

Canções Profundas (Deep Songs)

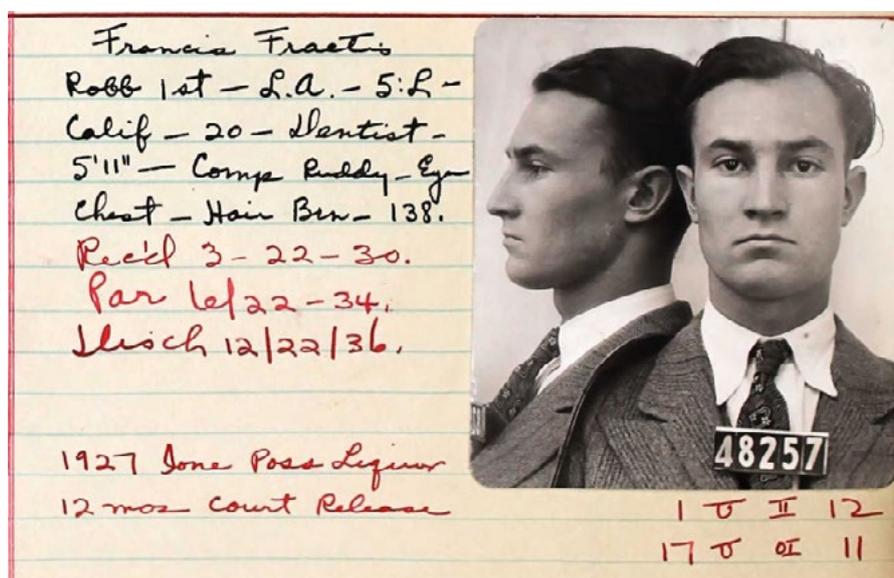
STEVE PETERS

My residency during Invisible Places involved working with an ensemble of musicians from São Miguel over a workshop period of two weeks to make a concert performance of a recent work called *Canções Profundas*, for field recordings and improvising musicians. This project weaves together the immigrant journey of my Azorean ancestors and my own search for a lost cultural heritage that was nearly forgotten in my family. Here I will discuss how it developed, starting with some personal and family history, followed by a bit of Azores history, and finally some details about the piece itself and the process of making this new version.

My interest in family history was originally driven more by psychological reasons than by a search for ethnic identity. Sometime in my late 30s I made the shocking discovery that, despite my efforts to be completely different from my parents, I had in fact inherited many of their mannerisms, character traits, and attitudes. Confronted with this revelation, I came to realize that they had certainly done the same, inheriting behaviors from their parents, who inherited them from their parents, etc. And so I became curious to learn about all of these other people who apparently inhabit my mind. Who were they? Where did they come from, and what were their lives like? And how do they contribute to what I want to think of as “my Self”? Such questions led me to these islands and ultimately to this project.



This is my mother, Renee Fraetis. When I was 6 or 7 years old, she explained that I was not just “American,” but a mix of German, Dutch, British, and Portuguese (1/8 Portuguese, to be more precise). This was rather confusing, but I was intrigued by the Portuguese part because I had no idea what it meant; no one in my family spoke the language, or knew anything about the culture. Yet for some reason it stuck in my head that I was “Portuguese”. Later, my mother’s sister and her husband became interested in genealogy, and would occasionally send us updated copies of our family tree, which said some of my mother’s ancestors on her father’s side were from a mysterious place called the Azores. Again, I had no idea what this meant, and assumed it was probably a mountain range in Portugal.



This is my mother’s father, Francis Fraetis, entering San Quentin prison in California at age 20, where he was sentenced to five years to life for armed robbery. He got out of prison after four years and married his German-American sweetheart, Evelyn Wohlfarth. They had two daughters, my mother being the youngest. The marriage was unhappy and did not last. Surprisingly, my grandfather – a convicted felon – got custody of the children. He later remarried. But in 1958 he went back to jail for fraud, doing nine months of a one-year sentence and getting out a few months before I was born.



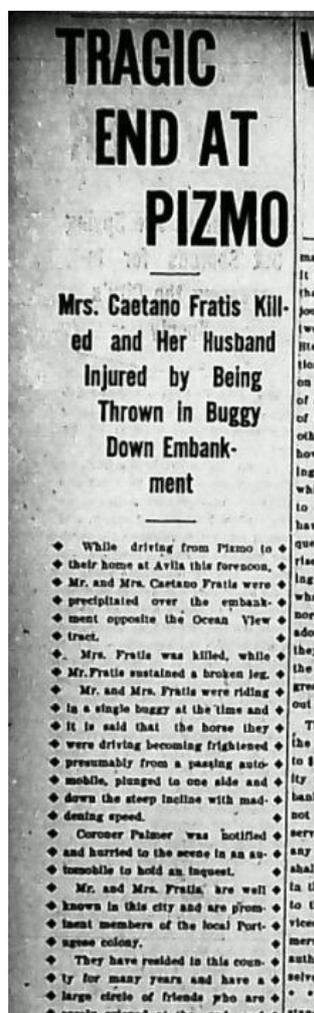
He was also a talented musician who led small dance combos in the 1930s and 40s. I still have his saxophone. I adored my grandfather, and because of my musical interests I think there was some concern in our family that I might take after him in other more problematic ways.



