



Naná Vasconcelos

The Voice of the Berimbau

BY GREG BEYER

Naná Vasconcelos is one of Brazil's most famous percussionists, and is probably the world's most famous virtuoso of the *berimbau*. His musical career spans over five decades, and the list of musicians with whom he has collaborated and recorded is enormous. His most famous and noteworthy projects include work with Milton Nascimento, his trio Codona (Colin Walcott, Don Cherry, and Naná), the Pat Metheny Group, Egberto Gismonti, Jan Garbarek, and his own solo recordings.

For the past eight years, Vasconcelos has been living and working in his hometown of Recife, capital of the northeastern state of Pernambuco, Brazil. His current undertakings include the formation of a new band of talented young musicians with whom he has recorded the album *Chegadas* (2005) and who is currently developing a second record; yearly Carnival activities as the master of opening ceremonies, working with the 1,600+ drummers involved in the local *maracatu* groups; and a project with children's choir and symphony orchestra, ABC Musical.

His last published interview in an American journal dates from July 2000. N. Scott

Robinson published "The Nature of Naná" in *Modern Drummer*, roughly coinciding with Naná's departure from New York and relocation to Recife. In that insightful interview, Naná points to the berimbau as the instrument that has guided his musical development and career: "Everything I do stems from the *berimbau*. Sometimes I ask myself, 'Why me? Why was I given the berimbau and why do I play it the way I do?' The berimbau is the main thing that influences all of my percussion playing."

Over a period of three days, from August 19–21, 2007, Naná invited me into his home simply to spend time getting to know one another. His gracious and generous manner led to a three-hour interview session in which he revealed once again his mercurial character, his fascination with nature, sound and music, and his energy and reverence for the creative spirit.

GB: *To begin, can you briefly talk about your early musical experiences growing up?*

NV: My earliest musical memory comes from the *maracatus* that are an important part of African culture in Recife. These drumming groups come out to perform

at Carnival time. The *deep* sounds of those drums, like thunder, have stayed with me and have influenced a lot of my instrument choices. I have a lot of low sounds—the gong, the talking drum, the berimbau...this thing about the drone, the OM. [Naná begins intoning, "OM."] For me, this runs deep.

I started playing music professionally with my father, Pierre, at local dance cabarets when I was 12 years old. I was banging pots and pans around the house, so my mother allowed my father to take me to work with him. We needed to obtain a special police permit for me to enter these establishments, and I wasn't allowed to leave the stage! With my father we played a lot of Cuban dance music, and my first instruments were maracas and bongo.

Soon after I began to listen to a lot of American jazz through the radio station *Voice of America*. My heroes were people like Ornette Coleman, Thelonious Monk, and Dave Brubeck. I bought myself a drumset and taught myself how to play it.

It is funny because I won a competition here in Recife. I won best drummer just because I could play in different time signatures. I used to listen to a lot of Dave Brubeck's quartet—"Take Five," "Blue Rondo à la Turk," all those things in five, seven, nine, etc. And so I put all these different time signatures into the samba.

GB: *So the music of Dave Brubeck influenced you to start playing Brazilian musical styles in odd time signatures?*

NV: Yes, Dave Brubeck influenced me to start thinking that way. It was Brubeck, Paul Desmond, Joe Morello—that band. This was one side of the development of my style. The other side was Africa. I had the whole culture of the *candomblés*. I knew all the rhythms of the African orixás and I put those on my drums.

GB: *But eventually you stopped playing the drums in favor of percussion. Let's talk about your work with the berimbau. You began*



PHOTO BY ERIN LESSER

Naná Vasconcelos with Greg Beyer



Naná playing with Trio Nordeste. Recife, 1968.

playing the instrument because of a theatre show in Recife called A Memoria dos Cantadores (Memory of the Singers). What year was that show?

NV: It was in 1964–65, during the great period of musical theatre here in Brazil. The show was meant as a way to show all the different folk musics and cultures from around the Northeast of Brazil. So there was music from Ceará in the north, Amazonas also in the north, and then the Northeast, Paraíba, Alagoas, and then finally Bahia. Capoeira was the music chosen to represent Bahia. So for this I started to learn berimbau.

