

make me wanna holler, issue 1: progressive voices for

Vol. 1

progressive action

progressive voices
raging for
progressive action.
written by members,
family, and friends of the
BLACK ROCK COALITION



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Shut'em Down: Reflections on Ferguson and Gil Scott-Heron

by Michael A. Gonzales

After the Michael Brown decision in Ferguson, Missouri last week, amid the expected disgust about the so-called fairness of a legal system that allowed murderous police officer Darren Wilson to remain free and employed while pocketing cash for network news interviews, I was taken back to the days of yesteryear when I'd seen so many scenes of racism played out on my childhood television screen. Memories of fire hoses and German shepherds used against peaceful marchers in the sixties, white Bostonians spitting on Black school children in the seventies, crazy cops killing us in New York City in the eighties and, on and on. Decades later, visions of a bloody teenager Michael Brown sprawled in the streets have been connected to that collage of disturbing images in my mind that visually defines racism in my lifetime.

Continually haunted, I try to go about my days as a Black man in America, avoiding direct eye-contact with police least they suspect that I too am a cigar grabbing criminal who deserves death over dignity. Although I haven't been a teenager in many years, it doesn't deter me from thinking that I too could be slain because of the color of my skin, because of the kink of my hair, because of the bop in my walk, because of the jungle music in my head.

While new school artists from J. Cole to The Game have written protest anthems for the millennial generation, I'm an old head who came of age when James Brown was shrieking about being Black-n-proud, Marvin Gaye beautifully moaned, "What's Going On?" and Curtis Mayfield broke down our "Hard Times." Offering strength through lyrics and solace through rhythm, these musical men kept Black America focused on the revolutionary road that supposedly led to our inevitable freedom from stereotypes and senseless death.

Although I grooved to those tunes, as a boy at the time they were just regular songs to me, finger-poppin' tunes whose true meanings my young mind didn't grasp. It wasn't until I heard Gil Scott-Heron's revolutionary blues "Johannesburg" on Saturday Night Live in 1975 that I first got turned out by the possibilities politics in Black pop. Airing on December 13th, it was a gig I later learned he'd gotten through his friend Richard Pryor, who guest-hosted the show that night.

Dressed in pajamas and sitting on the living-room floor of our Harlem apartment, my cool moms let me stay-up late on Saturday nights to watch the show; she and her friends Bubba and Herman sat on the couch. On the boob tube, Pryor (whose masterful comedy album That Nigger's Crazy I completely memorized the year before) held up the cover of Gil's upcoming album From South Africa to South Carolina, introduced the Afro wearing lanky cat standing next to him.

My mom's friends were excited, but I'd had never heard of the guy; I was more shaking my groove thang to the Ohio Player's blazing "Fire" or getting down to Earth, Wind & Fire's brilliant "Shining Star." According to the recently released Scott-Heron biography Pieces of a Man by Marcus Baram, NBC's producers were peeved and hoped had that Pryor "could bring in a more popular group." Still, with SNL producer Lorne Michaels giving Pryor permission to book whomever he wanted, the show also gave Gil, as Baram documents, "...free rein to play any songs he wanted."

After swaggering across the stage to his keyboard the then 26-year-old, Gil's youthful face was untarnished and filled with the promise. Inevitably for me, it was a musical moment that changed my life. Sitting behind his keyboards sporting a beard, Heron wore a dashiki and blue jeans. Heron sang about a foreign land called "Johannesburg," something else I'd never heard of as his intriguing mix of revolutionary poetics, African percussion and bluesy backdrop was hypnotic.

Being twelve years old at the time, I had never heard of apartheid and had no idea what this Black Panther looking dude was even talking about, but whatever it was, I knew the subject was serious.

For the next few minutes, I was enthralled by the sound and spectacle, while being acutely aware that I was also learning something; for the next three decades, Gil Scott-Heron became one of my favorite teachers. Although not a "real" singer on par with Marvin Gaye, there was something enticing about Gil's gravelly voice and heavy weather lyricism. Listening to his classic singles, the self-proclaimed "bluesologist" schooled a generation in the art of poetic protest.

As he did on his first hit single “The Bottle,” Gil’s blistering track about the bitter effects of alcoholism, Heron taught lessons without being preachy. As his musical “student,” Public Enemy leader Chuck D. once put it on “Don’t Believe the Hype,” Gil knew how to, “Rock the hard jams, but treat it like a seminar.” In other words, the brother could drop science and still make you boogie. Teaming with music man Brian Jackson, he introduced his listeners to various musical styles while also taking them on a brutal tour through the dark side of America as rapped about the corpse of “Jose Campos Torres” or the cultural signposts throughout “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” one of his most powerful and influential songs.

