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NOVEMBER 2023 U.K. £6.99

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LATIN JAZZ



LUCIANA SOUZA CHASING COMETS

BY DAN OUELLETTE

PHOTO BY MARK SHELDON

A close-up photograph of a person's hand reaching out, palm up, against a dark blue background. The hand is wearing a gold ring on the ring finger and a silver watch on the wrist. The person is wearing a pink and black patterned sleeve. The background is a blurred blue light, possibly from a stage or concert.

Just when it feels like the darkened clouds are bearing down with ominous portends, when it feels that the music has been sucked dry in sorrow, when the tradition no longer offers anticipation — the weather abruptly realigns.



Souza with, from left, Trio Corrente, Fabio Torres, Paulo Paulelli and Edu Ribeiro

The fronts cease to battle but swirl into a wonderful open-sky, high-pressure zone. In its early-morning glory, the aurora of daylight breaks through with a novel canvas that calls for a colorful impression and untrodden pathways.

And in Brazil-born, Los Angeles-based esteemed singer Luciana Souza's world, we're talking galactic on her first-time collaboration with the renowned Trio Corrente. It's a monumental shift sweetened with Brazilian classics and originals in the samba spirit.

Cometa (Sunnyside Records) translates from Portuguese into the English word *comet* — a rare fascination of celestial fire and ice and awe of the falling star with a long tail orbiting the sun in an elliptical path.

"We wanted to title the record that would explain what it is we're doing," says Souza. "Hey, it's a comet that's passing through. Check it out. Would you miss going out to see it if someone told you it was coming through? It's the title of the last song on the album, which is a ballad. We used it so the title wouldn't sound didactic. We are entertaining with meaning."

The comet's birth arrived when Souza

and Trio Corrente — pianist Fabio Torres, bassist Paulo Paulelli, drummer Edu Ribeiro — came together to celebrate the break from the depression and desolation Brazil had recently experienced when the pandemic combined with a disastrous presidency. Their goal was to turn the page into a cheerful affair with the pleasures of making Brazilian music as a community. That's at the heart *Cometa* — not just another relief recording from the pandemic, but a social uplifting from the tragic politics in their homeland.

"It's not just my album," says Souza, whose discography is expansive. "It's an album that's about all of us."

From January 2019 to December 2022, havoc reigned in Brazil's political sphere with Jair Bolsonaro, a retired military officer, decidedly right-wing and a bold authoritarian, serving as president.

Bolsonaro branded social protestors as terrorists deserving jail and death; he scaled back the country's protocols for the indigenous people in the Amazon rainforest, which resulted in widespread deforestation; and, most infa-

mously, he downplayed the pandemic as nothing more than the common flu. He frowned on vaccines and wearing masks. The outbreaks of the coronavirus, in the most recent estimates, resulted in more than 700,000 Brazilian deaths — one of the world's worst in terms of national casualties.

This and other illegal actions resulted in Bolsonaro being defeated by Brazil's former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in the 2022 elections, and Bolsonaro eventually being charged by the Brazilian electoral court with abuse of power and forbidden to run for any offices until 2030.

The ramp-up to the inauguration was marred by military attempts to interfere. They were quelled. Harmony prevailed.

On the day of Lula da Silva's inauguration, the optimistic Souza arrived in her one-time hometown of São Paulo to record a fresh, Portuguese-sung album of new joy and new vision for the legendary Brazilian tradition. The goal was the continuing search for peace.

"The three of us had a connection with little bits of recording over the years," says Souza, who notes that this is the first time in her

recording career where she played with a standard trio. "The members of Trio Correnta were all interested in the celebration of hope in Brazil with the power of Brazilian songs and the expression of jazz."

Torres struck a chord with Souza when he invited her to tour with him in the fall of 2022. It was an immediate joint decision to come up with a plan to work with the trio to record. Souza set out to jumpstart a collaborative project with the trio known for its 20-year achievement as Brazil's top instrumental band, a reputation earned through its mastery of styles from choro to popular Brazilian music.

