



Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a Man

Marcus Baram

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Best known for his 1970 polemic “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” Gil Scott-Heron was a musical icon who defied characterization. He tantalized audiences with his charismatic stage presence, and his biting, observant lyrics in such singles as “The Bottle” and “Johannesburg” provide a time capsule for a decade marked by turbulence, uncertainty, and racism. While he was exalted by his devoted fans as the “black Bob Dylan” (a term he hated) and widely sampled by the likes of Kanye West, Prince, Common, and Elvis Costello, he never really achieved mainstream success. Yet he maintained a cult following throughout his life, even as he grappled with the personal demons that fueled so many of his lyrics. Scott-Heron performed and occasionally recorded well into his later years, until eventually succumbing to his life-long struggle with addiction. He passed away in 2011, the end to what had become a hermit-like existence.

In this biography, Marcus Baram--an acquaintance of Gil Scott-Heron's--will trace the volatile journey of a troubled musical genius. Baram will chart Scott-Heron's musical odyssey, from Chicago to Tennessee to New York: a drug addict's twisted path to redemption and enduring fame. In *Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a Man*, Marcus Baram puts the complicated icon into full focus.

Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a Man Details

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From Reader Review Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a Man for online ebook

Daryl says

I don't read a lot of non-fiction, and biography isn't a genre I'm drawn toward -- unless it's about someone who I know a little about and am fascinated enough by to want to learn more. That description fits Gil Scott-Heron. He was a tragic figure: an inspired musician, poet, and activist (and as I learned from this book, a teacher and a novelist) whose unfortunate addiction to drugs led to a downward spiral that included poverty, homelessness, and prison time. There's a great, if tragic, story to be told here, and Marcus Baram tells it with varying degrees of success. To be fair, the copy I read was an Advance Reading Copy (though not listed as an uncorrected proof) that I won through Goodreads First Reads giveaway program. I'm not sure how much more editing and correcting will be done before the final publication, but a lot is needed. Just a few examples: early on, Baram tells a story that takes place in 1968 after MLK's assassination. Gil, a college student at the time, sat outside in a field with a rifle and two companions, prowling for possible KKK actions. After awhile, they drove off, got into a car accident and stashed the weapons before getting assistance from a state trooper. Twenty pages later, the same story is told in almost the exact same words, except now it's in 1970 following the Kent State incident and the murder of two black students in Mississippi, and Gil is with three others in the car crash. Other places in the book contain similar repetitions -- I made note of one point, where two full paragraphs are repeated word for word within four pages of one another. Baram often references and quotes other individuals without ever explaining where these quotes come from, and often name-drops without telling us who these people are. Frustrating to this reader. There are a lot of references to Gil's memoir, especially early in the book when talking about his childhood, and that sounds like a much better read (although I'm sure that book doesn't cover some of the low points in Gil's life). At one point, noted saxophonist Wayne Shorter (a name familiar to any jazz fan) is referred to as a "trumpeter." (Gil got married in Shorter's living room.) Gil's masters thesis, we are told, is a 35-page story, which is referred to in subsequent paragraphs as a "novella" and then a "novel." These are not things I would expect from a journalist-writer. Two pages after telling us about Gil's mother's death, in an apparently chronological sequence, Gil ends up in jail again, and his mother bails him out. When we get to the tragic circumstances of Gil's death, we are told that only two people are with him at that moment, one being his assistant Mimi -- but this is the first time in the book, she is even mentioned.

I really wanted to learn more about this fascinating musician and individual, and I did. I never knew that Gil had a masters degree in English and taught college courses. I didn't know that he had published several novels around the time he was beginning his music career (and I intend to seek out and read those books). I knew that Gil was often referred to as the "godfather of rap" which always kind of pissed me off; his music often incorporated spoken word poetry, but over a bed of jazz and blues music. It was enlightening to learn that Gil didn't like the "godfather" tag and didn't think much of rap music, especially the violence and misogyny. It was interesting to learn more about Gil's childhood, education, his musical background, his collaborations, his activism, and sadly, about his drug addiction, health problems, and death. Gil was a fascinating person, well deserving of a great biography, and unfortunately, this one's not nearly well-written enough to be that.

