

## GLOSSA

KAROLINA GOLEMO<sup>1</sup>**MUSICAL WORLDS  
OF SARA TAVARES**

An artist who passes away prematurely leaves behind a sense of incompleteness, of unfulfilled curiosity – especially when the musical world she creates is in constant metamorphosis, expanding in unexpected directions, absorbing other worlds, and multiplying.

Sara Tavares, a Cape Verdean artist based in Lisbon, passed away on November 19, 2023, at the age of 45, leaving her work unfinished, untold. One farewell tribute described her as having “a soul the size of the world” (Abreu 2023). Her death prompted an outpouring of comments on social media. It was not only her family, friends, and fans who bid her farewell, but also a multitude of artists with whom Sara had collaborated while pursuing her own parallel, unhurried career.

Sara Tavares had been co-creating projects with others for 30 years. She was deeply curious about other artists, their music, and their visions. In interviews, she spoke of how much she valued her connections with others and how these relationships inspired her creativity. Many of her song lyrics emerged from a phrase or anecdote overheard during a meeting. Her musical world was forged at the crossroads of cultures and languages but was fundamentally shaped by her relationships with other artists. She eagerly invited others into her universe, sharing it openly. Similarly, she entered the musical worlds of others, becoming a part of them for shorter or longer periods. Sara Tavares delighted in listening, absorbing, and exploring the music of other people.

She created without haste. In an interview with Vítor Belanciano on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of her musical career, she remarked:

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“I don’t like to force anything, I have no method; I move slowly, flowing with the wind...” (Belanciano 2014).

## A MUSICAL SEARCH FOR HERSELF?

Some describe her musical journey as a gradual rediscovery of her roots or a return to her origins. Perhaps, though, it was more a search for herself within Cape Verdean culture and, simultaneously, a recognition of Cabo Verde within her – a continuous, reflective process.

Sara Alexandra Lima Tavares was born in 1978 in Lisbon to a large family of economic migrants from Cabo Verde. She quickly lost regular contact with her parents: her father emigrated to the United States, while her mother moved to the Algarve (in southern Portugal) in search of work, taking several other children with her. Sara was placed in the care of an elderly Portuguese (white) woman, whom she called “grandmother” from the beginning.

Thus, Sara grew up immersed in Portuguese culture, in the Pragal district of Almada, a town on the south bank of the Tagus River, *na Margem Sul do Tejo*, near Lisbon. There were almost no other migrants in her neighborhood. In interviews, she recalled a sense of alienation that had accompanied her since early childhood – alienation from her family, who had left her behind, and from her surroundings, where she felt different, primarily because of her skin colour. Music became to some extent a means of seeking her own path and a form of emancipation.

Before becoming an acclaimed performer of so-called ‘world music’ – a blend primarily of Cape Verdean, African, and Portuguese styles – she, like many of her peers, went through a phase of intense fascination with Black American music. She listened to rap, soul, and gospel, drawing inspiration from the works of Stevie Wonder, Sarah Vaughan, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, among others. She was equally captivated by pop icons of the era, such as Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson. Sara absorbed their music long before she ever encountered the sounds of Cesária Évora (*Sara Tavares regressa...*, 2012). In her last interview, when recalling the beginnings of her musical fascination, she mentioned a tape recorder her grandmother had received from her cousins, along with a Nat King Cole cassette (Vieira 2022).

The Portuguese first encountered her in 1994, when she won the popular TV show *Chuva das Estrelas (Rain of Stars)*, where she bravely performed one of Whitney Houston's hits, "One Moment in Time." The host of the show, Catarina Furtado, later admitted that the organizers had to bend the rules to allow Sara to perform, as she was too young. However, after hearing the demo tape she had submitted, they were certain they had to invite her (Furtado 2023).

Sara Tavares later won Portugal's *Festival da Canção* and represented the country at Eurovision. The pop ballads, full of virtuosity, were the repertoire with which Sara, a girl from the suburbs of Lisbon, dreaming like many girls her age of a singing career, reached a wider audience. But this was not her true repertoire. It was the musical world in which she shone and was placed. After her immense success, she decided to pursue her own musical path elsewhere, discovering – unhurriedly and on her own terms – her unique relationship with the Cape Verdean culture from which she came.

Her first album was recorded in 1996 with her own gospel band called *Shout*. As one journalist observed, the simple fact that she made a gospel album instead of covering, for example, Céline Dion ballads was a subtle indication that Sara wanted to chart her own course (Bonifácio 2009). The *Sara Tavares & Shout* album (sung fully in English) was a reflection of the music she was listening to at the time, the music that was available to her. With the money she received from her grandmother, she used to buy albums – but only the discounted ones. That's how she discovered artists like The Supremes and Marvin Gaye, who were often on sale (Belanciano 2014).

