from Lynskey, Dorian. 33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.

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'We'd rather die on our feet than be livin' on our knees'

James Brown, 'Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud', 1968

Soul power meets Black Power

James Brown accompanies Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey as he addresses 500 youngsters in the Watts Labor Community Action Committee's summer program, 29 July 1968.

On the evening of 7 August 1968 James Brown was in his hotel room in Hollywood when he heard a knock at the door. When he opened it and peered out, the corridor was empty, but whoever had knocked had left behind a package demanding his attention. Squatting malignantly on the carpet was a deactivated hand grenade with the words 'James Brown' painted on it.

Or so he claimed in his memoirs. The timing of the threat, which he believed to be the work of the Black Panther Party, gives the sceptical reader pause for thought because that night Brown was due to go into the studio and record 'Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud', designed to silence the voices who had been crying, with increasing vehemence, that the Godfather of Soul was nothing more than an Uncle Tom, cosying up to the white establishment while his brothers plotted revolution. But whether the grenade was cold, metal reality or just a compact metaphor for all the hostility directed at him during that overheated year, it makes its point.

Not long afterwards *Look* magazine would feature Brown on its cover above the headline 'Is This the Most Important Black Man in America?' The accompanying article argued: 'To millions of kids on ghetto street corners, he is living proof that a black man can make it big – and still come back to listen to their troubles.' And furthermore: 'His constituency dwarfs Stokely Carmichael's and the late Martin Luther King's.'

What the profile acknowledged only fleetingly was that there were some on those ghetto street corners who held a less glowing opinion of Brown. There were those, not least in Carmichael's constituency, who had winced at the patriotic boosterism of his pre-'Say It Loud' hit, 'America Is My Home' ('to sing lies about America is not beneficial to the Black Nation', scolded radical poet Amiri Baraka), his subsequent USO tour of Vietnam and his

blossoming friendship with Vice-president Hubert Humphrey. At a White House state dinner in May 1968, where the only other entertainer was establishment wisecracker Bob Hope, the *New York Post* columnist Earl Wilson had asked Brown, 'Won't they call you an Uncle Tom for doing this?' Brown shrugged off the question, but he must have known the accusation was out there, even as he seethed over the injustice of it. The SNCC's H. Rap Brown scornfully dubbed the singer 'the Roy Wilkins of the music world', comparing him to the famously cautious NAACP leader.

The phrase on black America's lips by 1968 was Black Power, an oppositional alternative to non-violence. Brown wanted to take those words and harness them to his own vision of black self-improvement. At show after show he would take time out from the music, his voice hoarse, his face glossy with sweat, and make his own pitch to the audience. 'I used to shine shoes in front of a radio station,' he would say. 'Now I own radio stations. You know what that is? That's Black Power.'

But it wasn't in James Brown's remit to remake Black Power in his own image. In cafés and universities and meeting rooms in cities across the US, the debate was carrying on without him. Only someone with Brown's Canute-like self-confidence could believe that he could persuade black America to march to the beat of his drum, but even he realised that in order to get his point across he needed to remind people that he was nobody's Uncle Tom. 'Say It Loud' is constructed as a communal chant, a declaration by the many rather than one man, but when Brown entered the studio that day in August, the blackness he was most dedicated to reaffirming was his own.

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To say that James Brown was there at the birth of Black Power might imply that he was a part of it. It's more accurate to say that he was in the vicinity. The catalyst was James Meredith, the political science graduate whose brave stand in 1962 had led to the integration of the University of Mississippi. In June 1966

Meredith announced that he would be leading a March Against Fear through the state. It was a quixotic endeavour, made all the more so by his decision not to invite any civil rights groups to join him. He set off with just four companions. The following day he was ambushed on the highway by a white hardware clerk who blasted him three times with a shotgun and left him covered in blood. Pictures of his plight prompted groups such as the SNCC to vow to complete his march.

Blooded by sit-ins, Freedom Rides and voter registration drives, the SNCC was now heading in a much more radical direction under its new leader, Stokely Carmichael. 'The paths of Negro–white unity that had been converging crossed at Selma, and like a giant X began to diverge,' wrote Martin Luther King. In January 1966 a college student and recent SNCC recruit called Sammy Younge, Jr, attempted to use the toilet at a white-run gas station and received a bullet in the head by way of reply. The killing was the last straw for Carmichael and his SNCC colleague, James Forman. 'For myself, Sammy's murder marked the final end of any patience with nonviolence,' wrote Forman. Carmichael's tough approach made him an enemy of the NAACP's Roy Wilkins, who was widely regarded by younger activists as an establishment bootlicker. The black activist Julius Lester mockingly wrote: 'If President Johnson had called up one night around midnight and said the sun was shining brightly, Roy would've had to look out the window to check.'

