

soul searcher

Gil Scott-Heron is a musical maverick whose polemical lyrics are echoed in two powerful, newly re-published novels



MANY THINGS ARE KNOWN ABOUT GIL SCOTT-HERON. He is a cult, a one-off. He is the godfather of rap. He is a singer, pianist and composer who has recorded some of the most affecting and sought-after soul-jazz albums ever made. He is a poet and polemicist whose lyrics to such songs as "The Revolution Will Not be Televised", "Johannesburg" and "H2Ogate Blues" have inspired and galvanised generations. He has been called "the conscience of America".

What has been known to only a few, however, is that Gil Scott-Heron is also a novelist. His tough thrillers, *The Vulture* and *The Nigger Factory*, were written in New York when he was barely out of his teens, yet they are impressive and ambitious works that vigorously mix street savvy and intellectual flair. Never before available in the UK, and out of print in America for over twenty years, they are now being published by pioneering Scottish imprint Payback Press, which has already brought back into circulation such classic black American texts as Leroi Jones' *Blues People* and Chester Himes' *Harlem Cycle*.

The Vulture is a novel of early Seventies New York streetlife. Layered with multiple narratives, shifting time frames and sharp dialogue, it tells the story of the mysterious murder of eighteen-year-old drug dealer and chancer John Lee, alongside the stories of four men who knew him: street king Spade, the block's main man; his young pretender, Junior Jones; black activist and educator, Brother Tommy Hall; and street philosopher and intellectual, "IQ". All are trying to escape the clutches of poverty, drugs and the System, pressures that Scott-Heron himself would have felt after moving to Manhattan aged thirteen with his mother. "We were so poor we couldn't even afford to pay attention," he says.

Still, Scott-Heron was bright enough, and encouraged sufficiently, to go on to win a scholarship to a private New York school and gain a place at Pennsylvania's Lincoln University. His student days infuse *The Nigger Factory*. Set on the campus of the fictional black Sutton University in Virginia, it chronicles power struggles between the official student body led by the articulate and conscientious Earl Thomas and the militant activists in MJUMBE, the Members of Justice United for Meaningful Black Education. Explosive and enraged, the novel again mirrors the conflicting forces of Scott-Heron's formative years – he dropped out after his freshman year at Lincoln to



concentrate on writing fiction, but "dropped back in" to complete his degree and take a masters in creative writing at Baltimore.

While both novels have their faults – the style occasionally lapses into cliché and the proselytising can be heavy-handed – they retain a freshness and energy that has dated them little. They read like black *Bildungsromans*, landmarks in 47-year-old Scott-Heron's early development, snapshots of one of his most creative periods.

Scott-Heron went on to deliver many great albums in the Seventies – *Winter in America*, *From South Africa to South Carolina* and *Pieces of a Man* are essential for any newcomer – but fell silent for much of the next decade. He claimed he had already said everything needed, but there were rumours of drugs and alcohol dependency, and protracted legal battles with agents and promoters took their toll.

Recently, however, there has been something of a Gil Scott-Heron renaissance. Many of his classic albums have become available again; he released his first new album for twelve years, *Spirits*, in 1994, and he has begun touring extensively. The re-emergence of *The Vulture* and *The Nigger Factory* can only further this process.

"I know that a lot of people wish I was down and out, but I'm sorry to report that I've been happy," he says. "I've come from a street that didn't even have a pavement to a point where my music is acknowledged just about everywhere in the world. I couldn't feel anything but successful." Gil Scott-Heron: the real rebirth of the cool. **PHILIP WATSON** *The Vulture* and *The Nigger Factory* are published on October 19, priced £5.99.