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Black Music Sunday: Celebrating Horace Silver and 'Song For My Father'

by Denise Oliver Velez for Community Contributors Team
 Community

🕒 Sunday, June 18, 2023 at 8:59:05a EDT

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Horace Silver

As Father's Day approached this week, **my thoughts turned to my dad**. I kept hearing bits and pieces of one of my favorite jazz tunes in my head: "Song For My Father," by pianist, composer, and arranger Horace Silver. I pulled it up to play from my music collection and looked online for cover versions. Only then was I reminded that Silver **joined the ancestors on June 18, 2014**, nine years to this day.

Join me today in a memorial tribute to Silver, and to his music.

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jamboree

Black Music Sunday is a weekly series highlighting all things Black music. With **over 160 stories** (and counting) covering performers, genres, history, and more, with each featuring its own vibrant soundtrack, I hope you'll find some familiar tunes and perhaps an introduction to something new.

Silver's "Song For My Father" is both a tune by Silver and the title of the album he recorded for Blue Note in 1965, featuring a picture of his father, John Tavares Silver, on the cover.



The 10-track album opens with "Song For My Father."

From Silver's own website biography:

Silver was born in Norwalk, Connecticut on September 2, 1928. His father had immigrated to the United States from Cape Verde---and that island nation's Portuguese influences would play a big part in Silver's own music later on. When Silver was a teenager, he began playing both piano and saxophone while he listened to everything from boogie-woogie and blues to such modern musicians as Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk. As Silver's piano trio was working in Hartford, Connecticut, the group received saxophonist Stan Getz's attention in 1950. The saxophonist brought the band on the road and recorded three of Silver's compositions.

In 1951, Silver moved to New York City where he accompanied saxophonists Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young and many other legends. In the following year, he met the executives at Blue Note while working as a sideman for saxophonist Lou Donaldson. This meeting led to Silver signing with the label where he would remain until 1980. He also collaborated with Art Blakey in forming the Jazz Messengers during the early 1950s (which Blakey would continue to lead after Silver formed his own quintet in 1956).

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own quintet in 1956).

During these years, Silver helped create the rhythmically forceful branch of jazz known as "hard bop" (chronicled in David H. Rosenthal's 1992 book, *Hard Bop: Jazz and Black Music, 1955-1965*). He based much of his own writing on blues and gospel--the latter is particularly prominent on one of his biggest tunes, "The Preacher." While his compositions at this time featured surprising tempo shifts and a range of melodic ideas, they immediately caught the attention of a wide audience. Silver's own piano playing easily shifted from aggressively percussive to lushly romantic within just a few bars. At the same time, his sharp use of repetition was funky even before that word could be used in polite company. Along with Silver's own work, his bands often featured such rising jazz stars as saxophonists Junior Cook and Hank Mobley, trumpeter Blue Mitchell, and drummer Louis Hayes. Some of his key albums from this period included *Horace Silver Trio* (1953), *Horace Silver and the Jazz Messengers* (1955), *Six Pieces of Silver* (1956) and *Blowin' The Blues Away* (1959), which includes his famous, "Sister Sadie." He also combined jazz with a sassy take on pop through the 1961 hit, "Filthy McNasty."

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But it was a few years later when Silver would record one of his most famous songs, the title track to his 1964 album, *Song For My Father*. That piece combined his dad's take on Cape Verdean folk music (with a hint of Brazilian Carnival rhythms) into an enduring F-minor jazz composition. Over the years, it has become an American popular music standard, covered not only by scores of instrumentalists, but also such singers as James Brown.

In 2021, jazz DJ Bobbi I. Booker at WRTI-FM wrote, "**The Story Behind Horace Silver's 'Song for My Father.'**"

In his 2006 autobiography, *Let's Get to the Nitty Gritty*, Silver recalled events leading up to the iconic 1964 recording following a visit to Brazil as a guest of pianist Sergio Mendes during the week-long Carnival festivities.

"Believe me, Carnival provided much excitement," he wrote. "After returning home to New York from my visit with Sergio and (drummer) Dom Um, I was haunted by the bossa nova rhythm I had heard in Brazil. So I said to myself, 'I'm going to try to write a song using that rhythmic concept.' I sat down at the piano for a few hours and came up with a new song using the bossa nova rhythm. However, the melody didn't

sound Brazilian to me; it sounded more like some of the old Cape Verdean melodies my dad had played. Dad had always wanted me to take some of the old Cape Verdean songs and do jazz interpretations of them. This didn't appeal to me, but when I realized I had written a new song with a Brazilian rhythmic concept and a Cape Verdean melodic concept, I immediately thought about dedicating the song to Dad. So I titled it 'Song for My Father'."

Probably the most well-known cover (with vocals) of Silver's signature song was recorded by jazz vocalist **Leon Thomas** in 1969.



