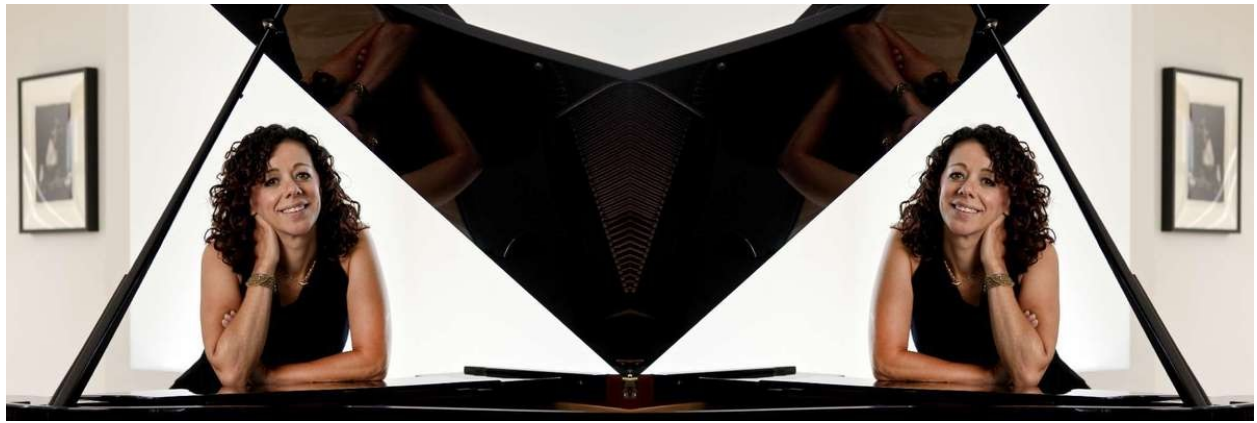


Jazz Notes: Vocalist/Composer/ Bandleader Luciana Souza Basks in the Beauty and the Challenge of Pursuing Something New



By Dan Ouellette, ZEAL Senior Editor, November 11, 2015

Ravishing vocalist/composer/bandleader Luciana Souza can't wait to return to New York and play. Her return to the city where her career spawned is always a pleasure—both for her and her adoring audiences. Her 92nd Street Y show on November 19 promises to be a sell-out.

Born in São Paulo, Brazil and schooled in Boston (Berklee, New England Conservatory of Music), Souza was the singing sparkplug on New York's scene for eight years—both as a support voice (with the likes of Maria Schneider's orchestra and Guillermo Klein's Los Gauchos big band) as well as a brilliant leader of band and duo recordings with pianist Edward Simon and guitarist Romero Lubambo. Her rhythmic sensibility is perfect—after all her musical parents were renowned poet Tereza Souza and bossa nova singer/songwriter Walter

Santos—and her alto swoops and soars with an otherworldly shadow and shine.

On each project Souza was largely not willing to duplicate what came before and took wide leaps of faith, such as devoting entire albums to singing the poems of Elizabeth Bishop (2000's *The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop and Other Songs*) and Chilean iconic poet Pablo Neruda (2004's *Neruda*). Given her growing prowess such as being nominated for six Grammys, Souza could well have slid into the diva vortex. Not a chance.

When she worked with esteemed producer Larry Klein, she not only came away with a superb album (2007's *The New Bossa Nova*) but they also fell in love (and married in 2006). She figured that since Klein was solidly settled in Los Angeles she would move from the East Coast to the Left Coast where she happily lives today with their young son Noah. As for her artistic freedom, she laughingly told the *New York Observer* a few years ago: “The idea that I am this fragile person who has been taken over by this man? We have a love affair. We adore each other. I had a baby with him. Of course, I trust him completely and unconditionally. But as a musician, I think I’ve proven to people, not just with my music but my life, that I’ve done whatever the hell I wanted.”

So for her newest project—and one of the best albums of 2015—Souza figured it was time to throw that kind of change up after a series of fine recordings with largely the same lineups supporting her. She didn’t have any gripes with the personnel, but it was more about the need to stretch. “It was time for something new,” she says. “What went before was great, but I needed a clean slate. So that’s what the new album is all about.”