Heron and Jackson recorded one album on the indie label Strata East (Winter in America) until primo record man Clive Davis, who had worked with Miles Davis, Sly Stone and Janis Joplin at Columbia Records, signed them to his newly formed Arista Records in 1975.

Unlike other political minded singers who wrote material based on experience and/or emotion, when the Lincoln University educated Gil, who had also written two novels (The Vulture and The Nigger Factory) and a book of poems, riffed on subjects including ghetto strife, Watergate, mine workers and addiction; one got a sense that his knowledge was both book learned and street smart, while also maintaining a sense of humor that was wicked and wise. From South Africa to South Carolina was Gil’s second album for Arista, where he released nine albums total.

Although Gil Scott-Heron was the first artist signed to Arista, ten years later, soon after Davis released Whitney Houston’s self-titled debut album, he was kicked to the curb. Gil continued to tour and occasionally made records, but it was also during this period that he sprawled into a long addiction that lead to health issues, numerous arrests and countless problems. When his friend Stevie Wonder volunteered to pay for Heron’s rehab, the singer refused.

With the introduction of crack in the mid-1980s, drugs were cheap and plentiful while simultaneously our communities were devastated. My old uptown Harlem hood, where Gil also lived, was soon transformed into a drug bazaar where coke and crack was sold openly.

One chilly winter night in 1995, I was hanging-out at a New York City bar called the Oasis. Located on the corner of a 149th Street and Broadway, it was an unofficial landmark that had been there since before I was born. Drunk on rum and cola, I stepped outside to get some air. A few of the patrons were drug dealers whose jittery customers often lurked under the blood red awning waiting for their pushers to exit through the glass door. It was then that I noticed Gil as he stood outside looking beaten down by life. It was brutal seeing Gil, all bummy beneath a dim street light with wild gray hair and a face that looked like a road map through hell.

At that moment, it was difficult to grasp that the man who wrote the addiction anthems “Home Is Where the Hatred Is” (1972) and “The Bottle” (1974) had become a junkie himself. However, when thought about rationally, one realizes it’s not difficult to become a dope fiend, because it always begins as something fun: sniffing a few lines with friends before the gig, freebasing with some fine soul sisters after the show and next thing you know, you’ve gone from partying to dreading the first rays of daylight as you smoke or sniff alone.

Perhaps, like many of us before and after Ferguson who see little promise in a system that constantly fails us while blaming the victims for their own brutal murders, Gil Scott-Heron was simply tired. How much racism can a man endure before he finally breaks? How much ignorance can a man take before he finally retreats into his own mind? How much bloodshed can a man take before he finally feels as though rock bottom is the best hiding place from the bullets with our race written on them?

After Gil finally scored a few hits of rock, he quickly disappeared into the night. Truthfully, if he had died soon after, I wouldn’t have been surprised. Yet, he somehow managed to hold on for another sixteen years of problems, prisons and poetry. In the meantime, the brother was being rediscovered by a new generation, and Heron’s balance of intellectualism, musical diversity and cynical humor also inspired the next generation of musical wordsmiths and jazzy rebels including Gang Starr, Mos Def, Q-Tip, Talib Kweli, Common and Kanye West, who he sampled on the brilliant “Who Will Survive in America” on My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy.

In June of 2010, when Gil performed in Central Park, Common joined him onstage. “The soul of his music touched my heart and spirit,” Common told XXL. “His voice and his words and his songs were like the revolution being told in the freshest way...he will always be cherished and loved.” In addition to rappers, Scott’s fusion of soul, salsa and jazz also helped lay the foundation for trip-hop, neo-soul and spoken word enthusiasts.

That same year, brother Gil, whom many folks had simply written off as “just another junkie loser,” surprised the world with his last classic single “Me and the Devil,” a brilliantly spooky cover of a Robert Johnson blues song. HIV-positive and still crack addicted, Heron’s thirteenth studio effort I’m New Here (XL Recordings) was a minor miracle and a worthy addition to his canon of classics. Releasing the title track as the second single, the critically acclaimed album also contained the prophetic track “New York is Killing Me.” A year after making a comeback, one of the most influential voices of our generation was finally silenced when Gil Scott-Heron died on May 27, 2011 in New York City. He was 62.

Although a few of my friends went to his funeral at Riverside Church in Manhattan, where Kanye I opted to stay home with my friend Shelia, perhaps the biggest Gil Scott-Heron fan I know, as we drank, played spades and blared his music loudly.

Like Nina Simone before and Public Enemy afterwards, Heron’s hard truths has travelled widely touching the souls of our communities and beyond. Artistic folks (painters, filmmakers, intellectuals and poets) often cite Gil Scott-Heron for giving them courage and inspiring them to strive for more in their work.

Having joined that list of flawed folks I love including Charlie Parker, Dinah Washington, Sly Stone and Jean-Michel Basquiat, brother Gil was another imperfect artist who did more damage to himself than anyone else while also contributing greatly to that fire-breathing creature we call culture.

