

MANSION
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Music in the Mansion

**KAVITA SHAH —
CAPE VERDEAN BLUES**

KAVITA SHAH, VOCAL
BAU, GUITAR
JORGE ALMEIDA, GUITAR
MIROCA PARIS, PERCUSSION

Thursday, October 5, 2023, 7:30pm



A NOTE FROM THE ARTIST

Nearly 20 years ago, I stood at an open-air festival in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, mesmerized by the performance of Cesária Évora, the legendary singer from Cape Verde. What struck me most was that she was radically herself—barefoot, drinking whisky, smoking, and delivering the songs without dancing or even smiling. Her voice and her authenticity touched my heart, and I knew that one day I had to travel to Cape Verde to better understand this music.

Uninhabited when first settled by the Portuguese, Cape Verde was the world's first creole society. Over the centuries, African slaves, Portuguese settlers, and colonial officers (including Indians from Goa), British coal miners, and Norwegian whalers all mixed in the archipelago. And due to its geographic isolation, the one constant in Cape Verdean history has been migration (today there are more Cape Verdeans living in the diaspora than in the country itself). So it only makes sense that at the heart of Cape Verdean music is *sodade*, a Kriol word that lacks a direct English translation but connotes a kind of melancholy longing.

I like to describe *sodade* as nostalgia for a person, place, or thing that you cannot have back; as a child of immigrants from India, this kind of *sodade* was ever present in my household. And having lost my father and four grandparents around the time I first

heard Cesária, I was all the more nostalgic for a type of home that no longer existed for me.

Fast forward to 2016, when I had the chance to first visit the island of São Vicente, where Cesária lived until her death in 2011. A series of serendipitous events led me to the door of master guitarist and multi-instrumentalist Bau, who was Cesária's musical director. Bau and I developed a deep friendship and musical exchange which evolved as we began performing and eventually recording the album *Cape Verdean Blues*, released last month on Folkalist Records. The record also features percussionist Miroca Paris, who toured with Cesária for 10 years, and vocalist Fantcha, who was Cesária's protégé.

I dedicate this album to Cesária, who inspired me on this beautiful journey, and to the people of Cape Verde for their *morabeza*, a Kriol word that describes welcoming others with open arms. And I am grateful to the traditional *mornas* and *coladeiras*, song forms of the Barlavento Islands, for allowing me to express my own *sodade*.

PROGRAM

1. RAQUEL (Rufino Almeida a.k.a. "Bau")

This is an instrumental song from Bau's 1994 album *Top d'Coroa*. It is known as a modern standard of Cape Verdean traditional music. "Raquel" was also the theme song of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's movie *Talk to Her* (2002).

2. AMOR DI MUNDO (Teofilo Chantre)

This is a beautiful love song that Cesária Évora recorded on her album *Café Atlântico*, which I listened to over and over, back when I still had a discman! The lyrics are simple and sweet, and the refrain says, "Let me sing of my love to you, oh world!" This song is a *coladeira-sambado*, which is a mixture of Cape Verdean *coladeira* and Brazilian samba rhythms. Many ships would stop in Cape Verde on their way from South America to Europe, and the Brazilian guitarists would interact with local musicians; there is a huge Brazilian influence in Cape Verdean music.

3. FLOR DI NHA ESPERANÇA (Traditional Cape Verdean)

This is my favorite *morna* to sing, and one that I feel very deeply. It is a song about grief, with the opening line, "If I knew that young people could die, I would never have loved anyone in this world." I like to think that Cesária was trying to teach me something with this *morna* because it took me four years to really master it. Because Cesária was very zen—whether she was singing something joyful or mournful, her approach was the same. I think that equanimity comes from accepting life, the good and the bad, just as it is. For me to deliver this song, I had to learn to accept myself more and to allow the music to unlock emotions within me that I had bottled up for years.

4. ANGOLA (Ramiro Mendes)

"Angola" is an upbeat *coladeira* made famous by the world music legend Cesária Évora (check out the original black and white video). Here, we have created a fresh acoustic arrangement of the song, with a trance-like intro/outro featuring vocal percussion, and vocal improvisation as influenced by the jazz tradition. The acoustic instrumentation and traditional beats pay homage to the traditional way of playing this music. "Angola" is a party song and an homage to the people of Angola; it speaks about how Angolans love to have a good time ("Don't kill me guys, I have to leave in the morning!"). Some interpret the lyrics to have a double entendre, speaking from the perspective of a Cape Verdean living in Angola during the civil war who does not want to die far from home.

5. UM ABRAÇO DI MORABEZA (Kavita Shah/Morgadinho)

After learning how to sing and falling in love with so many *mornas*, I wanted to try my hand at writing one. I asked Morgadinho, the living legend who is a great singer/trumpeter/composer of Cape Verde and is best known for his work with the band "Voz de Cabo Verde," if he had any Kriol lyrics sitting around at home that I could try writing a melody to. The next morning, he called me and told me he couldn't sleep so he wrote a new lyric for me inspired by my journey in Cape Verde. I took that paper (which I still have and treasure) and wrote this song. The refrain says, "Kavita / welcome / in our little land / learn to live / like a *kriolinha** / sing our *morna* / sing it with love / oh, *moreninha***!"

kriolinha* = a term of endearment for a kriol woman *moreninha* = a term of endearment for a brown-skinned woman

6. FLOR DE LIS (Djavan)

This is a beloved song from the Brazilian repertoire, and many jazz musicians around the world also love to play "Flor de lis." This is also a special song for me because it was the first song I learned when living in Brazil (I still remember sitting in a cafe in a small fishing village on the coast of Ceará state when I heard it come on the radio!). Some people wondered why we included a Brazilian song in a Cape Verdean music project, but again, this is because of the wide influence of Brazilian guitar on Cape Verdean music. When Bau and I started playing together, we would enjoy jamming on this one, so it seemed only natural to include it, and our mutual love and respect for Brazilian music, in this program.

7. SITUAÇÕES TRIANGULARES (Vasco Martins)

Vasco Martins is Cape Verde's leading classical composer, and he is also a close friend of ours. Bau recorded an album dedicated to the music of Vasco Martins, where he included this song, which means "Triangular Situations" in Portuguese. It features Bau's prowess and technique on the acoustic guitar (he is completely self-taught!).

8. CAPE VERDEAN BLUES (Horace Silver)

As a jazz musician, I couldn't engage with Cape Verde and not pay homage to, the great American-born jazz musician of Cape Verdean origin, Horace Silver. Though he never traveled to Cape Verde himself, he wrote many songs about the islands (e.g., "Song for My Father"). My mentor, NEA Jazz Master Sheila Jordan, was close friends with Horace and taught me several of his songs, including "Peace," which we recorded together on my last album, "Interplay" (2018). The title "Cape Verdean Blues" felt like a natural title for this project, so Miroca and I came up with this creative and improvised percussion-and-voice arrangement of the song.

9. CIZE (Morgadinho)

"Cize" was also Cesária's nickname, but this morna was not written for her, as is commonly believed. The composer, Morgadinho (who wrote the lyrics to "Um abraço di morabeza"), told me the story: he was on tour in Guinea Bissau with "Voz de Cabo Verde," and at one concert, he saw a beautiful girl in the audience named "Cesalina." On the bus back to Conakry, he wrote this song about her, which says: "Oh Cize / You're the light of my life / I want to die already / If you deny me, my dear."

10. UM PORTA ABERTE (Vasco Martins)

This is a beautiful *morna* written by Vasco Martins whose title means "an open door." It was recorded by a great singer with a distinctive voice named Hermínia on a record of Vasco's mornas with lyrics (you can find it on YouTube). Although this is a traditional *morna*, the chords and even the kriol language that Vasco uses are quite sophisticated in nature, which gives the song a unique flare. The chorus says: "Return / one day I will return / and in my view I will have learned so much / A door will remain open / and in my house will live / wisdom."

11. JOIA (Boy Gê Mendes)

My first impression of "Joia" (which means gem in Portuguese and Kriol) was that it was a fancy-free love song. It turns out the author Boy Gê Mendes (whom I had the pleasure to meet and interview personally) grew up in Dakar, Senegal. There his mom would bring him sweets from Cape Verde, which is how he "got to know his land," as the song states. After I understood the song as a tribute to his mother, I decided to make the accompanying music video a celebration of Cape Verdean women of all backgrounds, because each one is a *joia* (or jewel) to someone in their lives. (Check out the video on YouTube, which also features the beautiful landscapes of São Vicente and Santo Antão islands!)

12. SODADE (Armando Zeferino Soares / Luis Morais / Amândio Cabral)

It is believed that "Sodade" was written as a farewell song for a Cape Verdean departing, by sea, from his home of São Nicolau to the former Portuguese colony of São Tomé, likely never to return. *Sodade* in Kriol or *saudade* in Portuguese conveys nostalgia but has no direct translation in English; it particularly connotes something that you cannot get back, so is especially poignant for migration stories such as this one. This was Cesária Évora's most famous song, and it also became an anthem for my life as it expresses the *sodade* I carry within me, both for the family members I have lost, and as a member of a diaspora cut off from my Indian roots. The line that has always stuck out for me has been: "If you write me / I will write you / If you forget me / I will forget you." I also recorded a version of this with kora, tabla, jazz quintet, and string quartet on my first album, *Visions* (2014), but the song took on a new dimension for me after having spent time in Cape Verde, learned the Kriol language, and witness other singers making it their own. And singing "Sodade" with Bau, knowing he played it countless times with Cesária, is very emotional. I can feel the history in his hands; his intro line often moves me to tears.

13. CHAKI BEN (Traditional Indian)

This is a traditional song my parents used to sing to me as a baby. The lyrics are in Gujarati, my mothertongue, and say "Sister Sparrow / Sister Sparrow / won't you come play with me?" "Chaki Ben" has become a signature song for me (I also recorded it with my jazz quintet on an album that will come out next year). And it is a great song to connect with musicians across cultures because it is tonal and the 6/8 beat lends itself well to African and other styles of music. Here, we have adapted it to a Cape Verdean rhythm from the island of Santo Antão called *kola sanjon*, from the June festival celebrating the Catholic Saint John where people dance the *sanjon*, and the main accompaniment is percussion, with whistles as well, which Miroca brings to life on stage.

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