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Books: Suggestions for Further Reading

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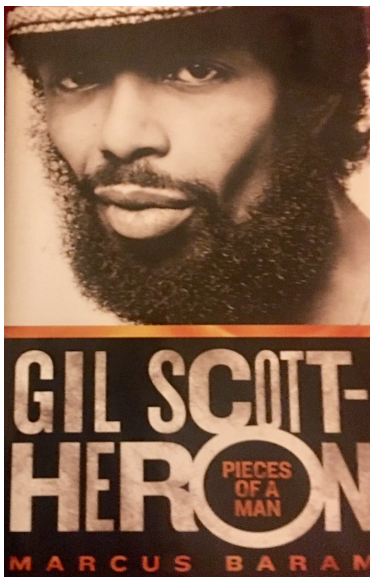
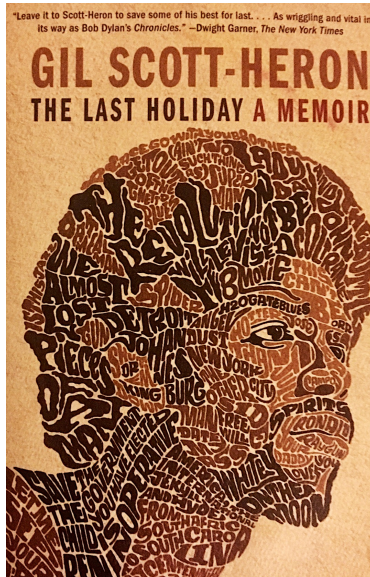
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Two Volumes on the Life and Legacy of Gil Scott-Heron

Scott-Heron, Gil. *The Last Holiday: A Memoir*. New York: Grove Press, 2012.
Baram, Marcus. *Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a Man*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2014.

Regennia N. Williams



A poet, novelist, and musician, Gil Scott-Heron has been called “The Godfather of Rap.” His contemporaries considered him to be an activist-artist in the truest sense of the word. In his heyday, his fans were many, and those who knew him well were all too familiar with his struggles with substance abuse and other demons—and the “spirits” that Scott-Heron believed had a hand in directing his life.

In the wake of his passing, two publications have promised to present complete pictures of the man who was responsible for the hit single “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” and numerous other works. Scott-Heron wrote the material in *The Last Holiday: A Memoir* over the course of the last 20 years of his life, and the book was released posthumously in 2012. Two years later, journalist and editor Marcus Baram published the meticulously researched *Gil Scott-Heron: Pieces of a Man*.

While neither work can be classified as an objective account, it is possible to achieve a certain sense of balance by reading, comparing, and contrasting the two books. In *The Last Holiday*, readers find the poetry, narrative grace, wit, and humor that make the Scott-Heron’s work so compelling. With *Pieces of a Man*, however, they get the added bonus associated with the author’s interviews of many of Scott-Heron’s fellow musicians, relatives, and friends. In the introductory chapter of his biographical study, Baram, who fell in love with Scott-Heron’s music when he was a college student, reflects on a 2007 concert performance and describes his subject as “the revolutionary prophet, griot, and stand-up comic who was always one step ahead of the rest of us.”

Gil Scott-Heron’s 62 years of living were filled with incredible joy, adventures great and small, and heart-rending tragedies. Born April 1, 1949, his mother, Bobbie Scott, was a Tennessee native and librarian. His father, Gilbert Heron, was a Jamaican-born “footballer,” who went on to become a soccer star in Europe. Early in life, relatives encouraged Scott-Heron to meet challenges head on. With support from his strong-willed “religious and God-fearing” maternal grandmother, Lily Scott, and other members of his extended family, he survived his parents’ separation, grew to value learning and the hard work that characterized the daily lives of rural and urban Black

Tennesseans, and discovered his “voice” as a musician, all of which would serve him well in subsequent decades.

At the time of the writing of his memoir, he was quite “proud of the education [he had] collected through seventeen years and ten institutions, from south town in Jackson, Tennessee, ultimately to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, Maryland.” Information in both books suggests that he was equally proud of the fact that he had served on the faculty of Federal City College in Washington, DC.

There were, however, some tough lessons that Scott-Heron learned in the recording studio, on the concert stage, on the mean streets of urban America, and in relationships with some family members, including his children. Of these, he was less proud. For example, in the closing paragraphs of *The Last Holiday*, he wrote the following:

[. . .] Right now everybody is using the ill-suited “be there for you” or “be there for me.” That expression was perfect for the Scotts, because if there was one thing you could count on, it was the fact that we would be there for each other. A hundred times more likely to be there, wherever “there” was, than to say “I love you” and share a genuine hug. And I say that as someone who wished for a hug and a word of encouragement on a thousand nights when tired and beat up by the world, I would have traded a hundred be-there’s for one heartfelt hug.

And it may be that I never get another chance to say this to those children, as well as I know I have never taught them by example so that they can turn to each other for this when they need it. I hope there is no doubt that I loved them and their mothers as best I could. And if that was inevitably inadequate, I hope it was supplemented by their mothers, who were all better off without me.

His life story is a spiritual journey that is deserving of the time it will take to read both of the aforementioned books.

Suggestions for Further Reading on Religion and Spirituality (Books Received in 2017)

Cassellberry, Judith. *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Castor, N. Fadeke. *Spiritual Citizenship: Transnational Pathways from Black Power to Ifá*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Conyers, James L., Jr., and Abul Pitre. *Africana Islamic Studies*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016.

Vaughan, Olufemi. *Religion and the Making of Nigeria*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.