GB: *So you were in your early twenties when you started playing the berimbau. Did you travel to Bahia to find your instrument?*

NV: No, I found it here in the market in Recife. Capoeira is common here, too, although Salvador is the recognized capital of capoeira. For the show, I learned the music of capoeira, but there are very few rhythms involved in traditional play. But after *Memoria dos Cantadores*, the berimbau stayed with me, and I started to think that it didn't have to only play those rhythms.

GB: *You moved from Recife to Rio, where you met Milton Nascimento and that changed the course of your career.*

NV: I never "left" Recife! [laughs] I was just

going to Rio for one week to play in a festival, *O Brazil canta no Rio*, and I never came back. It has always been like that, you know. I just leave. When I went to the States it was also like that. Paris, too.

I convinced a composer I was working with that the drummers in Rio didn't know how to play maracatu, so he invited me to go to this festival with him. In the middle of the festival there was a party at Milton Nascimento's house, and Geraldo Azevedo, whom I had worked with in *A Memoria dos Cantadores*, introduced me to Milton.

GB: *Did you know Milton's music already?*

NV: No. I knew about his reputation. There was a big buzz around him already. Everyone was talking about the new thing, Milton Nascimento. He had a new way to harmonize, to think about music. Everyone at that time was playing bossa nova, and Milton was something else, something different. I liked that, because I felt that I, too, had something different to say, in the sense that my drumming was different than what everybody was playing in Rio. I wasn't going to play the bossa nova that way because I couldn't play it that way, but I knew different things coming from the Northeast.

So Geraldo introduced me to Milton, and I told him, "Listen, I came here to play with you." [laughs]

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GB: *The story is that you jammed with him on pots and pans from the kitchen on his tune "Sentinela."*

NV: Yes, and his response was, "Hey, what are you doing on Monday?" So I started to compose rhythms for his songs.

GB: *The berimbau was one of many instruments you used when you recorded with Nascimento. What was it about the berimbau that drew you to it, that made you start to adapt your drumset ideas to this instrument?*

NV: Well, when I moved to Rio I lived in an apartment, so it was impossible for me to play drums! So I started to play the berimbau. And it drew me in.

The berimbau is very spiritual. The sound of the berimbau comes from *inside*. And the whole connection—the energy is in the *chakra* here [Naná indicates his chest and lung cavity]. Before, I didn't know about these things, but even then I felt something, some energy here [again he indicates his chest and this time exhales deeply and slowly]. My chest, my heart, everything leaves from here and

goes outward. So the sound of the berimbau takes you to a calm place where you can be quiet inside yourself. You can listen to your inner silence. It is like a meditation almost; the sound makes you so peaceful and at the same time it strikes very deep. The sound of the berimbau is very deep. You have to really get *in*, get in very deep to feel it.

It is a very simple instrument, but it is very deep, very rich. Something of nature is in that sound.

GB: *I understand that you made your own instrument—that the instrument you picked up in the market in Recife is not the same instrument you play today.*

NV: I started to think about the *soul* of the berimbau, and something told me I needed to make my own instrument. So when I was living in Rio, I went to the forest, cut my own beriba wood, prepared the wood just so... I did *everything*. I even discovered at that time that the wire should be piano wire. I already thought about that at that time. And it

was very difficult in Brazil to find piano wire. I had to find somebody who was a piano tuner and beg them for wire!

So the berimbau was incredibly important for me, because it made me realize that I have something that others don't have. It gave me the voice to contribute something original to a given context. I could suddenly play with jazz musicians in an original way. Shortly after I recorded with Milton, I played with Gato Barbieri, and he gave me a little solo during the concert, and there I realized that I had something totally different.

Then I started to think about how I could develop my ideas on the berimbau. And the berimbau started to give me ideas that I could translate to the other instruments that I play—congas, cuica, pandeiro, other instruments I made myself, thinking about *sounds*.

