

Gil Scott-Heron,
ca. 1974



GIL SCOTT- HERON

HIS EMPHASIS ON THE RHYTHMIC MEANING
AND POWER OF WORDS LED THE WAY TO RAP.

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

Gil Scott-Heron (1949–2011) believed in what he called “the spirits.” He wasn’t a religious man in conventional terms, but he believed in forces that provided inspiration and that helped people become their true, highest selves. “If you’re supposed to be doing something, the spirits will come and help you,” he told Alec Wilkinson of the *New Yorker*. “They have helped me out with lines I shouldn’t have known, chords I shouldn’t have known. Every once in a while I get lines from somewhere, and I think, I better write this down.”

Fortunately, he wrote down enough of those lines – and delivered them compellingly in a voice rich with emotional power – to amass an extraordinary body of work that includes albums, novels, and collections of poetry. His deeply textured music, much of it composed by his longtime collaborator Brian Jackson – draws on blues, jazz, soul, and R&B, all of which underlay his sung and spoken-word narratives of Black lives enmeshed in trying times. His songs – masterpieces like “Home Is Where the Hatred Is,” “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” “The Bottle,” “We Almost Lost Detroit,” and “Winter in America” – are clear-eyed and unsentimental, pointed and sardonic, but never without hope.

Scott-Heron’s emphasis on the rhythmic meaning and power of his words has earned him recognition as a “godfather of rap” along with the Last Poets, a politically charged trio of spoken-word artists from Harlem. Indeed, Scott-Heron saw the Last Poets in 1969 when he was a college student, and afterward he asked one of the group’s members, “Listen, can I start a group like you guys?” His decision to do so was life-changing, for both him and the culture at large. “You can go into Ginsberg and the Beat poets and Dylan,” said Chuck D of Public Enemy, “but Gil Scott-Heron is the manifestation of the modern word. He and the Last Poets set the stage for everyone else.”

By the time he saw the Last Poets, Scott-Heron already had defined literary ambitions. Inspired by Langston Hughes, he would publish two novels and a book of poems before graduating college. The Last Poets taught him that he could maintain the poetic quality of his writing while adding the additional appeal of music. An accomplished pianist already steeped in the history of blues and jazz, he was also drawn to the socially conscious Black popular music of the early seventies, by the likes of Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and Curtis Mayfield. With the help of Brian Jackson, he sought to potentially bring



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his words to a larger audience. To advance that end, he also incorporated singing into his performances. While he would never enter the pantheon of peerless Black vocalists, his singing was strong and expressive. “He wasn’t a great singer,” said bassist Ron Carter, who played with him, “but with that voice, if he had whispered it would have been dynamic. It was a voice like you would have for Shakespeare.”

“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” remains Scott-Heron’s essential statement. He first recorded it in 1970 accompanied solely by percussion, and then released it with a full band on his 1971 album, *Pieces of a Man*. While variations on that title had knocked around the Black Arts Movement in the sixties, Scott-Heron’s characteristically direct and unadorned version has subsequently become enshrined as the definitive reference. In addition to its political force, the song draws on Scott-Heron’s conviction that media and popular culture are opiates of the people, the means by which the forces of power and money blunt any impulse to revolt. His point is simple: The revolution will only come when people respond to their actual lived experience, not mediated, manipulated reflections of it. “The revolution will not go better with Coke,” Scott-Heron declaimed. “The revolution will not fight germs that may cause bad breath / The revolution will put you in the driver’s seat / The revolution will not be televised.” The song was heard around the world. When Egyptians rose up to overthrow president Hosni Mubarak in 2011, they blasted “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” in Tahrir Square.

When hip-hop emerged as a significant force on the cultural scene in the seventies and eighties, Scott-Heron loomed as a seminal influence, particularly on the more politically aware rappers. Most notably, his work was a major source for “The Message” by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five, the intense social commentary of Public Enemy, and the alternative rap of the Native Tongues posse. As time passed, Scott-Heron’s stature only grew, influencing the likes of Kanye West and Kendrick Lamar.

Like many older artists, particularly those who felt that hip-hop was outflanking their own music in cultural relevance, Scott-Heron initially seemed bemused by or even dismissive of it. Asked if his music had inspired rap, he said, “I don’t know if I can take the blame for it.” In another interview, he said, “It’s something that’s aimed at the kids. I have kids, so I listen to it. But I would not say it’s aimed at me. I listen to the jazz station.” But as time went on, he came to accept hip-hop’s place in the evolving history of Black music, as well as his own role as an elder statesman. Over a merciless bass line on his 1994 track “Message to the Messengers,” Scott-Heron intoned, “Young rappers, one more suggestion before I get out of your way / But I appreciate the respect you give me and what you got to say / I’m saying protect your community and spread that respect around.”

Toward the end of his life, Scott-Heron unfortunately descended into drug addiction and served time in prison. Still, he continued to perform and record when he was able, and his last album, *I’m New Here* (2010), was well received. His habits damaged his health, however, and he was HIV positive. He died in New York at the age of 62. At Scott-Heron’s memorial service at Riverside Church near his home, Kanye performed his song “Lost in the World,” which samples a question Scott-Heron had asked in one of his songs, “Who will survive in America?”

That question remains pertinent, as Scott-Heron’s thoughts and words, hopes and visions, can be felt in all the actions of the Black Lives Matter movement. So far, Scott-Heron’s reputation has grown, and his influence has only become deeper and more profound. But, as we are learning about so many values we cherish in America, its survival is not a certainty. Honoring his songs requires commitment in the world. Ndaba Mandela, a grandson of Nelson Mandela and chairman of the Mandela Institute for Humanity, pondered that fact as he considered Scott-Heron’s legacy. “It won’t grow automatically,” he said, as he compared the fate of Scott-Heron to that of his grandfather. “Even the old man, eventually, if we don’t continue his work, people will forget.” Remember, as Gil Scott-Heron told us: The revolution will be live.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: At the Bottom Line, New York City, 1981; with his son, 1975; onstage in Rotterdam, Netherlands, 1988; with Common, Central Park SummerStage, New York City, 2010.

