

# Review: Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, Harmonic and Political Still

By Nate Chinen  
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Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil were the picture of unfussy enlightenment on Wednesday, in their first of two nights at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Howard Gilman Opera House. Each seated with an acoustic guitar, they brought an easy collegiality to their exchange, with the odd flicker of guilelessness. But their songs contained all manner of complexities: rhythmic and harmonic, as well as tonal, political, philosophical and metaphysical.

Mr. Gil and Mr. Veloso, both 73, are among the most celebrated singer-songwriters in Brazilian popular music. For much of the last year they have been a traveling duo, in celebration of a camaraderie that stretches almost to the dawn of their distinguished careers.

They have a gemlike new album — “Dois Amigos, Um Século de Música: Multishow Live,” recorded in São Paulo and released on Nonesuch — featuring a set list that has remained fairly constant during the tour. This remained true of Wednesday's concert, which felt no less magisterial or special for adhering to a familiar contour.

Early on, there were nods to each artist's central role in Brazil's Tropicália movement, which led to their exile in London at the turbulent close of the 1960s. First came “Tropicália,” the opening declaration of Mr. Veloso's self-titled 1968 debut album, sung here with crackling assurance. Then, also from '68, Mr. Gil's “Marginalia II,” a slyly fatalistic diagnosis of the national condition, set against springy baião rhythm. That song's refrain is “Aqui é o fim do mundo” — “The end of the world is here” — and Mr. Gil gave it many playful variations of phrasing and emphasis.

Each artist backed the other on these songs, their guitar parts smartly arranged to avoid entanglement. At times one singer would perform a solo number, while his counterpart paid close attention, as if hearing the song anew.

The sparseness of the format sharpened some contrasts, like the one between Mr. Veloso's light, satiny croon and Mr. Gil's heavier, more textured cry. (He actually sounded a bit hoarse, more so than on the album.) But the instrumentation also underscored shared affinities and resourceful adjustments.

Both use phonetics and cadence as agents of rhythm. Mr. Gil provided a glowing example of this with “Expresso 2222,” which on its most literal level is a train song: singing the line “Que parte direto de Bonsucesso pra depois” (“It runs direct from Bonsucesso to the hereafter”), his syllabics evoked the clatter of the tracks.

Mr. Veloso and Mr. Gil also share an ingenious gift for couching pointed lyrics in sweetness or uplift. This played out subtly in song after song, including “As Camélias do

Quilombo do Leblon,” a buoyant new collaboration; “Terra,” which Mr. Veloso composed from a prison cell; and “Sampa,” a lilting ode to São Paulo that he sang with haunting deliberation, while Mr. Gil played softly thumping percussion with a thumb and forefinger on the body of his guitar.

The roil of contemporary Brazilian politics inevitably crept into the set. Mr. Veloso began the second encore with “Odeio,” a spiteful song with a blunt refrain: “Odeio voce,” or “I hate you.” A faction of the crowd turned the line into an indictment, shouting “Cunha!” — for Eduardo Cunha, the speaker of Brazil’s lower house, who spearheaded efforts to impeach the nation’s president, Dilma Rousseff.

Age and accomplishment have imbued Mr. Gil and Mr. Veloso with the aura of statesmen. And there was a touch of diplomacy in their insistence on letting the songs articulate their positions. The concert’s homestretch was full of singalongs, including one to “A Luz de Tieta,” an anthem by Mr. Veloso that critiques a people passionate only about “carnaval e futebol.”

As if to issue a counterbalance, Mr. Gil concluded the evening with Bob Marley’s “Three Little Birds,” tweaked with jazzy harmonies. This, too, became a singalong, but as Mr. Gil led the chorus — “Don’t worry about a thing/’Cause every little thing gonna be all right” — that blithe affirmation seemed to resonate on a complicated frequency, as if everyone were fully aware of what a spoonful of sugar is supposed to do.

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