Music in the Heart

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It is December 25, 1993. My immediate and mother’s side of the family have all met in front of my grandmother’s house awaiting the annual family Christmas celebration. The most integral part of the celebration, Todo Mundo Canta (Everybody Sing), is about to begin and the sense of anticipation and excitement that is filling the space cannot be completely expressed in words. From the children (myself included), ranging in age from 3 to 12, to the adults who can trace back to when they were children during this family tradition, all that can be heard are each person’s careful consideration of which song he or she should sing that would be most favored by the audience. At the age of 8, I can remember being intensely nervous and thinking really hard about what song to pick. When I finally decide, it is the Noite Feliz melody (“Silent Night”). Throughout the event, the traditional Christmas carols and numerous other songs are performed. At the end, prizes are given to all the participants and everybody sits down for Grandma’s all-time’s best catchupa (Cape Verde’s most popular dish).

Although it is an event that takes place every year, we are all disappointed that it has to end and cannot wait
until next Christmas. Throughout the year, my family also holds musical gatherings for special occasions, such as Easter, Cinza (Ash Wednesday), Carnaval (a celebration held in February), and sometimes birthdays. Occasionally, we also do the Todo Mundo Canta (not with a Christmas theme) where we sing any type of music and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place winners receive prizes from the judges (usually my uncles). The Christmas singing tradition, which was only one of the ways in which we showed our appreciation for music, was something that my mother’s side of the family started when we – the immediate family – moved to the capital of Cape Verde, Praia, in 1986 (Lima, Angelica).

Everyone has at least one trait that he or she can say is a result of his or her family’s influence, in my case it is the passion associated with music. Having been raised in a culture where music has always been an essential component has ultimately shaped me into a musical person. I remember being just a little girl when my eldest brother started a music group, “C4”, with one of our cousins and a couple of his friends in Cape Verde. The group of four consisted of singers and writers (including my brother), an acoustic guitar player, a pianist, and an electric bass player. They played mostly music for the youth, such as coladera (fun songs of humor, joy, and sensuality) and funana (a faster and more upbeat form of coladera). The little kids (including myself) used to listen and dance while they performed for small audiences in the community. The group also played inspirational songs that either sent out a message to the youth or spoke of tough experiences. Their first song sent out a message to the youth discouraging the use of alcohol and other drugs. When my brother was leaving for the US, his group mates wrote a goodbye song for him that started off with, “During our childhood we played a lot, in our adolescence we had lots of fun, but now we no longer can because destiny is separating us. (Silva, Ramiro)” This song definitely provoked a lot of emotion, and in a way it also reminded me of the types of songs that the early Cape Verdean immigrants sang.

According to my mother, two of her younger brothers were involved in the same types of musical activities as my brother. When the eldest one finished school, he was finally able to afford a guitar, so he bought one and started playing while the younger one would sing. Later, when the younger one finished school, he bought a guitar as well. They played and sang together, primarily as a hobby, but later moved on to do talent shows and other activities in the community. My godfather, who later joined the group, currently plays the organ and sometimes the guitar in church Masses (Lima).

In addition to the male part of the family, the females have also been involved in musical activities. My mother and her twin sister and, later, their younger sister were involved in church choirs, from the age of 11 to now. Just as genetics suggests, my two older sisters and I inherited this trait and have also been participating in church and school choirs since our elementary years. The kind of music that we sing in our church is just like in any other church: it consists of gospel lyrics used to praise the Lord. However, singing the words in our own language and using both the guitar and piano in producing the music not only adds our own unique rhythm to it, but also makes us feel closer to God simply because we are speaking to Him in the language that we believe was His gift to us. It reinforces the saying, “When you sing to the Lord, you are praying twice.” Over the years, we have also been involved in many competitive musical events, both as a group as well as separately. Thus, the musical passion has been shared and passed on by numerous members of my family.
From the slavery days in Cape Verde, to the earliest Cape Verdeans who immigrated to the United States by whaling vessels, and finally to today’s descendants of the Cape Verde islands, music has proved to be an essential cultural expression of the life of the Cape Verdean community and an integral part of family and social celebrations. The culture reflects both the European and African influences, which Cape Verde has been affected by over five centuries. The Portuguese colonized Cape Verde until it won its independence on July 5, 1975. Cape Verdean emigration to America began with the ships sailing from the Old World to the New World carrying slaves that were transported from Cape Verde. They were primarily brought to the New England area: Boston, Brockton, New Bedford, and Pawtucket.

