



The angel of the morna

Cesaria Evora's voice put Cape Verde on the map,
writes **Iain Shedden**

CESARIA Evora's story is one of triumph over adversity, combined with a bit of luck, quite a lot of alcohol and hardly any footwear. The Barefoot Diva, as she has become known during her 24 years as a recording artist, doesn't like to wear shoes on stage. She doesn't drink now, either, although at one point in her life it had a pivotal role. She still enjoys a cigarette, though, she says, lighting up.

"I've been smoking for more than 40 years and my voice still sounds the same," she says.

That voice, a sweet, delicate, yet powerful instrument, is what has made the 66-year-old Evora a global star. It has also put the music of her native Cape Verde on the international map.

Cape Verde, a group of islands off the coast of Senegal, has a rich folk music tradition. Evora practises several forms of it, notably morna, a kind of blues with its roots in Portuguese fado and Brazilian *modinha*. Like the blues, it can be sad and beautiful simultaneously. Despite the fact that she sings morna in a Creole language beyond the ken of most people outside of Cape Verde, Evora's emotive delivery has made it popular with audiences from Norway to New York.

The singer is making her second visit to Australia, bringing her rare form of music to the Perth International Arts festival this week as well as to Womadelaide, Sydney Opera House and Melbourne's Hamer Hall next month.

Evora joins a typically eclectic line-up at this year's Womadelaide, one that includes Mali's Toumani Diabate, Ugandan dancer and multi-instrumentalist Pedson Kasume and Brazil's Clube do Balanco alongside local talent such as the John Butler Trio, Sarah Blasko and Kutcha Edwards.

Although mature in years, she says she enjoys travelling to new places, perhaps because she got her start in the music industry, professionally speaking, only when she was in her late 40s.

"I like to travel because it's part of my job," she says. "I'm happy when a country invites me to perform a concert."

Evora's ability to make morna sound so authentic could be attributed to her upbringing as much as the traditions she has inherited. Her childhood reads like a blues song.

She grew up in a poor family on the island of Sau Vicente. Her father, a violinist, died when she was seven, leaving her mother to bring her up while earning a meagre living as a cook. Eventually the young Evora was taken

into an orphanage and it was there that she learned to sing in the orphanage choir.

"I didn't do anything to my voice, it's just natural," she says. "I didn't go to school to learn music or to learn singing or anything like that."

During her teenage years she learned the traditional skills of singing morna and the more upbeat coladeras. By the time she was in her 20s Evora had become a local star, just by singing in bars and clubs across Cape Verde.

"I wasn't at all ambitious when I was young," she says. "Really not. One day I started to sing in public just because I enjoyed it. I found a group of young people playing the music I liked and one of them said to me, 'Sing higher, because you have a nice voice'. That was when I was 16."

Once established as a star in her homeland, however, her career began to unravel. She liked to party as well as perform, a trait that led to her quitting music completely for 10 years.

Her revival — and indeed the beginning of her international career — came when she was asked to perform in Portugal in 1985 (Cape Verde had been a Portuguese colony until it gained independence in 1975). While there she recorded her debut album.

Although not a big seller, the recording was strong enough to attract the attention of a French producer, former Cape Verde resident Jose de Silva. He convinced her to make an album in Paris. *La Diva aux Pieds Nus* (The Barefoot Diva), released in 1988, was a critical success and Evora was on her way, at the age of 47.

Today she can look back on that break as just another episode of her unusual career. Since the release of that album she has released many more and collaborated with singers from other countries, such as Cuba's Compay Segundo. Even then, she has sung in her native Creole.

"Maybe I was lucky," she says, trying to explain her mid-life career transformation. "One day I went abroad to sing for other people and they liked it and I've been able to keep doing it ever since then."

As her reputation has grown, so she has come to be compared with some of the great female singers, such as Edith Piaf and Billie Holiday, but these are not comparisons that sit well with her.

"I don't like the comparison because each singer is unique," she says. "Piaf and Holiday are singers that I love very much. I'm a fan of them. But we are not the same. I stay with my style, with my traditional music."

Despite her success in the US, South America and Europe, Evora has remained in Cape Verde for most of her life.

"When I was young I didn't have this dream of travelling and singing everywhere, but I have always loved my country and I want to live here," she says.



And while her music, or more specifically the morna part of it, might be seen as relentlessly sad, she believes there is something uplifting in it as well.

“Morna seems to be melancholic,” she says, “but for the people here it is a very joyful music. Morna expresses our feelings. There are many themes like love, like separation and so on, but it can be happy music too.”

And she, for one, is happy not just to sing about it, but to live it, as she has done all of

her life.

“When you grow up in a poor country it is always hard,” she says. “But I think it was meant to be for me. It was lucky for me. It was my destiny.”

Cesaria Evora plays Perth International Arts Festival on Thursday, Melbourne’s Hamer Hall on March 2, Sydney Opera House March 3 and Womadelaide on March 8 and 9.



Sole-baring:
Cesaria Evora prefers to perform without shoes