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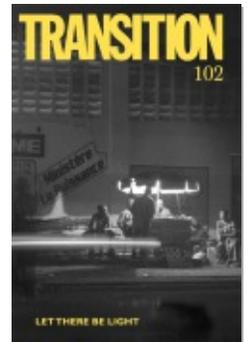
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## **Cesária Évora "The Barefoot Diva" and other stories**

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# Cesária Évora

*“The Barefoot Diva” and other stories*

## Carla Martin

“INDEPENDENCE WITHOUT CULTURE has no value,” said Amílcar Cabral, leader of the guerilla movement for the independence of Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, as he charged members of his organization with projects aimed at cultural development in the mid-1960s. Deeply invested in culture and its role in national liberation, he insisted that by reclaiming cultural heritage and employing it as a tool for resistance against colonial domination, a people could move toward true freedom. Though Cabral was assassinated before he could witness the end results of his labors, with Guinea Bissau (1974) and then Cape Verde’s (1975) independence from Portugal, he and his team laid the groundwork for decades of cultural development alongside the building of the new nation-states. On July 5, 2010, Cape Verde celebrated thirty-five years of independence, and one can only imagine that Cabral would have been joyful upon seeing some of his dreams for the country’s progress realized: Cape Verde is now heralded as one of the most stable democracies in Africa. The movement that he and his compatriots began, and the emphasis that they placed on culture, appears all the more significant given the fact that Cape Verde’s most well-known public figure is a singer from the humblest of means. Cesária Évora’s journey to success in many ways mirrors that of her country.

Cape Verde is best known for its music, perhaps its richest export. For centuries, Cape Verdeans have left the country, limited in natural resources, in search of greater opportunities abroad. With numbers of immigrants now likely greater than Cape Verde’s own population of nearly 500,000, music plays an integral role in linking the Diaspora with the homeland. The country’s music, along with beaches and adventure travel, is also one of the biggest draws for the crowds of tourists who visit the islands in increasing numbers every year. And with its success on world music stages far beyond Cape Verde, it is clear that Cape Verdean musicians are making a visible and aural impact on global sound.

Cesária Évora, also known as “The Barefoot Diva,” “the queen of *morna*,” and the “unofficial ambassador of Cape Verde to the world,” has, in the past decade, risen to international fame. Many suggest that she is on her way to doing for Cape Verde “what Bob Marley did for Jamaica.” Her image, an integral part of her audience’s fascination, is of a maternal “Mama



Cesária Évora. Photograph.  
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Africa” figure, barefoot and close to nature, dressed in a loose West African *bubu*, her face wrinkled and distorted by years of work and worry, solitary on a stage or surrounded by younger male musicians, singing of sorrow and longing in a deep, contralto voice.

I first met Cesária—Cize to her friends—when I was twenty-two years old, in 2004, at her home in Mindelo, on the Cape Verdean island of São Vicente. I subsequently met her close friend and manager, José da Silva, in the capital city of Praia, on the island of Santiago, where I was living. At the invitation of Cesária and her manager, I joined the Western European leg of her spring 2004 world tour as a researcher, translator, and glorified groupie. In the six years since, I have frequently traveled to visit and conduct interviews with Cesária, her band, her manager, and her audiences in Europe, Cape Verde, and the northeastern United States.

## An Exceptional Voice

CESÁRIA WAS BORN on August 27, 1941, in Mindelo, then a small but vibrant port city. Cape Verde is a dry tropical archipelago of ten islands (nine inhabited) three hundred miles off the coast of West Africa. During Cesária's early life, the country was reeling from the after-effects of the Great Depression, the collapse of international shipping during World War II, and the combined severity and neglect of Portugal's Salazarian regime. It was a starkly poor, underdeveloped place. Drought, famine, and poverty were massive problems that the Portuguese government failed to address, and thousands of Cape Verdeans sought better opportunities in the Americas, Europe, and West Africa. The city of Mindelo, to this day lovingly called the "Paris" of Cape Verde by tourism promoters, was an urban cultural hub, home to colonial officials, educators, clergy, and a dynamic community of musicians and intellectuals. Sailors from around the world came to port in Mindelo during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Arriving on ocean liners and submarines, they used the switching station for the Trans-Atlantic telegraph cable, refueled ships with coal, and collected the goods that made Cape Verde one of the most important stop-overs in the Atlantic Ocean at the time.