In a post-Ferguson world that negates any discussion of post-racial anything, Gil Scott-Heron’s aural bombs of race, rage and revolt are still relevant, still explosive and still needed as a soundtrack as we navigate through the war zone of racism hoping to escape death.

#BlackProtestMusic @gonzomike

by Garland Jeffreys

When BRC asked me to weigh in on what's been happening in our country of late, I thought about it and realized that perhaps the best way to communicate my point of view would be to include lyrics from my songs over the last five decades.

I'm hopeful that this historic rift between us can be closed and that recent protests and dialogue mark a major change in America and across the world. Maybe this is a glimmer of what can happen – I've never seen such dramatic and wide scale outrage over racial injustice. This seems like it could be the beginning of a revolution. Count me in.

1977 "Why-O" from Ghost Writer

If I were a little black boy say five years old
I'd ask my mommy please what's going on
And if I were a little white girl say six years old
I'd beg my daddy please, do I belong

Tell me why-o
Won't you tell me

Oh the governor tell me sonny boy
If you want to stay with us
You must ride to school on Monday son
In a big black bus

1981 "Miami Beach" from Escape Artist

A bomb explode on a hot concrete
It can happen in a broad daylight
It can happen in the middle of the night
Screech and a scream and a pistol shot
It can't be a dream if it sounds like that
It's a riot in a Liberty City
A race riot such a down right pity

Walkin' down the road one afternoon
Feelin' upset no I'm not immune
Let me tell you a story
Another painful story

1991 "Don't Call Me Buckwheat" from Don't Call Me Buckwheat

Don't call me blackie boy, your nigra toy
Don't call me Johnny O'Darkie
Don't call me spic spic spic high yellow bird
Don't call me coonskin
Don't call me nig nig nig nig watch that word
'Cause it hurts and that ain't nice
And it sticks like white on rice

In 1976 you called my girlfriend
A nigger lover
In 1966 you washed my face in the Mississippi mud
In 1956 you tore my pages
From the history book
In 1946 you left my uncle on the chain gang
Don't call me buckwheat

2011 "Streetwise" from The King of In Between

And when you're out there on your own
In a crowd or all alone
You gotta be smart you gotta be tough
Cause it's on the rise
And streetwise sometimes it ain't enough

Black president on the White House lawn
I remember when there were two black jockeys there
When I was born
Now lock your cars shut your doors and close your gate
Mind yourself you cannot ever try to hesitate

Where Are We?:

by Sandra St. Victor - The Family Stand

I get it. We're all busy. Life is busy. Life goes on.

As should art. Art should be a reflection of our society, not only a release from it. But I get it. As I write, I have babies who's hair needs to be washed, a dinner that needs to be cooked, another meal that needs prep before tomorrow's family get together. My daughter has a school project that we need to help her with, another daughter has a social issue at school that has to be addressed. All of it imminent. Meanwhile, mommy is in the midst of a series of frustrating painful knockout blows to any thoughts of just being another human being. All served to me boldly by the judicial system, sworn to protect us, the citizenry. As an artist, I'd like to be able to look to like minded artists for that feeling of empathy, inspiration and compassion we got back in the day when things blew up, and we'd put on Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come".

Iconic artists, mainstream artists of their day, from Stevie Wonder, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, Harry Belafonte, Nina Simone, Syl Johnson.... The Isley Brothers told us to "Fight The Power", Even The O'Jays warned us about the perils of chasing 'that almighty dollar'. Music has always been centric, the soundtrack to a movement. What would be our soundtrack today? Something new that gets to the heart of the matter and the people. Something the masses could refer to. Right now I dare say, we'd be reaching back to play an old Donny Hathaway or Marvin Gaye song.

Yes yes, sure there are many underground artists, myself included, and several BRC artists that do have something to say. But i'm not interested in a circle jerk of 'that's right bro & sis' or apologists reminding ourselves of our own righteous works. We might need to step back from our own career interests for a minute to create a conscious concerted consistent combined outreach to particular artists who DO have mass reach. To insist that they come to humanities table, and do something other than watch their Instagram numbers go up. Do something that we can then, all stand behind as a collective. I'm not sure what that thing that should be done is. But clearly, what we've been doing so far, isn't it.

Where are we today? Where? Where is our KRS1? Where is the community of hip hop standing up with Talib Kweli? Where are our Gil Scott-Herons, Esther Phillips', our Tracy Chapmans? Where are the artists willing to throw their musical bodies of work against the gears of the machine, to force a change of this busted machinery?

Who can get to a Beyonce & Jay-Z level artist? Who can hit up Chris Brown? He needs some good press. Who can reach out to Wiz Khaifa, Sean Bell? I don't know, I'll take Darius Rucker, T.I. What are we waiting for, Eminem or, souls forbid, Macklemore & Ryan to swoop in? Then we're mad that not only our music but our cause has been co-opted?

