

Let the song tell its story

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London-born, New York-based vocalist, composer, and lyricist Tessa Souter is a storyteller in music.

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The skinny

Tessa Souter Quartet will appear Sunday around 6 p.m. at the Erie Art Museum Blues and Jazz Festival at Frontier Park. It's free and open to the public. For more on Tessa Souter, visit the Web site www.tessasouter.com.

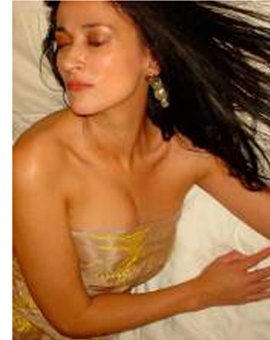
Before Tessa Souter was a singer, she was a freelance journalist and author of a book entitled "Anything I Can Do ... You Can Do Better: How to Unlock Your Creative Dreams and Change Your Life."

Or maybe I have that wrong. Souter herself told me, "Really, I'd always sung. I did it all the time. I woke up singing. Singing is a fantastically cathartic experience, even if you aren't terribly good at it."

Souter is speaking rhetorically about you and me, because it's quite obvious that she is terribly good at it.

This is a very good time to be a woman singing jazz. If jazz were the larger economy, female vocalists would be the health-care sector -- growing and recession-proof.

But there are a lot of them out there right now, most leaning toward the sultry side of the spectrum, the lush, pleasure palaces where Cassandra Wilson and Diana Krall hold court.



Like them, Souter has a low-ish, insinuating voice that's most effective at ballad tempos. Her time is excellent, and she has great taste in songs (you won't believe what she does with the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" or "White Room," the hit by the '60s rock supergroup Cream).

But Souter is her own woman. First of all, she's British, born in London of Trinidadian and English parents. Her diction is flawless, making every syllable count. It's an almost actorly way of singing, so much so that I wrongly supposed that Souter had dramatic experience.

She doesn't, but she conceded, "It's a kind of channeling when you get into a song, and you become the song in a funny sort of way. One time I was singing 'I'll Get By,' and I started crying in the song. The band carried on, and later I learned that a girl in the room had just lost her father."

Souter's love of lyrics may have been deepened by her experience as a writer, but she places its origin much earlier. "I think that comes more from when I was a child, when I used to write stories. Journalism is once-removed because you're writing about things, but when I was first really serious about singing in my early teens, I sang folk songs, and they are stories."

Another of Souter's loves contributes to her originality.

"Space is one of my favorite things. My favorite musicians use space, and I love it in décor and clothing. I used to pick up bands when I was traveling. I would say to them, 'You can do what you like in the solos, but when I'm singing, can you please leave me space, because it's a story.'"

"[Music] needs space to let the song tell its story. Each song has a life and a story, and you have to let it do its thing."

On Monday, Souter and her band -- Jason Ennis on guitar, Gary Wang on bass, and drummer Conor Meehan -- will celebrate the release of her very fine new CD, "Obsession," at no less a jazz shrine than New York's Blue Note.