GB: *And thinking also about imagery? You mention Villa-Lobos as an important influence...*

NV: Yes, Villa-Lobos' compositions are very powerful visually. In the "tocatta" of "Bachianas Brasileiras no. 2," he imagined a *trenzinho caipira*. He wrote everything on the page, and yet it sounds like he's constructed a train, and he puts you inside, and from the train you can see the entire Brazilian landscape. It is amazing. Villa-Lobos' music has this power, and I do try to put that imagery into my music. I've known his music for a long time. My father listened to him in the house, so I knew this music from my childhood.

GB: *Did you talk to your father about this imagery?*

NV: No, my father died when I was very young. He never saw me play the drums; he never saw me play all these things.

GB: *The earliest examples of your work with the berimbau in the music of Milton Nascimento are two bonus tracks on a re-released version of Milton (1970). On both of these tracks, "Tema de Tostão" and "O Homem da Sucursal," the tuning of the instrument is identical and seems to bear to no relationship to the prevailing harmony of the music you are playing. Were you thinking about tuning at that time?*

NV: No, not yet. It was just an instrument. It was only later when I started to think about writing pieces for the instrument that I thought about tuning the berimbau.



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GB: *Pieces that resulted in your first solo album, Africadeus (1972)?*

NV: Yes. With the berimbau I started to feel like I was on a *mission*. First I started to experiment with different rhythms—different from capoeira. That was scary at first, because the berimbau in Brazil is capoeira. And capoeira is a tradition, and nobody can fool around with tradition—a tradition you must respect, because it has to do with religion, with Africa. I was scared to play berimbau differently because people would say, “Oh, you are messing with tradition.” So I started to play these solos more outside of Brazil, rather than inside.

GB: *Shortly after these early Milton recordings you did, in fact, leave Brazil.*

NV: Because of the work I did with Milton, I started to get a lot of phone calls. Gato Barbieri, the Argentinean jazz saxophone player, asked me to do a tour of Argentina with him. Less than a week into the tour, he asked if I wanted to go to New York City to record an album. Suddenly I was in New York City, and I ended up staying there for ten months.

Then I went on a tour with Gato through Europe, and at the end of the tour I had this feeling. We played in Rome, and then flew back to Paris to catch the flight back to New York. And at the airport I said, “Gato, thank you for everything. I’m not going back to New York; I’m going to stay here.” Because I felt like, “I have something; I have to do something by myself.” And I thought to myself, “If nothing happens, I’ll go back to Brazil and play with Milton Nascimento.” But after three days in Paris, a lot of things started to happen. This guy came looking for me, Pierre Barouh, who did the film *A Man and a Woman* (1966).

The rhythmic work I was doing with the berimbau, using odd time signatures, etc., eventually led to experimentations with sounds, then the use of my voice with the berimbau. Then I started to think about composition. In Paris I wanted to put a solo show together, to show what I could do with the berimbau. And then I did *Africadeus*.

GB: *What strikes me about Africadeus is that it seems like between 1972 and 1979, when you recorded Saudades, there is a radical difference of timbre, of sound quality, of tuning. All of these aspects of your work with berimbau seem to have clarified themselves*

in between those two projects. A lot of the rhythmic language is very similar on both records, but it is the quality of sound that has so drastically changed.

NV: Yes, all those aspects became clearer. After *Africadeus*, I started to play with a lot of excellent musicians: Egberto Gismonti, Don Cherry, Colin Walcott. Working with other instrumentalists led me to the idea that I wanted to make a concerto for the berimbau with strings. That led to *Saudades*.

Let me tell you a crazy story about the berimbau from those years. In my early explorations with the berimbau, I spent a lot of time working on the wire, on the *verga* (bow), on rhythmic patterns and more virtuosic playing. I used to spend hours and hours doing this, and one day the berimbau began to speak to me. I was working, working, working, and then when I finally came out from playing so hard, I needed to come up for air, I physically needed to breathe. So I hit the open wire and simultaneously breathed out, “wah-wah...”

