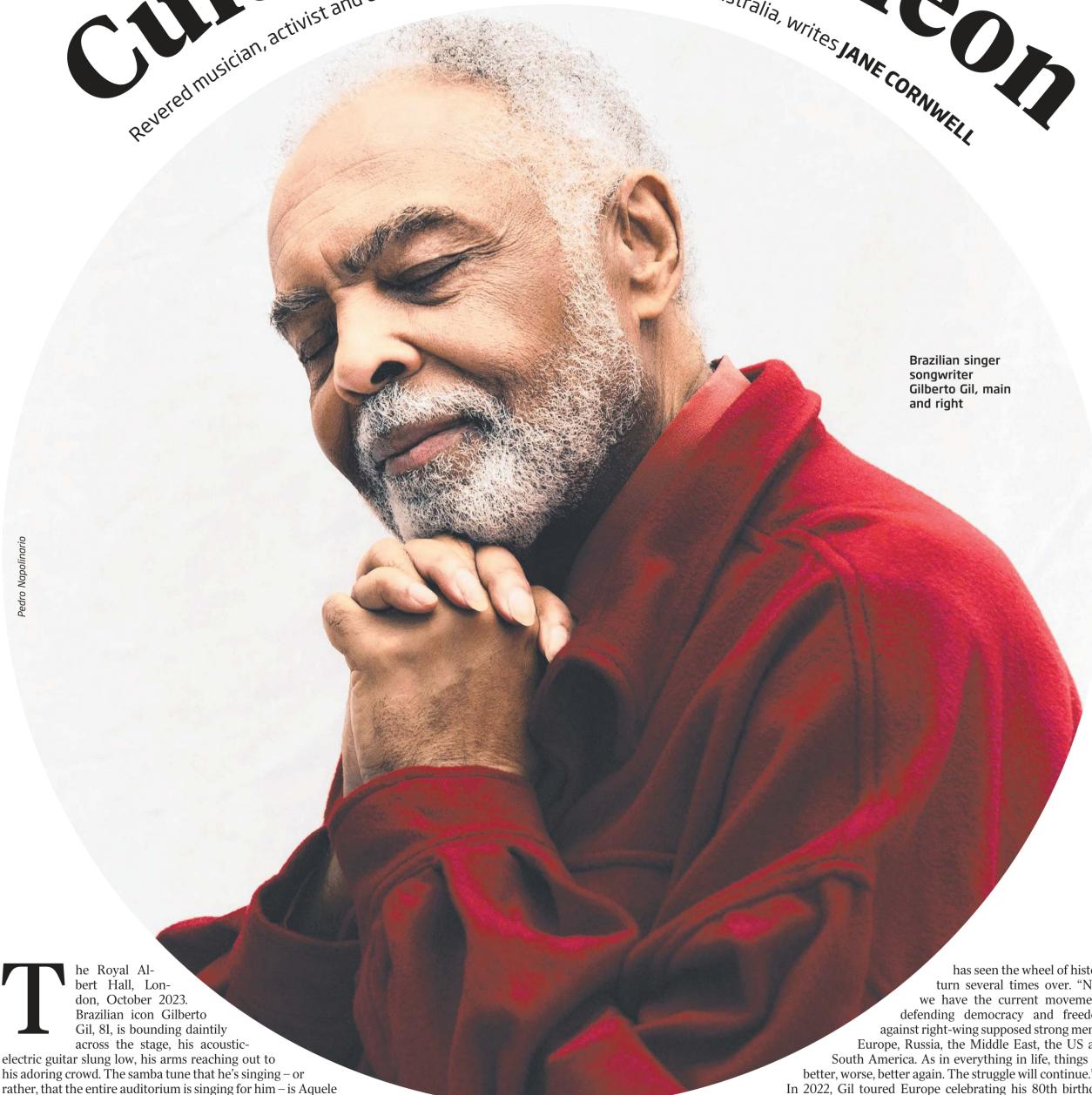


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# Cultural chameleon

Revered musician, activist and environmentalist Gilberto Gil is back in Australia, writes JANE CORNWELL



Brazilian singer songwriter Gilberto Gil, main and right

Pietro Napolitano

**T**he Royal Albert Hall, London, October 2023. Brazilian icon Gilberto Gil, 81, is bounding daintily across the stage, his acoustic-electric guitar slung low, his arms reaching out to his adoring crowd. The samba tune that he's singing – or rather, that the entire auditorium is singing for him – is Aquele Abraco (That Hug), which Gil wrote in 1969 while under house arrest in Rio de Janeiro, prior to his three-year exile in the UK.