Lyrics

If there was ever a man
Who was generous, gracious and good
That was my dad
The man
A human being so true
He could live like a king
'Cause he knew
The real pleasure in life

To be devoted to
And always stand by me
So I'd be unafraid and free

If there was ever a man
Who was generous, gracious and good
That was my dad
The man
A human being so true
He could live like a king
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The real pleasure in life

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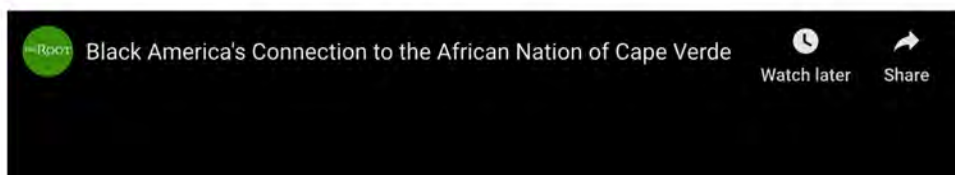
The man, The man

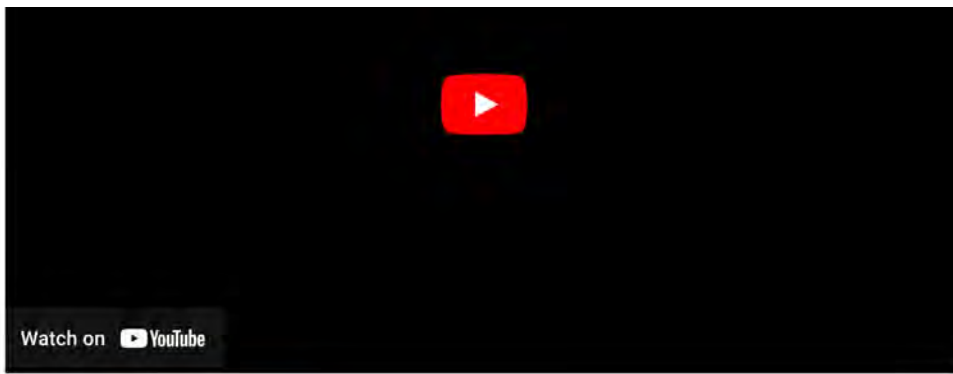
Silver followed up "Song For My Father" with another tribute to his dad's homeland. The album "Cape Verdean Blues" featured Bob Cranshaw on bass, Roger Humphries on drums, Joe Henderson on tenor sax, Woody Shaw on trumpet, and J.J. Johnson on trombone on its six tracks.



Allow me to digress from music and Silver for a bit, and talk about Cape Verde, and Cape Verdean Americans. Most Americans, unless they live in the Boston area or in Rhode Island, know very little about Cape Verdean Americans, if they are aware of them at all. I met my first two members of that group in 1965 at Howard University in Washington, D.C. They were both from Boston, and I assumed at first that they were no different than any of the other Black students enrolled there, although I had noticed they had Portuguese surnames. They educated me about their history and culture. According to Census Bureau data there are, as of 2020, **approximately 78,000 Cape Verdeans** in the U.S.

This six-minute documentary from The Root covers Cabo Verde history, and introduces some Cape Verdean Americans—including Silver.





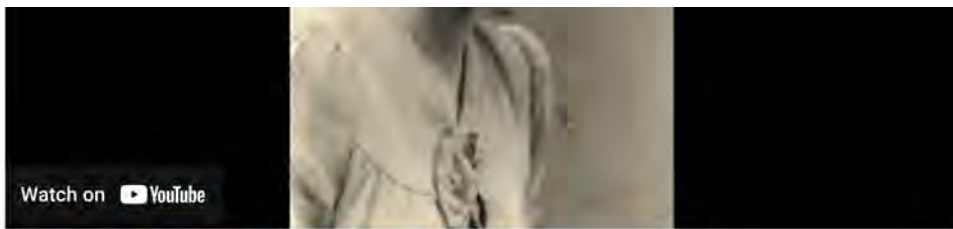
From the **YouTube notes**:

Little is know about the African nation Cape Verde, locally known as Cabo Verde. Historically, the West African islands were as a stop-over for enslaved people being transported across the Atlantics. Some famous Cape Verdeans include revolutionary Amilcar Cabral, music icons Cesario Evora, Left Eye and Horace Silver. Ethnomusicologist and Artist Marcy DePina gives us a brief history and introduction to the African nation.

For a deeper dive into Cape Verdean history in the U.S., this 90-minute documentary, "Some Kind of Funny Porto Rican?", explores the history of Cape Verdeans from the Fox Point neighborhood in Providence, Rhode Island. It was produced and directed by Dr. Claire Andrade-Watkins, **who stated**:

I have often been asked how I came up with the title for my documentary on the Cape Verdean community in the Fox Point section of Providence, Rhode Island where I was born and raised. The "Some Kind of Funny Porto Rican?", is derived from an actual comment made many, many years ago. My beau's brother was a student at Brown University in Providence, RI. Upon learning that his brother had met a Cape Verdean girl from Providence, the Brown student replied, "Cape Verdean? Oh, there are a lot of them around here; they're some kind of funny "Porto Ricans." (Note: spelling of "Porto" is the way it was pronounced, hence the spelling in the title). This is a classic example of the (mis)perceptions of Cape Verdean Americans.





