

Second Annual PercPan Festival

Salvador, Brazil, March, 1995

Nana Vasconcelos gathers a world of percussionists in Bahia. Together, they tap into a global pulse.
by Layne Redmond

“More powerfully than any other place in the world,” Brazilian percussionist Nana Vasconcelos says, “Bahia provided a fertile space for the ethnic diversity of African origin to merge with other influences and to forge a rich and authentic cultural identity. Here the meeting of the Americas took place and gave birth to a unique identity, one that is present in a smaller or larger scale

throughout the whole of Brazil. In the realm of music, this is what gave rise to the birth of samba and all the variety of percussive instruments in the country. For these reasons an event such as PercPan could manifest and blossom so fully only in Bahia.”

Vasconcelos performed at last year’s inaugural World Percussion Panorama (or PercPan) in Salvador, Brazil, in the state of

Bahia. Producer Beth Cayres organized that four-day event to present a broad palette of percussion masters drawn from all over the world. When Cayres decided to make PercPan an annual affair, she chose Vasconcelos as artistic director. And in opening this year’s festival, which included percussion performances, workshops and musical exchanges, Vasconcelos announced, “I hope to create a symphony composed of both musicians and audience. And I dedicate this symphony to Zumbi, the King of Palmares.”

Three centuries ago, Zumbi, an African man, escaped from slavery and returned night after night to help other slaves escape. These runaway slaves formed *quilombos*, or mountain villages, with Zumbi as their inspired leader. Eventually, he was captured and beheaded in the public square in Recife, although legend holds that he did not die, and that his spirit continues to vitalize the oppressed of Brazil. With 1995 dedicated to his remembrance in Brazil, Vasconcelos saw this festival as an offering to his spirit.

Nearly 5,000 people attended the festival’s events this year, among them musicians, journalists, ethnomusicologists, and filmmakers from all over the world. They created a unique cross-fertilization of rhythmic music from many parts of the world. Participants videotaped one another, sharing knowledge and absorbing as much as possible. These exchanges spilled out into the streets and back to the hotels. This being Salvador—a city where the rhythm never stops—any spare moment was filled by one of the many visiting *capoeira* schools, reggae cafes or candle rituals.

Nana Vasconcelos, a native of Recife, began performing when he was 12 years old with his father, a guitarist. As a teenager he moved to Rio and began performing with a then-unknown young singer/



Top left: Nana Vasconcelos; right: Layne Redmond; below: New York street performers, Drumin’ 2 Deep.

photos by Rejane Carneiro

These people who harbored the power of rhythm, survived by the miracle of their drums, the magic of their music.

guitarist, Milton Nascimento. Soon after, he was hired by the Argentinian tenor sax player, Gato Barbieri, to tour Europe. Besides being a great vocalist, Nana has specialized in the *berimbau* — a bow strung with steel wire, with a resonating gourd at the bottom. One of the world's oldest instruments, the berimbau and arrived in Brazil via Africa where it is used to accompany capoeira, a martial art that combines dancing and fighting. In the United States, Vasconcelos formed the group, Codona with Don Cherry and Colin Walcott, one of the first great world-music fusion ensembles. And though he has performed with popular Brazilian and American stars, one of his major concerns has been the preservation of the folk traditions of Brazil. He and Cayres have worked together to institute programs in the elementary schools to teach this music to the very young.

The major poetic metaphor behind the second PercPan Festival came into place when Nana was hired to compose the soundtrack for *The Other Side of the Water*, a UNESCO-sponsored documentary about the slave port of Goree in Senegal. The last buildings that the captured Africans entered were the houses along Goree's waterfront. The back doors of these houses opened onto the docked ships waiting to disperse them to a life of slavery in the New World.

