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Gilberto Gil

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"I knew that music would be my language and that I would discover the world through it." From the Tropicália movement to his collaboration with Jimmy Cliff, famous Brazilian composer, singer and guitarist Gilberto Gil has been an important cultural broker. His trajectory captures the range of musical genres of the Atlantic world.

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"I knew that music would be my language and that I would discover the world through it." [1] With a career lasting 60 years, 65 records, 2 Grammy and 7 Latin Grammy Awards, Gilberto Gil is one of the most famous Brazilian artists in the world today. The trajectory of this multi-talented musician—at once guitar player, hit maker and Minister of Culture under president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva—captures the range of musical genres present in the Atlantic world.

From the pop esthetic of the *Tropicália* movement to his collaboration with Jimmy Cliff or with Benin artist Angélique Kidjo, [2] Gil has been a veritable purveyor of cultural influences. He has contributed to the appropriation of American and African musical genres in Brazil as well as to the popularization of Brazilian music on foreign stages.

Luiz Gonzaga, João Gilberto and the Beatles

Gilberto Passos Gil Moreira was born in Bahia in 1942 into a middle-class family—his father was a doctor and his mother a teacher. Gil spent his childhood in Ituaçu, a small town located in the interior of the country, until he came to Salvador to pursue his secondary and university education. This is when he discovered Luiz Gonzaga, the celebrated maestro of *baião* music and Brazil's Nordeste rhythms. Following in his footsteps, Gil learnt to play the accordion and made his debut with the group Os Desafinados (the out-of-tune). Like many musicians of his generation, Gil experienced the emergence of bossa nova at the end of the 1950s as a revelation. Impressed by João Gilberto's technical mastery and musical sensibility, he moved on from the accordion to the guitar. In 1963, he recorded his first album at the initiative of producer Roberto Santana, who introduced him to Bahia's young generation of musicians: Caetano Veloso, Maria Bethânia, Tom Zé and Gal Costa, with whom Gil gave his first collective performance at the Vila Velha concert hall in Salvador.

Gil then left for São Paulo, and worked for a year at Unilever, before devoting himself exclusively to music. Success first came in 1967: his debut album, *Louvação,* was released by Philips and his song *Domingo no parque* was awarded a prize at the Brazilian Popular Music Festival. Claiming to be influenced by the Beatles, this "pop manifesto" mixes electric guitars with *berimbau*, the traditional musical bow that accompanies capoeira rounds.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl7xHuEtlyg

> Gilberto Gil at the Festival de Música Popular Brasileira, São Paulo, TV Record, 1967.
>
> **Source:** YouTube

Gil and Caetano Veloso were at this time already defending an aesthetic of métissage, open to the world. They promoted a *som universal* (universal sound) that drew equally from Anglo-Saxon pop, Carmen Miranda's sambas and from the rhythms of the Nordeste. The desire to modernize Brazilian music gave birth to the *Tropicália* movement in 1968, which gathered an eclectic mix of artists behind the leadership of Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, including singers from Bahia, musicians from the rock band Os Mutantes, the poets Capinam and Torquato Neto, the bossa nova muse Nara Leão, and the composer Rogério Duprat who was one of Stockhausen's students.



Source: Tropicália. Panis et Circensis, Philips, 1968

Tropicália claimed the heritage of both Brazilian modernism and of the *Anthropophagic Manifesto* written by poet Oswald de Andrade. Published in 1928, the text opened with a provocative interrogation: "Tupi or not Tupi? That is the question." For in the image of Tupinamba Indians who devoured their enemies to absorb their vital energy, Brazilian artists were to "cannibalize" Indian, African and European traditions in order to create an original culture, which was to be neither a pale copy of European models nor the simple reproduction of an outdated folklore. This aesthetic of métissage is highlighted in the collective album *Tropicália. Panis et Circensis* (1968), that associates pop sonorities with classical music and revolutionary hymns.

