

# LUCIANA SOUZA

## DISTILL EVERYTHING

By Allen Morrison

**L**uciana Souza doesn't revel in virtuosity for its own sake. "I could sing pirouettes," she says in her rapid-fire, Brazilian-accented English, her eyes lit up with amusement. "I love doing that stuff, note after note, runs up and down. It's thrilling! But the idea is to distill everything and to ask, 'What does this song need?' I certainly don't need to sing circles around anything. I *could* do it, but I'm more interested in really telling the story."

Souza is discussing her two new albums, *The Book Of Chet* and *Duos III* (both released on Aug. 28 by Sunnyside), in the airy, atrium-style living room of her home in Venice, Calif. Souza lives there with her husband of six years, Larry Klein—who has produced her albums since 2007—and their son, Noah. The modern, three-story townhouse is on a quiet, tree-lined block, well removed from the carnival atmosphere of the Venice boardwalk. Over the fireplace hangs an original poster for Federico Fellini's *Amarcord*. On the coffee table sits a copy of *The Beatles Recording Sessions*.

Why would a singer issue two ambitious, utterly different albums on the same day? For the restless, energetic Souza, it almost seems the least she could do after a three-year absence from recording since 2009's *Tide* (Verve), a Grammy-nominated album that encompassed many different parts of her musical identity. Although firmly grounded in the traditional Brazilian music she continues to celebrate, Souza long ago transcended any one genre, becoming an internationally renowned jazz singer, a champion of Brazilian song, an adventurous composer/arranger of both jazz and jazz-influenced pop songs, and a sought-after classical soloist.

As a singer, she is a musician first. Raised in São Paulo, the daughter of bossa nova guitarist/composer Walter Santos and poet Tereza Souza, she was educated at Berklee College of Music and New England Conservatory of Music; she has also taught at Berklee and Manhattan School of Music. Her gifts include uncannily precise intonation, even at breakneck speeds; a rock-solid rhythmic sense; a love of syncopation; a lush, pure tone; and the sensitive interpretative ability that can turn a lyric into poetry. Her wordless vocal improvisations display a keen, playful musical intelligence.

*Duos III* is the third, and perhaps last, installment in her series of vocal/guitar albums in which she performs favorite Brazilian songs

accompanied by guitar masters. Her accompanists on this album are Romero Lubambo (her regular duo partner), Marco Pereira and singer/songwriter Toninho Horta. *The Book Of Chet* couldn't be more different. Her first album exclusively devoted to American standards, the project is no mere imitation of the style of trumpeter/singer Chet Baker (1929–'88), one of Souza's key influences. Accompanied by the trio of guitarist Larry Koonse, bassist David Piltch and drummer Jay Bellerose, it's a stunning, hypnotic evocation of the feelings of romantic longing and loss that infused Baker's music.

The albums are very much the product of Souza's partnership with Klein. A Grammy-winning producer, bassist and songwriter, Klein achieved fame playing with Freddie Hubbard and as a first-call session player in Los Angeles. Hired to play on Joni Mitchell's 1982 album *Wild Things Run Fast*, he became a confidant and collaborator. He and Mitchell married that same year and stayed together for a decade. During their marriage and afterward, Klein co-produced six of Mitchell's albums, including the acclaimed *Turbulent Indigo* (1994) and *Both Sides Now* (2000). They remain friends and musical collaborators. Klein has become one of the top producers in L.A., co-producing *River: The Joni Letters* (2007) and *The Imagine Project* (2010) with Herbie Hancock, as well as projects for Melody Gardot, Raul Midón and Madeleine Peyroux.

During three days of interviews—at their home, at a favorite Venice bistro and at Klein's Market Street Studio in Santa Monica—Larry and Lu (as her friends call her) were breezily affectionate with each other, often finishing each other's sentences. We began by talking about Souza's musical heritage growing up in Brazil.

**DownBeat:** You were raised in the middle of the bossa nova movement, and your father was a famous guitarist, songwriter and studio owner. Were you surrounded by that music?

**Luciana Souza:** Completely! That was all we knew. All the musicians would come to the house if they were coming through São Paulo for a concert. I remember many nights, falling asleep ... maybe some sound would wake me up, and looking down on the living room, full of musicians playing, kind of hushed and quietly singing. It was beautiful.

