

Fado:

The Saddest Music in the World

Kelly's Corner

BY JAN KELLY



Fado is the music of the working class, the inner city dwellers of Lisbon, Portugal to whom life is a daily, inescapable struggle. Love is viewed and grasped as a panacea for all that is lacking, but grasped too quickly or with unrealistic expectations and so love, too, becomes part of the struggle. Unrequited love or love sadly far from perfect, but alive with some element of possibility, feeds the imagination and weakening dream to mournfully persist. Unrequited love has all the forces of contentment in love and so along with loneliness, nostalgia and yearning for unrealized dreams the themes of fado are stamped. This is "saudade," the lamenting of fate, the dealing with inescapable and unsolvable problems of the soul. It is a fatalistic refusal to accept possible defeat quietly. The very being of the fadista, singer, depends on their words. Their portrayal is a fervid commitment to cope with life's struggles and to convince the audience so that they can understand and vicariously experience pain. The fadista performs standing, moving only the hands in imploring dramatic gestures. Depicting their acceptance, even resignation to sadness, poverty and loneliness and allowing the audience to glimpse this struggle. The singer is supported by the harmony of a 12-string Portuguese guitar, possibly evolved from the Arab lute and refined by the English guitar, and usually by a second guitar of Spanish origin called a viola in Portugal. This is not simple chord strumming but intricate picking and timing, aiding the Fado words to capitalize on their poignancy.

This Lisboa fado is considered the oldest urban folk music in the world. It has mixed beginnings of the fofa and lundum, Brazilian dances, the nostalgic songs of sailors and fisherman on long voyages, the keening of their waiting wives fearing danger for their husbands, of Arab instruments and North African songs. These sources blend and express the fate of the individual against the odds of the world, the centuries past and the intimacy of the present. The fadista is caught using song, deep melody in an effort to understand or at least cope with the human condition. The working class with limited resources for improving life and its diurnal struggle sang unto death- this is the Lisboa Fado.

The first fados were sung in Brazil in 1829. The genre arrived at Portugal and was first performed in Lisbon in 1836. The taverns and brothels of the Alfama and Mouraria districts were the welcoming landing spots for the new music. Daily and nightly, any who wanted to perform were encouraged by the inhabitants. The style was quickly set. Harsh and mournful words, sung with the proud stance of a storyteller, erect and only the hands moving, explaining the singer's plight. No one watching can ignore the drama and the passion. It demands attention and attention is given unquestioningly, whether you understand the language or not.

The first fadista to become famous was Maria Severa. In 1836, she began to sing in her mother's tavern. She wore a black shawl during her performances. In respect to Maria Severa, all women fadistas wear a shawl while performing. Severa, "mother of fado," had an illicit love affair with the Conde de Vimioso. It was the scandal of Lisbon- what was a

count doing in the slums of Lisbon? The same as high society visited the jazz joints of Harlem. The affair was forced to end. Maria Severa died at age 26, some say from tuberculosis, others say suicide, blaming unrequited love for Vimioso. This is fado. Maria Severa lived fado- she personified "saudade," the underlying theme of fado, nostalgia overly involved with a yearning for the past, depression, sadness, an uncertain future and longing for the unattainable. Severa's life is the subject of Portugal's first sound movie of 1931.

Lisboa fado continued to thrive. Without rules or disciplines it remained an urban folk music. Not until Amalia Rodrigues took to the stage was a strong single singer born out of the genre. From 1939 until her death in 1999, Rodrigues was the most celebrated fadista. She is called the "diva of fado." She was innovative and international- she was a movie star and she traveled, performing in Japan, Europe, South America and the US. The dictator Salazar put controls on fado music in the 1940s and '50s- off the streets and into proper venues. Social and political fados were suppressed, and emphasis of love, jealousy and passion was encouraged. Rodrigues followed the rules and was able to take fado out of inner Lisbon to the world. When she died in 1999, three days of mourning was decreed. She was named a national treasure and is buried in Lisbon's National Pantheon. Her most famous CD is "The Art of Amalia." The current queen of fado is Mariza and her noted CD is "Fado em Mim." She has been awarded the Best European Act by the BBC Music Awards.

If you do not know fado, Lisbon fado, I suggest you tune into the Portuguese radio station 97.3. Get a taste for it, and next spring come to the spring fundraiser for the Portuguese Festival held at Napi's. Several fadistas accompanied by two guitars will charm you through the afternoon as you leisurely taste viands of Portugal and wine as you wish to accompany- delicious Portuguese wines. There is a tasting before the meal and bottles of your choice will follow through the afternoon. I remember a soft spring snow falling one year- what atmosphere! You can also travel to New Bedford, San Francisco, Montreal and Toronto for fado, and of course, you can buy some CDs. You'll grow to love the music.

