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Who in the World Is Luciana Souza ... Today? A 'Tide'-Turning Source Outing

Posted by Steve Hochman on Jun 30th 2009 Around the World

It must be hard sometimes for Luciana Souza to keep track of who she is night to night, musically speaking.

The tour she's on right now has already seen her in an intimate jazz/bossa nova residency at San Francisco Performances, working in a trio format at New York's Jazz at Lincoln Center and teaming in her mezzo-soprano persona with dancer Rosa Collantes for three shows with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, sandwiched around a brief Spain tour. Still to come are another dance/orchestra program in Chicago's Millennium Park series with the Luna Negra company, more shows in the San Francisco gig and, next April, two Easter performances in the lead vocal role of Argentine composer Osvaldo Golijov's *St. Mark Passion* with the La Pasion Orchestra at the Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles.

On recordings she's explored her Brazilian bossa nova roots, the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Elizabeth Bishop, and the songwriting of Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon and other greats of her adopted home in the U.S. She's been featured on several ambitious works by Around the World alumnus Golijov, collaborated with Herbie Hancock, Simon and many others, sung in various film soundtracks including with her friend (and another Around the World alumma) Rebecca Pidgeon for David Mamet's *'Redbelt.'* And so on.

"I love it," she says. "I am blessed to not sing the same things every week. One week with Osvaldo, one week with a guitar duo, one week with a bossa nova trio. I get to learn from all these great musicians and come home full of joy for music. Never jaded."

Still, it may be no wonder that when she started work on her new album, *'Tide,'* she had a little trouble just getting oriented, especially since the idea this time was to focus on her own songwriting.

"I wasn't coming up with anything that felt strong enough," she says. "Just had a collection of songs I'd been writing."

It didn't get any easier, as life intervened.

"Then I got pregnant and had a baby, and it's a new life," she says. "So I didn't know how to put music to

that. And I lost my father last year and my mother in February. So in addition to having the baby, I lost them. I had been very close to them. In addition to emotionally, they were my reference points of music growing up. So I felt lost."

It's understandable. Her musical nature comes directly from her parents: Her father was a guitar player and her mother a lyricist and poet.

Ultimately, though, these events -- with their respective elations and sorrows -- provided the guideposts she'd been lacking. Working with producer-bassist Larry Klein (who also happens to be her husband) and songwriter David Batteau, she crafted material that reached back to her childhood and looked ahead to the life now in front of her. That material is complemented by several settings she wrote for poems by E.E. Cummings and framed by an opening song ('Adeus America & Eu Quero um Samba') that's considered an anthem of expat Brazilians longing for their birth country and a closer ('Amulet,' in which she sings a wordless melody over a guitar composition by Paul Simon) imparting a sense of contentment in the here and now. As a whole, with Souza singing in both Portuguese and English, 'Tide' provides a full picture of the artist, musically and emotionally.

That's pretty clear from 'Circus Life,' which echoes equally her bossa nova background and her love for Joni Mitchell ...

... as well as the melancholy lilt of her adaptation of 'Chuva,' a poem by Paulo Leminski, whom she calls the Brazilian equivalent of E.E. Cummings:

"With this record, what's successful for me is I look back and say I like what this shapes up as," Souza says. "To close a record and say, 'This is really me at this moment, these songs tell the story of me in my life' is great. I feel integrated, singing in both English and Portuguese. Family gives me that, too. The fact that I lost my parents and had a baby wants me to be here more. It grounds me more."

That grounding process also comes through music, as revealed by a little tour through the albums that have been the most important to her own development, which is a good excuse for another edition of Around the World's occasional Source Outing excursion. Souza was asked to discuss the five albums that she considers the keystone to her musical character. It was a task she was very easy -- except that she couldn't quite stick to the five limit.