Born to limited means, Cesária received only a brief education. Her father, a violinist, passed away when she was young, and her mother, who earned a meager living working as a cook, struggled to care for her. An introverted teenager, Cesária was encouraged by family members and a boyfriend to take up singing; it quickly became apparent that her talent was extraordinary. She performed in bars and clubs around the city, gaining a following as a performer of the favored songs of the time, *mornas* and *coladeiras*.

*Mornas*, typically set in a minor key and played at a *lento* tempo, most often touch on the subject of *sodade*. *Sodade* is a Cape Verdean Creole, or *Kriolu*, word related to the Portuguese *saudade*. It refers to feelings of longing, nostalgia, homesickness, or regret. Through *morna*, Cape Verde's composers and lyricists have expressed the sadness and happiness of Cape Verdean life—immigration, drought, poverty, social inequality, family ties, love—evoking strong emotional responses in listeners. Although the musical origins of the genre are obscure due to lack of written records, it emerged on the islands in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Research, still inconclusive, suggests that early *mornas* drew on influences from some or all of the following: Portuguese *fado*, Brazilian *modinha*, West African *lundu*, North and West African songs of lament, and possibly even the blues, samba, fox-trot, and mambo. The *coladeira* song style takes a different approach to expression, with lyrics often satirical or celebratory in nature, providing humorous takes on politics, problems between the sexes, or everyday life. With its *allegro* or *andante* tempo, it has long been a popular couples' dance style. Instrumentation in both genres most often involves solo voice, *rabeca*



**Cesária e a Sua Banda [Cesária and Her Band].**

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[violin], *violão* [guitar], and *cavaquinho* [a small Portuguese stringed instrument], though this arrangement is flexible, especially with increased availability of electronic instruments. Each of the genres is organized into musical strophes that alternate with a refrain, making group or call-and-response audience participation common.

Cesária has reached, through song, far beyond the life that society might have prescribed for her. Early in her career, she met with challenges commonplace for women performers in Cape Verde, who were often mistreated and regarded with disdain by the more conservative elements of society. Indeed, music is a heavily gendered domain in Cape Verde—to this day, almost all instrumentalists are men. Famous composers and poet-lyricists, such as Eugénio Tavares, Pedro Monteiro Cardoso, B. Leza (who also happened to be a relative of Cesária's), and Jotamont, all men, have been elevated to the status of national heroes, considered among the greatest creative



**Cesária Évora.**

Photograph.  
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poetic and artistic minds to grace the nation. It is a more recent development to see formal recognition of the accomplishments of women performers like the folk singer Ana Procópio, *finason* performer Nha Nasia Gomi, Cesária, and other vocalists recording contemporary work.

A self-described “beautiful girl, before I got sick,” Cesária was subject to frequent attention from the male patrons and workers at the bars where she sang. She was paid not with cash but with tips or dinner and free drinks. She was referred to as *pé na txon* [literally “feet on the ground” or “barefoot”], because she did not wear shoes (this was also a common name for people of her social standing, who often could not afford shoes). As a black woman of mixed race and a speaker of the oft-maligned national language of Cape Verdean Creole, she frequently met with prejudice. She, like others who were *pé na txon*, was formally excluded from certain areas of the city and had limited opportunities for social advancement. She sometimes took advantage of her colonialist audiences’ ignorance of her mother tongue, singing to them critiques of the inequality she and her fellow Cape Verdeans experienced, touching on issues of politics, economic neglect, and racism.

Today, Cesária has turned her much-publicized bar-singing origins into performance shtick. Halfway through each concert, usually tired from standing, she takes a seat at a small bar table mid-stage, shakes her feet out in front of her, lights up a cigarette, and pours herself a drink (water nowadays), much to the delight of the audience though sometimes to the chagrin of the venue management, who often prohibit smoking in their distinguished concert halls. The band plays a brief instrumental number while she rests. Seated as she is, surrounded by a band made up of men mostly young enough to be her sons, she fits a seasoned, maternal image, occasionally

offering them drinks or applauding their solos. The contrast between this scene and the scene in which she began her performing career is stark.

