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RECORDINGS VIEW

Brazilians Try To Get Beyond The Rain Forest

By JULIAN DIBBELL

IT MUST BE HARD FOR BRAZILIANS to decide whether the wide appeal of their popular music is a blessing or a curse. Though it has given the nation a global presence otherwise difficult to attain, the music's allure has meant that for years Brazil's international identity has been constructed in and by the West's giddy pop markets.

Through several decades Carmen Miranda's fruity stylization of Afro-Bahian folklore was the mask Brazil wore abroad. Nowadays, pop's greener-than-thou tendencies — spearheaded by the likes of Sting and Paul Simon — have forced the most sophisticated nation in Latin America to don the loincloth and feathers of the Amazon's endangered-forest dwellers.

But Brazil hardly takes this passively. In part because of this peculiar vulnerability to foreign tastes, Brazilian musicians have spent inordinate amounts of energy trying to define a strong sense of national identity. This effort often grows more strained the closer the music comes to international success, as illustrated in new American releases by two veteran Brazilian singer-songwriters, Milton Nascimento and Ivan Lins.

Mr. Nascimento has spent much of his 20-year career pursuing an ideal of what it is to be Brazilian, a vision that is both earthy and transcendent. His strategies in this pursuit — marrying rural simplicity to difficult jazzy melodies and carrying the high poetry of his collaborators' lyrics up and away in his soaring falsetto — have produced music that is often intensely moving.

The themes of Mr. Nascimento's new album, "Txai" (Columbia CK 46871; CD and cassette), seem to lend themselves as much to his career-long concerns as to current global pop trends. (The word txai, pronounced chi, as in child, means "companion" or "other half of me" in the language of one of the Amazon tribes whose ecological plight the album aims to help publicize.)

Musicians are trying to reflect a national identity despite pop's greener-than-thou tendencies.

The artist's close encounter with the heart of the forest provides a suitably mystical, arch-Brazilian setting and enables him to toy with the sonorities in the Indian songs, recorded in the field, that dot the album. But not until the last third of the record, starting with the ravishingly sweet "Benke," do any of the compositions sound as though they engaged Mr. Nascimento's heart as much as his head. This may be because the snippets of Indian music are equally disengaged from the body of the album — they could just as well be recordings of tropical bird calls. In the end, it seems, the culture of those Brazilian Indians remain as alien to this black Brazilian as it would to any white Englishman or American.

The level of inspiration on Mr. Lins's album, "Awa Vio" (Reprise 9 26499-2; CD and cassette), is decidedly more consistent, but that isn't saying much. Mr. Lins came to prominence in Brazil not long after Mr. Nascimento, but he is a comparatively minor talent. His reedy voice strains mightily to go to the same places Mr. Nascimento's does, but it comes close enough for comfort. His compositions, executed here with American producers and a complement of American session musicians, are endowed with the mature melodic grace that seems to be every Brazilian's birthright. But they are otherwise unexceptional pop readings of already well-diluted pop samba.

What is notable about the record is the way its lyrics stake their claim to a rootsy, African-inflected Brazilianness. The album title

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The Brazilian singer Milton Nascimento—Marrying rural simplicity to jazzy melodies, he carries lyrics up and away with his soaring falsetto.

(it means "Let's go") is borrowed from the Yoruba rituals still practiced in Bahia and Rio, and most of the songs come wrapped in self-conscious references to black Brazilian culture. But because urban African influences have always been the lifeblood of Brazil's popular music, Mr. Lins's cultural cross-dressing comes off less awkwardly than Mr. Nascimento's.

In fact neither record is quite honest about the cultural identity it seeks to project. Listen closely to them both, and the refined textures and postures reveal little about any black or Indian Brazilian realities. Rather, you will hear a small, university-shaped class of Brazilian musicians longing to recapture the shining moment that was bossa nova, when the face Brazil turned to the world was neither folkloric nor primitive, but sleek and cosmopolitan. It's a lovely dream, but it's just one of the many that make up Brazil's complex and elusive identity. □