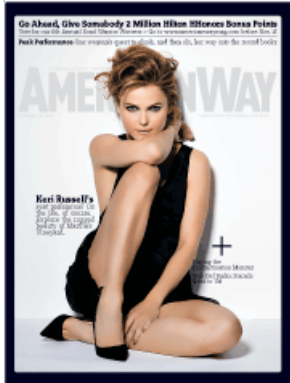


# AMERICANWAY

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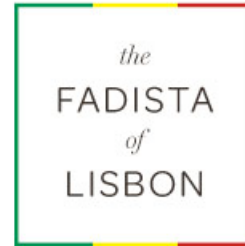
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Her beauty stops you in your tracks. Her voice causes grown men to cry. Combine the two, and you have the unstoppable force that is **MARIZA** — the woman who has made Portuguese fado cool again. By Kevin Raub. Photographs by Julia Baier.

Her beauty stops you in your tracks. Her voice causes grown men to cry. Combine the two, and you have the unstoppable force that is Mariza — the woman who has made Portuguese fado cool again. By Kevin Raub. Photographs by Julia Baier.

**INSIDE A WORKING-CLASS** Portuguese seafood joint in the suburbs of Lisbon, the young woman who currently lays claim to the most famous musical face in Portugal is easy to spot. Not because she doesn't belong in such a simple place as this. Quite the contrary. She is extremely unpretentious, insistent upon doing her own grocery shopping and unafraid of getting down and dirty with a little traditional seafood. The reality is that this 33-year-old superstar would stand out in any room. Her striking features, born of a Portuguese father and a Mozambican mother, are in direct contrast with nearly everyone else's you stumble across in Portugal (and in any of its former colonies). And her name, Mariza, has become synonymous with a musical revolution.

"Are you ready to eat the snails?" It's the first thing she says to me, this woman who's one of Portugal's most admired voices, an artist who sells more records in her country than Madonna and whose voice commands silence upon first note. But, really, that's not what startles me. Rather, it's her boyishly short, pressed platinum-blond hair, which is shockingly unique by Portuguese standards. It clashes with her bronzed skin and dark eyebrows, creating a sense of beautiful chaos within the circles she runs, ones that revolve around fado — Portugal's haunting genre of musical poetry that's drenched in sadness. She stops me in my tracks, despite my having seen plenty of photos and videos in preparation for this moment, and I haven't even heard her sing a note yet.

Fado, which means "destiny," is such an indispensable part of the Portuguese culture that you may wonder whether the country would have just acquiesced to Spain were it not for the people's fierce devotion to their national maudlin melodies. Though fado's history remains debated to this day, the general belief is that the musical form — usually sung by a male or female vocalist (known as a fadista) who's accompanied by the melancholic sounds of the unique fat-bellied 12-string Portuguese guitar — was developed by Portuguese sailors who were influenced by Brazilian and

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It's complicated to explain, but the gist is that there are 300 or so instrumental fados, from which a head-spinning number of new combinations can be created, depending on the chosen lyrics and metrics (quadras are four rhymes, quintilhas are five, and so on, up to 12 rhymes). Sonically, fado is mesmerizing poetry set to a sentimental soundtrack, and it captivates anyone within earshot. Imagine hearing a gut-wrenching eulogy set to music during the funeral of the most beautiful woman in the world, and you'll have an inkling of what fado sounds like. The Portuguese have such an emotional attachment to their national song that it's not uncommon for tears to be shed during performances, even when the fados are happy ones.

Walking the streets of Lisbon, I find the country's history palpable. After all, Portugal was the last European country to go modern. Today, it remains one of the most richly preserved European capitals, despite having been brought to its knees by an earthquake, a tsunami, and a devastating fire — all on the same tragic day in 1755. The city was rebuilt by the Marquess of Pombal, whose architectural style (known as Pombaline) still permeates Lisbon's crotchety old streets.

The city's two most historically significant neighborhoods, the once Moorish Alfama, with its mesmerizing Arab-influenced mazes of hillside staircases and twisting alleyways, and the tough, blue-collar Mouraria, where Mariza's parents settled after moving to Portugal from Mozambique when she was only three years old, are where fado has thrived for two centuries. Today, though, the bulk of the fado clubs are in Alfama and Bairro Alto, which has cobblestoned thoroughfares so narrow that even Smart cars can't navigate the tight walls.