Cesária's desire for a singing career was limited by the social conditions clouding the first decades of her life. She was certainly well known in Mindelo and on other islands, but was virtually unknown internationally except for the occasional recording of one of her songs that found its way to Europe in the hands of Cape Verdean immigrants. By the middle of the twentieth century, Cape Verde's status as a neglected colony had only worsened and improvements in international shipping technology made stopovers in Mindelo unnecessary. Cesária had children, their fathers left, and she found herself a single mother supporting a family on a performer's pittance. Her impoverished diet and frequent drinking affected her health, plunging her into alcoholism and deep depression. For a decade, spanning much of the 1970s, she did not sing, but rather strove day-to-day to survive. She refers to this time period as "the dark years." Eventually, a group of concerned citizens of Mindelo, finding Cesária sickly and in dire financial straits and remembering her golden voice, took up a collection for medical treatment. Her recovery marked a turning point in her life.

Cape Verde reached the height of its resistance to Portuguese colonial rule in the decade leading up to 1975 and then worked feverishly to develop an infrastructure from the bureaucratic chaos that resulted from independence. During this time, Cape Verdean immigrant musicians abroad, inspired by Cabral's call to cultural arms, financed modest recording and touring ventures, their efforts bolstered by the increased use of inexpensive cassette tapes. An interesting imbalance remained, as a result of social mores and gendered economic opportunities: the most prominent musical groups (Voz de Cabo Verde, Os Tubarões, Bulimundo) were made up almost exclusively of men.

The *Organização das Mulheres de Cabo Verde*, or Organization of Cape Verdean Women, aiming to increase women's participation in cultural development post-independence, sponsored occasional activities for Cesária and other women performers in the late 1970s and 1980s. Cesária was invited to travel to Lisbon to perform in the Monte Cara restaurant-nightclub belonging to Bana, another influential Mindelense performer who had spent years working intimately with Cesária's relative, the heralded composer B. Leza. There, a young family man, José da Silva (Djô for short), was enchanted by Cesária's presence and voice. He approached her and a unique partnership was formed; she began living with Djô and his family part-time in Paris, recording and performing whenever possible, and, already in her forties with grown children, her journey to international stardom began.

**Halfway through each concert, usually tired from standing, she takes a seat at a small bar table mid-stage, shakes her feet out in front of her, lights up a cigarette, and pours herself a drink**



**Cesária Évora.**  
Photograph.  
© Lusafrica

### **“The Barefoot Diva”**

Djô, a CAPE Verdean raised in France, himself a former member and manager of a Cape Verdean band there, had long wanted to further his involvement with Cape Verdean music and to take advantage of what he saw as the growing popularity of African music in Europe. He formed a company called Lusafrica and began raising funds to produce an album. While at the time Cesária’s success among Cape Verdeans living in the diaspora could be described as viral, the community was small, unorganized, and unprepared to support a musician on a larger scale. So Djô embarked on a long search for a distributor—not an easy task, as he explained: “For a considerable period of time, I had some difficulty finding a distribution company. I approached all of the major labels (BMG, Sony, etc.) and while all the executives agreed that Cesária had an extraordinary voice, they said she would never sell—the image just wasn’t right.”

It is here that Cesária’s story, so often romanticized by the press, becomes a bit fuzzy. No one is certain of precisely why the image of “The Barefoot Diva” proved the most attractive to audiences and promoters. Djô described a momentous performance that contributed to the development of the image:

In Cape Verde, she was known as *pé na txon* [barefoot], but when she came to Paris, I of course bought her some shoes because it was colder here. The evening of one of her concerts, she had a lot of pain in her feet, so she took

off her shoes. The audience took the shoes and ran around filling them up with money to give her.

The late French producer, Dominique Buscaï, saw potential in Cesária's particular charm and accepted her music for distribution as part of a series called "Musiques du Monde." Her first album was released in Europe in 1988, entitled "La Diva aux Pieds Nus" ["The Barefoot Diva"]. The album cover depicted Cesária in a simple dress, standing barefoot and alone on a dirt road, staring into the distance.

Yet a singular narrative of her reasons for going barefoot does not exist. The media and the World Food Programme (WFP), of which Cesária has become an ambassador, cite her lack of shoes as a political statement. The WFP website states: "Évora has long campaigned on behalf of underprivileged women and children in her home country, and is known as the 'Barefoot Diva' because of her preference for appearing on stage barefoot to show support for the poor of Cape Verde." (This is not entirely inaccurate, and has a historical precedent in the *Claridade* cultural movement devoted to Cape Verdean culture, which used the term *pé na txon* as a sort of motto, arguing for a celebration of common people and their contribution to the country's cultural wealth.)

