



• by Robert

Myers

# THE BRAZILIAN

**T**he way I make music is so primitive, so naive," Nana says, sitting in a black silk bathrobe in his Chelsea apartment. The birds in the courtyard titter in the branches of the ginkgo trees; behind them the Empire State Building rises above the brownstones on the next block. "I try to look for simplicity," he says, "to make musical sounds everyone can enjoy."

And he genuinely seems to mean it, although it's important to remember that he's the same person who has created some of the most sophisticated music of the last 20 years, leading his own groups and playing percussion with everyone from David Byrne to B.B. King to the Ambitious Lovers. He's only recently returned from a tour of

Scandinavia with his band the Bushdancers and a solo performance in the Teatro Valli, an opera house in Milan (where he performed music from his composition "Saudades" for a ballet by choreographer Jennifer Muller). In a few days he'll be in the studio in New York with Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto.

Because Nana achieved notoriety on his first album, *Africadeus* (Europa), playing the berimbau (an African stringed instrument with a bow and resonating gourd, used in Bahia to accompany capoeira, a dance that evolved from a martial art brought to Brazil by slaves), many people assume Nana is from Bahia. Vasconcelos was actually born in Recife, the

capital of the neighboring Brazilian state of Pernambuco. He grew up playing mambo, bolero, and cha-cha-cha with his father, an itinerant guitarist and arranger. Nana began his professional career at 12 — he had to obtain a special license from the police to perform in cabarets — and by the age of 16 he was playing tympani for the Recife Municipal Orchestra.

"There was such a variety of rhythms in that part of Brazil," Nana says, "xote, baião, ciranda, xaxado, bumba-meu-boi. Brazil's the only place in the world some of them exist. They're not in Africa anymore because they were destroyed by colonization. They became Brazilian because they mixed in Brazil, berimbau from one place, capoeira



There is a delightful confusion upon hearing Nana Vasconcelos' new album *Rain Dance*. It's not unlike what you experience as a child when you first walk through the woods alone or take a bus by yourself to the center of the city. You are surrounded by sounds — chirps, whistles, hisses, or strange voices, engines rumbling, the clattering of machines. Even the most familiar sounds, like leaves rustling in the wind, water moving between stones, and loud breathing,

**NANA** can startle you in the cacophony or the sudden silence.

**VASCONCELOS** You are frightened, disoriented, ready

**DOESN'T** to run. But the fear dissipates and turns suddenly

**SKIP** A to delight, as you detect in the sounds of this place an

**BEAT** undeniable rhythm, an exhilarating, strangely familiar music.

# RHYTHM MACHINE

from somewhere else, the cuica (squeaking drum) from Congo. They got together for the first time in Brazil."

One of Nana's favorite rhythms is maracatu, the Pernambucan version of music of the congada, the ritual crowning and de-crowning of a slave king during carnival. "It's played by these big drums," he says. "It has incredible funk." When he was a teenager in Recife he played the bass drum in a maracatu (also the name of the groups that play the music), and in stage performances he frequently uses it in the same drum-major style with a cymbal, a snare drum, a whistle in his mouth and various rattles, shells, gourds, and a large piece of shining sheet metal laying at his feet.

**A** couple of years ago Vasconcelos passed some kids breakdancing on the street in New York, and when he told them he was a musician they asked him to play something. He began playing percussion, but because it was acoustic they didn't like it, and told him to stop. Chagrined, he went out and bought a drum machine — the first one he had ever used — and programmed it with maracatu and other rhythms from northeastern Brazil. "The sounds were so fresh," he says. "The kids loved them." He ended up forming a group with the breakdancers called Magnificent Force, and they toured together, performing with the Indian percussionist Trilok Gurtu.

Nana proudly refers to himself as an ethnic or folk musician, although ironically he identifies Jimi Hendrix as one of his seminal influences. Because Nana was not a Bahian, he says, he was freer to explore the use of the berimbau in modes other than the ritualistic realm of capoeira, but it was not until he first heard Hendrix in the late sixties that he perceived the diversity of harmonic possibilities inherent in the instrument. "I listened to Hendrix," he says, "playing guitar, using feedback, and I thought I can do that with the berimbau." Nana began to explore similar techniques with other Brazilian percussion instruments and with his own voice, and eventually used the cuica to play an extraordinary blues ▶



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Jon Young - Option Magazine  
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duet with B.B. King.