These are his parents, Manuel Fraetis and Elaine van Orman. Elaine was also a musician, a pianist. Her family background was Dutch and British. She first married at age 17, but 12 years later she left her husband and three children, which must certainly have caused a scandal. A few years later she was on a ship that broke down near Avila Beach, California. The family story is that while waiting there for the ship to be repaired she met Manuel, who was ten years younger than her. They married sometime in 1907 and in May of that year had the first of their three children. (You can do the math and draw your own conclusions.) My mother

and aunt remember them as being very kind and having a loving and playful relationship. They later moved to Los Angeles, where Manuel worked in oil fields and lumber yards.

Manuel's parents were Caetano Freitas and Maria Isabel Avellar, both from the island of Flores in the Azores. We believe that Caetano was born in the village of Fajãzinha, and came to the United States on a whaling ship, arriving at age 20 in 1865. We don't know how long he was at sea or where he landed, nor do we know anything about his life in California during the 17 years before he married Maria in 1882. Maria may have been born in Ponta Delgada (Flores, not São Miguel) and came to the US around 1878 at age 23, but sadly we know little else about her. They settled in the Avila Beach area on California's central coast and had seven children. The 1900 census lists him as an illiterate warehouse laborer named "Caton Frates," (one of many bureaucratic misspellings) and her as "Mary." She died in a wagon accident near Pismo Beach in 1908, and Caetano died 11 years later.



But what compelled these people to leave their little island in the mid-Atlantic, their families and all that was familiar, and travel across the world to the far side of an unknown country?

Emigration is a major part of the history of the Azores, and it continues to this day. The current population of the islands is about one fourth the size of the diaspora in North America, where it is estimated that approximately 80% of people of Portuguese descent have their origins in the Azores. In the mid-19th century, life here was extremely difficult and there were compelling reasons to leave: overpopulation, crop blights, high unemployment, and military conscription for boys 14 and older. People were very poor and had difficulty feeding their large families. One source of income and escape was whaling. The Azoreans had become formidable whalers, hunting from small seven-man boats launched from shore. American whaling ships would stop in the islands, taking on local boys and young men as crew. It was hard and dangerous work, and they could be at sea for years before finally coming ashore. Azorean whalers who landed in North America established Portuguese communities in Canada, New England, and California, many of which still maintain their cultural traditions and ties to the islands in spite of the pressures of assimilation and attrition through intermarriage.

In 2011 I went to mainland Portugal for a Binaural artist residency in the tiny mountain village of Nodar.



Since I was more or less in the neighborhood, I took a side trip and spent a few days on the islands of Faial and Pico and became enchanted. Actually, I became obsessed. I made some field recordings and vowed to develop a bigger project so I'd have an excuse to come back. After a few years of additional research, I returned in 2014 and spent a week each on São Miguel, Faial, and Flores, with another short trip to Pico. I went home with many hours of recordings and no clear idea what to do with them.

I had originally intended to make a kind of abstract ethnographic portrait of the islands in the form of a sound installation. But the piece gradually began to take on a narrative form, which I soon realized was the story of my immigrant ancestors. It starts with the natural history of the place, then introduces the human culture, followed by a long journey chasing

whales across the ocean, eventually landing in California to the sound of foghorns and waves near the old whaling station in Avila Beach, where Caetano may have worked. We then hear



how the transplanted culture has survived to the present day at the Festa do Espiritu Santo (Feast of the Holy Spirit) in Sausalito.



The piece ends in the cemetery where Caetano and Maria were laid to rest, the sounds of the local birds mixing with birds from the islands and a traditional melody.

It soon became obvious that this story was too long to work as an installation in a gallery, where listeners would likely drop in for only a few minutes at a time. If I wanted people to follow the whole story it needed to be a concert piece – something I had not done in many years. Much of my work with musicians involves lightly structured improvisation, and it seemed promising to combine that with elements of traditional Azorean music and use the soundscape recordings as a kind of score.



I decided on an ensemble of woodwinds, brass, and percussion, inspired by the ubiquitous *filarmónicas* that play for religious *festas* and in formal concerts. Perhaps the most iconic Azorean folk instrument is the *viola da terra*, a small 12-string guitar, and I was fortunate to meet and record the fantastic young player Rafael Carvalho, who teaches at the Conservatório Regional in Ponta Delgada.