Anita says

I should note that I received this as a free book through the Goodreads "FirstReads" giveaway program.

I was not very familiar with Gil Scott Heron beyond “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” so I was curious to learn more about him.

This book was very intense and give a vivid look at his life and struggles with addiction. It was also fascinating to see how much Heron's works influences artists today. A very compelling read that made want to seek out more of Heron's books and music

Toni Moore says

I first heard Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not be Televised" in 1978 or 1979, when I listened to an AM jazz station in Fort Worth, driving back & forth to work in my car. I was fascinated by the blend of spoken poetry and music and bought the album of the same name, a compilation of his most popular works up to that point. I sort of lost track of him after that, though I read about the release of his album, "I'm New Here," in 2010, not long before his death on May 27, 2011. Because of its spoken-word format, his work greatly influenced the founders of both rap music and hip-hop.

This is a thorough, and thoroughly readable, biography of Scott-Heron by first-time author Marcus Baram, who became a Gil Scott-Heron fan after seeing him in concert in the early 1990s. Baram was an elementary schoolteacher at that time, with dreams of being a journalist. While there were books about Dylan and other significant folk singers and pop music greats, there weren't any on Scott-Heron. Baram decided that one day he would write Scott-Heron's biography. More than 20 years later he did, after years as an editor for major publications such as The Wall Street Journal and a writer for magazines such as The New Yorker.

Scott-Heron's father, Gillie St. Elmo Heron, was Jamaican; his mother, Bobbie Scott, an African-American from Tennessee. He was born in Chicago, on April 1, 1949, but was raised in segregated Jackson, Tennessee, by his maternal grandmother, Lillie Scott, and later by his mother. His father left his mother before Gil turned 2 years old; Bobbie Scott struggled to pay the bills in Chicago, so she sent little Gil to Jackson. Both Scott women were major forces in shaping Gil's character and personality.

He also had tremendous talent in writing and music. He helped integrate an all-white middle school in Jackson before he and Bobbie relocated to the Bronx when he was 13. It was a different world, and Gil soaked up the atmosphere. These different cultures, with distinct music -- Gospel and the blues -- gave him a unique perspective that was reflected in his works. Gil went to public school for a while, but then was accepted into Fieldston, a prestigious all-white prep school.

All these disparate influences enabled him to forge his own musical genre, blending jazz, funk, and proto-rap or spoken-word poetry over music. Scott-Heron performed in large and small venues from the late 1970s until his death. He never quite achieved huge popular success, primarily because of his refusal to give up control of his music, as well as his long-time drug addiction to crack cocaine, which made his behavior increasingly erratic.

He fought his demons -- fear of abandonment; inability to commit to long-term relationships with his girlfriends, wives, or even his children; and a life-on-the-edge kind of self destruction -- and sometimes he fought the addiction that enabled him to live with these demons. But he didn't really want to give up crack, and finally the lifestyle it required killed him.

However, it's his amazing words and music that we'll remember, and Baram does a remarkable job of

portraying Gil Scott-Heron and showing how his life experiences enriched his creative work. I enjoyed this book and it has inspired me to listen to more of Scott-Heron's music. I highly recommend it, whether you are familiar with his music or not.

Victor says

(ARC received via St. Martin's Press and Goodreads Giveaways. Many thanks.)

In the summer of 1970, Flying Dutchman records introduced 21-year old Gil Scott-Heron to the world via the album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. Featuring Scott-Heron's fiery, politically conscious poetry (itself inspired by The Last Poets) set to a backdrop of minimal percussion, it was the first of a decade long run of massively important jazz and soul infused records, many alongside pianist and longtime collaborator and friend Brian Jackson. This steady output stopped abruptly in the early eighties and, save for a handful of stray releases over the next thirty-odd years, Scott-Heron almost dropped completely out of the spotlight. After a string of prison sentences in the early aughts, Scott-Heron returned with the final album released in his lifetime, 2010's *I'm New Here*. He died a year later on May 27.