It was only as a teenager that Sara began learning the *crioulo* language. After gaining fame, she visited Cabo Verde, her parents' homeland for the first time, accompanying an official state delegation. This marked the beginning of a transformation, a gradual discovery of a world that had until then been unknown. Sara's fascination with this newly found second homeland started to shape her music. In an interview, she recalled how she began learning to play the guitar, singing Cape Verdean mornas, and changing her style of dress and hairstyle (Soromenho 2007). These initially superficial expressions of a newfound African identity deepened over time and became integral to her music. Reflecting on this exploration, Sara said: "I knew some names from Cabo Verde, like Cesária Évora, Tito Paris, Os Tubarões..., but I didn't even listen to their music. Going to

the islands, I started to take an interest in them by collecting material, going to music clubs, spending time with the musicians, internalizing the culture” (*Vozes de Jovens*).

The titles of Sara’s successive albums and the compositions within them reveal a growing attachment to her island roots. With these albums, she shed the image of “the Portuguese Whitney” and showcased her own distinct musical identity.

In 2014, she described the process as follows: “I realized that for my Black music to grow within me, it had to be the Black music of my reality. Hence my approach to Cabo Verde, because for years I only had access to westernized Blackness” (Belanciano 2020, 26).

Her first album in crioulo, *Mi Ma Bô* [“Me and You” in Creole], resulted from a collaboration with Paris-based Congolese producer Lokua Kanza. Her next album, *Balancê* (2006), reflected the multicultural character of Lusophone Lisbon. Created in collaboration with artists from Cabo Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and Angola, it combined Portuguese and Creole and became the voice of the “multicultural generation, which blends various styles, from funk to rap, including mornas and coladeiras” (Margato 2017). Sara described the album as follows: “I thought I could make a Lisbon stamp, with a tutti-frutti flavour, to show abroad that Lisbon wasn’t just about fado, even though fado is great” (Margato 2017). Notably, this album featured a duet with famed *fadista* Ana Moura – a stunning a cappella track titled “De Nua.” *Balancê*, subtly infused with Cape Verdean rhythms yet enriched by Brazilian influences, achieved platinum status and earned Sara a nomination for the BBC Radio 3 World Music Awards as Best Newcomer. Speaking about the album, she said: “I realized that making music didn’t mean imitating. I wanted to tell my own stories and sing in my own language” (Soromenho 2007).

The contact with her parents’ country of origin also became a way for the singer to understand her own difficult family situation: “I realized that the entire history of Cabo Verde is one of separation. Relatives’ homes are filled with pictures of grandchildren who have never been seen. Everyone has been separated from someone” (Soromenho 2007).

Her 2009 album, *Xinti*, was another chapter in her musical journey. More subtle and ethereal than its predecessor, it reflected a deeply personal connection to Cabo Verde – a musical narrative woven by someone who had not grown up within Cape Verdean culture but had gradually

come to understand it from the outside. Sara refrained from discussing the album extensively, encouraging listeners instead to simply “feel” it.

Sara Tavares drew inspiration from Lisbon’s rich cross-cultural landscape, tapping into not only her ancestral heritage but also the traditions, dreams, and longings of other migrant communities that had made the city their home.

After the release of *Balancê*, Fernando Ribeiro, a blogger from Porto, described Sara as “the voice of today’s Lisbon – a modern, tropical, and colourful Lisbon, where the pristine white of Portuguese blends with the colours of the Cape Verdean language, Angolan slang, the *kriol* of Guinea-Bissau, the sweet Portuguese of Brazil, and so many others” (Ribeiro 2006).

Sara herself described her work as a reflection of her lived experiences: “I found a place for the music I wanted to make, flowing out of cultural confusion (*miscigenação*). The Creole I sing in is just that: a mix of street slang and the language of my Angolan and Mozambican friends, fused with Portuguese to reflect the life of my generation in this country. It’s a language in constant development” (Soromenho 2007).

Her final album, *Fitxadu* (2017), was released almost a decade after *Xinti*. Its title, meaning “closed” or “sealed” in Creole, symbolized the end of one chapter and the beginning of another.

But, as she explained, the word may also signify something that is close (to her heart), something real to her. The album was influenced by her time in Cabo Verde, particularly on Santiago Island, and features lyrics predominantly in *crioulo badio*, the local dialect (Abreu 2023). *Fitxadu* was nominated for the Latin Grammy Award for Best Portuguese-Language Roots Music Album. One review of the album stated: “Sara Tavares is part of the world, once again” [*Sara Tavares é do mundo, outra vez*] (Dias de Almeida 2017). With it, she confirmed that she belongs to and draws from a vast musical universe.

