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Canada's Love Affair with Fernanda Cunha (The Feeling Is Mutual)

por Nancy Matos

Brazil's musical contribution to the world is vast--from Choro to Bossa Nova, most people can recognize some form of music from South America's largest country. Who hasn't hummed along to João Gilberto's "Girl From Ipanema" ("Garota de Ipanema") or moved their hips to the "lambada" at some point?

Bringing a versatile voice and unique musical offerings to the Brazilian musical family is Fernanda Cunha, a Rio de Janeiro-based singer whose voice has been compared to legendary Brazilian songstress Elis Regina. Speaking of family, Cunha's own is rich in talent: her mother, Telma Costa, is famous for her duet of the song "Eu te amo" with Chico Buarque, and she is the niece of composers Sueli and Lisieux Costa.

Performing for the second year in a row at the Vancouver International Jazz Festival this month, Cunha will share the stage with her long-time pianist Ricardo Rito and special guest Celso Machado, a fellow Brazilian and Vancouver-based musician. A fan from a distance, Cunha was unable to connect with him during last year's jazz festival, so she set the wheels in motion to have him join her for this year's show. "I got in contact with him [Machado] through his website. He phoned me in Brazil and sent me his CDs. This year when [the] festival invited me again to return, I asked to have Celso with me as a guest in a couple of songs, and he promptly agreed. I don't know Celso in person, but I feel like I do."

Their concert will also mark the 50th anniversary of the Bossa Nova, and although Cunha's music doesn't rely solely on the famous Brazilian sound, she will be paying tribute to it. The Vancouver audience can expect to hear "lots of Bossas by Jobim, Johnny Alf, João Donato, among others."

With two previous tours to Canada already under her belt (she has performed in Edmonton, Calgary and Fernie, BC) and an always well-received reception at her Vancouver concerts, there could be more Cunha/Machado pairings in the future. In fact, Cunha could see herself spending a lot of time here. "I love Canada, and audiences respond very well to my music. Brazilian music is very respected and revered all over the world. I had the opportunity to sing in other countries and felt that. But I have a special care with Canada. Vancouver is magic and for some reason I feel like home there."

As her name gains recognition, more invitations are coming through, like a first-time appearance in Toronto at the TD Canada Trust Toronto Jazz Festival in June (just days before her Vancouver show), leaving little time for exploring the city and discovering our own local flavour and talent. Cunha is familiar with other Portuguese musicians, like Vancouver's "Pe de Cana", but has yet to find the time to play audience member instead

of performer. “I spent just two days in Vancouver last year and didn’t have the opportunity to watch their shows. But I met the musician Ray Piper in Rio last year and he gave me his beautiful CD and told me a lot about the Choro groups in Vancouver. I hope to meet them this time.”

An upcoming CD and concerts are on the horizon for the busy singer, including stops in Portugal and Japan. When she has completed the North American jazz festival circuit, Cunha will resume her Brazilian tour in support of her latest CD, 2007’s “Zíngaro” featuring guitarist Zé Carlos. The intimate-sounding CD honours two of Brazil’s greatest composers—Antonio Carlos Jobim and Chico Buarque, covering their melodies and lyrics solely with Carlos’ elegant acoustic guitar and Cunha’s lush voice. Her previous effort, 2004’s “Dois Corações” featured what the singer called her “dream team” of musicians, including Johnny Alf and her aunt, Sueli. For her next CD, Cunha isn’t giving anything away. “My next CD is a surprise, a good surprise. I have a lot of ideas for CDs; my mind doesn’t stop.”

As for an English-language CD, nothing is currently in the works, but she does see it as an option, adding, “I’m open for all possibilities in music. But I don’t have plans to sing an English CD yet.” Future collaborations with other artists are also a possibility (“the list is too big”), namely with Brazilian guitarist virtuoso Toninho Horta. “I’d love to have him playing a song with me on a CD.”

Given the shared affection between Cunha and Canadian audiences, we can probably expect future visits from the popular singer. “Canada will be always in my way. If possible I’ll sing in Canada every year and would like to bring a different special guest each year.”