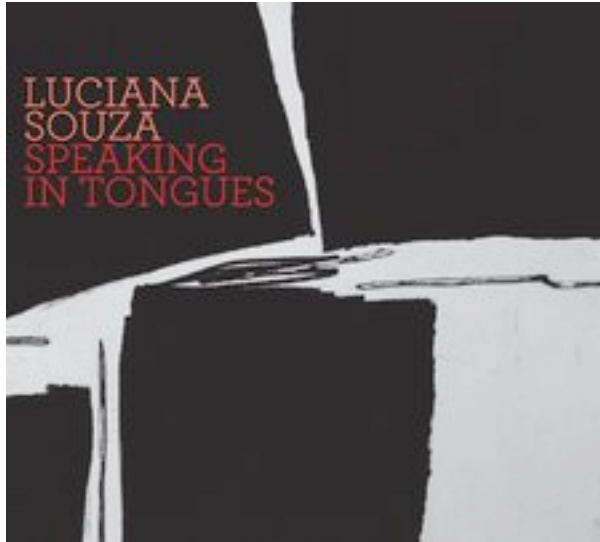


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Review: Luciana Souza's Instrument, Her Voice

By Nate Chinen SEPT. 16, 2015



Luciana Souza
"Speaking in Tongues"
(Sunnyside)

Luciana Souza has used her voice as an instrument of empathy and intimacy, cultural linkage and poetic disquisition. Sometimes, too, she has used it as an instrument in a more literal sense. Her history with a range of jazz and classical composers has shown that she can be a color in a larger palette, singing wordlessly but with full expressive intent. That's largely the point of her fine new album, "Speaking in Tongues."

It places her limber, dusky voice within the stir of an excellent band, featuring Lionel Loueke on guitar, Grégoire Maret on harmonica, Massimo Biolcati on bass and Kendrick Scott on drums. Each musician hails from a different country of origin, one reason for the album's title. Another is Ms. Souza's use of scat syllabics, a lexicon she imbues with shadowy gravity rather than coquettish razzle-dazzle.

Ms. Souza, 49, has composed more than half the album, with the dynamic capacities of this ensemble in mind. "Straw Hat" has a hard-driving pulse and a frisky, syncopated melody; "Free at Last" suggests a nod to the Pat Metheny Group. And "Filhos de Gandhi" gives Ms. Souza a welcome excuse to flirt with the samba phrasing of her native Brazil. (It's distinct from [the famous track of that title](#) by Gilberto Gil and Jorge Ben.)

Ms. Souza's main point is connection — music as a universal language that transcends difference. Meaningfully, the only tracks with proper lyrics are musical adaptations of Leonard Cohen poems, from his "Book of Longing."

In one of these, "Split," Ms. Souza sings of the bond of marriage in terms suggestive of a rift. In the other, "No One to Follow," she projects an existential resignation: Despairing that "the goal/Falls short of the reach," she ends up holding that last word for a good 10 seconds, to properly devastating effect.