

## Episode 95: Fado

### Summary

Nick and Wendy talk about the famous Portuguese music style known as fado. They discuss the concept and origins of fado, and how to see it in Lisbon.

### Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about fado, which is a type of Portuguese music that we've enjoyed since we've been living here in Portugal. And it's unique to Portugal and it very much forms part of the Portuguese identity, I think. So Wendy, what is fado?

Wendy: What is fado? It's a bit hard to explain. Well, the word fado means something like fate or destiny and the music is very much filled with emotion, and often quite sad emotions. Uhh, there's a word in Portuguese called, well the word is *saudade*, which, uhh, doesn't really have a good English translation. It's something like longing<sup>1</sup> and missing and nostalgia. You know, having ... being sad that things aren't the way that they used to be before. And so this word comes up a lot in fado songs. And they're not all sad. Some of them are quite happy but they're all very emotional. So even if you don't understand a single word of Portuguese, I think that the emotion really comes across through the music and it can be a very powerful experience to watch fado being sung live.

Nick: Wow, that's a good answer. It's interesting that there's actually a fado museum here in Lisbon and we've been to it. And there's a video that they've set up, and it's very well done. And they have these interviews with these *fadistas*, who are the people who sing fado. And they actually ask all of them that exact question: what is fado? And it's a very basic, simple question, or it seems to be. And they all have so much trouble answering it.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And so they just sort of stand there and they say, 'Ooh, oh gosh, I don't know.' And they can't really explain it or they can't really describe it. And so it really goes beyond just a type of music. It's something more than that.

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<sup>1</sup> longing: strong desire for something

Wendy: Yeah, absolutely. I would say it's something quite visceral<sup>2</sup>, something that people feel very deeply, especially the performers, you know, people who have dedicated their lives to singing fado or to playing, because the singers are accompanied by a classical guitar and also another instrument that's called a Portuguese guitar, uhh, that's a little bit different from your typical acoustic guitar. And I think all the people who are in this fado world, they're really consumed by it and can't think about anything else. And, uhh, yeah, it's, like I said, very powerful and very full of emotions.

Nick: So you know more about fado than I do, but I believe it was born here in Lisbon, and in particular in one of the historical neighbourhoods of Lisbon which is called Mouraria. And so what else can you tell me about that?

Wendy: Yeah, so it ... fado came about initially in Mouraria, which was a very poor neighbourhood and so it was very much a music of the working class and the lower classes. It was actually sung by prostitutes in many cases. And then it was a particular prostitute named Maria Severa who was, umm ... one of her clients, let's say, was from the higher classes. And he would take her out, you know, to the fancy<sup>3</sup> events that he would go to, to the bullfights and fancy dinners and things like that. And then she started singing in public to the higher classes and that's when it kind of became popular on a national level and it became accepted by all different types of Portuguese people. And then it was much later, with Amália Rodrigues, who really made it internationally famous, and she toured all over the world and filled theatres and stadiums and that was when fado really became known around the world.

Nick: And the same thing happened with us, because we knew of a song that was sung by Amália, which in translation is called *The (A) Portuguese House*, and so when we were thinking about moving to Portugal, this became a kind of, umm, just a song that we would think about because we were aware of the song and we also wanted to move to Portugal and have a Portuguese house, so to speak. Not exactly the one she describes in the song. Umm, and in fact where we live in Lisbon is very close to where Amália herself lived.

Wendy: Yes.

Nick: And so her house is now a museum, and you can go into it, and we've been into it to see where we lived.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm. There's also a little café inside there and there's a great courtyard where you can sit and eat and hang out<sup>4</sup>. So, yeah, it's a beautiful house and all of her furnishings and everything is there just as she left it when she died.

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<sup>2</sup> visceral: related to emotion, something you feel inside you (literally and figuratively)

<sup>3</sup> fancy: classy, high quality, not plain (can be used to describe clothes, restaurants, hotels etc).  
See also: Episode 44.

<sup>4</sup> hang out (phrasal verb, informal): spend free time in a relaxed and casual way

Umm, yeah, so Amália, she's known as the queen of fado, and she is definitely the most famous fado singer. She's not alive anymore, she died in 1999, I believe. But there are others who have come after her. And now there are *fadistas* who are kind of modernising fado a bit. So you have kind of a new kind of fado that's being sung now. And it is more modern, more, kind of, I don't know, upbeat<sup>5</sup> and maybe something a bit more attractive to younger people. But the traditional stuff is also still very popular, at least among certain circles<sup>6</sup>.

Nick: Yeah, it's a very traditional country so, yeah, I'm sure some people maybe aren't really happy with this new direction that some fado might be going in, but, umm, so be it.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: So there are quite a few different ways that you can see fado in Lisbon, and elsewhere in the country, I'm sure, as well. Umm...

Wendy: Yeah, it's really mostly a Lisbon thing, at least the fado that I know and the fado that we hear in Lisbon, that is from Lisbon. There are one or two other cities that have their own type of fado. Coimbra is one of them, but it's a different style. And if you listen to ~~very much~~ (a lot of) fado, you'll be able to pick out pretty quickly which is Coimbra fado and which is Lisbon fado. And I think that Porto might have its own kind of fado as well, if I remember right. But, yeah, it really is specific to Lisbon, at least the kind that we're talking about for now.