**The discrepancy between the reasons for her footwear choices and their political interpretation by the media and her audience is striking, as the image of a life-worn maternal and politically-minded barefoot figure has proven both enticing and lucrative.**

In fact, Cesária's penchant for removing her shoes is a personal choice of a different nature. She never developed a habit of wearing shoes as a young person, unable to purchase them and subjected to discrimination as a result. Diabetes has also taken a toll on her feet as she has aged, leaving her with chronic pain that now makes wearing shoes an unwelcome discomfort. She simply prefers to go barefoot or to wear sandals, even in cold, wintry conditions. The discrepancy between the reasons for her footwear choices and their political interpretation by the media and her audience is striking, as the image of a life-worn maternal and politically-minded barefoot figure has proven both enticing and lucrative.

The allure that foreign audiences find in this image reveals much about their own tastes and biases. The seemingly commonplace Western desire for comparison of prominent figures in World Music to more familiar personalities has affected how journalists and publicists introduce Cesária to readers and listeners. She has been called "Billie Holiday's long-lost twin sister," "Edith Piaf on a cloudy day," and "Susana Baca on a steady diet of cognac and cigarettes." She has also been compared, with dubious flattery,

to Ella Fitzgerald, said to have a gorgeous voice and homely appearance. The 1999 album “Café Atlântico” cover art portrays Cesária, the recovering alcoholic, in a colorful bar, carousing with her band (all younger Cape Verdean men), cigarette in hand. The album literature includes the description that first enticed me to purchase one of her CDs:

The inimitable smoky sound of the reigning queen of world music, in praise of her hometown, Mindelo, on the tiny Cape Verde island of São Vicente. There, in the safest harbor between South America and Africa, ‘the barefoot diva’ has distilled centuries of cross-cultural music into the solid joyous ache that sings her love to the world.

The combination of the album cover art and literature offers a highly romanticized account of “The Barefoot Diva,” drawing on her smoking and drinking habits, the strong regard in which she is held in the world music scene, the small size of her exotically-located home country, and the centuries-old port-side Creole mixture that has led to her bittersweet adoration of the world. Is Cesária a tragic mulatta, hopelessly caught between two worlds, one black, one white, one poor, one rich, of both but neither? Is she a seductive siren of classical poetry and the African Diaspora, enchanting and manipulating hapless sailors into Mindelo’s bay (imagined in ancient Greece as the Hesperides)? Is she Mother Africa, the exotic, wild source of humanity, a Creole Miriam Makeba? One need simply scan the plentiful number of articles and biographies of Cesária in digital or print media to note these persistent representations of her as maternal, ancestral, Creole, genuine, folksy, and blue. These characterizations are not mere fabrications. However, their continual emphasis in the Western media and by her international record labels, with accompanying “illustrations” drawn from her biography, exemplify the veritable obsession with her “otherness” as a performer-object.

I have, at times, discussed this issue of representation with Djô and Cesária, curious about their sense of control over her image and stories of her life and work. The reading of journalistic accounts of Lusafica and Cesária reveals that plagiarism is commonplace, facts are often incorrect, and quotes are mistranslated or borrowed from one article for use in another without context or citation. Regarding the factual errors made by some, of details miswritten or quotes misquoted, Djô explained with some frustration, “It’s their responsibility to get the facts right, to check their work, not mine.” Cesária, somewhat apathetic to the discrepancies that turn up in accounts of her life, said, with a flick of her hand, “Let them write what they will.”

They both openly discuss their concerns about representation. Cesária once explained:

Cape Verde is tiny; it is little known in the world. I am not surprised that sometimes people do not understand it or say strange things. There is a tale about how God created Cape Verde. He made the world in six days, just like in the Bible. Then, on the seventh day, he took a piss, and he shook his little thingy, and the drops that fell into the ocean made Cape Verde.

She followed up this story with a similar one about God “taking a dump,” laughing heartily and gesturing evocatively as she told it. Then she addressed me seriously:

Listen, *menininhe* [little girl], Cape Verde was forgotten for many years. The Portuguese did not give a lot to the people. They left us with hunger, with thirst, with sickness, with poverty. We are still a developing country. We are still trying to represent ourselves. My songs tell the story of my country for the world to listen and to learn. I am a woman, so maybe they listen more or they listen less. I try to sing our story for them.

Djô agreed: “We are like any colonized country, any people with a mixed heritage. We must explain who we are to the outside world. But there is only so much that can be done at once or that we can do. We are trying our best to show the world who we are, to make our music heard.” This is a task made more difficult by Cape Verdean music’s *de facto* categorization as “world music,” a much criticized pseudomusical term that most often serves as an across-the-board descriptor and marketer for any of a vast and diverse collection of non-Western sounds, anything “other,” with little attention to the particularities of sociohistorical context.

## Global Star and Godmother

CESÁRIA DOES, OF course, exert a measure of control over the use of her image and celebrity. In 2004, while on tour in Europe, I witnessed a call from an executive of a small, somewhat troubled airline on which Cesária regularly travels. The call was to her tour manager, who then relayed the message to Cesária. The airline had just purchased its first large Boeing plane for use in trans-Atlantic flights between Cape Verde and major cities in the Cape Verdean Diaspora. The airline’s executives wanted Cesária to christen the plane and to serve as its godmother. Cesária, exasperated by the request,

told her manager with her typical wit and biting sarcasm: “They can name it after me when they return my suitcase—the one that they *stole!*” She then recounted in great detail the contents of her suitcase that had disappeared years ago from a flight, filled with some of her favorite clothes and jewelry. Her entourage, intimately familiar with the tale and Cesária’s frustration with its loss, laughed as she spoke, knowing well that Cesária would never lend her name to the endeavor. (Suzanna Lubrano, a young Cape Verdean-Dutch pop star, eventually agreed to serve as godmother to the plane.)

Such requests are not uncommon for Cesária. Her fame is considerable—she cannot walk down a street in Paris, for example, without being quickly surrounded by mobs of fans, both young and old, native French and immigrants, asking for autographs. Once, having just finished a hair appointment and shopping trip in Barbès, the multicultural African/Arab *arrondissement* of Paris, Cesária was overwhelmed by the prospect of waiting in a gathering crowd of fans for her driver to pick her up, so her personal assistant and I flagged down a cab and rode with her back to her hotel. The taxi driver immediately recognized her, rolled down the windows, and then proceeded to drive us circuitously through the city, all the while shouting “Cesária!” and beeping to attract the attention of onlookers. He belted out her well-known song “Sodade” off-key, eliciting the occasional chuckle from Cesária, who rolled her eyes and smiled, waving at awestruck fans on the sidewalk. In cities with large Cape Verdean populations throughout Europe, West Africa, Latin America, and the Northeastern United States, Cesária is frequently greeted at her shows by members of the Diaspora communities with gifts, requests for charity (she routinely buys the old jewelry of those who need money and then wears it on stage), messages from friends and relatives, and audience members waving Cape Verdean flags and shouting out encouragement and song requests.

Celebrity status aside, many of her accomplishments have been formally recognized by global institutions since she embarked on her first large-scale concert tour in the late 1990s, after the release of several albums, including the highly successful “Miss Perfumado” (1992). Every year since then, she has continued to record, perform, and tour at breakneck speed, garnering numerous accolades in the process. In 2003, she was awarded a Grammy in the category “Best Contemporary World Music Album” for her album “Voz d’Amor”; in 2004, she was named an Ambassador of the World Food Programme; and in 2009, she received France’s most prestigious civilian honor, the *Légion d’honneur*. The Cape Verdean government has bestowed upon her the honor of a diplomatic passport, formally recognizing her as a “cultural ambassador.”

Cesária’s success and willingness to pass it on to new musicians has allowed Djô da Silva to build an influential world music label. Lusafrica has released more than two hundred albums, the majority of them from Cape Verdean artists. Djô explained her importance:



Lusafrica has never had a politics of type or a particular style of music.... Lusafrica has approximately sixty percent Cape Verdean music and forty percent from other parts of the world. All of our artists are important to the company. Of course, without Cesária, there would be no Lusafrica. She alone accounts for fifty percent of our business. It is with her go ahead and her generosity that we invest in new artists. Even today she is an extremely significant part of what we do behind the scenes. She is an important voice in negotiations and a great promoter of other artists. Even her mentioning of an artist in an interview is a powerful thing.

