

TROPICALISMO

Brazil's new
hot throb



It is noon in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, and about 104 degrees. Thousands of people silently follow a slight woman who would evoke El Greco even without her starched white robes, which make her seem very tall. They are devotees of Candomblé, a religion that marries the magic of Nigerian animism with Catholicism; their destination is a fisherman's shack that has been transformed into a chapel to the old African gods. The woman collects the offering—gardenias and candles, soaps and perfumes—then sets out in a boat to deliver them to Iemanjá, spirit of the ocean.

This is the private side of Maria Bethania, forty-two, one of Latin America's most magnetic singers, the Brazilian Piaf. Bethania shies away from talking about her (Continued on page 132)

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role in Candomblé; instead, she sings. At seventeen, she was brought in to replace the ailing star of a Rio musical; she's been a superstar ever since. Her voice is dark as they come, a monumental voice that pulls against the intimacy of the melodies; the result is haunting. Although her records have gone gold and platinum in Europe and Latin America, word of Bethania has just spread to this country. This spring, she plans to make her first trip north to perform at Town Hall in New York City.

Bethania grew up amid the African rhythms of Bahia, which was once home of the Brazilian slave trade, and still is the center of Brazilian folk culture. Everybody in the state belongs to a musical carnival group; ask a Bahian about himself, and he will tell you the name of his group. (Recently, Bethania established a miniature performing arts center in Bahia to show

off its artists, who, in the past, have been dismissed by Brazilian "high" culture.)

During the 'sixties, Bethania and a group of singers came together to cut through what they saw as Bossa Nova's increasing coolness and intellectuality. Their movement, known as "Tropicalismo," experimented with old folk forms, added a bit of rock and a bit of politics. Caetano Veloso (Bethania's brother) and Gilberto Gil remain on the cutting edge of Brazilian music, and it is their ballads Bethania sings most frequently. Onstage, Bethania's uncanny: sweeping in and out of categories from 'forties Carmen Miranda kitsch to "Papa" Tom (*The Girl from Ipanema*) Jobim's breezy jazz, always changing, always becoming something more. Her performances, like her spirit world, have to do with honoring the mysteries.

—ELIZABETH HANLY