From **Dr. Andrade-Watkins' YouTube notes:**

This is the feature-length version of "Some Kind of Funny Porto Rican?": A Cape Verdean American Story (SKFPR) with Portuguese subtitles. Twenty years in the making, this popular and critically acclaimed documentary brings to life the culture, traditions, and music of a thriving and vibrant community of immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands, the first sub-Saharan African people to voluntarily immigrate to Providence, Rhode Island.

SKFPR chronicles the 'golden years' of the first Cape Verdean community in Rhode Island that settled in the historic Foxpoint area of Tockwotton and Sparrow Parks near the waterfront and the Port of Providence from the late 19th through the mid-20th century.

Renowned as whalers, captains, and mariners, Cape Verdeans have a 'double narrative' in the history of the United States, New England in particular and the larger African Diaspora. From the 16th into the 19th centuries, Cape Verde acted as a point of embarkation for the global slave trade, including slave ships from Rhode Island. In the 20th century, Cape Verdeans fleeing harsh colonial rule and devastating cycles of famine and drought became the first people of the African Diaspora to immigrate voluntarily to the United States.

The new immigrants to Rhode Island arrived in 1892 on the packet *Nellie May*, captained by Antonio Coelho. Others followed, arriving in Fox Point aboard Cape Verdean-owned packets. The close-knit Cape Verdean neighborhood of tenement homes and businesses stretched contiguously through the Tockwotton neighborhood, along South Main, Pike (now Alves Way), Brook, Traverse, and Wickenden Streets.

Arriving at the height of Jim Crow segregation and discrimination, the thriving and vibrant community in Fox Point kept to themselves and took the jobs nobody else wanted. Every activity included music. Three generations of Cape Verdeans from "the Point" have vivid recollections of the St. Antonio Society dances: small children dancing together, older women, maybe widows, slowly moving to the morna, little girls learning to dance standing on the feet of their fathers.

The community's forced displacement by urban renewal, the construction of Interstate 95, the expansion of Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design, and historic preservation is an untold tragedy and scandal. The absence of the Cape Verdean story from the timeline of Rhode Island history and erasure of the

from the timeline of Rhode Island history and erasure of the displacement of Cape Verdeans is not bad history. It is incomplete. We are here and this love letter from the community is the story as we lived it.

Cape Verdean-Portuguese jazz singer-songwriter and instrumentalist Carmen Souza has also recorded her version of "Song For My Father." From [her website](#):

Carmen Souza was born in Lisbon (81) within a Christian family of Cape Verdeans.

Very early she experienced the "Sodade" feeling of missing someone with the long absence of her father due to his work at sea. She grew up in a mixed language environment of Creole, the Cape Verde dialect her parents spoke at home, and Portuguese, always surrounded by the Cape Verdean way of life.

Theo Pascal, her producer, and mentor and one of the best bass players in Portugal, discovered her talent and introduced Carmen to Jazz and other contemporary sounds that markedly influenced her musical development. Musicians like Theo Pascal, Horace Silver, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Joe Zawinul, Herbie Hancock, Keith Jarrett, Bill Evans, Miles Davis, etc, truly inspire her evolution and search for a unique personal style.

In 2003, Carmen began working with Theo on the compositions that would be included on her debut album *Ess ê nha Cabo Verde*. Carmen wanted to create a new sound, in her ancestor's dialect Creole, that would mix traditional African and Cape Verde rhythms like Batuke, Morna, Cola djon, and others, with her jazz contemporary influences, in a totally intimate and acoustic vibe, different from the traditional festive environment of Cape Verdean sounds.

Give her take a listen:



Lyrics

"The joy of always coming back home after a big trip..."

Ess ê um canção pa nha pai qui passá tud sê vida na mar

Na bord daquês navio

El ta trabalha viaja ta tchora sodade di volta

Ta luta pam vivê

Ma sempre el ta voltá

Chei d' ligria pa dam

Dipôs de tont temp na mar

Nha pai

Ess ê um canção pa exalta sê exempl sê herança pa mim

Força de vontade, carinh

Um vida tud ta luta ta viaja ta conquista tud mund

Note ta parecê sem fim

Ma sempre el ta voltá

Chei d'ligria pa dam

Depôs de tont temp na mar

Nha pai

(ENGLISH)

This is a song for my father that spent His whole life at sea

Aboard those ships

He would work, travel crying His whole way back

Fighting for my life

But he would always come back

Full of joy to give me

After so long at sea

My father

This is a song to exalt His example His legacy

Will and love

A whole life fighting travelling conquering the world

...more me fighting, screaming, conquering the world

Nights seemed endless

But he would always come back

Full of joy to give

After so long at sea

My father

Blessings to all the fathers, grandpas, uncles, husbands, and any men in our lives who have given us fatherly support.

Join me in the comments for more music, and please post your Father's Day favorites.

RELATED STORY: [Black Music Sunday: Soul food, summer sun, and family reunion tunes for Father's Day](#)

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