



PURE POETRY

LUCIANA SOUZA SETS MUSIC TO THE WORK
OF LEONARD COHEN AND OTHER POETS —
INCLUDING HERSELF — ON HER LATEST OUTING.

BY MICHAEL ROBERTS



ocalist Luciana Souza laughs as she describes how she convinced singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen to let her adapt several of his poems, including the four that appear on *The Book of Longing*, her luminous new album, which shares its name with a collection he penned. In her words, “There’s this thing about having to ask Jewish people for everything three times, because the first two times they’ll say no and the third time they’ll say yes.”

The Brazilian-born, Los Angeles-based singer is joking, but the witticism is more revelatory than it may seem at first blush.

Souza met Cohen, who died in November 2016, through her husband, *The Book of Longing* producer Larry Klein, his longtime friend and a onetime member of his synagogue. And she did indeed have to make multiple requests of Cohen for permission to record his verse before he finally acquiesced.

Cohen’s initial reluctance was rooted in the sort of romantic complications that marked his life and informed so much of this greatest material — but Souza has never let such scenarios stand in her way. Granted, she was initially reluctant to sing “Amelia” on Herbie Hancock’s *River: The Joni Letters*, a 2007 tribute to the compositions of Joni Mitchell co-produced by Klein, whose marriage to the unparalleled songstress ended in 1994, a dozen years before he wed Souza. But she did it anyhow and wound up sharing an Album of the Year Grammy for her efforts.

Her quip also evokes the persistence and daring that can be found in both her character and her voice, a highly redolent instrument capable

of shifting among a seemingly endless range of emotions from line to line and word to word.

Klein notes that even before Cohen gave his blessing to Souza setting some of his stanzas to music, she went ahead and did it anyway, knowing that if he continued to balk, her efforts wouldn’t be heard outside her own home. “She just went for it,” he says admiringly, “which, of course, is a ballsy thing to do.”

Such leaps of faith are common to Souza. She’s managed to build an acclaimed career that encompasses the jazz and classical worlds through a killer combination of talent and tenacity, as well as a willingness to bare her soul and take creative risks that lesser performers would eschew.

The Book of Longing [Sunnyside], which also employs the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Christina Rossetti and Souza herself, is a case in point. “I was 51 when I made it,” she notes, “and I feel that when you achieve a half-point in your life, you go, OK, I’ve done a lot of things, I’ve learned a

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few things and there's a lot that I haven't learned. But I've experienced things, and they have scarred me, they have shaped me. They've made me and they're making me. And that's where this record starts."

ão Paulo, Brazil, where Souza was born in 1966, "is a massive city," she points out. But it felt like a village to her because of the close-knit family atmosphere fostered by her parents, Walter Santos and Tereza Souza.

According to Souza, Walter was "a self-taught guitar player and songwriter who came from very humble beginnings. He was from the state of Bahia and he grew up with João Gilberto, who was one of the fathers of bossa nova. They grew up together and had a vocal group.

At Gilberto's suggestion, Walter subsequently relocated to Rio de Janeiro, where he met Tereza, who Souza describes as "a poet, a thinker, a writer."

The couple headed to São Paulo after he landed a steady gig at a nightclub and never left.

"I'm the youngest of five, and I grew up in this very simple home that had a lot of instruments and lots of musicians coming through," Souza says. "It was very fluid and beautiful."

Among the regular visitors was Hermeto Pascoal, a renowned composer and multi-instrumentalist, as well as Souza's godfather. "Whenever he was in town, he was at our house, playing musical games with me," she recalls. "In a way, I grew up in a music school."

She soon put her skills to work in the family business. "My parents worked at a jingle house," Souza says. "They would write jingles, commercials for television and radio. I started singing on some of them when I was very small. And in middle school and high school, I was singing jingles maybe two times a week."

She chuckles when asked about what kind of products she touted. "I sang about candy. Little toys. Vacuum cleaners. And I got paid. All that money went in the bank."

