

SONGS OF RESISTANCE  
**GIL SCOTT-HERON**  
**Mary Ellison**

We're gonna take this world through changes  
not the other way around.  
See the world is slowly rearranging  
can't nobody stop us now  
It's the Third World Revolution  
and we're standing at the gate  
You can add to the solution  
while the world is changing shape.

Gil Scott-Heron is a young black American singer, poet and musician who articulates with unusual persistence the need for a radical transformation of most Western political, social and economic systems. His songs mirror the causes that Manning Marable (*From the Grassroots*) sees sparking off revolt — 'unemployment and economic



Gil Scott-Heron

underdevelopment, police brutality, a racist legal system, and a heritage of social and cultural prejudice aimed against all black people'.

Black Americans have created a unique body of music that has not only reflected their struggle but sometimes catalysed their activism. The rebellion inherent in the music is rooted in the blues that refused to gloss over poverty-stricken lives and repressive circumstances. Songs like Robert Johnson's *Hellhound on my Trail* and Johnny Shires', *Tom Green's Farm*, showed the horror of life as it was just as Bessie Smith expressed class inequality during the 20s in, *Poor Man's Blues*:

Mr rich man, rich man, open your heart and  
mind  
Give a poor man a chance and stop these hard,  
hard times  
While you livin' in your mansion, you don't  
know what hard time mean  
While poor working man's wife is starvin',  
your wife is livin' like a queen.

On a recent album Gil Scott-Heron sings of the:

Sister in the welfare bind  
examining the threads of her life  
Never thought she'd be cheating and lying  
to make sure her and her kids survive  
Waiting for the axe to fall.

Such a situation is hardly new and bluesmen had complained in the New Deal period of similar mistreatment:

Now, you go to your workhouse, put in your  
complaint,  
Nine times out often, you know,  
They'll say, 'I can't'

They don't want to give you no dough,  
Won't hardly pay your rent,  
And it ain't costin' them  
One doggone cent

(Carl Martin, *Let's Have a New Deal*)

Several decades later, in the early 70s, Marvin Gaye had exposed the exploitation of ghetto life with brilliant insight in *What's Going On* and *Inner City Blues* and his embittered vision was reinforced by Stevie Wonder's *Living For The City*. The logical, startling extension of these views was reached in Sly Stone's *There's a riot goin'on*. A record that challenged oppression so directly that it became an act of rebellion. Menacing music was interlocked with some of the most eerie and perfectly developed lyrics in rock music to create a sound that threatened to change the very shape of the relationships that existed between black and white and rich and poor. *Riot* urged action as inevitable:

Lookin' at the devil  
Grinnin' at his gun,  
Fingers start shakin',  
I began to run

Bullets start chasin',  
I begin to stop.  
We begin to wrestle,  
I was on the top.

(SlyStone, *Thank You For Talkin' to me Africa*)

A few years later the Isley Brothers were to be even more explicit in their advocacy of violence in songs such as *Go For Your Guns*.

Few blacks have ever had much faith in the ability of mainstream politics to give them a fair deal. Gil Scott-Heron denounces the paucity of a political system that elected presidents like Gerald Ford who

Has declared himself at odds with people  
on welfare . . . people who get food stamps,  
day care children, the elderly, the poor,  
women and

people who might vote for Ronald Reagan.  
Ronald Reagan — It got by him. Hollyweird!

Acted like an actor  
acted like a liberal  
acted like General Franco, when he acted like  
Governor of California.  
Now he acts like somebody might vote for him  
for President.