“Ooh!” [with surprise] Suddenly the voice of the berimbau had opened up to me; its voice came through me. It said, “Wah-wah” [Naná plays open tone on the wire], “psiu,” [he plays a hammer-on and -off with the coin], and then “ch-ch-ch-ch-ah-ah-ah-ah” [he plays a rapid series of notes first on the verga, then pressed against the inside of the wire]. That is how I discovered these sounds from the

wire and the verga. I used these sounds when I recorded *Africadeus*.

Later, in the mid-’70s, I was on tour with Don Cherry and we had a performance in Klagenfurt, Austria. During down time, I went to the middle of a nearby forest and again worked all these sounds. Then suddenly the cabaça began to speak to me. There were two voices. One was agitated and aggressive: “Ah-ba-di-ga, ah-ba-di-ga, ah-ba-di-ga” [Naná rapidly sings this phrase in high voice while playing a fast tremolo with the baqueta on the side of the cabaça]. The other was murmuring and mumbling [Naná rubs the baqueta on the side of the cabaça in slow, soft circles, while softly mumbling unintelligible short phrases in Portuguese]. So these two guys were carrying on, and then suddenly an Indian came to me from the depth of the forest and said, “And now, I am here...” [Naná begins to slowly spin circles around the gourd with the baqueta] “and I sound like this” [Naná begins to whistle a high pitch that slowly descends].

GB: *Those are instantly recognizable as your sounds. In other words, the spirit of the berimbau spoke to you.*

NV: Yes, the berimbau spoke to me. These two guys were having a conversation [Naná points to the gourd] and then the Indian spoke, “I am here” [again Naná whistles and spins circles around the outside of the gourd].



"But the sound isn't here" [he points to his mouth], "you have to get it from here" [Naná points to the gourd, and begins to laugh]. Getting this sound depends upon your absolute equilibrium. You mustn't drink, smoke, nothing. You must be clean. You train like this [Naná assumes a yoga-like pose, standing on his right leg only, lifting his left leg up off the ground and planting the foot into the side of the right knee], and you try to achieve a perfect circle, and the spirit comes to you like this.

Really crazy, that story, no?

GB: Beautiful story. And so then you recorded *Saudades*, and the concerto, "O Berimbau," uses all those sounds.

NV: Yes, I had Villa-Lobos and all these other influences going on inside my head, and I decided I had to make a concerto for the berimbau.

GB: And when you wrote "O Berimbau," that was done in collaboration with Egberto Gismonti, right?

NV: Yes. I knew what themes I wanted to use in the orchestra. In the first section of the string part, I used themes based on traditional cattle calls from here in the interior of the Nordeste, *aboios*. [Naná begins singing themes that resemble melodic fragments from "O Berimbau"

and *Cantando Historias*.] And the second part for the strings, very angular and "modern"—well, that was Egberto.

[laughs] I gave my ideas to him. He has conservatory training. I came from the streets; I never went to school.

GB: *Escola de samba?*

NV: [laughs] Exactly. But I know the things that I want. I knew that I wanted to hear cello and viola. I love these instruments and their sounds. I love the cello. It is fantastic. The timbre is so close to the human voice. The timbre of both the cello and the viola match very beautifully with congas, hand drums, berimbau.

GB: Many of the rhythmic patterns you played in "O Berimbau," were ideas already present in *Africadeus*. The opening triplets, for example.

NV: Yes, true. That opening idea for me is like an introduction, to *show* the instrument. You see, at that time I had to do a solo percussion show in a theatre. And the stereotypical thought of a solo percussion show is *lots of fast drumming* [air drums a big mess].

I wanted to make *music* with percussion. I don't try to play loud or fast. I tried to make sounds. So with that introduction, it was just a way to make an opening statement. I didn't use the

caxixi yet, just the berimbau, just the wire. To really show how to listen to the instrument, I needed to come up with a theme—a way to organize my thoughts, to give time for the music to open up and develop, not to show everything right away.

