Feature Story

Luciana Souza at Mandel Hall

By Crystal Fencke

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On the last Friday night of April, a rainstorm and shocks of lightning jumped at the windows of University of Chicago’s Mandel Hall. Inside the humid room, the sultry bossa nova and jazz stylings of Grammy-winning vocal artist Luciana Souza filled the air. It was so warm inside that Souza herself quipped that it felt more like Brazil than Chicago.

Composer, teacher and jazz innovator Souza performed songs from her latest recording, “The New Bossa Nova,” a title which is not a new movement in the Brazilian genre, she said. However, it does describe her album -- a new turn on some American pop favorites. It includes a cover of the bossa nova pioneer Antonio Carlos Jobim, but the focus is on slow, expressive versions of Americans such as James Taylor, Joni Mitchell and The Beach Boys.

Souza took the stage with her band in one of her final performances before a year-long maternity leave. Dressed for comfort in low sandals and a long, black sundress, which couldn’t hide her ample baby bump, she asked, “Can you tell?”

Opening and closing her hour-and-a-half set with electrifying versions of Brazilians, she began with Joao Gilberto’s “Adeus America,” which she described to the Portuguese-challenged among the audience as about a Brazilian who, when he travels to America longs to be back in his home.

Ever the innovator, Souza covered the haunting “Down to You,” from Joni Mitchell’s album “Court and Spark.” She also offered an ethereal retelling of the lively “God Only Knows,” from The Beach Boys’ “Pet Sounds.”

The artist concluded with Jobim’s “Aguas de Marco,” or “Waters of March,” which signals a quiet, rhythmic natural rebirth or renewal. Souza gave a detailed back story of the song. The month of March brings the end of the Brazilian winter and delivers torrential rains. The lyrics are a soft chant giving a long list of items that are left in the rains’ wake: “…A stick, a stone, It's the end of the road, It's the rest of a stump, It's a little alone… .” It is evidence of the people of Brazil: rich, middle class as well as the many of Brazil’s poor, all who are at risk of getting washed out by the rains.