

“These songs were not meant to sit still. Every time I play them, they seem to speak to the moment we’re in.”

— Brian Jackson

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“We were messengers, keepers of tradition, harbingers of things to come.” Brian Jackson is reflecting on his partnership with the late musician and poet Gil Scott-Heron, often called the Godfather of Rap, and on the America of the 1970s and 1980s that fed their work. It is an America more enduring than they might have hoped.

They saw themselves, he says, as part of a much older tradition. “We were channelling the spirit of the griots [the hereditary musicians of West Africa] and passing down the soul of African culture,” says the 73-year-old composer and multi-instrumentalist whose flute melodies, Rhodes grooves and harmonic sensibility helped define Scott-Heron’s jazz-funk sound. “We wanted to create songs that people could rally around. We wanted to wake people up.”

He recalls the audiences who – before the duo’s dramatic falling out – revered them as America’s social conscience. “People used to come up to us when we were playing and say, ‘I have to listen to this one song of yours before I go to work in the morning so I can stay mindful.’” He considers this for a moment. “But there hasn’t been a hell of a lot of change. Maybe it’s got worse.”

Now living in France, where he has been based since 2022, Jackson continues to watch the country that Scott-Heron chronicled in such classic tunes as “The Bottle”, “Lady Day and John Coltrane” and his signature anthem, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”. A spoken-word song drawing on a phrase from the civil rights movement that skewered white America’s complacency over inner-city inequality, the song has since entered the cultural lexicon.

“Is it progress that more Black people can now get a loan to buy an SUV?” asks Jackson via Zoom, dressed in his signature dark T-shirt and thick-rimmed glasses. “Or that we have more Black people with PhDs, but they can still walk out of their homes and be dragged away or choked to death?” Another pause. “What kept Gil and me working together for almost 10 years during the ’70s – a time of great turmoil – was that we saw how pervasive the atmosphere of control had become and how urgently truth needed telling. As griots, it was vital to pass the baton down through generations.”

Next month, in a world-premiere celebration of Scott-Heron’s legacy – he died in 2011, aged 62 – Jackson will tour Australia with Brooklyn-born hip-hop artist Yasiin Bey, formerly known as Mos Def, appearing at Sydney’s Vivid LIVE Festival and Rising in Melbourne, as well as in Brisbane and Adelaide. They will revisit material largely cherry-picked from the nine albums Scott-Heron recorded with Jackson as his musical director, from 1971’s landmark *Pieces of a Man* through the 1974 jazz-funk classic *Winter in America* to 1980s synth-driven *1980*.

“We haven’t actually met yet,” says the soft-spoken Jackson of Bey, “but I know he

worked with Gil years ago, so there’s a natural connection.” Following his split with Scott-Heron, Jackson stepped away from the music industry for 34 years, working instead as a manager in the IT division of the City of New York. He later moved to Portland, Oregon – “One of the most peaceful places in the US” – with his French wife and their young twins. “But when my kids’ school started doing active shooter drills, I said, ‘Okay, we’re out.’ Sure, there’s racism in France,” he adds. “But it’s racism without the guns.”

Jackson grew up in Brooklyn, an only child raised by his single mother, a librarian at the philanthropic Ford Foundation. He listened to everything from John Coltrane and Max Roach to Tchaikovsky, and studied piano for seven years with his mother’s childhood music teacher. The civil rights movement was gathering momentum. “In 1963, aged 11, I was coming home from school when I saw somebody wearing a badge that read ‘No segregation’. When I asked my mom what it meant, her face fell as she realised she’d have to explain the whole context behind that word in America, and why it ended up on someone’s badge.”

He devoured the books his mother brought home, particularly those by 20th century African-American authors Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, all of whom challenged racial injustice. Still 11, he joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); at 12, he took part in the pivotal citywide school boycott organised by the Reverend Milton Galamison, a leader of New York’s school integration movement.

In 1969, at 17, Jackson attended Lincoln University, the historically Black college in Pennsylvania whose alumni included Langston Hughes, a pivotal figure in the Harlem Renaissance. There he met Scott-Heron, then 20, a writer of lyrics and poetry whose crime novel *The Vulture* was already attracting attention. They jammed. They clicked. They began writing songs together.

Scott-Heron had also been raised by a single mother who worked in a library and emphasised academic achievement. Their shared influences ranged from Hughes to The Last Poets – the New York spoken-word collective founded in 1968 following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Tensions at Lincoln, as on campuses across the country, were high. People looked to culture for meaning – and for messages.

After he wrote “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” in 1969, Scott-Heron recorded it for his 1970 live album, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, which sold well enough to persuade revered jazz producer Bob Thiele, founder of Flying Dutchman Records – and the man who produced Jack Kerouac’s spoken-word jazz albums in the late ’50s – to bring the pair into the studio for a follow-up.

Thiele asked Jackson for his dream list of accompanists. “I got what I asked for, including [Miles Davis collaborator] Ron Carter on bass, which was terrifying for a kid who’d never been in a studio before.”

Featuring a fuller version of “The Revolution...”, *Pieces of a Man* confirmed Scott-Heron and his rich, weathered baritone

as an important new voice. He insisted Jackson be credited alongside him, and throughout the 1970s, even after Scott-Heron (but not Jackson) signed to Arista, their names appeared jointly on every album cover.

