Souza’s two new projects brings these two musical—and vocal—traditions together in a different way. *The Book of Chet* is Souza’s first recording that exclusively tackles American “standards”— all ballads associated with the singer and trumpeter Chet Baker.

These treatments of US music, however, are not given a bossa nova caste in any explicit sense. Rather, Souza sets these tunes into simple arrangements for a spare guitar trio (Larry Koonse on guitar, David Pitch on bass, and drummer Jay Bellarose) and squeezes out the melodies in airy, intimate, tuneful singing. Naturally, the question you want to ask her is about whether Chet Baker wasn’t—with his whispery, intimate singing tone—a kind of Brazilian-style, bossa nova singer.

“Brazilians were definitely listening to Chet Baker in the 1950s—it’s documented, I’ve read about it. His style was very attractive to the Brazilian culture because it was more introspective, more of a still narrative in the lyrics. He sang very quietly and intensely, in a way that the story of the lyrics would come through.”

Souza explains the Baker style and the bossa nova singing style as being at the opposite end of the spectrum from the samba singing style. “It was very different, based in the Italian bel canto style. With the advent of the microphone, however, a singer could use more subtlety and sing more intimately. And Chet Baker did that so beautifully.”

Souza’s specific interpretations can be stunning, even if the album as a whole is almost stiflingly still. The opener, “The Thrill Is Gone”, allows her to pitch her voice low in her range, singing with a flat affect that, nevertheless, is rich with implied power. “I Get Along Without You Very Well” is delivered at a very slow tempo, becoming the equivalent of an art song, with each word of the lyric taking on the weight of poetic irony. “I Fall In Love Too Easily” is exceptionally lovely—beautifully shaped and among the most traditional of Souza performances by the usual “jazz” benchmarks: melodically embellished, rhythmically swinging, and rich with tonal personality. What Souza does with the words “fall” and “last”, for example, on the chorus after the guitar solo is very subtle and very essential.

Each of these performances is also very *quiet*. “I simply cannot sing loud!” Souza told me with near apology. But what she may lack in volume, she makes up for in emotional intensity. “This is why I was so interested in making a recording of songs associated with Chet,” she explains. “I realized how influenced I was by his singing, which was so emotionally pure. He was a great musician, and he sang with great musicality, but his singing is pure feeling.”

So is hers.

Two Recordings, Simultaneously

But *The Book of Chet* is not Souza’s only new recording. The second is *Duos III*, the third in a series of recordings Souza has made of Brazilian songs accompanied only by acoustic

guitar. Like its predecessors, this disc covers a huge emotional and sonic range using only two tools, and there is enough up-tempo material that it balances *The Book of Chet*.

"I just had to do this third record to really finish my engagement with Brazilian music," explains Souza. "But, in addition, I knew that the Chet project was going to be all ballads. Chet Baker did sing some medium tempo or faster songs, but not many. And I was drawn to getting to the essence of him, to the songs of emotion. Releasing these records at the same time made sense because there had to be a contrast."

But even within *Duos III* there are many contrasts. For example, "Dona Lu" is a snappy tune conveyed in scat syllables by Souza, as if she were a hip, Portuguese saxophone. The very next tune, however, "Magoas de Caboclo", is a leaping ballad that has little "jazz" content and comes from a more formal tradition. The guitar part sounds largely composed, strict, rigorous. "Pedra da Lua" introduces a second singing voice (Toninho Horto), both solo and in harmony with Souza, that produces stunning sonic effects.

Most of the tunes will be unknown by Souza's jazz audience, giving *Duos III* a sense of freshness that is also a contrast to *The Book of Chet*, where Souza's unique interpretations have to overcome a program of songs that have been done to death. "As Rosas Não Falam", for example, comes out of nowhere to my ears, and could not be more welcome. Yet Souza also takes a lovely run at "Dindi", one of the familiar songs from Jobim. It's great to report, however, that this "Dindi" is like no other I've heard. It starts slowly and out of tempo with Souza caressing the syllables in open space, and then it picks up a strutting kind of jazz tempo that allows both the singer and the guitarist (Romero Lubambo) to play with this classic bossa nova as if it were a tune by Fats Waller. Terrific.

No One Sounds Like Luciana Souza

So, before you get caught up in the question of whether Luciana Souza is ultimately more a "jazz" singer than a singer in some specific Brazilian mode, it's best to note that she sounds utterly like herself in both idioms. As a straight-up musician, that's probably the only thing that matters.

Best of all, I think, is that aside from her *Duo* series Souza always seems to be making music that dodges and dives away from being "pure". Her sublime version of Randy Newman's "Living Without You" (from *The New Bossa Nova*) may have a touch of that *tum-TUM tummm . . . tum-TUM tummm* groove of a bossa nova, but it also thrums with a kind of smooth backbeat that feels like southern California. Her Chet Baker standards never get a real "walking bass line" going, and the more pop-oriented grooves on her 2009 album *Tide* seem to graft themselves to soul music, jazz, Brazilian, and folk sounds with equal ease.

It's not easy to make a living as a musician so between worlds. "But it's what you have to do—it's what I have to do," says Souza. She knows what it's like to taste big-time success in pop music. She spoke to me affectionately of singing concerts with Paul Simon. "Great music, and what an incredible set-up. You don't have to plug in your own microphone—the sound guy has everything all set for you, and it all sounds perfect." And the pay ain't bad either, she told me.

On your own as a "jazz" musician, teaching jobs are no longer so easy to get, record sales are essentially negligible (even when you're Grammy nominated, it seems), and you have to hustle for gigs. Souza laments it all but then hits you with a laugh and a burst of

conversational energy. She's too busy to worry about it much—spreading her talent across different styles and projects, starting a family, musically looking to her past, and brilliantly embracing her new US home and the future as well.

For me, that's what makes her a jazz musician more than anything else: her omnivorous appetite for variation and creative eclecticism. She has many homes or no home, a sense of journey, a willingness to react to the sounds around her.

Luciana Souza laughs and talks some more. She sounds like a New Yorker living in California via Brazil. Or a Brazilian living in California who misses New York. Or something. Or whatever she wants to sound like. Like herself.

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