

February 21, 2011

Voicing Her Pleasure

After Years of Writing Stories, Tessa Souter Now Sings Them

By MARTIN JOHNSON

There have been thousands of renditions of songs from the Beatles songbook, but few with the intense delicacy of Tessa Souter's "Eleanor Rigby," which appears on her most recent album, "Obsession (Motéma Music)." She croons the opening verse over the gentle plucking of a guitar and the quiet keening of a violin. In the second verse, she is joined by the hum of an accordion and the burble of an acoustic bass. The peaceful aura is pierced only when she sings the familiar refrain, "Ah, look at all the lonely people."

"I like evocative music," Ms. Souter said in a recent interview at Jazz Standard, where she will perform on Tuesday. "Actually, I like evocative everything—novels, movies, music, people—but it's all really about getting to a mood."

Her band is a far cry from the jazz norm of piano, bass and drums, and her song selections are a reflection of the music she heard as a child in London. "I grew up listening to a lot of folk-jazz, like Sandy Denny, Fairport Convention and Pentangle," she said. "They had amazing instrumentation—percussion, upright bass and violin."

Ms. Souter, who is 54, has traveled an unusual route to her position as one of New York's leading jazz vocalists. Early motherhood led to her choosing a career as a journalist, which she considered more child-friendly than the life of a professional musician. She spent much of the 1980s and '90s writing for the Times of London, the Independent, and the British editions of Vogue and Elle.

In 1992, after her son left home for college, Ms. Souter relocated to San Francisco, and

two years later she helped start the Writer's Grotto, a collective and workspace for writers and artists. There was a karaoke bar not far from the Grotto, and one night in 1996 she found her passion for music rekindled when she got up and sang a song.

In 1998, Ms. Souter won a scholarship to the Manhattan School of Music and apprenticed with the jazz-vocal greats Mark Murphy and Sheila Jordan. She put down roots in upper Manhattan, where she became a regular at the weekly jam sessions at St. Nick's Pub on 149th Street. That year, she also wrote about the local scene for the New York Times.

'I always imagine that Tessa is singing in some swanky bistro in 1930s Shanghai,' said Michael Bourne.

At those jam sessions, as well as a weekly vocal series she curated at the now-defunct Greenwich Village jazz club Sweet Rhythm, Ms. Souter quickly distinguished herself with unusual instrumentation and ambitious repertoire. "Obsession" includes "White Room," the Jack Bruce-Pete Brown tune that was a hit for the British rock group Cream in 1968, and "Riverman," a 1969 song by the singer-songwriter Nick Drake. She said her focus is always on the narrative of the lyrics, and that a priority for her musicians is "to play sensitively enough that no one is getting in the way of the story itself."

Ms. Souter has gained notice for her take on classic Brazilian pop songs. She considers the 1974 album "Native Dancer" (Columbia), by saxophonist Wayne

Shorter and vocalist Milton Nascimento, as one of her primary influences. There are Brazilian songs on "Obsession," as well as on her two other releases, "Nights of Key Largo" (Venus) and "Listen Love" (Nara Music).

"She's got this exotic vibe that comes through, especially when she's singing Brazilian songs," said Michael Bourne, host of the WBGO-FM show "Singers Unlimited." "I always imagine that Tessa is singing in some swanky bistro in 1930s Shanghai."

In discussing her arrangements, Ms. Souter cited guitarist Saul Rubin, a frequent collaborator, who told her to take away as much as possible to leave songs bare. Her spin on "Eleanor Rigby" was developed four years ago during a two-month engagement in Tokyo, and one motive for keeping it spare and loose was to give the musicians room to interpret the song.

"I often introduce it as my tribute to the movie 'The Remains of the Day,'" she said, adding that "the original Beatles tune is about two separate people. But in my de-arrangement, it is the story of Eleanor's un consummated and secret yearning for Father Mackenzie."

Some of the songs that Ms. Souter plans to sing at Jazz Standard are compositions of her own. She is working on two new recordings, one with a conventional band for a Japanese label and another for Motéma. The latter will feature mostly originals.

"Writing songs is great," she said. "It's a lot like journalism. You write something, then you edit it and edit it, and it's always improving."

Mr. Johnson writes about jazz for the Journal.



Photo by The Wall Street Journal