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"Giving Back to the Community!" Interview with Gil Scott-Heron, February 1995

Amilcar Shabazz
University of Massachusetts - Amherst, shabazz@afroam.umass.edu

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We've gotten a lot of good things to happen. What young folks have done primarily is...they've had to go back and do some homework on us because they didn't know who we were. So, like, I don't think that there's been an immediate response that we can tell. They used our music to do "Paper Doll" and we're constantly called on to issue some sort of sample for Chuck D. and Michael Franti has traveled with us with both of his groups: Disposable Heroes and the group (Spearhead) that he has now.

We didn't dedicate a whole lot of songs to those things but, you see, what happens is people end up seeing you based on the songs they like. After doing 150 songs, I'll be damned if I can pick one that generalizes and talks about what we've done altogether. We've done a lot of those things because we try to represent a lot of points of view from the community. And, like, each song is a different idea. So I'm saying, like, people can go back and pick "B Movie" and "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and say it's political. But then they can pick "Your Daddy Loves You" or "I think I'll Call It Morning" or "Lovely Day" or "Bobby Smith." You know, it just depends on which songs you enjoy...

Like, when you go back to the community -- if you go back into the community -- people wonder what you're doing there and if you don't go back, they say "See, that nigger didn't come back." [laughter]...So, I'm saying it's ass backwards either way, so you have to be yourself and allow those other opinions to be out there. It's a fool to allow someone else's opinion to shape his life. We're not about that, we believe that inevitably the people who listen to our music will understand our music and that there's a serious direction to it.

Full Text (2099 words)

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Giving Back to the Community! Interview with Gil Scott-Heron February. 1995

GIL SCOTT-HERON is a legendary musician in the tradition of Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal and other Black cultural artists who helped raise the socio-political consciousness during the sixties. Many credit him as the most

influential figure in the early genesis of rap music. His incorporation of wordsongs throughout most of his music helped lay the basis for today's rap artists. Beginning in 1970 with SMALL TALK AT 125TH & LENOX, he has recorded over 22 albums, published two novels and three works of poetry, and has performed throughout the world.

In 1994, Gil Scott-Heron, after a 12-year absence from the music studio, released the album SPIRITS. During February of 1994, he toured America performing for various causes -- in this case, the struggle of death-penalty abolitionist Gary Graham. Moments before a high-spirited performance, Gil Scott-Heron talked to journalists Larvester Gaither, Lynn Page, Bakari Kitwana, and political historian & educator Amilcar Shabazz.

Gaither: How did Gary Graham's struggle come to your attention?

Gil Scott-Heron: It's been advertised and publicized all over the country for quite a while by people involved with his defense fund. But we've played several benefits for various causes. We've played just about everywhere -- like even prisons...We seek out the circumstances and if we can do something for the various causes -- we do -- particularly during Black History Month. We believe that the community takes care of us the rest of the year, so we should try to do something to contribute back. We understand that the brother wants a new trial. Like, that's different from saying that you want to get off just scott free. I believe that the trial wasn't correct the first time...I don't believe there is any justice in the Gary Graham Trial.

Gaither: Are there any other people on death row who stand out?

You know like, there are a lot of prisoners. Not every state has the death penalty. But every state's got a lot of penitentiaries and every penitentiary got a lot of brothers. So we've been contacted by some folks in Pennsylvania about the journalist who's on death row up there...You see like, where we look at benefits, more than anything else, is publicity for the circumstance because the community, the people most familiar with the case, the people most familiar with the brother, are the ones that are gonna have to inevitably do the things that bring about a new trial, or clemency, or pardon, or whatever is necessary.

But in the meantime, if we can contribute in some fashion, we will. We don't claim to know as much about Gary Graham as the folks who live here in Texas do, we just know about the circumstances that Black people are put into all over the country. So when we see that there's an active movement for something that's been going on as long as this brother's been in jail, there must be some truth to it. We feel as though we'll try to support it as best as we can.

You know there are a lot of different ways to trick up evidence, to rig circumstances to put brothers in a jam. We're not saying this is what happened, we're saying that we're aware of these possibilities. We see them happening all over the country. And there are too many supporters of various people for us to feel as though there shouldn't be some more investigation.

We're saying, like, why shouldn't we do what we can to make that possible? We can't do very much as it is. But each time these circumstances are brought back to the public's attention, brought back to the attention of the community, somebody from the community who can help and send their support to the brother or sister may be available, may hear about it, and may involve themselves. What you need is community involvement and that's the sort of thing the publicity makes possible.

Gaither: What's your stand on the death penalty?

I'm against the death penalty because sometimes I figure you may get the wrong one.

Shabazz: Bro. Gil, you raised sometime back in "The King Alfreds Plan" the imagery of the United States as kind of a prison-state. Do you see things as changed from when you did "The King Alfreds Plan" in terms of the whole move in this country towards prisons? Well, "The King Alfreds Plan" had to do with what they did to the Japanese during the Second World War -- the internment camps that they had during the war where they put all of those people they felt were of the nature that they might support their homeland. Anybody who hasn't seen changes over the last twenty years hasn't been looking.