And given her past outings, Souza takes a stimulating innovative turn. On the dynamic, overdub-fueled *Speaking in Tongues* (what she calls “a musical inquiry into language and conversation,” released by Sunnyside), she enlisted an international quartet of artists who hale from different regions of the planet to collectively enliven her wordless vocals

excursions: guitarist Lionel Loueke from Benin, West Africa; harmonica virtuoso Grégoire Maret who was born in Switzerland; Sweden-born bassist Massimo Biolcati; and drummer Kendrick Scott, a Houston native.

“I knew there were lots of possibilities playing with these guys,” says Souza whose voice serves as another animated improvisational instrument in the musical mix. “They are all generous, but I needed them to push me. The band offered me more than I had experienced—they were ready, open and unapologetic. Since they had a deep understanding of the limitations of supporting a singer, they poked me and said don’t worry, we’ll catch you.”

Remarkably given their own busy careers as leaders and support artists, the full band will be in New York to celebrate the album (other dates include only Boston and Baltimore).

Interestingly, the project came together based on what Souza was listening to: the ‘70s jazz-rock fusion super group Weather Report. “I used to listen to them when I was in school,” she says. “I went back to them and listened a lot to what they were doing. They were my muse. They were a collective that told musical stories. It was very episodic, and there was no sense of head-solo-head. They were all musicians who collaborated together. They weren’t reading from a sheet. The furthest thing from traditional jazz still sounds modern. And their music touched my heart. It was all about emotion—joy, even when the music was melancholy. It was totally collaborative but completely individual.”

The way that her music for this album played out was that Souza brought the skeletons of compositions with bass lines, melodic phrasings and rhythmic impulses that she then let the band explore. “I didn’t tell the musicians what to do,” she says. “They were able to come up with the groove and the parts they wanted to play. This is my first collaborative recording where we were listening to each other”

After rehearsing in December 2013 and then playing eight warm-up gigs in 2014, they jumped into the studio and gave new birth to Souza material as well as two pieces by Loueque, a Scott tune (co-written with Mike Moreno), a reflective and yearning song by Gary Versace (“Hymn”) and two renderings of Leonard Cohen poetry that Souza wrote music to.

After that she did something out of the ordinary for her: bake the tunes further in the studio with the help of Klein and engineer Maxime Le Guil who overdubbed beyond the originals’ boundaries. “On my other albums, it was go into the studio, record for two days and then take the best tracks,” Souza says. “This time I wanted it to be messy, full and dense, but also exciting. So what we did was clean, select and decide how far we wanted to go. Sonically if it helped the story to be told, I wanted it to be kept in. If the electronics went too far and wasn’t comfortable for me, we got rid of it. But there’s a big difference between the roughs and the final.”

The nine-song recording that focuses on the confluence of conversation and listening, *Speaking in Tongues* features such Souza originals as the celebratory “At the Fair,” which gets its ebullience from Scott’s percussive undergirding and skittering grooves and Maret and Loueque trading with festive color and crazed) that soars with a wild harmonica ride by Maret.

Souza says that she often used Loueque as a sounding board for decisions on tunes and his movement between his acoustic and electric guitars. “Luciana gave us plenty of room to express ourselves,” Loueque says. “We’d record and then add in a lot after to bring it alive more. I just got new equipment, so she gave me the chance to experiment with different sounds, like organ and distortion.”

He says that Souza has a unique voice and that she is willing to take risks and be in the moment. “She jumps immediately wherever you go. She’s not afraid if I play the wrong chord behind her, she’s not afraid to get lost. She goes for it.”

As for the introspective and sobering Cohen poems (“Split” and “No One to Follow”), Souza says she just stumbled onto them after already figuring the recording was going to be exclusively wordless vocals. “You can have so much storytelling in music that doesn’t have words—it’s sophistication, it’s screaming and it’s all very primal and like folk music,” she says. “Leonard is a family friend and had told me once a while ago that he didn’t want me to do a whole record of his poems set to music. So I left that project, but discovered printed versions of his lyrics I had written inside my piano bench. I loved them. So I contacted him and he was very generous and sweet and said, ‘Do it.’ Some people say they don’t belong on *Speaking in Tongues*, but I needed to include them because they hit me so deeply. I created simple melodies to let the words speak.”

For her New York date, in addition to the album’s songs, Souza will deliver an improvised solo piece (“It’s how I push myself onstage”) and introduce new music she’s written for the band. “I’m totally committed to this,” she says. “I’m not too bothered that we can’t play live a lot or tour as much. They’re busy, and I’m busy. But for now, we’re looking to connect on a deeper level. That’s the high.”