Then I developed a formula: first start with the wire, then add the caxixi, then open up the wire to play the length of it, then add the sounds of the staff and the gourd, then add the voice. It was a formula to develop the whole sound of the instrument, to *show* how rich this instrument is. [See Example 1]

GB: When you play these extra beats or odd time signatures, as for example in the 15/8 bar, you added a fifth beat to the phrase. Did you do those things deliberately?

NV: Yes. Because I have this idea that you don't need to *end* one idea to *start* something else.

GB: You blur the lines at points of transition?

NV: Yes. I didn't do this so much at that point, but nowadays, I frequently take phrases of seven, for example, and suddenly change them to six, then again to four. For example [see Example 2]:

You see, I don't stop an idea when I want to start another one; I just go. When I finish one it is because I've already

Example 1. Excerpt from "O Berimbau." Opening figure. *Saudades* (1979)

The musical score for Example 1 consists of three staves of music in treble clef. The first staff begins with a 12/8 time signature, a forte (*f*) dynamic marking, and a *poco rit.* instruction. The melody is composed of eighth notes. The second staff continues the melody, featuring a 15/8 time signature and a *wah-wah* vocalization indicated by a wavy line. The third staff shows further time signature changes to 14/8 and 12/8.

Example 2. 7/8 to 3/4 pattern transformation.

The musical score for Example 2 is written in bass clef. It shows a rhythmic pattern starting in 7/8 time, marked with an 'x' below the staff. The pattern then transitions to 3/4 time, also marked with an 'x' below the staff. The notes are beamed together to show the transformation of the rhythmic structure.

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started the next. Here is another kind of thing that is a good exercise to do. It is always on beat one that you change. [See Example 3.]

GB: The last part of "O Berimbau" is in seven. [See Example 4.]

NV: Yes, all in seven. I got a lot of that from my drumset playing, inspired by Joe Morello, the maracatu, all that.

GB: You have stated that everything you do comes from the berimbau, but perhaps it is more accurate to say that your berimbau playing comes from the drumset.

NV: Well, yes. I realized I could transpose those drumset things to the berimbau. And now it is even easier for me because it is just on the berimbau; I've got the whole drumset on the berimbau! [laughs] Even the snare drum—I can get that sound on the berimbau! [Naná mimics

opening of the second berimbau solo in "O Berimbau." See Example 5.]

GB: Your tuning in "O Berimbau" is F.

NV: Yes, because for that instrument, the soul of the instrument, the thickness of the wire—where they really sound best is in F. Everything is there: the overtones, everything.

GB: The last track on Saudades is "Dado,"

Example 3. 7/8 to 3/4 to 2/4 pattern transformation.

Musical notation for Example 3, showing a pattern transformation from 7/8 to 3/4 to 2/4 time signatures. The notation is in bass clef and consists of four measures. The first two measures are in 7/8 time, the next two in 3/4 time, and the final two in 2/4 time. The pattern consists of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Example 4. Excerpt from "O Berimbau." Opening passage from third berimbau solo. *Saudades* (1979)

Musical notation for Example 4, showing an excerpt from "O Berimbau." The notation is in treble clef and consists of five staves. The first staff starts with a dynamic marking of *f* and includes a 4X pattern. The second staff continues the pattern. The third staff includes 3X and 2X patterns. The fourth staff includes 2X and 3X patterns. The fifth staff includes 2X, 4X, and 3X patterns. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and dynamics.

Example 5. Excerpt from "O Berimbau." Opening passage from second berimbau solo. *Saudades* (1979)

Musical notation for Example 5, showing an excerpt from "O Berimbau." The notation is in treble clef and consists of two staves. The first staff has a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 124$ and a dynamic marking of *f*. The second staff continues the pattern. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and dynamics. Transcribed by Greg Beyer.



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something you recorded with a special berimbau.

NV: When I was going to record *Saudades*, I left New York and I met Egberto Gismonti in Copenhagen, to change flights to go to Stuttgart to record for ECM. When I met Egberto in the airport, he said, "I brought this berimbau Dado made for you." Dado lived in São Paulo. He had already spoken to me on the phone and said, "I'm going to make a berimbau for you with two strings," and sure enough, he did.

