

Who is Salvador Sobral, the winner of Eurovision 2017?

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Portugal's Salvador Sobral attends news conference after winning the grand final of the Eurovision Song Contest 2017 at the International Exhibition Centre on May 13 in Kyiv.

Photo by Kostyantyn Chernichkin

He says he would never write a song just to get played on the radio and winning Eurovision will not change his life, but who is Salvador Sobral, the Portuguese star who has touched the hearts of millions of fans across the world?

The 27-year-old conquered the song competition with “Amar Pelos Dois” (“Love For Both”), which was written by his sister Luisa, a renowned songwriter and composer in Portugal.

“We live in a world of disposable, ‘fast food’ music without any content and I think this could be a victory for music that actually means something,” Sobral said on stage after the announcement of his victory.

“Music is not fireworks, music is feelings.”

A long time coming

Portugal is perhaps one country that has long deserved a victory. It has been taking part in Eurovision since 1964, having sent 49 artists over the years to the competition, all singing either fully or partly in Portuguese. But until now, it had never managed to place

higher than sixth in the overall standings.

Sobral sang in his native language, the first winner to do so since Marija Šerifović's "Molitva" a decade ago. The Portuguese says the decision was never in question, ever in the face of the risk that it could have limited the appeal of his music.

"Singing in English could help in the votes, yes," Sobral said at a press conference on May 13, the soothing timbre of his voice audible even off stage. "But I never cared about the votes, so I would never do a song in English. I just wanted to sing a beautiful song as it is, and it's in Portuguese."

The Lisbon native, just like many Eurovision contestants, had already tried his luck in another singing competition. In 2009 he took part in season three of *Ídolos*, the Portuguese version of *Pop Idol*, where he came seventh. Sobral is well aware that his sound is far from what usually qualifies today as pop music. In terms of this year's Eurovision entries, "Amar Pelos Dois" stood out in no small part thanks to its bossa novian qualities.

"I never wrote a song so it would get played on the radio," he said. "My album came out in 2016 and nobody gave a sh*t, but then it's jazz and that's just the way jazz is."

Sobral's sister Luisa, who performed alongside her brother for his victory encore, believes when it comes to songwriting less is more and that's why their song was successful.

"I think our ears are so overwhelmed with everything that's happening and when someone comes and sings something very simple and very straight to your heart, it works 10 times better," she said.



Salvador Sobral performs at the dress rehearsal of the grand final of Eurovision Song Contest on May 12 at International Exhibition Center in Kyiv. (Kostyantyn Chernichkin)

How love for both was born

“Amar Pelos Dois” came together as something of a last minute project, after Portugal’s public broadcaster invited composers to submit a song for Eurovision, calling for entries to “do something different” after the country’s long run without success in the song contest.

Sobral said given his sister’s place as “the best composer in the country” she naturally made a submission but only managed to get it in at the last minute, having just given birth a few months ago. The result, said the singer, is “the most beautiful song Eurovision has ever seen.”

“Amar Pelos Dois”, which tells a tale of unconditional, unrequited love, was always meant to be sung by Sobral, rather than Luisa herself.

“His love is strong enough for both of the partners,” she said of her brother.

Observant listeners have noted that the song does not have any feminine or masculine pronouns or endings, leaving it open for all sexualities and making it the ultimate fit for this year’s Eurovision theme “celebrate diversity.”

That touch wasn’t deliberate, Luisa explained, but she did want to write a song that would be applicable both to herself and her brother.

“I think for a song like this to win is “celebrating diversity,” for sure,” Sobral elaborated. “I hope for the next editions of Eurovision people can bring some different things and also

some music.”

More than music

Sobral is known for delivering powerful messages that go far beyond attempts to boost record sales. He arrived at the first semi-final press conference on May 9 wearing an “S.O.S. Refugees” sweatshirt in what he said was an effort to bring the world’s attention to “the biggest problem Europe has now.”

“People come to Europe in plastic boats and are being asked to show their birth certificates in order to enter a country,” he said. “Make no mistake, these people are not immigrants, they’re refugees running from death.”

Such comments prompted the organizers of Eurovision to send Sobral an email asking to stop “political or commercial messages.” The singer hit back, ridiculing the request.

“What if I wear an Adidas sweatshirt, would that be considered a commercial message?” he asked. “It wasn’t political, it was humanitarian.”

Future plans

Sobral, always a crowd favorite with his jokes and sincerity, said having four bodyguards escort him to his dressing room at Eurovision was “too much.” He also believes it would be “weird” if he were now considered a national hero in his native Portugal.

“I think the real hero is (Real Madrid footballer) Ronaldo, I’m glad he has that role,” Sobral said.

“I just want to live a peaceful life and I hope that can happen and I’m sure it will. Maybe there will be a big fuss in the beginning, but that will pass.

“Let’s not forget that with these things you win today and tomorrow nobody remembers you.”

Sobral says he hopes to release a second album soon and have a summer concert tour around Portugal. A further European tour could also be on the cards, with the singer revealing that he would also love to go to South America.

But most of all, he says he hopes his success at Eurovision will leave a lasting impression.

“I hope this victory can bring a change,” he said. “Not only to this contest, but also to music in general and pop music.”

“If I can do that, it will be my biggest joy.”