

Gil Scott-Heron

1949–2011

Flawed yet brilliant, Gil Scott-Heron had a knack for capturing the spirit of the human condition, often foreshadowing future events with his writing. Though known as the godfather of hip-hop from his spoken-word roots, it was Scott-Heron as a master singer-songwriter that endeared him to generations of listeners.

by **Ericka Blount Danois**

Last summer, my father navigated traffic along FDR Drive in his 1980-something Volkswagen to get us uptown from Brooklyn as we traveled to Mt. Morris Park to see Gil Scott-Heron. My two daughters sat in the back, surprisingly quiet. Their connection to him was more far-flung: through his former collaborator Brian Jackson. Specifically, they played with his daughters regularly, through the friendship between my sister and Jackson's ex-wife, Megan.

We got to the park, traversed through hordes of people, and managed to get a seat on the grass up front. We sat with our Styrofoam containers filled with curry chicken, and we listened to Gil perform sets with the energy of a man half his age. Though his body was slight, his face worn, and his skin thickening from abuse, his voice was strong, without the shaky vibrations of age or the lockjaw of vices. He sung the classics: the infectious and ironic "The Bottle," the anthemic "Johannesburg," and the haunting, percussion-funky, self-fulfilling prophecy "Angel Dust," along with gems from one of the best albums in the last few years, his rebirth, *I'm New Here*. The crowd was excited about his return to music. During his sixteen-year hiatus from recording, much of it spent in and out of prison, he was asked by a fan when he was going to make another album. "As soon as you buy some more of them old ones," he retorted.

He was back, Black America's press secretary who, in 1970, warned the world of the buzzard quality of mass media with

the polemic "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." He implored the universe to care on 1971's "Save the Children" (the same year Marvin Gaye made the same plea with the same title). He healed any insecure daughters with "Your Daddy Loves You." He foresaw the future of billion-dollar nuclear plants and their accidents in 1977's "We Almost Lost Detroit"; economic and ecological warfare and the death of the middle class on "H²Ogate Blues"; and the quandaries of undocumented workers on "Alien (Hold On to Your Dreams)." And he predicted widespread unemployment and its effect on the spirits of men, particularly Black men, and their dignity on "Pieces of a Man."

He looked the Grim Reaper in the face and sent it crying, defeated, and crouching back down into its uncomfortable hole. Like any good trickster, he had me believing that, unlike many of our flawed heroes, he had beat the odds. The crowd saw it too, as they watched him lean over to get closer to them, preaching on the prescient "New York Is Killing Me," singing that "he needs to go back home and take it slow in Jackson, Tennessee."

Like one of his biggest influences—wordsmith Langston Hughes—he navigated a variety of worlds, tapped into the psyche of the everyman, recorded what was going on around us with a journalist's eye for detail, and a cinematic gift for storytelling. He warned us of sheep following the herd. He criticized myopic revolutionaries and questioned authority—and corporate greed—before it was de rigueur. As a poet, a novelist, a student of the world, a gifted musician, and a hu-

manist, Scott-Heron was alive, and lively—even at his weakest.

Almost ten years ago, poet and author Willie Perdomo remembers him arriving for a set two hours late at New York's S.O.B.'s, walking down to the green room while ripping open the plastic wrapping of a brand-new pin-striped Brooks Brothers collared shirt as he prepared to dazzle the stage.

"Why are you late?"

"I was talking to Dionne Warwick on the Psychic Friends Network," he quipped.

Gil later called Perdomo to tell him how much he enjoyed his second book, *Smoking Lovely*. "Getting that call from him was one of the highlights of my writing life," remembers Perdomo.

Gil never missed a beat. He never missed the opportunity to teach, to comment on the absurd or the unjust with acerbic wit. He created a title for himself, a bluesologist, as he gave us a taste of the "double blues," and was trained in turning the mundane into the electrifying, pain into healing, and everyday life into a canvas of colors.

Even as he sang "Ain't No Such Thing as a Superman," he showed the world that he was a Superman genius with a *G* for *Goddamn!* embroidered on his vocal chords, on his spirit, on his beautiful brain, around the shape of his heart.

Never falling into the trap of being didactic, he could talk about the dangers of nuclear war while making you dance with outrage. He never taught so much as he generously shared what he knew, connecting with people, looking for solutions to questions that have no right answers.

As prolific as his muse, Langston Hughes, he produced over twenty albums, most with his insanely underappreciated longtime collaborator, Brian Jackson. He wrote two critically acclaimed novels, 1970's *The Vulture*, a crime novel, and 1972's *The Nigger Factory*, a novel which exposes the backward conservatism of the administration at a Black college. Though published a few years later, he wrote both novels before he was even twenty years old. He recently finished another book, *The Last Holiday*, about Stevie Wonder's struggle to have Martin Luther King's birthday declared a federal holiday. And he published three collections of poems, including *Small Talk at 125th St. and Lenox*, which he later turned into an album.

But it was his music he was best known for—and his voice, with a sound both authoritative and gentle. Bassist Ron Carter recently said of his voice: "If he had whispered, it would have been dynamic."

But what got me was his sly smile, evidence that he couldn't help but to inject a little bit of fun into everything he did. Although he was serious, he never took himself seriously. He was a humorist, dipped in sarcasm, the mayor of Anytown,

an expert on pain and vulnerability who could create songs to be studied in ivory towers and grinded to in blue-light basement sessions.

And he was explicitly flawed. Like many of our most prolific artists—Art Blakey, Charlie Parker, Hector Lavoe—he felt and saw things that others couldn't, and he suffered because of it.

"Imagine being born with nerve fibers outside of your body," says Last Poets founding member Felipe Luciano on the phone from New York. "Every shift in the wind, every eye look, every tone of voice. I think he was exquisitely sensitive, so exquisitely attuned to what was happening that it affected him. If you add that to a dysfunctional family, nine times out of ten you will find self-destruction."

Despite his human frailties, he gave us what we needed in our time of need; he helped us to jump-start our hectic days with "A Very Precious Time," or just suffer along in a job we hated with "Bicentennial Blues." But we didn't return the favor, as music writer Greg Tate wrote so poignantly in his *Village Voice* tribute: "Gil's fall at the not-so-ripe age of sixty-two reminds me that one thing my community does worst is intervene in the flaming out of our brightest and most fragile stars, so psychically on edge are most of us ourselves."

During his worst moments, we took to calling him Gil Scott "Heroin," as he suffered alone in a rehabilitation center that he said refused to give him medicine for HIV. We forgot about him as younger, more virulent MCs and poets owned microphones while he withdrew, alone in Riker's Island. It's not that we left him hanging by not doing the hard work of separating an addict from his addictions. Anybody who has tried knows the futility of that. No, it was the work of preserving his legacy, not letting it get abridged or muddied, putting him on a pedestal next to celebrated greats like Bob Dylan, passing his genius down for generations. That's where we failed him while he was here.

The sparse crowd at his memorial at Harlem's Riverside Church told an even more painful tale. But it doesn't matter now. After all, he's back home with his grandmother, who introduced him to the writings of Langston Hughes and bought him a six-dollar rickety piano to learn church hymns. He can be with his mother who chastised his teachers for disciplining him for playing the piano, with his father, the professional soccer player he never knew.

As they say, it's not that you don't know what you got till it's gone—truth is, you knew exactly what you had; you just thought you'd never lose it.

No, we didn't. Rest in peace, Gil. Peace Go With You, Brother. ●