Not surprising, there's a Brazilian bent to her choices. But the ones that are not tied to her home lend some perspective. Joni Mitchell as "world music?" Well, she certainly was for a Brazilian who didn't speak English:

"The first one is **Bill Evans**' 'Symbiosis.' It's an orchestral record he did in the '70s with Claus Ogerman. It's Claus' music, Bill plays piano and Fender Rhodes. Five movements -- dense, brilliant and wonderful. It's a record my brother brought home when I was 12 or 13. Like Bach, but in jazz. I listened to it for weeks. In terms of composition, it influenced me directly -- but the cerebral part of it. You can be crazy and mindful, anal and cerebral but also free in a way. It's a record that for me encompasses all that. Bill brings the improvisational part, but he was devoted to the piano, a very technical guy. I love that record and it's something Larry and I listened to, and when we met we talked about it ad nauseam. And I still listen to it."

"Next is **Frank Sinatra** in 'Frances Albert Sinatra & Antonio Carlos Jobim,' which is from late '66 or '67 or '68. This is something I know from front to back! 'Girl From Ipanema.' I know Jobim was playing the guitar because it sounds so authentic. The way Frank phrases made me addicted to it. He loves what he's doing, knows this music will come out and be a major force in the world, a language that is going to stay. He knows the importance of the music and the composer. And the relationship they have, the respect for each other. It was a great introduction for me to Frank. He is one of the great teachers of jazz singing. When I need a lesson, I turn to him. And for a non-native English speaker, I need someone like that with his sense of language and phrasing. This opened a lot of doors for me."

"One that Larry and I listen to is 'Blue,' by **Joni Mitchell**, from 1971. So little I need to say about it. It revolutionized the way I thought about music and the way I still do. Every song is a masterpiece, the orchestration is beautiful, the poetry is brilliant, how high and low she goes in the melodies -- a bird flying. So incredible. I don't like it when people say this is her best record. I love everything she's done. But to me, this marked my life and still does. I first heard it, must have been when I was 13 or 14 or 15. What I knew was the tunings were different, didn't sound like a Brazilian guitar. I didn't know what she was singing about since I didn't speak English. But the melodies got to my ears. And when I came to the States and did more research about poetry, I then understood how she writes and what she was writing about, how she tells a story. And there's not a bad song on this -- 'California,' 'Case of You,' 'River.' Every song is brilliant."

"There's a record by **João Gilberto** from '85 called 'Live in Montreux.' I used to live in Boston, moved there in '85, and I probably got this album my first year there. I was at Berklee School of Music. The opening song to 'Tide' is from this: 'Goodbye America.' This is a solo concert, a man alone with his guitar and singing. It's sublime, the epitome of great Brazilian groove. He does the most famous song of Brazil, 'Aquarela do Brasil,' one of the most done songs and often boring. But he just brings it to life in a way that makes you understand the words and why it's so celebrated with the phrasing of Brazilian music, understated and conversational."

"Elis & Tom,' by **Elis Regina** and **Tom Jobim** -- that I've had since the day it came out in '74. My father

rushed out to get it and brought it home and put it on the phonogram and we just listened to it for a year. That's when I first had the feeling of listening to something every day and memorizing it. That was the video game for me! Listen to the bass lines and then what the drummer does. It was like going to school. Didn't know I was learning, but that's the way you do it -- immerse. What 'Kind of Blue' is to Miles Davis and jazz, this is the record that best represents Brazil. Takes music from the '50s and takes it to now. Sophisticated and transparent. So successful, the way they play it as simply as they can."

"Can I do a sixth one? '**Nancy Wilson and Cannonball Adderley**,' I listened to it every day, used to. Had it in the car for a year. Just got it on iTunes and sent it to Rebecca [Pidgeon]. Few people know that Joe Zawinul was on keyboards on that. It's a record of an instrumentalist and vocalist, something I love in jazz. Nancy has such a sound. This is maybe from '58 or '60. The cover is gorgeous. The song 'Darling Save Your Love For Me' just kills me. There are a million other singers I love -- Carmen McRae, Ella Fitzgerald. But Nancy for that moment was just brilliant. And some of the songs are instrumentals, so it's a real collaboration. Has that feeling of sharing a bill. All of these records, even the real sophisticated ones like the Bill Evans, the intention you feel from these people is to really tell the stories through their voices, whether instrument or real voice. To be an artist and do that so clearly is all you can ask for."