**It was great to hear you sing with your father's accompaniment on the first Brazilian Duos album. That must mean a lot to you.**

**LS:** Oh, very much! It was great to get him on tape. When he was growing up, my father had a vocal group with João Gilberto. They were from the same little town in Bahia. When João went to Rio, he called my dad and said, "Come down." And there he befriended João Donato, [Antônio Carlos] Jobim and all the [bossa nova] guys. He made two records in the late '50s. He became an accompanist, a writer of songs and jingles, and a studio owner. He was beautiful, but he just couldn't handle the stage thing. With the *Duos* albums, I feel I am continuing my father's legacy in a way, because I play in this duet format. This is what I do, and this is what he did.

**Which artists influenced your singing style?**

**LS:** With Brazilian [music], of course, João Gilberto. My father, of course. Elis Regina, Gal Costa, Elizete Cardoso, Leny Andrade. In American music, we listened to a lot of Sinatra at my house, I listened to Ella quite a bit and Carmen [McRae]—my father was a big fan of hers. And I listened to a lot of Joni—even though I didn't understand what she was saying, I understood the sound. And Chet Baker, too.

**When you were entering Berklee, did you know that you wanted to be this kind of a musician—a composer, and not just a singer?**

**LS:** Most definitely. At the time, I was enamored by the idea of being a bandleader, like Maria



BOB WALLENSON

Luciana Souza in São Paulo

Schneider or Toshiko. Carla Bley, Steve Swallow, Scofield, Gary Burton—I loved them. A part of me also loved Sarah and Ella—Ella because she could scat—and Frank because the pitch was ... *ridiculous*, the phrasing was *insane*... he swung so hard. I mean, he had 17 musicians accompanying him and he was the hardest-swinging musician in the band. That's what I wanted to do—I wanted to sing on that level. The only way I could get there was to go through the *musician* path.

*[Klein joins us. He describes meeting Souza for the first time backstage at the L.A. Philharmonic, after she had performed as a featured soloist in a work written by his childhood friend, pianist/composer Billy Childs.]*

**Larry Klein:** Billy had actually told me about Luciana previously, saying, “There’s this singer, this girl Luciana Souza, and she’s *bad*,

man.” I went to the concert, and while I was sitting there listening I just thought, “Holy cow, who is this woman?” Everything about her—I was really impressed.

**LS:** And he courted me incessantly for weeks.

**LK:** I did [*laughs*]. So, because [I went] as a last-minute thing, I had called a friend of mine ...

**LS:** ... who was a model! [*laughs*]

**LK:** Actually, an actress. But she was a *friend friend*, you know? During the performance, I leaned over to her and I whispered, “This woman is amazing!” So then we go backstage, and [my friend] elbowed me and said, “Talk to her.” I spoke to Lu, and she knew a bit about my career. I told her, “Well, I’m going back and forth to New York, working on this record [Walter Becker’s *Circus Money*], so maybe we can get some coffee.” After the concert, I called Billy right away and asked for her number.

Eventually we started emailing and got to know each other.

**Luciana, you produced your own albums for years. What has changed in the way you make your albums, now that Larry is producing?**

**LS:** Everything has changed. Larry is a great intellect, and I respect him so much as a musician. He knows so much and hears so much. My process of recording changed drastically with Larry. When we did *The New Bossa Nova* in 2007, we did it in New York with all the players that I knew; nobody that you usually use in L.A. And Larry was very respectful of that. But one thing shocked us all: As jazz musicians, you rehearse outside the studio, then you go into a studio, and do one or two days of recording. But we were in the studio for four or five days, which was a luxury I never had before. Larry made us do multiple takes of everything—to the

point where we were exhausted. And at the same time, I was reading [Marshall Fine's] biography of John Cassavetes, called *Accidental Genius*. [Cassavetes] talks about rolling tape for 16 hours and doing the same scene 80 times. The actors talk about him being just vicious, you know? They think they've done it all, they're exhausted, and they're still acting. When asked why would you do that, Cassavetes said, and I'm paraphrasing, "If you roll enough tape, finally you get to the humanity—it seeps through the acting." It took me reading that to understand going into the studio with Larry.

