

## BRAZIL BEAT

### The Storyteller

BY MARA WEISS AND NEGO BETO

**N**ana Vasconcelos is history incarnate: The history of Brazilian people, far-flung lands, strains of the diaspora and other wanderings. He tells his stories playing and voicing his music, a music that eludes words. You can talk all you want about Nana's music, but it's like some abstract painting; the most learned discourse could have nothing at all to do with what he really had in mind. For this very reason he has been able to keep doing what he feels most deeply, expressing his art, pure and uncompromising.

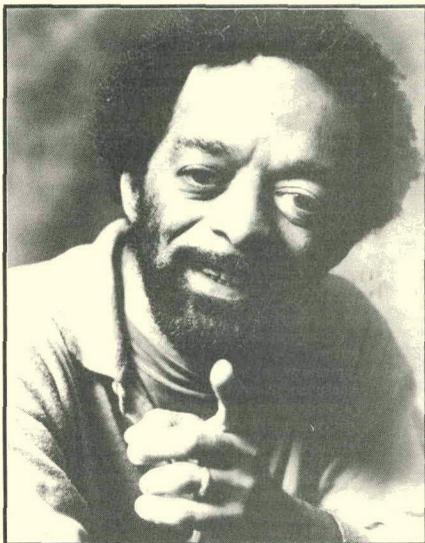
*Storytelling* (Hemisphere/EMI 74238-33444), his newest album, marks the reflective progression of this master percussionist. Another volume in his album of landscapes, it is a thick Amazonian taproot mainlining contemporary language from his millenary drums.

The interview was a spontaneous thing, as is just about everything in Bahia. The hotel swimming pool on a sweltering morning—Nana is relaxed, in a tangential sort of way. Speaking a good-humored English, interspersed with an occasional Portuguese word or Brazilian idiom, Nana runs with the interview, forgets about the interview, begins to tell stories.

When he was 12 years old Nana began playing music with his father, a guitarist, in his home town of Recife. Driven by intense curiosity that took him from *orquestras* to street bands, he taught himself all of the Brazilian percussion instruments and came to specialize in the *berimbau*, an instrument that resembles a bow string with steel wire and with a resonating gourd at the bottom.

When asked how he started his semi-nomadic world travels, Nana says, "For me it was very natural. Everything happen very natural. I was in Recife. I migrated to Rio de Janeiro and I started playing with Milton Nascimento because he migrated to Rio de Janeiro too. So then I met Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, Caetano Veloso. I started playing with them, playing percussion. Then one day a musician pass by, an Argentinean musician tenor saxman, Gato Barbieri, and say 'You want to come to Argentina?' I say 'Yeah.' So when I's there some-

body invite me to come to America, to New York. So when I get to New York, one week I's there I am in the studio with Ron Carter, with people who had been my idol! I say 'I can't believe it.' I didn't speak any English but I's there, playing with these people. Everything



**NANA VASCONCELOS:** "TODAY IN BRAZIL YOU CAN FIND AFRICA THAT AFRICA DOESN'T HAVE ANYMORE."

happen that way with me. I stay 10 months there in New York. This is 1970. Then I got to have a tour in Europe. When I'm in Europe I realize I have something! So at that time I say OK, thank you, I think I'm going to stay here for awhile. . . . I stayed in Paris for six years."

Nana tells that the early 1970s in Europe were a time when some Brazilian musicians like Aíro Moreira were involved and highly respected in the jazz circuit, but that Brazilian music itself, especially percussion, was a novelty. "They'd say, 'Oh you have those strange instruments from Brazil!' You know, because

before they only know about congas and maracas from Cuba and Puerto Rico. But *berimbau*, *queixado de burro*, *cuica*, *pandeiro*. . ."

This prolific time united Nana with dozens of international artists from the most diverse of backgrounds—he especially recalls Miles Davis—and produced his first studio album, *Africa Deus* (1971).

Back in Brazil Nana made his second record, the quintessential Amazonas in which he defined his unique style, an experimental, roundabout voyage through many genres, ultimately anchored in Afro-Brazilian rhythms.

*Zumbi*, probably his most revolutionary recording, highlighted his work with voices and body percussion, using the sounds of slapping and otherwise manipulating his own body. "I imagined the first African body arriving in Brazil."

"I think who discover Brazil is these people. They discover Brazil. They didn't know what they going to see on the other side of the water. They didn't know nothing. But they made Brazil the heartbeat of these events diaspora and today in Africa you can find Africa that Africa doesn't have anymore."

"I believe my music with people on some deeper level, in some deeper place inside themselves." When Nana lays his hands upon an instrument, he exceeds its purely musical value. What began as an intuitive experiment with psychologically disturbed children became a successful ongoing project in musical therapy. He maintains a workshop-residence in institutions in the U.K. and Italy. "They teach me a lot."

In recent trips back to Brazil he brought another idea to fruition, that of teaching Brazilian kids about themselves and their history through music. Two programs were developed under his tutelage—one in Salvador, one in São Paulo—which incorporate experimental and Brazilian forms with symphonic and handmade instruments. "I want to teach them Brazil. I want to teach them Africa, this different Africa that they have here in Brazil. Because folklore is the true opera. It is not a solution but it help us." ★

PHOTO BY NICK WHITE