Cabo Verde can be heard in the sounds of the songs, in their rhythm, in that distinctive phrasing and pulsing energy. There’s also *crioulo* in its various forms. But this is a new, modern take on tradition. You can hear the fascination with electronics and the intense, often danceable beats. While it is hardly a case of “going back to the roots,” one can sense that “the rhythmic skeleton is always Afro” (Margato 2017). References to music from Cabo Verde and broader African musical traditions are also present in her final singles. The last track, *Kurtido*, was released just two months before the artist’s death.

## THE VOICE OF AFRICAN LISBON BEYOND BORDERS

In Sara Tavares' reflections on cultural belonging, one finds diverse expressions: joy and pride in her Cape Verdean roots and a sense of connection to an island nation; pride in being a Lisbon native; and identification with the category of *pretogueses* (Black Portuguese). In one interview, she openly stated, "I feel very Portuguese. My way of observing and experiencing what comes from my parents is marked by a European perspective (*abordagem europeia*)" (Stillwell 2011).

Over time, her statements increasingly echoed her cosmopolitanism and interculturalism. As a Portuguese radio station once wrote, "her talent grows with each new journey because her vision of the world is one of inclusion rather than rejection (*não exclui mas inclui*)."<sup>2</sup>

Commentators on Sara Tavares's work have had difficulty categorizing her, especially regarding her background. She has been defined in various ways: as a Portuguese artist with strong Cape Verdean roots; the only Portuguese artist who does not sing fado and has already conquered international stages; a representative of a generation of young artists known as "Portuguese cosmopolitans," a Portuguese citizen with Cape Verdean origins and heart. Others have viewed Sara Tavares as a Lusophone citizen of the world, offering a deeply personal interpretation of her own roots and the traditions of her ancestors.

Indeed, those seeking direct references to typical Cape Verdean styles in her compositions might struggle to identify them. With extraordinary musical sensitivity and a talent for drawing from a variety of sources, Sara combined diverse genres into unique, cohesive creations.

Her work is often classified as "world music," and she performed at festivals promoting this category. However, she herself was sceptical of the term, critiquing the commercialization, exoticization, and exploitation of variously perceived "authenticity" at the expense of quality. Her relationship with Cabo Verde was never a tool for self-promotion, nor did she see herself as a conventional representative of Cape Verdean music. Instead, she considered herself part of a new generation of the diaspora. She once said:

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<sup>2</sup> Commentary on the album 'Xinti', RTP, <http://www.rtp.pt/antena1/?t=Disco-A1-Xinti---Sara-Tavares.rtp&article=736&visual=10&tm=2&headline=14>.

I prefer to bring together these two cultural riches of mine that intersect. There are many shared elements between Creole and Portuguese culture – all the history we have in common. I’m a young woman, and I see around me a very special identity arising from the intersection of two cultures, immigration, second-generation children, and the African diaspora in Portugal. I thought it would be more relevant to celebrate this than to celebrate a tradition I don’t know, one I haven’t lived – whether it’s Cape Verdean or Portuguese. I grew up in Portugal, listening to American soul music and English pop on the radio. That’s what we were always given because Portuguese music (and all other music) has always been segregated into a corner. (Rei 2006).

Throughout her musical journey, Sara sought to reaffirm and deepen the Creole sonorities in her work. She drew from the classics – Paulinho Vieira, B. Leza, Eugénio Tavares, Bulimundo, Tito Paris, Boy Gé Mendes, Bana, and Cesária Évora – but created something uniquely her own. “I use *funaná*, *batuque*, *coladeira*, but I do everything my way. I reinterpret the genres,” she said. “I’m Cape Verdean by skin colour, language, and history, but I’m also Portuguese. I was born here,” she stated (Bonifácio 2009).

No matter how one views lusophony – whether as a neo-colonial construct, a legacy of lusotropicalism, or in a more neutral way – Sara Tavares embodied this Lusophone connection in her own way. She was an icon of interculturalism. Straddling Lisbon, where she lived, and Cabo Verde, which she often visited, she also drew inspiration from other African cultures. Catarina Furtado (2023) aptly wrote that Sara “wanted to find multiculturalism to find herself as well.”

Sara was the voice of a pluralistic, cosmopolitan, ever-changing Lisbon. In her final interview, a year before her passing, she spoke at length about the lack of representation for Black people in Portuguese public life (Vieira 2022). She actively worked to change this, supporting and mentoring African-descended artists, especially younger generations.

## MUSIC AND RELATIONSHIPS

I first heard Sara Tavares in 2011 in a duet with Anna Maria Jopek, a Polish jazz singer. I was visiting my friends in Barcelona at the time, and they were passionately listening to the Jopek’s album *Sobremesa*. Anna Maria Jopek sang one of the tracks from this album with Sara Tavares, partly in

Polish and partly in Portuguese. The song, “Lizbona moja miłość” [ENG: Lisbon My Love], was a variation of Sara’s song “Lisboa Kuya.” So, from the very beginning, I encountered her in a cross-cultural context: Portuguese-Polish-Cape Verdean-Barcelonense. The first album of hers that I bought was *Mi Ma Bô*. I listened to it alternately with *Xinti*, and even then, I had the impression of different musical worlds blending together. My research and personal fascination with young musicians from Cabo Verde creating in Lisbon began a decade ago with Sara’s works.