Of course there have been changes. But not all of the changes have been as drastic or as broad as they seemed to be. Like, for example, we now have a class of Black people who have become the new white racist. Because the folks we felt that we were supporting to get into a position to where they could help us, in many instances, have turned their backs on us.

We need to reinvolve those people in the community. The same way people from Africa come over here to go to school and are supposed to go back and help their communities and don't, we have a lot of folks in our community who could be doing more for us. And we're trying to encourage these people to be involved with the community and help folks out because this is why we supported them to get to the position where they're in today.

It's a funny thing how people who accomplish something attribute it to their initiative, their determination, and their talent and if they fail, it's because they're Black. [laughter]...This is something we have to comment on. Like the folks who went out to try and make these things possible for them deserve some pay back. And they can best pay them back by reinvolving themselves in the issues of the community and trying to help out.

Kitwana: What's been the response to the album?

SPIRITS has done quite well. Of course, we're still categorized as jazz and miscellaneous but we've found that the response relates to how many people come to see you when you come to play.

Kitwana: You had one of the rappers from A Tribe Called Quest involved in this project? Ali Shaheed Muhammad. Shaheed wrote a piece of music that we added some lyrics to. That's a song called "Don't Give Up."

Kitwana: How has the response been to the song directed towards rap artists: "Message To the Messengers?"

We've gotten a lot of good things to happen. What young folks have done primarily is...they've had to go back and do some homework on us because they didn't know who we were. So, like, I don't think that there's been an immediate response that we can tell. They used our music to do "Paper Doll" and we're constantly called on to issue some sort of sample for Chuck D. and Michael Franti has traveled with us with both of his groups: Disposable Heroes and the group (Spearhead) that he has now.

Kitwana: Do you think that the rappers are too embedded within popular culture to be able to make the level of impact that you all have been able to make?

I think, like, if you pick the wrong ones, you can always have something to complain about. Like, if you don't like those, don't listen to them. Like, in my house, turn it off.

Kitwana: I mean, do you think that they're too embedded in popular culture to make an impact at the level that your generation has able to make an impact. I just think....

...I'm saying like, it's a question of how much of an impact we made. Like, I mean, there's a lot of people from my generation who don't know who I am. Like, we were listening to the Temptations and Marvin Gaye, you don't want to discount their music. When the young people are young, let them be young. If we keep going the way we're going, there will still be some problems here for them to solve.

Page: Are you bringing any of your old material into this new project? This seems to be a new trend.

There's a live version on the album called "The Other Side" and part of that was adapted from "Home Is Where The Hatred Is." You treat the songs that you have based on the orchestration that's available. You know, when I cut a couple of the songs, it wasn't nobody but me and a couple of conga players. Now that we have a full band, in many instances, we do them and they sound like a new song but it's something we now have a chance to bring out better.

Page: What about the message? There's a big difference between the message you were bringing and the one the young kids today are bringing. Yet, I think youth are looking for a message. It's just not out there. Has your message changed at all?

Well, you see all of the messages that we did, those messages are still available.

Page: They're still available?

Of course, they are. They're still on the records, you got them. [laughter]...

Page: Okay, right but you were talking about marijuana, you were talking about different kinds of drugs. Today, we're talking about hard-core drugs, hard-core problems, hard-core...

There ain't nothing no more hard-core than heroin! [laughter]...There ain't nothing more hard-core than heroin! That's what we were talking about in "Home Is Where The Hatred Is." Drugs is something...like folks end up making their own decisions about drugs. All you can do is tell them how you see it. We talked about alcoholism...

We didn't dedicate a whole lot of songs to those things but, you see, what happens is people end up seeing you based on the songs they like. After doing 150 songs, I'll be damned if I can pick one that generalizes and talks about what we've done altogether. We've done a lot of those things because we try to represent a lot of points of view from the community. And, like, each song is a different idea. So I'm saying, like, people can go back and pick "B Movie" and "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and say it's political. But then they can pick "Your Daddy Loves You" or "I think I'll Call It Morning" or "Lovely Day" or "Bobby Smith." You know, it just depends on which songs you enjoy...

Shabazz: Bro. Gil, you raised the question of classification. What would you see as a way to classify what you do?

You see, I don't have to because I ain't going to put it down nowhere. I just call it mine. [laughter]...

Shabazz: But in terms of the industry. I had this conversation with Spirit (Bilal Sunni Ali) and he felt that you all were building in the 70's, trying to control the music -- traveling the chitlins circuit, the college campuses, et al. -- and trying to keep the ownership of the music within the community and then things kind of went off in another direction in terms of how this industry constrains the art, constrains the product.

You see, if you want to be in the industry, you accept what it is when you get there. You don't go into a factory and say you're going to change the factory just because you're going to work there. We didn't consider our music their music just because they made it available. Like, once someone comes out on record, that doesn't mean they no longer belong to the community. They live in the same place, they play the same stuff. People look at you differently.

Like, when you go back to the community -- if you go back into the community -- people wonder what you're doing there and if you don't go back, they say "See, that nigger didn't come back." [laughter]...So, I'm saying it's ass backwards either way, so you have to be yourself and allow those other opinions to be out there. It's a fool to allow someone else's opinion to shape his life. We're not about that, we believe that inevitably the people who listen to our music will understand our music and that there's a serious direction to it.

Photo (Gil Scott-Heron)

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