Who can get to folks? All of us if we work as a unit.

Where are the frontrunners of our music, on the malignant tumor of racist injustice growing with reckless abandon in our society? There are absolutely some that can get at the leaders of the pack.

But who will? Not many in the position to succeed, will. Why not? Fear.

The need for the appearance of being nice. Not wanting to come off as angry or negative. If someone else tells me to just keep my head up and stay positive one more time, I'll be going to jail.

Excuse me if I've ruined your day with my reality. Actually, niceness may be the problem. Tim Wise said recently, "nice people change nothing. They never have, they never will." Whether that is totally true or not is debatable. But who can argue that niceness has done nothing to change things in these circumstances so far?

Now, even if we do get one person to hit up a popular celeb artist, just one person can be ignored. But a barrage of consistent haranguing from a concerted organized effort of 'DO SOMETHING' can't be so easily ignored.

Are we all so afraid of upsetting that particular one follower that could possibly lead to that one needed retweet, that might blossom into that one precious download, that we are willing to stand idly by, whistling past the graveyard full of the lives sacrificed to get us to the place where we can say what we want in our art?

Changing your profile pic to one of you with your hands up, wearing a hoodie packing a bag of skittles in your hand, or hashtagging "I can't breathe", does not constitute 'enough'. We need to use that vast reach to shake it up where the people are really listening. In the music.

This moment right here, these times, are the singular reason I became a singer songwriter at the age of 8. This moment, when incident after incidents are begging us imploring us to be a movement, not just a 24 hour news cycle.

A system changing thrust that can not be undone. If anything, this moment right now, is the only salient reason to wish you had more twitter followers.

I wish I did. Because I know what I would do.

December 2014

The New Post-Reconstruction Era Has Begun

by Peter Lord Moorland from THE FAMILY STAND

Racial profiling, police brutality, the inequities of the justice system, arrest and imprisonment statistics, the failures in our public education system across the country... all of these issues are sadly the status quo for too many Black, Latino, and poor citizens in America.

A society is defined greatly by how it responds to these issues. There appears to be this reactionary waltz that the American psyche engages in with progress – two steps forward, one step back.

We find ourselves now in the familiar scramble of fighting for the basic acknowledgement of human rights for those who are not deemed powerful or worthy in this land.

The abolition of slavery, and the reconstruction period was followed by the horrors of Jim Crow America.

The “Civil-Rights” Movement was followed by the era of Reagan, the undermining of “Great Society” programs, The New Conservatism, The Evangelical Right.

The Election Of President Obama gives birth to the “Tea Party”, the “Voting Rights Act” being dismantled piece by piece, and the “Citizens United” decision of the Supreme Court.

We are in the midst of a new post-reconstruction era, but the good news is this...

In times like these, where the message is sent loud and clear that the lives of some of us are worth less, that is when we find the power to do more.

So each of us must do our part (which is a mind numbing cliché at this point) but the platitude addresses the means by which we shift the consciousness of the world and ourselves.

I feel as if the thoughts expressed in this essay are ones that have been written or said by countless others. But the fact that one more individual adds their emotional, and spiritual drop in the bucket of change makes the shift in consciousness needed one iota closer.

With this shift of consciousness...

Perhaps the next grand jury that is given overwhelming evidence against a police officer, or a citizen involved in the shooting of an unarmed Black or Latino victim will at least think the case is worthy of going to trial, and if guilty, convict.

Perhaps young Black, Latino, and poor men and women who have yet to find a positive direction or purpose in their lives will fight the enormous odds against them with even more resolve, realizing they are not yet afforded the luxury of mediocrity while in pursuit of their dreams.

Unfortunately, the type of murders committed by police officers and “would be police officers” against the Michael Brown and Eric Garners of this world are so prolific they become generic in the mind of the public.

Unless we continue to fight for, demand, and take nothing less than the respect we deserve from others, these atrocities will continue. In addition, we must always keep in mind that the highest version of ourselves will not allow us to be placed in the position to be anyone’s victim.

In the end, it is this total shift of consciousness by the society as whole, as well as our own self-perception, that will end the cycle of re-construction and reactionary forces in America.

from Annette Jackson,
Malcolm's Mom
(from Unlocking The Truth)

I am somebody? (Rev. Jesse Jackson)

No justice? No peace? Whose streets? Our streets? (Rev. Al Sharpton)

What time is it? Nation time? (Hon. Min. Louis Farrakhan)

I just don't leave my house without taking Jesus with me and tell my son,
"You better take Jesus with you too. It ain't funny out here."

