



The white sands of Santiago, Cape Verde – the capital of the first Creole nation

→ FESTIVAL PROFILE

KRIOL JAZZ FESTIVAL

SANTIAGO, CAPE VERDE

With an eclectic line-up stretching far beyond the traditional jazz repertoire, this spectacular festival celebrates Creole music and culture in a stunning setting

WORDS & PHOTOS ALEX ROBINSON

Cape Verde's Santiago island is a magical place – from the air it looks like one of a cluster of Saharan rocks thrown by a giant's hand into a bottle-green Atlantic. At night the full moon shines limpid and bright in a grey sky, tinted by desert dust blowing high in the jet stream. Eighteenth century Portuguese buildings crumble under the tropical heat in haunted old Santiago, once the principal slave port between African and the Americas. Dusty dry mountains tower high in the interior of the island, and the tiny, remote town of Tarrafal is fringed with two crescent bays of powder-fine sand, one black, one white. They seem symbolic of Santiago itself; capital of the world's first Creole nation – where African, European and South American fused to form an entirely new people, language and music. And it is to celebrate Creole music

and culture – whatever its mix might be and wherever in the world it originates, that the Cape Verde Kriol Jazz Festival was established in 2009.

Kriol Jazz itself takes place over a long weekend in the town of Praia, a huddle of streets and squares sitting on a low cliff next to the sea, which is the capital both of Santiago and Cape Verde as a whole. The festival is nominally devoted to jazz, but as the co-founder, the islands' culture minister and founder of Simentera Mario Lucio explains "it is jazz is in the broadest sense – as Creole music, uniquely its own yet born of a fusion of all manner of other musical styles." Fellow co-founder José da Silva of Lusafrica cites jazz pianist Horace Silver as an example. Silver's father was Cape Verdean and his music mixes Africa, bop and Brazilian *bossa nova*.

Though dominated by West Africa, the festival programme is always eclectic, with

an astonishing and imaginative array of new and established artists from the world over. The first festival in 2009 saw Tcheka headline, along with Brazilian guitarist Lenine, *griot* singer Ba Cissoko and pianist Meddy Gerville. 2010's festival featured accordion player René Lacaille, cellist Jaques Morelenbaum and South African hip-hopsters, Tumi and the Volume.

But a line-up of interesting musical names does not make a festival, and it is Santiago island itself which makes Kriol Jazz so special, as I discover when I attended this year. Things begin quietly on a warm, sunny Wednesday with people still arriving from the Cape Verde archipelago, mainland Africa and Europe. As the sun sinks golden into the sea, a string of African acts who include locals Veracruz and Danae soothe the crowds with gentle melancholy until Congolese rapper Lexxus Legal gets people up and dancing.

By the following day when I return from a visit to hauntingly beautiful slave colony of Old Santiago, Praia is packed. And by 8pm people are moving and swaying to Portuguese jazz and the sad, lilting melodies of *Cordas do Sol* before a series of snappy *funaná* bands hit the stage. Star attractions are Gaita Ferro (a group of Cape Verdean teenagers fronted by the brilliant young *gaita* (accordion) player, Victor Tavares), and the band's grown-up counterparts, Ferro Gaita. The latter are one of the biggest acts in Cape Verde and when they strike up in the small hours, the crowd, which by now stretched the entire length of the street, go wild, jumping, shrieking and dancing. Everyone, even snowy-haired Europeans are infected with the *funaná* rhythm, swirling and swinging to the beat as the hours flash by.

By the weekend the festival has spread to restaurants and cafés all around the town, and to a stage in one of the town's largest squares, set up to host the headline acts. Mali's Boubacar Traoré stuns the crowd into silence with his soulful fusion of blues and melodies drawn from the Sahara's Mande religion. Most of the songs are taken from his recent album, *Mali Denhou*. And they continue to be mesmerised by the gaucho guitar pyrotechnics of Brazil's Yamandu Costa. He's a kind of Brazilian Paco de Lucia, mixing traditional music from the border region of Argentina and southern Brazil with blinding virtuosity. Both musicians join impromptu jams at the intimate after show party. This is held at a lovely little bar overlooking the moonlit sea, hosted by Cuban jazz pianist Abel Marcel. By the end of the night I'm downing *caipirinhas* with Yamandu at the bar, whilst Abel and a series of local musicians take to the mic. They include Sara Alinho, daughter of Tete Alinho, singer with Simentera, and whose warm, *morna*-tinged voice is equally as

beautiful as her mother's. It's like seeing a young Mayra Andrade before she hit the world stage.

The next morning local tour operator Seu Domingos take a group on a tour through the middle of Santiago island. The van leaves the dry suburbs of Praia, where Mayra Andrade has her family home, and winds up into the hills. Villages become increasingly smaller and more ragged. Goats wander across the cobbled road. Smiling locals wave to us as we pass by. Domingos point out a tiny hamlet – a mere cluster of houses perched on a mountain slope. "That's where Tcheka is from," he tells us. After 90 minutes the van cuts through a high pass between two mountain crags and then drops once more towards the coast at Tarrafal in the far north of the island. We spend the afternoon swimming in a fresh, clean sea and nursing hangovers with fruit juice and shade on two



Clockwise from top: Congolese rapper Lexxus Legal and band; Brazilian guitarist Yamandu Costa; the town of Praia where the festival takes place; rising star Sara Alinho

vast beaches which are almost completely deserted, despite it being the weekend.

Saturday is the festival's last – and most spectacular – night. The first act on stage is Hernani Almeida, a young guitarist from Cesaria's hometown on São Vicente island, whose gentle playing is like a cross between Bau and Strunz & Farah. It's a perfect complement to the incipient twilight, which thickens into night as festival-goers begin to arrive in earnest. He's followed by a soulful Tania Libertad, whose sweet, soaring voice floats over shuffling Afro-Peruvian rhythms. The crowd get to their feet for Lenny Kravitz's former percussionist, Cindy Blackman-Santana who plays an effortlessly

tight, up-tempo set powered by her funky drumming and the staccato bass of Jaco Pastorius' son Felix. The night draws to a close with a stunning set from Maraca and his Latin Jazz All Stars. It's an electrifying blend of old school Havana jazz and contemporary fusion underpinned by Grammy award winner Horacio 'El Negro' Hernandez's blinding Afro-Cuban percussion, and is surely the musical high point of a little-known but unmissable festival. **N**

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