

Milton Nascimento

pays tribute to his past

By Frank Spignese

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Brazilian singer-songwriter Milton Nascimento is revered with godlike status by those who know the music of his motherland. Sergio Mendes might dominate the airwaves at Starbucks, Astrud Gilberto's voice may monopolize every uber-hip cocktail party north of the equator, but it's Nascimento's sprawling body of work that continues to evolve and surprise those with an ear for originality.

Bossa nova legend Gilberto Gil has called his falsetto "one of the most beautiful sounds produced by the human species today on this earth." Noted New York Times critic Jon Pareles referred to him as "one of the greatest musicians alive." But, on the eve of his latest Japan tour, at a hotel in Roppongi, Tokyo, Nascimento appears humbly accessible, even shy.

Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1942, he moved to the devoutly Catholic state of Minas Gerais after the death of his biological mother. Adopted by white parents, the change in locale would have a profound influence on him. Being raised in the rural township of Tres Pontas lent his music a more subdued, even effeminate, quality compared to sounds of other more urbanized artists (Os Mutantes, Tom Ze) who came out of the post-bossa-nova movement.

Nascimento attributes this inimitable essence to his bucolic upbringing.

"My music would be different if I hadn't been raised in Tres Pontas; not only the town itself but the home I was brought up in," he says. "My family was very musical. My mother sang and played piano and my father was a great admirer of opera and classical music. Besides that, there was the folk music from the street parties and feasts."

His whisper of a voice is a blend of these various influences and even on more up-tempo numbers it retains its hypnotic tranquility. Again, when pinpointing his distinct vocal origins, he refers home.

"Tres Pontas is a town surrounded by mountains and that's where I discovered echo," he says. "The echo was my first musical partner, because I would sing back and forth in harmonies with the echoes when I was a kid. And discovering the echo was one of the most important things

in my artistry.

"I used to play with my friends in the mountains. We were all together and one of us screamed and the echo came back, so we started to play with it, building on the voices and even today on my recordings I like to build a design with many different voices."

On Nascimento's latest release, *Pieta*, he pays respect to something else from his past: his late, adoptive mother and the female songbirds who inspired him.

"When I was a kid I was very fond of women singers and would listen to them on the radio. I didn't like male singers," Nascimento says. "I found that they just wanted to show the power of their voice as opposed to women who sang with their hearts."

"My most important influence as a singer was female voices and the first one I remember hearing was my own mother's. She used to sing in a choir conducted by Villa Lobos, the Brazilian composer. That's what I first liked about music and I tried to imitate the women singing. I hadn't yet done a project thinking specifically about this theme. That's how *Pieta* came about."

An ode to motherliness in general, the title track is particular moving. This wordless hymn to the woman who took him in and raised him is devoid of lyrics as "there are no words in any language to describe how beautiful that woman was."

A DVD of the same name has just been released. The disc finds him in fine form, reinventing his classics "Maria, Maria" and "Lilia," while also performing inventive versions of Nat Adderley's "Work Song" and Led Zeppelin's "Going To California." The latter is sung with his protege Marina Machado and unsurprisingly, the rest of the band consists of musicians half his age.

Nascimento's music often has a youthful vibe. He sprinkles his lyrics with reminiscences of his boyhood as well as using child choirs in the studio.

"I've always had a strong bond with children. Even at an early age I would entertain other children, sitting down with my little accordion and making up stories that would last five hours, all of them with music. I was a kind of local Walt Disney."

"The fact that I was an adopted child, so well taken care of, with such great love, increased the relationship that I have with children. I have

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113 godchildren, and I love the purity of children's voices."

As well as working with the youngsters, Nascimento has collaborated with some superstars in his time, recording with the likes of Wayne Shorter and Sarah Vaughan in jazz and Paul Simon and Duran Duran in the pop-rock realm.

Aside from his celebrity associations, his music is naturally imbued with a sense of camaraderie, a longing for community and a reverence for the relationships that frame our very existence.

"My parents were not rich people but my father

and mother were always available to help anybody that needed help. Their house was always open, not only for their own friends but for mine as well. So, the main reason for collaborating has to do with friendship...which is the most important thing for me. I'd really rather work with a friend than work by myself."

Milton Nascimento will play April 28, 7 p.m. and 9:30 p.m., April 29-30, 6:30 p.m. and 9 p.m., May 1, 7 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. at Blue Note in Omotesando, Tokyo, (03) 5485-0088.