

'No debate: Vocalist Tessa Souter's Chicago debut promises a winner' **By Neil Tesser**

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"*Beyond The Blue*" (Motéma), released this spring by New York-based vocalist Tessa Souter, is the most frankly romantic album I've heard this year – perhaps because it takes pains to bypass the usual routes to musical sentiment.

The album doesn't drip with glitzy sensuality: Souter's strong suit is her reserve, and she holds as much back as she reveals in her

by the Russian composer Alexander Borodin). Then Souter, a gifted lyricist as well as vocalist, wrote words for nine more themes, from Brahms, Chopin, Schubert, and others – strains that, even after a century or more, remain among the most purely gorgeous melodies in the western world.

Her lyrics are memorable and exhilaratingly mature, while still filled with the wonders of love. The thrilling second movement of Beethoven's 7th Symphony gains these lines – "Naked as music, gentle as rain is / You are the song that wakes up my heart" – to become the Ludwig-Tessa collaboration "Prelude To The Sun." The title track, from Chopin's famous "Prelude In E Minor," concludes: "Out of a dark and cold starless sky, beyond the blue / Believe that love – just like a half forgotten song that we both almost knew – will return to sing in me and you."

And to one of my favorite melodies of 19th-century music, the French Impressionist Gabriel Fauré's "Pavane," Souter writes: "Lost within the deepness of your kiss / A

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interpretations. Nor does the album rely on cloying ballads; as with real-life romance, the tempos surge and subside, with an almost constant undercurrent of motive mystery. And rather than fill the program with traditional examples of the Great American Songbook (which defined love for so much of the 20th century), Souter – who makes her Chicago debut Wednesday at the Jazz Showcase (806 S. Plymouth) – turned to the classical music repertoire for her inspiration.

The London-born vocalist started with a handful of existing, well-known standards drawn from classical themes: "The Lamp Is Low" (adapted from Ravel's "Pavane For A Dead Infant"), "My Reverie" (Debussy), and "Baubles, Bangles And Beads" (from a theme

wordless song of love in blue / I'm drowning in an endless sea of bliss / Where you are me and I am you." (To me, this has something more to offer than "Baby baby baby baby." But that's me.)

The beauty of this project lies in the synergy of melodies, lyrics, and Souter's consummate musicality, carried by her clarion, gently burnished timbre. Apparently, she is incapable of singing off-key: none of these melodies was written with a vocalist in mind, but she navigates the most difficult intervals among them with the ease of someone practicing her scales. She can also swing out, and makes room to do so on this album, where her heritage – half British but half Trinidadian – forges to the front. *[continued ...]*

Souter has a remarkable band backing her up on *"Beyond The Blue,"* led by pianist Steve Kuhn (sprightly and still soulful at 74) and including vibist Joe Locke and saxist Joel Frahm, with keyboardist Gary Versace adding sumptuous solos and counterlines on accordion. (The instrumentalists alone – not to mention the delectable arrangements –

slew of college towns down through L.A. and San Diego.

But a debut one-nighter in Chicago? That requires an act of faith on the part of musicians, venue, and audience. And in order for this to happen more often – and for such artists to visit town on a more consistent

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would make this album worth owning.)

Fortunately, she has engaged a Chicago trio more than capable of handling the intricacies of this material. Guitarist John Kregor, bassist Larry Kohut, and drummer Eric Montzka all have plenary experience in backing a nuanced vocalist: Kregor and Kohut form two thirds of Patricia Barber's current rhythm section, and Montzka played in that band for more than a decade.

But Souter has a couple things going against her tomorrow. Most Chicagoans haven't heard her (or even *of* her); also, there's a political discussion of some sort [the Romney vs. Obama debate] taking place, on all the networks, directly opposite her first set. But you can TiVo the debate (or catch Souter's second set at 10). And while I hate to preach here, you owe it to your long-term listening to support bookings like this, on at least an occasional basis.

Chicago's geographic location makes it difficult for artists on either coast to break into our market: it can get expensive to travel here, and the midwest offers relatively few adjacent venues to bundle together into a tour. By contrast, musicians from Boston to Richmond have a string of seaboard cities (with large jazz audiences) to draw from, many within driving distance; as a result east-coast tours happen all the time. Same for the west, where tour schedules regularly include Seattle, San Francisco and Oakland, and a

basis, which extends and expands our musical options – such acts of faith require occasional validation.

I won't go so far as to say that hearing Tessa Souter will guarantee the continued health and vitality of the Chicago jazz scene. But going to hear people like her, at least once in a while, couldn't hurt. And singers like her don't come along every day. □