

## The modern face of fado

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By David Honigmann

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As Mariza tells it, she never wanted to be a superstar. "The idea of recording, tours, big concert halls, it just seemed ... pretentious." When the idea of making a record came up, her ambitions were modest. "My idea was that it would be a gift to my father."



But that record, *Fado En Mim*, released in 2002, and the four that followed it have made her voice hugely famous, not only in her homeland of Portugal, but across the world. Mariza has performed in venues from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House and the Royal Albert Hall. She is now seen as the successor to the adored diva Amalia Rodrigues. Her most recent record, *Terra*, which appears internationally this week, has attracted two Grammy nominations, and has already gone platinum in Portugal, where it was released in May. She is playing three packed-out concerts (one for children) at the Barbican in London in November, opening the Atlantic Waves festival.

She was born Marisa dos Reis Nunes in Mozambique – then Portuguese East Africa – to a Portuguese father and African mother. "We moved to Portugal when I was three. From Mozambique, I have a few memories, not so many connections. I remember my grandfather's farm – it was always very foggy."

Her family settled in the Lisbon neighbourhood of Mouraria. "It was a very traditional neighbourhood. We rented a little taverna. My father put on fado weekends. I fell in love with the sound of the Portuguese guitar coming up through the floor. I started to sing fado when I was five years old."

Fado is the urban Portuguese blues, sung accompanied by the Portuguese guitar, a sweet-sounding instrument with 12 strings. Legend has it that the form was imported into the country in the mid-19th century, when the Portuguese court returned from a decade's exile in Brazil. "It was the music of Portuguese sailors, of African slaves, of Brazilians. It was a fusion of cultures. Our sailors and explorers spread our culture abroad but brought some back too."

The musical language of fado is universal. "When I give concerts, I see people cry who don't speak Portuguese, and they don't know why." But Mariza resists the notion that all fado songs are melancholy. "Fado is not sad, it's realistic. It takes you deep into the soul of a human being." Its subject matter stems from its nautical origins. "A sailor doesn't know when he'll be home again, or if he'll be home again. Sailors sang to clean their souls – they sang about Lisboa, about the river, the sea, God, love, death, sadness, happiness."

The underlying spirit is untranslatable into English. "We have this fantastic word in Portuguese, *saudade*. It's about separation and reconnection. *Saudade* is when you miss something. It could be in a happy way or a sad way. It could be a person, a country, a house, a smell. You could have *saudade* about many things."

When Mariza started singing fado, in her father's tavern, the music had fallen out of fashion, perhaps because it had been co-opted by the authoritarian regime, the Estado Novo of Portugal's dictator Antonio Salazar, which lasted until 1968. "For some reason, fado was relegated to working people and traditional neighbourhoods. When I was a teenager in high school and I told friends I like to sing fado [and] they said that's weird." In the tavernas where fado was sung, "it was not normal to see children or upper-class people."

After the death in 1999 of Amalia Rodrigues, a national icon whose funeral drew 100,000 mourners on to the streets of Lisbon, Mariza and a handful of other singers revived the genre. "Now, in the last eight years or so, it's different. We have a fado museum. The young generation are very protective. My Portuguese guitar player is 19 years old, and my acoustic guitar player is 22. The younger generation are trying to protect the music and participate in it."

Mariza's latest album, *Terra*, further broadens her palette out from the narrow range of traditional fado. The Spanish flamenco singer Concha Buika wraps her breathy vocals round Mariza's on "Pequenas Verdades". A duet with the Cape Verdean singer Tito Paris on "Beijo de Saudade", smoky with late-night trumpet, nods to fado's kinship with Cape Verde's similarly sombre musical style *morna*. "Cabo Verde has Dutch and French cultures too. On this record, I sing in Portuguese and Tito in Creole, making a bridge between the two."

Other guests bring other influences. Dominic Miller, guitarist for Sting (with whom Mariza duetted at the opening of the Athens Olympic Games in 2004), contributed a fragile guitar line, to which Mariza wrote a melody. "I told him 'We need a lyric.' He said: 'I don't write.' I said 'When you wrote this song, what were you thinking about?' He said 'The wind'". So Mariza and her guitarist Diogo Clemente wrote "Alma de Vento".

Chucho Valdes of the Cuban band Irakere is present as well. "We had a traditional song from the north of Portugal," Mariza says as she taps out a slow rhythm on the table. "Chucho turned up and wanted to do ..." – she mimes some splashy pyrotechnics with her hands – "and I said, Chucho, we don't want a jazzy thing." Valdes' spaced chords trot through "Fronteira" like a racehorse tightly reined in. "It's his sound, but different; softer, very traditional."

None the less, *Terra* is a logical progression from her traditional fado roots, not a repudiation of them. The lyrics still sing of Alfama, the Lisbon neighbourhood where fado began, and of the city and of the river Tagus.

Mariza's role as national figure leaves her ambivalent. "All artists are representations of their own countries. I don't feel like an ambassador. But I do have a lot of eyes following me. I've received a lot of important awards from the government of my country. It's not that that makes me sing, it's music. Sharing that is amazing."

For the last seven years, she has toured almost constantly. "I don't have a family, but I have a life. My life is music. I have my parents. I have fantastic friends. I never expected to have any of this."

The touring can be gruelling. "Music is like being naked in front of everyone, saying, 'This is me.' You show so much you feel sometimes ashamed and a little bit shy." But the audiences buoy her up. "I look on people as friends coming to my house. I don't have such a big house, so I have to use a concert hall."

Fado, she reiterates, cannot be performed insincerely. "I still do it with a lot of joy, a lot of love. The day that feeling is finished, I will stop. You can't do it if you're not sincere or transparent." Still at heart a fan, Mariza is at her most animated when she talks about her predecessors. "When I'm in Lisbon, I still go to the little taverns to sing and to hear the old singers. I'm still young, well, not so young [she turns 35 in December] and I have a lot to learn. They're teaching me. They're recharging my batteries, they're recharging my soul." If she becomes one of these teachers, she will have no complaints. "I imagine myself very old, maybe in the middle of the neighbourhood in a little taverna, singing. You don't need much in life to be happy."

*Mariza plays at the Barbican, London EC2 on November 1 & 2, including a family concert for children. 'Terra' is released by EMI*

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