

Culture

Gilberto Gil is a musical legend – and now a senior Brazilian politician. He ta

Minister of counterculture

Gilberto Gil wears a sober suit and tie these days, and his dreadlocks are greying at the temples. But you soon remember that, as well as the serving culture minister of Brazil, you are in the presence of one of the biggest Latin American musicians of the 60s and 70s when you ask him about his intellectual influences and he cites Timothy Leary. “Oh, yeah!” Gil says happily, rocking back in his chair at the Royal Society of the Arts in London. “For example, all those guys at Silicon Valley – they’re all coming basically from the psychedelic culture, you know? The brain-expanding processes of the crystal had a lot to do with the internet.”

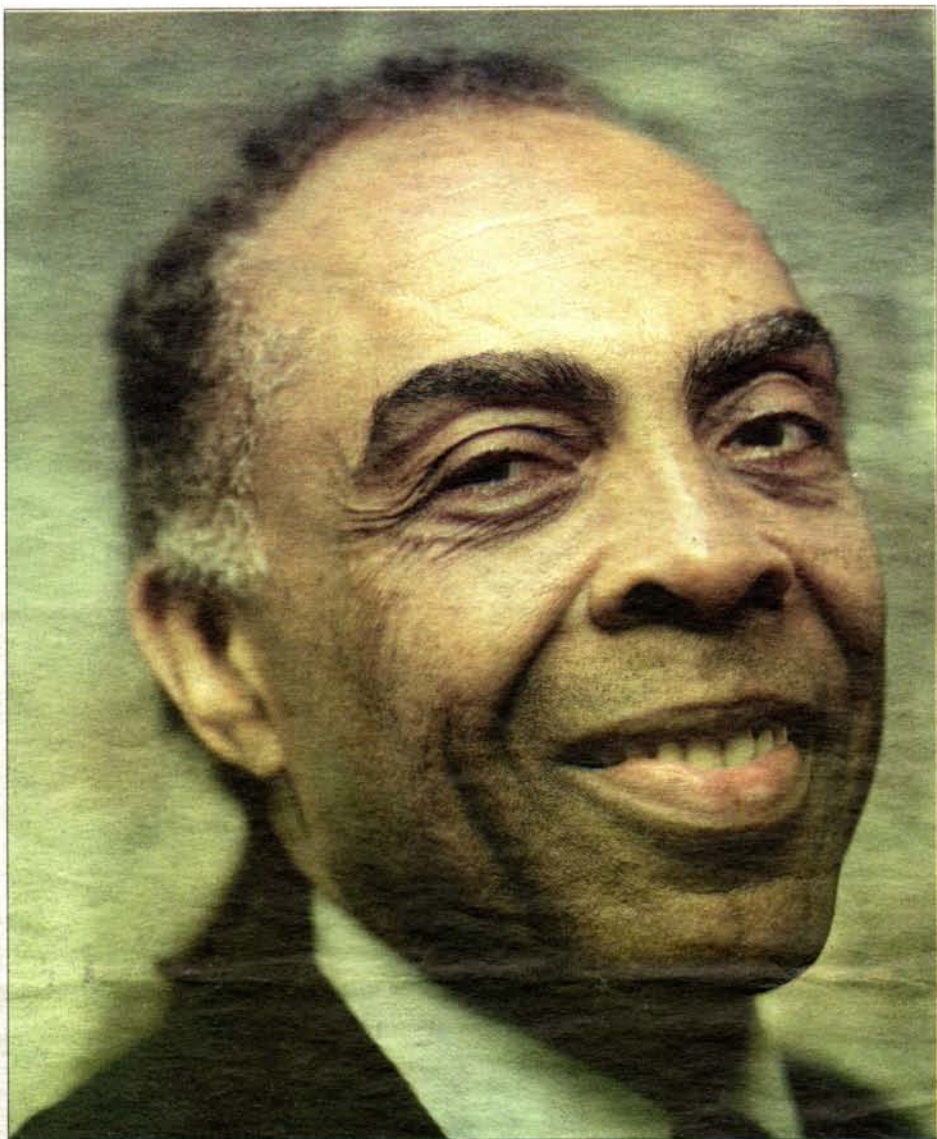
Much as it may be currently *de rigueur* for journalists to ask politicians whether or not they have smoked marijuana, the question does not seem worth the effort. Gil’s constant references to the hippy counterculture are not simply the nostalgia of a 63-year-old with more than 40 albums to his name.

For several years now, largely under the rest of the world’s radar, the Brazilian government has been building a counterculture of its own. The battlefield has been intellectual property – the ownership of ideas – and the revolution has touched everything, from internet file-sharing to GM crops to HIV medication. Pharmaceutical companies selling patented Aids drugs, for example, were informed that Brazil would simply ignore their claims to ownership and copy their products more cheaply if they didn’t offer deep discounts. (The discounts were forthcoming.)