“It was the era of peace and love and trust,” says Jackson. “We split everything 50/50. I’d write the music, he’d ask me what I was feeling when I wrote it, and we’d figure out what to say.”

They scored a hit with “The Bottle”, the lead single from *Winter in America*, but resisted pressure to pursue a more commercial sound. Over time, however, their paths diverged. Jackson wanted to move further into avant-jazz. Scott-Heron, a self-styled “bluesologist”, was content with their direction. Not long after their split in 1980, Scott-Heron dissolved their mutual publishing company, Brouhaha Music, and Jackson stopped receiving royalty payments. They did not speak for 14 years.

Both struggled without the other. Jackson recorded with bands including Kool & the Gang and Earth, Wind & Fire but failed to secure a new record deal. Scott-Heron released three underwhelming albums on Arista before entering a series of enforced hiatuses. “People would tell me, ‘I saw Gil and he looked bad’, or ‘Did you know Gil was on heroin?’ Then, in 1994 – the year Scott-Heron returned with *Spirits* – ‘he asked me if I’d fill in at his gig at SOB’s in Manhattan. We were waiting onstage when he arrived late, and I swear he looked like my grandfather. We tried to do more projects, but I was always resentful. I’d lost so much, emotionally and fiscally.’”

Jackson last saw Scott-Heron in 2000, after they reunited for his own solo album, *Gotta Play*. One track, “Parallel Lean”, included lines from their earlier collaboration, “Home Is Where the Hatred Is” (“Kick it, quit it / god, but did you ever try / to turn your sick soul inside out / so that the world can watch you die”), a stark and prescient meditation about addiction. “It was tough,” Jackson says. “Someone told me, ‘When you have a friend who is a junkie, it’s like they’re dead, but you’re still carrying them around on your back. At some point, you have to say goodbye.’” He pauses. “I told Gil I loved him, but I was walking away. That let me resolve everything that had happened between us.”

An overlooked soul-jazz gem, *Gotta Play* did much to rebuild Jackson’s confidence, shaken by a lack of recognition from fellow musicians, particularly in Europe. “I’d be introduced to blank faces then, as ‘You know, Gil Scott-Heron, “The Bottle”...’ and suddenly they’d realise.” A grin. “For a while it felt like I was called ‘Brian Jackson on flute’.”

The zeitgeist, however, was reconfiguring. When hip-hop became ubiquitous in the early ’90s, it introduced a new generation to ’70s jazz and soul. Groundbreaking artist-producers such as Nas, J Dilla and A Tribe Called Quest were sampling tracks by older jazz greats including pianist Ahmad Jamal, harpist Dorothy Ashby and vibraphonist Roy Ayers, folding their music into boom-bap beats and lo-fi melodies, over bars that spat and flowed. Hip-hop didn’t just break down barriers between musical genres, it fostered a new jazz literacy and

preserved and extended careers, including those of Jackson and Scott-Heron.

“I was originally interested in hip-hop because of the message,” says Jackson, “but then younger friends kept telling me how many artists were sampling the music that Gil and I made.” Artists from Kanye West, Jay-Z and Yasiin Bey (with Talib Kweli in Black Star) to Flying Lotus and Kendrick Lamar (who referenced “The Revolution...” during his 2025 Super Bowl half-time performance) have drawn inspiration and soundbites from Scott-Heron’s words and Jackson’s compositions.

Jackson’s renaissance began in the late 2010s, with performances at international festivals including Mona Foma in Hobart. In 2021 he was the first artist to be featured in *Jazz is Dead*, a collaborative series highlighting elder musicians by producers Ali Shaheed Muhammad (formerly of A Tribe Called Quest, and a long-time friend/collaborator of Yasiin Bey) and Adrian Younge. In 2022, he released his first solo album in 20 years, *This Is Brian Jackson*, on the British label BBE (Barely Breaking Even) and received a lifetime achievement award at the Worldwide Awards, founded by British DJ and broadcaster Gilles Peterson.

Jackson’s forthcoming album, *Now More Than Ever*, also on BBE, is a 19-track collaboration with legendary production duo Masters At Work, featuring reinterpretations of Scott-Heron and Jackson’s oeuvre with a raft of special guests. British soul star Omar sings on “The Bottle”. Rapper Black Thought, of American hip-hop group The Roots, delivers “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”.

Onstage, the songs take on additional weight. Backed by his crack band of British musicians – he’s a frequent visitor to Britain – Jackson alternates between piano and Fender Rhodes, standing to wield a silvery flute solo on “The Bottle”, or leaning into the mic to sing, his voice increasingly energised by the crowd’s eagerness to listen and to sing along. “When I sing ‘Winter in America’ at gigs, people get teary-eyed,” he says. “I tell them, you can cry, but change is coming. All empires fall. America, in its present form, is going through its last gasps.”

Revisiting this material is not, for him, an exercise in nostalgia. It is a way of reactivating engagement – a reminder to stay vigilant. With Yasiin Bey stepping in, a standard-bearer from another generation, the dialogue across time continues: the hip-hop griot carrying the tradition forward. Scott-Heron saw it coming: “Young rappers, I appreciate the respect you give me and what you got to say,” he says on “Message to the Messengers”, from *Spirits*. “Protect your community and spread that respect around...”

“These songs were not meant to sit still,” says Jackson. “Every time I play them, they seem to speak to the moment we’re in.” He flashes a smile. “What happens next depends on who’s listening.” ●