



Stephanie Murnier

Elza Soares

She may be one of Brazil's finest samba singers, but her career and life have been a series of ups and downs. **Russ Slater** tells her fascinating story

Elza Soares has built her career on strength over adversity. It's this characteristic that has defined her career, ever since the Brazilian public discovered her voice in the 1950s. Soares was

13 years old, married and with a sick son needing costly medication. With dreams of a singing career and in serious need of money, Soares got invited to perform on the popular radio programme of Ary Barroso. In a dress

kept together by safety pins and with a mop of hair twisted into pigtailed, she arrived on the stage only for the audience to burst into laughter at her appearance. Barroso kept up the gag, looking Soares up and down before asking "what planet do you come from?" Soares, not missing a beat, replied: "I'm from planet hunger." She then sang, giving a debut to her signature driving, raspy voice, and the laughter soon turned to applause. By the end of the song, Barroso's tune had changed: "A star has just been born," he rhapsodised.

Over the following 60 years Soares' star has shone and faded many times, the successes of her singing career and status as one of Brazil's

finest samba singers seemingly always running parallel with a tragic personal life. Now 79 years old (though some accounts believe she is 86; Soares herself is unsure of the date), Soares has just released one of the most acclaimed albums of her career, *The Woman at the End of the World*, and is seeing a new generation discover why the BBC voted her Best Singer of the Millennium in 2000.

Born to a labourer and a laundress in a Rio de Janeiro *favela*, Soares had an extremely humble childhood that was cut short when her father ordered her to get married at 12 years old, thinking it the best way to curtail her growing tomboy antics. With her husband she would have seven children, of which two died of malnutrition, before he himself passed away from tuberculosis, leaving Soares a widow aged 21. It was only then that she truly began to pursue her nascent singing career.

First she paid her dues on radio and spent some time singing tangos and *boleros* in Argentina. Then in 1960 she got a record contract and never looked back. Her gravelly voice, often compared to Ella Fitzgerald, and her early skill at scatting, proved to be the perfect lead vocal for the big-band samba arrangements of the time and she had instant successes with songs like 'Se Acaso Você Chegasse' and 'Mulata Assanhada' from her debut, *Se Acaso Você Chegasse*, in 1960. Throughout the 60s, 70s and the beginning of the 80s she established herself as one of Brazil's finest samba singers, adapting her style for the huge range of important arrangers and musicians that she worked with. Whether a ballad, upbeat jazzy number or hard-edged samba soul, there were few singers with the power and singularity of Soares.

When both Louis Armstrong and Soares were invited to sing at the 1962 World Cup in Chile, Armstrong would say that she had "a saxophone in her throat." It was at that event that Soares would fall for Garrincha, the famous Brazilian footballer who became the love of her life. When he left his wife for Soares, the Brazilian public turned on her, seeing her as immoral for taking a married man. She was threatened with death and routinely had eggs and tomatoes chucked at her house, along with offensive posters glued to her gates. Despite this abuse, Soares tried to make their marriage work, even fighting Garrincha's alcoholism, which was spiralling out of control. Soares stood by Garrincha

when her own mother died in a car crash in which he was driving under the influence, but she finally left him in 1978 after he beat her. He would later die of cirrhosis of the liver in 1983. Tragically, her only child with Garrincha would die soon after in a car crash, aged nine.

Soares' success, despite all of these personal traumas and her poor upbringing, is essential for understanding why so many people who suffer discrimination in Brazil – whether it's because they are poor, black, female, gay or uneducated – see Soares as one of their own, finding inspiration in her enduring spirit. It's also vital for understanding why she keeps making music. In recent interviews she has stated that she doesn't want to talk about the past – maybe it's just too painful – and instead has ploughed herself into music even more, describing it as "medicine for the soul." After a quiet 90s, the BBC award in 2000 gave her new momentum and she re-emerged as a potent artist with the album *Do Cócix Até O*

People who suffer discrimination in Brazil see Soares as one of their own

Pescoço in 2002. Working with younger musicians and producers, she embraced electronic music, hip-hop and acid jazz for an incredibly bold release that earned her a Grammy nomination.

Similarly, inventive releases followed, leading up to *The Woman at the End of the World*, which was released as *A Mulher do Fim do Mundo* in Brazil in 2015, where it has won numerous awards. The album was the brainchild of Guilherme Kastrup who wanted to pair her with some of the musicians and songwriters who have been redefining São Paulo's samba scene in recent years, infusing the style with elements of dissonance, spirituality and free jazz. Soares seized on their songs, written especially for her, which detailed everyday stories of domestic violence, inequality, sex and poverty. Remarkably, her voice is sounding better than ever (if anything, it has gained power, rather than lost it, over the years), testament to how well she's preserved it, but also owing to all the experiences she's accumulated.

Describing what the album's title means to her, Soares has said: "I think that it's a courageous woman that's going to fight to defend other women." With courage, attitude and that remarkable voice still intact, it feels very much like Soares' fight, defending and singing for those on the margins, will go on. ♦

+ **DATE** Soares performs at the EFG London Jazz Festival at the Barbican on November 13

BEST ALBUMS



A Bossa Negra
(Odeon, 1961; re-released by Dubas Música, 2003)
Her second album was recorded at the height of *bossa nova* – hence it's

cheeky title (Black Bossa), taking a swipe at the fact the genre was dominated by white middle-class singers – and set the blueprint for many albums to come, with big-band samba arrangements featuring strong, jazzy vocals, spiky brass and lavish strings.



Pede Passagem
(Odeon, 1972; re-released by EMI, 2004)

Her style took a giant step towards samba-soul after teaming up with arranger and pianist Dom Salvador. It contains classics such as the swinging 'Cheguendengo' and funky 'Amor Perfeito'.



Do Cócix Até O Pescoço
(Maianga/Trotare, 2002)

This marks her first major reinvention. Soares raps and croons over a mixture of funk, hip-hop beats, brassy jazz workouts and the odd samba, showing a predilection for experimentation that sees her career reignite in the new millennium.



The Woman at the End of the World
(Mais Um Discos, 2016)

Soares teams up with some of the most inventive samba musicians and songwriters in São Paulo. Full of uncompromising lyrics about sex, equality and life in Brazil, as well as a loose definition of samba that includes electronics and electric guitars, *The Woman at the End of the World* is the boldest release of Soares' career. A Top of the World review in #119.

IF YOU LIKE ELZA SOARES, THEN TRY...

Velha Guarda da Portela



Tudo Azul
(Red Circle Music Limited, 2008)

Brazilian superstar Marisa Monte was at the helm of this labour of love, collecting classic sambas that had never previously been recorded, then getting legendary members of Rio's Portela samba school to perform them. The result is gloriously authentic and surprisingly fresh. A Top of the World review in #50.