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Clockwise from left: Cape Verde sirens  
Fantcha, Sara Tavares, and Lura

BY ANDREW GILBERT



# Divas of the Diaspora

**THE SPECTACULAR NEW WAVE OF CAPE VERDEAN SINGERS**

**B**y just about any measure, Cape Verde is a supremely unlikely locale to emerge as the next world-music hothouse. A remote archipelago some 300 miles off the coast of Senegal, the former Portuguese colony is barely larger than Rhode Island. Cape Verde's population of about 420,000 is spread out among 10 main islands so distant from each other that travel between them is prohibitively expensive; the nation's endemic poverty has resulted in a far-flung diaspora of another half-million people, some of whom now live in large communities in Providence, Rhode Island, and New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Singer Cesaria Evora's rise to prominence in the late 1980s put the West African country on the international musical

map, and outside the Lusophone world she continues to reign as the nation's sole musical voice. But with a confluence of influences from Portugal, Brazil, and West Africa nourishing a musical culture as rich as the islands are barren, a new generation of Cape Verdean vocalists is coming up.

Indeed, when it comes to strikingly beautiful singers, Cape Verde seems to have a bumper crop on its hands, with at least half a dozen immensely talented women making serious inroads into North America, and another half dozen finding an audience in Europe. In the past few years, alluring performers such as Lura, Sara Tavares, Mayra Andrade, Fantcha, Maria de Barros, and Gardenia Benrós have all released impressive and widely distributed albums, and waiting in the wings are Sara

Alinho, Maria Alice, Nancy Vieira, Carmen Souza, and the *zouk* star Suzanna Lubrano.

"We can call it a women-dominated world," says Osvaldo Dos Reis, the Cape Verde-born, Paris-raised editor of the invaluable website [www.sodademagazine.com](http://www.sodademagazine.com) and of *Sodade*, a quarterly magazine based in Brockton, Massachusetts. "It just happened that we have a lot of talented young women, and they all seem to be coming up at the same time. It's kind of a blessing for the entire team. They're all different. They've all developed their own sounds based on Cape Verdean forms, but with different kinds of influences."

What the women share is the sensual rhythmic sensibility that pervades Cape Verdean music, a pulse usually defined by the four-string, ukulele-like *cavaquinho*. While electric instruments came to dominate performances on the islands in the 1970s and '80s, the women work in small group contexts with mostly acoustic instrumentation that flows from the return-to-roots movement of the '90s. What's fascinating is that rather than breeding insularity or restricted notions of cultural authenticity, the roots movement has actually facilitated the women's expansive vision.

Reflecting the dispersal of the Cape Verdean people, the rising wave of women are as likely to have been born in other West African countries or Portugal as their ancestral homeland. Eschewing the slicker commercial pop sound from Cape Verde, they have tapped into the world music scene by tending to their roots, while also nurturing a following on the islands by demonstrating a love and connection to the left-behind land. Rather than dance music, the women's profusion of approaches is akin to the creative flowering that took place in 1970s Brazil, when *música popular brasileira* stars such as Clara Nunes, Alcione and Maria Bethânia created strikingly contemporary (and popular) music steeped in traditional styles of *samba* and *forró*.

I do music very instinctively, and I'm not very interested in who influenced what."

Andrade sees herself as part of a wave of young Cape Verdean singers ready to seize the international spotlight. Access to state-of-the-art recording studios in Europe and the US, technology unavailable on the islands, has certainly played an important role in creating new opportunities, but the essential change is one of perspective, as young singers look to reach out to the world rather than find an audience restricted to fellow Cape Verdeans.

"It's not like 15 years ago, when all the singers were singing the very traditional way, with the high, feminine voices," Andrade says. "We're all working on our own musical personality, and I think that's very interesting and what makes things work. Cape Verde needs this kind of singularity to keep growing."

One thing that every rising Cape Verdean singer shares is a reverence for, and often a relationship with, Cesaria Evora. She introduced the world to the music of Cape Verde with her ineffably graceful, minor-key *mornas* describing lives of hardship, heartbreak, and anguished longing for absent loved ones. The music is much like the blues in its heroic transcendence of hard times, but strongly inflected by the rhythms and cadences of West Africa, Brazil, and Portugal, of which Cape Verde was a colony until 1975.