"We wanted to push Brazilian music deeper into jazz," says Souza. "This trio is perfect. They've developed their own language. What grabs me is the facility of how they play so well together. The groove is there but so is the relaxation. We're expanding the music in terms of the freedom it allows."

A key historical influence to the project was the '60s instrumental ensemble Zimbo Trio that collaborated with bossa nova vocalists Elis Regina and Jair Rodrigues de Oliveira in a search for musical fearlessness. "They were on the weekly TV show *O Fino Da Bossa* beginning in 1965 through '68," Souza says. "Everyone watched them. It was like a vari-

ety show. And Elis would come to the studio, learn the songs in the afternoon and arrange them on the spot for the show. That spirit was so relaxed and fun as she played with the trio's virtuosos. Every show spotlighted Elis. They were playing with a jazz attitude. Everyone was working the songs out and playing like it was a party. They gave us the tips we needed to create *Cometa*."

The plan combined a swirl of the simple and complex. The foursome began having Zoom meetings on repertoire and arrangements. They agreed to honor in their own improvisational voices Brazilian song heroes, including the classic bossa nova team of Antônio Carlos Jobim and Vinicius de Moraes, songwriter great Ary Barroso, singer-songwriter Djavan, sambista Paulinho da Viola and the legendary bossa nova inspiration Dorival Caymmi.

Two of Caymmi's tunes make it onto *Cometa*. His "Você Já Foi À Bahia" (a spirited celebration of the Bahai region) serves as the opening track and is arranged by Souza. She sails into the album with fire, her buoyant voice and flowing scats held afloat by the rising heat of the band. The expressive support focuses on the confluence of conversation and listening.

The song serves as an introduction to

Souza's characteristic embrace of poetry, melody, passion, elegance, transcendence, romanticism, wistfulness and melancholy in her always sublime vocal delivery. Former collaborator Lionel Loueke says, "She jumps in immediately wherever you go. She's not afraid to get lost. She goes for it."

Part two of the album-production strategy required each member to contribute a new song in sync with the sentiment. "I love writing on assignment with deadlines," Souza says. "Everyone had to have originals with arrangements. Deadline was Dec. 20. Everyone was so busy, but I said I needed everything because I was going to be on a plane in two weeks to record the album with them. So before I left, we all had each other's arrangements." She contributed the spirited "Bem Que Te Avisei," about a suitor for a woman who's already committed to a relationship.

The trio jumped into action. "That's the way Trio Corrente always works on a new project," says drummer Edu Ribeiro. "We bring songs and arrangements from everyone. We were so impressed with the way that Lu fits into that and made the music come to life so easily. She brought a beautiful musical affair to create this fresh vibe with her tune that has alluring arrangements. And she also composed lyrics to

