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A Former Student and Colleague Remembers Gil Scott-Heron

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Musician and Activist

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A Former Student and Colleague Remembers Gil Scott-Heron

December 26, 2017

Greetings!

I first met Gil Scott-Heron at Federal City College, predecessor to the University of the District of Columbia. As an undergraduate student in the 1970s, I was always looking through the course schedule booklet for classes that sounded interesting. When I saw a listing for a Black Literature course with an emphasis on poetry and music, I signed up for it.

Before the class started, I went to visit the instructor, Professor Gil Scott-Heron. I told him that I was a musician, too, and he invited me to “jam” with him on the first day of class. His vibe was upfront and accessible. His class was more like a workshop or jam session. When I arrived, the class was full of students and folks who just wanted to be part of this historic experience. I brought my flute and djembe drum with me. He said that I could play drums or flute while he read his poetry, spoken word, chants, and songs. On that first day, there was a sense of energy and high-spiritedness that permeated throughout the classroom. I remember that his work was multi-layered, deeply profound, and had a lot of changes in it, and all the while Gil would request for call and response from the class.

From that moment on, I promised myself that I would be in his class every time that he had a class—and even when he didn’t have one—as well as be committed to combine the music with a message. I learned that his various styles of teaching were to impress upon young people a new revolutionary consciousness and to further advance the movement. His words were the choreographed movement, and he wanted his students to understand and be a part of that movement—that movement that loves great heroic victories and progressive poets like Langston Hughes.

My comrade Gil Scott-Heron regularly spoke in poetic verse, where he constantly made references about exploitation, former U.S. presidents, Pan-Africanism, popular culture, and historical moments in time, all rapped together in a couple of sentences. Brother Gil knew this formula would garner an immediate response. No matter where you saw him, Gil had what we called back then, “some knowledge to lay on you.”

I knew early on that Gil Scott-Heron was the embodiment of a Black liberated “soul-dier” true to the struggle and the movement—the real deal, being part of the movement for African liberation and for humanity overall. For him, the movement and music were one and the same, and that was also true for many of us as young folks. My relationship with him was very open, and he was like an older brother to me, never changing.

With Gil, it was not just about being a professor. He was someone who cared about our careers and our knowledge of the liberation struggles in southern Africa. Something told me spiritually that this brother had a lot going on. Gil gave me another position from which to look at a career in performing arts and politics together. At rallies throughout the District, particularly back in the day at Federal City College (FCC) and Howard University (HU), during those times there would be such a catalog of artists, musicians, revolutionaries, and Pan-Africanists on the faculty as well as in the community, from Gil Scott-Heron himself to Dr. C.L.R. James, Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael), Ms. Jo Butler, Jack O’Dell, A.B. Spellman, and Gaston Neil, just to name a few.

He always made sure that the message of the struggle was conveyed in a professional manner, and he took that message everywhere—including a 1980s “Jobs and Justice Rally” with Jesse Jackson, Stevie Wonder, and my United Children’s Voices of the World group. On that occasion, my children’s group performed just before Gil and the Midnight Band, and those young people stole the show. Gil made me promise that I would never do that to him again.

Later, I saw Gil at an anniversary celebration of the Sandinista Nicaraguan Revolution in D.C., at the former Kilimanjaro Night Club. I will never forget how the audience was chanting, calling, and responding with Gil with such a strong sense of solidarity. At that moment on stage, I glanced over at Gil and saw so much intensity in his eyes it was as if he was right there in Nicaragua fighting against the Contras with the Frente (FSLN). When you were around Gil, you were around talent and consciousness, straight no chaser.

It is worth noting that he never changed his passion, commitment and love for the people during the time I knew him. From the 70s and FCC to the early 2000s, he never stopped checking in on me, no matter where it was—in a park or on the avenue—to make sure that I was presenting my art professionally and that I was still in the movement.

His mind was working all the time on beats, words, vocals, horns, lines, the struggle, the planet, Mother Earth—everything. You had to bring an open ear and consciousness when he was around because his vibe was going to be bebop jazz/mainstream/60s-70s R&B/rap/the cotton picking uprising blues. The universe of music and sound was always with him, you just had to be prepared in the spirit. When Gil was in town, I wanted to be where he was because, Gil’s generous spirit was that he always showed great love for the people and was concerned about moving the struggle forward. His message was, “Don’t be complacent!” or come real. He was a very deep, empowering brother. If you sat back with him, he would always have a lot to say about the world, and just everything in general.

After the 1976 release of his still popular “Johannesburg” with Brian Jackson, I thought he would leave town for good, but he did not. Sometimes he would just show up and participate in the D.C.-based Anti-Apartheid Movement and international Solidarity Movement. With the June 16th Coalition in 1976, for example, when we were in front of the embassy calling for freedom in South Africa and participating in the boycott against apartheid, Gil was right there encouraging us, and always in spirit, music, beats, and verse.

He was influential in D.C. Some people were irritated that he was putting politics in the music, but Gil Scott-Heron was doing it with great success. He was very conscious about what was going on around him, and D.C. gave him a “Chocolate City” vibe in which he had even more material to analyze in his poetry and music. He knew he was making an impact, both here in D.C. and around the world. You could hear it in his laugh, and you could see it in his swagger.

I learned a lot from him. I understood what he was saying because it was based on true historical facts and a consciousness-driven love for the masses. However, we should be careful when we listen to and analyze the body of Gil’s work as not to confuse his commentary and love for the masses with his own personal blues. As the late B.B. King would say, “Everybody sings the blues.”

Certain things have changed, and certain things have not. It is almost like we are going to have to dig a little deeper. There is hope, however, only if we keep the struggle moving forward.

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