These innovations form the basis of his second record, *Zumbi* (Europa), an album based on the myth of the historical leader of a quilombo (slave maroon) at Palmares in the state of Alagoas. Densely polyrhythmic, this all-acoustic effort seamlessly employs drums, bird whistles, tree trunks, the berimbau, voice, and that most African of percussion instruments, the human body, to evoke the environment of a fully functioning African community in 17th century Brazil. This 1972 album — highly influential among musicians in and outside Brazil — prefigures many of the techniques of contemporary percussionists and composers through its use of contrapuntal rhythmic structures, syncopation, reverb, overdubbing of a cappella voices, and its exploration of the dissonant and harmonic possibilities of acoustic folk instruments. "People think I try to imitate Bobby McFerrin," Nana says, "just because I use my voice for sound. Bobby McFerrin is fantastic, but he's a singer. I'm a percussionist. I've used voice as percussion since 1972."

In Nana's case this complex compositional strategy has allowed for a constant freshness in his music as he has explored ways to refine and reinterpret earlier compositions. A version of "Ondas 'Nos Olhos de Petronila'" (Waves 'In the Eyes of Petronila') from *Zumbi* appears on Nana's 1979 album *Saudades* (ECM) — with members of the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Stuttgart providing string accompaniment — and again on the 1988 album *Lester* (Soul Note), a collaboration with Sardinian keyboardist Antonello Salis. The Keith Jarrett-like improvisations by Salis, conjoined with Nana's haunting African-Brazilian singing, remind the listener that the piano evolved from a folk instrument — the dulcimer — and that the compositions of Brahms, Mozart, and Beethoven are, like "Ondas," stylizations of folk songs.

Nana first gained attention in Brazil in the late sixties playing with singer-songwriter Milton Nascimento in Rio. He has continued to work with Milton over the years, most recently collaborating on *Miltons* (CBS), a record Nana describes as Nascimento's "return to his Brazilian roots" after his previous album *Yuarete* (CBS), with Paul Simon.

Although the late sixties was the heyday of tropicalismo in Brazil, neither Nana nor Milton — whose distinctive style derives in part from the folk ballads of his native state of Minas Gerais — were strongly influenced by the movement. To Nana, tropicalismo was more a cultural stance than a musical movement, and the only influence he will admit to is a parallel interest in "jogos de palavras" (plays on words) and the use of words for their sound value. This interest is evident on songs like "Xingu Xango" on his album *Bushdance* (Island/Antilles), where he creates a composition by joining two Brazilian musical traditions (Xingu, from the name of the largest group of Amazonian Indians, and Xango, the name of an orixa, or Yoruba god, in African-Brazilian religion) with a text that refers in a self-consciously childlike fashion to the onomatopoeic English phrase "jingle-jangle."

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Nana left in Brazil in 1970 to tour the U.S. and Europe with saxophone player Gato Barbieri, who at that time was immersed in tango, the musical idiom of his native Buenos Aires. "Leaving Brazil freed me to play music in my own way," Nana says. "If I'd stayed in Brazil I would have been just another percussionist, because there are better tambor players and better cuica players, but that's all they do, play one instrument. Leaving allowed me to use everything, in my own way, to compose. I've had to pay a price for it. Wherever I go I represent Brazil, but I'm strange to

music he creates with Codona, a group composed of Nana, Don Cherry, and percussionist Colin Walcott. "For me it was a fresh collaboration," Nana says, "a fresh mixture of different kinds of information. Each musician had different roots, a different kind of background. We were the first to use tympani, berimbau, and sitar together."

Codona also used tablas, trumpet, hammered dulcimer, melodica, voice and douss'n'gouni — an instrument from Mali, played by Don Cherry — in varying combinations. The group's three albums —

idiosyncratic style. On his 1987 album *Bushdance*, he constructed songs by beginning with folk rhythms from northeastern Brazil or scat-like chants inspired by candomble (an African-Brazilian religion) and Indian rituals, or subtle percussive sketches — rendered with rattles, DMX, and shaking sheet metal — that guide the listener back to the sources of the songs. On these foundations he laid Arto Lindsay's jarring guitars, the keyboards of Peter Scherer and Clive Stevens, and the delicate acoustic guitar work of Mario Toledo on the beautiful ballad "Calmaria." He created the album's title song from what sounds like a lilting children's round, deftly adding harmony parts — all sung by him — drums, rattles and bells.