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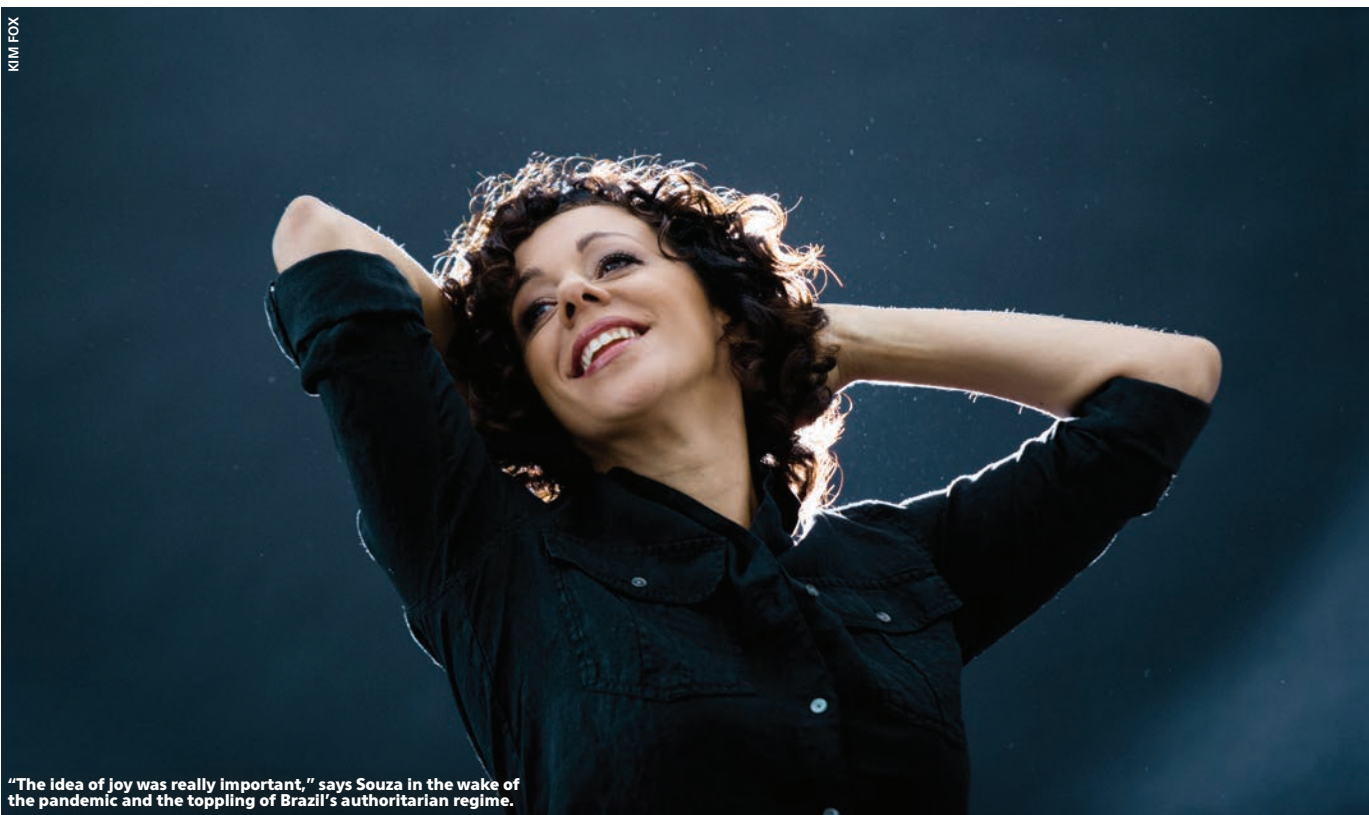
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"The idea of joy was really important," says Souza in the wake of the pandemic and the toppling of Brazil's authoritarian regime.

'I USE MUSIC AS MY COMPANION WHILE THE COMET MAKES ME AWARE.'

one of my originals, the ballad 'Cometa,' that I arranged. We sounded as if we had played for 20 years together."

They all met in São Paulo and spent a day going over the arrangements as a means of preparing for two short studio dates to record. "Recording with Luciana is easy," says Ribeiro. "She is a perfect one-take singer and musician."

"The idea of joy was really important," says Souza. "So we could play the sambas and be playful. Let's get the spirit going. We don't play enough of that kind of music. I've spent a

lot of my career recording albums with darkness and sorrows. I fought against that on this album. This is tipping our hats to the old composers who had crazy break-up humor. We're playing live music with that spirit, like going back to the idea of how Zimbo Trio and Elis Regina played."

The samba-drenched *Cometa* dips into the blues, runs with a percussive beat, leaps into tempo changes, offers straight-up melodic beauty and breaks with celestial vocals.

"Recordings are always a special moment," says Ribeiro. "It's really serious, demands a

lot of energy and concentration, but it has to be joyous and relaxed all the time. Any mood that we put on the record is going to be delivered 100% to the listeners, to their ears and hearts. We always try to serve something enjoyable for them."