Gil himself has thrown his weight behind new forms of copyright law, enabling musicians to incorporate parts of others’ work in their own. And in one small development that none the less sums up the mood, the leftwing administration of President Luiz Inacio da Silva has announced that ministries will stop using Microsoft Windows on their computers. Instead of paying through the nose for Microsoft operating licences, while millions of Brazilians live in poverty, the government will use open-source software, collaboratively designed by programmers and owned by no one.

“This isn’t just my idea, or Brazil’s idea,” Gil says. “It’s the idea of our time. The complexity of our times demands it.” He is politician enough to hold back from endorsing the breaking of laws, for example on music downloading, but only just. “The Brazilian government is definitely pro-law,” he grins. “But if law doesn’t fit reality any more, law has to be changed. That’s not a new thing. That’s civilisation as usual.” (He is not a hi-tech person himself, he says, but concedes that his children have “probably” done a fair bit of illegal downloading.)

Gil has lived by this philosophy – his guitar-based music has always been, in its own way, open-source, mixing the influences of bossa nova, samba, reggae and rock – and he has suffered for it, too. Tropicalia, the anti-establishment movement he helped found in Brazil in the 1960s, threatened the grip of the military dictatorship there and in 1968 he was jailed,



‘If law doesn’t fit reality any more, law has to be changed’ Photograph: Eamonn McCabe

along with his musical collaborator, Caetano Veloso, with whom he shared the status of a Latin American Lennon and McCartney. Freed after several months, he was instructed to leave the country and moved to London. His fame followed him to Europe and he went on to perform with Pink Floyd and Jimmy Cliff.

“Like most artists and musicians, I considered myself detached from the political life,” he says. “But I had an insight that maybe we would have a political contribution to make in the future. I remember telling a Brazilian girl who used to be part of our community here in London, ‘I’m gonna have a role to play in politics in the future!’ And now... it is the future.”

Gil is in London as a signatory to the RSA’s Adelphi Charter on Creativity, Innovation and Intellectual Property, which calls on governments to restrain corporations from further locking down their ownership of ideas. The

campaign encompasses everything from the music industry’s myopia over downloading to the recent efforts of one agribusiness firm to patent basmati rice, then charge Indian farmers for the privilege of growing it.

Defenders of such developments insist that strong patent laws are crucial – without them, nobody would have the incentive to develop new ideas – and that anything else would impede innovation. Gil and his ministry team have an opposing theory: tough intellectual property law is a 20th-century idea and most of the blossoming of world civilisation has happened perfectly well without it.

“The 20th century is a cul-de-sac,” says Claudio Prado, Brazil’s digital culture tsar. “And the engine of progress doesn’t have a reverse gear, so it’s hard for the first world to get out of the cul-de-sac.” The fact that many Brazilians still live in 18th- or 19th-century conditions, he says,

talks to *Oliver Burkeman*

means that the country has an opportunity to accelerate into the 21st century without entering the cul-de-sac in the first place.

Internet evangelists are fond of hyping the "network society", but this, Prado argues, is what Brazil has been for centuries. "In a Brazilian favela, that's the way it works," he says. "You go and help your neighbour build their house. Or take carnival — that's a totally collaborative process. Sixty thousand people, unrehearsed. That's what you do when you don't have money. You collaborate."

Brazil has ploughed millions of dollars into bringing computer access to the poorest parts of the country, but the bigger picture is not that President Lula's government is embracing the internet. It is that Brazilian society, in a manner of speaking, was itself a kind of internet before the fact.

All this leaves the minister with little time for writing songs. "I haven't even thought about it," Gil says. "It's a very different, drastic kind of time that you have to give to writing music. So for three years I haven't even considered it — the last song I wrote was before the ministry. But now, as my routines become a little more controlled, I'm gathering momentum again. I might be reading documents for work, for instance, on a plane, and an idea comes and I write it down on the back of the page. It's not a preoccupation, but I'm letting it come, slowly."

Performing, he says, is more important to him, and he frequently leaves his wife Flora, with whom he shares a home in Rio de Janeiro, to perform abroad. He must surely be the only serving politician to have completed a 22-gig tour of Europe earlier this year.

The two worlds of Gil's music and his politics merged most closely when he announced that he would license some of his own songs for free downloading. Time Warner, which owned the licences in question, quickly announced that, actually, he would not. "That showed me how difficult the situation is," he says. "An author is not the owner any more. He doesn't exercise his rights. His rights are exercised by someone else, and sometimes the two don't coincide."

Time Warner won — "for the moment" — but it is characteristic of Gil that he regards the experience as a largely positive and rather amusing one. "I think it's a good development that the minister of culture of Brazil is looking after the interests of a Brazilian artist," he says, "who happens to be himself."

A similar mischievousness seems to have explained the government's response when an official accused Microsoft of behaving like a drug dealer in handing out free software to make customers dependent on its products. Microsoft Brazil sued, but the administration simply ignored the case, and the company eventually withdrew it.

"But this is not demagoguery," Gil insists, if you accuse him of just being provocative. "This is pedagogy." Eventually, in other words, the world will learn.