

# A Visitor From Brazil With a Sound That Crosses Borders

By BEN RATLIFF

Visits to New York from the Brazilian singer and songwriter Milton Nascimento are becoming rarer: the last one was five years ago. When he does come, he tends to play a single concert at a big theater. This time, he's playing four nights — eight sets in all, through Friday — at the Blue Note, a much smaller place.

In theory, it's a really good idea. For 40 years, Mr. Nascimento has tapped into rural Brazilian folk music and combined it with jazz and pop and Catholic-Mass solemnity; it's a spooky mixture, and his vulnerable, wide-ranging voice swells and strains and ululates over it. At his best, when his touring band produces the least amount of treacly racket around him, he seems to make the temperature and color of the room change. The question was, how would he and his band adjust their show to a nightclub?

The answer was that either they didn't consider the question at all, or they drew an unfortunate conclusion. All six members of his backing group, including a percussionist and a saxophonist, wore headphones to hear themselves in the mix — an in-

Milton Nascimento continues through tomorrow at the Blue Note, 131 West Third Street, Greenwich Village; (212) 475-8592.



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Milton Nascimento at the Blue Note, in a rare New York appearance.

stant sign of bad news in a small club — and Mr. Nascimento used a prompter screen for both the Portuguese lyrics to his songs and his short speeches in English during the pauses. He sang his songs at about half capacity, walked hesitantly, and left the stage for two songs in the middle of the set (imposing ones,

too: "Milagre dos Peixes" and "Canção do Sal") while his competent backup singer, Marina Machado, took over. But if the problem is Mr. Nascimento's lack of energy, and if the band is enveloping him with blare to mask it, then why are they playing eight shows instead of one? Or, if Mr. Nascimento wants the

## Milton Nascimento

Blue Note

more intimate and restful side of his music to come through, as opposed to the mass-pop side, why didn't the band consider rehearsing leaner arrangements?

His frailty isn't necessarily a problem; it is part of his artistic temperament. During the best stretch of his record-making career — the first half of the 1970's — Mr. Nascimento already seemed old and wise. (He is now 63.) And either by accident or by design, the show did dislodge one jewel of a performance, the song "A Lua Girou" ("The Moon Turned") from the 1976 album "Geraes." It is an adaptation of a Bahian folk song, and he played guitar as he sang its three meditative choruses, with minimal backing. It was chilling.

But for most of the performance, the band stayed walled off and insensitive. It wasn't for lack of good material. The songs chosen for the set were among Mr. Nascimento's best, full of fascinating harmonic movement and subtle messages about humanity and innocence and experience; though most came from the 1970's, one of them, "Casa Aberta," from Mr. Nascimento's recent album "Pietà," deserved its place on the formidable list. But here, they became almost hollow; they had no sense of their own power.