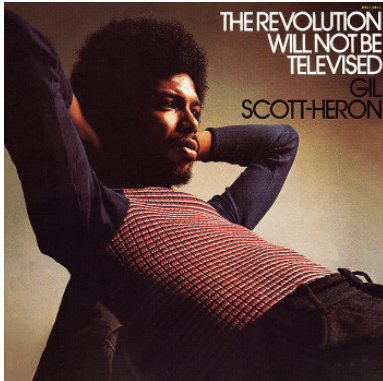


# “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”--Gil Scott-Heron (1970)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



Gil Scott-Heron

Poet/performer Gil Scott-Heron's recording of his famous epic poem/song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” was named to the National Sound Registry in 2005. With its wide-ranging references, both pop and political, encompassing both national affairs and consumer culture, and its not-so-subtle jabs at “white America,” “Revolution” has endured as both a timeless social critique and as a unique musical expression, one in which the founding modern strands and themes of rap and hip-hop can be heard.

Literary-minded from a young age, the Chicago-born Scott-Heron (b. 1949) had published his first novel, “The Vulture,” by age 21. His first collection of poems, “Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox” appeared in 1970. “Small Talk” contained the first incarnation of “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” “Small Talk at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox” would also be the title of Scott-Heron's first album; it would contain his first recorded version of “Revolution.” The album was released in 1970, on Flying Dutchman records.

For the recording of his work, Scott-Heron read his own powerful sentiments, stinging commentary and rhythmic but non-rhyming stanzas in a deep, resonating voice but with a Ginsberg-like detachment. During the reading, Scott-Heron was accompanied by pounding congas and bongo drums which lent the recording a feeling both beatnik and tribal. In his journey from poet to rock musician, Scott-Heron followed quickly on the heels of Leonard Cohen and just barely preceded punk priestess Patti Smith. His spoken-word concerts, which he began giving around this time, also prefigured the angst-driven “poetry slams” which prospered inside coffee houses beginning in the 1990s.

Like much of Scott-Heron's work (for example, his “Whitey on the Moon” piece also from 1970), “Revolution” has a decidedly Black Power slant:

*There will be no pictures of pigs shooting down brothers in the instant replay.  
There will be no pictures of Whitney Young being run out of Harlem on a rail with a  
brand new process.  
There will be no slow motion or still life of Roy Wilkens strolling through Watts....*

Yet, the work has also, for generations, struck a chord with white audiences as a screed against mindless, mass consumerism and the malaise that excessive television watching seems to spawn:

*The revolution will not be right back after a message.*

[...]

*The revolution will not go better with Coke.*

*The revolution will not fight the germs that may cause bad breath.*

*The revolution will not put you in the driver's seat.*

Additionally, the poem takes aim at some highly-rated, low-rent entertainment and the pop (pap?) music that was then being produced for the masses:

*"Green Acres," "The Beverly Hillbillies," [...] will no longer be relevant,*

*And women will not care if Dick finally gets down with Jane on "Search for Tomorrow"*

[...]

*The theme song will not be not be [...] sung by Glen Campbell, Tom Jones....*

After committing his first, spare rendition of the poem to vinyl (the version later named to the National Recording Registry), Scott-Heron re-recorded the piece a year later for his "Pieces of Man" LP. This version, which included a full band backing him, was released as the B-side to his single, the equally political "Home is Where the Hatred Is."

Since its emergence, Scott-Heron's "Revolution" has had a spectacular, far-reaching afterlife, one which has seen it become deeply embedded into American culture. The title alone has been endlessly referenced, repeated and co-opted, across the spectrum, by politicians, pundits, historians and others espousing on the role that the media plays in publicizing, promoting or preventing social trends and even uprisings. It has inspired a sometimes playful, sometimes serious, still-raging debate about whether or not, in the end, the revolution will be televised at all. Arguments on both sides are strong:

--it will because the pervasiveness of all forms of television and media (from the networks to Youtube) dictates that, in the soon-to-be future, there is nothing that won't be "televised";

--it won't, if we don't lift ourselves from our sofas, there won't be a revolution to begin with;

to, finally,

--television is the revolution.

The phrase "The revolution will not be televised" has frequently been invoked in a variety of popular musical and other works. Elvis Costello, Jamiroquai, Steve Earle, and the Wu-Tang Clan are just some of the musicians who have referenced it, and its sentiments, in their own performances. Perhaps most famously, the title was adopted as the title of an acclaimed 2003 documentary about the coup staged against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez which had occurred one year earlier.

Meanwhile, the full poem/song has, for many years, been covered, sampled, and even reinterpreted by others. Funk divas Labelle recorded it for their "Pressure Cookin'" album of 1973; Prince made ample use of it in his 1998 26-minute single "The War"; and KRS-One updated the work (adding more modern references) in the mid-1990s. Actress and performance artist Sarah Jones meanwhile fashioned a feminist version, "Your Revolution" ("Your revolution will not happen between these thighs") in 2002.

If the poem's rallying cry against some aspects of "white America" (i.e. "The revolution will not be [...] about a white tornado, white lightning or white people") has been repeated in innumerable rap songs over the years, then its post-modernist diatribe against mass marketing

and product-placement has been echoed in such songs as “Love for Sale” by Talking Heads and “This Note’s for You” by Neil Young.

For Scott-Heron, he grew more musical, though no less militant, with his subsequent releases (like “Free Will” in 1972 and “Winter in America” in 1974). He enjoyed continued attention and influence well into the 1970s, often performing to audiences of 200,000 or more. His output and notoriety lessened in the late 1980s. In 1980, he appeared in the concert film “No Nukes” and then took a ten-year sabbatical from recording. He did not reemerge until 1993 with the release of his album “Spirits.” He died in 2011.

By the time of his death, with his long history of melding spoken word passages with music and of including brutal social commentary from a black perspective in his lyrics, Scott-Heron had already been adopted (or anointed) as one of the—if not *the*--founding godfathers of rap. In that regard, he is then an artist of almost unequal statue, one whose singular, lifetime creative oeuvre created an entire genre of expression in their wake.

*Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).*