There is another style of fado music in Portugal. It is practiced in the city of Coimbra (pronounced "Kweembrah"), the literary capital of the country. This style which began in the late 19th century is more refined, less sad and accompanied by a guitar of English origins. One can hear the influence of the 12th century troubadours of the Court of Love in Provence. The themes of unrequited love and romantic melancholy are carried over but less tragic, more like an illusion which is a temporary luxury. The tunes are sung by university students formally dressed in black suits or leggings covered by a black cape, quite debonair compared to a humble shawl. The format is chorale with added solos, and professors also sing with students. This is the presentation of young scholars who will be future professors, poets and leaders, singing of unrealistic love at 20 years or age while comfortably preparing for a commanding future. Financially sound and ever looking forward is not so much a tragedy as a whimsical growing pain. Also the venues are outdoors: city squares, at the Santa Cruz Monastery, the Old Cathedral of Coimbra, and even beneath balconies in serenades reminiscent of Romeo and Juliet. The music is beautiful, visiting sadness while remaining formal. Themes are student love, love of Coimbra, and criticism of professors. It is not the earthy music of the Lisboa fado.

In the 1950s, the Coimbra fado moved onto ballads, folk music and poetry, both classical and contemporary. They were resisting the Salazar dictatorship. They had the freedom of class, while Lisboa was more trapped. The internationally famous Coimbra tune from the '50s was "April in Portugal." The song remained popular two decades on and can still be heard on AM radio. No wedding, prom or graduation was complete without "April in Portugal." It was sung world wide in several languages with magical guitar accompaniment. But in Portugal, it is sung "Coimbra my joy," etc. We don't hear the word "Coimbra" in English. Coimbra fado does not delve into "saudade" - there is no struggle. While people clap in rhythm to show their pleasure at Lisboa fado, in Coimbra they clear their throats, disconcerting the first time you hear it, like snapping fingers for a waiter in Greece, but it is the custom in Coimbra.

There is a third style of fado from that part of the world, the highly individualistic style of Cesaria Evora of Cabo Verde, Cape Verde Islands. Cesaria Evora is a large, older woman with a knowing face carrying all the marks and moods of life. She performs with a drink and cigarette, her



womanly form swaying to the haunting music. Her dialect speaks and sings of "saudade," longing. That is the title of what may be her most famous song. Other titles are of sadness: "Torturas" ("Torture"), "A Woman's Disappointment," but "Like Crooked Mr. Antoine," "Luck," and carnival songs show a joyful side. Cesaria is internationally popular. Her CDs "Miss Perfumado" and "Café Atlantico" sell well in the US. Buy one, try one- this woman is unique!

All nations have their version of fado. For us in the States, it is the blues. Kurt Vonnegut, in his book of mini-memoirs, "A Man Without a Country," writes: "The priceless gift that the African Americans gave the whole world while they were still in slavery was a gift so great that it is now almost the only reason many foreigners still like us at least a little bit. That specific remedy for the worldwide epidemic of depression is a gift called 'the blues.'"

Albert Murray, writer, jazz historian, and friend of Kurt Vonnegut, tells us that during the era of slavery in this country, the suicide rate per capita among slave owners was much higher than the suicide rate than the suicide rate among slaves. Murray thinks the African Americans' reaction to depression was to develop the blues, songs of deep lamenting voices with which they could coax hopelessness and despair out of the trap. Murray says, "The blues can't drive depression clear out of a house, but can drive it into the corners of any room where it is being played."

And so of fado, Greek rebetika, and Argentina tango which meandered to France where apache dancers and Edith Piaf continued the musical drama. The French loved watching the pathetic Piaf belting our songs of hard luck, performing under duress of tuberculosis, rickets, money problems and gigolos. The audience could have a cathartic experience without suffering so much as a hangnail. Today Madeleine Peyroux and Norah Jones touch upon the theme. And opera?! What of Violetta in Verdi's "La Traviata"? Her aria sung as she gives up her highborn Alfredo is pristine fado. What of "La Bohème" or "Madame Butterfly"?

The blues. Fado- when something in life has you slowed, hard reflection is needed and you're doing the right thing rather than jumping to distraction chasing lighter moods. Take it hard on and when the catharsis has cleansed you, go on and live fully. ■

jan kelly



Jan Kelly was six years old when she learned the value of altruism. Two girls had moved in across the street and young Kelly marched over and offered them candy. "The girls faces just lit up," recalls Jan. "I realized then how good doing things for others makes you feel." From childhood through adulthood Kelly hasn't stopped giving of herself. Since moving to Provincetown in 1970, Kelly has been a tireless supporter and entrepreneur of community spirit. She chaired the Housing Authority in the late 70's, served as the President of the Friends of the Library for 25 years, founded the Year Rounder Festival and the Tennis for Life. She runs a weekly women's tennis group, volunteers as a tutor and mentor in Provincetown schools and offers her auctioneering skills to non-profits. She personally funds three scholarships annually to Provincetown High School seniors which promote courtesy, humor and discipline. Last year her efforts earned her a Community Service/Impact award from the American Red Cross. When asked if it's easier to sit back and do nothing, Kelly responded in her typically direct fashion. "Is it? I'd die of boredom if I did that. Helping is so much fun. It's a give and take. It's nothing but a swap shop this life." Here's Kelly on her iconic poinsettia-lined bike.

continued on page 25