**LK:** I'm always looking for when a singer or instrumentalist reaches the point of what a Taoist would call "no mind." Often you see their eyes roll up in their head ... where they lose self-consciousness. They're not playing to show anyone anything. They're hearing the lyric and how it corresponds to the melody, the architecture.

**LS:** I learned so much. I had never thought that [approach] was good or that it would bring anything new. But I was deeply surprised. I don't question things anymore.

**Larry, how does your experience producing Lu compare to working with other singers, including Joni Mitchell?**

**LS:** You want me to leave?

**LK:** No!

**LS:** I'm kidding! [laughter]

**LK:** What I do is a very mysterious, intuitive process for me: to take an artist who is, in Lu's case and in Joni's, incredibly accomplished, who already functions on a very high level, then find what is needed to take the music up a couple of notches. It's almost like being a Zen abbot or ninja—when it's done well, it's invisible. But I have to tell you something about the comparison between [producing albums for the two singers]: Lu benefits from a lot of the mistakes I made during the time I was working with Joni. A lot of my work with Joan was during a time when I was learning about how to do this job right. How to do it in a way that came from this place ...

**... in a way that really supports the artist?**

**LK:** Yeah, and man, she would ... the equivalent of *smack* me if I screwed up and said something at the wrong moment that was counter-productive. You know, she was one of my real teachers in regard to how to do this job with your heart in the right place and with this sense that everything you say and do is going to have an impact on the room and on the music.

**LS:** And I benefit from his experience. I haven't worked as much as he has, and I haven't even lived as much as he has. Why shouldn't I at least listen to what he has to say? We may have disagreements, but about 100 percent of the time he happens to be right [laughs].

**Let's talk about *Duos III*. Why a trilogy of *Duos* albums, and will there be a fourth?**

**LS:** I think three is a good number. I had my dad on the first one, and Romero and Marco,



who returned on *Duos II* and *III*. Romero is, if anything, crazier and more free—I adore him. Marco has evolved as a player and a writer. And Toninho Horta, he's the pinnacle—he's one that I really wanted to connect with. I'm sort of realizing my dreams.

**How is *Duos III* different from the previous two?**

**LK:** My agenda was to make this record a little more immediate, to have it feel just a little rawer than the other two records, and give the listener the feeling that you are in the room ... hearing things crunch and squeak. One of the things I love about a lot of the bossa nova records of the late '50s and early '60s is that you hear the character of the room. You hear things that, from an audiophile perspective, are unintentional.

**[We stop to listen to several tracks from *Duos III*, including "Chora Coração," featuring Pereira's guitar accompaniment.]**

**LS:** "Chora Coração" means "Cry, Heart." Marco follows so beautifully. We both played with our eyes closed. He would hear where my breath was going and he would just follow. That takes enormous trust. If you listen with headphones, you can hear his breath—he's breathing with me.

**LK:** Marco is an exquisite technician. He is almost as much of a classical guitarist as he is a Brazilian guitarist. For me, the way you guys are playing together, it's the most organic and human thing that I've ever heard him play.

**LS:** He said he cried when he heard it.

**The *Book Of Chet* embodies something you told me you learned from your father—how to be quiet around music and to value silence as much as sound.**

**LS:** I continue to research sound and silence. I'm just as interested in what's being played as in what's not being played.

**Yet there's plenty going on in *The Book Of Chet*.**

**LS:** Yeah, but it's very minimal. Sometimes you sing a song so many times you don't even know what it's about. Our idea, Larry's and mine, was to really slow everything down so much, and make it so pure and so simple, that

you have no choice but to actually listen to these words, this melody and this harmony—and to the sound of the bass and guitar. Everything Larry Koonse plays matters. Every bass note has great importance to the song. It's not just passing [chords] and showing off—there are no excesses. We literally went through the charts and took chords out.

**Why did you decide to do *Chet* with a guitar trio?**

**LS:** I've been playing with Larry Koonse since I moved to L.A. He played on *Tide* so beautifully. He's so professional and intelligent, so willing to adapt and learn. I've been playing with him and Dave Piltch, doing little trio things here and there. So when it came time to do this record, I told Larry, I want to use Koonse and Piltch. Then I asked Larry to suggest a drummer. Larry said, for this music, you would really like Jay Bellerose. I went to Berklee with him. He's delicious to work with.