So I took this berimbau with me to the hotel, and when we got there I tried to tune it and tried to work with it, and it was just that.

GB: It was an improvisation, then?

NV: Yes, an improvisation, but with a formula. There I played all the same rhythms and things I do with the other berimbau, but I tried to develop a dialog, a conversation between the two strings. [Naná sings a figure high, then repeats it low.]

GB: But the tuning system didn't work to well, so you ended up leaving the instrument behind after a while?

NV: Yes, I got the perfect fifth. I tried for other tunings but the instrument wouldn't hold them. Eventually I stopped playing the instrument.

GB: That is a shame. The fifth—it was tuned in D and A—is a beautiful sound.

NV: Yes... Now you've made me think about this, and you've made me think that it is time to try to make a new piece for a two-stringed berimbau. I need to find somebody to figure out a system where the two strings can be attached to two independent staves, or to try to split the stave into two independent ends. The top of the instrument would fork into two ends so that the tuning could be more flexible...

GB: Around the time of *Saudades* you were working with both Codona and the Pat

Metheny Group. Your composition, "Que Faser," from *Codona 2* (1980) is another very beautiful berimbau passage in 7. This time, however, your tuning is in E. [See Example 6.]

NV: There I had to tune for the *donso ngoni* and the tabla. When I play and sing that theme now in my solos, I keep the tuning in F or G.

GB: You also used the berimbau when you recorded with Pat Metheny: "Ozark" from *As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls*. The tune is in C, and you have tuned to G, the dominant.

NV: [Listens to the recording and laughs.] Yes, I had become a country and western musician!

GB: On that recording the sound of your *caxixi* and the *cabaça* are very clear, but the sound of the wire itself is very faint, as if you were EQ'd out of the mix.

NV: That was because of the combination of instruments. Everybody played too much all the time! [laughs] There is berimbau because they wanted to have the berimbau, but there wasn't much space to listen to the berimbau.

GB: When you went into the recording studio with these musicians, did you make most of these recordings in one take?

NV: Yes, and I work like that even today when I record with various artists. I love to record in just one take. But I listen before the session a lot. I ask for a demo, and when I get to the studio I already have my ideas. I like to walk in, record, and go home. In, out, done.

Pat Metheny's *Secret Story*, for example. "Doctor," Pat likes to call me, "Doctor, come on, man! I have this thing for you, it is a collection of nine songs." He gave them to me, and I listened to them for a couple of days. Then I went to the studio and in one session recorded nine songs, just like that. But okay, I work a lot before at home. Don't sleep, just work to get really involved. Because when I get in, it is totally buried so everything is

there. Complete. No distractions. When I play, no distractions. Nothing can take my attention away. It is there. Music is music. It is the only thing I know how to do; it is the only thing I do in my life. My best moment is now, and nobody can distract me in that. It is buried [Naná points to his arms and hands as if to say, "buried in the muscle memory"] so it is there.

This is the sense of the improvising musician. I love ECM Records, because at least 80 percent of the ECM albums were done in three days—two days for recording and one day to mix. *Saudades*, Codona's albums, my recordings with Egberto, all of them in three days.

GB: On your solo recording from 1995, *Cantando Historias* (Storytelling), you recorded two very beautiful tracks that feature the berimbau: "Clementina" and "Tu Nem Quer Saber." "Clementina" is a sort of samba de roda, and you wrote it in homage to the great samba singer Clementina de Jesus.

NV: Yes, I recorded with Clementina in 1973. I was living in Paris and I came back to Brazil to try to launch my solo record, *Africadeus*, on the Brazilian market. I ended up recording with Milton Nascimento again, on *Milagre dos Peixes*.

GB: The first cut on that record, "Os Escravos de Jó," is an angrier version of "O Homem da Sucursal," but without words.

NV: The government censored his lyrics, and he was forced to record albums singing melodies without words.

GB: The new title: "The Slaves of Jó"?

