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Gil Scott-Heron & Amnesia Express

The Paris Concert [DVD]

(MVD / Wienerworld) Rated: N/A
 US release date: 5 June 2007

by **Quentin B. Huff**

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Pieces of a Soul Man

The revolution will not go better with Coke.
 The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.
 The revolution will put you in the driver's seat.
 The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised.
 The revolution will be no rerun, brothas;
 The revolution...will be live.
 - Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"

If we're not careful, we're going to turn the biography of the great wordsmith, musician, and singer Gil Scott-Heron into little more than a cautionary tale instead of a throw-caution-to-the-wind tale about the beauty and influence of song. This, together with about two hours of solid material from Gil Scott-Heron and Amnesia Express, explains why the *Paris Concert* DVD should be important to our soul music collections, even though it's evident that the main attraction is not at the peak of his powers.

Brothas and sistas, this DVD will not be flashy. There will be no stage diving. The DVD will not be *Musicians Gone Wild*, with high-energy suggestive choreography from imitators of the Pussycat Dolls. It will not be titillating, but you will get a rush from emotive saxophone solos ("Three Miles Down") and frenzied percussion and congas ("The Bottle") and you might even get goose bumps when the guitar player commits to some hellacious George Benson-esque plucking ("Winter in America").

Gil Scott-Heron will not bring the house down by doing the moonwalk. You won't find special guest appearances from Sounds of Blackness, Black Eyed Peas, or Blackalicious. The DVD will not offer the option of looking at a guitar solo from a special angle. There won't be exclusive behind-the-scenes banter in the dressing room, with the band members picking on each other or telling stories about life on the road, emitting giggles-slash-groans about the youngster who said, "Gil Scott-Heron? Oh, yes! The 'Revolution Will Not Be Televised' guy! His song was used in a soda commercial, right?"

The DVD will not contain a fine print warning about the side effects from overexposure to the performance, nor can it be packaged in a purple, blue, or red pill. The DVD will not prevent disease outbreaks, so come clean with your partner and your doctor on your own accord.



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Gil Scott-Heron - The Bottle (live)

The DVD, however, *will be live*, and so, while many things *could* have been included to supplement this July 2001 performance at the New Morning in Paris, it still serves a noble purpose. Maybe the actual performance is a little long with a meandering bulge near the middle mark, but the positive thing about the DVD's no-frills approach is that it appropriately emphasizes the man's music, front and center. That's important because we (writers who consume and consumers who write) are running the risk of packaging Gil Scott-Heron in a most confining and limiting bottle (pun intended!).

Cue the violins now and as we take a stroll with the Spirit of Biography Future.

We'll begin the Gil Scott-Heron biography with his birthday, April 1, 1949, in Chicago, Illinois. "That's right," we'll say, "April Fools' Day," and we'll note that he himself joked about the date. We'll move him from Chicago to Tennessee, where we'll grow him up with his grandmother, and then we'll transport him to New York to live with his mother. Emphasizing young Scott-Heron's adoration of Langston Hughes, we'll mention his attendance, like Hughes, at Pennsylvania's Lincoln University and, later, at Johns Hopkins. Gil Scott-Heron was something of a prodigy, we'll say, having written a novel (*The Vulture*) and a book of poetry (*Small Talk at 125th & Lenox*) by age 20. While at Lincoln University, he met Brian Jackson, who became a friend and longtime collaborator.

We'll dash through the '70s, with Scott-Heron and Jackson cranking out some of the most soulfully insightful (and "incite-full") tunes ever. Invariably, the discography of the times will highlight "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised", which I've been satirizing above, the global struggle for peace in "Johannesburg", the bluesy swig of "The Bottle", and the spoken word "Whitey on the Moon". His writing voice will be characterized as "aggressive", "biting", "outspoken", or "attacking" to contrast our description of his instrumental side as vaguely "smooth" and "jazzy". In hindsight, we'll know that rap music is going to hit the big time in the '80s, so we'll crown Gil Scott-Heron "The Godfather of Rap" or "The Primogenitor of Hip-Hop".

