

Brazil mourns death of musician João Gilberto

Bossa nova legend, 88, earns warm tributes – but not from president Jair Bolsonaro.
Dom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro



João Gilberto who was described as an extraordinary genius by Gilberto Gil. Photograph: Dario Zalis/EPA

Brazil is mourning the death of João Gilberto, one of the country's greatest musicians and composers, a reclusive genius in a nation of extroverts whose work recalled happier, more optimistic times for a deeply divided nation.



João Gilberto obituary

Gilberto's funeral will be held on Monday at Rio's Municipal theatre. It is not yet clear whether members of the public will be allowed in.

The death on Saturday of the 88-year-old bossa nova legend – whose *Girl from Ipanema*, recorded with his then-wife Astrud Gilberto, became perhaps Brazil's best-known song worldwide – was marked in newspaper headlines, in musical tributes and in homages from many of Brazil's greatest living artists.

But it also played into politics: the far-right president Jair Bolsonaro's brusque description of Gilberto as a "famous person" appeared to brush aside the legacy of a Brazilian genius whose work was celebrated all over the world.



“The final flicker of the old flame,” read a headline in Rio de Janeiro’s O Globo newspaper. “One of the greatest geniuses of Brazilian music, the creator of bossa nova influenced generations of artists with his ‘different beat’.”

Gilberto Gil, the singer and former minister of culture, described Gilberto as an “extraordinary genius” in a video on Facebook dedicated to “João, music, poetry and love”. The composer Caetano Veloso tweeted photographs of himself with Gilberto and called him “the greatest artist with whom my soul made contact”. “With his voice and his guitar, he reworked the function of speech and the history of the instrument ... he was a musical illumination,” Veloso wrote on Facebook.

Gilberto’s daughter, Bebel Gilberto a singer, commemorated her father on Facebook. “How much fun we had! Thank you for everything ... the attention to every little harmony and melody in any song, to leave the moment in life, to be kind to be honest, to be a family man, to be the GREATEST Dad anyone could ever dreamed of,” she wrote.

At Rio’s Triboz jazz club, Ricardo Silveira, a guitarist, opened Saturday night’s show with two Gilberto songs, one of many tributes that focused on Gilberto’s role creating the sound of bossa nova – the lilting, gently romantic, yet musically adventurous sound that encapsulated a young, optimistic Brazil of the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Girl from Ipanema, recorded by Astrud Gilberto with the American jazzman Stan Getz, was a worldwide hit and won a Grammy in 1965.

Others remembered how Gilberto famously turned up in a suit at the hippy apartment in Rio where the 1970s group Os Novos Baianos lived to teach them melodic tricks and elevate their psychedelic samba rock into something much more profound, “Me and my brothers in Os Novos Baianos received many precious lessons in the early hours,” said Baby do Brasil (Bernadete de Carvalho Cidade), one of the band’s vocalists, who became an evangelical preacher. “The maestro João Gilberto, a mark in our music.” O Globo printed photographs of a recent seafood dinner shared by a gaunt Gilberto, his lawyer Gustavo Miranda and companion Maria do Céu Harris at a restaurant in Rio.

Ruy Castro, whose book *Chega de Saudade* is regarded as the definite history of bossa nova, addressed complaints about Gilberto’s decision not to perform after 2008, pointing out he had left a legacy of 17 albums. “João Gilberto spent the last decades playing for the walls of his apartment, set on a musical mission, by definition, crazy and impossible – to perfect perfection,” Castro wrote in the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper.

Amid all this praise, Bolsonaro’s abrupt comment on Saturday sounded like a dismissal. “He was a famous person, our sentiments to the family, OK,” he said, according to *Folha*. Some leftists noted that Bolsonaro had heaped much more praise on MC Reaça (Talees Fernandes), a rightwing rapper who recorded campaign songs supporting Bolsonaro. The leftist congressman Marcelo Freixo used the remark to refer to Bolsonaro’s nickname of “legend”. “Today we lost a true Brazilian legend. João Gilberto helped to form our culture,” he tweeted.

Fred Martins, a Lisbon-based Brazilian singer, said Brazil had been left orphaned. “In a difficult moment for the country, João represented the best Brazil could dream of,” he said.