NV: The social climate in Brazil in the '60s and '70s needed words—poetry from their music. Composers like Gilberto Gil, Caetano Veloso, Chico Buarque, all of these people weren't happy with the situation. So instead of talking about love and flowers and nature, like the bossa nova, the *Tropicalismo* movement spoke out against the social problems that were at hand. And for that a lot of people got

Example 6. Opening bars from "Que Faser." Codona 2 (1980)



in trouble—either put in jail or thrown out of Brazil. As artists, we felt like *we* were the slaves of that political environment.

Clementina's producer was a friend of Milton, and he was saying, "Oh, you have to record with Clementina

de Jesus." So I did that recording the same week as *Milagre dos Peixes*.

That was her first album, and she recorded it when she was 50 years old! So I composed this piece for her. I was in Gorée, an island off the coast of Senegal. Gorée was one of the last African ports that slaves passed through before crossing the ocean to go to the Americas. There is a film about my trip there by UNESCO called *On the Other Side of the Water*. The idea of the film was mine. You see, the slaves didn't know what they were going to find on the other side of the water.

GB: You left New York around 2000; what have been your main projects since then?

NV: I've been here for seven or eight years, now. I'm hiding here! There is a very strong energy for me here. And I can be quiet here. I like to be calm, to have my ideas, and my ideas are more challenging for me. Directing the opening ceremonies for Carnaval here in Recife—I like this challenge. It is important work, because maracatu, the icon of African religion and culture here in Recife, was starting to disappear. The individual maracatus would compete with each other. I managed to get them to work together, and now they are coming back very strong. There are a lot of young people getting involved.

GB: How many drummers come out for the maracatus at Carnaval?

NV: Sixteen hundred plus. And I've been doing this every year for eight years now. Every year I have a different idea about how to put things together. Sometimes I use a symphonic orchestra, for example, to put alongside these drummers.

All this is very strong and good. I can help break down walls and open up doors for people. Today a lot of women come out to play drums in the maracatu.

"The berimbau is a very simple instrument, but it is very deep, very rich. Something of nature is in that sound."

Before, you would never see that. A lot of people from the middle and upper classes are now playing, too, and before

maracatu was exclusively music from the favelas, morros and ghettos—from the slums. Now it is all over the place. And it is very good

to see young people playing alongside electronica and the like, to make these mixtures happen.

GB: Breaking down barriers of class and of gender is something you've always been striving towards. When you started directing PercPan, you invited female drummers to the festival, just so people would see that.

NV: Yes, to show that women can play drums. To end that preconceived stereotype. I invited Terri Lynn Carrington, Layne Redmond, and Alessandra Belloni. N'Doudou Rose is big. He has an entire

orchestra of female drummers in Senegal. And this opened a lot here in Brazil. Today, for example, you have Escola Dida in Salvador playing samba reggae.

Today we are in 2007; we have to finish this sort of discrimination. I know it is the tradition. In India, for example, it was impossible for women to play tabla or to play sitar, but now they are starting to open this, too.

GB: Here in Recife, you have a new band, with whom you've recorded Chegada. In your live show with this group, you perform your two solos, "O Berimbau" and "Vamos pra Selva," back to back and in that order. When you finish "O Berimbau" you pause to say to the audience, "É ele, é ele. É um Brazil que Brazil não conhece." ("It is him. It is a Brazil that Brazil doesn't know.") Were you talking about the berimbau, or were you already prepping them for the Amazon that you evoke in "Vamos pra Selva"?

NV: No, I am talking about *myself*, and more importantly, *my work*. I'm speaking about the hard time I had in the '70s, trying to launch my own music here. It was im-

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possible, and it remains a struggle today. I still get no radio play in Brazil, despite my new album, *Trilhas* (2006), being nominated for a Grammy this year.

