




▶ "Breaking every barrier":
Bobby McFerrin

WORDLESS SINGING

BY LUCIANA SOUZA

Wordless singing is what I call it, but the absence of words doesn't mean there is no story to tell. On the contrary, the artists I have chosen are masters of storytelling through song—no words needed. Their humanity emerges through both the vulnerability and the strength of their sound. They have opened a door for many of us who wanted to go beyond scat singing.

 Read *JT's* review of the new album by Luciana Souza

Milton Nascimento

"MINAS"

Minas (EMI Brazil, 1975)

I was a child when I heard Milton's voice. It helped shape my own sound and kept my imagination expanding. Minas Gerais is Milton's home state in Brazil, with wide-open skies and rolling green mountains. His falsetto on this song, which opens with a choir quoting another Milton tune on the album, exemplifies his musicality, intuition and powerful storytelling. He reveals what's most primal as well as most sophisticated about a melody and makes it seem vital and noble. His recordings have always innovated in terms of sound and orchestration. Wayne Shorter's album *Native Dancer* relies heavily on Milton's sound and aesthetic, and is one of the most important recordings in jazz.

Kenny Wheeler

(Norma Winstone, vocals)

"PART 1 —OPENING"

Music for Large & Small Ensembles (ECM, 1990)

I first heard this record, which features Dave Holland, John Abercrombie, Evan Parker, Peter Erskine and John Taylor, when I was in school in Boston. I lived with it, breathing with Norma at the end of every one of her gorgeous phrases. She epitomizes the depth of Kenny's music and reveals her intelligence and gentle strength, and from the record's first notes you get the feeling that this will be a journey. Norma is weaved beautifully into the orchestration, and her sound remains a mystery for the many who ask, "Is there someone singing there or am I hearing things?"

Bobby McFerrin

"SELIM"

Bang! Zoom (Blue Note, 1995)

Bobby McFerrin broke every barrier there ever was for singers. He showed us what was possible (and impossible, for us mere mortals) and continues to do so. On "Selim," he teaches us a lesson in self-restraint. He could sing pirouettes around everything, but he remains reverent to the melody and exposes its bones like Miles would with his horn. The notes emanate from him as if they were born inside his soul, yet he has this instrumental approach to sound. It is rare, if not a miracle, for a singer to have a sound as gorgeous as his *and* huge knowledge and curiosity.

Theo Bleckmann/Ben Monder

"HYMENIUM"

At Night (Songlines, 2007)

Theo Bleckmann has explored and investigated so many possibilities in his voice, or voices, I should say, as he is so many things. His years working with the genius Meredith Monk ensured that Theo kept everything open and unfinished in his music—a constant and infinite exploration. Although he is one of the most adventurous singers I know, he is also disciplined and methodical. On this short and beautiful piece, you get a glimpse of his beauty and his devotion to the human sound.

Toninho Horta Com e Orquestra Fantasma

"AQUELAS COISAS TODAS (SANGUESSUGA)"

Terra Dos Pássaros (Odeon, 1980)

Toninho's writing is extremely gorgeous and vocal, even when it is instrumental. His singing is so natural and unaffected—a guitarist's or composer's singing—and it matches his music impeccably. His orchestrations use the human voice as melody and counterpoint, making his music very distinguishable and incredibly personal and intimate. "Aqueles Coisas Todas" is an amazing composition with a memorable vocal melody that keeps unfolding.

Pat Metheny Group

(Pedro Aznar, vocals)

"HAVE YOU HEARD"

Letter From Home (Geffen, 1989)

For so many people, this was probably their introduction to wordless singing. Pedro Aznar's voice is timeless and makes complex music seem simple and singable. His sound is so expressive and emotional I sometimes hear him in places where I know there are no vocals; his sound lasts in my ears. Many of my generation were influenced by this music, and I think Pat's inclusion of a voice elevated the possibilities of wordless singing and made his ensemble sound utterly unique. **JT**



Luciana Souza is a celebrated Brazilian singer and composer whose latest release is *Speaking in Tongues* (Sunnyside). Six of her previous albums were nominated for Grammy Awards.