Scott-Heron's influence on the world of music and especially that of rap and hip-hop is nothing short of gargantuan. As such, a proper biography of the man's life has been a long time coming (a posthumous memoir, *The Last Holiday*, details his tour alongside Stevie Wonder in the early eighties to raise support for the creation of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day). *Pieces of a Man* is the first attempt to fill that role, and for the most part, it succeeds.

The book brings together a mostly complete picture of Scott-Heron, starting with his humble upbringing in Jackson, Tennessee, his relationships with his grandmother, mother, and distant father, his education at Lincoln University during the Civil Rights movement, and his troubled years in the latter half of his life. For fans, it's a wealth of information and helps to paint a context for his artistic output. For someone completely new to his work, it establishes his importance to the world of music and activism.

Author Marcus Baram, a personal friend of Scott-Heron, brings together a huge number of interviewees throughout the book. Everyone from childhood friends, former classmates, ex-band members, and even jazz legends Wayne Shorter (incorrectly identified as a trumpeter in the text) and Ron Carter are included. While this gives a great number of perspectives, the sheer number of voices often becomes downright confusing; there was more than one instance of a "Wait, who is this again" backtrack through the text to find out a speaker's relevance to Scott-Heron. This also only serves to muddle the reader's perception of the relationship between Baram and Scott-Heron. The seemingly endless supply of quotes and sources makes the text feel like it's moving at a breakneck speed and never really allows the author-subject relationship to be seen. That's not to say that there's anything wrong with a "Just the facts, ma'am" style of biography, but considering both the dynamic character of Gil Scott-Heron and his apparent friendship with Baram, it would have been nice to see this connection, if only implicitly.

While *Pieces of a Man* is not perfect, it is a nonetheless important look at the life of an important man. Alongside *The Last Holiday*, it will serve as a primary source of information on the artist's life and influence the way we perceive and interpret his work.

Jayson Whitehead says

Although this was told in very basic, straightforward prose, a well-researched and very informative book about a fascinating figure.

Mark says

I'm a longtime Gil Scott Heron fan so this was required reading. Marcus Baram tells the story well and has clearly done a lot of research. It's telling that the first couple of hundred pages cover the first 32 years of Gil's life, but it only takes another eighty pages to cover the last thirty years. A long slow decline after a brilliant youth: a sad story.

JuJu says

So, full-disclosure, I LOVE Gil Scott-Heron. So, I'm doomed to give this book a good review because there is so little out there about him. I think this is the first legit biography since he passed away (SOBS) And, this is a thorough, well-researched biography by someone who clearly really respected and enjoyed him.

Having said that ("Nice job, Mr. Baram") I think that there were things that he had to contend with that were out of his control. By most accounts, Scott-Heron was a moody, emotionally distant, prickly man. His quasi-autobiography, "The Last Holiday," was oblique, like listening to Bob Dylan interviews (ok, maybe not that bad but...) So if this book never really reaches any insight or emotional peak or resolution I don't really blame the author.

Also, if you don't know anything about Scott-Heron and his career trajectory (I almost typed "tragedy" which would have also been appropriate), you have to know that this book will make you sad. Hopefully, it'll also make you want to enjoy his work, if you haven't already.

Ross says

People with low self-esteem are not (typically) inclined to wear their self-loathing on their sleeves, as it would be an almost intolerable burden upon those around them, friends and family. Instead, they wrap it up and put it out of sight, and cloak themselves in an alternate reality, one that can give the impression of arrogance, imperiousness, aloof, emotionally cold and distant. Believe me, I know. Whilst such people have dreams, hopes and aspirations, often, when they find these fulfilled, they will, deliberately, often unconsciously, go out of their way to fuck it up. Scott-Heron was a riddle of conflict, and whilst the author of this bio does not attempt cheap and easy psychoanalysis, it's a good way of filling in the blanks in his life that his own (unreliable) memoirs do not. I once had all his albums on vinyl, I feel like getting them all again on cd now. The writing is serviceable, and the length doesn't overstay its welcome. If you're a Scott-Heron fan, you should probably read this.

Rick says

Gil Scott Heron, who died in 2011, deserves a great biography. He is a seminal figure in jazz music and an ancestor to rap. But his influence was greater than his impact on both those significant genres of American music. He was a musician, street poet, an influential lyricist, a pioneer in political art whose work survives well the limitations time usually imposes on art too rooted in its time.

