

The Mercury News

ANYTHING SHE CAN DO

By Paul Freeman
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When it comes to following artistic aspirations, London-born, New York-based Tessa Souter wrote the book... literally. The acclaimed jazz singer and songwriter penned the how to/self-help book *Anything I Can Do, You Can Do Better: How to Unlock Your Creative Dreams and Change Your Life*.

Since childhood, Souter dreamed of being a singer. But when she

had a baby at 16, along with a short-lived marriage, she devoted herself to her son and put those performing hopes on hold. “My son was my music,” Souter told The Mercury News.

Instead, she became a journalist, which allowed her to work her schedule around the boys needs. As a freelance writer, Souter cultivated skills that are now reflected in her songwriting. “When I write, I blurt it all out. I’m a blurter. Then I go in and hone it all. I pick. I think, Is that the exact word I wanted?”

“I learned when I was first writing as a journalist, that you just have to get it done, you have to just write. Then you can go in and edit. I started as a copy editor, which was very inhibiting when I first started writing, because I was editing myself before I began. Then I realized, Why don’t I write the same old bollocks that I get in when other people write and then fix that? So that’s what I did.”

An interview with famed photojournalist Stefan Lorant, then 98, made a huge impression on Souter. He invited her to visit him in the U.S. Once on these shores, she decided to also visit a friend in San Francisco. “I did what many people who visit San Francisco do... And that is, I didn’t leave. It’s an amazing place, a really healing place. Named after St. Francis of Assisi, apparently. I got myself back on my feet there.”

While residing here, Souter augmented her writing income by cleaning houses. She penned articles on all sorts of subjects, ranging from homelessness to transsexuality to celebrity profiles. She became a member of the city's famed Writers Grotto (where she will conduct a Blocks Busters workshop on Feb. 15; www.sfgrotto.org).

"I loved being at the Grotto. In that situation, you can't procrastinate. It taught me discipline. We helped each other, talked about ideas, shared contacts."

Souter's musicologist boyfriend at the time prodded her to sing publicly. He finally convinced her to take the microphone at a San Francisco karaoke bar. "I was terribly shy. If you come to a gig, you would never imagine me to be a shy person. But I really am. I didn't want to do it. But I did it to please him. He relocated to New York and Souter decided to make the move, as well. When the relationship faded, Souter followed her long repressed musical fires. Her son had reached adulthood. I'm not going to tell you how old my son is, because my son is now older than I am," Souter said, laughing.

"For me, to be out singing was a fantastic, cathartic release, a pain reliever, like a drug. I would go to vocal jams in New York every weekend and it was very natural. The only other career, if you like, that I felt this strongly about, was my son. He was my absolute universe. And then, when I got into music, I remember noticing, Oh, I recognize this feeling. It's this feeling that there's something more important than you are. That's how I felt, obviously, about my son. But that's also how I feel about music. I want to take care of music and stick up for it.

She earned a scholarship to study at Manhattan School of Music and, the month she started, landed her first professional gig in Greenwich Village.

Souter's captivating vocals offer a rare blend of sensitivity, intelligence and emotion. She brings a new level of understanding to even the most familiar lyrics. Her approach draws from pop, soul and world music, as well as jazz. After becoming a big hit in the Big Apple, she played to packed houses internationally.

"I wish there were more hours in the day. With music, there's so much to discover, so much to know. Music is incredibly absorbing. If you let it, it can completely take over your whole life. But I try not to let that happen. Otherwise, what are you feeding it with? I like to draw from life experiences."

The book she wrote draws from the life experiences and career dreams of many creative people. "There are chapters I like to go back to and remind myself, yes, it does take time. There's no such thing as overnight success. It's a game of perseverance. Sometimes you feel like, I can't take one more step. And then you'll read something about somebody who's had that exact same feeling, somebody like Virginia Woolf. You think, Oh, I think I'll go for another week then."

"In the book, I'm not taking it from a position of, I've got it down and here I am, super successful. The book's title is Anything I Can Do, You Can Do Better. I've seen people work some of the principles of the book very successfully and I thought to myself, I wish I had my book, when I started," Souter laughed.

Souter maintains a healthy perspective. Appreciating where you are sometimes is a challenge. "Sometimes it's good to look back on where you came from and think, 'Wow, a few years ago, how much would I have loved to have had three CDs out?' Sometimes people look at what they haven't got yet."