He is featured at the end of the piece, and also in an earlier section playing a part derived from the *cantigas ao desafio* (“challenge songs”), which are still performed in North America as well as in the islands. This is a vocal tradition of musical “duels” in which two singers exchange witty improvised verses over a simple, repetitive instrumental accompaniment. One song can last for an hour or more, requiring intense concentration from the singers. The combination of improvisation within a minimal form and long duration appealed to me

as it corresponds nicely with much of my own work. Finally, there are the *foliões* (“jesters”), groups of men who sing with spare percussion accompaniment in religious processions.



The soundscape recording also features the mysterious, “electronic”-sounding buzzes and clicks of sperm whales. I was unable to make my own whale recordings in the Azores, so these sounds were sourced from online archives. Aside from some editing, mixing, and EQ, I did not process the whale sounds in any way or try to make them overtly “musical.” However, I have used electronic processing on some of the other recorded sounds, most notably the large church bell that dissolves into a swirling mass of overtones and glissandi.

Canções Profundas (Deep Songs)

Steve Peters – Sept. 2013

0'	2'	4'	6'	8'	10'	12'	14'	16'	18'	20'
0:00 – Caldeira + Surf.....	6:00	6:26 – Bugs + Frogs.....	10:00	12:16 – Bells + Mass.....	16:15					
1:45 – Tide Pool + Terns.....	6:26	8:04 – Dawn Chorus.....	10:39	15:04 – Big Bell.....	17:58					
2:00 – Cagarros.....	8:10	9:49 – Cow Bells.....	12:18	17:55 – Procession.....	20:49					
		7:32 – Forest Birds.....	13:21	18:09 – Crowd + Bands.....						
30'	32'	34'	36'	38'	40'					
Crowd + Bands.....	25:28	25:30 – Surf + Boats + Wind.....	32:49	37:32 – Desafio.....						
	25:28 – Tuning + Crowd.....	27:55	31:00 – Ramble + Whales.....	39:13						
40'	42'	44'	46'	48'	50'	52'	54'	56'	58'	
Desafio.....	43:27	50:53 – Tuning + Crowd.....	56:06	41:18 – Foghorn.....	50:50	52:43 – Cemetery Birds.....	57:40			
	45:06 – Surf.....	52:41	55:55 – Saalade.....	58:00						

(watch out! exit times may vary according to length of fish in / fish net)

There is no written notation for the live musicians. During the rehearsal process they refer to a timeline of the location recordings, and together we determine general ideas for how they will improvise for specific sections. Once that general framework is established, the timeline is abandoned and the piece is performed in darkness, with the musicians surrounding the audience. They are encouraged to play with the recorded sounds in ways that are complimentary but without overtly trying to imitate them, and to integrate themselves with the soundscape rather than treating it as a background to play over.

Canções Profundas was first performed in Seattle on my birthday in 2015, with an ensemble of first-rate improvisers consisting of Lesli Dalaba (trumpet), Beth Fleenor (clarinet, bass clarinet), Paul Kikuchi (percussion), Naomi Siegal (trombone), and Greg Sinibaldi (tenor sax, bass clarinet).



I also played my grandfather's alto saxophone for the first time in nearly 25 years, and had it completely restored for the occasion. We recorded a studio version for CD in 2016. But my fantasy all along has been to present this piece here in the islands with local musicians, and Invisible Places allowed me that opportunity with a three-week residency/workshop and live performance at Arquipélago Center for Contemporary Arts in Ribeira Grande.

On my previous visit to São Miguel I had met the excellent bassist and guitarist Gianna De Toni. Although the piece does not typically include bass, I knew she would add something special to it and was happy that she was interested in participating. She was also very helpful in finding other musicians, and by the end of my first week here we had a band:



Carlos Medeiros Carlos (clarinet), Nuno Carreira (trumpet), Gianna De Toni (contrabass), José Medeiros (trombone), Carlos Miguel Mendes (tenor sax), and Luís Senra (tenor sax). I did not play saxophone this time, but mixed the recorded sound to match the volume of the live instruments. (We could not find the right kind of percussionist, so used Paul Kikuchi's pre-recorded percussion track.)

Some of the musicians had experience with free improvisation and were somewhat familiar with the type of work that I do, while for others it was entirely new musical territory. Over the next two weeks we had four rehearsals in the black box theater at Arquipélago, during which we built a relationship as an ensemble and found our collective way into the work. The first two rehearsals were rather rough, but on the third night something shifted and the piece came together beautifully. In addition to overcoming the challenges of my unusual working methods (and enduring my terrible Portuguese), these musicians made an important contribution by bringing an innate sensitivity to the traditional Azorean aspects of the piece that had simply not been possible with the Seattle group. I was very pleased with the concert, and thankful for the positive audience response. Indeed, I consider this to be the most personally fulfilling and meaningful musical experience I have ever had, and I am grateful to all of the people who helped make it possible.

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