

# Hartford Courant.

## Voice & Voicings

By *Richard Kamins*

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**Obsession - Tessa Souter (Motema)** - This is vocalist Souter's 3rd release but only the first I've heard. An interesting collection of tunes, from 60s "rock hits" to sweet Brazilian melodies to re-imagined jazz standards and, basically, a quartet of musicians backing Souter's handsome vocalizing. And, it does sound like a group effort - guitarist **Jason Ennis** (Charles Neville Band, Sonya Kitchell Group) is an excellent second voice, a perfect match for Souter's explorations. His love of Brazilian melodies and rhythms is obvious in his work. The rhythm section of **Gary Wang** (bass) and **Conor Meehan** (drums) is subtle, expansive without being

intrusive. Accordionist **Victor Prieto** appears on 6 of the 12 cuts, adding colors to the rich tableaux.

One has to admire Souter's bravado by opening the program with "**Eleanor Rigby**" and "**Riverman**." The Lennon-McCartney tune, here, is haunting, especially with violinist **Todd Reynolds** softly keening in the background and the impassioned vocal. The oft-recorded Nick Drake tune that follows has a lovely melody and Prieto contributes a very jazzy solo in the midst of the modal exploration. But, it's the impressive "**White Room**" that truly stands out. Ennis takes the Jack Bruce melody and gives it a hard percussive edge while Souter actually makes Peter Brown's haiku-like lyrics sound sensible. While the original version by Cream seemed to slog along, this version is exciting, sensual, and satisfying.

Other highlights include the smart coupling of "**Afro Blue**" with Wayne Shorter's "**Footprints**" (more strong guitar work from Ennis) and "**Nara's Song**." For the latter tune, Souter takes Freddie Hubbard's "**Little Sunflower**" and adds her lyrics. Ennis's articulate guitar rides atop the simple yet propulsive rhythm section. Milton Nascimento's "**Vera Cruz/Empty Faces**" is, perhaps, the smartest integration of voice and instruments on the recording, the guitar and accordion moving in and out of the mix, Meehan's Brazilian parade drums pushing the piece forward, Souter's voice on top or beneath the musicians - really exemplary emotion and execution.

Only 2 of the 12 tracks exceed 5 minutes yet there is so much to absorb. One can easily get lost in Souter's rich alto vocals, her long tones rising and falling above Ennis's sparkling guitar. Souter does not get caught up in "showing off"; the lyrics are important in every song and she makes sure the listeners hear them. And, though one may heard these songs many times before in their original versions or on remakes, here they seem fresh and, in some instances, refreshed. Sounds beautiful and is beautiful, "**Obsession**" is worth exploring.