Over a decade ago, I experienced Sara Tavares live for the first time during a concert at Teatr Studio in Warsaw. To this day, I vividly remember the extraordinary atmosphere of that evening – how her music seemed to irresistibly draw the audience out of the confines of the rigid theatre seats, urging them to move their bodies, to follow the rhythm, to sway, to dance. Later, while living in Portugal, I had the privilege of immersing myself in her live music again, both at *Festival Músicas do Mundo* in Sines and in Lisbon.



Photo 1. The first and last album by Sara Tavares from the author’s private collection.

Source: photo by the author

Sara Tavares collaborated with countless artists, primarily Portuguese and Cabo Verdean, but also with musicians from other parts of the globe. These included Canadian Nelly Furtado (originated from the Azores), Uxía



from Spanish Galicia, Selma Uamusse from Mozambique, and Angolan artist Paulo Flores. It would be impossible to list them all here.

She avoided routine, stating that she couldn't create from the same place repeatedly. She drew inspiration from her artistic relationships – often cross-cultural and non-obvious. She listened to and collaborated with others, focusing on their work without putting herself at the centre. Not only a singer but also a composer and lyricist, Sara wrote for others while actively supporting and following the work of African-descended artists in Lisbon. For some, she was a role model – not just musically but as an example of finding identity, authenticity, and truth, often at the expense of widespread popularity.

In her songs, one could find a variety of musical styles, often categorized as pop, soul, ethno, world music, and 'African vibes.' She herself described her music as flowing, a fusion of different elements yet simple in its essence of melody and lyrics (Belanciano 2014). Of her creative process, she said, "I listen to reggae, and what I hear inside is semba [traditional Angolan music]. I discover similarities between rhythms and find myself playing with them"; "I play with genres and styles, reinterpreting them through a personal lens" (Bonifácio 2009).

Sara Tavares believed in her right to reinterpret traditions, to mix and combine. "Authenticity is something that can be felt and heard," she claimed (Belanciano 2014), as if she wanted to suggest that it is not something that can be arbitrarily defined from above. After the release of *Xinti*, she observed, "What may be of Cape Verde in me is already reinvented. Even my Creole isn't pure; I mix several variants" (Bonifácio 2009). It is worth adding that, generally, traditional Cape Verdean music itself is a fusion – a hybrid born of interactions between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Perhaps this could be the reason why it easily lends itself to creative reinterpretations.

## INTERCULTURAL LEGACY

Since releasing *Balancê* in 2005, Sara toured Europe and the USA, giving 120 concerts, appearing on the BBC, and featuring in publications such as *The Guardian* and *Sound Roots* (Bonifácio 2009). Angolan artist Aline Frazão said that Sara Tavares paved the way for other Afro-Portuguese artists: "I think that, on the Portuguese scene, Sara represented an almost unprecedented

African pride. She helped create a Lisbon that opened its arms to welcome Black people and African music” (Quevedo 2023). Paulo Flores, her friend and collaborator, paid tribute with these words: “You are the mother of this *Lisboa Crioula*, who loosened the bonds of the traumas of decolonization and made all the races kiss on the lips, mixing languages and tongues.”

When I listen to Sara Tavares’ works from different moments over the past three decades, I hear distinct musical worlds overlapping and intermingling. Was she a representative of world music or Lisbon’s Cape Verdean diaspora? Cape Verdean, Portuguese, Lisbon African, an ordinary cosmopolitan? She seems to have transcended labels, resisting definitions. Vítor Belanciano (2020) wrote that she was at ease with her identity: “For her, it’s not a question of choosing or subtracting, but of accumulating.”

I get the impression that her work was driven primarily by curiosity – about people, about the world, and about her place within it. It reflected her journey of self-discovery, her path between two or more cultures.

After three decades of Sara Tavares’ work, marked by periods of health challenges, she left behind many musical projects with other artists, but only four solo albums. Nearly a decade passed between her last two releases, *Xinti* and *Fitxadu*. She didn’t have the time to create a fifth, though her recent singles offered a tantalizing glimpse of what it might have sounded like – or perhaps it would have taken an entirely different direction.

What remains is a deep sense of gratitude for all that Sara Tavares shared with us, for the worlds she unveiled. But there’s also a quiet melancholy – a bittersweet mixture of Portuguese *saudade* and Creole *sodade*. And the lingering question: how many musical worlds did she leave undiscovered? Where else might her journey have taken her?

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