When he looked out to the open sea through one of these back doors, Vasconcelos thought of his ancestors. By the time they had reached this place they had lost everything including their families — everything but their music and art. Vasconcelos felt the wind that filled the sails of the slave ships, the wind that blew the music to the far reaches of the New World, where, like miraculous seeds, they lodged in harsh, yet fertile ground. These seeds, these people who harbored the power of rhythm, survived by the miracle of their drums, the magic of their music. They transmitted the ancient rhythms to this new world, blending with the music of the indigenous people and the European colonizers. In planning this year's festival, Vasconcelos thought of the drumbeat that calls the dispersed breezes back, funneling them into a roaring wind of rhythm

—of music—created from all the places they had been.

Vasconcelos was particularly interested in bringing to light the feminine quality of drumming, which was, for so many centuries, consigned to the shadows, and which had been missing from the previous festival. Nana heard about me, invited me to perform as a soloist, and so I found myself at the brink of the most transformative experience of my life.

Perched on the hills overlooking the bay, Salvador has preserved much of its colonial architecture. Looking up from the water's edge at the tiered streets of colonial houses, we were greeted by the electrifying sight of Ile Aiye coming down the hill, a glorious procession of drummers and dancers carrying torches. Ile Aiye was created 21 years ago, to preserve through music and dance the history of the African nations, their gods and goddesses, leaders and movements. The group represents the dignity and *noblesse* of the African spirit and manifest the quality of *Ashe* - a religious concept meaning "the power to make things happen."

The following day was filled with workshops and preparations for the first concert, in which everyone performed for 10-20 minutes. The stage in the Castro Alves Theatre was multi-tiered, with ramps leading from level to level. Performers were positioned in different areas, Vasconcelos off to one side with his percussion setup. Nana made full use of the modern theater's lighting system, fog machines and video screens to create a dream-montage of archetypal images, segueing from one performer and the next.

Adama Drame from the Ivory Coast brought African roots to bear. A pioneering soloist on the *djembe*, he has also developed a technique of using all of his

fingers for individual sounds, creating a drone from the overtones of these strokes.

La Calenda is also dedicated to preserving African roots, blending them with the music of the indigenous people of Uruguay. They play nine *tamborils*, large barrel-shaped drums ranging in width and size from a conga type drum to one that was over two-and-a half feet wide. Their music is drawn from the *candoble*, the religious rhythms that invoke various African deities. The emphasis is on repetitive patterns, intricately overlaid in ensemble pieces rather than through virtuoso drum technique.

Vasconcelos knew that African slaves had worked the sugar cane fields in Uruguay, so he knew the remnants must be there; when he sought out the relatively unknown La Calenda, even the group's members were surprised. In the amphitheater, they began drumming on the top level of the stage and proceeded down the ramps, out of the fog; I got the impression they were coming from 8,000 years ago.

Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, from Cuba, preserves the traditions of Santéria. They are also known for preserving the popular dance music of the *rumba*. For this performance, the singers and drummers dressed in white clothing, derived from the Spanish colonialists, while the dancers were clothed in the African dress of specific deities that corresponded to the rhythms invoked. The beautiful vocals were anchored to the ancient rhythms of the batá drum. This drum—which is preserved in Cuba—has been lost to the Yoruba of Nigeria; the English colonials in Africa, fearing its power, banished it completely.

The same rhythms that underlie the traditions of La Calenda and Los Muñequitos also underlie the music of Fogo De Mao, "Hands of Fire," a Brazilian folkloric group of drummers and dancers from the Northeastern state of Maranhao. Fogo de Mao was established by Luiz Claudio Farias to study the unique traditions of "boi de zabumba" and "tambo de crioula" with the old masters. They use African fire-hollowed drums, with skin heads played with the hands. As the master drummer plays the "master drum"

THE INSPIRATIONAL DRUM CIRCLE VIDEO FOR THE WORLD!



COMMUNITY DRUMMING FOR
HEALTH AND HAPPINESS™
WITH JIM GREINER
LPV115 \$29.95



BONGO MAN T-SHIRT
LP646 \$15.95



DJEMBE
EARRINGS
LP696 \$16.50



What the best players play.™

To order one of our full percussion catalogs,
or to find the dealer nearest you contact:
LP Music Group

Dept. 726, 160 Belmont Ave., Garfield, NJ 07026

(800) 526-0508

Widen Your World of Music and Dance

Call toll-free for our 32-page catalog
of specially selected educational
compact discs and videos:

1-800-550-WORLD (9675)

Folk, traditional, classical and
contemporary music and dance from
around the world.

