

# LULA PENA



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(VOICE & GUITAR)

«Portuguese singer with a deep voice and an amplified guitar, who sings like a poet» – **Caetano Veloso**

## The Artist

Lula Pena, born and raised in Lisbon, is a cosmopolitan Portuguese: a woman of the wide world! Singer-poet, mysterious woman that hides behind the guitar to best surprise us. A unique, deep voice, inspired by multiple references, playing with borders and with the finest poets.

Some try to define the voice and work of Lula Pena: “Something between Tom Waits and Leonard Cohen, but with a feminine twist”. Not an easy task!...

Her first album, Phados, released in 1998, won her immediate acclaim. The deep, commanding yet sensitive voice; the natural blend of fado roots with colours of Portuguese folk music, French chanson, Cape Verdean morna, Brazilian bossa nova; the stripped-down delivery of voice and guitar; all heralded the arrival of a major new talent. And then she disappeared again, only reappearing some 12 years later with the release of her second album, Troubadour, a collection of stories of passion and pain, mirroring her personal journey as existentialist musician and serendipitous poet. In the past few years she has remained reassuringly present, performing in Cape Verde, Brazil, Chile and around Europe, occasionally appearing in duo with Guinea-Bissau multi-instrumentalist, Mu Mbana, or the New Zealand saxophonist, Hayden Chisholm, but usually, on her own and in her own time. In 2015, Lula Pena will be presenting new repertoire, that will be recorded in her third album that is being crafted.



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"2010 proved to be another successful year for Portuguese fado and its derivatives. But the real surprise came with the long-awaited follow-up to singer-guitarist Lula Pena's classic 1998 album [phados]. Troubadour followed closely in its predecessor's footsteps, offering up a stark, haunted take on fado that took in Portuguese folk music, French chanson, Latin American nueva canción and Anglo-American pop, all stripped down to the wood." **Richard Elliott**, PopMatters Picks: The Best Music of 2010



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## Biography

There used to be a recurring thought whenever one spoke – and thankfully, one spoke quite a lot – about Lula Pena. Where was she and why were we suddenly deprived of hearing new recordings of her music, of her unique way of singing, a way that causes wonder in all that come across it? The reasons are manifold, like tales, and as pure and honest as the music they envelop.

Born and raised in Lisbon, she grew away from the television set, her father’s radio a constant presence. She got used, she says, to “sound without the social imagery”. She remembers being 10 and having a teacher that would take her students to the far end of the playground, ask them to close their eyes and identify every sound they could hear.

At home, her brother played the guitar and they both discovered the humble miracle of polyphony, while tearing through the discography of Simon & Garfunkel, Bob Dylan, north-American folk, Beatles or jazz.

That may well have been a significant part of her education even if, to this day, she insists she does not “look for anything” and instead “finds [it] along her path”. She didn’t idolise or despise anyone or anything; and if, as a child, she ever picked up the guitar to play a song she barely remembered, the possibility was always there to make it hers.

She took the lyrics and rearranged them; offered up new words, new metrics, a new melody. She says “Tradition must be kept alive so it can become tradition”.

Lula Pena plays fado removing its “f”, assuming, without orthographic drama but with a lot of faith, her role as “phadista” (the title of her first and only album, from 1998, was, precisely, “Phados”, a sort of Arabic wordplay).

Immersed in her own, singular, relationship with sound, with history, with memory, we can think about Lula not only as one of great craftswomen of fado, but also as someone who lives it. She sails it to every Mediterranean port, towards the French language so she might add words to speak of love, but also across the Atlantic to Brazil and Central America when the wind carries her that way, uttering the English word when she must.

She took drawing classes then stopped. But there is still some calligraphic precision in every musical note she sketches. On the day she celebrated getting a show in a Barcelona gallery, her house was broken into, all her work robbed. Someone reminded her she still owned a guitar. She played on the streets, left for Brussels where she performed in bars and jazz clubs. She played in Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands and to King Mohammed V of Morocco right after the Royal Orchestra, with the oud giant Rabih Abhou-Khalil nearby. She performed many miles away from here, her voice the gift of a romantic husband to his wife on her sixtieth birthday.

Many have fallen in love with her music through the years. But she considered giving up her art and the business, to withdraw, refusing public appearances. She says “velocity is inhuman” and hers is a “work that builds inside out – trying to figure out human



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technology”. We must be thankful to those who only work like this – because they are infinite, serious and lighthearted at the same time. Yes, maybe Lula has been away too long, away from those who understand she is beautiful just the way she is, from those who are more than happy to give her the room she needs to share everything coming out of her in a flow, both serene and everlasting. Those who are free follow their own rules. Those whose hearts are gentle have rules we might do well to trust.