I Can't Breathe
(For Eric Garner & Mike Brown)

written after my time spent protesting in Ferguson
with Talib Kweli, Rosa Clemente and The Peace Poets
by jessica care moore

I'm in Detroit
& i can't breathe
the air is being sucked out of my city
the poor don't have water
& everything *new* means
no niggas.
I can't breathe
there is a smoking gun
down my throat with promises of
a post racial america
i can't swallow the chamber.
it is stuck in 1967
& it keeps reloading after it pierces
the bodies of our unarmed babies.
I can't breathe
cause i'm being rushed
on a sidewalk in the middle of a peaceful protest
by a militarized
police force in Missouri
they are yelling "i got one"
"i got one"
i am half running, distraught
searching for Talib's hand
Rosa is a few steps ahead
the air is thick & ugly & dense
& i can't breathe
cause now i'm being forced to lie face down
on the cement
in Ferguson with an AR15 pointed
at my back.
a long brown teenage boy is shaking
in Rosa's lap
A young thick girl stands up anyway.
i pull her back down, and ask her to
please
wait.
In Atlanta a beautiful young activist
tells me she is arrested at 6pm and
is driven around by officers till 2am
before finally being booked,
with no explanation.
we know who you are. they say
hoping to replace her breath with fear
& now she doesn't know how to tell
her story of being kidnapped.

she can't breathe

Who can push out fresh air in this country anymore?

the rich? the corporation?

we should all be choking to death from

Fox News & Processed foods

white supremacy & what the hell

is going on with don lemon ?

he needs to hit the weed

only he could smell. obviously.

through that digital screen.

my 19 year old son calls me

after hearing i'm in Ferguson

to say

can you please go home

?

and he hasn't lived with me in years

so i'm trying to figure out the geographic location

of that place.

home.

the place we feel the safest.

& i'm wondering where has all this

rage has been?

and i'm confused because when

you acknowledge race

you're called the racist!

Mississippi got damn Missouri

feel hot as you.

on can/field

this young man smiles his gold at me

beautiful and bright and bravado

"you from Detroit. you a poet.

i saw you on the news"

this is the place. where mike browns blood

turned to roses. the stemmed legs

of our boys. long and racing & always swimming

toward the sun.

easily tripped up

life interrupted. the ones who don't love you

are armed.

as much as we claim this is our land

the world minority is running our country

our sweat our women our mothers we

birthed this nation.

built it on free labor and death with

no reparations ray in sight.

Insight.

I need more insight on what this has to do

with genocide. (everything)

we are here. without choice.

many of us. fatherless. some of us. warm

blooded. west african. dakota. cree. cherokee.

we are a place with no place. we are natives.

beautiful somewhere people.

noosed flag poles and crosses & so many more

little girls plus those 4 we will never forget.

we are moors. we are portrayed as whores

beggars. we. the children of royalty

we red clay goddesses. we down south forests

we the trees with rings of stories

i can't breathe

I'm home

from a terrifying place

an octavia butler past/future

past lives scars resurfaced.

i can't breathe

cause my son is four years from 12

& the park is his own planet.

where he plays freely and

he knows a seed leads to flowers

if you plant it.

& he loves bob marley faith ringgold and frida khalo

walks with his head up & doesn't follow

recites baraka sings the blues

he thinks wearing a belt is cool.

he is simply a black boy with an imagination

built on nations of poems

and a mom that says

don't fuck with me

cable is a winter luxury

so we don't get our info from the idiot box

still, i've already had to teach my son

how to act when we are pulled over by cops.

he's seen them wave and like my poems

he's seen them black & flirt and ask to

call me on the phone.

he's seen them white in dearborn heights

accusing me of running a light i did not run

"mommy but the police man is lying"

yeah...this is the reality too son.

when i can't breathe

i cry. in a parking lot

dropping you off at hockey camp

praying the white coaches & white kids

won't try to suck the beauty out of your lungs

pray you black ice skate fast past the chokeholds

the dangerous walks from the store to buy candy.

i can't breathe

so i rush

to get you from school daily

a collective mothers intuition always

feels death moving

round this winter in america clock

in these spaces where the air is thin
humanity is forgotten
& ancestral spirit is blowing hard
& fear has pushed you to a place
you don't recognize.
a forced language is pushed
into your mouth
whipped across your back
along the ivory coast
on the ship called jesus
in the Congo
through the door of no return
in an Alabama cotton field
in chicago in cleveland in staten island
when you look the world in it's face
after attempts to hijack your spirit
take your breathe loosely
for a loosie

I will inhale God & blow my last wind into your body

your exhale will be the holy ghost
for this land.

i can't breathe
i can't breathe
i can't breathe
i can't breathe
i can't breathe
i can't breathe
i can't breathe
i can't breathe
i can't

breathe
i can't
breathe
i can't
breathe

breathe.

