

Gilberto Gil: The minister of cool

After four decades of taking his country's music around the world, Gilberto Gil is making his mark on the Brazilian political stage.

By Phil Meadley

Gilberto Gil must be one of the coolest government ministers on the planet. Three years ago, after 40 years of iconic superstardom, he accepted the position of Brazil's Minister of Culture from President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. These days, music takes second place to intergovernmental meetings, but it hasn't stopped him releasing his new live album, *Eletracustico*, and taking advantage of the annual summer recess to perform at some of Europe's finest concert halls. It all seems a far cry from the heady days of the late-Sixties Tropicalismo movement, when Gil and his fellow musician Caetano Veloso fled to Europe after Brazil's military government took exception to their radical mix of bossa nova, samba and loaded wordplay.

"It's a whole different kind of work," he says of his new life in the Brazilian Cabinet. "The first change was having to get up early, which I didn't have to do as an artist. These days a normal week consists of a lot of office work, travelling as a representative of the Ministry inside and outside Brazil, and taking part in international meetings to sign agreements or discuss new deals. It's more about instilling different concepts of administration and politics inside the government, for the people, and on the international platform. I enjoy it."

Gil's rise up the political ranks is an intriguing one, and speaks volumes for the government's determination to appeal to its multicultural population. "I think President Lula was looking at my record as a public figure, and also as a cultural militant and environmentalist," he says. "It was a personal choice, and I think the fact I'd been an ambassador for Brazil through my music helped. Also, I belong to a very popular middle-class sector of society which is of black descent, so I represent a very important demographic."

His celebrity status hasn't been without controversy, with the Public Ethics Commission recently recommending that Gil should refrain from his music activities until "Friday evening, weekends and holidays". He was also asked to publish his concert fees on the Culture Ministry's website, told to seek President Lula's permission to perform abroad, and advised to avoid playing concerts for people with business associations with the Ministry. This doesn't negate the fact that Gil was instrumental in Brazil becoming a supporter of the Creative Commons licensing system, which allows the artists to have a say in the way their work is used. He has also encouraged open source systems and software for schools and state-run establishments and supported the provision of free Aids drugs.

With his well-publicised opinions about poverty and environmental issues, it was of little surprise that he was asked to attend Rome's recent Live8 show. He was unable to go, but he is largely positive about Geldof's efforts. As to his thoughts on the forthcoming G8 summit, and whether he thinks music can truly change the world, he offers these words of encouragement to those active in highlighting the cause of poverty and corruption in Africa: "I think everybody involved believes it's worth doing

something for peace and understanding. They feel strongly it can make a difference. I think it's hope that is moving these people."

Born Gilberto Passos Gil Moreira on 29 June 1942, in Salvador, in the northern state of Bahia, he had a middle-class upbringing and developed an interest in music at an early age. He was turned on to bossa nova ("new wave") by hearing Joao Gilberto's *Chega de Saudade*, taught himself guitar and became part of the burgeoning movement, and while studying business administration at the University of Bahia, he met Caetano Veloso and Gal Costa. Along with his sister Maria Bethania and other musicians such as Tom Ze, they put together a show, *Nos, por Exemplo*, which marked the first collaboration of some of the most prominent members of what became the Tropicalismo movement.

In 1967, Gil and Veloso, influenced as much by bossa nova and MPB (Popular Music of Brazil) as Hendrix and Chuck Berry, collaborated with their fellow musicians Ze, Os Mutantes, Costa and Bethania on the groundbreaking album *Tropicalia ou Panis et Circensis* (*Tropicalia or Bread and Circuses*), which fused psychedelia with traditional Brazilian rhythms, while poking fun at aspects of Brazil's new consumerist society. "The music was a mix of everything," Gil says.

In December 1968, a new military dictatorship came to power in Brazil, and Gil and Veloso were arrested before being persuaded to leave the country. Gil fled to England, and it was a painful period in his life: "I was in exile, but I was glad to be in London. I was in contact with a different music scene, learning how to play electric guitar, and writing in English. At the same time I was missing my country. It wasn't a joyful time."

He arrived here on the day of The Rolling Stones' infamous Hyde Park concert, and his presence sparked a wave of interest. "It was a very exciting time," he says. "I met great people such as David Gilmour from Pink Floyd, Jim Capaldi from Traffic, Terry Reid, and Alan White, who was playing with the Plastic Ono Band. It was great fun."

He collaborated with Pink Floyd, Yes and the Incredible String Band, and recorded his self-titled album *Gilberto Gil*, a melancholy mix of Brazilian psychedelia, folk-rock, and electric bossa. Its opening track, "Nega (Photograph Blues)", reflected Gil's newly acquired improvisational jazz-fusion aesthetic, which he used for his next album, *Expresso 2222*, on his return home in 1972.

In the late Seventies, he became a spokesman for the new black consciousness movement, and in the 1990s, he chaired the Blue Wave environmental education group, which promotes the conservation of Brazil's rivers. These days, he's concerned with helping independent record labels in Brazil, as well as promoting Brazilian music and arts abroad, and tackling the problem of the favelas (shanty towns). "Favelas are a growing problem, despite the attention that governments and society in general have given to it. It's not something that can be sorted out by taking two or three actions. It can't be solved by sheer governmental will or voluntary aid. We are trying to put together programmes to tackle violence, drugs and poverty, but unfortunately it's a problem that attacks during the day and grows during the night.

"As regards the Ministry of Culture, we've developed a number of chambers for different cultural activities, and within the performing arts we have a steadily growing area for music," he says. "One of the areas that has been particularly busy is the

independent record sector. We have more than 150 labels in Brazil, and they are united in an association that discusses new business models for spreading their product both at home and internationally, and helping to fight piracy. The latter is a big problem - we're rated the fourth or fifth most affected country.

"Brazilian music has always been very intense with great variety," he continues. "We have lots of different styles and approaches. We are broad in scope and vast in population, with many different regions producing different music. I spend a lot of time travelling in Brazil, supporting people's efforts. There are always newcomers with exciting new agendas. We are a very musical society."

The process of making music must seem less important these days, but Gil insists he's as passionate as ever. "It's essential for me. Music is a manifestation of my nature. I was born with it and I'll die with it. I've been around for almost 40 years as a professional, and there is a lot more left to do, I hope."

He insists that playing live will always be his main passion. "I had to record because it was the best way to get the music out, but what I really wanted was to perform live," he says. "I still love playing things like 'Palco', 'Aquele Abraco' and 'Nos Barracos De Cidade'."

Eletracustico includes covers of John Lennon's "Imagine", Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds" and Enrique Santos Discepolo's 1934 tango classic "Cambalache". Recorded in Rio, it includes acoustic and electronic percussion, acoustic guitar, banjo, mandolin, accordion, keyboards and vocals. "The idea came from a presentation I did at the UN in New York," he says. "I chose a very humanistic, pro-peace repertoire, and 'Imagine' appears because it's peaceful... that, and feeling for a long time that I would like to do a bossa nova version."

If diversity is the key to understanding Brazilian culture, then Gilberto Gil remains one of its greatest emissaries.