This cash would come in handy soon enough. She applied to Boston's Berklee College of Music at the suggestion of her brother Eduardo, who preceded her there, and after getting in, she used her jingle income to travel back and forth to Brazil.

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Early on during her Berklee studies, Souza wasn't convinced she would put music at the center of her life. "I grew up in a dictatorship, with artist-parents who had friends who disappeared," she remembers. "We were told at the dinner table not to let anyone know who had been at our house, because some of them were followed, persecuted, tortured. It was a terrible time in Brazil, and I thought I wanted to go into politics. I wanted to change the world."

Fortunately, military rule had ended by the time Souza completed her studies at Berklee in 1988. "When I left there," she says, "I knew music is what I wanted to do."

After some time back in Brazil, she returned to the United States to attend the New England Conservatory of Music and soon began to contribute to recordings by a wide variety of artists, including Pascoal, Bob Moses and many others.

Finally, in 1998, Souza got the chance to headline her own project, dubbed *An Answer to Your Silence*,

which reflected her then-current obsessions. "For me, it was all about melody and harmony and complicated meters. At the time, to be honest with you, I wasn't that interested in words."

That would change.



running gag in Souza's family when she was a kid involved Tereza's addiction to reading. "The house was filled with books, and my mother's

head was always in the pages," she says. "We'd ask each other, 'How many times did you have to call mom before she looked up?'"

Years later, Tereza's love of the written word led to a gift that prefigured an important shift in

OF POETS DEAD AND GONE

Over the time she's been adapting poetry to music, Luciana Souza has learned some harsh lessons. Among them: Just because a poet is no longer among the living doesn't mean his or her work is fair game. "If it's in the public domain, you can do it," she says. "But a lot of it isn't, and you have to be careful with that. Because if you fall in love with a poem you set to music and then find out you can't get permission, it all goes out the window."

Fortunately there are plenty of scribes Souza admires whose work and wisdom might find their way onto future albums. "There's a Brazilian poet I really love who Elizabeth Bishop translated. His name is Carlos Drummond de Andrade," she notes. "And I've written a song from a poem by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, but I haven't recorded it yet."

When it comes to poets no longer able to sanction her efforts, Souza does her best to set insecurities aside. "The poem doesn't need me. The poem is done, and it's a masterpiece. So you have to be bold and be a fool in a way. You have to believe that you can do this thing, or otherwise, you'll be completely intimidated."

The validation she received from Leonard Cohen before he died helps prevent such self-doubts. "Leonard, someone I respected and admired, said yes. And that makes me think Neruda and Bishop and the other dead poets would be OK with it, too." —MR



Souza's artistic development. "My mom sent me a book in Portuguese called *Minha Vida de Menina* and the English translation, which is called *The Diary of Helena Morley*. The translation was done by a woman named Elizabeth Bishop, who was a poet. I remembered reading one of her poems in college. But she really captured something of the Brazilian culture and the Brazilian spirit, and it made me curious about her and her life."

Her research led to the 2000 album *The Poems of Elizabeth Bishop and Other Songs*, an artistic breakthrough that Souza has built upon regularly throughout the years that followed. "It was a very difficult record," she acknowledges. "I was searching for something, and it opened a whole new path for me."

It's hardly the only route Souza has taken. Over the years, she's appeared with a slew of major orchestras and chamber music groups, and her eclectic recordings, including 2012's *The Book of Chet*, a tribute to trumpeter-vocalist Chet Baker, shows that she's unwilling to stick to a single lane. But she keeps coming back to poetry, as witnessed by 2004's *Neruda*, featuring 11 poems by Pablo Neruda that Souza set to music, and 2015's *Speaking in Tongues*, which includes "Split" and "No One to Follow," her first recordings of Cohen poems from his *Book of Longing*.

Klein met Cohen in the early 1980s through Mitchell. "He's one of my only friends who attended both my weddings," he says.

After Klein gave Souza a copy of *Longing* around the time of its 2006 publication, she quickly fell in love with the directness of his imagery. "I've spoken English for more than half my life, but with some poetry, I still feel like I have to labor at it," she concedes. "With Leonard, there's none of that. I just read the words and I know what they are. I can see the scene he's describing. I can smell the skin he's talking about."