Marcus Baram provides a useful but not a great biography. Baram is a fan, a journalist, and someone with sufficient access to interview many significant figures in Heron's life. This does not, however, result in a well told, comprehensive and incisive life. He does not get below the surface and the surface is not always coherently presented. Baram being a fan is not a weakness of the biography. The weakness is putting to use the access he enjoyed from Heron's family and peers and not seeming to do deeper research into the artist's life and art and synthesizing that into a richly textured and revealing biography. There is sloppy writing--and editing--did Heron's soccer playing father score two or three goals in his debut with Detroit? Baram in successive paragraphs says two and then three. Within four paragraphs he refers to Heron's mother's wit three times (without example); it is a wicked, sharp, and razor-wit. The sloppiness makes the book feel rushed. *Pieces of a Man* does include some thoughtful discussions of some of Heron's songs and it does encourage you to listen to Heron's work again. That's not a small service given the culture's collective memory but a biography worthy of the artist and this very complex and self-destructive man is still to come and, one hopes, soon.

Ricky Kilmer says

I received an ARC of *Pieces of a man* 3 days ago and couldn't stop reading it since. This is one worth picking up and worth sharing. If you're asking why, or who Gil is...Here is the story of one of the more important figures in the landscape of hip hop music and that's only the tip of the iceberg. Gil Scott-Heron is an intriguing figure of modern times and I'd venture to say many people may not even know or remember that they know of him. Thanks to Marcus Baram and His new Book; *Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a man* his story and life will get some much deserved attention. Baram takes us on the journey of Gil's life, from his birth all the way through to his tragic passing in 2011 in New York. Where we go along the way covers a life that is hard to pin down or categorize. An Artist, radical, genius, addict, poet, musician (hip hop, jazz, blues, soul and then some) social commentator, recluse, trailblazer, and more. All of these are pieces of The Man, Gil Scott-Heron. Baram shares in depth with us all of Gil's talents, passions, demons, voices, and influences. A great read from start to finish. Baram shines a light on Gil and his light. Sharing the dark spots as well, with an honest look at a brave, gifted and flawed man. I am glad this book was written and even happier it is written well. It's hard to say how important or influential Gil's work and words really are, but I can say for certain that he deserves to be remembered and shared in our generation and generations to come. All in all, a very good book about a very cool cat. 5 out of 5 for my money. "The revolution will not be televised" and Marcus Baram reminds us all who's said that and who Gil is in all his complexity and beauty.

Allan says

This is a well written and meticulously researched biography of an artist who I became aware of mainly

through his 'I'm New Here' release, shortly before his death in 2011.

It was sad to read of Heron's demise through an addiction to first cocaine and then crack, but at the same time interesting to learn of his early precocious talent, published as a writer and poet as he was before leaving college. His music career, political activism and personal life are well documented by Baram, whose research consisted of many interviews with friends and family, in addition to with Heron himself, as well as 40 years worth of press, and his own posthumous memoir. One comes away from the memoir ultimately frustrated at the stubborn nature of the artist who refused help from so many quarters to tackle the personal demons that led to his early death.

Having read Heron's debut novel, 'The Vulture', finishing this will encourage me to tackle his second, as well as said memoir, both of which are presently unread on my shelves.

Jacob says

Great subject matter but lazily reported. Feels like an outsider looking in, and in an awkward way at times. Still worth a read as there aren't many books on this American great.

Michelle says

3.5 stars

Pieces of a Man is the title of a song by Gil Scott-Heron from his 1971 album of the same name, and it is an apt title for this biography, which spans Scott-Heron's life from his birth in 1949 to his untimely death in 2011.

In serviceable but rather lacklustre prose, Marcus Baram takes the reader through all the stages of Gil Scott-Heron's life in chronological order. Scott-Heron was born in Chicago, but soon moved to Jackson, Tennessee, where he was raised by his maternal grandmother until her death in 1960. In 1962, Scott-Heron was one of three black students who integrated an all-white high school in Jackson. We follow Scott-Heron through his adolescence in the Bronx, his college days at Lincoln University (his hero Langston Hughes' alma mater), where we encounter his beginnings at a poet, songwriter, and singer.

