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# Gil Scott-Heron, Voice of Black Culture, Dies at 62

By BEN SISARIO

Gil Scott-Heron, the poet and recording artist whose syncopated spoken style and mordant critiques of politics, racism and mass media in pieces like “[The Revolution Will Not Be Televised](#)” made him a notable voice of black protest culture in the 1970s and an important early influence on hip-hop, died on Friday at a hospital in Manhattan. He was 62 and had been a longtime resident of Harlem.

His death was announced in a [Twitter message](#) on Friday night by his British publisher, Jamie Byng, and confirmed early Saturday by an American representative of his record label, XL. The cause was not immediately known, although The Associated Press reported that he had become ill after returning from a trip to Europe.

Mr. Scott-Heron often bristled at the suggestion that his work had prefigured [rap](#). “I don’t know if I can take the blame for it,” he said in an interview last year with the music Web site [The Daily Swarm](#). He preferred to call himself a “bluesologist,” drawing on the traditions of blues, jazz and Harlem renaissance poetics.

Yet, along with the work of the Last Poets, a group of black nationalist performance poets who emerged alongside him in the late 1960s and early ’70s, Mr. Scott-Heron established much of the

attitude and the stylistic vocabulary that would characterize the socially conscious work of early rap groups like Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions. And he has remained part of the **DNA of hip-hop** by being sampled by stars like Kanye West.

“You can go into Ginsberg and the Beat poets and Dylan, but Gil Scott-Heron is the manifestation of the modern word,” **Chuck D**, the leader of Public Enemy, told **The New Yorker** in 2010. “He and the Last Poets set the stage for everyone else.”

Mr. Scott-Heron’s career began with a literary rather than a musical bent. He was born in Chicago on April 1, 1949, and reared in Tennessee and New York. His mother was a librarian and an English teacher; his estranged father was a Jamaican soccer player.

In his early teens, Mr. Scott-Heron wrote detective stories, and his work as a writer won him a scholarship to the Fieldston School in the Bronx, where he was one of 5 black students in a class of 100. Following in the footsteps of Langston Hughes, he went to the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and he wrote his first novel at 19, a murder mystery called “The Vulture.” A book of verse, “Small Talk at 125th and Lenox,” and a second novel, “The Nigger Factory,” soon followed.

Working with a college friend, Brian Jackson, Mr. Scott-Heron turned to music in search of a wider audience. His first album, “Small Talk at 125th and Lenox,” was released in 1970 on Flying Dutchman, a small label, and included a live recitation of “Revolution” accompanied by conga and bongo drums. Another version of that piece, recorded with a full band including the jazz bassist Ron Carter, was released on Mr. Scott-Heron’s second album, “Pieces of a Man,” in 1971.

“Revolution” established Mr. Scott-Heron as a rising star of the black cultural left, and its cool, biting ridicule of a nation anesthetized by mass media has resonated with the socially disaffected of various stripes — campus activists, media theorists, coffeehouse poets — for four decades. With sharp, sardonic wit and a barrage of pop-culture references, he derided society’s dominating forces as well as the gullibly dominated:

The revolution will not be brought to you by the Schaefer Award Theater and will not star Natalie Wood and Steve McQueen or Bullwinkle and Julia.

The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal.

The revolution will not get rid of the nubs.

The revolution will not make you look five pounds thinner, because the revolution will not be televised, brother.

During the 1970s, Mr. Scott-Heron was seen as a prodigy with significant potential, although he never achieved more than **cult popularity**. He recorded 13 albums from 1970 to 1982, and was one of the first acts that the music executive Clive Davis signed after starting Arista Records in 1974. In 1979, Mr. Scott-Heron performed at Musicians United for Safe Energy's "No Nukes" benefit concerts at Madison Square Garden, and in 1985, he appeared on the all-star anti-apartheid album "Sun City."

But by the mid-1980s, Mr. Scott-Heron had begun to fade, and his recording output slowed to a trickle. In later years, he struggled publicly with addiction. **Since 2001**, Mr. Scott-Heron had been convicted twice for cocaine possession, and he served a sentence at Rikers Island in New York for parole violation.

Commentators sometimes used Mr. Scott-Heron's plight as an example of the harshness of New York's drug laws. Yet his friends were also horrified by his descent. In interviews Mr. Scott-Heron often dodged questions about drugs, but the writer of the New Yorker profile reported witnessing Mr. Scott-Heron's crack smoking and being so troubled by his own ravaged physical appearance that he avoided mirrors. "Ten to 15 minutes of this, I don't have pain," Mr. Scott-Heron said in the article, as he lighted a glass crack pipe.

That image seemed to contrast tragically with Mr. Scott-Heron's legacy as someone who had once so trenchantly mocked the psychology of addiction. "You keep sayin' kick it, quit it, kick it quit it!" he said

in his 1971 song “Home Is Where the Hatred Is.” “God, did you ever try to turn your sick soul inside out so that the world could watch you die?”

Complete information about Mr. Scott-Heron's survivors was not immediately available, but Mr. Byng, his publisher, said that they included a half-brother, Denis Scott-Heron; a son, Rumal; and two daughters, Gia Scott-Heron and Che Newton. Mr. Byng added that Mr. Scott-Heron had recently been working on voluminous memoirs, parts of which he hoped to publish soon.

Despite Mr. Scott-Heron’s public problems, he remained **an admired figure in music**, and he made occasional concert appearances and was sought after as a collaborator. Last year, XL released “I’m New Here,” his first album of new material in 16 years, which was produced by Richard Russell, a British record producer who met Mr. Scott-Heron at Rikers Island in 2006 after writing him a letter.

Reviews for the album inevitably called Mr. Scott-Heron the “godfather of rap,” but he made it clear he had different tastes.

“It’s something that’s aimed at the kids,” he once said. “I have kids, so I listen to it. But I would not say it’s aimed at me. I listen to the jazz station.”



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