As we approach his mid-80s absence from the musical mainstream, the story itself will take precedence, overshadowing the man and his numerous important messages. We'll allude to the promise of his return to form in the '90s with *Spirits*, an album produced by Gil Scott-Heron, Malcolm Cecil, and A Tribe Called Quest's Ali Shaheed Muhammad. Then we'll chronicle his drug-related run-ins with the legal system, accenting the irony of his supposed inability to heed the warnings of his own prophetic song lyrics, mostly in "Angel Dust" ("Down some dead end streets, there ain't no turnin' back") and "The Bottle" ("Don't you think it's a crime to drink time after time"). Nice and tidy, and gift wrapped in academic objectivity, we'll imply that his fiery brilliance has been derailed by his excesses.

Maybe so. Okay, probably so. Everything in that biography might be technically true. But the *Paris Concert* DVD reminds us that a musician's story is at least as significant as the musician's factual history and legal troubles. Gil Scott-Heron has been written as a man out of sync with the moment, simultaneously ahead of his time yet standing in his own way. Of his own music, his "gifts", Scott-Heron says in the liner notes to *Spirits* that he sometimes answers the question of what he calls his music with a joke, "I call it collect." Funny. But we shouldn't allow anything or anyone—not even *Scott-Heron*—to block us from keeping our eyes on the essence of his mixture of poetry, blues, jazz, and straight talk. His contributions are too important to the unfolding of the soul tradition.



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On the DVD, we can at least assess his stage presence, along with the nimble gait of his fingers across his piano keys and the poignancy of his wit—not just the feistiness of his lyricism. The “Gil Scott-Heron” who performed in Paris in 2001 is very much a producer and product of the moment, uniting his audience around the warmth of his recognizable tunes (namely, “Angel Dust”, “Winter in America”, “Johannesburg”, and “The Bottle”), stoked by the familiar crackling of his vocals. That rendition of “The Bottle” is especially satisfying, stretching out to a robust 8 minutes and 25 seconds, although I wish the performance could have retained a flute solo like Brian Jackson’s from the recorded version.

He begins softly and unassuming, just a man, his microphone, and his ebonies and ivories. “Obviously,” he tells the audience, “rumors of my demise have been exaggerated.” The stage is his; none of his Amnesia Express band members are assisting him with the show’s opening. He’s alone in the spotlight, as he should be, seated behind his keys, his time-sculpted countenance modestly tucked under his cap and wiry gray Afro. Quietly, he puts the blues to the set’s first number, “Blue Collar”. The audience members, all of them standing, swoon to the grooves like trees in a roaming breeze, lending an appropriate background for his launch into “Lovely Day”.



Scott-Heron exudes the calm that has always balanced the ferocity, anger, or aggression we’ve been pointing out in his work. Of course his music is “serious”, but he has often served his politics with a chaser of good humor, like when he opens “Three Miles Down” with the quip, “This is written in everybody’s key.” He welcomes everyone to participate, to lend a voice to the song, as well as to “Work for Peace” and its theme of creating a better world through cooperation. Missing are the album version’s wordplays regarding the early ‘90s Gulf War maneuvers and the “military industrial complex” (“They took the honor from honorary, they took the dignity from the dignitary, they took the secrets from the secretary, but they left the ‘bitch’ in obituary”)—but I suspect the arrangement (1) simply works better in a live setting with less narration and (2) emphasizes the spirit and communal vibe of the show. “Work for Peace” also marks the spot where Amnesia Express join Scott-Heron onstage.

And, remember, this concert takes place a little more than a month before the events of September 11, 2001 brought the concept of “war” onto a new frontier, at least for those of us in the United States. When Scott-Heron sings “There’s a War Going On” and “Did You Hear What They Said?”, it’s like listening to songs around a campfire, and his rendering of them is as touching as his approach to “Your Daddy Loves You”. I got shivers listening to that one and also when I listened to his stirring tribute to human rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer in “95 South (All of the Places We’ve Been)”.

With Amnesia Express jamming behind him, the performance is intimate, comparable to a family reunion or a festival, as opposed to the political rallying we might expect from an un-televised revolution. The set is representative of many of his gigs, a mixture of old favorites and new energy. He’s a bit weary and a little worn, and he looks it, but the congenial atmosphere of the evening is palpable. That, to me, is Gil Scott-Heron. That’s the beauty and power of song.

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Gil Scott-Heron - The Paris Concert

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