Exile in London

Tropicália didn't last long however. The military dictatorship inaugurated by the 1964 coup took a turn for the worse with the adoption of Institutional Act Number 5 in December 1968. Gil and Caetano were arrested for desecrating the flag in one of their shows, where the décor was modeled on the work of plastic artist Hélio Oiticica, *Seja marginal, seja heroi* ("Be marginal, be a hero"). After spending two months in military prisons, and four held under house arrest in Salvador, they were "invited" to leave the national territory, marking the beginning of long years of exile in Europe: landing in Portugal, Gil and Caetano spent a short period in France before settling in London, where they resided until 1972.

In London, Gil acquainted himself with the pop scene and worked on his guitar skills. "Everything was an opportunity to learn. All at once, I would think: the Beatles came through here; Jimmy Hendrix too. I was going to play at the Marquee and I would tell myself: 'Mick Jagger played on this stage!'" [3] Beginning in 1971, Gil recorded an album entirely in English at Chappell studios, combining original compositions and

covers of songs by Jimi Hendrix, Steve Windwood and the Beatles. [4] He toured Europe—The Isle of Wight Festival, France, Switzerland, Germany and Sweden, etc.—and performed in New York, but his music remained unfamiliar to most and his audience was primarily composed of Brazilian and Latino exiles.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z03PB1jHBoI

Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso at the Isle of Wight Festival, UK, 1970

Source: YouTube

Exile also thrust Gil into the heart of the Black Atlantic. Until his departure for Europe, the musician felt "little concern for black conscience" and claimed he had never suffered from racism due to his middle-class origin. [5] It was in London that the racial question resonated with him due to the bonds he developed with American activists and with African independence movements. This new consciousness brought him to take an interest in African and afro-American musical genres, starting with reggae, which he discovered in England and popularized upon his return to Brazil. In 1979, just as the military regime was beginning to show signs of weakening, Gil recorded a version of "No Woman, No Cry" in Portuguese. This tribute to Bob Marley also provided the opportunity to comment on the political situation in his country. "Good friends we have / Oh good friends we've lost / Along the way"nunca mais."* Literally, "imprisoned friends, friends gone missing that way, forever"—a direct allusion to the crimes of the dictatorship.

Performing the Black Atlantic

London is also the place where Gil developed a new approach to Afro-Brazilian culture. Upon his return to Brazil in 1972, he attended for the first time a religious ceremony of candomblé, and started playing with the Afro bands of the Bahia festival. The worship of orixas along with the carnival's rhythms haunted his records from that period: *Cidade do Salvador*, or *Gil Jorge Ogum Xango*, a duet recorded with Jorge Ben Jor.

In 1977, Gil made his first trip to Africa to attend the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos. In order to assert its strategic position in the South Atlantic, Brazil had indeed sent an important delegation to the FESTAC. Artists and intellectuals were chosen with care by the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affaires to embody the "historic and human relations between Africa and Brazil." Despite being a political opponent, imprisoned, exiled and subjected to censorship since his return to Brazil, Gil was officially invited by the Ministry of foreign relations to participate in the festival—a contradiction which displays the contrast between the military regime's internal politics and Brazilian cultural diplomacy.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sfOHLa98Rw

Gilberto Gil peforming at the Second World African Festival of Arts and Culture. FESTAC, Lagos, Nigeria, 1977.

Source: YouTube

After the festival, Gil recorded the concept album *Refavela* (Phonogram, 1977), mixing sounds from the Black Atlantic. The tracklist included: *Samba do avião*, a bossa nova by Tom Jobim played to funk rhythms; *Ilê Ayé,* an Afro chant from Bahia; the reggae *No Norte da saudade*; and *Balafon*, a tribute to Nigerian juju music. In his own words: "*Refavela* is a concept. It speaks of art in the Tropics, of black communities that have contributed to the formation of new ethnicities and new cultures in the New World, in Brazil, the Caribbean, Nigeria, the United States." [6] Still, the aesthetic of métissage remained founded upon a universal aspiration: "Refavela has a Brazilian accent but it is written in an international language." [7]

Musician and Diplomat

The 1980s marked the return to democracy in Brazil and the development of the musician's international career. In 1978, Gil recorded a double live album at the Montreux Festival. The following year, Warner released his first US record, *Nightingale*. Gil toured in Europe and the US and was consecrated by the global music industry with *Gilberto Gil Unplugged* (Warner/MTV) in 1994. In 1998, he received his first Grammy Award for *Quanta*, winning the "best album of the year" award in the *world music* category. He repeated this performance in 2001 for *Gil and Milton*, and in 2005 for *Eletracústico*. Since the creation of the *Latin Grammy Awards* in 2000, he has also received several prizes in the Brazilian music category.