Both on stage and off, Evora has played an essential role in promoting the careers of young Cape Verdean artists, encouraging them to exploit opportunities that were denied her until she was nearly 50. Rather than seeking to monopolize the spotlight, she's invited many of the young singers to join her on tour, introducing them to her devoted audience.

"Cesaria is like our mother," says Lura, who was featured on an extensive 2001 European tour, *Cesaria & Friends*. "She makes Cape Verdean culture known all over the world. She does it very seriously, and I learned a lot with her. I learned where my place

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**A**t 23, Mayra Andrade is the latest addition to the roster of rising Cape Verdean stars, a remarkable singer-songwriter with a cushiony voice and an insinuating rhythmic sensibility. She exemplifies the way in which contemporary Cape Verdean artists are embracing the nation's musical roots while confidently claiming the right to use whatever sounds strike their fancy. Singing mostly in Kriolu, a creole language that blends Portuguese with several West African languages, Andrade made her US debut in May 2008 at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, marking the US release of her arresting debut album, *Navega*.

The daughter of a Cape Verdean diplomat, Andrade was born in Cuba because of medical complications with her mother's pregnancy. After her family left the Cape Verdean island of Santiago when she was six, Andrade spent significant time in Senegal, Angola, and Germany, in an odyssey punctuated by several stints back in Cape Verde. She acquired an international sensibility in those formative years and is now based in Paris, where there's a significant community of Cape Verdean musicians.

"Because of the fact I traveled so much, this obviously influenced my way of singing," Andrade says. "I listened to very different kinds of music since I was young—Brazilian music, but also world music in general, jazz, reggae, rock, and soul.

is in music from Cape Verde, and what I have to do."

Born and raised in Lisbon, Lura began as a dancer, but realized she had a gift for singing when Cape Verdean-born *zouk* star Juka recruited her to record with him. The duet was a minor hit, and the budding teenage singer suddenly started receiving requests to record and perform from established Cape Verdean artists such as Tito Paris, Paulinho Vieira, and Angola's Bonga. She recorded her first album, *Nha Vida*, in 1996, and made a splash when the title track was included on the AIDS benefit compilation *Onda Sonora: Red Hot + Lisbon* (1997), alongside pieces by stars such as Caetano Veloso, Djavan, Marisa Monte, and k.d. lang.

Determined to spread awareness of Cape Verdean styles beyond the lilting *mornas* and sprightly *coladeras* popularized by Evora, Lura has delved into accordion-based *funana*, a sensuous style long repressed by the Portuguese colonial administration, and *batukeu*, a work rhythm that originated among groups of women beating folded stacks of clothes, accompanied by improvised verses that are topical and, often, satirical. Her breakthrough third album, *Di Korpu Ku Alma* (2005, Lusafrika, La Escondida), features five *batukeus*, including her signature tunes "Na Ri Na" and "Vazulina," by Orlando Panteira, a gifted composer who died before he had a chance to release his own album. *Di Korpu* includes a separate DVD, shot during a 2004 concert at Paris's Le Grand Rex Theater in which Lura opened for Evora, that captures the younger singer's infectious, youthful energy.