Exclusive distributors of the
JVC Video Anthology of World Music
and Dance (now sold as separate
geographic sets).



Multicultural Media

31 Hebert Road,
Montpelier, VT 05602
802-223-1294
Fax 802-229-1834



At the PercPan Festival's close,
(l. to r.), Narendra Gurtu, Milton
Nascimento, Nana Vasconcelos and
Madhurita Sarang join hands.

guitarist and vocalist, per-
formed with a percussion
ensemble made up of
Vasconcelos, along with
Gustavo, an extraordinary
16-year-old Bahian per-
cussionist, Neginho do
Samba, the director of
Olodun, and Marcos
Suzano, the great pandeiro
player.

between his legs, another drummer plays
accompanying rhythms on the body of
the drum with sticks. Another tradition,
"Bumba meu boi" merges African
rhythms with the Iberian rhythms of the
frame drum that reach back to the tradi-
tions of ancient Mesopotamia. After the
concert, the entire group took their
drums into Pelourinho, the old, recently
restored area of Salvador. At 2:30 in the
morning they built a bonfire, tuned their
drums, and began singing and dancing
until 5:00am.

From America, Vasconcelos had
selected Drumin 2 Deep, two young men
of African descent who have created
their own style of stick drumming on
plastic buckets. Their perfectly synchron-
ized, relentless expression embodied
the raw energy of the New York streets
and subways where they first gained
attention. The swing of a jazz trap drum-
mer was exemplified by Terri Lynn
Carrington, a top female jazz drummer,
beautifully accompanied by trombonist
Robin Eubanks. Vasconcelos invited me
to perform on frame drums, the ancient
instrument of the Mediterranean world,
and the same drums that Fogo de Mao
played, out of the very same tradition.

From India, he invited Shobha Gurtu,
the great singer in the style of thumri,
the semi-classical romantic vocal tradition
from North India. Gurtu was accompa-
nied by a tabla player, Rajeev K.
Mahavir and her own son, Narendra
Gurtu on *dholak*, as well as by a tradi-
tional *kathak* dancer, Madhurita Sarang.
Kathak is a dance of rhythms stamped-
out by the feet that parallels those played
simultaneously by the tabla.

From a more popular Brazilian tradi-
tion, guitarist and vocalist Gilberto Gil,

Since performing with Vasconcelos
decades ago, Milton Nascimento has
grown into an international superstar,
and one of Brazil's most revered singers
and poets. He is from Minas Gerais, a
state in which the old colonial churches
of the Portuguese preserved the tradi-
tions of Gregorian singing, and the
African slaves worked deep within the
mines.

Vasconcelos spoke of Milton as "the
Black Diamond, the best natural voice
that Brazil has." He joined Nascimento's
percussion ensemble, Robertinho Silva
and his two young sons, Ronaldo and
Vanderei, onstage. Nascimento's
"Chamada (The Call), a call to the spir-
it of the forests was truly a musical high-
point of the festival.

The festival's final evening climaxed
with all the musicians on stage. The
energy was so contagious that the drum-
mers, followed by two thousand mem-
bers of the audience, proceeded out the
aisles and out onto the streets, offering
me a small taste of the exuberant,
unstoppable energy of the Carnival. It
would be hours before people stopped
dancing and playing, celebrating the
intricate weave of the rhythms Nana
Vasconcelos had brought together. The
next day as my new Brazilian friends
saw me off, I realized I was forever
changed by my experience in Bahia. RM

*Layne Redmond is an acclaimed drummer, compos-
er, and author specializing in the frame drum. Her
book, When the Drummers were Women, will be
published by Harmony Books in 1996.*

*To hear music by some of these artists in this story,
see MUSELINE listings, p. 55.*