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Police Brutality: On Blacula and Reclaiming Our Humanity

by David F. Walker

I'm watching the 1972 blaxploitation film *Blacula*, and my mind is racing. I've been asked to record the audio commentary that will accompany the upcoming blu-ray release, and because of some weird schedule changes, I haven't had the chance to prepare the way I should or would have normally. Some people might argue that I don't really need that much preparation, seeing as how this is *Blacula*, not *Citizen Kane*, and I am, in all humility, one of the world's leading experts on blaxploitation. Seriously. I know a lot about the black films of the 1970s—so much so that I've been asked to record an audio commentary for *Blacula*. And despite all of this, my mind is racing, and I'm having trouble thinking of what to say. Not because this is *Blacula*, and some people might erroneously think there isn't much to say about the film. No, my mind is racing, and I don't really know what to say, because less than twenty- fours earlier, a grand jury in Missouri chose not to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the murder of Mike Brown. And suddenly, *Blacula*, and my trivial knowledge of this and all things blaxploitation, seems so unimportant. And I feel helpless. I feel useless. I feel like I have no right to be sitting around comfortably talking about some silly movie, when there are more important things to discuss.

In the world I live in, and the social circles I keep, there have been many conversations, not just about Mike Brown, or Eric Garner, but of a long list of names, stretching back centuries, that comprise the very real, and very ugly truth about the black experience in America. These conversations always lead to the same feelings of rage and sorrow and despair, which in turn lead to the same questions. No need to repeat the questions, because we've heard all of them before. We've asked these questions time and time again. Our parents and our grandparents, and every generation that came before us have asked these questions. And if any of you are like me in any way—a person whose career is tied into creativity—there is another subset of questions that begin to eat at your soul.

As I look back on 2014, a year of epidemic police brutality, followed by absolute miscarriages of justice, I can't help but wonder that same thing so many of us wonder—"What can I do?"

In my life I've been a participant in marches and protests and rallies and vigils. I've locked horns with the police. I've argued with FBI agents. I've tangled with Neo-Nazi skinheads. But truth be told, I'm tired. I'm closer to 50 than I am to 40, and all I really want to do is sit around in my underwear, sipping tea, and writing. I don't want to have to leave the comfort of my home, and get tear-gassed, or arrested, or maybe even shot. I just want to be a grumpy old man, who writes, as the world keeps on turning. But I know that I have to do more than that, because there is more to be done. Which, of course, brings me back to, "What can I do?"

All of this leads me back to *Blacula* and, by default, blaxploitation. I'm not going to get too deep into blaxploitation or *Blacula* in the space that I have left, though there are a few things that I'd like to explain. During the 1970s, a series of films emerged that were largely marketed to an inner-city black audiences. By 1972, just as *Blacula* was coming out, these films were labeled blaxploitation. Much has been said about these films—both positive and negative—and the debate of their merits is not something for this piece. Though it is important to understand that these movies provided iconic characters that were largely unseen by black audiences up to that time. Likewise, these films provided a level of fantasy fulfillment to black audiences that had, by and large, been absent from American film. Whether or not these films were good or bad is not the point—at least not in this discussion—so much as these films brought to the screen elements black audiences responded to, often in a positive way.

Blacula was one of those films that thrilled audiences—especially young people—who flocked to see it back in the summer of 1972, making it a box office hit. William Marshall stars as the lead character, Blacula, whose real name is Mamuwalde. A classically trained Shakespearean actor, Marshall played Mamuwalde as an 18th century African prince, who ventures to Europe to enlist aid in fighting the African slave trade. Unfortunately for Prince Mamuwalde, his first stop happens to be a certain Count Dracula. Incensed by Mamuwalde’s I’m-not-standing-for-this attitude, Dracula turns him into a vampire, and locks him in a coffin for all eternity, while at the same time leaving Mamuwalde’s wife to starve to death inside the crypt that houses the coffin. Two hundred years later, Mamuwalde is freed from his coffin, and begins to terrorize L.A.

The most important thing to know about Blacula is that the idea of having the character start out as a sophisticated, articulate African prince came from William Marshall. In the original script, Mamuwalde was actually a character named Andrew Brown—the same name as one of the lead characters in the show Amos ‘n’ Andy. By his own admission, in multiple interviews—both at the time, and over the years—Marshall described the original script for Blacula as “utter garbage.” I interviewed him back in 1996, and we talked about this at length. The only reason he agreed to play the role was because the producers allowed him to play the lead character as a prince.

The important thing to understand is that Blacula was the first time in the history of American film, where African royalty was not portrayed as some mumbo-jumbo talking buffoon in a leopard-skin loincloth, with a bone through his nose. Quite simply, there had never been a black character like Mamuwalde/Blacula portrayed in American film. That in and of itself—despite all the other shortcomings of the film (and believe me, there are a ton)—makes Blacula something of a revolutionary movie.