Marvin Gaye

He reinforced this view when interviewed in London last April. He emphasised that general disillusionment with the American political system was beginning to set in: 'after all, over half the registered voters did not vote in the last election'. He drove home the illogicality of a situation where one man is supposed to represent the complex interests of a vast territory: 'you can't just come from one place and say that's what's going to be doin' it for everybody in a country of that size with that many diverse interests.' He stressed the inherent emptiness of political aspirations of this kind — 'as you go higher in politics you have to sell little pieces of yourself and by the time you get to the top, there's nothing left.' It is an emptiness that he had already commented on in songs:

You can depend on politicians  
'cause they always got a point of view  
They are contemporary court magicians  
Sleight of mouth will dazzle you.  
You can depend on a bad position from them  
(But) don't depend on the train from  
Washington  
it's 100 years overdue.

Promises had continuously been broken since the time when emancipation failed to deliver freedom, and more recently 'sleight of mouth' was diverting attention from the discrimination within America to oppressive foreign policy. But to Gil Scott-Heron the subterfuge had not worked. The youth of America are the people who are not fooled and they condemn activities in El Salvador

# Channel Five

just as they did the Vietnam war. Earlier blues singers had been just as cynical about previous presidents and past wars.

Young people are beginning, believes Gil Scott-Heron, to be equally open in their condemnation of racism and inequality at home. Blacks and whites of their generation went to school together and grew up playing ball together and have become less alienated from each other than any other previous generation. Simple contact has reduced the fears that used to divide black from white to tensions of more manageable proportions. Social proximity and daily communication has eroded prejudice and begun to undermine non-institutional discrimination. Young whites now understand blacks better as human beings and rejection has given way to emulation — "They walk like us now, they talk like us, they dance like us — because they have come to understand and appreciate us."

Echoes of his views resonate through the songs and mood of the two-tone British bands. *Ghost Town* by The Specials summed up brilliantly the spirit of unemployed and angry black and white youths, while the music and lyrics of The Beat and UB40 are both radical and fun. Even the



deeply black rooted songs of Linton Kwesi Johnson see class as more important than race. They reject the capitalist theories that 'put profit before people' and substitute automation for employment. Gil Scott-Heron sees young people rejecting a system that designs industrial complexes that function with a minimal number of people. He sees them propelling a reluctant America and the world towards a different and more egalitarian society which will reject the inherently decadent inequities of the present system. His symbiosis with the views of

articulate spokesmen for the third world is affirmed by the dynamic anti-capitalist songs of Fela Kuti in Africa and Bob Marley in the West Indies.

How successful this is likely to be Gil Scott-Heron confronts with a determination and optimism remarkably similar to that of Manning Marable:

'Can we achieve real equality for all people, in every aspect of economic, social and political relations? As we destroy the economic illusions of US society, the crisis of equality looks the great unresolved riddle for democracy in the US. For the sake of our children and for the future of the world, we must address the problem and master it, without uprooting the best of black cultural and social traditions which were created during the former period of segregation and inequality. We must resolve ourselves to struggle for the basic principles of fairness and equality for all people.' (Marable, *From the Grassroots*)

Is all this possible? Gil Scott-Heron believes so and hopes his songs can contribute towards change. He believes that 'I am a part of something that can be constructive out of all the destructive things that are around.'

## r-radical postcards

<b>Leeds Latest!</b> over 50 inc. full colour and StickerCards	£ <b>4.90</b>	<b>GIFT BOXES</b>
<b>Complete Works</b> over 100 inc. some out of print	<b>9.90</b>	
<b>Best of the Rest</b> over 30 recent political cards from other publishers	<b>4.90</b>	

send cheque/PO + 40p P&P to 'Leeds Postcards' 13 Claremont Grove Leeds 3.

## Now in full colour!!

Now in full colour!!  
£2 for 15 inc P&P  
Leeds Postcards  
13 Claremont Grove  
Leeds 3.

£2 for 15 inc P&P  
Leeds Postcards  
13 Claremont Grove Leeds 3

First 3 now available

Great Carthage waged three wars -  
It was still mighty after the first,  
still inhabitable after the second.  
It left not a trace after the third.  
Booby

postcard reverse/sticker front 15p each + 40p P&P  
another innovation from Leeds Postcards