"Realango ... Flamengo ... Portela" holler 5000-plus Brazilians and superfans (including a low-key Janet Jackson), the song's Portuguese-language lyrics invoking the neighbourhoods, football clubs, samba schools and people that Gil will miss when he is gone. A band comprised of sons Bem and Jose, guitar-wielding grandson Joao and granddaughter Flor on keyboards buoy their silver-goateed paterfamilias through hit after hit: sambas including Expresso 222 and 1972's rollicking, Beatles-influenced Back to Bahia.

The funky sing-a-long Cerebro Electronico helped soundtrack tropicalia – a kind of psychedelic punk that emerged in 1968 as part of a wider movement whose vibrant counter-culturalism and anti-authoritarian politics riled the junta. Gil and musician friends including singer/composer Caetano Veloso, also exiled in London, intended to use culture to unify a class-ridden Brazil. The two men were fortunate: many musicians were tortured, or "disappeared".

"That narrow-minded regime wanted rid of anyone who offered

a more enlightened and open view of society and the world at large," says Gil, who has gone on to release more than 60 albums spanning everything from rock, reggae and bossa nova to highlife, psychedelia and disco-boogie, garnering accolades including two Grammys, several Latin Grammys, a French Legion d'honneur, UNESCO's Artist of Peace Award and Sweden's Polar Music Prize – and he served as Brazil's minister of culture (2002 to 2008) along the way.

"Tropicalia was in line with the late-60s zeitgeist," he tells Review, Zooming from his light, airy home in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil's northernmost state, the birthplace of samba and capoeira and the epicentre of Afro-Brazilian culture. "It was similar to what was happening in the US and England, a natural revolution fuelled by young people who defied established values and structures. Who wanted change."

An octogenarian who considers getting old "a task, a job", Gil

has seen the wheel of history turn several times over. "Now we have the current movements defending democracy and freedom against right-wing supposed strong men in Europe, Russia, the Middle East, the US and South America. As in everything in life, things get better, worse, better again. The struggle will continue."

In 2022, Gil toured Europe celebrating his 80th birthday with his entire (28-member) family onstage and backstage, a tour that was filmed as part of the second season of the Amazon Prime series Travelling With the Gils. The tour took place in the run-up to the fraught Brazilian election that ousted the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro and reappointed Luis Antonio "Lula" da Silva, on whose invitation Gil served as culture minister, for a record third term.

His Aquele Abraco Tour, an honouring of Gil's 60-year career and his adeus/goodbye to the world, therefore has a much more jubilant air. Gil will be saying farewell to Australia next month when he plays dates including Sydney's Enmore Theatre and WOMADelaide, which he last played in 2004. He's since visited our shores to shoot footage for Viramundo ("Wanderer"), a 2013 documentary by Swiss director Pierre-Yves Borgeaud that follows Gil from Bahia to the Brazilian Amazon – showcasing the legacy of the 5000 cultural centres he implanted to bring the internet and multimedia tools to Brazil's poorest communities – to Johannesburg, South Africa, and on to northeast Arnhem Land before

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returning him home again. "We examined possible links between Brazilian Indians, certain ethnic groups in South Africa and Aboriginal people in far north Australia and explored cultural responses to conquest and colonisation," says Gil, who is variously shown observing traditional ceremonies, listening to stories of lost languages, forced separations and the desecration of nature, meeting erstwhile Midnight Oil, frontman-turned-cabinet minister Peter Garrett and collaborating joyously with Indigenous singer/song-writer Shellie Morris. He remains stubbornly hopeful.

"So things are changing," he says after a conversation with an elder.

Asked for his opinion on the outcome of Australia's 2023 Indigenous voice referendum, he pauses and sighs. "But at the same time, through the struggle, (First Nations Australians) came to be recognised even more as an essential part of Australian culture. Of course, the struggle will continue until they are completely reintroduced to their own culture and share political and economic power," he says. "This goes with achieving the right to keep their land, to avoid its destruction through mining and other things."

A long-time environmental activist, in 1988 he became Salvador's commissioner for environmental protection. In 1990, he joined Brazil's Green Party and set up Onda Azul (Blue Wave), an organisation dedicated to the protection of Brazilian waters. Gil won't comment directly on his old friend Lula's anti-mining offensive; despite expelling an estimated 20,000 illegal gold and tin ore miners the Amazon's Portugal-sized Yanomami Indigenous Territory in the months after he (Lula) took office in January 2023, the offensive has waned and the situation has worsened.

"In Brazil, Africa, America, Australia and New Zealand, from the first moment of occupation by European colonisers, the fight for the future is constant," says Gil in his gracious but steely way. This, after all, is the man who as minister of culture – and Brazil's first culture minister of African descent – represented his country internationally and influentially, lobbying successfully on topics including new technologies and changes in copyright law as well as on cultural development and diversity.

