

Luciana Souza's presence is subtle, laid-back, magical - Roanoke Times: Reviews



April 12, 2014 12:06 am

by [Tad Dickens](#)

In recent years, audiences have come to expect histrionics of their singers. The more notes, the more flamboyant, the better.

That is not Luciana Souza's M.O. The Brazilian-born, U.S.-based singer has range, and she has chops. But more importantly, she has subtlety.

Souza also has musical generosity. Even though it was her name atop the bill for Jefferson Center's season-closing musical performance, she gave just as much space to her featured sidemen, guitarist Lionel Loueke and harmonica player Gregoire Maret. Both delivered magnificently, thrilling a too-small audience of 477 in the 900-seat venue on Friday.

There was plenty of Souza, though. Her voice often came across like some exotic, heretofore undiscovered brass instrument. Its warmth and vulnerability came through equally, either on wordless vocal melodies, the Portuguese lyrics of originals and covers from her native land, or the bittersweet works of Leonard Cohen and Chet Baker.

But her ease of delivery was deceptive. What she was doing was incredibly difficult, something that requires a lot of control and mastery of phrasing.

Samba pioneer Angenor "Cartola" de Oliveir's "As Rosas Nao Falam" (the roses don't speak) was a strong example both of her vocal power and her generosity. Maret began the song with a long, unaccompanied introduction, mournfully blowing, calling up dense chords between wails. Souza's voice emerged as if from within Maret's chromatic harp.

She brought more of the same on a couple of Cohen poems, "The Goal" and "Split," which she combined over top of her own composition, melody matching words in meditation on love's vagaries.

Elsewhere in the set, Loueke summoned plenty of the juju he had displayed fronting his own trio at a Jefferson Center rehearsal hall performance in 2011. His soloing, which at times he accompanied with a spooky vocal, took songs with happy melodies into darker places. On his own "Oudiah," he employed a bassist's thumb-popping, combined with hands slapping the fretboard while his fretting hand bent and slid in ways a listener rarely hears.

Louke's complementary work behind Maret's solos showed deep chord knowledge. At times during Maret's solos, he would walk over to Loueke and face him, and both players would embark on a long and thrilling adventure, Souza smiling about it.

The show was mostly laid-back, peppered by moments of musical intensity. But set-closing "Straw Hat" turned it all upside down. After Kendrick Scott's musically and sonically exploratory drum solo, the band launched into a rousing crossbreed of samba and funk-rock, with Maret's best work of the night.

It brought a raucous response from the crowd, which stood in expectation of an encore. Souza and the band returned to deliver Rogers and Hart's "He Was Too Good To Me," which she had recorded on her recent, Grammy-nominated tribute to Baker, "The Book of Chet." It was slow and gorgeous, but a strange change of pace after that set-closing peak. Apparently, subtlety won again.