



A Winning Pair

Singer Luciana Souza interprets Chet Baker and further explores her Brazilian roots on two new albums.

By Ted Panken • Photos by Bob Wolfenson





“I have a little story to tell you,” says vocalist Luciana Souza, recalling the third and final studio session that generated *The Book of Chet* (Sunnyside), a CD released in August comprising 10 renderings of American Songbook jewels upon which Chet Baker placed his distinctive stamp. “Right after lunch I decided to sing ‘I Get Along Without You Very Well.’ We had rehearsed it, so I thought it would come out as easy as everything else. I was on mic, everybody wearing headphones, tuned, ready to go. They started playing, and I froze. It felt so slow, and I didn’t know how to fit the words into the meter. I had a moment of feeling like death.”

Souza’s producer, Larry Klein, her husband since 2006 and the father of their 3-year-old son, made a quick suggestion. “Larry said, ‘Let’s just put one down, then come hear it,’” Souza continues, speaking by phone from her Santa Monica home. “That was it. We never looked back.”

No trace of agitation or confusion can be discerned in Souza’s exquisite, one-take evocation of the Hoagy Carmichael lyric, which surpasses Baker’s affectless reading from 1954 and holds up to such enduring treatments as Frank Sinatra’s wistful 1955 interpretation and the haunted dirge that Billie Holiday conjured on her 1958 swan song *Lady in Satin*. Framed by spare chords from guitarist Larry Koonse, whispery bass lines from David Piltch and impeccable slow-roll brushwork from Jay Bellerose, she floats over the meter, caressing every note, infusing each syllable with bittersweet implication and gravitas, building a cohesive narrative arc. She concludes the five-and-a-quarter-minute track with a wordless voice-as-instrument passage that encapsulates the oceanic emotions and ironic perspective that give the song legs.

“You can’t be shy about making mistakes, like you can’t be shy when you play jazz,” Souza says. “If you have fear in music or speaking a language, it holds you back — it edits what you’re going to say.” Throughout the proceedings, Souza, whose first language is Portuguese, conveys a rarefied level of soulful transparency on tunes less-traveled (“Forgetful,” “Oh, You Crazy Moon”) and much-exposed (“I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance,” “I Fall In Love Too Easily,” “You Go To My Head”). Ultimately, she fulfills Klein’s hope that “people who’ve heard the song a million times, whether instrumentally or lyrically, will actually hear it anew and reach the place where this music has taken Luciana.

“Otherwise,” Klein says, “why do it?”

Souza’s own answer to that question is multi-layered.

The fifth and youngest child of composer-guitarist Walter Santos and poet-lyricist Tereza Souza, both consequential contributors to the early bossa nova songbook and founders of a major São Paulo recording studio, she heard such Baker recordings as “The Thrill is Gone” and “My Funny Valentine” at home during her ’70s childhood, in rotation with other American icons like Sinatra, Nat Cole and Ella Fitzgerald. “I had no idea what they were saying,” she says. “I tried to imitate the sounds, the way they shaped their mouth.”

She gravitated to Baker while attending Berklee School of

Music from 1984 to 1988. “I became smitten by him — not as a man, but by his voice and music,” she recalls. “I dug his mood, his sense of pitch, where he places the note in his voice and the fact that he dealt with vibrato differently than other American singers — a straight tone, with a fast vibrato and a slower one.” During the early ’90s, while pursuing graduate studies at New England Conservatory, she augmented her knowledge by transcribing scat solos from several Baker recordings. All the while, Souza adds, she was well aware of Baker’s influence on the way bossa nova trailblazer João Gilberto conceptualized the projection of *saudade*, the famously untranslatable Portuguese word that evokes the notion of yearning or nostalgia for the unattainable. (Gilberto and Souza’s late father were friends since they were boys growing up in Juazeiro, a small city in the interior of Bahia.)

Then, Souza says, she “didn’t think about Chet for a long time.” Her interest rekindled upon settling in Los Angeles with Klein after a decade in New York during which she made — and self-produced — six well-wrought recordings, three of them Grammy-nominated. She was also the lead voice on Argentine classical composer Osvaldo Gojilov’s *The Passion of St. Mark* and *Oceana*, and sang voice-as-instrument on pan-American-oriented projects by such cutting-edgers as Guillermo Klein, John Patitucci, Danilo Perez, Maria Schneider and Edward Simon. As she absorbed her new terrain, grieved the deaths of her parents, adjusted to motherhood and adapted to L.A.’s mellower pace, she read up on Baker’s life and times, and immersed herself in his recordings. After bringing her infant son on several tours backing 2009’s *Tide*, a Grammy-nominated CD encapsulating all of the flavors she’d documented over the previous decade, she decided to put public performing on hold to be a full-time mom. Last fall, she began to think about how best to reenter the fray.

“New York was all about music, which I ate and drank like nobody’s business,” she says. “I’m glad I experienced that rat race. Now I’m deeply influenced by the sunlight, living outside, doing more yoga and pilates. I’m more in touch with my body. I was a very brainy singer, and I still am, but there’s a deeper connection to the breath and the sound. The way I sing is more legato, much more forgiveness and acceptance, embracing the moment in a way I couldn’t quite do in New York.

“I’m not a sad person, but I have deep moments of sadness. We all do. I’m looking for that humanity in myself. When Chet Baker sings, he takes me to that place. I want to be there because I think having intimacy with that makes me a better human being.”

As an example, Souza discusses “Forgetful.” She based the arrangement on David “Buck” Wheat’s guitar part on Baker’s languid, reefer-fueled 1957 recording. “It’s an amazing lyric, so deep,” she says. “The feelings are quite muted and veiled, distant in the way bossa nova hits me sometimes. But there’s a bit of humor and deep feeling, and you can get to the bottom of the story.”

These considerations guided Souza as she winnowed her song list from 40 to 10 during the fall and winter, relying on her husband as a sounding board. Klein — his instincts honed



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by three decades of supervising recordings by Souza, ex-wife Joni Mitchell and other A-list singers, including Madeleine Peyroux, Melody Gardot, Julia Fordham, Shawn Colvin and Tracy Chapman — deployed the Socratic method, asking questions that unveiled new pathways.

“I love density, odd meters and thick chords, and Larry’s job was to help me reduce and shed,” Souza says. “He’d have me spend time alone with the material. I’d noodle at the piano, find voicings, then settle on a key. He’d tell me if something worked or suggest I choose a brighter key. As the song evolved, or the takes were going, he’d ask, ‘Who are you speaking as here? Is it your story? Are you telling someone else’s story from a distance?’ I am more worried about my breath, the phrasing, should I elongate this, should I make this staccato. He wants me to be less concerned about these things, and just breathe and let it come out in a way that’s true to that story.

“Collaborating is new to me, but we have a give-and-take, a back-and-forth, with enormous respect. He’s very delicate and gentle that way. He knows how to listen. And he knows that I don’t want to go to bed mad.”

While assembling *The Book of Chet*, Souza worked on a simultaneous

release, *Duos III* (Sunnyside), the third album on which she interprets repertoire drawn from several eras of the Brazilian songbook. It follows the format of its Grammy-nominated predecessors, 2001’s *Brazilian Duos* and 2005’s *Duos II*, in presenting 12 voice-guitar duos, eight recorded in São Paulo with the influential singer-songwriter Toninho Horta and virtuoso guitarist Marco Pereira, and four in Los Angeles with jazz maestro Romero Lubambo, with whom Souza has performed hundreds of concerts since the mid-’90s.

“I’m the fruit of the bossa nova,” Souza says. “It’s the music I’m most comfortable with. I learned most of these songs from my dad, or from João, or from my dad and João together.

“The first *Duos* was more focused on *Baião*, the northeast, where my dad grew

up. He had been diagnosed with cancer at that point. I wanted to be with him, and he played on that record with me. He wasn’t well enough to play on the second record, which is more samba, more Rio-based. This new one has some Bahia, but the two voices are really Jobim, who is Rio, and Toninho, who is Minas Gerais.”

Klein’s input was palpable, but, in deference to Souza’s intimacy with the material, more subtle. “I wanted to give the record a little more blood and less skin,” he says. “If I was to find a criticism of the previous *Duos*, it’s that they sounded a bit clinical. I missed the rawness. I think Luciana’s journey is one from technical mastery towards trusting that intuitive part of herself, living there more, and letting go of the ropes. Apart from this bifurcated division between intuition and technique, there’s an intelligent quality in her singing. She grasps the entire musical situation more than most singers and knows how to negotiate her way through it in an elegant manner, rather than being someone who, to put it rather rudely, is smart in a stupid way.”

Souza notes that, because some of the melodies are challenging to sing, she prefers “to address the technical part to get those issues out of the way.” To navigate high keys, she adds, “I tend to sing with a voice that gets me to the center of the sound in a more classical way. Larry thought I could sing more softly, that I don’t need to look for a perfect sound, but should remember who I am singing this thing. He always left the door open for me to make the choice myself — especially as he wasn’t in São Paulo to make it with me.”

Looking for maximum idiomatic authority on the earlier *Duos* dates, Souza sent cassettes of various tracks to Brazil for her father to vet. “It took weeks, and by the next time we spoke on the phone I had already solved my problem,” she recalls. “He’d say, ‘Well, I guess you’re done with it; you don’t need me anymore.’ When he heard the finished record, he’d say, ‘Oh, you did that in that key and you did this that fast? I really don’t know what you’re saying there.’ Whatever. He got mad. I’d have to live with that.”

That being said, Souza emphasizes



that the fruit fell close to the tree in the realm of aesthetics. “He was just crazy about pitch,” she says. “Any time I’d sing something out of tune, he’d go, ‘Oh!’ He loved vocal music and vocal groups — the Hi-Lo’s, the Singers Unlimited. Harmony singing was important in our house. I learned to be a part of an ensemble and follow my function: ‘OK, you’re singing the alto line now, stay with that. It’s lower than the soprano, you can’t sing loud.’ My father schooled me, even though he didn’t know A-major from A-minor. Music was the way we talked to each other.”

Through his Bahian heritage and direct engagement with the iconic performers of Brazilian music, Walter Santos also provided Souza a first-hand connection to the deepest roots and branches that underpin the various idioms she renders.

“He was from a place where there was no electricity, where people had one pair of flip-flops and wore them until they no longer existed, and then found a way to get another one,” she says. “He carried that with him even after he’d lived in São Paulo a long time. He raised all his kids through writing songs and jingles. Music was his bread-maker and also his life, his language. He had a guitar with him all the time. We had to pry it away from him, even when he was on his death bed. It was always bossa nova or old sambas. And he knew stories about all the old players and what they had done, their dirty lives and how many wives they had. When I grew up and got what he was doing, it just felt so natural.”

This was Souza’s pathway to “Mágoas de Caboclo,” a melancholic lamentation from the *seresta* genre, made famous by Orlando Silva, “the most famous Brazilian singer before João.” She imparts a keening feel akin to *fado*. “‘Mágoa’ means ‘the hurt heart,’ and ‘caboclo’ is a mulatto. I didn’t hear it for 30 years, but decided I had to do it after I found it in the little workbook I list these songs in. Nobody knows this song in Brazil. Or, if they know, it’s from way back, when their aunts sang it.”

Household listening was also Souza’s source for Dorival Caymmi’s brisk “Doralice,” which Gilberto famously recorded with Stan Getz (Souza addresses it more on the beat and at a brighter

tempo), and for “As Rosas Não Falam,” a torchy bolero-like ballad by Cartola, which Souza takes at a leisurely, almost rubato pace, luxuriating in every syllable. “He was a famous old-school samba singer who was illiterate, a rudimentary guitar player, but wrote phenomenal songs with unusual harmonies,” she says of Cartola. “The title means ‘The roses don’t speak.’ It’s about the hope of a love coming back. The narrator goes to the garden, sits with the roses, and the smell of roses evokes love and whatnot.”

Indeed, Souza can trace familial points of connection to most of the 36 songs on the three *Duos* dates. To wit, two-thirds of the effervescent “Baião Medley,” which opens *Brazilian Duos*, are tunes by Luiz Gonzaga, the Bahian accordionist-singer-songwriter known as “the King of Baião.” “He was sort of my grandfather,” Souza says. “He took my father under his wing when he was 5 years old.” She enjoys a longstanding relationship with the visionary composer and multi-instrumentalist Hermeto Pascoal, her godfather (and consistent employer after she returned to São Paulo for three years post-Berklee), to whom she pays homage on *Duos II* with a precisely calibrated, pristinely enunciated scat on the challenging intervals of “Chorinho Prá Ele.”

“Hermeto was around the house a lot,” Souza recalls. “When I was 3 or 4 he’d call me over, play fast lines and have me sing them. He can pick up whatever is in the air and make music with it. His main lesson to me was to be fearless. Very early on, both he and my father often told me not to imitate anyone, although I had a facility to do it. He also taught me that the most important thing in music — more than sound, more than pitch — is rhythm. Of course, my instrument is not rhythmic. The voice is considered beautiful if it’s legato, if it holds, if it sustains, not if it’s staccato. So I’ve had to negotiate these things, and find a place for it to exist. I love singing Brazilian music because it can be both.”

In a 2009 interview supporting Melody Gardot’s *My One and Only Thrill*, which he produced, Klein remarked, “Most of the people I work with have gone through

some period that forces them to get to the very core of who they are.” Asked how this statement applied to Souza, he suggests that motherhood and the process of adjusting to Los Angeles has “stripped her back emotionally in a way that has changed her musically.”

Elaborating, Souza says, “Moving from São Paulo to Boston at age 17 was pretty intense, too. I was very independent growing up, and I came from a very progressive family, but my family was my life. I felt protected and supported. I found myself alone in Boston, cleaning houses and opening a coffee shop at 6 a.m. to support myself. I was learning English while also learning about a new culture. I was trying to be accepted as a woman in a man’s world. I also tried to remain true to who I was. I am always going to be Brazilian. What do I retain from that, and how do I make room for this other thing?”

“But Larry is right to say that leaving New York terrified me. Obviously I did it for love. But I think there was also a deep attraction to the unknown, a need to break with what I knew. He and I often discuss the danger of repeating yourself when you start to get too comfortable and there are no challenges. That’s not something I want to do.”

Perhaps Souza has faced no greater challenge than how to restrict her schedule to meet, as she puts it, “the limitations or needs of my family” while also trying to “carve out a lot of time to do music.”

“I love my son, I love family, I love cooking and having people over, but the truth is I’m happiest singing,” she says. “When we made the record about Chet, I was thinking how lyrical he is. Then I looked up ‘lyricism’ in the dictionary. It’s an intense, personal way of being expressive. If I get that feeling from my singing, whether I’m perfectly in tune or not, or I held that note or didn’t, or even if the accent is not perfect, then I’m satisfied. There’s no lying. It’s the breath. I don’t do music as often as I used to, so I want it to be incredibly fulfilling. What fulfills me is stepping onstage or in a studio with musicians who can be honest, who can walk out of that session and say, ‘Yeah, we were there, we did this thing, we told those stories together.’” ▲