In the eighteenth century, whaling vessels stopped at the Cape Verde islands to recruit men to work as the whaling deckhands and harpooners aboard the New England Whalers, and they primarily sought to make money and take it back to their country. They were particularly regarded as superior whalers. When whaling declined in the late nineteenth century, Cape Verdeans bought old whale ships (rigged as packet ships) and sailed home, returning to America with shiploads of immigrants who sought refuge from famine. These packet ships sailed until a series of immigration laws came into play, but a new wave started in the 1960s due to the constant changes in the immigration system [in terms of how many incoming people were allowed by the US at a time] (Barboza 10-11). The Ernestina (one of the packet ships), which Cape Verde gave to the US as a gift, remains in the New Bedford harbor today as a symbol of the long-standing relationship between the two countries.

The Cranberry industry became active, particularly in Southeastern Massachusetts, when whaling began to decline. When Cape Verdeans started to immigrate in larger numbers, the women and children worked in cranberry bogs. Later on the men decided to work in this industry as well, which is mainly why today there is such a heavy concentration of Cape Verdeans in the southeastern Massachusetts area. Although working in the cranberry bogs was difficult, and the pay was not very good, they remained faithful to their jobs because they knew that it was better for them at the time. Drought and famine had taken over their homeland (Coutinho).

As Cape Verdeans settled in, they quickly found that they would soon have to cope with not only homesickness but also discrimination. Being homesick was inevitable, in that they were living in a foreign land that was far away from their home and their loved ones. It was also particularly hard for them to adapt to a new language, customs, and culture. In addition, they also had to face discrimination from other cultural groups. As Cape Verdeans strove to cope with discrimination and homesickness, music became a way in which they could join together as one and comfort each other.

Morna, a ballad similar to the Portuguese fado, which embodies Cape Verdeans’ saddest and sweetest poetry, was the most popular at the time when more and more Cape Verdeans were immigrating to the US. According to Barboza, the morna is “accompanied by the haunting strains of guitars and violins, its singers cry the blues, telling stories of cruel fate, or hardship, or lost love” (13-14). For instance, in a song known quite well among Cape Verdeans the singer cries out, “Cape Verde, my small homeland, your blessings came from the heavens full of divine grace.” In a similar one the singer cries, “All the pain, all the sorrow, all the suffering, and all the tears from your eyes are shed on the ocean.” This is basically saying that the people who decided to emigrate left all of their tears on
the ocean [Atlantic], as they left Cape Verde. Since morna connotes a certain sense of nostalgia for the Cape Verdeans spread across the world and of the destiny of those who want to stay but must leave, it seemed to the best way that the new immigrants could be relieved of the sorrow they felt after leaving not only their homeland, but also their families and friends.

Music had a really strong impact on my culture at the time of immigration. Its effects were essentially ones of consolation and comfort for a people who had left their land and loved ones. Although some musicians continued to pursue the popular music of the time, in the 1950s many groups who played traditional music were also formed. For instance, one of the best-known Cape Verdean musicians of his day, tenor saxophonist, Paul Gonsalves (of Pawtucket, Rhode Island) played with Count Basie and Dizzy Gillespie and joined Duke Ellington’s band in 1950. He remained in the band until his death and was the principle soloist for the last 25 years of the band’s existence (Barboza 15).

Although over the years there have been some changes in the culture’s music due to the American influence, the Cape Verdean descendants still clearly represent their ancestors’ natural and unique sense of rhythm and creativity in producing music. Just as music provided comfort for the Cape Verdeans who first immigrated here, in a special way it has comforted me over the years. Not only has music helped me identify with my Cape Verdean heritage, but it has also kept me closer to my family. Sometimes when I sing, I feel as though I am singing to my ancestors - to comfort them, just as when they sang it had the same effect. When my sisters and I sing together it seems to create a stronger sense of bonding between us, in that we feel that we will always be there for one another, and we have created that feeling through music. Thus,