

Careful whispers

Sara Tavares has become a cultural figurehead for her native Cape Verde. She tells Sue Steward how her songs are all about 'catching the train of responsibility'

By SUE STEWARD

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'Songs come to me as prayers,' says Sara Tavares, sitting in her dressing room in a freezing Amsterdam, where later she will open Holland's first festival of Lusophone music. But if that suggests a solipsistic, navel-gazing singer, that's not how the 29-year-old Cape Verdean singer sees herself. While her music is languid and introspective, the songs have moral depths - she wants young people who hear her music "to catch the train of responsibility and the train of consciousness: be active". She talks of feeling a deep sense of responsibility towards Lusophone youth, and her performance shows why she has become a cultural figurehead for the isolated islands off the coast of west Africa.

Tavares was actually raised in Lisbon. Her parents had arrived there from Cape Verde in the mid-1970s. They were part of the wave of immigration from Portugal's former African colonies that followed the fall of the Salazar dictatorship to fill jobs in the country's construction and tourism industries. She's part of the very audience that is so proud of her: the Cape Verde diaspora (there are more people of Cape Verdean descent in Boston alone, for example, than there are in the 10 islands that make up the little republic). She says of the country: "It's like the womb of my family. Sometimes I feel like I'm home, then I get homesick for Lisbon. But as a young Portuguese person growing up there without any real reference to my own culture or history, it's cool for me to go there and hang out with older musicians."

Her childhood, she says, was "unfortunate and lonely". Her father left the family and moved to the US, while her mother took their youngest children to the south of Portugal, leaving Sara in the care of an old Portuguese woman. "But it was my fortune, too," she says, "because my life was more constant than my brothers' and sisters'. I had an older, churchgoing woman caring for me, giving me a structure that shaped me." Her family history seems to inform the mournful choruses of her ballad Guisa (Lament) - "Guisa di Mama, Guisa di Papa".

She was, she says, "a very serious child - going to church, looking after myself". She loved football, and she loved music. The great soul singer Donny Hathaway was a favourite, along with Tina Turner, Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin. Their songs led her to learn English. "I wanted to know every word they sang, because that music is all about the heart," she explains. Mostly she sang gospel, launching the first Portuguese gospel choir, with people from Portugal's African community - "That's when I fell in love with the idea of making a living out of music."

Her first steps in that direction came with victory in a Portuguese TV talent contest, the prize being a recording contract with BMG, which led to her being the Portuguese entry in the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest with the song Chamar a Música. That wasn't the route she wanted to follow, but, she concedes, it gave her a start.

She has talked before of Cape Verde being a "metisse culture", in which different traditions and languages are mixed together. That's the case with her music, too, which is rich with multilingual slang - Portuguese, Creole, Angolan. She reckons the slang helps her connect with younger people, but she also sees its linguistic significance. "I think anthropologists will study the slang because it speaks a lot about our social evolution and the identity of cities," she says.

But while Tavares might be singing to young people, are they listening? She thinks for a moment, then quotes a line from her song Poka Terra, itself borrowed from an Angolan reggae band in Lisbon: "An alligator that sleeps will be turned into an alligator bag on sale in some store."

But if Tavares believes she has to help inform young people, she's more ambivalent about being cast as any kind of spokeswoman for her sex. Though one of her songs, Muna Xeia (Full Moon) explores the sensibilities of women, she shies away from the suggestion that it might have a feminist message. "No-oo!" she says. "I do see the reason for the feminist revolution, but some girls don't want to be responsible, they just want to be Barbies. I look at singers who always want to be up in front, acting beautiful, but I don't know too many girls who are into staying at home for hours, like Joni Mitchell, working out their poetry or their instrument." So how do the young women who want to act beautiful view this dreadlocked singer, who clearly doesn't have a thought of emulating Jennifer Lopez? She says her peers are rejecting hair, getting it straightened like Beyoncé's. "My message is obviously about loving what you are. As for the way I dress, they're like, 'You're a bit freaky, but we like you anyway.'"

Later on she is sitting on the stage, under dim light, plucking rippling melodies from a small thumb piano. The audience includes many for whom her songs raise memories of their homeland or thoughts of their parents' birthplace. And the songs seem to come to her like prayers. "Just me and my guitar," she tells the audience. "God and my imagination."