



Luciana Souza with her band (Photo: Fran Kaufman)

## **Souza Brings Warmth to New York**

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The weather in New York was unusually warm during the last weekend in January. It was probably due to global warming, but I'd rather think it was because singer Luciana Souza brought a bit of Brazil to Manhattan for four shows in Jazz at Lincoln Center's Allen Room. A four-time Grammy nominee for Best Jazz Vocal, the São Paulo-born Souza is a master of singing in multiple genres—jazz, pop and classical—and has collaborated in recent years with Herbie Hancock, James Taylor and Paul Simon. She also has demonstrated formidable skills as a composer, arranger and lyricist.

While all those talents make her a rarity among the world's great singers, it is her personal charm—the warmth and calm wisdom she conveys when singing—that makes her unforgettable. The Portuguese word *saudade* comes to mind. Considered difficult to translate into English, the word's meaning combines longing, yearning, hope and nostalgia. It has been described as “an indolent dreaming wistfulness.” It is a quality that Souza embodies.

In a pre-show interview on Jan. 27, we asked if she's really as calm as her songs might suggest. “People always say I speak fast, and I'm usually running around like a chicken without a head,” she laughed. “But musically, I look for that place where things can happen even in silence. I feel that what makes sound special is the absence of sound—the contrast.”

For the Lincoln Center dates, Souza assembled a sensationally skilled, bi-cultural band consisting of two Americans and three Brazilians. She describes the brilliant duo of bassist Scott Colley and drummer Clarence Penn as “her favorite rhythm section” from her New York years (during which she also taught some lucky students at Manhattan School of Music). On the Brazilian side was her current working trio, which includes the phenomenal Romero Lubambo on guitar, and tropical percussion wizard Cyro Baptista, winner of the percussion category in the 2011 DownBeat Critics Poll. Plus, making his New York concert debut, was famed Brazilian clarinet/sax player Nailor “Proveta” Azevedo. Souza has known Azevedo since he was a teen phenom who came to record in the studio operated by her parents: guitarist-composer Walter Santos and author Tereza Souza. Azevedo is a master of traditional *choro* music, often described as “the New Orleans jazz of Brazil” and a precursor to modern Brazilian music. Equally at home with samba and modern jazz,

Azevedo leads the Grammy-nominated, São Paulo-based big band, Banda Mantiqueira.

The evening proved a heavenly marriage of the traditional and the modern. Despite the fact that *choro* means “cry” in Portuguese, this music is often lively and lilting, with improvised contrapuntal parts that may be played dazzlingly fast. The set mixed these traditional sounds with the sambatinged, folk-pop songs Souza and her husband, producer/bassist Larry Klein, wrote for her 2009 album *Tide* (Verve). The connections between the two genres became clearer as the evening progressed.

The set opened with Baptista, alone onstage amid a cornucopia of exotic percussion, evoking a tropical jungle through a combination of birdcalls, wooden flutes and a single-string instrument called a *berimbau*. Eventually he settled into a gentle samba groove on a large hand drum. Lubambo entered stage right, comping on nylon-string guitar, while Souza entered stage left and began crooning “Trem Das Onze” (“The 11 O’clock Train”), a beloved Brazilian samba classic.

Colley and Penn joined the trio onstage to play “Adeus America,” a samba about being a Brazilian expatriate in the United States and missing home; it was the first of three songs from *Tide*. Unlike João Gilberto’s leisurely version of the song, Souza’s was hyperkinetic and hypnotic. She wielded her gentle contralto with pinpoint accuracy, syncopating the rhythm with stunning dexterity. The piano-less quartet format might have made extraordinary demands on Lubambo to carry the band harmonically and melodically, but he never broke a sweat. In fact, he looked absurdly at ease performing virtuoso feats of syncopation and counterpoint.

On the traditional *choro* tune “Cochichando” by Brazilian flautist-saxophonist Pixinguinha (who has been called the Duke Ellington of Brazil), Azevedo weaved his delicate clarinet notes over, under and through Souza’s melodic line, wailing and swinging, but oh so gently. “Doralice,” with Azevedo’s clarinet providing lovely melodic commentary, was a revelation. Fans of the famous 1964 rendition on *Getz/Gilberto* need to hear this as sung by Souza—we can only hope she records it, preferably with Azevedo. She could claim this classic for her generation of singers.

Over the past decade, Souza has fashioned lovely musical settings for works by great poets, including Pablo Neruda, Elizabeth Bishop and e.e. cummings—another aspect of her restless creativity. At Lincoln Center, she premiered two melancholy, carefully constructed songs based on poems from Leonard Cohen’s 2006 collection *Book Of Longing* (Ecco). Again, more *saudade*.

For a finale, Souza and the band chose Antonio Carlos Jobim’s classic “Chega De Saudade,” with Azevedo returning on alto to play a fugue-like accompaniment in lockstep intervals with Lubambo before the band broke into a luxurious samba. Wildly inventive guitar and saxophone solos and superb scatting by Souza followed. All evening long, she made exquisite control sound effortless. But perhaps her greatest gift is her ability to bridge cultures, languages and musical styles to express profound truths about love and life.

—Allen Morrison