On *Rain Dance* he consciously juxtaposes the most elemental sounds — bird calls, hands clapping, berimbau, African traditional drumming — with the synthesizer of Swiss keyboard player Teese Gohl. But here the sound is seamlessly integrated, perhaps because the primary players — Cyro Baptista (percussion, vocal), Sergio Brandao (bass, cavaquinho), and Gohl — worked together for two years as a band before going into the studio. *Rain Dance* has much more of a live feeling," Nana says, and this is especially evident on songs such as "Bird Boy," "Eh Bahia," and the title song, which begins with the slow clapping of hands and develops into a thunderous storm of rhythm.

In its successful mediation of folk and modern, *Rain Dance* mirrors Nana's own journey from the streets of Recife to the recording studios and stages of North America, Europe and Asia. In another sense the album represents a natural evolution from the work he first did on *Zumbi*, *Saudades*, and especially the 1974 album *Amazonas*.

"When I wrote 'Amazonas' it was a violent scream about the destruction caused by the building of the Trans-Amazonica highway," he says, emulating the harrowing screech from the song he wrote in 1972. "Now it's a fashion. Everyone has a song or is releasing an album about the rainforest. My approach is very different. Everything I've done is connected with nature. I make my own instruments — shells, berimbau — and when I do workshops with children, I talk to them about the relationship between the music and the instruments and nature. I think that's going to help the generation of the year 2000 have respect for nature when they grow up."

Nana has always employed his ensemble of instruments — including his voice and body — like a synclavier with which he samples the sounds of nature. Anyone who has ever heard the sound of tropical rain hitting a river will recognize it immediately in the clapping hands on *Rain Dance*.

"I start with rain," he says, "and rain becomes the rhythm. It's simple." And then with a deep-throated laugh right out of one of his songs, he corrects himself. "The way to do it is very simple, but the result is very sophisticated. I look for that. I try to find it. Because the more difficult thing is to play simply." ●



Brazilians because today they're doing something else."

After an acclaimed performance with Barbieri's band at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Nana settled in Paris, where he played his berimbau on the street and worked with disturbed children in a psychiatric hospital. He used music as a means of communication and a form of creative therapy for the children and himself, a practice he has continued throughout his career. "I work with children quite a bit," he says. "On every tour I do a special program for handicapped children. Just recently, I played at the U.N. School and at a Harlem school with (trumpeter) Don Cherry." On the song "Cantei Oba" on *Rain Dance*, Nana sings with four seven-year-old girls, and he is planning an entire album of collaborations with a group of New York children. "Children don't have barriers," Nana says. "They're open to anything. And to communicate with them, I have to be open to anything too."

During the seventies and early eighties, Nana worked with a succession of folk, jazz, and pop-rock musicians, including Jean Luc-Ponty, Don Cherry, Brian Eno, Pat Metheny, Egberto Gismonti, and Norwegian saxophonist Jan Garbarek. He toured with Jack DeJohnette on the international jazz circuit, but he has never considered himself a jazz musician, even though his work has been enthusiastically received by jazz audiences.

*Codona*, *Codona 2*, and *Codona 3* (ECM), recorded between 1979 and 1982 — contain some of the most original music since Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Using folk rhythms (such as "Que Faser" by Nana from *Codona 2*), traditional forms rendered entirely with traditional instruments from other cultures (such as "Goshakabuchi" by Cherry from *Codona 3*), or fusions of superficially incongruent musical styles (as on "Coleman Wonders" from *Codona*), the group was able to produce music that is at once radically reinterpretive and disarmingly "simple." On "Clicky Clacky" from 3, for example, Don Cherry gives a free-form rap in southern dialect as Nana, using voice and whistles, and Colin Walcott, playing sitar, create the sound of an approaching train. The result is a piece that is simultaneously a blues ballad and an inventive reprise of the entire genre.

"Each session was like a laboratory of sound," Nana says. "We improvised and it was totally natural. And it was that sense of being improvisers that allowed us to pick up an instrument without thinking this instrument should be in combination with that. And the next thing we knew, we had that thing, just a natural combination of sounds."

The trio's collaborations ended with Walcott's death in an automobile accident in 1984, but many of their musical ideas have survived in subsequent works by Nana, albeit in his own

The work Nana seems proudest of is the