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The Songs Of the Forest

Brazil's Milton Nascimento And His Latest Musical Cause

By Julia Preston
Washington Post Foreign Service

RIO DE JANEIRO These days Milton Nascimento is radiating so much moral energy, he even seems to be affecting the weather. In March, four days before the Brazilian musician was scheduled to give an open-air concert on a beach in Rio de Janeiro at which he would present a new crop of songs inspired by the Amazon rain forest—and at a moment when the city's streets were awash with the year's most relentless tropical drenching—Nascimento made a public prediction that the rain would stop in time for his show. "There will be too much power in one place for it to rain," he said.

Sure enough, in an almost mystical serendipity, the week-old downpour abated a few hours before Nascimento's appearance. To the even greater satisfaction of the 20,000 fans by the bay, it resumed in a drizzle just as he hit the last notes of his finale.

Another artist might look silly in 1991, making such '60s-era claims about his harmony with the universe. But in a nearly 25-year career that has produced at least 25 albums, Nascimento has earned his aura of "being right with life," as he puts it in one of his new songs. He has managed to combine a sophisticated and varied musical sound with an unshakably direct and optimistic spirit.

In an interview, Nascimento said that in the late '60s, when he moved away from his hometown in the state of Minas Gerais, "I wanted to leave for a place with no borders. I didn't want to be just a man from Minas, or just a Brazilian. I wanted to be a person of the world."

Today he believes he has achieved that. "I have my inner freedom to say anything I want," he said. "Since I have that freedom I know that at least some people are going to listen to what I have to say."

Milton Nascimento will be performing at 8 tonight at Lisner Auditorium in Washington. The concert

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Musician Milton Nascimento.

Milton Nascimento

MUSICIAN, From G1

will mainly feature songs from his new album, "Txai," released last month by CBS. The word *txai*, from the language of the Kaxinawa Indians of the Amazon, is a term of greeting denoting camaraderie.

Nascimento's new work is the fruit of an 18-day odyssey he made through the Amazon two years ago. Traveling with him on his current tour, which will take him to 20 American and Canadian cities in this month and next, are several Indians from Amazon tribes whose survival is threatened by the encroachment of loggers and gold prospectors. Also joining him is a representative of a rubber tappers' union whose past president was the activist Chico Mendes, who was assassinated in 1988.

For Nascimento the rain forest is only the latest in a series of social causes. Through the years he has sung songs for Brazilian democracy and human rights and against racism. He says he seeks to mobilize with his music. But he is not a brow-beater. Even at home in Brazil, his talk onstage is terse. He just sings his melodies, evoking, in the case of his recent work, the undulating water, the hush and darkness of the rain forest. On his foreign tours he still sings and speaks almost entirely in Portuguese.

Some Americans may have heard Nascimento for the first time as the celestial voice singing in Portuguese on the "Spirit Voices" track of Paul Simon's "Rhythm of the Saints." On "Rhythm" Nascimento was returning a favor to Simon, who sang a duet in Portuguese with Nascimento on the latter's 1987 "Yauarete" album. But Simon's collaboration with Nascimento is quite different from Simon's transcultural "Graceland" album, which rocketed a number of South African musicians into the American limelight. Nothing Simon could do could boost Nascimento's already giant stature in Brazil. And Nascimento's work with American musicians began as long ago as 1967, shortly after he won three prizes at an international music festival in Rio with some of the first songs he ever wrote. Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Hubert Laws and Pat Metheny are among the Americans who have played with Nascimento.

He resents the American practice of categorizing musicians by jazz, pop or rock. His own music was born of the diversity of Minas Gerais, which during Brazil's colonial epoch was a prosperous mining region with a considerable slave population. Nascimento, born in 1942, grew up with black work songs, Afro-Brazilian percussion, gyrating sambas and the somber chant of the Catholic Mass all vying for his ear.

Brazil is a society in which racism lies just beneath a smooth surface of tolerance. But Nascimento, who is black, says he was brought up keenly aware of the existence of bias but at the same time protected from its pain. He explains that he was adopted as a 2-year-old by a white family (he doesn't offer details about his natural parents) and raised with three white siblings. "There was never any distinction in my house because of color. So my attitude toward the issue of race has always been one of conciliation," he said.

Nascimento's father sponsored a radio club in their town. Nascimento and his friends spent hours with their ears pressed to the radio, trying to pick up the hit parade over the hills from Rio. So when Nascimento emerged onto the international scene in the late '60s, he brought a generation of Minas Gerais musicians with him. Wagner Tiso, Beto Guedes and Lo Borges are some of those still making the lilting, jazzy Minas sound here and adding to the jazz mix in the United States. In 1967 Nascimento's lyricist, Fernando Brant, who still lives in the Minas capital of Belo Horizonte, wrote the words for "Travessia" ("Crossing"), Nascimento's first big hit. To this day, Brant said in an interview, he remains a kind of anchor for Nascimento, who is on the road overseas for months each year.

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>
> —Milton Nascimento

"He gets the glory. But I lead a calmer existence. I stay in my own place. It's important for me to live day-to-day life. I can still go anywhere and observe things as they are," Brant said. Wherever he is, Nascimento writes tunes and sends the tapes to Brant. Brant faxes back the words.

"Our affinity is so great, he very rarely says anything to me about the music. It just takes us in the same direction," Brant said.

During the early '70s a military dictatorship censored many of Brant's lyrics. Nascimento, whose voice retains its bell-like timbre through a multi-octave range, retaliated by singing the songs without words in discordant mumbles and howls.

Nascimento has not always had the confidence he displays today. He is naturally reserved and uses words with caution, as if he considers them mainly to be a source of trouble. For some years only an excess of vodka could get him up on a stage. He has spoken with fear of flying in airplanes, and of the attentive silences of American theaters, in contrast to Brazil, where the audience expects to be part of the show.

His ecological concerns began to show up in "Yauarete" ("Jaguar"), on which he contemplated the similarities between himself and a jungle cat. On his Amazon trip Nascimento "discovered that Brazil is a very big country," according to Carlos Alberto Ricardo, an anthropologist who accompanied him. "He was almost anonymous in many places. The people knew him only as 'the singer.' "

The "Txai" album includes snippets of music recorded in Amazon Indian villages. To generate funds for the Amazon cause, Nascimento registered the author's rights for those tracks to the Indian tribes that performed them, so some record royalties will go to them. The windy, atonal sound haunts some of Nascimento's new tunes. But "Txai" also has much vintage Nascimento-Brant, aching melody and blunt declaration:

Man is not just an animal
His history is more than physical
He opens his eyes to be free . . .
The city's ease does not need to kill the trees . . .

On tour Nascimento and his acoustic guitar will be accompanied by, among others, drummer Robertinho Silva, a veritable patriarch of percussion. Silva's sons Vanderlei and Ronaldo back him up with chimes, cymbals and congas from a rack that takes up 25 feet of stage.

Nascimento's abiding conviction that something can still be done for the human race is particularly striking in modern Brazil, which is sunk in a gray depression after its push toward development in the '70s failed amid corruption and disorder.

"I make music for people," he said. "If my music was for me, I would stay at home in my room and play. But when I go out to the street I carry a message, that in spite of everything, we have to have confidence in human beings. Otherwise, nothing we do makes any sense."