

JAZZ Fest 09 Profile: Tessa Souter

Telling stories in songs

By [Ron Netsky](#) on June 3, 2009



Tessa Souter has switched careers from journalist to singer, and made a big mark with the audience at the 2007

Christ Church, Rochester, NY
6:45 & 8:45 p.m. | \$20

When a beautiful singer invites you back to her hotel room after the show, as Tessa Souter did at the 2007 RIJF, it could pose a moral dilemma for a married man. But it didn't. Souter had received such a warm reception from the overflow crowd that she invited the entire audience back to her room.

That kind of humor, combined with a gorgeous voice and eclectic repertoire, made Souter a festival favorite two years ago. She returns this year as part of the Made in the U.K. series at Christ Church.

Born in London, Souter was a successful journalist, writing for The Guardian, The Times of London, Elle, and Vogue. After braving open-mic nights and studying with vocalist Mark Murphy, she switched from journalism to a more tuneful and emotional form of storytelling.

"I cannot sing a song that I don't mean," says Souter. "Even if I'm not in that experience at the moment, I have to have been there."

No matter where the songs go, it's a good bet Souter has been there. First, there were questions about her identity. "I was 12 when my mother told me about my birth father, that he was an amazing singer and how interesting it was that I sang a lot of the songs he loved. So singing was a way for me to feel close to this absent parent who Mum romanticized to me somewhat," she says.

Her mother also told her that her father was Spanish, and that he was dead. This information resulted in an interest in Spanish music, and a Spanish tinge that pervades her music today.

At 15 Souter got pregnant and ran away from home; from 16 to 18 she was married. She was a single parent until she met her second husband when her son was 11. She was an excellent student who might have become a professor of English if she had not chosen journalism. (Her son now teaches at a university in South Korea.)

At 28 she became curious about her roots. She discovered her father's name in the London telephone directory and dialed the number. She found he was not only alive, but from Trinidad, and he was black.

"When I met him, he really was a great singer. Amazing voice. Gave me a pain in the chest to hear the tone - that's my test of if something is good or not," she says.

Although she never taught English, Souter became a writer. A few years ago she published her first book, "Anything I Can Do... You Can Do Better: How to Unlock Your Creative Dreams and Change Your Life." The book consists of interviews with celebrities and other achievers. It also includes her own story of overcoming adversity, including her road to singing.

She had written a piece on Stefan Lorant, the legendary filmmaker, photographer, writer, and publisher. He was 94 and her hero, when he asked, "Why don't you come to America?"

Souter thought she'd visit for a month, staying with Lorant in Massachusetts and then with a friend in San Francisco. But she fell in love with San Francisco and decided to stay. To make ends meet she freelanced for magazines and cleaned houses.

One night in a karaoke bar she sang "Cry Me A River." A man in the audience became a fan, then a friend, and eventually her boyfriend. They moved to New York and, even as the relationship was dissolving, he encouraged her singing. Every weekend she honed her skills at Cleopatra's Needle on the Upper East Side.

"It was an amazing cathartic release for me."

On the wall of her apartment Souter has a picture of Miles Davis with a quote: "Do not fear mistakes - there are none." She values these words after studying with Mark Murphy. At her first workshop with him, she sang "Round Midnight."

"I extended a note at the end for no reason really, except to show off," says Souter. Murphy told her people with beautiful voices often have a bad habit of over-singing. "I thought, This is who I want to have lessons with. He's really authentic and he's going to tell you what's wrong. I was always Mrs. Wanting-to-Be-Perfect. He made me take chances."

Souter takes chances with her repertoire, expanding the jazz canon to include tunes like Cream's "White Room" and U2's "Where The Streets Have No Name." On her recent album, "Nights Of Key Largo," her powerful delivery breathes new life into the James Bond theme "You Only Live Twice."

Souter has recently sung to appreciative audiences in London and Tokyo and filled a 1700-seat theater in Moscow. She is excited about having signed with Motema, a label boasting Geri Allen and Lynne Arriale.

Although she has not recorded many of her own tunes, her upcoming album includes an extraordinary one. "Usha's Wedding (Love is Forever)," a melody sung over a chant, is as beautiful as it is unusual.