

## BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Alex Robinson on Brazil's singer-politician

# GILBERTO GIL

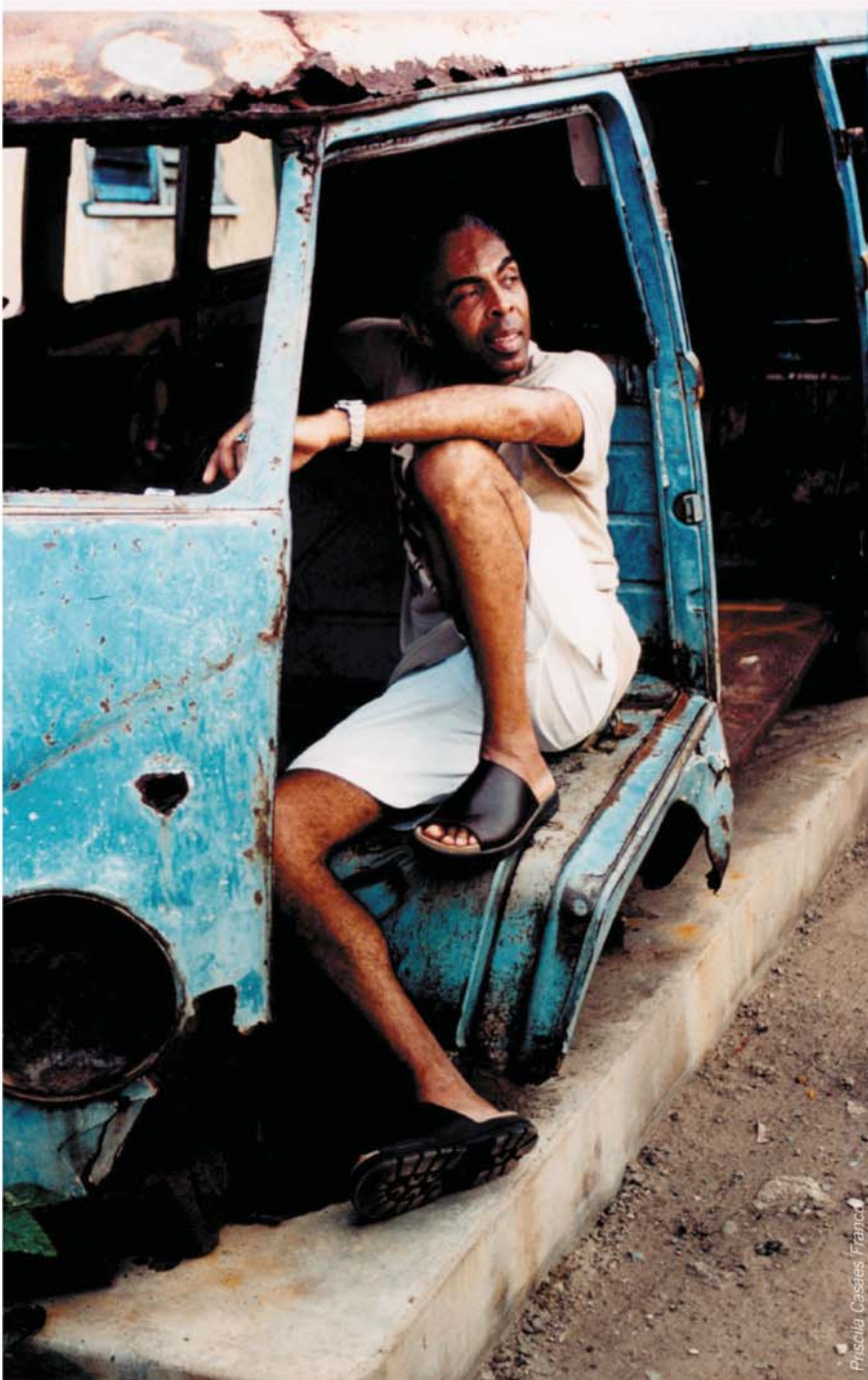
When musicians make political statements or lead political lives in Brazil they are not treated with the scorn that they are in the UK and US. Gilberto Gil, who is now Brazil's Minister of

Culture, is living proof of this. In the early days he could so easily have become another anodyne pop artist, but instead he chose to create a new artistic movement, *tropicalismo*, and he has emerged as the country's foremost proponent of the use of

art for social and environmental change.