But when Souza approached Cohen about writing songs based on *Longing* prose, she learned that they'd already been promised to someone else: singer-songwriter Anjani Thomas.

"He was with her through a period of time that Lu and I were friends with him," Klein says, "and I think she had already sort of laid claim to putting music to some of the poems. He was actually no longer in a relationship with her, but he felt obligated to kind of stand by the commitment he had made."

When Cohen declined her first entreaty, "I was very sad, but I understood," Souza maintains. "Every year and a half or so, though, I kept pushing: 'Can I record them? Please, Leonard?' Finally, he said, 'Send them to me.' So I made a little demo and sent it to him on a file on the computer. He was always so lovely to me — funny and generous, but kind. And he wrote back and said, 'Yes, you can do it.'"

After Cohen's death, Souza still had several tunes based on *Longing* poems: "Night Song," "Paris," "The Book" and "A Life." Because his father had already signed off on them, Adam Cohen, Leonard's son and executor, granted permission for their inclusion on a new recording. They wound up establishing the tone for the contemplative offering that would result.

With the Cohen songs and a few other odds and ends, Souza thought she had collected enough material to make her next album. Her producer, Klein, disagreed.

"I wanted to do a couple of things from other people," she says. "And Larry said, 'I really think this has to be your thing. I don't think it should be 80

percent your thing. It needs to be 100 percent your thing.' So he sent me back to the piano and told me, 'Go finish writing some other things.'"

"I just felt like the template had already been established," Klein explains. "To my mind, it would have been a bit scattered to put in songs from another group of things. It felt to me like there was the potential for a suite, a kind of elegant structure with those four pieces of Leonard's lying at the center of it. So I encouraged her to stay the course and make it an album of poetry adapted to music — including her own poetry, which is really very good."

Given that Souza and Klein are in a personal relationship, with a young son, this advice might have seemed risky. Lucky thing Souza had some excellent role models.

"I watched this with my mom and dad," she says. "They lived together and worked together, and they did it all seamlessly. It's not like they didn't have disagreements, but they did it in a very beautiful and constructive way. And even though Larry and I come from very, very different backgrounds, we intersect on the things that matter."

There's certainly no arguing with the results. From the moment she sings, "These are the duties of the heart/These are the things we've come to call our own" on "These Things," *The Book of Longing's* first track (written entirely by her), Souza is in complete control. Sensitive accompanied by bassist Scott Colley and guitarist Chico Pinheiro, she establishes a mood of quiet reflection that spans not just years but centuries.

"Alms," by St. Vincent Millay, "could be a Leonard poem," Souza contends. "With the Dickinson one, 'We Grow Accustomed to the Dark,' it's the same thing. And the Christina Rossetti piece, 'Remember,' is very simple harmonically, and it's very short. But to me, it says so much."

C

learly, Klein isn't the most objective person to ask why Souza is such an intriguing artist. But his answer takes an unexpected angle on her attributes.

"She's kind of an anomaly," he allows. "She's got the innate and natural gift for Brazilian music that comes partly genetically, from her parents, and from Hermeto Pascoal. But she's also a restless, curious musician, which is expressed in the way she moved to Boston and put herself through the die of really learning the nuts and bolts of how jazz works and how Western music is constructed. And she's constantly oscillating between contemporary classical music and the work of various South American and Spanish composers. I can't think of anyone else who does that as a vocalist, composer and arranger."

In Klein's view, hearing Souza's work can be a transformative experience. "If you're really sitting and listening to someone like her sing a piece of music that has this kind of magical quality, then you're a different person for some period of time. And probably a better one."

The subject of this praise makes no such claims for herself. She's especially modest when it comes to talking about her own words.

"I'm not pretending to be a poet," she insists. "I just hope I'm not offending people by including things I included. But Larry sequenced the album, and the way he programmed them, they fit the curve of the record. They frame it very well, because all of the songs — including the Leonard ones — are part of this story." ■



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