A key member of the recording team resided thousands of miles away, back in Los Angeles. Larry Klein, Souza's husband and the father of their 15-year-old son, Noah, served as the producer using the software program Audiomovers, which allowed him to hear the sessions simultaneously from his home studio. "This was a lesson in how to turn the tradition on its head but still hold on to the important elements," Klein says. "I know the guys from the trio, and they are the best of the new crop of Brazilian musicians. I'd say that Luciana was the driving force to putting this all together. I learned a lot. I didn't know about how lyrical Dorival Caymmi was. For me, that's part of what I love about my job."

"We all played an informal session, making choices and taking care about details with Larry after," Ribeiro notes. "Even having a 'bi-continental' recording session, we had such a great time together as we are in the same space with a high level of commitment to the music."

"At times it was challenging," Klein says. "Everyone there is conversing in Portuguese, so at times during the conversations, I'd ask Lu, what are we talking about? But everyone works at such a high level that my only dia-

logue was on structured elements. Lu and I had discussed the arrangements before she went to Brazil. So I made my suggestions. But, really, our goal was to go for a live record feel — not work things into some polished form. We wanted to capture the spontaneous element.”

In the end, what *Cometa* means to Souza is a reminder of the hardship her country had gone through previously. Nothing is overtly political in the tunes, she says, but “the spirit of this album is political, in a way. It’s about helping each other out, to be resilient, to be in the resistance as jazz musicians. We know the hardships.”

Cometa goes much deeper for Souza than the recent setbacks. From her birth in São Paulo, she lived under a military dictatorship. It began in 1964 and ended in 1985, putting a stranglehold on the cultural vitality of the country. Dissidents were killed, imprisoned, persecuted and exiled.

Luciana, the daughter of songwriter-singer-guitarist Walter Santos Souza and poet/singer Teresa Souza, two prominent leaders in the bossa movement, remembers well the regime’s oppression that stripped away artists’ freedom of expression. Before being released, every song had to be approved

by government censors.

“We lived through hardships,” Souza says. “When I was very young I remember the military taking my mother away for three days. She came home fearful. We couldn’t visit people, and we used codes. We couldn’t speak about things within the family. We had hushed conversations. But we did hide people and feed them. And really, the song became the most powerful weapon of youth against the dictatorship. Music saved us.”

After Souza arrived in the U.S., attending Berklee College of Music and later New England Conservatory of Music, she became a mover. New York City seemed the perfect place for her to sing as a support voice with the likes of Maria Schneider’s orchestra and Guillermo Klein’s Los Gauchos big band. She became a mature bandleader specializing in duo projects with pianist Edward Simon and guitarist Romero Lubambo. Her rhythmic sensibility allowed her to sing alto swoops and soars with an otherworldly shadow and shine. On each project Souza was not willing to duplicate what came before, and she took wide leaps of faith.

In 2018, Souza recorded her superb song cycle *The Book Of Longing* in addition to col-

laborating and touring with the fusion band The Yellowjackets in support of their poignant *Raising Our Voice* album.

At the heart of both projects during turbulent political times in the U.S., Souza says she believed that truth as a moral barometer had been tilted the wrong way. In regard to her new solo work, which calls out for inner peace, she says, “It is truth because the music and lyrics are telling about life. It feels like morally we’re in a pit as all we’ve tried to build is being deconstructed right in front of us. I’m hoping the music I make will bring in some stillness in the midst, a time to be honest, to rest, to go inward.”

As for *Cometa*, a veil of hopelessness has lifted. “Bolsonaro reminded us of how we lived in the old days,” Souza says. “This album serves as a reminder of what can come out of the harshness, out of the darkness. There’s still a lot of noise out there, and it’s hard to get meaningful music to be heard. But I’m certain people are going to be touched by the joy and uptempo of the jazz here. Even if someone says that it puts them in a good mood, to tap into rejoicing, I understand that. For me, I use music as my companion while the comet makes me aware.”

DB

