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His Way Home: In Memory of Gil Scott-Heron (1949-2011)

MAR 17, 2012 / WRITTEN BY RUSSELL NICHOLS



Home is where I live inside my white powder dreams

Home was once an empty vacuum that's filled now with my silent screams

Home is where the needle marks

try to heal my broken heart

and it might not be such a bad idea if I never,

if I never went home again.

— "Home Is Where the Hatred Is"

Home, according Gil Scott-Heron, was a place with drugs overflowing.

It was a place of perpetual winter, where no one stopped to think about the babies. A place of full of suffering. But Scott-Heron -- the man, the musician, the urban griot -- understood that suffering was only a symptom of the condition called being human. And he laced his jazz poetry with this harsh reality from his first words to his last breath.

Since 1970, when *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* came out, we wrapped ourselves in the worn-velvet texture of his voice. But his words shook us to the winter bones. His words rang out in the crooked streets of the inner city. His words canvassed America's collective consciousness, going door to door to deliver bitter truths that we tried to hide from.

No, we couldn't hide. He called us out. Not by name, but through horror stories of frustration and failure that sounded so familiar. We saw our reflections in his recitations as he spoke about running away and broken homes and addiction. He spoke about unemployment and missing fathers and depression. We found ourselves in the crowded company of misery, but at least we weren't alone. And on common ground, we could gather the strength to answer the hard questions that hit home:

How would we ever get over losing our minds?

— "We Almost Lost Detroit"

He gave us a direct answer on "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," a take-no-prisoners salvo of satire against the media. This was around the same time that Marshall McLuhan declared that "the medium is the message," meaning that we can anticipate the impact of what we create if we look beyond what's right in front of us. But in the case of "Revolution," Scott-Heron said, we couldn't see past the combustible mix of proto-rap poetry and fist-raising politics to notice the more subtle social commentary on the rest of the classic *Pieces of a Man*.

"Very few people heard 'Save the Children,' 'Lady Day and John Coltrane' or 'I Think I'll Call It Morning,'" he told the Houston Press in 1998. "They just missed the point. The point became one of the 11 pieces. The least inventive one on the album was the one that was the most heralded."

But the message was already in motion. His fusion of spoken word soul, urban dispatches and jazz funk was like water for the seeds in hip hop's fertile ground. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" has become a permanent part of the conscious rap lexicon. And countless emcees have used his songs as a musical backdrop, from the Jungle Brothers ("Black is Black") to Black Star ("Brown Skin Lady") to MF DOOM ("Campor") to Common ("The People"). On Reflection Eternal's 2000 *Train of Thought*, Scott-Heron told listeners to "get on the train." But still, he refused to accept his title as the "godfather of rap." The roots of rap run much deeper than him, he used to say. Regardless, his influence is undeniable.

"RIP GSH..and we do what we do and how we do because of you," Public Enemy's Chuck D [tweeted in May.](#) [And to those that don't know tip your hat with a hand over your heart & recognize.](#) His most prominent co-sign comes from Mr. Kanye West, who sampled Scott-Heron several times, including "My Way Home" from *Late Registration* and "Lost in the World" and "Who Will Survive in America" on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. And it all came full circle when Scott-Heron sampled West on his last album, *I'm New Here* (2010). The symphonic strings and throbbing synth of "Flashing Lights" soar beneath the poet's husky baritone:

Maybe there are homes that are hurt

But there are no real lives that hurt without reach

But not broken

Unless the homes of soldiers stationed overseas

Or lost in battles or broken

Unless the homes of firemen, policemen, construction workers,

seamen, railroad men, truckers, pilots

Who lost their lives

But not what their lives stood for...

-- On Coming From a Broken Home (Part 2)

He spoke for the people. To the people. He spoke to me. To this day, I keep *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* within arms' reach. I've had it for 10 years now, but every time I return to its pages, I feel like I'm experiencing his mastery of language for the first time. Each reading offers a new revelation. I remember the days when I would read his words out loud to myself as if to absorb their power through poetic osmosis. I tried to invoke this power on spoken word stages. The revolution, he proclaimed, will be live. And so he lives. His lives on through me, through each one us who ever heard the pain in his voice and felt the impact of his words.

No, we couldn't hide. He called us out. He told us the truth even if it hurt. And as we carry the legacy of Gil Scott-Heron on these crooked streets saturated in hues of the blues, we can rest assured, knowing he's now free from suffering in the comfort of home.

2 Comments



Isis Valentino March 26, 2012 2pm

Love

REPLY

Joe D. April 11, 2012 10am

Great piece on a legend I'm glad to say I had the chance to see live at least once. His music and mind will be missed but he left us with much to think about.

REPLY

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