

A Brazilian Awakening

Long mutual admirers, bassist **esperanza spalding** and legendary Latin singer-songwriter **Milton Nascimento** recently released an acclaimed album, *Milton + esperanza*. **Jane Cornwell** spoke to both of them about this magical cross-generational collaboration

Being around Milton is like being around a magical presence," says bassist and singer **esperanza spalding** [*sic*] of the iconic Brazilian singer-songwriter Milton Nascimento, 82, with whom she has released a new cross-generational studio album, *Milton + esperanza* on Concord Jazz. "There are archetypal energies in the Universe that express through music or song. Milton is one of those energies."

The Portland, Oregon native, 40, fell under Nascimento's spell as a scholarship student at Boston's Berklee College of Music, which she attended on an accelerated degree program that, on the recommendation of the college president, then saw her teaching music to undergraduates her own age. She was attending a dinner party with friends when the host put on *Native Dancer*, the 1975 collaborative album by Wayne Shorter featuring Nascimento, with Herbie Hancock playing keys, and was immediately entranced – and forever changed.

"Whenever I put it on, I'm awake," the five-time Grammy-winning musician told [Grammy.com](https://www.grammy.com) in 2021. "It's like coffee. I'm energised. I have to sing along. Maybe it's oxygenating my brain because I'm breathing deep, I'm sighing, because I love the music so much."

One of South America's most venerated artists, Milton Silva Campos do Nascimento (or 'Bituca') has influenced many over the course of a six-decade, now 44-album career. "If God had a voice, it would be Milton's," the Brazilian MPB (Brazilian popular music) singer Elis Regina once famously declared of his celestial tenor. It's a voice that has graced textured, often harmonically complex songs whose lyrics variously protest injustice, celebrate nature and champion love and racial harmony.

Many of his recordings are deemed masterpieces; among them, the milestone 1972 double album *Clube da Esquina* (*Corner Club*) that Nascimento co-authored with 20-year-old singer/guitarist Lô Borges and titled after the collective of musicians that gathered in their birth state of Minas Gerais, in the shadow of Brazil's murderous military regime. Its 21 tracks, sung in Portuguese (bar one in Spanish) spans a sprawl of sounds both ambitious and mysterious ("I have not managed to discover the rhythmic impulse he gives to his songs," said the album's string arranger Eumir Deodato). It remains a vital document of Brazilian music.

Photo: Lucas Nogueira

Nascimento folded his otherworldly voice – wordlessly shrieking here, shaking with pure vibrato there – and interracial, interplanetary aesthetic into influences including bossa nova, The Beatles, psychedelic rock, Afro-Brazilian music, Western classical music and the freeform spirituality of John Coltrane. Dissonance was embraced, as were grand orchestrations, marked tempo shifts and on 'Cais', a beach-set plea for hope that features on *Milton + esperanza*, haunting minor key motifs.

Milton + esperanza itself has drawn parallels with *Clube da Esquina* for its broad scope and collaborative aesthetic. Recorded in Brazil over several months in 2023, in the TV room at the Rio de Janeiro home Nascimento shares with his adopted son Augusto and two dogs named after John Lennon and Paul McCartney, the new album features guest appearances by Brazilian stars, including singer/songwriter Maria Gadú and finger-picking guitarist/composer Guinga.

Singer Lianne La Havas is here, as is UK woodwind hero

Shabaka Hutchings, and spalding's core band with the likes of guitarist Matthew Stevens and vocalist/synth player Corey D King. Nascimento's longtime buddy Paul Simon sings in Portuguese on 'Um Vento Passau' ('The Wind

// The music for me is basically friendship, love, children, ocean, the life //
– Milton Nascimento

Has Passed'), a tune written especially for him by Nascimento, and Diane Reeves helps transform Michael Jackson's climate shout-out 'Earth Song' into a work of spare, spine-tingling urgency. Singer Carolina Shorter, the widow of the late great Wayne Shorter, appears across a nine-minute reimagining of 'When You Dream', a song about love, life cycles and connections from her husband's 1989 release *Atlantis*.

"Another thing Milton and I have in common is this love and friendship with Wayne," says spalding of the American saxophonist and composer, who died in March 2023, and with whom she collaborated on two genre-less, Greek myth-fuelled performance pieces, *Gaia* and *Iphigenia* (which premiered as an opera in 2021). Nascimento has named an amphitheatre in his garden after Wayne Shorter.

"Carolina said that one of the last things Wayne said to her was, 'Carolina, you need to sing, and people need to hear you'. She said it was if Wayne's spirit was involved in getting her involved in the recording. And everything came together.