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SACRAMENTO BEE

## Jazz singer Luciana Souza finds new, bigger sound



“There’s no standards – there’s nothing that’s been heard before. We really wanted to create something new,” says singer Luciana Souza.

BY MARCUS CROWDER

Creating a successful band and keeping it together are an art all its own. It’s particularly difficult in jazz, where musicians are paid to play but rehearsing is done mostly on their own time.

The best musicians work as much as they can and downtime is rare. Even rarer would be finding four world-class musicians with enough free time to form a band that didn’t necessarily have booked gigs or a recording scheduled. Somehow Brazilian-born vocalist Luciana Souza managed all of this and is now briefly touring with the remarkable quartet who recorded her latest album, “Speaking in Tongues.”

Souza mostly sings wordlessly on most of the collaborative album, produced by her husband, Larry Klein. There are two songs with lyrics from poems by Leonard Cohen. The band – guitarist/vocalist Lionel Loueke, harmonica virtuoso Grégoire Maret, bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Kendrick Scott – comes to the Mondavi Center's Vanderhoef Studio for four nights Jan. 27-30.

Producer Klein, considered the sixth member of the band on "Speaking in Tongues," has worked with a wide range of jazz and pop artists, including Herbie Hancock, Melody Gardot, Pink, Seal, Bob Dylan and most famously his former wife, Joni Mitchell. When Souza asked him about contacting Loueke for her new project, Klein was effusive in support.

"I love the guitar. I've been playing duos with many guitarists for years," Souza said from the home she and Klein share in Los Angeles. Souza has been linked musically to the Brazilian guitarist Romero Lubambo for more than 20 years, performing and recording with him often. But this time around, she wanted to do something different.

"I just wanted to change things, change the color, change the way I think," Souza said. "There's nothing better to promote change for me than to surround myself with different people. Just immediately you start to embody a new character in many ways." She had met Loueke when they both had performed with master pianist and composer Herbie Hancock. Loueke has created a major name for himself through his distinctive guitar style and vocals, which combine African and mainstream jazz elements. Last summer, he toured Europe in a quartet with Dave Holland, Chris Potter and Eric Harland. "I wanted someone really creative, beautiful with a soul," Souza said. "I knew there was a connection and (Loueke) loved my music and I certainly loved his." Loueke contributed the original composition "A.M." to the "Speaking in Tongues" record. Getting a commitment from Loueke allowed the other musicians to fall in place. Swedish bassist Biolcati has played in Loueke's longtime trio, so he seemed a natural fit. Drummer Scott is another new creative force in jazz – not only as a sought-after musician but with his record label, World Culture Music.

"I heard him play live and I was just in awe," Souza said. "He contributes in a compositional way. When he's playing, he's thinking about the arrangement, it's not just groove but also textural, like an orchestration." Scott also contributed an original song to the album, co-writing "A Pebble in Still Water" with guitarist Mike Moreno. Adding Swiss harmonica wizard Maret completed the new unit for Souza. Maret has toured and recorded with Meshell Ndegeocello, Pat Metheny, Cassandra Wilson and Steve Coleman, among many others.

"I wanted to also include a different instrument," Souza said. "I wanted something lighter and more breathlike." Getting the band together in the same room meant meshing busy schedules and coordinating travel, as Souza lives in Los Angeles and the others live in New York. But Souza found a way to be in New York when the others were there as well, and they rehearsed for two seminal days in December 2013.

On the first day, during a break, they got word that Nelson Mandela had died. “It started a conversation about what the world was like, what peace was like,” Souza said. “The whole band played in a different way after that, and the spirit of the band formed. We’re all from different places in the world but something unites us.” Soon after, Souza knew the band was ready to record. Until she’d met Klein, she wasn’t sure she needed a producer, but his artistic collaboration convinced her otherwise.

“I come from a very different place in music than Larry does, but where we interact is what matters,” Souza said. “He’s not trying to impose anything. He’s just trying to facilitate and also open doors, musical doors.” Unlike most jazz records, which are recorded live in a day or two, these sessions stretched over three days with numerous takes and revisions. Klein then mixed the assorted takes in ways that jazz records aren’t usually created. “It was very different ... in the sense that he picked the best of what we had done and he assembled it in a very specific way so there’s a lot of energy on the record,” Souza said. “He wanted a lot of layers – to create a sound that was bigger than just the five of us because we wanted really to create a world and a village and for that we needed added bodies. So we added ourselves to it.”

The idea was to create a unique-sounding record to fit the feeling of the band. “There was an attempt to make a different sound,” Souza said. “Not to change me but to bring something new, since this music was new. There’s no standards – there’s nothing that’s been heard before. We really wanted to create something new.”