Nick: So a lot of people who come here as tourists, especially those who come as part of a group tour, will go to these fado houses, which are in Alfama. Alfama is the most famous of the historical neighbourhoods of Lisbon. It's not the Mouraria, which is where fado was born, but it's essentially the neighbourhood that's next to that. And you can go and have a dinner and a show, umm, which is a good introduction, I guess, to fado. It's quite a touristy operation, but it's very popular and a lot of people do it.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm, yeah. It's quite expensive and I think that's why it's become something that only tourists do, because it's really beyond the reach of most Portuguese. The salaries are not very high here and you can easily spend a hundred euros for a dinner for two people, uhh, at one of these fado houses. Now you do get a performance along with<sup>7</sup> your meal, so you can think of it as paying for the performance and the meal together. And, you know, maybe that's not such a bad price. And the quality is very good, of the performance, if you go to one of those places. But I prefer to go to, kind of, dive bars<sup>8</sup>, where the quality might not

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<sup>5</sup> upbeat: positive, happy, cheerful

<sup>6</sup> circles: social groups (in this case)

<sup>7</sup> along with: in addition to

<sup>8</sup> dive bars: cheap, local bars that might not be clean or reputable

be so good, and you never really know who's going to be singing on any given night<sup>9</sup>. But for one it's much cheaper, because you can just buy one drink, so you can have a glass of wine for four euros, and that's all you spend, as opposed to<sup>10</sup> spending fifty euros in a fado house. And you can sit there all night and listen to, you know, people sing for hours. And it's very, very intimate. It's a really, umm, really small bar and there's no stage or anything. The singers are just standing, you know, right in the middle of the crowd and that's my favourite way to watch fado.

Nick: Yeah, and even sometimes, even though they're dive bars like you said, sometimes famous fado singers come and sing at these places, right?

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, that's true. Uhh, there's one particular bar that I like to go do, which is called Tasca do Chico. And one night I saw Mariza in Tasca do Chico, and Mariza is the most famous fado singer who is alive today, I would say. Umm, so she is in her early forties, and she was actually from Mozambique originally, but then she moved to Lisbon when she was very young, about three years old, and kind of grew up in the Mouraria. And so she sings, I would say, traditional fado. And she did not actually sing the night that I saw her there. But she was sitting at the table right next to me, and some of the other *fadistas* who were with her and who were her friends and who were sitting at their table, they did get up and sing. I didn't know them by face. Maybe they were also famous, but I don't really know that many famous fado singers. So I didn't recognise them to see them, but it was a fantastic show that night. So, yeah, it's always a gamble as to what you're going to get.

Nick: Yeah, but I guess that's part of the attraction. You see a similar thing in comedy clubs, umm, in New York for example, where some of the famous comedians like to go to these kind of crummy little comedy bars when they could sell out a huge arena. But they prefer to go to these little ones and it's a lot more intimate and it's a different experience for them.

Wendy: Yeah, for sure.

Nick: Alright, so hopefully we'll see some more fado while we're living here.

Wendy: I'm sure that we will!

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<sup>9</sup> on any given night: on a particular night, from one night to another

<sup>10</sup> as opposed to: instead of (+ -ing form; the 'to' is a preposition that forms part of the phrase, not part of the infinitive of the verb that follows). See also: Episode 10.

## Comprehension Questions

1. According to Wendy, what is the main feature of fado singing?
2. Who were some of the early fado singers and how did it become popular?
3. Why does Wendy like to go to dive bars to listen to fado?

## Exercises

*Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.*

1. She had another long week at work but she never complains. She's always very \_\_\_\_\_ every time I see her.
2. They grew up near the ocean and ever since they moved inland for professional reasons, they've felt a deep \_\_\_\_\_ to move back to the beach.
3. The restaurant they've chosen for Saturday night is quite \_\_\_\_\_, so you should dress up for it.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ the raise that he got this week, he also received a big Christmas bonus.
5. The restaurant doesn't have a fixed menu so you never know what you're going to get \_\_\_\_\_. Sometimes it's delicious and other nights it's not as good.
6. In the social \_\_\_\_\_ that they usually frequent, they don't often come across commoners. Most of their friends and associates are rich.
7. Although it was Friday night, she didn't feel like going out and decided to stay home and \_\_\_\_\_ with some friends.
8. In Lisbon, the Bairro Alto and Pink Street are where all the \_\_\_\_\_ are. On weekend nights, it's really noisy and it can get ugly with so many people drinking.
9. In England, cricket is a very popular sport, \_\_\_\_\_ the United States, where baseball is the national pastime.
10. He has a \_\_\_\_\_ hatred of IKEA. Every time he has to spend hours walking through the display rooms, he feels physically sick.

## Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever listened to fado? If so, do you like it? If not, you can watch this clip of [Uma Casa Portuguesa on YouTube](#).
2. If you went to see fado in Lisbon, would you prefer to go to a fado house with a nice meal and a guarantee of a good performance, or to a dive bar where you don't really know what you're going to get?
3. Do you know another local form of music from your country or somewhere you've visited? What's it like?

## Answers

### Comprehension Questions

1. The main feature is emotion, which can be happy or sad, but is usually sad and often relates to the Portuguese concept of *saudade* (longing, missing or nostalgia).
2. Some of the early singers were prostitutes and one of them brought fado to the general public because her client took her to upper-class events.
3. She likes the dive bars because they're much cheaper than fado houses and the setting is more intimate.

### Exercises

1. upbeat
2. longing
3. fancy
4. Along with
5. on any given night
6. circles
7. hang out
8. dive bars
9. as opposed to
10. visceral