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Members of the fado duo band 'Fado Bicha' (Fado Queer) perform live at Festival Iminente in Lisbon. — AFP photos

Portuguese duo brings fado music out of the closet

Wearing a long black wig, fishnet stockings and a miniskirt, "Lila Fadista" wafts a fan in front of his beard as he sings about the gay community's pain and revolt in lyrics not heard before in fado, Portugal's traditional style of folk song. Tiago Lila, his real name, is performing alongside band mate Joao Cacador, who also breaks fado tradition by strumming an electric guitar rather than a 12-string acoustic one.

Hiding under a large felt hat, only Cacador's leopard print trousers and stiletto shoes are plainly in view. Together, the duo makes up the band "Fado Bicha", which translates from Portuguese as "Fado Queer". Although not widely known among the general public, they have toured Portugal, Spain, France and Belgium, performing around 150 concerts since 2017.

But they like to make regular appearances in Lisbon, home to many dimly-lit bars featuring live fado music. The melancholy genre about the struggles of daily life, sung in soulful tones, was born on the margins of Portuguese society at the end of the 18th century. Since 2011, it has been inscribed by UNESCO as part of Portugal's cultural heritage.

Breaking tradition

In Lisbon, the duo performs at The Late Birds hotel, an urban resort catering for gay men in the capital's trendy Bairro Alto neighborhood. The audience listens intently. Rather than sticking to classic fado themes of general malaise, the pair, who are themselves both gay, take the traditional style but turn the lyrics to LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) stories.

Their playlist features songs about a fisherman's love for a fishmonger, the desperation of a gay dancer locked up in a psy-



Members of the fado duo band 'Fado Bicha' (Fado Queer) pose for a picture in Lisbon.

chiatric hospital and the pride of a transsexual woman who became a figurehead for LGBTI activists. French tourist Guillaume Bellon, 31, a guest at the hotel, is new to the genre but already a fan of Fado Bicha's style and objectives. "It's the first time I've been listening to fado and it's very moving," he says. "Artists should get involved like that, it's great what they do for our community," he adds.

Soul and guts

"When I sing fado, I feel a feminine energy," says 34-year-old Lila. "I quickly realized that there was no place for me in the middle of traditional fado," adds the singer, who abandoned the fado school he attended to create his cross-dressing alter ego. "It's the solution I found to live my dreams without having to give up my identity", Lila, a psychologist by training, says. Lila also takes historic, well-known fado songs and rewrites their lyrics, including those by the famous fado diva Amalia Rodrigues, who died 20 years ago and is still regularly played on the radio.

Another method of "liberation and subversion" is playing the songs with an electric guitar, says Cacador, 30, who studied jazz and also plays in the traditional fado bars. At another gig during a music and arts festival in Lisbon, audience member Ana Pereira is also taken with the duo's performance. "I do not make a distinction if it's gay culture or not, he sings with his soul, with his guts," she says.



Members of the fado duo band 'Fado Bicha' (Fado Queer) gets ready before a photo session in Lisbon.

Out of dictatorship shadow

It may have a long history but fado's past is not squeaky clean. Maria Severa, a singer who lived in the mid-19th century, is considered the first fado singer to have shot to fame, says Lila. "But she was a gypsy and sex worker," he adds, with a mischievous smile. Today, conventional fado performers say artists such as "Fado Bicha" are disrespecting tradition, says Carlos Sanches Ruivo, owner of The Late Birds hotel and co-founder of Variacoes, a LGBTI chamber of trade and tourism in Portugal.

"We want to get out of this status quo that remains linked to a dark period in our history," he says, referring to the dictatorship of the late Antonio de Oliveira Salazar until 1968 whose cultural policy hinged on the three Fs: football, fado and Fatima—a Catholic pilgrimage site in the centre of Portugal. Still today, he says, even if legislation has evolved to permit, for example, gay marriage, Portuguese society remains conservative.

As part of the effort to take fado in a different direction, "Fado Bicha" has begun recording its first album, which is being produced by Luis Clara Gomes, a Portuguese musician known for his electronic pop under the name "Moulinex". Fado Bicha's style of fado is a truer form than classic fado, he said, describing the duo's as roaming, of the street and a "fado of the forgotten". "What attracted me to Fado Bicha is their ability to pay tribute to the legacy of fado, while transposing it into an aesthetic and philosophical universe which I identify with," he says.—AFP

