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Fresh Contexts and Favored Formats
by Larry Blumenfeld

With new CDs, several leading jazz vocalists and instrumentalists focus on points of origin and comfort zones. For singers Dee Dee Bridgewater and Luciana Souza, that means exploring personal roots in fresh musical contexts. For pianists Matthew Shipp and Myra Melford, and for reedman Marty Ehrlich, it involves returning to favored formats.

It's become de rigueur to translate pop tunes into jazz vernacular. And Brazilian bossa nova has long been a part of both traditions. But what about treating pop songs as bossa tunes? And who better to tackle that task than singer Luciana Souza? Born in Brazil, the daughter of bossa composers, she's also a graduate of American jazz academies, with degrees from Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory. And she's a strong conceptualist, with fine albums of her own design, including two Grammy-nominated projects.

The soft strums of guitarist Romero Lubambo, Ms. Souza's frequent duet partner and countryman, support this "bossa-fication" of songs written and previously recorded by the likes of Joni Mitchell, Randy Newman and Leonard Cohen. James Taylor's "Never Die Young" seems stiff to the form's natural lilt, but most tracks work, showcasing Ms. Souza's confident yet still advancing skills. The least likely song choice, Elliot Smith's cryptic "Satellite," ends up the clearest realization of her theme. Far from the aloof trifles that often caricature bossa, Ms. Souza's vocals are direct and always informed by the drama of the lyric. She weaves a narrative about love, romantic and mystical, that reaches its climax with a cleverly syncopated version of the 1966 Beach Boys hit "God Only Knows."