

# Review

*I'm New Here (2010)*  
 Gil Scott-Heron

*Roots and Branches: Electro Acoustic Poetry (Botsotso, Johannesburg, 2010)*

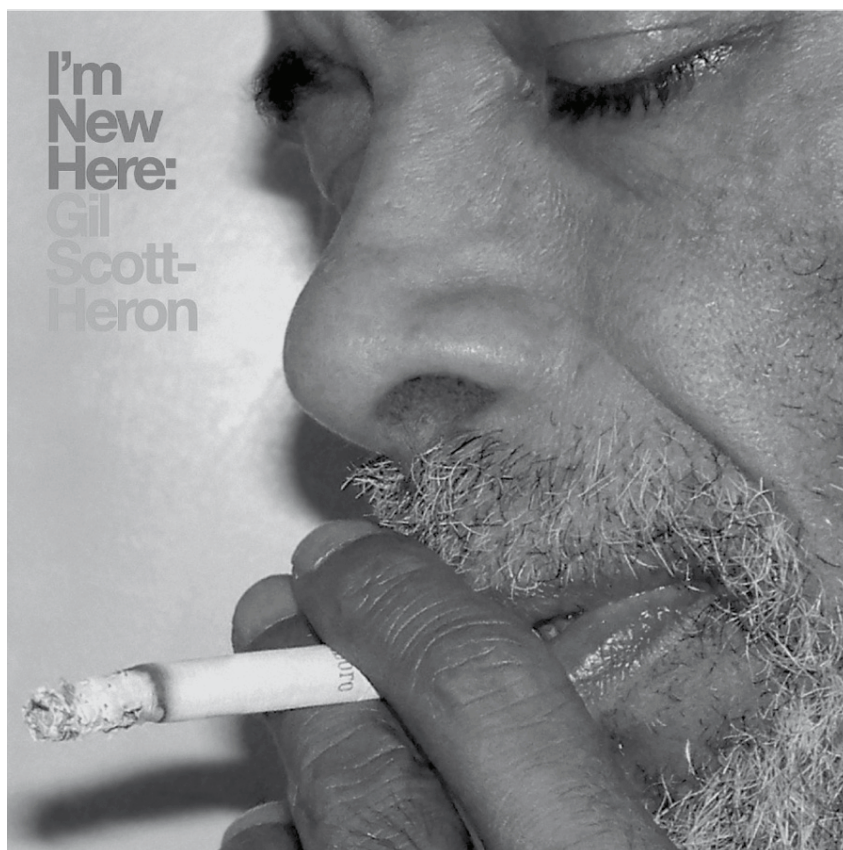
Reviewed by Steve Faulkner

It is not often that you are given two CDs to review and both are based on putting poetry and music together, and both feature poets who want to change the world!

The first is the long awaited album from the great black revolutionary poet Gil Scott Heron (GSH) which came out last year to admittedly very mixed reviews. This is his first 'new' album for 17 years. He has been serving time in prison for drug-related offences, overcoming a chronic dependency but now happily seems to have straightened out. In case readers are not familiar with GSH's work, he is especially well known for his stirring 'Have You Heard (from) Johannesburg' and 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised' (not sure if Gil might revise this view now given what has happened in Cairo!)

His latest album is called *I'm New Here* and comprises 12 pieces, of which only a handful are his own compositions, and total playing time is just 28 minutes. But I think it is brilliant! This is dub poetry at its best in many ways. Gil has an impressive back catalogue of explicitly revolutionary work, on matters ranging from the struggle against apartheid to the black liberation struggle in the heartland of imperialist America. This is however a much more introspective collection. Some reviewers have dismissed it as 'politics-lite' but this shows their own dogmatism rather than musical insight.

On this album, GSH covers some real gems, including the haunting love song 'I'll Take Care of You' by ancient soulster Bobby Bland, and a cover of Delta Blues Supremo



Robert Johnson's 'Me and the Devil', which is bound in a halting metallic electronic landscape to great effect.

The title track, originally belonging to indie band *Smog*, gives full reign to his famed and familiar craggy vocals but with a simple acoustic guitar setting it takes on new life completely. There are a number of sharp observant edges too as on his self-written 'New York is Killing Me', which explores the theme of loneliness and dependency in the city, and will certainly ring bells for Jo'burgers.

I think the critics have not listened carefully enough. This is the revolutionary GSH catching

his breath, experimenting as always with new approaches, and perhaps most importantly, making connections. Isn't that what all art should try and do?

The second album is by those associated with the ever evolving Botsotso Poets. In contrast to GSH's album, this one is brimful of original work presented by an amalgam of 30 tracks by 15 performance poets. Each track has been carefully situated in a music and/or sound landscape by the clearly talented James de Villiers who is responsible for excellent recording standards and the score. It reputedly took two years to

make the album, and I am not surprised. This is inventive work.

There is something here for every discerning fan of poetry, even if you are one of those who prefers poetry unaccompanied. There are several acidic (and sometimes squeaky!) political observations by Allan Kolski Horwitz, including work on a recurring theme of the shallowness of the lives of the new and old bourgeoisie, and the craven accumulation of the former. The Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) comrades who entered Parliament do not escape his sharp tongue.

A lyrical 'tribute' to Ingrid Jonker ends the collection on a very serious note. But there are also the seductive tones of Myesha Jenkins, and especially her brutally honest 'Autobiography', which should be a set work in all of our schools, if ever the national curriculum does become genuinely gender sensitive.

There is humour, often of a sardonic variety from the multi-talented Phillippa ya de Villiers inviting the past president home in 'Tea for Thabo', and Khanyi Magubane's 'Who Will I Marry?' Which is a beautifully delivered biting satire on marrying to get out of the township 'because everything

in DK is no longer OK'. Lesley Perkes shows real performing expertise with her laconic poem about a rebellious 'Lone Cow' and I swear you will never look at cattle quite the same way again.

Hidden in amongst the more wordy offerings are also sharp and seductive dub and bluesy interludes touching on class and race oppression, and of course disappointment with our leadership. A favourite is Ike Mboneni Muila sharing a very moving conversational piece between a parent and child and the grinding poverty they experience, and why the human spirit must not be allowed to fade. If this does not move you, you are already stone dead.

A review is by its nature selective, but each contribution here deserves a comment, but alas space does not allow. Everyone will have their favourites.

And now a confession. Maybe it's generational, but I have been 'under impressed' by some of what is called poetry of late. The cliché-cross-fingered-posturised-neo-gangstered-designer-american-accented-strutting-rapsters who have emerged at some of the poetry events I have attended have

frankly left me cold and not a little sad. Surely poetry is more than just a quick fix of verbal ego at a competitive poetry slamfest?

As Gil Scott-Heron continues to illustrate, revolutionary poets in particular illustrate their commitment to change through their words, but also their readiness to hone their work, re-work it, and to put the time and effort into laying bare its universality. Sometimes they fail. But they must still strive to make that vital connection capable of stirring a response, providing a new insight, to encourage and hopefully strengthen a resolve to join the good fight for a new world.

Being an effective poet is a tall order. The two collections here are a commendable benchmark for all those reading and writing poetry who want to make a difference, and who want to hear what happens when poets work hard at their craft. Buy them, and play parts of them at your next union or community or campaign meeting. That's how good they are. They deserve, no, demand, to be heard. ■

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