**Cesária Évora.**  
Photograph.  
© Lusafrica

Cesária regularly collaborates with other artists such as Bonnie Raitt, Caetano Veloso, Eleftheria Arvanitaki, Pedro Guerra, Chucho Valdés, Ismaël Lo, and Bonga. While Djô and her band leader, Nando Andrade (who plays a largely unrecognized role behind the scenes, composing, arranging, and interpreting), tend to handle the scouting and present her with possibilities and invitations for collaboration, the decision ultimately rests with her and is dependent on a number of factors: how she perceives the quality of the singer's voice, the suggested song, and even personal compatibility. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, are her ongoing, long-term collaborations with a number of Cape Verdean composers, such as Manuel d'Novas, Amandio Cabral, and Teófilo Chantre. She simultaneously keeps alive and renews the work of deceased composers (B. Leza, Luis Morais, and others) and promotes the work of contemporary ones. On

an influential world stage, Cesária and the composers and musicians with whom she works are fruitfully tinkering with the sound, instrumentation, and interpretation of *mornas* and *coladeiras*.

As Cesária's success has reached greater heights, the tastes of Cape Verdean youth at home and in the Diaspora have changed, revealing a salient tension

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between the Cape Verdean music that is consumed as world music and that which is consumed by the Cape Verdean population. Cesária has in many ways become a symbol of the authentic homeland for Cape Verdean immigrants, a figure of great nostalgia and reverence for those who remember Cape Verde's story through hers, identifying with her image as

an unmodernized, simple, affable maternal figure who struggled for her independence. For younger generations of Cape Verdeans who view her as part of an older generation, she is often understood as less cosmopolitan, less educated, and less integrated into global society, respected from a distance for her accomplishments, but not considered to be of immediate relevance to their own lives. Many younger Cape Verdeans are not avid consumers of so-called traditional music, preferring other styles popular in Cape Verde and the Lusophone and African Diaspora, like *zouk*, *funaná*, *batuku*, *kizomba*, *kuduro*, and hip hop. Cesária's songs are sometimes sampled by MCs and DJs, such as in the crossover album, "Club Sodade," bringing her work to younger audiences.

Despite Cesária's tongue-in-cheek reluctance to serve as godmother to an airplane, she takes her role as a mentor to young musicians very seriously. As Cape Verdean musical sounds and tastes change, many ponder who will be "the next Cesária" and on what musical styles she or he might focus. A number of younger, up-and-coming musicians could potentially see the torch passed to them. These artists fall roughly into the following groups, each unique in her or his own right: neo-*batuku* and *funaná* artists, working to develop the musical styles from the island of Santiago and the compositions of Orlando Pantera (e.g. Lura, Mayra Andrade, Tcheka, Princezito, Zeca di Nha Reinalda, Ferro Gaita); artists working primarily in the so-called traditional genres, including *morna* and *coladeira* (e.g. Teófilo Chantre, Gardenia Benros, Tito Paris, Titina, Fantcha, Dany Silva); artists working with multiple genres from Cape Verde and beyond (e.g. Mário Lúcio, Sara Tavares, Carmen Souza, Nancy Vieira, Humberto Ramos, Candida Rose, Mendes Brothers, Maria de Barros); and *zouk* and hip hop

artists (e.g. Suzanna Lubrano, Philip Monteiro, Gilyto, Gil Semedo, Boss AC, Chullage, Chachi, La MC Malcriado). The vast majority of music production takes place outside of the islands, in places with plentiful resources, such as southern New England, Portugal, the Netherlands, and France, creating a diaspora-heavy recording scene. Though Cape Verde did not have its first recording studio until the late 1990s, the increasing mobility and “wiredness” of members of the Diaspora and Cape Verdeans living in the country proper allows for dynamic collaboration. The penchant for music creation is part of a widely discussed narrative of identity. Jokes are common, such as “One in four Cape Verdeans will release a CD in his or her lifetime” and “You are not truly Cape Verdean unless you or your sibling has released a CD.”

The most commercially successful artists in the World Music market, interestingly, are almost all women of Cape Verdean descent living in the Diaspora—Lura, Mayra Andrade, Maria de Barros, Sara Tavares, and Carmen Souza. Several of these artists have had the opportunity for direct collaboration with or sponsorship from Lusafrica, Djô, and Cesária (de Barros’ marketing proudly proclaims the fact that she is Cesária’s goddaughter, Lura frequently takes the opening act on Cesária’s tours, etc.), or have at least benefited from the existing international world music networks in which Cesária is beloved and in which Cape Verdean music is prized. Lura describes Cesária’s importance as a mentor: “Cesária is like a mother to younger musicians. She teaches us a great deal; she introduces us to the world. She helps us to achieve success by showing us how hard we must work.”

