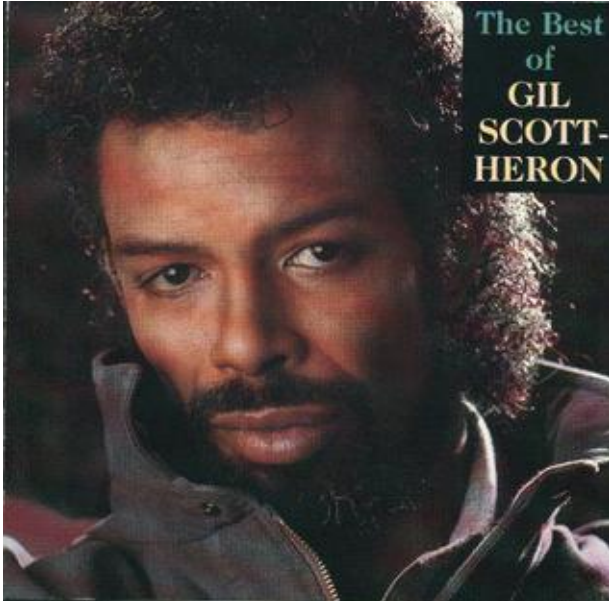


## Gil Scott-Heron: Life After Arista

By **Larry Jaffee** (audio of interview available on *RocksBackpages.com*)

*NOTE: This May 1986 interview with the late artist was intended for Tower Records' Pulse!, but was rejected for fear that Arista Records would pull its advertising.*



IT'S BEEN SEVEN years since the last Gil Scott-Heron album of new material, but he's in no rush to start recording again. Dropped in 1986 by Arista Records, for which he made 10 albums in a decade, Scott-Heron has something of a bitter taste for the subject of record companies.

"You never can tell [when I'll put out another album]. Let's wait and see what happens," says sometime Washingtonian Scott-Heron, who will be appearing at Blues Alley Feb. 25-28. In recent months, he's worked on putting a band back together that he's taken on a European tour. He's also been talking with "three or four" labels about a new contract, but is in no hurry to sign and that's not for a lack of material.

The jazz/funk/political commentator anticipated things at Arista, whose president Clive Davis signed him to be the first artist for the new label in 1974, would go sour when multi-media conglomerate RCA bought into the smaller company several years ago.

"I don't know how much influence RCA had," he says, noting that, in any case, the company couldn't be too comfortable releasing extremely critical rap pieces about the shortcomings of the Reagan Administration. That is unless they sold in the millions; in Scott-Heron's case, they don't.

"When I left Arista they had an accountant running A&R," he says. The singer was especially miffed how his last release for the company, a best-of compilation, was put together. "The best songs were left off. They picked the ones that sold the best. Record company people can't sing, can't dance and can't perform.

"We are the indispensable commodity of the record company. Everybody that Arista signed in the beginning was able to do what they wanted to do," he says, citing Patti Smith and Loudon Wainwright as two roster-mates who also revelled in the artistic freedom that was briefly granted to them. "I don't see that there anymore," says Scott-Heron, who put out five other albums on independent labels before signing with Arista.

Evidently, Davis, whom Scott-Heron had often happily consulted with about his latest studio creations, had changed his musical priorities – away from cult figures with limited commercial potential to carefully molded mega-sellers like Whitney Houston, Aretha Franklin and Carly Simon.

However, a slim chance of reaching a mass audience will not stop Scott-Heron from continuing to espouse his thoughts on international and domestic politics, apartheid, injustice, nuclear power and social problems.

"It's not that the average person doesn't care. There are so many problems that the average person is being bombarded with, and they can hardly keep their own problems in focus. So it remains the responsibility of the people in the public eye to bring attention to certain issues and ideas."

In 1975, Scott-Heron focused on South Africa with 'Johannesburg', and two years later he commented on the Three Mile Island nuclear

accident with 'Shut 'Em Down', both which were rereleased last year in Europe. He also came out against alcohol abuse in 1974 ('The Bottle') and drug abuse in 1979 ('Angel Dust') at a time no one else was writing about the problems. "Those songs were released at a time the public's attention wasn't home and now that these issues are in the headlines it makes it more important," he says.

Scott-Heron also contributed a song, 'Let Me See Your I.D.', to the *Sun City* album. "Anyone who heard 'Sun City' had their consciousness raised whether they wanted it or not. Steve Van Zandt deserves a tremendous amount of credit for putting it together. I don't think there are too many more musicians who could have drawn that kind of diverse backgrounds in order to put together a project like that," he says.

A previously unreleased dance track called 'Re-Ron' on the 1984 compilation contained plenty topical food for thought: "It's a Re-Ron/Corruption, peace with Raymond Donovan and Edwin Meese/It's the Latin plan, here's our star, Macho Man/While 30 years after segregation was tried and banished from the Nation/Here it comes again, discrimination/And the world's watching our reaction to the third world/It's the neutron bomb from Lebanon/It's the Gladiator Invader of Grenada/It's millions for El Salvador/And he's up to his keisters with the Sandinistas..."

On stage, Scott-Heron occasionally puts aside the politics, revealing a comical side reminiscent of Richard Pryor when introducing his repertoire. For example, before launching into 'Is That Jazz' he tells how he and his friends searched every New York City record store for his records to bring with them for the European tour to sell at concerts.

"If lucky, we'd find one under 'miscellaneous' or 'jazz'. Fifteen fucking years, and only miscellaneous?" he asks incredulously. "I looked up jazz in the dictionary and it said, 'miscellaneous'," Scott-Heron laughs.

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