In Mouraria, Mariza's parents owned a small tavern and hosted fado singers on the weekends. By the age of five, Mariza was singing before a live audience — having had no formal fado lessons. But fadistas will tell you that fado can't be taught at all. Lessons? Get out! You either have it inside you, or you don't; it's something that's passed on from generation to generation. And though she spent a decade in various singing gigs (including a cheesy cover party band in Lisbon called Funkytown, and belting out bossa nova on a Portuguese cruise ship in Brazil), Mariza had it in her. I would spend several days with her before realizing just what that meant, but Lisbon found out one day back in 1999.

Mariza was having a late-night meal at a tavern when an older, steadfastly traditional fado poet approached. "He said to me, 'You don't know how to sing fado. You only sing in English,'" she recalls. "It hurt me. I was feeling really bad. I said, 'I know how to do it. I'll prove it.' There was a musician with us, and I asked him if he knew any fado. He only knew one song in one tune. I said, 'Okay. Play it.' I sang, and the poet looked at me and started crying, saying 'Whatever day you want, I will receive you in my fado house.'"

Mariza turned him down at first, still smarting from his earlier comment. But friends kept pushing her to accept his offer to appear at his professional fado house, Senhor Vinho, and she eventually acquiesced. She seized a Monday-night slot, and it didn't take long before the peanut gallery was in an uproar. Until that point, fado had been a staunchly conventional art form best known around the world through the classic voice of Amália Rodrigues, an archetypal Portuguese beauty (long, dark hair; a slightly portly figure; customary dress) who remains the undisputed queen of fado after nearly a

century of work. (She died in 1999 at the age of 79.)

Mariza was anything but a typical fadista. Her hair was artificially blond, and she stood out like a pop star at an Amish wedding. She was young, tall, and skinny. She wore Prada over practicality. She turned heads everywhere she went, so you can imagine what happened when she first appeared on television. "Suddenly, here in Portugal, Amália died," she remembers. "I appeared on television around the same time, and boom! I don't know what happened. My album was released, and suddenly it was triple platinum in Portugal. Everybody was crazy, and I was like, 'What is happening?'"

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That was five years and three albums ago, and Mariza has quickly become not just the new face of fado but also the impetus behind its miraculous reinvention as cool, which was no small task. Portugal's Estado Novo, the authoritarian military regime that ruled the country for an astonishing 41 years, controlled the airwaves during its reign, and fado was endorsed and encouraged. Needless to say, music forced down the throats of a resentful population can't possibly be considered hip.

"During the regime, we only had one television station, and they treated fado very poorly," she explains. "So the younger intellectuals and more sophisticated audiences would see it and say, 'This is not my style.' It was too connected with the regime, and people harbored those memories."

As a result, anyone born in the late '60s or after considered fado the music of their parents — a deathblow in any

culture. But nowadays, when you step inside the Fnac record store in Lisbon's trendy Chiado district, you'll see Mariza's latest album, *Concerto em Lisboa*, in the top 10, alongside those by Madonna and Kelly Clarkson. She has sold more than a million records worldwide (an insane number for a world-music artist). In the same way that Nirvana chewed up and spit out rock music in the '90s, Mariza has jump-started fado.

Mariza counts performing with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 2004 at the then newly opened Walt Disney Concert Hall in L.A. as one of the proudest moments in her life to date. (Currently on tour in the United States, she'll have the opportunity to perform there again at the end of this month, with award-winning architect Frank Gehry turning the stage into a cozy fado tavern just for her.) She's just as proud, though, of a fado megaconcert she gave in Lisbon in 2005. The recording of that concert is her latest release.

"If you invite someone from fado to do a concert in an open-air space in Lisbon, you don't [normally] get more than 5,000 people," she explains. "I asked the municipality to let me do a concert in the gardens of Belém. It was raining that day, and I was crying over it. I didn't think we would get anyone. When I entered the stage, there were 22,000 people [there]. It was the biggest fado concert ever in Portugal." *Concerto em Lisboa*

chronicles that evening.

Like most Americans, I don't know fado from Play-Doh, so Mariza agrees to play tour guide for a day and teach me everything there is to know about her music, her city, and the fado clubs that are such an intrinsically significant part of life in Lisbon — and a major tourist attraction to boot. But which clubs are tourist traps, and which are the real deal? The country's biggest fadista should know, after all.

