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For Nascimento, a Leap to Mass Popularity

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His voice, an agonizingly pure tenor that often slips into an ethereal falsetto, has been described as that of an angel. But the Brazilian singer Milton Nascimento recognizes that "you can be the biggest genius on the planet, but you're going to end up singing in the shower" unless given an opportunity to make people aware of your talents.

A star in Brazil for more than 20 years, a longtime cult favorite among jazz and rock musicians everywhere and a proven draw in a few big American cities, Mr. Nascimento has in the last few months been able to reach a whole new mass audience thanks to his participation in Paul Simon's hit album "The Rhythm of the Saints." As he prepares for a monthlong American and Canadian tour that begins Saturday at the Ritz in New York City, Mr. Nascimento's reputation has never been higher or his prospects brighter.

Besides Mr. Simon, who called him "a great singer and a great composer," Mr. Nascimento has a broad gallery of foreign admirers ranging from established jazz instrumentalists like the saxophonist Wayne Shorter, the pianist Herbie Hancock and the guitarist Pat Metheny, all of whom have recorded with him, to rock and funk groups like Genesis, Talking Heads, Santana and Earth, Wind and Fire. "Truth in Beauty."

"Milton Nascimento has a beautiful, beautiful voice, and in his tunes you hear things that are almost like folk melodies," said the pop star Sting, who sang with Mr. Nascimento on a television show in Brazil last year. "The idea that there can be truth in beauty is kind of missing in modern rock-and-roll and jazz, but the Brazilians have kept it, and Milton is its finest exponent."

Interviewed amid the tranquillity of the Botanical Gardens in Rio de Janeiro in late January, Mr. Nascimento said he welcomed the increased international attention, and not just because it had opened doors for him. To his relief, he said, the upsurge of interest among pop stars has helped counter the impression that he is at heart a sophisticated jazz man and therefore outside the pop mainstream.

"When people talk about Brazilian music, they always stick us with the label of jazz, which is something I don't like," Mr. Nascimento said. "It's not that I don't like jazz; it's that I don't like labels. Here in Brazil, we listen to everything, and in my little town in the interior of Minas Gerais we never worried about it. We just sang whatever appealed to us."

Mr. Nascimento has always followed that course during his recording career, drawing on everything from Gregorian chants to the bossa nova and rock-and-roll. In Brazil he has had hits not only with his own compositions, but also with such oddities as the American country music standard "Ghost Riders in the Sky," a favorite of his childhood. 'Discovered' Once Again

As Mr. Nascimento acknowledged with an amused smile, the current round of interest in him actually marks the third time he has been "discovered" by American audiences. In the late 1960's he was recorded by the jazz impresario Creed Taylor, who saw him as a successor to bossa nova stars like Joao Gilberto and Antonio Carlos Jobim, and in the mid 1970's there was a flurry of interest after the release of "Native Dancer," made with Mr. Shorter and now considered one of the most influential jazz albums of the decade.

On those earlier occasions, however, Mr. Nascimento said, he found most of his dealings with American show business to be cold, impersonal and frustrating. He felt his lyrics were inadequately translated, and though he found a warm reception in the jazz world, many of the pop performers with whom he felt an affinity were unapproachable.

"I'm used to being the friend of my songwriting partners," he said. "So I would get there to the United States, and first you had to talk with the agent, then the publishing company, then the lawyer. The last thing would be the person himself, and by then I'd generally be tired and discouraged. You can't work well that way. But now this barrier has been overcome. It's a relationship of equals and I'm no longer the supplicant."

To hear Mr. Nascimento tell it, the sophisticated harmonic sense that has so enchanted his American and British admirers is largely a byproduct of growing up in a small and isolated town in the interior of Brazil. There, he explains, he was an avid listener to the radio stations in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo that played the latest Brazilian and foreign hits but that had their signals partly blocked by the Serra da Mantiqueira mountain range. Invented Harmonies.

"You couldn't hear the harmonies, because the radio reception wasn't strong enough," he said. "They'd play a song we liked, and we'd copy the lyrics and the melody, but we had to invent the harmonies out of our own heads. Months later, we'd get to a big city to play the song and see that our harmonies were completely different from the original."

Often overlooked abroad in the excitement generated by Mr. Nascimento's composing and vocal skills is the importance his countrymen attach to the lyrics he sings, most of which are written by his songwriting partner, Fernando Brant. Songs like "San Vicente" and "Maria, Maria" have become anthems both in Brazil and the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America.

Nor was the power of the words he sings lost on the military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985 or the censors it appointed to review all books, movies and music before publication. Mr. Nascimento became one of their favorite targets.

"All it took was for them to see my name, and boom, it was, 'No you can't,' " he recalled. "You'd write a lyric and it would be censored. Then you'd write another lyric, trying to say the same thing in a different way. Sometimes you would write five different sets of

lyrics before you'd get the stamp of approval from them. It was sheer craziness, but we were powerless." More Direct Lyrics

Over the last six years, as Brazil's political situation has opened up, Mr. Nascimento's songs have become less opaque. His "Letter to the Republic," released just after an assembly had been convoked to write a new constitution, not only became a big hit, but also helped shape the national debate on the matter.

Mr. Nascimento has also been active on behalf of Amnesty International, but he devotes much of his energy these days to the movement to halt destruction of the Amazon, a matter that has been of growing interest to him since he played a bit part in the director Werner Herzog's Amazon drama "Fitzcarraldo." His new album, "Txai," includes several songs examining the problems of that region's indigenous peoples and also haunting samples of the music and chants of such tribes as the Kayapo, Yanomami, Surui and Waiapi.

Mr. Nascimento explained that the album's title (pronounced Tchai) is itself a word taken from the language of the Kaxinawa tribe, meaning something akin to "comrade," and has become "a salutation of respect and affection used by all the peoples who love the forest."