

## BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Claudia Borges Cerbino charts Cesaria Evora's successful path to remix hipness

# CESARIA EVORA

**H**ow much melancholy a voice can convey? When Cesaria sings, her voice comes out from the depths of her being, communicating in a way that goes beyond words. Effortlessly, she sings with her heart. Powerful yet unpretentious, husky yet smooth, Cesaria's voice is the essence of her music. Cesaria's rough sweet tone blends with the sounds of acoustic guitars, *cavaquinho*, piano, violins, clarinet and accordion.

Now in her 60s, Cesaria still can't understand her fate. "I have a granddaughter who seems to have an artistic drive. I just wish she doesn't follow my path, it was too hard," Cesaria confesses. Her talent was brought to light late in life, in her 50s, after a harsh life in Cape Verde. I met her in Paris, her self-confessed 'second home', in the middle of her European tour. Barefooted, she puffed one cigarette after another while chatting warmly about her life and career. Through Cesaria's deep and simple voice a whole country's soul is unveiled.

Nine islands 500km off the north-west African coast form Cape Verde. These barren islands suffered constant abuse from different nations and natural disasters along the centuries. Emigration has been the solution for many running away from poverty, with two thirds of Cape Verdeans live abroad.

Since its discovery and first human settlement in 1462, colonists, slaves, pirates and seamen from all over the globe left their mark on the islands. A beautiful racial mix and rich culture is the result, with music at its heart.

*Morna*, the main style of Cape Verdean music, gives voice to the sentiment of *sodade* (melancholy). Longing, homesickness and loss fill nostalgic lyrics in slow rhythms – a style whose most famous voice is Cesaria's. Portuguese *fado*, African rhythms, Argentinian tango, all fuse to make a style that is intrinsically Cape Verdean. The islands have also produced *coladeira*, a

speedy danceable version of morna.

Cesaria Evora was born in 1941 in the port town of Mindelo, São Vicente island. Her father, a violinist, played in bars with her uncle, B. Leza, the great morna composer, and Cesaria accompanied them. At 16 she started singing mornas and

giving so many concerts. One day I'll die on stage. It wouldn't be a bad way of dying, though..." Always concerned with her country's people, she is planning an organisation to help new Cape Verdean voices. It will be named 'Cize', as her friends call her.



Cesaria's birthplace, Mindelo, São Vicente island (Claudia Borges Cerbino)

coladeiras in bars. Soon, the 'barefoot diva', as she was known, became a celebrity on local radio. She lived off the generosity of her admirers, selling her talent just to drink and smoke. But this bohemian lifestyle discouraged her. She found a job to support her family and gave up singing for almost a decade.

In 1985 she was invited to give some concerts in Portugal. It was then, aged 46, that she met her future producer, Jose da Silva. A Frenchman with Cape Verdean origins, he brought her to a world audience.

In 1992 her big success began, when *Miss Perfumado* sold nearly 200,000 copies, and her concerts sold out in Paris. The world was ready for her. She embarked on her first international tour in 1993.

*Cesaria* (1995) was her first nomination for the Grammy Awards and in 1996 Rufino Almeida, known as Bau, became her guitar player.

Cuban and Brazilian musicians were the new ingredients for the Latin atmosphere of *Café Atlantico* (1999) and *São Vicente di Longe* (2001).

After Europe, Cesaria will tour the USA, then Brazil. "Although I enjoy my work, my body is feeling tired of travelling so much,

## BEST ALBUMS

**Miss Perfumado** (Lusafrica/BMG 1992)



This album launched her career. When it was released in France, she was compared to Edith Piaf and Billie Holiday. In the opening 'Sodade', one of her most popular songs, Cesaria's naked voice expresses the Cape Verdean yearning for the land and people left behind, under the rippling sound of a cavaquinho.

**Cesaria** (Lusafrica/Nonesuch 1995)



Her first big international release (licensed to Nonesuch) begins with *Petit Pays*, a gentle tribute to her country and one of her best songs.

There are plangent violin solos by Bau, who now leads her band. His elaborate guitar in 'Tudo Dia E Dia' bring to mind the dance between wind and dry sand on the Cape Verde islands. Just ignore the 'Grandma, We Love You' song, 'Flor na Paul'.

## BEST COMPILATIONS

**Anthology** (BMG 2002)



A good balance of mornas and coladeiras combines the finest work from Cesaria's career. Of the 16 tracks, four are taken from *Miss Perfumado*, plus there are various popular choices such as 'Petit Pays', 'Tchinchirote' and 'Carnaval de São Vicente'.

**Club Sodade: Cesaria Evora by...** (BMG 2003)



The world's best electronic DJs remix Cesaria's melancholic traditional songs. Does it sound strange? Maybe, but the result is fantastic. Carl Craig's 'Angola' is irresistibly dance-inducing. 'Besame Mucho' turns into salsa *chachacha* with Señor Coconut and 'Negue' has found its home in Cris Prolific's soul remixes.

## BEST AVOIDED

**La Diva Aux Pieds Nus** (Lusafrica 1988)



Her first album is an 80s electronic musical arrangement, which never manages to transmit the richness of her voice. The opening track, a third-rate pop dance treatment of 'Bia Lulucha', sounds something like a children's fair, and should serve as a warning to proceed no further.

## LIKE CESARIA? THEN TRY...

✦ **Tito Paris *Guilhermina***

(Universal 2002)

Also born in Mindelo, Tito's background is very similar to Cesaria's. An excellent guitarist, songwriter and singer, *Guilhermina*, his new album, is the best of all.



✦ **Various *The Soul of Cape Verde***

(Lusafrica 1996)

This begins with a Cesaria track and then paints a broader picture of the Cape Verdean scene. Nearly 75 minutes of languorous instrumental and vocal tracks from Bana, Tito Paris, Celina Pereira and others.