Parallel to his musical activity, Gil entered politics: elected to the municipal council of Salvador in 1989, he adhered to Brazil's Green party in 1990. In 2003, he was named Minister of culture by newly elected president Lula. Gil's mandate was marked by innovative projects such as the establishment of *pontos de cultura*, small cultural centers that aimed at democratizing access to digital cultures; he also initiated a reflection on intellectual property and Creative Commons licenses. Throughout these years, the musician-minister continued to perform in public and at official events. In 2003, he sang at the UN headquarters in New York as a tribute to the victims of the attack on the UN building in Baghdad. He interpreted 16 pieces in Portuguese, Spanish, French and English, among them John Lennon's "Imagine," before inviting to the stage General Secretary Kofi Annan, who, to the great surprise of the audience, accompanied him on the drums. This highly symbolic performance echoes the conviction shared by both men that music can serve the goals of unity, reconciliation, and cross-cultural understanding.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CkravaY2JGQ

> Gilberto Gil performing in the United Nations Headquarters with Secretary-General Kofi Annan after the attack on the United Nations compound in Baghdad, New York City, September 19, 2003
>
> **Source:** YouTube

Brazilian cultural diplomacy did not however limit itself to European and North-American stages: Mercosul, the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, cooperating with African countries were also priorities of the Lula administration. South-South diplomacy determined Brazil's participation as a guest of honor to the third edition of the World Festival of Negro Art in Dakar in 2010. Gil composed the hymn for the festival, "La Renaissance africaine" (African Renaissance), which he interpreted in French and recorded in several albums, with various arrangements, in solo or with Vusi Mahlasela, the celebrated voice of South-African activist music. [8]

On the eve of the twenty-first century, this tribute to Africa, to "its people and its territory which extends with the diaspora to the end of the earth" occupies a significant place in the oeuvre of Gilberto Gil. The Brazilian musician and political activist has been at once a privileged witness and major actor of the contemporary cultural globalization process. Tropicalism, exile, and African renaissance constitute critical prisms through which to view his work, enabling us to grasp his relationship both to the world and to the many cultural appropriations that have sustained his compositions. Based upon the métissage of tones and rhythms, Gilberto Gil's work attests to the vitality of cultural exchanges in the Atlantic space well beyond the North-South commercial circuit of world music, and to the importance of politics in the process of musical globalization.

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NOTES

1. All quotes are taken from interviews given by Gilberto Gil, and cited in Sergio Cohn and Federico Coehlo, ed., *Encontros. Tropicália* (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue, 2007); Sérgio Cohn, ed., *Encontros. Gilberto Gil* (Rio de Janeiro: Azougue, 2008); and off the official website of the musician. This essay is a reduced and revised version of: Anaïs Fléchet, "Le monde musical de Gilberto Gil," in *Littératures et musiques dans la mondialisation. XXe-XXIe siècles*, ed. Anaïs Fléchet and Marie-Françoise Lévy (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015), 231-243.
2. *Black Ivory Soul* (Sony, 2012).
3. "O sonho acabou. Gil está sabendo de tudo," *O Bondinho*, February 16, 1972.
4. *Gilberto Gil* (Famous Music (UK), 1971).
5. "Gil fala a Odete Lara," *O Pasquim*, October 15, 1969.
6. "A paz doméstica de Gilberto Gil," *O Globo*, 10 août 1977.
7. "A paz."
8. Gilberto Gil and Vusi Mahlasela, *The South African Meeting of Viramundo* (Dreampixies, 2010).