

Content Area

Luciana Souza: On saying a lot with no words, and her new album ‘Speaking in Tongues’

[STEVE HOCHMAN](#) on September 17th, 2015



Luciana Souza (Photo by Kim Fox)

Luciana Souza is sick of words. Well, not sick. She'd just had her fill of them for now, as a singer at least, and needed to put them aside for a bit.

She's certainly sung plenty of them, in plenty of languages. She's sung jazz standards on an album paying homage to Chet Baker. She's sung the poetry of Pablo Neruda (in English, controversially). She's sung samba and bossa nova in Portuguese, the language of her native Brazil. She's sung Spanish versions of liturgical texts in massive, challenging works by Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov. Words have been a big part of her art and of her life. Her mother was a noted Brazilian poet, after all.

"I've done enough of that," she says.

Hence [“Speaking in Tongues.”](#) her aptly named new album, which comes out Friday via [Sunnyside Records](#). Here, for the most part, she does away with words, or transcends them, singing wordless sounds. And it’s an inspired and inspiring set of pieces, thrilling flights of interplay with a stellar international band bringing together some particularly inventive talents: Benin-born guitarist Lionel Loueke, whose stunningly original approaches have been showcased in stints alongside Herbie Hancock and Terence Blanchard among many others, and Swiss harmonica player Gregoire Maret, who has also been in Hancock’s band as well as Pat Metheny’s, join her up front. The three of them sometimes are in near unison, other times darting around each other like swallows at play and other times one or the other will peel off in a solo flight of dizzying dexterity (or the vocal equivalent, in her case).

Backing them is the nimble, powerful pair of bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Kendrick Scott, both of whom have been in Loueke’s trio for a few years. Helping direct it all was producer Larry Klein, Souza’s husband, perhaps best known for his work with his ex, Joni Mitchell, and on the 2007 Herbie Hancock tribute to her, “River: The Joni Letters,” which took the Grammy for album of the year.

Now, there *are* two songs with words, poems by Leonard Cohen no less, with somber music written by Souza. But these, coming at the end of what on vinyl would be each side, serve as punctuation and contrast for the other pieces, in which by eschewing words and their pesky shapes and meanings she was free to be purely a musician.

“I wanted to be in a band and be an equal with the guys,” she says. With modesty that seemed genuine, but off-base, she added, “Clearly I’m not. They are amazing. But the voice can be another vehicle.”

It worked.

Voice as one piece of the puzzle

“That was definitely the idea, a collective,” she says, citing the groundbreaking jazz-world ensemble Weather Report as a key template. “What’s amazing is you can still remain an individual and have your sound and contribute to the greater

good. That's what people do in Brazil and Africa. You don't get fazed by the presence of greater things in this collective. I made skeletons of the music — here's the bass line, came up with a melody and then brought it in and didn't have to say anything. We just started playing and grooving. And in that way you can tell a story and you don't need words."

On opener "At the Fair" and centerpiece "Filos de Gandhi," it's thrilling, happy and exploratory, each musician seeming to challenge the others to top what they've just done in good-natured competition. The epiphany is Maret, who takes the chromatic harmonica into places usually reserved for jazz's top horn players. The latter of those two songs is particularly fascinating, the name — translating as "Sons of Gandhi" — honoring a Carnival krewe that grew out of a late-'40s dockworkers strike which took inspiration from the Indian icon's non-violent approach.

Souza readily offers that she's hardly the first to do this. There's a long history of wordless singing — classical vocalese, jazz scat. Hello "Magic Flute!" Hello Ella Fitzgerald! She's explored the form some herself here and there through her career. And in Brazil there's also a noble tradition of such approaches — she cites Brazilian 20th century icon Heitor Villa-Lobos' Baroque-inspired Bachianas Brasileiras, as well as many pop-jazz hits of Sergio Mendes and his groups.

And Brazil really sits at the heart of the album, the music often evoking the dynamic jazz fusions of the '70s and '80s, the music of such stellar artists as Airto, Flora Purim, even some of international star Sergio Mendes. And to those who know that music, the most prominent discernible influence may be that of Hermeto Pascoal, whose mix of complexity and whimsy was as distinctive as his long, white bushes of hair. To those who did pick up on that, Souza says, "Good ears."

"Hermeto was my godfather," she says. "I'm Jewish, but he's my *padrinho*, one of the best friends my father had, and my mother." Her father was a successful musician in São Paulo.

Don't fear the music

"I've done several recordings with him, one that didn't come out in the States. And I grew up with him. He was the first person who sat me down and said, 'Sing things.' He played a melody on piano and I'd sing back. Ear training. 'Follow this

... sing that ... imitate that.' That became a thing for me. It broke the wall between words and sound. Hermeto was the first person who said to me, 'Don't fear music. Play. It's called play.' Singers have a lot of fear, like not being able to hit the note." Another name that might come to mind: Milton Nascimento, another of the most beloved music of that generation, mixing adventurous approaches and classic pop appeal. Again, no coincidence.

"He was also a family friend, was at the house a lot," she says. "But I loved his records independently of that. He was the first one who mixed poetry and wordless singing. In the middle of a song he would go almost into a chant, beautiful songs." And by channeling the essence of that inspiration, the purity of the voice, she found something new and beautiful in herself as an artist. Well, when she remembered to sing.

"They're all amazing together," she says of the band. "They're so involved in what they're doing. I become an audience member, which is not good sometimes. I miss my cues."

Luciana Souza performs Friday, March 18, 2016, at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica.