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JAZZ REVIEW | LUCIANA SOUZA
Guitar and Conversation: A Singer at Ease With Her Roots

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Luciana Souza's new album, "Brazilian Duos" (Sunnyside), presents a set of lithe, poignant, voice-and-guitar partnerships covering old sambas, bossa novas, progressive Brazilian pop music and baiões, a democratic music of city and country, of different eras and classes. When Ms. Souza performed at Joe's Pub on Wednesday, she replicated songs from the album and others, and she gave her performance its same fresh spontaneity.

Ms. Souza, who grew up in Brazil and became a jazz performer and educator in New York, came back to her roots with this performance. Her midrange voice is amazingly controlled; it doesn't put on airs, either with belting or smokiness. It is alert, directed, with undertones of calm conversation. It's the sound of a well-rested intelligence. She makes good singing seem incredibly easy.

On Wednesday she played with Romero Lubambo, one of the three guitarists on the album. (Another is Walter Santos, who is Ms. Souza's father.) She chose songs well, material by Luiz Gonzaga, Edu Lobo, Jacó do Bandolim, Antonio Carlos Jobim, and the songwriting team of her parents, Walter Santos and Tereza Souza.

She applies a touch of jazz technique to this music, with bounding, wordless improvisations in her clear voice, but not too much. These are idiomatic renderings cleanly rearranged by Ms. Souza for voice and guitar without changing the essence of the originals. What was here, too, was Brazilian swing, particularly on some of the Jôbim material ("Chega de Saudade" in particular) and in a connected series of fast, hypersyncopated baiões, the two-beat dance music from northeastern Brazil.

It was a good mixture of learned musicianship and soul. Mr. Lubambo's interest in jazz flashed out here and there, but he, too, was playing within the given idioms on his acoustic guitar. Ms. Souza, who is also a songwriter of considerable gifts, departed from the script only once: it was to perform a musical setting of Poem No. 49 from Pablo Neruda's "100 Love Sonnets," written in a harmonically open structure, with the African thumb-piano her only accompaniment, plucked in cycling rhythm. The audience, which had come to hear music it was familiar with, seemed momentarily stunned.