

## Lula Pena, Café Oto

### Introspective intensity from a singular Portuguese artist

by Peter Culshaw Monday, 13 March 2017

Lula Pena is a Portuguese singer who takes fado (or "phado" as she calls it) into new directions and musical horizons. She is one of the most intense performers you are likely to hear and, with only three albums in the last 20 years, keeps a lowish profile. She inspires fierce cult-like loyalty among fans, and had sold out the adventurous Café Oto, located in hipster central, Dalston.

She calls herself an "existential musician" and talks of "wandering borderless and intuitively through different languages and sounds" as she drifts through snatches of blues, flamenco and chanson in a seeming state of trance. The audience received her with a sense of reverence – unusually for nowadays, there was almost no-one taking phone photos or distractingly scrolling through apps.

The variety of styles lifted the show from fado's tendency towards the turgid and gloomy, and she has fashioned her own intimate relationship to the guitar. The word "artist" is used loosely to describe musicians, but here you felt you were in the presence of the real deal. Like other significant visionaries such as Nick Drake, she has created a unique style to fit her sensibilities and material.

The feeling that this was an unvarnished, authentic performance was amplified by her impressive appearance. She was relatively unkempt, at 42 has grey hair and has, as one audience member put it, "eyebrows you wouldn't want to get into an argument with". If most performers are on stage pleading "please like me", nearly always the more interesting ones give the impression of not caring that much, that the urgency of the expression outweighs such mundane preoccupations of whether the audience actually likes them or not.

The concert was, incidentally, to promote a rare new album, *Archivo Pittoresco*, which is a typically driving, atmospheric, introspective set. But whether she is channelling medieval troubadours, Belgian Surrealists or even her adopted theme tune, "Come Wander With Me", from the sci-fi series *The Twilight Zone*, she has the kind of intensity WB Yeats said activates the world of the spirits, and all with a fierce dose of that untranslatable Portuguese word *saudade* (located somewhere between sadness, nostalgia and heartbreak).

if there was something unrelenting about the sometimes claustrophobic levels of intensity, there's no doubt that Ms Pena is a rare unvarnished jewel among contemporary performers.

<http://www.theartsdesk.com/new-music/lula-pena-caf%C3%A9-oto>