I mention Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira, a British journalist and a Brazilian Indigenous expert who were ambushed and shot dead in the western Amazon on June 5, 2022 after returning from a reporting trip. (Three fishers accused of their murder are awaiting trial by jury; a fourth suspect was arrested in January.)

Gil squares his shoulders. "It always happens in history that there are disasters, some dramatic things, some martyrs. These men were important agents in the fight for the preservation of our natural wealth and a future of more balanced environmental relations. Grief is like fuel for the fight."

Born Gilberto Passos Gil Moreira in the little town of Ituacu in the sertao, the outback region of northeast Brazil, Gil found

beauty in nature, and poetry in words and music, from the get-go. He grew up listening to desert birdsong, watching street performers and religious processions, bopping to the rhythms of the region's forro dance music as played on accordion, bass drum and triangle. At five-years-old, already adept on trumpet and drums, he declared he would be a musician when he grew up.

He was aged 10 when the family moved to Salvador and his mother bought him an accordion. For several years he practised hard, composing songs, selling jingles to local radio stations.

Then he fell for the sensuous sun-and-sea bossa novas of Brazilian singer/guitarist Joao Gilberto, and fell in with the city's arty alternative scene of musicians, writers, poets, filmmakers and visual artists eager to push the boundaries of their art. Gil rose to fame aged 25 with the song Domingo no Parque, a fuzz-guitar driven tune about a murder in a Salvador amusement park that was inspired by the writings of Jorge Amado, the acclaimed Brazilian novelist feted for bawdy novels that celebrated the country's underclasses.

A cross-art form sensibility has continued to inform Gil's oeuvre and outlook, across his move down to Rio and his exile in London – where he saw the Rolling Stones, performed with Pink Floyd, supported Chelsea FC soccer club, and took part in talks that kickstarted the Glastonbury Festival – and his return to Brazil in 1972 with the hit album Ex-presso 222.

He still plays the bossa novas as they are meant to be played, stripped back on classical guitar (and does so for the first half of his Royal Albert Hall show). But Gil's guitar-based music has always mixed influences: his most recent studio album, 2018's Ok Ok Ok – recorded after he was hospitalised with cardio-renal failure – still finds him travelling through genres.

The video for the title track, a musing on the political situation in Brazil at the time, depicts a young black boy walking through a ravaged land, moving forward as outside forces try and push him back.

Ideas, new paradigms, still motivate a polymath who is currently reading books on Italian opera, and on composers Stravinsky, Wagner and Stockhausen; who cites Bob Marley, countercultural hero Timothy Leary and the Jackson Five among his influences ("Janet Jackson came backstage after the show in London to see me," he says. "She is a big fan of tropicalismo and bossa nova, and was quoting my lyrics to me").

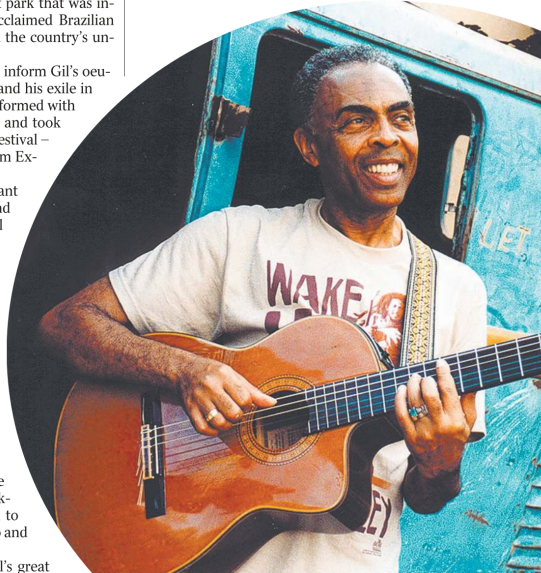
As indeed does the spirit of Carnival, Brazil's great

democratising force for self-expression, palpable in the giddy joy of the Albert Hall crowd, in the hands-in-the-air celebration of music, life and possibility.

"This feeling isn't especially about an individual," he says. "There's something warming in the songs and the dance rhythms that lets us share our physicality, which all belongs to the African music tradition. It's represented by me and other artists like myself and people recognise it. It's an old cultural attraction."

You probably have a lot more to do with it than you think, I say. Gil smiles, diplomatically.

**Gilberto Gil** plays Gold Coast March 1, Brisbane March 3, Sydney March 6-7, Womadelaide March 9 and Melbourne March 12. Womadelaide runs at Adelaide's Botanic Park from March 8-11.



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