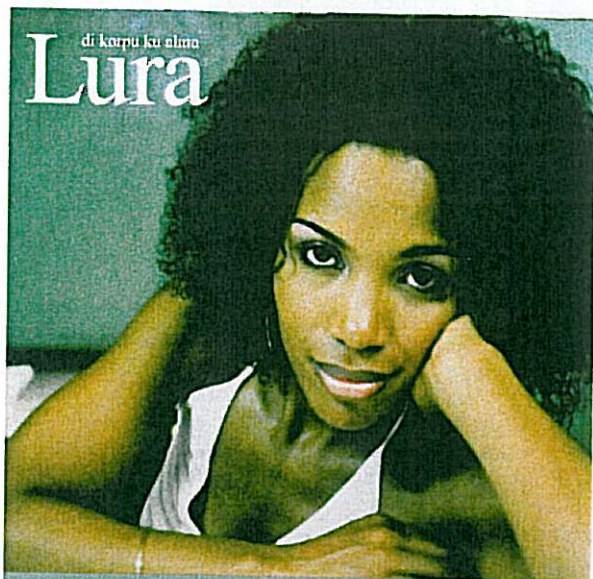
"There's a new generation, and I'm just a piece of a puzzle," Lura says. "We sing and play traditional music from Cape Verde with influences from all over the world—soul, reggae, blues, samba." Her latest release, *M'Ben di Fora*, cemented her status as the most visible and exciting young Cape Verdean singer on the world music scene. She's widely toured the US several times, and her career has benefited greatly since she signed with her current manager, Luis Barros, a Boston-based Cape Verdean and music-industry veteran who worked with L.A. Reid and Kenny "Babyface" Nelson's hugely successful LaFace Records, and who has also worked with Maria de Barra and Sara Tavares.

"Lura resurrected *finana*, a genre that was popular when I was a kid," Barros says. "Artists like Lura and Sara Tavares, they use the foundation of the past, and put their own spin on it. I believe our music hasn't been appropriately packaged and presented. Cesaria was the model, but nobody is going to replicate that. So we're looking for ways to showcase the great amount of Cape Verdean talent in an already crowded market."

In some ways, the fact that Lura was born outside of Cape Verde makes her a particularly apt representative for the country. Instead of being tied to the sounds of one particular island, she claims the entire archipelago as her muse. Rather than simply absorbing Cape Verdean culture, she made an affirmative decision to embrace it after her mother discouraged her from speaking Kriolu as a child. "I'm from Santiago and from São Nicolau," Lura says. "I feel I can show other people all the different rhythms and styles. I'm trying to show that every island has something good, and that we complement and need each other."

In much the same way, music isn't just a vehicle for self-expression for Sara Tavares, but an ongoing quest through which she has forged an identity and made a place for herself in the world. Born in Lisbon to parents from Cape Verde, the 29-year-old singer-songwriter has traveled a winding musical path, from teenage pop phenomenon to gospel crooner to her present status as a singer/songwriter and rising world music star crafting a highly personal sound based on her experience growing up as a cultural outsider.

Essentially abandoned as a child by her parents, Tavares used music to reconnect with her roots, a journey that came to



## Best Recordings

**Mayra Andrade: *Navega*** (2008, STERNS MUSIC)  
A supremely impressive debut recording, *Navega* captures an artist as she confidently claims her place in the limelight. Andrade is the complete package: a gifted singer with a keen rhythmic sensibility, emotional insight, and a flexible voice that's full and rounded in her upper register, warm and throaty when she dips down into her lower chest tones.

**Cesaria Evora: *Miss Perfumado*** (1992, NONESUCH)  
A *morna* masterpiece, Evora's breakthrough album introduced her to an American audience. Suffused with the untranslatable Portuguese sense of loss, nostalgia, and longing known as *sodade*, a mood that also pervades much Brazilian music, Evora's *mornas* are perfectly poised between exquisite pleasure and unbearable pain.

## INSTEAD OF BEING TIED TO THE SOUNDS OF ONE PARTICULAR ISLAND, LURA CLAIMS THE ENTIRE ARCHIPELAGO AS HER MUSE.

ravishing fruition on her album *Balancê*, which Times Square Records released in North America in 2006. Focusing on her melodically inviting original songs, which are mostly written in Kriolu, *Balancê* is unmistakably Cape Verdean, though Tavares's lithe phrasing is marked by her love of African-American music. Built on intricately layered percussion, her love-besotted music also draws on bossa nova understatement, jazz harmonies, and reggae grooves. While the title track evokes the tightrope act of young people suspended between two cultures, all of Tavares's songs gracefully address this struggle. "It's important that we show that we're not only a diaspora in the world, but, as a nation, that we're still evolving," she says. "It's not about creating an identity. I think the identity is here already. It's about speaking up about it."

