

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

MARIA BETHÂNIA

Alex Robinson reviews the career of the Brazilian singer who is a huge star at home, but still relatively unknown abroad

PORTRAIT LEO AVERSA



Maria Bethânia sings like a young tree which burns in an explosive crackle into the sky above; everything is fire in this extraordinary singer whose voice comes to us from Bahia with a message of rare poetry and love,' wrote Vinícius de Moraes, the great bossa nova poet and writer of 'The Girl from Ipanema,' with whom Bethânia worked in the late 1960s. Outside Brazil, Maria Bethânia is famous for being Caetano Veloso's sister, but within Brazil she is a superstar, celebrated for her remarkable voice and her uncompromising individuality. It was Bethânia who made *tropicália* possible, whose fame brought recognition to Veloso. She was the first Brazilian female singer to record an album which sold more than a million records, and in a career which spans almost 50 years, she has released more than 30 records.

Bethânia grew up in the tiny but then prosperous town of Santo Amaro da Purificação in Bahia, some 1,600km north of Rio de Janeiro. Modern Brazil was born in Bahia – from the sugar plantations tilled by the hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans, from the Portuguese administration based in the country's first capital, the baroque city of Salvador, and from the rhythms of *samba* and *capoeira*, which were fomented here. Yet despite its heritage, Bahia was regarded as something of a backwater by Brazil's ordered and progressive 60s new wave – (or in Portuguese, bossa nova) generation – a middle class, intellectual set based in Rio de Janeiro.

Bethânia and a group of young Bahians, comprising of, amongst others, Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa and Tom Zé, made waves in early 60s Salvador staging shows at the Vila Velha theatre. *Nós Por Exemplo*, (Us, For Example) and *Mora na Filosofia* (She Lives Philosophy) deliberately challenged the national artistic status quo, mixing music and theatre (Bethânia had long dreamed of being an actress) and attracting an arty,

avant-garde crowd who comprised many of the young intelligentsia of Salvador. But they would probably have gone unnoticed by the rest of Brazil were it not for Nara Leão, a singer and Rio de Janeiro intellectual, who attended one of the performances whilst on holiday in Salvador.

Leão had already played a crucial role in the growth of bossa nova in her home city – *bossanovistas* had honed their art and discussed their ideas in her Copacabana flat, and Leão herself remained a key player within the movement. She was to play a crucial role in *tropicália* too – for after she became entranced by Bethânia's shows, Leão invited the singer to come to Rio and take her place in a polemical theatre show in Copacabana, called *Opinão* (Opinion). This epitomised, in the words of Veloso, "the trend among some of the bossanovistas to promote the fusion of modern Brazilian music with politically engaged art."

Opinão culminated with Bethânia singing 'Carcará' – which describes a violent attack by a caracara hawk on new-born calves in the dry backlands of Brazil's north-east. It was intended as an allegory and a call to arms against the incipient military dictatorship. The song became an underground hit, and Bethânia, whose Middle Eastern, indigenous Brazilian and African looks contrasted markedly with the pretty, white faces of Rio bossa nova, came to be seen as a roots protest singer. She was just 17.

Whilst her success opened the door for a series of new Bahian artists (who would include her brother, Gilberto Gil, Tom Zé, Gal Costa and Novos Baianos) thereby beginning the *tropicália* movement, Bethânia was not interested in being a protest singer or in *tropicália*. Her focus was solely on music and the art of singing and interpreting. Her first two solo albums, both recorded in 1965 were artistically conservative, dominated by traditional sambas by composers like Noel Rosa and Benedito Lacerda, chosen to showcase her voice – breathy, deep, resonating and as intimate as a whisper in the ear.

These albums established her name throughout Brazil, and they were followed by a series of collaborations with well-known bossa nova performers and composers, including Edu Lobo (with whom she recorded *Edu e Bethânia*) and Vinícius de Moraes (with whom she made *Vinícius + Bethânia + Toquinho*).

As Brazil entered the 70s, Caetano and his tropicalista cohorts had transformed traditional acoustic Brazil into electric, psychedelic and subversive, and Bethânia turned her intimate singing style to compositions by a series of emerging *Música Popular Brasileira* (MPB) composers, many of whom she collaborated with. They included her brother, the protest singer and poet Chico



Bahian star
Maria Bethânia
whose brother is
Caetano Veloso

Buarque and Milton Nascimento. Her voice grew as she explored a new musical style. It matured, became richer and more varied in mood and range, with a deep sonorous tone, thick with feeling and a subtly shifting tonal and dynamic range.

Her albums became increasingly intimate and romantic, and as they did so, they became ever more successful, reaching a peak with the lush, jazz and bossa nova-tinged 1978 release, *Álibi* – the first release by a Brazilian woman to sell more than a

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She was the first Brazilian female singer to sell more than a million records

million copies. The album gave her a massive hit with the Nelson Gonçalves ballad 'Negue' – later covered memorably by Cesaria Evora. Through the 80s and 90s, Bethânia largely stuck to *Álibi*'s successful formula – releasing intimate albums which at times suffered from a suffusion of sickly sweet strings but which pleased her ever-increasing legion of fans.

Bethânia broke the mold in the new millennium, downsizing her sound and producing a series of reflective, intelligent CDs aimed at a more discerning public, and released on Biscoito Fino, Brazil's pedigree independent label. These included the wonderful, smoky *Que Falta Você me Faz* – a tribute to Vinícius de Moraes and the twin CDs *Pirata* and *Mar de Sophia*, which reflected in the relationship between Portugal and Brazil.

She enters her fifth decade as popular and well-loved in Brazil as she was in her first – a remarkable feat of endurance, unknown to most non-Brazilians, but surely unequalled by any other woman singer worldwide. ●

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PODCAST Hear a selection of music from Maria Bethânia on this issue's podcast

BEST ALBUMS



Maria Bethânia e Caetano Veloso ao Vivo (Phonogram/Universal, 1978)

One of Bethânia's best live recordings, with a mix of cover versions (including 'Carcará') and songs by Caetano himself, sung separately and as duets.



Álibi (Universal, 1978)

If you can get beyond the lush strings, this is a flawless collection of jazz-tinged songs, by Caetano, Chico Buarque and Nelson Gonçalves, spiced with deliciously 1970s Fender Rhodes and effortlessly sung in a voice tinged with melancholy.



Mar de Sophia (Discmedi, 2008)

A reflective mix of Brazilian and Portuguese songs imbued with *saudade* (a uniquely Lusitanian blend of nostalgia, sweetness and longing) and mercifully free of those overly lush Bethânia strings. Reviewed in issue #49.



Que Falta Você Me Faz (Biscoito Fino, 2005)

A tour through some of Vinícius' most beautiful and reflective bossa nova songs, with a diversion here and there into an occasional joyous samba. Reviewed in issue #33.



D Songlines Digital subscribers can download 'Asa Branca' from the album *Dentro Do Mar Tem Rio*. See p58 for details

TO AVOID



Romântica (BMG, 2002)

Bethânia at her most syrupy, string-smothered and lush.

IF YOU LIKE BETHÂNIA, THEN TRY... ELIS REGINA



Little Pepper, The Definitive Collection (Universal Music Brazil, 2004)

Bethânia's rival as the greatest diva in Brazilian MPB, with a voice as varied and saturated with feeling, and a repertoire comprising songs from some of the greatest Brazilian composers of the 60s and 70s, including João Bosco and Milton Nascimento.



Elis Regina who died in 1982 aged 36