In 1970, Scott-Heron's first album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, was released on Flying Dutchman records. The album includes one of his best-known songs, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Considered a significant precursor to hip-hop, it comments on the need for diverse representation in media, a vital and popular topic nowadays. Way ahead of his time, Scott-Heron was talking about this almost fifty years ago! "Gil felt that most critics missed the point of the song—it was less about condemning commercialism and more about criticizing cultural racism, how black people viewed the TV shows they watched, which didn't include their views, let alone their faces." (p. 82)

Long before the term "woke" came into contemporary parlance, Scott-Heron explored the concept in "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." He talked about the meaning of the song to PBS, "You have to change your mind before you change the way you're living and the way you move. The thing that's going to change people is something that no one will ever be able to capture on film, it will just be something that you see

and all of a sudden you realize that I'm on the wrong page, or I'm on the right page but I'm on the wrong note. And I've got to get in sync with everyone else to understand what is going on in this country." (p. 83) In other words, the first step to social change is in our minds, in the way we perceive the world.

This album was followed by a decade of influential records featuring mix of blues, jazz, soul, and spoken-word poetry, many of which were created in collaboration with pianist and flautist Brian Jackson. Scott-Heron's fiery, politically-conscious lyrics are tempered by his wit and his empathy for the poor, the dispossessed, the forgotten, the marginalized. Two of his most famous songs talk about addiction: "Home is Where the Hatred Is" and "The Bottle." These two songs are not your average anti-drug songs thanks to Scott-Heron's ability to empathize with the illness of addiction: "Gil says he wrote [Home is Where the Hatred Is] in the first person, rather than the third, to avoid making it sound accusatory. 'If you do things in the first person, then even people with those kinds of problems can look at them because you're not talking about them. You're talking about yourself. They can look at themselves by looking at you.'" (p. 88)

The final portion of the book deals with Scott-Heron's own long struggle with drug addiction, which led to serious health problems, prison time, and his death at age 62. Baram treats Scott-Heron's addiction with compassion. The last chapters of the book are truly heartbreaking.

An enormous amount of research went into writing this biography. In addition to listening to all of Scott-Heron's music, reading his writing, and reading over a hundred articles cited in the selected bibliography, it is apparent that Baram conducted a huge number of interviews with Scott-Heron's former schoolmates, bandmates and fellow musicians, lovers, friends, and family members. Baram's background as a journalist shows in the depth and quantity of research that went into writing this book. That said, this biography really lacks a sense of character. When you listen to Gil Scott-Heron's music, his searing intelligence, righteous anger, and originality practically grab you by the throat. Clearly, he must have been a fascinating character. Unfortunately, Baram's biography fails to bring him fully to life. If you want to learn about Gil Scott-Heron, listen to his music.

Rob Charpentier says

Overall, this is a fine biography of a neglected yet important figure in music, Gil Scott-Heron. However, I'm a little embarrassed to confess that I myself had somehow at one point confused him with Jill Scott, a female jazz musician, who I figured had married someone named Heron and changed the spelling of her first name somewhere along the way. Then later, when I figured out that they were actually two separate people rather than leave it at that I further assumed that Jill must have been his daughter. Of course, I was wrong on both counts and was in need of straightening out this confusion and so I picked up this book to try and get the facts straight.

Despite my confusion on who the man/woman was, I have always been familiar with the name of Gil Scott Heron having seen it on several compilation albums and vintage rock posters all of my life. I had even listened to some of his music long ago but had written him off on a rather arbitrary point of it being mostly spoken word and so was not to my liking. Consequently, I never delved any further into his catalogue. My preference is that if I want to hear someone speak I can turn on talk-radio or attend a lecture but music should always have a singer. I tend to even dislike the doo-wop spoken interludes or those by later artists in the soul era like Barry White.