Now, if you want to get deeper, and we should, if only for a moment, at the core of Blacula, is the story of an African prince, robbed of his freedom, and enslaved to the curse of vampirism. Mamuwalde is transformed by Dracula into two things—a slave and a monster. Again, that’s somewhat revolutionary. Don’t get me wrong, because much of the film teeters on the edge of the cliff that leads straight down into the abyss of the abysmal. In fact, there are moments where the movie wallows in its own ineptitude and cinematic mediocrity. But then there’s this prince, and this very obvious allegory about slavery, and the dehumanization of the black man in America—none of which was supposed to be there, but was brought there unashamedly by William Marshall.

At the end of the film, Mamuwalde is trying to make his escape with Tina (Vonetta McGee), who he is convinced is the reincarnation of his dead wife. As they are being chased by the police—LAPD, for the record—the unarmed and innocent Tina is gunned down and killed by a cop. This unleashes the full fury of Blacula, who goes on a killing rampage, tearing through the police.

Keep in mind, that this movie came out in ‘72, on the heels of the turbulent 1960s, which saw cities burn, and uprisings triggered by police brutality. Many of the blaxploitation films of the ‘70s were revenge fantasies that catered to the audiences’ need to see black people fight back and win. This is why so many black folks went nuts over movies like Melvin Van Peebles’s Sweet Sweetback’s Baaaaadasssss Song and Gordon Parks Jr’s Super Fly.

As I was watching Blacula and then recording the audio commentary, it dawned on me that many of the same socio-political realities that informed blaxploitation are still being faced today. For all of its cinematic shortcomings, Blacula spoke to the dehumanization of black people in America, and the threat of police brutality. It is sad that a dated movie, that isn’t even that good, is still so damn relevant more than 40 years later. I mean let’s be honest; it’s bad enough that we can look at Do the Right Thing and say, “Nothing has changed.” To look at something like Blacula and say it is just...hell, I don’t even have the words.

So, what does all of this have to do with the larger issue of the atrocities that we’ve seen in 2014, and for far too many years prior? Well, I suppose it speaks to the question I find myself asking—that many other artists and creatives find themselves asking—

“What can I do?”

I know this is the question William Marshall asked himself when he read the terrible script for Blacula. But instead of walking away from the project, he took the role with certain provisions, and those provisions were informed by what he knew needed to be seen. He knew that Blacula wasn’t going to change the world, but he also knew that for some people, seeing an African prince portrayed with dignity and style would have an impact on how they saw themselves. And to be certain, it did have an impact. I remember seeing Blacula for the first time, and being struck by the concept of him being a prince. It stuck with me. As a child, it changed the perceptions of what it meant to be an African, which up until then, had been informed by Tarzan movies.

To be sure, we can look at the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, and see how the revenge fantasies that were manifested on the screen helped to appease and placate black audiences. But we can also see glimmers of how those films empowered us in a new way. There is no denying that those films gave audiences what they needed and wanted—whether it was an African prince dressed in a tuxedo, or a black vampire killing a bunch of cops. For a moment, our dreams were manifested.

If there is one major problem with blaxploitation, it is that it did not build upon the fantasy fulfillment—that’s all it ever was, even with the best of those films. These films were a reaction to the times leading up to them, but they did nothing to prepare us for what was to come. And as a result, nothing changed. Here we are, more than 40 years later, and we are still in desperate need of our blaxploitation heroes all over again. We need Shaft and Foxy Brown to deliver vengeance to the systems of corruption, hatred, and dehumanization that we have seen claiming the lives of more people than any of us could ever possibly list. At the same time, we need more than what they gave us last time.

What can I do?

I can’t speak for anyone else. All I can say is that I know what I feel compelled to do—as an artist, as a human being, as someone who is identified and identifies as being black. I want to create work that empowers us to reclaim our humanity—that portrays us as more than the stereotypes so quickly used to define and degrade us. I want to help fulfill dreams of greatness (and occasionally revenge), and give to the world, in my own unique way, stories that reveal the truth of who we are as black people in America. And who we are, quite simply, is human beings. The only thing I really know how to do is deliver to people the means by which they can begin to reclaim their humanity. I can help show them that we are more than what they keep telling us—that our lives matter in ways that they don’t seem to understand or care about. That’s what William Marshall was trying to do with Blacula.

