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Direct from Rio, a chanteuse's sultry gift to Canadians

Brazilian singer recruits local jazz artists to record part of her new CD here

BY ROGER LEVESQUE, FREELANCE JANUARY 29, 2009

It's a long ways from her hometown, Rio De Janeiro, and a lot colder, too, but Fernanda Cunha finds Edmonton audiences to be warm and friendly.

This week the Brazilian singer is making her third visit here both to perform and record, bringing two of her colleagues along to play with a couple of Edmonton's best jazz players. I asked her how it all came about:

You grew up in a musical family, but music wasn't your first career choice.

That's right. My mother was a singer, my grandmother was a pianist and my aunt is a composer and singer, so the whole family was musical. But they showed me it was very hard to survive in music, especially in Brazil. So I tried a career in psychology for three years before I gave up and picked up the microphone in 1997. I realized I couldn't live without music.

Brazil is known for having such a musically rich culture. Is it very competitive for musicians?

It's very competitive, but we have a lot of different styles of music in Brazil -- samba and bossa nova, chorinho, Brazilian jazz and ballads and more -- so you have to pick one and go with it. I specialized in Brazilian popular music, but I heard a lot of jazz growing up and I was influenced by that.

What inspired you to take on the songs of Antonio Carlos Jobim and Chico Buarque on your latest (third) CD Zingaro?

Jobim was the most important, most famous composer in Brazil and he had a lot of collaborators on the lyrics. But the 10 songs he wrote with Buarque are less well-known than most Jobim tunes. Most of them are sambas and slower, instead of his most famous bossa nova songs like

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On Tuesday, Bernard Lachance

The Girl From Ipanema.

You recorded Zingaro with just a guitarist, Ze Carlos. Did that make it easier or harder?

Harder. Most of them are love songs, but because all of these songs were written for piano, because Jobim was a pianist, Carlos had to rewrite everything for his acoustic guitar.

This is your third visit to Edmonton since November 2005, the latest since you sang at the 2007 Jazz Fest. Have you had a good reception here?

I've performed in a lot of countries and I think this audience is very special. I love it here. I feel like it is home. That's one reason I got the idea to record part of my next CD here.

It will feature songs of Canada and Brazil and it will be my gift to Canadians. I've chosen songs by Canadians like Shelton Brooks (One of These Days) and Joni Mitchell and Bruce Cockburn. I found a samba by Joni Mitchell called Dreamland so I'm going to record that. I'm working with (bassist) Mike Lent and (drummer) Sandro Dominelli, who I sang with on my previous visits.

I like playing with them very much. Mike really puts his heart into it, which is so important.

How do you communicate with listeners here so easily when most of your songs are in Portuguese?

It's because you really have to really communicate the emotion, not the words.

Fernanda Cunha performs Friday at 9 p.m. at the Yardbird Suite (10203 86th Ave.). Tickets are \$20 for members, \$24 for guests, from Ticketmaster (780-451-8000) or at the door.

Warren Commission

For most of two decades now, Ted Warren has been steadily developing into one of the busiest drummers on Toronto's jazz scene.

That experience has also made him one of the most versatile player-composers around, as you can hear on a recent CD with his band Warren Commission, Songs For Doug (the title refers to his late colleague, keyboard great Doug Riley who played on three tracks).

You can also hear the quartet tap into various shades of contemporary jazz live when they hit the Yardbird this weekend.

Regina-born Warren says he's drawn influences from all over jazz music and beyond. But he's an enthusiastic composer, too, and Warren Commission was meant as a creative outlet when he founded it in 1993. Because drummer-leaders are relatively rare, you might wonder if that makes the band any different.

"Drummers tend to think a lot about the mood that's created," says Warren. "They're always looking for different types of grooves and more sensitive to tempo than say, a horn player. I also have a more casual

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relationship to harmony too, because I don't have to navigate the harmony."

Warren Commission plays the Yardbird Saturday at 9 p.m. Tickets are \$14 for members, \$18 for guests.

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