unicorn times

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GIL SCOTT-HERON

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GIL SCOTT-HERON

By Richard Harrington

"I've been doing what I'm doing for five years on records and for longer in my life," says Gil Scott-Heron, who seems to be approaching national recognition for his mixing music and poetry in a style which, while straddling pop and more serious music, is firmly rooted in black pride and power. "People are now becoming aware and deciding that they're interested in it. It wasn't ever called straddling when we couldn't sell records and nobody was coming to our shows. It was just called what we dig."

Scott-Herons is no stranger to Washington; in fact, he is one of its culture heroes, combining his teaching duties at Federal City College with the performance aspects of his now-blossoming career. Washington was one of the centers of action on the album that seemed to have finally clicked for him, "Winter In America" (Strata-East). Unfortunately, that label being small, independent and inexperienced with sudden success, was unable to get records into stores around the country. With his mark finally made, Scott-Heron weighed several attractive offers before signing with Clive Davis' Arista label. "The First Minute of A New Day" (Arista) is Gil's fifth album and has firmly established him on the current scene. He has not exactly been patient. "I think it's possible that it could have begun earlier if people had become interested in "Pieces of a Man" (Flying Dutchman) or "Winter In America." But we didn't have the kind of distribution or promotion that was possible for the type of recognition that came about when we got with Arista."

The roots of his music extend back to his growing up and going to high school in New York City, and particularly his experience at the prestigious Fieldston School. "Roots were what attracted me to writing, in certain respects, from the beginning. As a part of my senior project, since I was concentrating on English at the time, I stu-

in Pennsylvania because the atmosphere and the location had been ideal for him as a writer."

Attending Lincoln, besides giving him an opportunity to get away from New York's maddening crowd to do some serious writing, allowed him to seriously pursue the works of Hughes and Paul Dunbar. In particular, he became interested in their perspective in terms of the phonetics, and the dialect of black idiom. "They did it closer than anyone else I've ever seen do it in print. When I first started to write poetry that I felt would be related in the oral tradition, it was their work that I went heavily into. Later, as I began to develop my musical perspectives, even in terms of music and words, then musicians became more important and I began

Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix and Richie Havens, all as songwriters, "in terms of both their phrasing and the things that they decided were important to sing about."

Even before attending Lincoln, music had been a frequent companion, and at Lincoln, he first teamed up with pianist Brian Jackson, a relationship that continues to this day. Much of the music at first was covering current hits, but eventually, Scott-Heron started to write his own songs. "I felt we often describe ourselves as interpreters, or whatever, of the black experience and of course the black experience is supposed to be 360 degrees, but within most music, and certainly most of the tunes we were handling and the tunes we were coming in contact with, only one or two of these angles were being covered.

poetry and fiction. Eventually, the effort took its toll and he left school to concentrate on the writing. One short story was developed into a novel, "The Vulture" and one of the characters in it was a poet. When Scott-Heron introduced the idea of "The Vulture" to his editor at World Publishers, "he asked me if I had any more poems, because he was interested in the poetry also. I said, sure, I've got a whole room full, and we ended up doing the novel and a book of poetry simultaneously."

The book was "Small Talk at 125th Street", and a recorded version came out soon after the book and is now something of a collector's item. Its staccato, straight-for-the-gut delivery and themes were reminiscent of work by the Last Poets, but Scott-Heron attributes his style elsewhere. "I'm trying to think now. . .the Last Poets started up in '65, but my first contact in working in the oral tradition came about when Leroi Jones, or Imamu Baraku, came to Lincoln in the fall of '67 and brought his group, The Spirit House Movers. He gave a workshop which explained black poetry in terms of the oral tradition and advised people there who were interested in poetry to deliver it themselves and to work in the oral tradition because there were so many black people who needed to hear and understand what poets were saying who couldn't read or could not read comprehensively in terms of interpretation. He felt that the oral tradition was very important and very effective for that reason. I was going to school at the time with a brother, Eddie Knowles and we started putting poetry and rhythms together."

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The roots of his music extend back to his growing up and going to high school in New York City, and particularly his experience at the prestigious Fieldston School. "Roots were what attracted me to writing, in certain respects, from the beginning. As a part of my senior project, since I was concentrating on English at the time, I studied the Harlem Rennaissance. In doing that, I became familiar with Langston Hughes and did an extensive interview with him when he was working for the *Post* in New York. He was the one who first indicated to me that it might be a good idea for me to go to Lincoln University down in Pennsylvania because the atmosphere and the location had been ideal for him as a writer."

Attending Lincoln, besides giving him an opportunity to get away from New York's maddening crowd to do some serious writing, allowed him to seriously pursue the works of Hughes and Paul Dunbar. In particular, he became interested in their perspective in terms of the phonetics, and the dialect of black idiom. "They did it closer than anyone else I've ever seen do it in print. When I first started to write poetry that I felt would be related in the oral tradition, it was their work that I went heavily into. Later, as I began to develop my musical perspectives, even in terms of music and words, then musicians became more important and I began to deal with them as well."

