

Shadows and Silence: Tessa Souter Brings a Jazzy Soul to Erik Satie's World

By **Eric Cooper**, June 21, 2025

June 27, 2025, marks a century since the passing of Érik Satie, the enigmatic figure and founder of modern music. It is on this symbolic date that singer and songwriter Tessa Souter releases her new album, *Shadows and Silence: The Erik Satie Project*, the result of a long and intimate artistic collaboration with the work of the French composer. More than a simple tribute, this album is a personal quest, a journey through human emotions set against a backdrop of refined jazz, where musical elegance rubs shoulders with the vulnerability of memories.

A voice, a pen, an exceptional career: Tessa Souter – “A truly beautiful voice which she uses to unearth and get to the core of truly great songs,” said Dermot Hussey on Sirius Radio. Born in London to an English mother and an Afro-Trinidadian father whom she only met later, Tessa Souter grew up surrounded by music. Her mother, a talented amateur singer, taught her to sing from the age of three. She learned to play the piano at eight, then the guitar, self-taught, to perform songs by Sandy Denny and Pentangle. At 16, she became a mother, and at 18, a single mother. For two decades, she built her life around her son, returning to her studies, eventually obtaining a degree in English literature in London. She then moved towards a career as a journalist and editor (notably for *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Guardian*, *South China Morning Post*, etc.), until a meeting with the photojournalist Stefan Lorant took her to the United States. First to San Francisco, then to New York, where she settled permanently.

It was there, in New York, that music took hold again. After a karaoke session and the encouragement of writer Mark Burford, she sang in jazz clubs, was spotted by David Lahm, who guided her towards jazz. She then underwent mentorship with Mark Murphy, who gave her the keys to the stage.

Since then, she has recorded five critically acclaimed albums: *Listen Love* (2004), *Nights of Key Largo* (2008), *Obsession* (2009), *Beyond the Blue* (2012), and *Picture in Black and White* (2018), the latter exploring her biracial roots with remarkable poignancy. She has sung with Steve Kuhn, Joel Frahm, Billy Drummond (her husband), Romero Lubambo, Yotam Silberstein, and Charnett Moffett. She has performed on the biggest jazz stages: SF Jazz, Kennedy Center, Blue Note (NY, Beijing, Shanghai), Ronnie Scott's, London and Edinburgh Jazz Festivals, Star Eyes (Nagoya), etc.

Both self-taught and a perfectionist, Souter is a rare singer, transforming each song into an intimate event. She blends jazz with touches of flamenco, oriental, classical, and Brazilian, with disconcerting sincerity. “There's something raw and real about hearing Tessa Souter sing,” wrote *LA Weekly*. Her voice never imitates; it reveals. Her pen, however, explores the unknown territories of the instrumental, placing words vibrant with soul.

Satie, Between Lights and Ghosts – A genius composer and a figure of minimalism before its time, Érik Satie (1866-1925) was long relegated to the margins. His work, both simple and profound, nevertheless inspired Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, John Cage, and many others. Famous for his *Gymnopédies* and *Gnossiennes*, he also invented “furniture music” (the ancestor of muzak) and founded a religion with a single member: himself. With *Shadows and Silence*, Tessa Souter chooses to pay homage to both music and man. The slowness of his pieces becomes a space of expression, where the silences are as evocative as the notes.

An album between worlds – The genesis of the album dates back to 2006, when she listened to a vocal version of *Gnossienne No. 1* by Anne Ducros. The project matured slowly, until it was reactivated during confinement. The birth of a child, the loss of loved ones, the death of her mother last June... Each track is rooted in an experience. Highlights include *Rayga's Song* (*Gymnopédie No. 1*), *Mood* by Ron Carter, *Avec le Temps* by Léo Ferré, and *Vexations*, an obsessive metaphor for rupture. Accompanied by Luis Perdomo (piano), Yasushi Nakamura (bass), Billy Drummond (drums), Nadje Noordhuis (flugelhorn) and Steve Wilson (saxophone), Souter navigates between Satie's compositions and contemporary jazz pieces with a moving clarity.

A rare and necessary tribute – As we commemorate Satie's centenary, *Shadows and Silence* is not just a tribute album. It is an act of faith in music as an invisible link between souls, between the living and the dead, between eras. Tessa Souter gives flesh to Satie's shadow, dressing it in words and emotion. As she so aptly puts it: “Satie has become a traveling companion, a guide, a presence.”

An album to listen to with your eyes closed. And your heart wide open.