When I interviewed Marshall back in 1996, the last thing he said to me was this: “We have to learn to activate our dreams. And if we don’t, it’s not a dream and not a promise of anything, but a repetition that we’ve experienced over the years, of disdain.”

by Christopher Whaley

25 years later
they wanna ask
why Mookie threw
the trashcan through
the window of Sal's Famous
but no one bothers
to ask why they killed
Radio Raheem
I feel like
I'm having a bad dream
a box of Swisher Sweets
is no excuse
for a black body
riddled with bullets
in the middle
of a Ferguson street
my delusions of grandeur
led me to believe that
justice would finally
get served with a side of
truth and a bit of repercussion
but when all was
said and done
I began shouting,
screaming, and cussing
that motherfucker walked
it was MURDER
Michael Stewart
it was MURDER
Amadou Diallo
it was MURDER
Michael Brown
it was MURDER
Tamir Rice
my country tis of thee
but who the fuck
you think you free?

there's a part of me
that wishes I was with
my fellow brothers and sisters
burnin' and lootin'
and I wanna fight
because I want those bastards
to feel my pain
but what will I gain?
motherfuck a window...
Radio Raheem is dead
and so is my American Dream
I'm still seen
as 3/5 of a man
I have no rights
so that's probable cause
for them to take my life
the KKK took off the
the hoods and white robes
and traded for badges
and paramilitary suits
HANDS UP - DON'T SHOOT
they don't even
need a reason
one less nigger
open season.
when does it end?

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by Earl Douglas, Jr.

'It is difficult at this day to realize the state of public opinion in regard to that unfortunate race which prevailed in the civilized and enlightened portions of the world at the time of the Declaration of Independence, and when the Constitution of the United States was framed and adopted; but the public history of every European nation displays it in a manner too plain to be mistaken. They had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far unfit that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.'

—Chief Justice Roger B. Taney on the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case, 1857.

There it is. A paragraph that effectively lays the blueprint on how people of color—specially Black folk—were and are viewed, by the legal system. So when the grand jury decided not to hand out any indictments in the cases of Michael Brown and Eric Garner's murders, I was, either out of resignation, straight up cynicism, or both, not surprised. Not at all.

What is alarming is how, in this age where everything is open and just about nothing is secret, law enforcement continue to find new ways to do an end run around the Constitution. Prosecutors seem to have free rein—through procedure, court back logging and straight up stall tactics, to tip the scales of justice. For Black folk, the burden of proof isn't on the state, its on us and its a burden we've been carrying ever since Plymouth Rock landed on us. If you sell everything you own to make bail, you still have to wait a minute to get a bail hearing. Then you still have to deal with mounting legal fees (versus an opponent with unlimited capital), while waiting—in jail—for your day in court. This is the core rationale behind why a lot of defendants accept plea deals. It isn't as much as an admission of guilt, as much as it is being spiritually, emotionally and financially tapped out.

Now if you find yourself trying to get a measure of justice against a cop(s) that's disgraced the badge, you find yourself going 150mph into the Blue Wall Of Silence—with no airbag. You don't get help anywhere: Not from the NYPD who faithfully carry out their duties, but don't want to become a department pariah for speaking out; not from the D.A. who needs a healthy relationship with police to insure successful prosecutions; and certainly not from a jury, grand or otherwise because all they will see is a Black person who posed an 'immediate threat' regardless of whether they were being stalked, wounded or unarmed.

Not that the situation's entirely dire. This new wave of activists and its respective activism is keeping the powers that be off balance and off guard. They are younger, multicultural, multi-gendered, more informed, social media savvy and their organizational disciplinary approach to the overall movement rather than the focus and vision of one specific figurehead are the likes not seen in decades, if ever. It's not an American thing either: protests have transcended our borders and happening on a global scale. They are not holdovers from previous movements either. These are young people who are finally waking up to the fact that the game is rigged and if they don't do something about it now, they will be mortgaging their futures as well as their children's future. They are putting it all on the line, determined to put the spirit of Justice Taney's racist and destructive decree in the dirt where it belongs should be commended.

I just hope that they, as well as all of us, have the patience and resolve to carry forward to see that justice prevails. Then the term 'And justice for all' will really mean something.

Until then, the struggle continues...

by LaRonda Davis

there's not enough ink.
not enough paper.
not enough ways to configure letters into words into meanings.
never enough air.

they think, because they tried to break us, we must be broken.
inhuman, because we've been dehumanized.
they tell themselves we're criminal so they don't have to face the fact
that atrocities are 'enforced' against good people every day.

then they pray to white jesus
that they succeeded in breeding, preaching, and book-learning
the warriors out of us.

and maybe they did.

because this shit keeps happening.
and they keep breathing.

but we...are capable of worlds.
and while society's negatives can be projected too, too easily on our brown
skin,
we know better...

targeting us won't save them from themselves.
choking us won't prevent big business from burning up the air.
shooting us won't keep the dollar from collapsing like lungs.
drowning us won't wash the blood from their hands.

our ancestry is not a weakness of character.
our breath should not be punishable by death.

so, we mobilize. boycott. agitate in kind.
hurl dirty words at oppression.

words like:
protest.
revolution.
pride.
progress.

and hope against hope that we live to see them in action.

WOMEN

if you have
something to say,
write us at
submissions@
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