Before I read this book I checked out a “Best of Gil Scott-Heron” CD from the library to reacquaint myself with his music, which I had so dismissed so easily in the past. Especially, since in retrospect Scott-Heron’s obvious impact upon hip-hop music was pivotal I needed to reevaluate my bias towards him. Upon hearing his music I found it to be more than enjoyable and extremely easy to listen to and it made reading about him that much more interesting.

The author Marcus Baram was apparently an acquaintance of Gil’s but he never mentions in his biography just how he knew him. Nevertheless, he offers a sensitive yet balanced portrait of the man that includes all sides of the man, both good and bad. Gil was an enigmatic and fascinating person who was not always as charming and engaging as his music and public persona might suggest, especially to those closest to him. He also had some extremely famous friends, such as Richard Pryor and Stevie Wonder. Both of who played crucial roles establishing Gil’s career.

The story of Gil’s life is a cross-section of a particularly fascinating time in American history that Gil had personal firsthand experiences with. He was actually one of three of the first black students to be integrated into his school in Mississippi. Primarily, he was raised by women of his family, his father, a famous soccer player from Jamaica having left his wife and child when Gil was a toddler. He grew up in the South and later in New York and his experiences were both atypical as well as representative of the black experience in America for this time.

Fiercely independent and outspoken with a gift for language, Gil became a spokesman for his generation and not just for African-Americans but also for any downtrodden and oppressed peoples, ranging from white coal miners in Pennsylvania to Mexican-Americans in Texas. Although he had some close ties to the Black Panthers, he never officially joined them or any other group or association out there. He wanted to remain unaffiliated so as to be able to be welcome everywhere without the stigma of any associations. In this way, he spoke for a much wider group of people and was often referred to as the “Black Bob Dylan,” a term he did not fully embrace or appreciate.

He was also considered by many to be the godfather of Hip Hop, something he also downplayed and argued as being misplaced. Mainly, he was not a fan of the violence and misogyny often contained in the lyrics in this music and his own distinct delivery rarely rhymed as they do in this particular genre. Nevertheless, countless influential rappers have cited Gil as a huge inspiration to them in showing the way as to how their new form of music could and should be done. Particularly, Chuck D. of Public Enemy and KRS-One champion him as a main influence.

Unfortunately, although he had a very promising career ahead of him, Gil was not all that interested in superstardom or aggressively promoting his music to mainstream audiences. After a decade of rave critical reviews and a dedicated underground following Gil slowly slipped from the public view in the United States. However, all throughout his life he always maintained a devoted following in Europe where he often toured up until the end of his life. He also unfortunately developed a hard drug habit, specifically free basing cocaine, which some have speculated that Richard Pryor may have introduced to him. This, more than anything, contributed to his downward spiral into obscurity.

It’s a sad tale overall but one with many bright spots along the way, even in the more darker periods of Gil’s life. The author writes engagingly, if not somewhat breezily through all the different stages of Gil’s life. It is an easy and entertaining read that informs the reader about this fascinating individual and his many accomplishments and influence. However, there seems to be much more here about the man that could be said than what the author chooses to tell. Although it isn’t rushed in it’s telling there seems to be huge holes in relaying the events of Gil’s life. Often, major events happen that are only mentioned as afterthoughts.

Furthermore, little time is really spent discussing his music in any real detail as much as I would have liked. To be fair, I don't know if a scholarly or critical biography is what is needed here but I still feel that much was passed over here. Nevertheless, for what it is, I found it to be well worth reading and would easily recommend it to anyone even remotely curious about this enigmatic performer.

Stephen says

I thought Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces Of a Man was a very enlightening story about how Gil Scott-Heron went through very challenging times in his life.

A lot of people say that Gill Scott-Heron was the "first rapper ever". After reading "Pieces of a Man", I wouldn't say that, because it's wrong to call his work as "rap", only because he expresses his opinions speaking. Why there is always need to hide behind the musical notes? If you feel something inside so strong, so wild, so powerful that it can't be stopped by your beautiful voice, don't throw it away! "Pieces of a Man" tells the heart wrenching story of Gill Scott-Heron.

In conclusion, "Pieces of a Man" is a masterpiece. You can find different music styles (from funk to jazz) and different way to express what you feel in Scott-Heron's work, but you can't even imagine what this book and his music is like until you try it.