We fuel up for our journey at yet another hole-in-the-wall seafood spot, Churrasqueira do Sacramento, in the Alcântara neighborhood of Lisbon. It's packed with people clamoring for one of but a few tables in the place. They are used to Mariza here, so nobody bats an eyelash at her presence. And that's the way she prefers it. "It's very normal," she says. "That's why I like it." She fends off the manager's advances to take her coat for her and throws it around the back of her chair, just like everybody else in the restaurant has done.

When we finish our meal, we are within walking distance of the Museu do Fado, the fado museum. It's normally closed on Mondays, but they open up at the first sight of Mariza, who views the museum as the logical starting point for those interested in submersing themselves in Portugal's most beloved form of expression. Mariza's albums and awards are housed here (her 2003 BBC Radio World Music Award, for instance), alongside those of Amália and other big-name players like Carlos do Carmo, yet she breezes right by them in favor of showing me a three-dimensional painting called *Vieira (Alley)*, Rua Pimentel 1998, a reconstruction of what a typical Lisbon neighborhood looked like hundreds of years ago. That's when I hear my first few notes.

"Sardinhas vive!" she sings, describing how an old woman, such as one of those depicted in the painting, would shout out "Live sardines!" to let the neighborhood know what she was selling. It is surely the most beautiful touting of a small salty fish that I've ever heard.

Later that evening, our first stop is, naturally, Senhor Vinho, the fado club where Mariza got her start. She is welcomed with open arms — though the up-and-coming fadistas on tonight's bill must surely have started shaking in their boots when she came through the door. In America, the equivalent would be Shania Twain walking into a small country bar in Nashville on an open-mike night.

The first singer is Filipa Cardoso, a traditional fadista who has more in common with Amália than with Mariza. Then, the moment she begins to sing, a startling thing happens: Though dinner is being served, all knives and forks drop, all conversations cease, and all drink orders are put on hold — the room becomes as silent as a prayer session at the Vatican. Of all the things I've ever seen in Lisbon, it's this show of respect that I will always find most endearing.

Despite chants of "Ma-ri-za! Ma-ri-za!" from a table of drunk Spaniards, Mariza does not get up and sing. Instead, we move on to A Tasca do Chico in the Bairro Alto, Lisbon's nightlife hub and the home to many fado clubs, all of which pale in comparison to this one. Unlike most fado venues, A Tasca do Chico is a dive. The walls are covered in soccer banners, and the place is spilling over with people from all walks of life. Locals love it because anyone can sing fado here — it's a free-for-all — and Mariza loves it for the same reason. It's not uncommon for taxi drivers to roll in, sing a few fados, then get right back into their cabs and speed off into the night. We pile into the old-school wooden picnic tables and join a family as if this

sort of thing happens every day.

If Mariza's presence can make the professionals nervous, imagine how the amateurs feel when she's around. One woman in her mid-30s starts her fado but soon chokes up. She apologizes and quickly loses herself back in the crowd, claiming nervousness. Another forgets the lyrics; another sings completely out of tune.

Partly due to the raucous nature of the club, partly due to Mariza's visit, the place is so loud that you can hardly hear yourself think. People are turned away, as the club is at capacity (and probably then some). The MC lays down the law: "No silence, no fado," he says. "You choose." (There are no mikes in fado.) The crowd settles down for Artur Batalha, a formerly successful fadista whose career was on the up-and-up in the '80s but who later fell victim to the vices of fame. His voice still has the goods, though.

Before he sings, he looks at Mariza; the two of them hail from the same working-class Lisbon neighborhood. "It's a pleasure to see an artist in person whom I love." He calls her a daughter. Mariza sings along to his fados under her breath.

The night is winding down, but the crowd wants more. They want Mariza. The MC once again hushes the crowd. "So you will go home in peace," he says, "Mariza!" She calmly slides out from the table to the roar of the crowd, briefly consults with the guitarists, and seconds later, without so much as a single moment of warm-up, she launches into "Quando Me Sinto Só" ("When I Feel Alone"), from her last studio album, *Transparente*.

Her voice soars and captivates, radiating through the roughened walls with piercing delicacy. The room is frozen. Though nobody has much space to do so, they give her a standing ovation. Batalha, sitting nearby, bows his head, covers his eyes, and holds his hand over his heart. In peace he goes, as do we all.

*American Airlines serves Lisbon via London, with service operated by oneworld partner British Airways.*