Gil was born and brought up in an intellectual middle-class family in Bahia. From the age of three he knew that he wanted to be a musician; initially an accordion player, and then after hearing João Gilberto playing *bossa nova* on the radio, a guitarist. By the time he reached his teens he was regularly performing in Salvador and composing jingles for Bahian radio. By his early 20s he had moved to the south, first to São Paulo where he met Chico Buarque amongst others, and then to Rio. Here he became a well-known TV personality, with his own show, *Ensaio Geral*, and a popular album, *Louvação* (1967), to his name. After Elis Regina and Sergio Mendes had hits with his songs, Gil was well on his way to becoming a mainstream Brazilian recording artist.

But this was not to be. In 1967 Gil separated from his first wife and began a relationship with Nana Caymmi, the daughter of the famous Bahian composer, Dorival. This relationship and his previous meetings with Chico Buarque were to forge his political consciousness and change the course of both his life and Brazilian music. At the now legendary 3rd Festival da Record music competition in 1967, Gil performed together with Os Mutantes, Nana and his old friend from Bahia, Caetano Veloso. The atmosphere of political protest that surrounded the festival, the undermining of commercial pop in favour of artistic expression marked the performances as the first manifestation of a new style of socially aware, electric Brazilian music. It came to be known as *tropicalismo* and Gil, Caetano, Gal Costa and Tom Zé emerged as its exciting new stars. *Tropicalismo* took much of its inspiration from the Brazilian artistic movement of the 20s known as *antropofagia* (cannibalism); where European and international artistic and philosophical influences were 'consumed' and allowed to regrow organically as Brazilian. And so *tropicalismo* consumed psychedelia, reggae, Fela Kuti and rock and produced a new and completely Brazilian sound – strong on rhythm and jazz harmonies with powerful political lyrics. Unfortunately *tropicalismo* wasn't received well by the military government and Gil and



Priscilla Casates/Franca

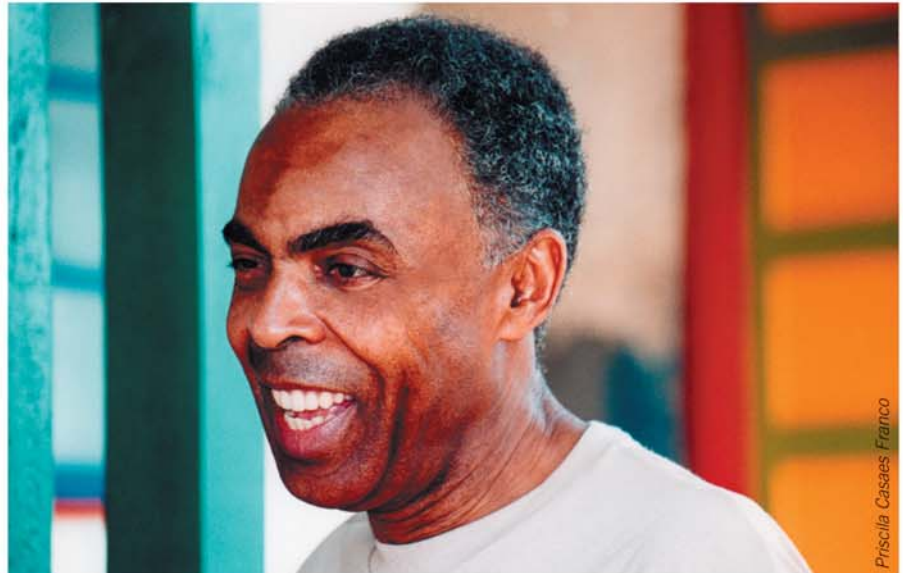
Veloso were arrested, imprisoned and then exiled in London. They were lucky – their fame was immortalised. Other musicians had their tongues cut out.