Oddly enough, the musicians that attracted Scott-Herron were not progressive jazz or r&b personalities, but people who were innovative primarily in their approach to music and words, or merely music or merely words. He cites Oscar Brown, Jr., Otis Redding, Jimi Hendrix and Richie Havens, all as songwriters, "in terms of both their phrasing and the things that they decided were important to sing about."

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At Lincoln, he mixed campus leadership, playing with a band and writing

ROCK& ROLL – EXPERIENCING AN ERA

Seven Book Reviews

By Richard Harrington

JIMI—by Curtis Knight, illustrated, 223 pages, Praeger, $7.95

THE MAN WHO GAVE THE BEATLES AWAY—by Allan Williams and William Marshall, illustrated, 216 pages, Macmillan, $9.95.

BILLION DOLLAR BABY—by Bob Greene, illustrated, 364 pages,

best writing, of course, is done in the magazines (not all of them musically oriented, either) where the limitations of space at least seem to exert a steadying influence on the writers.

Two recent biographies seem to have found their way onto major publishers' lists, though they more properly belong on a vanity press. Curtis Knight's purported biography of Jimi Hendrix is the most self-

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As the fusion developed, more friends were gathered, though enough of them scattered with various winds to prevent recording at that time. Things came slowly back together when Scott-Heron came to Washington to teach, and the Arista album became the first chance for him to record with the people he wanted to: his longtime friends. The new album is solidly commercial, containing only one stinging rap. "Pardon Our Analysis (We Beg Your Pardon)", a sharp and well-directed attack on contemporary justice. The songs are general-

Continued on page 3.

PERIENCING AN ERA

Harrington

ger, $7.95

best writing, of course, is done in the magazines (not all of them musically oriented, either) where the limitations of space at least seem to exert a steadying influence on the writers.

that should satisfy neither the reader nor the fan. Hopefully, it will encourage a serious biography.

The problem of bad writing crops up again in Alan Williams' *The Man Who Gave the Beatles Away*. Williams, as he points out again and again, was the group's first manager and certainly did help their career in its formative stages. But during his

Speaking of Ben E. King, it's a strong comeback year for the R & B veteran,

and the Brown Dirt Cowboy. How can he miss?

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nard and Jimmy Hopps (another frequent performer) are some of the greatest jazz musicians in the world. . . they're pure jazz. I've got a lot of respect for them."

Richie tells this writer that plans for recording live at Rouge 'n Jar (which has live music seven days a week) are being put into operation by Tony Taylor. Taylor, the former owner of Bohemian Caverns, now heads a small private label that works out of this city.

Besides performing at Rouge 'n Jar, Richie has appeared locally at Blues Alley and Maryland Inn in Annapolis. He spends a lot of time on the road commuting to gigs. A recent job took him to Prince Edourd Island in Canada, where he performed at a local club for about a month. This was the first taste of jazz in that area.

While in New York City, the saxophonist performs at clubs like Striker's, Tin Palace and St. James Infirmary, a new club on Seventh Avenue. Richie also spends time checking out other jazz musicians when in the Big Apple.

In a recent set at St. James Infirmary he had the opportunity to appreciate and perform with vocalist Eddie Jefferson. "That's my idea of a singer," Richie says about Jefferson. "I like that kind of singing." He hopes to have this fine jazz vocalist appearing in the Nation's Capital in the very near future.

Practically a one-man business, Richie Cole, a bachelor, handles the booking, travelling, publicity . . . right down to the unloading of equipment, by himself. Using his blue van as a home, he has been able to remain independent in a field that can easily lead to financial headaches. He understands the value of proper publicity and the subsequent exposure to larger audiences. "I wanna reach the people," declares Richie.

Being a commercial success is secondary to the youthful musician, who places a high value on his art. Richie sincerely believes, and rightly so, that he can and will become a commercial success, 'doing his own thing.' Time is on the side of the jazz saxophonist and by taking one step at a time he knows that he will receive his do. 'It takes a lot of patience,' admits Richie Cole.

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cont. from p.1

ly up-beat in spirit, appealing to black pride and strength, but humanistic overall. The sharpness of "125th Street" has been somewhat dulled, but now Scott-Heron's audience is larger, so perhaps his message has had to become subtler in its presentation. He insists that he is not moving away from the synthesis that has always been so effective, insists that success hasn't clouded his vision. "I would hope that doesn't happen, you know. My intention is to continue as we have, because what we've been doing is what got us where we are . . . wherever that is. Where I'm coming from, the things that Brian and I put on wax are consistant, they're our tunes, the development is ours, the progression has been ours. Consequently, we look at that as an indication of what we should be doing in terms of further progress. What we do is by choice rather than coincidence, so all our development is geared in that direction. I don't believe that people who have become familiar with our work over the past five years would be as involved in our work if we change directions.

Somethings, outside the music, will change, however. "I've had a good experience," says Scott-Heron of his three years of teaching at FCC and his four years overall in that profession. "I'm still doing as much as I was doing in the beginning, but it's become very taxing and there is a possibility that I'll cut that back to pursue this. This is what I was doing before I was teaching and its something that I've always been interested in attempting to do. It would not be to my advantage, psychologically or any other way, to cut back on it. It's been my objective from the beginning and I have a thing about sticking with objectives, priorities."

Song Writer & Performer

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