**These guys are so restrained, it's like they're on another planet.**

**LS:** We drugged them and locked them in a closet [laughs].

**LK:** They're used to working with me, so I've conditioned them to distill things down to absolute essence.

**[We listen to the song "Forgetful" from *The Book Of Chet*.]**

**LK:** Lu is singing the tenor line. You hear how the over-note creates tension? [He points out Koonse's high, bell-like guitar tones layered on top of his off-beat comping.] If that were a Claus Ogerman arrangement, those would be woodwinds up there.

**Why did you decide to just do ballads?**

**LS:** Chet sang mostly ballads. It was clear that it was going to be a record of ballads.

**LK:** Up-tempo for Chet was medium.

**LS:** So we were all in that quiet, really soft, slow thing for three days. It was ...

**LK:** ... like an altered state.

**LS:** When we were going home, it was like everybody was levitating. It was like another planet.

[We listen to "I Get Along Without You Very Well."]

I love the way Koonse sketches out the chords with just a couple of notes.

**LS:** Two notes—that was [Klein's] idea. That's all you're allowed. But what other musician would accept that—and embrace that? Not just, "OK, I'll do it," but, "I'll love it." He loved it—he was transformed; we were all changed.

It says so much with so few notes.

**LS:** And sadness is a bit like that. You know, there's sadness that's sobbing loud; and there's a sadness that just sits somewhere in your body where you hold it in your shoulders, or the back of your throat. I think Chet had a lot of that.

**LK:** That's the deepest sadness—that is very quiet or silent, that just sits inside all of us. Whatever that vein is that gets formed in all of us, probably very early, some kind of deep heart-break or sadness that sits there. I think that's why you often hear artists talk about trying to write the same song over and over through your life. That same thing [is happening] in this song. Or when you talk about Chet, there's this place inside him, and this song gets at that. Miles, too.

**LS:** Absolutely, yeah.

**LK:** You always hear that place that his pathos and his melancholy came from.

**LS:** And [this sadness] has nothing to do with happiness—it's not in contrast.

**LK:** It's *saudade*, right?

**LS:** Yes. It's a companion. It lives in you. Happiness is something you look for; and there's a tone that can also be present in your life, of searching for it and looking for it. But I think sadness lives in people. It's just there.

And that's why you were drawn to these songs, most of them about heartbreak and lost love?

**LS:** Not all of them; there's some hope in there. Obviously I'm in a healthy, loving relationship. [We have] a lovely, beautiful, healthy son. So it has nothing to do with that. But it is a part of everyone, as much as we want to deny it.

I guess it's not heartbreak exactly; it's more a sense of longing.

**LS:** Exactly. And a beautiful sense of sadness.

**LK:** I always think of this Kafka quote, that "art is the axe for the frozen sea within us." I always keep that in my mind. Somebody once asked Miles why he didn't record for all that time—you know, that period where he stopped recording. And he said, "It's too personal."

Looking at your evolution as a recording artist, do you have a sense of paring things down to their essentials over the years?

**LS:** It's a natural thing. Things take time to reveal themselves. And records reflect life experience—they may take years to make. Think of Herbie—he made amazing records growing up, in middle age, and now that he's a more mature, 70-year-old man, he's still making beautiful

records. Maybe they incorporate different styles of music that some people may be critical of—he's not pure jazz, it's not the Miles thing.

He's just not that interested in categories.

**LS:** He's interested in *music*. Most great musicians are not interested in [categories], anyway. Wayne [Shorter] is not interested in that.

There's a quote in *Footprints*, Michelle Mercer's biography of Wayne Shorter, in which he says, with regard to Joni Mitchell, "They don't even have a name for what she does anymore."

**LS:** Exactly! People used to always ask, "In which bin in the record stores are they going to put your record? How should we classify it? Is it world music? Is it Brazilian? Is it jazz?"

How do you respond to a question like that?

**LS:** I don't know—it's not *my* question. If you're the marketing guy, you figure it out—put it in both, how about that? I think that's what iTunes does. That's the beauty of the Internet—there's no limit to how much information you can have, so you can be Brazilian, you can be jazz, you can be world. All of the above. **DB**

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