Tavares first gained widespread attention in Portugal when she won a national television talent-contest show, *Chuva de Estrelas* (Rain of Stars), singing a Whitney Houston-inspired version of "The Greatest Love of All," which led to her representing the country at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest. Singing had become a source of solace for the teenager after

**Lura: *Di Korpu Ku Alma*** (2005, LUSAFRICA, LA ESCONDIDA)  
With her irrepressible charisma and bright, lustrous voice, Lura delivers a cosmopolitan program of songs set to little-known Cape Verdean folkloric grooves, accompanied by a mostly acoustic band that includes accordion and the four-string, ukulele-like *cavaquinho*.

**Sara Tavares: *Balancê*** (2003, TIMES SQUARE)  
On her breakthrough album, Tavares emerges as a savvy singer-songwriter who captures the rhythms and feelings of cultural hybridity with uncommon grace and intelligence. Her music, while unmistakably Cape Verdean, is deeply engaged with the rest of the world.

**Various: *Cape Verde*** (1999, PUTUMAYO)  
This CD offers an excellent introduction to the nation's music, with a smart selection of singers both female (Cesaria Evora, Maria Alice, Fantcha) and male (Teófilo Chantre, Boy Gé Mendes).—Andrew Gilbert

her father returned to Cape Verde and her mother moved to the south of Portugal with Tavares's two older siblings, leaving her in the care of an elderly Portuguese woman.

"I was a lonely child, and I became a very deep observer, a great listener to whatever was around—radio, TV, old people conversing," Tavares says. "As a teenager, I think it was harder than childhood to be without my parents, because you go through all these very deep challenges and you live everything so intensely, and I really felt the need for my father."

Tavares began attending a Baptist church, where she fell in love with gospel music. The television contest prize was

Barros. Born in Senegal and raised in Mauritania, she moved with her parents to Rhode Island at the age of 11, joining a thriving, close-knit community. While in high school, she started singing at weddings and Cape Verdean community celebrations. "It was like being in Cabo Verde in Providence," de Barros says from her home in Los Angeles. "I was very thankful for that. My parents wanted to make sure we kept our roots, that we understood, and that we'd be proud of where we came from."

It was on a trip back to Cape Verde in 1988 that de Barros struck up a close relationship with Cesaria Evora, who claimed de Barros as one of her godchildren. Like Lura and

## "I CAME TO THE U.S. AND I HAD A WONDERFUL LIFE HERE," SAYS DE BARROS, "SO I CAN'T BE SINGING MORNAS."

a recording deal, and her debut album, *Sara Tavares & Shout* (1996), captured her assimilation of African-American soul music, both sacred and secular. By the time she recorded her follow-up, *Mi Ma Bo* (1999), she had shed gospel and immersed herself in various African traditions, working in Paris with Congolese singer-songwriter Lokua Kanza.

A hit in Portugal, *Mi Ma Bo* seemed to launch Tavares's career as a new Afropop star. Instead, she took the lessons gleaned from working with Kanza and began to reinvent herself. The result was *Balançê*, a highly personal singer-songwriter project featuring stripped-down settings that leave plenty of room for her light, lustrous voice and deft guitar work. "Lokua kind of woke up in me tools that gave me the ability to search for my own sound," Tavares says.

In the US, the leading Cape Verdean performer is Maria de

Tavares, de Barros approaches the music from the perspective of a successful immigrant, steeped more in affection than nostalgia. While her repertoire includes several *mornas*—such as the soul-baring "Triste Gonia," written by her grandfather—she celebrates her ancestral homeland with an optimistic spirit that reveals that the vast distance between the Old World and the New isn't only a matter of miles.

"Cesaria's life is a *morna*," says Maria de Barros, whose gorgeous CD *Nha Mundo* (2003, Narada World) made her the first Cape Verdean-American artist signed to a major American label. "This is someone who has suffered a lot, and now, thank God, she has been given everything she merits. My life is a completely different picture than hers. I came to the US and I had a wonderful life here, so I can't be singing *mornas*. I wanted to show people the other side of Cape Verde." ■

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