### About the last record “Troubadour”



“Troubadour” is a “living organism that gives and receives”, where we find a gloriously raw Lula Pena, stripped of limits, given breathing room – in composition, in her inimitable rhapsodies, in her overwhelming emotional delivery, in her incomparable voice. She says that, in a record, “everything is an attempt” in the shape of a song, “a coded reading we



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are forever making of the world around us” even if she adds “what I hear can never be put into a record”.

She looks at a stage differently these days, no longer a source of nervousness, a necessary “purge”. The “huge risk” she assumes onstage made her grow into a humble and delicate performer, attuned to her audience. In agreement with the airiness of this “Troubadour” Pena says she doesn’t “want to make closed-off records” so that anyone who sees her live hasn’t “the faintest memory”; so that each moment and reaction might exist solely in that one occasion.

In her own words she is looking for a “Universal tradition. In each street corner lies a divine presence that allows us to reach that scale”. And if she questions fado, it’s in order to feel free and share that freedom, since to her an artist is someone who “can expand by imploding himself and the world”. If Pena has a goal it might be “to turn poetry into the coat of arms of this world. Nothing else” No matter which idea of hers first strikes us or where exactly we start to follow her line of reasoning, this is her web of coherence, cast about every sentence, gesture and moment, one that we are fortunate enough to hear in Lula Pena’s music.

Finally, the necessary alignment of circumstances and events was achieved – we can, at last, gaze upon the Lula we have been waiting for all these years, show her to those with whom we share precious secrets so they too, might widen the circle. An unquestionable treasure: Portuguese, contemporary, unrepeatable. A gift that teaches us to make each day our own, more beautiful and then, be brave enough to share it. “If we are capable of loving individually, why can’t we accept the idea of love in a larger scale?”

This “Troubadour” is also in a way, the culmination of a meta-linguistic and meta-musical process that, through the years has turned a born interpreter into an author. Quite apart from the raw material at her disposal, those who compare what can be heard here with the songs collected in “Phados” may reach the conclusion that Lula Pena has turned all the music in the world into her own. Aestheticism and the cult of citation have become appendages faced with stated objective of metamorphosis. This translates into a guitar technique as personal as the vocal one, though more secretive, based in a singular management of silence, evoking an underground river, mirroring movement on the surface and yet multiplying it in a game of reverberation and dissonance. From someone who often speaks of labyrinths, guitar and voice easily transform into an enchanting maze, beckoning the listener.

As difficult as it might be to us – who know the world would be a better place with more of her records – all these years away from public scrutiny seem to have become necessary, as they deepened and broadened a style that borrowing as it does from fado, bossa, rancheras, tango, chason, flamenco, everything – cannot be claimed by anyone else.

A final note: though the record is not presented in this way, “Troubadour” is schematically divided in seven acts. The first opens with a conversation held in the street,



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evoking both the public and the private spheres, includes the traditional “Quanto é Doce” and “Divina Santa Cruz”. The second is marked by the profoundly altered fado “As Penas” combined with a traditional theme from the Alentejo region “Dá-me uma Gotinha de Água”. The third act consists of themes entirely penned by Lula. In the fourth, two celebrated fados are combined (“Cansaço” e “Fado de Cada Um”). In the fifth, we sail by the fado “Libertação” and a ballad from the Azores islands is alluded to (“Os Bravos”). In the sixth act, we have, again from the Alentejo, “Ribeira Vai Cheia” and the fado “Dança de Volta”.

Finally, in the seventh, her “Rosa” spreads so much perfume it evokes Eden Ahbez’s “Nature Boy” and Mirah’s “Pollen”. None of these are versions, as we traditionally understand them, but rather deciphering keys, possible clues, parts of an ever flowing current that transcends them all.

### **Listen to ‘Troubadour’**

[lulapena.bandcamp.com/](http://lulapena.bandcamp.com/)

### **Video**

Live at Auditorio de Tenerife (ES), 2011 – [vimeo.com/47413659](https://vimeo.com/47413659)

Live at Auditorio Carlos Paredes (PT), 2011 – [vimeo.com/29960692](https://vimeo.com/29960692)

Live at Cueva de Los Verdes (ES), 2011 – [vimeo.com/47413658](https://vimeo.com/47413658)

### **Line Up**

Lula Pena – vocals & guitar

### **Travel Party**

3 people – artist, tour manager, sound engineer

\* all photos by Cláudia Varejão



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