Not surprisingly, the media and music industry constantly query whether or not one of these young artists is Cesária’s “heir apparent,” wondering who will follow in her barefoot steps. Journalists have also given the young women updated gendered and racialized descriptions. One 2009 article in *Stereophile* was entitled: “The Cape Verde Singers: Sexy Sirens from the Islands” and subtitled “Divas of the Diaspora: The Spectacular New Wave of Cape Verdean Singers.” The article included details on the work of Cesária, Maria De Barros, Lura, Sara Tavares, and Mayra Andrade, all the while perpetuating some of the stereotypes placed on Cape Verdean women. Its characterization of these women is not anomalous—many of the same tropes employed in descriptions of Cesária have simply transferred to this younger set, though they are treated as her sexy daughters rather than as maternal figures. Cesária’s presence and path breaking as “The Barefoot Diva” has set the stage for their success while also delimiting the way in which that success is represented.



**Cesária,  
Malaquias, e Jorge**  
[*Cesária, Malaquias,  
and Jorge*].

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Firmino

## Cize Today

TODAY, CESÁRIA LIVES modestly, dividing her time between Mindelo and Paris. In Mindelo, she lives with multiple generations of her family and enjoys receiving visitors in her modest home and riding around in the one thing on which she splurged after making her first comfortable sum of money: a Mercedes. In a sad, ironic twist, she does not often perform on the islands. Many are loathe to address the question of why Cesária (and some other prominent Cape Verdean musicians) cannot or will not perform on the islands. Put simply, limited funds and infrastructure combined with class prejudice and even petty jealousy once severely limited performance invitations. As a result, performance in the country is an unattractive or unavailable option for some artists. In Paris, she customarily stays with Djô and his family or in hotels or rented condominiums. She works long hours there, recording, rehearsing, and conducting interviews, photo shoots, and meetings. She considers Paris her second home, and expresses an affinity

for the French, saying they “have been very good to me. They care for Cape Verdean culture very much.”

Cesária has recently instituted a number of health and lifestyle changes, following a minor stroke in the summer of 2008 and major heart surgery in 2010, both of which forced tour cancellations. She has not noticeably slowed down, though, planning to continue her work after a brief respite.

And, wherever she is, she entertains a steady flow of visitors and tourists or fans bold enough to approach her. She enjoys playing pranks on her entourage and chatting with friends. In fact, Cesária is probably most at ease in a wisecracking maternal role, tending to

everyone in a room from a comfortable chair, asking, “Have you eaten? You’re too thin!” or insisting without room for negotiation, “Here, take this and eat it; it’s delicious and you are hungry,” or asking her assistant to bring food to visitors, to whom she always refers in the affectionate diminutive, “Make sure that she eats; she is just a little girl.” She inquires after families, wondering aloud if boyfriends have proposed to girlfriends yet, if children are on the way, if sick relatives are recovering well.

Whether she is passing the torch or widening the fire, her collaborations, godmothering, advice, and networking will serve to bolster the careers of numerous musicians for years to come. The search for the “next Cesária” has resulted in a number of possibilities, each distinctive. Her life and career demonstrate the confluence of artistry, creativity, immigration, mass media, economics, race, and gender in society. In many ways, she and her story have served as the loci for the inquiries that the curious outside world makes of Cape Verde more generally: Is it Portugal? Is it Africa? Is it the African Diaspora, the easternmost Caribbean, or even an extension of Brazil? Is it the New World’s first and original Creole?

Cesária’s charity endeavors are also expanding—she offers music scholarships for underprivileged children in Cape Verde, works with the WFP, and lends financial support to a variety of other causes. She expresses that her only regret is that her success did not come sooner and that she endured years of suffering before reaching this state of satisfaction. Her story exposes the contrasts typical in the lives of world music artists from recently independent, developing nations. “The Barefoot Diva” has proven herself to be more than just a world-weary mother with a good set of pipes—she is a virtuoso, a creative force, a cultural ambassador, a philanthropist, and a mentor. Cesária has done it all late in life, in a profession previously dominated by men, and all without wearing shoes. 🌍

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