I am singing about the same thing in the song "Tu Nem Quer Saber." "You don't want to know about me, I feel this pain, because you don't want to know about yourself, and I speak with so much love." I'm basically saying that Brazil doesn't want to know about Brazil. Because *I am Brazil*. I represent Brazil all over the world. And no one here pays attention to this Brazil that I propagate all over the world. It is Brazil when I play; what I play is Brazilian. They don't know about my work here, they never play it on the radio, there are never any commercials—but this is Brazilian. But the system is like that.

GB: *But the audience seemed to really be enjoying your live show.*

NV: Yes, they love the show, but I'm not talking about the people, I'm talking about the system. You never hear my music on the radio, or that of Egberto or Hermeto Pascoal, or even Milton—especially instrumental music.

GB: *You mention that Brazil is a very special country because it contains multiple streams of African culture that mixed together in ways that never would have happened in Africa, and that there things that exist here in Brazil that no longer survive in Africa.*

NV: Brazil was a force of change. Because a lot of these roots, when they arrived here, they found each other and mixed. The samba is a result of that. So when Africans come here, they say, "Oh, that instrument comes from Africa, but I've never seen it played that way or in that context." Brazil is unique that way.

When I travel to Africa to play, people say, "Wow. We gave something to Brazil, and you've come back with it transformed, organized, modern, very arranged." This is the reaction I get from African audiences. Because in Africa the traditions they had have largely stayed the same or have gone extinct.

GB: *Roger Lucey's Guardians of the Bow superbly documents your 2004 tour with Kituxi, Inoscencio Gonçalves, and Victor Gama, performing your musical bows in Angola, Mozambique, and in Durban, South Africa. What was that experience like, to be playing side by side with Kituxi, the famous*

master of the hungu, the closest predecessor to the berimbau?

NV: It was fantastic, because he represents my roots. The *hungu*—the way he is playing, the broken bottle end over the thumb in place of a coin, no *caxixi*—was very interesting for me to experience so closely. It was fantastic, the way he is playing, his compositions; I would say for both of us it was a discovery. When he heard my berimbau solo, he was so happily surprised. "What is this?"

And it is because of these experiences that I continue to ask myself, "Why me?" I am so happy to do this work with the berimbau. I wish other Brazilians would take pride in our culture and do this work—with the berimbau, with all the percussion instruments. Very few are. Marcos Suzano and his pandeiro playing is a great example of someone who is pushing an instrument in new directions and playing it in varied contexts, and this is wonderful.

GB: *You have mentioned that you felt like you were on a mission with the berimbau. Do you still feel that way?*

NV: Yes. There is still so much to discover there. I have been thinking about composing another piece like "O Berimbau," but it is difficult for me to get away from the things I've already done with the instrument. Not just in terms of rhythms—that would be no problem, I could do another piece in seven or whatever—but *sounds* and how to make the sound become different, maybe by mixing the sound with my voice. And not with electronics either, but doing everything *live*.

I like this kind of challenge. So, yes, I've been thinking to do a new berimbau piece, maybe for my next album!

GB: *I look forward to seeing you with Trio Manari at PASIC 2007.*

NV: I'm excited about Trio Manari. They are young. They come from the north of Brazil, from Belém. They represent an entirely new thing, a new proposition. They are propagating the percussion music from the Amazon, from the jungle. The *carimbó*, the *marimbó*—these are fascinating rhythms that the rest of the world doesn't know yet.

GB: *Is there anything else you'd like to share with us before we wrap up?*

NV: Watch out! I'm coming! [hysterical

laughter] I'd really like to come to play in America again. America represents a lot for me; it is where I really developed my career, much more so than in Brazil. I have had great experiences there, wonderful collaborations with great musicians, so I'm looking forward to going there again to meet old friends and make new ones, too.

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Greg Beyer was second-prize winner of the 2002 Geneva International Solo Percussion Competition and he has given solo performances and master classes throughout the United States, Europe, South America and China. Of primary importance to him is his project, *Arcomusical*, dedicated to the advancement of the *berimbau* in contemporary music. Beyer is a founding member of the flute/percussion duo, *Due East*, and he teaches at Northern Illinois University, where he is an Assistant Professor of Percussion in the School of Music. **PN**

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