On his return to Brazil in 1972 Gil exploded back into the Brazilian music consciousness with a huge hit album, *Expresso 2222* and two big singles; 'Back in Bahia' and 'Oriente'. He has never left the national consciousness since, either as a singer or increasingly as a politician. He was elected a city councillor in Salvador in the 80s and when Lula came to power last year, with Gil's Green Party support, Gil was appointed Minister for Culture. In his inauguration speech Gil set out his agenda – to promote Brazilian culture where it has always been strongest: "The way I understand the term 'culture' goes far beyond the restricted and restrictive domain of academic concepts and the rites and liturgy of a supposed creative and intellectual class." He said, "No one will ever hear me pronounce



the word 'folklore'... Folklore is everything not included, because it lacks currency, in the panorama of mass culture. It's produced by uneducated people, by 'modern primitives', in a kind of symbolic ghetto of the present day set aside for all that is of merely historical interest. There is no folklore. Everything is culture." One of the first projects he initiated was a culture programme in the world's largest *favela* (slum city), Roçinha in Rio de Janeiro. Some of Rio's most exciting concerts are now held here, in the midst of a cubist sea of little breeze block shacks and antennae jutting out high above the plush apartments and white sand beaches of São Conrado.

Gil's music is light, tight and effortless. In it he reaches out to the world, absorbs all the styles he can and re-articulates them in Brazilian form: true always to the philosophy



Priscilla Casaes/Franco

of tropicalismo. He once claimed, "We are part of everything and we are in every part. That consciousness pushed us to create a new music that was at the same time the oldest music. We uncovered tradition, we paid tribute to our old masters, we celebrated the new revelation of bossa nova and allowed ourselves to be shaken by the whirlwind of rock'n'roll."

## BEST ALBUMS

**Tropicália ou Panis et Circenses** (Philips, 1968)



This is a landmark album in the history of Brazilian music. It introduced *tropicalismo* to the world and most of the leaders in the movement feature on the album alongside Gil – Caetano Veloso, Tom Zé, Gal Costa and Os Mutantes.

**Realce** (WEA, 1979) and **Luar** (WEA, 1981)



The best of Gil's late 70s and early 80s flirtations with funk and reggae. *Realce* includes the very funky title-track and a version of 'No Woman No Cry'. *Luar* includes 'Palco' – which was stolen by Earth, Wind and Fire to become a disco anthem.

**Parabolicamará** (WEA, 1992)



Gil's best 90s album – a mix of funk, sophisticated jazz rock and Bahian roots. The lyrics explore the roots of culture and its place in a globalised world.

## BEST COMPILATION

**Acoustic** (Atlantic, 1994)



An excellent live 'unplugged' compilation covering Gil's career from the early days to *Parabolicamará* and including almost all of his most famous songs.

## BEST AVOIDED

**Soy Loco por Ti America** (WEA, 1987)

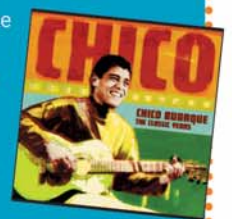


Gil at his least uninspiring – a songwriter going through the motions. Songs like 'Mar de Copacabana' are slick and smooth but sound like they belong in a business hotel's cocktail bar.

## LIKE GILBERTO? THEN TRY...

Chico Buarque, *The Classic Years* (Manteca)

A compilation of the best 60s and 70s songs from Brazil's most highly respected prophet and protest singer, who inspired Gil and Veloso.



Unfortunately most of the Gilberto Gil discs are no longer available in UK record stores. However they are available from online retailers