

# The Musical Roots of New Bedford



*1910 painting by José Malhoa (1855–1933), O Fado (Wikipedia)*

by Emma James

With several world renowned Portuguese Fado singers (fadistas) performing in New Bedford's arts centers and venues, let's take a look at this exciting and evocative style of folk music and learn more about its origins and the other influences of New Bedford's music scene.

For those who don't already know, Fado is a type of urban folk music which originates from the city of Lisbon in Portugal. It is known as the soul music of Portugal. Nobody really knows its true origins but it is believed that Fado dates back to the 1820s and 1830s, making it perhaps the oldest folk music in the world. As opposed to rural folk music, which usually has a single local influence, urban folk music was heavily influenced by many cultures as they merged together within developing towns and cities. It is said that Fado was

influenced not only by Portuguese country music but also has some African and Moorish elements.

### **Music of longing and despair**

This mournful style of music is infused with sad lyrics and melancholic tunes, usually inspired by the sea or the resigned lives of the poor. Fado actually means “destiny” or “fate” and a word much associated with this music is “saudade” which means nostalgia or unrealized dreams, a longing, loss or yearning that can never be satisfied. The theme of all Fado songs is death, destiny, despair or betrayed love and the deep emotion it evokes transmits through the whole audience, overcoming any language barriers. A performance is only considered a success if the audience are completely moved to tears by the end. For many Portuguese emigrants Fado is an expression of the homesickness they feel.

### **An emotional and passionate night out**

A Fado performer is called a fadista. Because Fado is a style of music that has to be experienced and felt a performer of Fado needs to be able to express and transmit deep feelings using their whole body and voice. Many of them train for years and years from when they are young. Fado audiences are very demanding and if they feel they are not having a deep enough experience of raw emotion they have been known to stop the performance.

### **Music as therapy**

For centuries music has been an important aspect of life for humans. Not only does it connect people as they watch live performances and go out to dance, it is also used to relax and unwind. It can be an inspiring and invigorating to hear an upbeat tune and music is often a source of consolation in times of sadness. Music such as Fado, with its emotional power, can have a strong influence on the brain. Research shows that playing, making or listening to music can have a

**powerful therapeutic effect** and music therapy is becoming more widely used in the **treatment of mental and other health issues** such as addiction.

## **Musical influences**

New Bedford's mix of music and art perhaps originates from deep in the ancestral heritage of New Bedford, with its mixed settlers and immigrants from around the world bringing lyrics and music from their traditional cultures here. The original settlers landed here from Exmouth in England followed by settlers from Scotland and Wales. During the first half of the 19th century a wave of Irish immigrants arrived, followed later in that century by immigrants from Portugal, attracted by the whaling industry. With each of these waves of immigrants local traditions, customs, culture and art were introduced leading to the rich diversity displayed today.

The music scene in New Bedford contributes to its vibrancy and culture and this is encouraged in the young. The **House of Music** in New Bedford is a free performing arts school for children and teens offering free services to the youth and their families, including singing, dancing, and drumming. Each year their annual event attracts the local music lovers to share in the celebration of music.

## **New Bedford Music Events**

The Zeiterion Performing Arts Center hosts national and international events and not only is there a selection of live music venues there are also art galleries and museums to keep the most eager culture buff enthralled. The huge diversity of music and art can be seen in the many fairs and festivals taking place, which include the **Summerfest Folk Music and Arts Festival**, the traditional **Blessing of the Fleet**, and the **Feast of the Blessed Sacrament**, the largest Portuguese cultural celebration in the nation.

