

BOSTON GLOBE

Through Her Music She Discovers Her Roots, and Her Solace

By ANDREW GILBERT

January 20, 2007

For Sara Tavares, music isn't just a vehicle for self-expression, it's an ongoing quest through which she's forged an identity and made a place for herself in the world.

Born in Lisbon to parents from Cape Verde, the 28-year-old singer-songwriter has traveled a winding musical path, from teenage pop phenomenon to gospel crooner to her present status as a leading figure in the rising tide of Cape Verdean artists, some of whom are children of the island's widely scattered diaspora.

Essentially abandoned by her parents as a child, Tavares used music to reconnect with her roots, a journey that came to ravishing fruition on her 2005 album, "Balance," released in North America last year on Times Square Records. In one of only three US appearances scheduled this year, including a showcase tomorrow at the prestigious globalFEST in New York, Tavares plays the Berklee Performance Center tonight in concert presented by World Music/CRASHarts.

Featuring her melodically inviting original songs, which are mostly written in Crioulo, "Balance" is animated by the islands' unmistakable rhythms; Tavares's lithe phrasing is marked by her love of African-American soul and gospel music. Built upon intricately layered percussion, her music also draws on bossa nova understatement, jazz harmonies, and reggae grooves. The title track evokes the tightrope act of young people suspended between two cultures, a struggle all of her songs gracefully address.

"Sara started very young and was very successful," says Tavares's manager Ani Fonseca, who was impressed by the then-14-year-old singer's self-possession the first time they met.

"This album is a mirror of what she's been living for the past five years, really finding her place in the world," said Fonseca. "I see her as a mix, a person with very rich characteristics, because she lives in three worlds, Portugal, Cape Verde, and the rest of the world, where she's traveling and gathering influences, too."

Tavares first gained widespread attention in Portugal when she won a national television talent contest, singing a Whitney Houston-inspired version of "The Greatest Love of All." This led to her representing the country at the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest. Singing had become a source of solace for Tavares after 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 in a phone interview from Lisbon. "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."

She started attending a Baptist church, where she fell in love with gospel music. The television contest prize was a recording deal, and her 1996 debut album, "Sara Tavares & Shout/" captured her embrace of African-American soul music, both sacred and secular. By the time she recorded her follow-up, 1999's "Mi Ma Bo," she had shed gospel and immersed herself in various African traditions, working with Congolese singer-songwriter Lokua Kanza in Paris.

A hit in Portugal, the album seemed to launch Tavares's career as a new Afropop star, but instead she took the lessons gleaned from working with Kanza and began to reinvent herself. "Lokua kind of woke up in me tools that gave me the ability to search for my own sound," Tavares says. Her creative journey took her to Cape Verde, where she grounded herself in the culture. When she decided she was ready to return to the studio five years after "Mi Ma Bo," Tavares had assembled a body of about three dozen original songs and was determined to produce her third

album herself. At first she developed elaborate arrangements, but she ended up with stripped-down settings that leave plenty of room for her light, lustrous voice.

"I started bringing the songs back again to what is spontaneous in me, whether it was something close to Cape Verde, or something closer to Jamaica, not worrying about that and just letting it flow," Tavares says. "So these five years was about struggling with myself and my identity and composing alongside all those inner conversations."

Tavares's creation of a global Cape Verdean sound is facilitated by her band, which reflects the way Lisbon's music scene has been enriched by artists from throughout the Lusophone world. A deft guitarist herself, she performs with her longtime drummer, Angolan-born N'Du; bassist Fernan do Embalo, whose family hails from Guinea-Bissau; and, as a special guest on these American dates, Senegalese-born Cape Verdean guitarist Boy Ge Mendes (a star in his own right who had hit with 1990's "Grito de Bo Fidge").

For Tavares, finding her own voice isn't just about personal fulfillment. She's staking a claim in Portugal for all those who hail from the former colonies by creating a sound that resonates around the world.

"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," Tavares says. "It's not about creating an identity. I think the identity is here already. It's about speaking up about it."