

Loneliness in Two Languages

By LARRY BLUMENFELD

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Growing up in São Paulo, Brazil, singer Luciana Souza led a charmed life when it came to culture. "There was no television in our living room," she said from her current home in the Venice section of Los Angeles. "For entertainment, my father played guitar and sang with my mother, and friends who'd drop by." Her father, Walter Santos, was a singer and songwriter; her mother, a poet and lyricist. Their visiting friends often included such towering presences of Brazilian music as singer-songwriter Milton Nascimento and composer Hermeto Pascoal.

Bob Wolfenson

After three years away from recording, Luciana Souza releases two stunning albums Tuesday.

Ms. Souza's father favored bossa nova, the distinctly Brazilian style that distilled indigenous samba into a simple yet provocative rhythm, primarily expressed on guitar, and incorporated the harmonies of mid-20th-century jazz. He was in on that stylistic revolution, enough to sing in the chorus alongside Antonio Carlos Jobim, bossa's flagship composer, and João Gilberto, its purest exponent, on Elizeth Cardoso's 1958 version of Jobim's "Chega de Saudade," widely considered the first bossa recording. Bossa's pioneers drew inspiration from American jazz musicians, especially those who prized restraint, such as Miles Davis and Chet Baker. Baker's soft vocals, which stressed directness over innovation and contained only the slightest vibrato, were a particular fascination. In his book "Bossa Nova," Ruy Castro described Gilberto and his wife, Astrud (who sang the classic "Girl From Ipanema"), "forming an imaginary trio" with Baker, "gathering around the stereo and singing incessantly 'There Will Never Be Another You.'"



When Ms. Souza, now 46, talks of her current home, she might as easily be describing Rio de Janeiro during bossa's heyday: "Blue skies and constant breezes, and the sounds of waves against the shore." Early musical influences—hers and her father's—have returned to her musical foreground. After three years away from a recording career that earned consistent acclaim for both solo work and collaborative projects with the likes of Herbie Hancock, she releases two spare and stunning CDs on Tuesday on the Sunnyside label.

"Duos III" covers a wide range of Brazilian songs and extends Ms. Souza's decade-long fascination with voice-and-guitar duets, this time with three players: Toninho Horta, Marco Pereira and Romero Lubambo. On "The Book of Chet," she works with a trio—guitarist Larry Koonse, bassist David Piltch and drummer Jay Bellerose—and focuses on songs indelibly rendered by Baker. On tour, she'll draw from both repertoires and bands. At the Broad Stage in Santa Monica on Sept. 1, Mr. Koonse will perform both songbooks with her, augmented in trio at some points. At Joe's Pub in New York on Sept. 12, Mr. Lubambo will be her guitarist partner. As on the recordings, the weight of each performance will rest squarely on Ms. Souza's voice.

"In both cases, I'm pushing myself into a corner," she said. "I have serious restraints. This forces me to focus on meaning and feeling." Ms. Souza took the long road to such an approach. While in Boston, at Berklee School of Music and then New England Conservatory, she grew enamored of unusual time signatures and wild leaps of intervals. "I still love my early recordings," she said, "but they're also a registry of where I was for a long time. I wanted to be a musician of the voice as opposed to just a singer, to walk the walk of a jazz player."

A wide range of musicians have been drawn to Ms. Souza for her technical mastery, including pianist Danilo Perez, big-band leader Maria Schneider and classical composer Osvaldo Golijov. (She'll perform Mr. Golijov's "La Pasi3n segun San Marcos" at Carnegie Hall in March.) At a certain point, complexity lost its appeal in her own music. "Now, I just want to be as human as I can be, to breathe and to sing."

Ms. Souza's new CDs largely examine lyrics—in Portuguese on "Duos III," English on "The Book of Chet." They also mine relationships. "Duos" highlights her family, so to speak, of guitarists: Mr. Lubambo, a marvelous improviser and her closest collaborator; Mr. Pereira, a hero from her childhood and master of classical technique; and Mr. Horta, whom she credits with "breaking down all the ideas about harmony you can have in Brazilian music."

Her Chet Baker project reflects actual family bonds. She played sketches of arrangements to her husband, Larry Klein, who is also her producer, on the Wurlitzer organ he bought her as a birthday present. ("Don't make a tribute record," he advised. "Make this about you.") She credits their 4-year-old son, Noah, with shifting her focus toward simplicity. She may have little to reference regarding Baker's addict's life, for which his music was mirror or escape valve (or both). Still, she recalled losing both her parents during the year of Noah's birth. "I was sitting in a lot of sadness without being able to grieve while breastfeeding him," she said. "I didn't want him to grow up with tears on his face."

Pent-up emotions found new expression in the studio. On "Duos III," she sings Gilberto Gil's "Eu Vim da Bahia" in a higher key than Elis Regina's classic take, "to make the heartache sound more urgent," she said. Her version of "I Get Along Without You Very Well" on "The Book of Chet" can't match Baker's detached agony; yet Ms. Souza slows the flow of lyrics into tortured declaration, with little more than three-note guitar figures for accompaniment.

"Chet Baker had an intimacy with pain and loss that few of us can grasp," she said. "Jo3o Gilberto has that same thing, even when singing a samba that's perky and peppy. There's a loneliness I was after with these recordings: How can I pull away and still reveal so much?"

Mr. Blumenfeld writes about jazz for the Journal.

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