

# A politician stands by his records

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The greying, dreadlocked "minister of cool," as he has been nicknamed, is regularly seen striding through international airports on government business, guitar strapped across his back. For Gilberto Gil, Brazilian Minister of Culture since 2003, music is essential, or as he puts it, "part of my body, part of my soul."

Both body and soul told him he couldn't take on the government gig without making sure he'd have some time off work to play.

"When I accepted the position as minister I negotiated with the president about the possibility of keeping some of my musical activity, but to a residual level," says Gil, speaking from his home in Salvador. "I haven't been able to fully dedicate myself to music, but I keep some performing."

Politician-musicians are usually novelty turns, trotted out on select occasions: Bill Clinton and his sax, Bob Rae and his piano. But in Gil's case, this is hardly youthful-dreams-turned-hobby-turned-PR-windfall. He's one of the most revered musicians in Brazil's richly inventive popular-music history. He's also notorious for having been thrown in jail for his perceived stand against military dictatorship.

Loose allegations were made of subverting the country's youth, fomenting "bad attitudes," accompanied by "noisy music."

"They were dictatorial times, exceptional times," says Gil, recalling his imprisonment in December, 1968. "They were military taking over power. They weren't concerned about being law abiding. They just put us in prison for two months, then in home arrest for another four months. Then they said, 'Now you leave the country.' "

The "us" was Gil and his musical partner Caetano Veloso, agent provocateurs of Tropicalia, an eruption of cross-pollinating art, fashion, film and theatre. Its soundtrack merged rock and samba, the Beatles and Joao Gilberto, and lyrics that could be interpreted as incendiary. Veloso and Gil were exiled in London for several years, hanging out with the likes of Pink Floyd and Yes. Both men went on to enormously successful solo careers, Gil recording more than 30 albums.

He also went on to incorporate his roots into his music, and in the 1970s became a spokesperson for the country's emerging black-consciousness movement.

Now, as one of the country's first black cabinet ministers, he brings this kind of awareness to public office, calling the approach "social inclusion through culture."

Part of his agenda includes progressive notions of copyright. He supports the notion of the creative commons, whereby authors establish what kinds of "uses and abuses," as he puts it, their work may be subjected to. That these ideas, reflecting aspects of Tropicalia, are becoming more widely embraced is something Gil finds more satisfying than ironic.

"Political cultural movements in history are always interesting or valuable when they introduce some possibility of anticipating history. I think that Tropicalia was one of those movements. It doesn't surprise me that we are having now the actualization of some potential trends that we envisioned some years ago."

At almost 65, Gil believes he will continue in office until he is close to 70, at which point he hopes to dedicate his time to music, reading, writing, and to "a sharing process" with his grandkids, who are "starting to be interested in music and other forms of expression."

As for his own primary forms of expression, music and politics, he rejects the notion that one has been more significant than the other.

"Music isn't an amusement for me, it's part of my own creation, my own living," he says, speaking more loudly as some of those grandkids, playing nearby, get more rambunctious. "And now the ministry has been a great opportunity to make application of some ideas and elements I bring from my life and my musical life also. I wouldn't separate them, no."

*Gilberto Gil performs solo at Massey Hall tonight.*