As the voices of militant dissent in the civil rights movement were growing louder and more numerous, a significant semantic change was also taking place. Malcolm X had argued for the word 'black', decreeing 'Negro' 'a label the white man placed on us to make his discrimination more convenient', and it was catching on via the likes of Carmichael. The phrase 'Black Power' had first been used in 1954 by writer Richard Wright, but it was only now about to become a sweeping slogan.

Even as the march began, the cracks in the movement were plain to see. Sporting sunglasses and an Afro, Carmichael linked

arms with the soberly suited Martin Luther King at the head of the march, a visual analogue for the two men's divergent policies.* When the marchers reached Greenwood, they staged a rally. SNCC organiser Willie Ricks took the microphone and asked, 'What do we want?'

The crowd gave the traditional response: 'Freedom now!'

'Uh uh,' scolded Ricks. He tried again.

'Freedom now!' they repeated.

Then he told them the new answer to the old question: 'Black power!' Again and again, he told them. Gradually, the new call rose up, smothering the old. At another rally that evening, Carmichael took up the cry and this time the crowds knew their lines. 'Ricks had everybody primed,' Carmichael later recalled. 'Ricks was there saying, "Hit them now, hit them now." I kept saying, "Give me time, give me time." When we finally got in, we dropped the Black Power, of course they had been primed and they responded immediately. But I myself, to be honest, I didn't expect that enthusiastic response.'

With all media eyes on Mississippi, the phrase spread like flu. King, aghast, called it 'an unfortunate choice of words'. 'Black Power can mean in the end only black death,' Wilkins dolefully warned. But there was no stopping it now. In the crowd at Greenwood, white veterans of the civil rights struggle felt the ground shifting beneath them and sensed the implication: this was no longer their fight.

Julius Lester would later gleefully record the moment in his tract *Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama*: 'What had been a dull march turned into a major news event. Everybody wanted to know what this Black Power was. If SNCC had said Negro Power or Colored Power, white folks would've continued sleeping easy every night. But BLACK POWER! Black! That word. BLACK! . . . My God, the niggers were gon'

* When King and his comrades began singing 'We Shall Overcome', other marchers omitted the verse about 'black and white together' and told him that they would rather be singing 'We Shall Overrun'.

start payin' white folks back.'

To paraphrase Buffalo Springfield, there was something happening here; what it was wasn't exactly clear. Having popularised Black Power, Carmichael was slow to define it. 'We're not ever to be caught up in the intellectual masturbation of the question of Black Power,' he told an audience in Berkeley in October 1966. It was less a solid political platform than a basket of different, even competing ideas: separatism, Afrocentrism, Islamism, revolutionary socialism. Although there was confusion over what Black Power stood *for*, what it was *against* was clear as day. At the end of his epic Berkeley speech, Carmichael warned white America: 'Move over, or we're going to move on over you.'

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James Brown was uneasy about the changing mood. At thirty-three, a decade into an extraordinary career, he was political more by virtue of his unique position than of any deliberate intent. Born in a one-room shack in South Carolina, he had found fame with his group the Flames when their very first single, 'Please Please Please', sold over a million copies in 1956. Hard work and obstinacy kept the Flames touring solidly, even in the face of blatant racism in the segregated South.

Brown hit paydirt in spring 1963 with the bottled lightning of *Live at the Apollo*, which remains the greatest live album ever recorded. It was taped during a week-long residency at the Harlem Apollo the preceding October, two days into the Cuban Missile Crisis. Brown strutted and strained, shouted and shimmied, sweated and screamed. He fell to his knees. He hollered like a man possessed. He made America love him.

If *Live at the Apollo* was all about overload, then Brown's true stroke of genius depended on reining himself in. In February 1965 he had convened his band in Charlotte, North Carolina, to record 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag', the ur-text of funk. Funk peeled away everything but rhythm, and then redefined what rhythm could do. Listeners had never danced to anything

like it, and single after single followed 'Papa's Got a Brand New Bag' into the charts, making Brown a superstar.

No black entertainer with such cultural reach could avoid becoming a spokesman. The previous month, Roy Wilkins had visited Brown backstage at the Apollo and recruited him to the NAACP. When Brown heard about Meredith's assault he flew down to Mississippi to visit him in hospital and perform for the marchers in Tupelo. Shortly afterwards, Brown flexed his political muscles on vinyl for the first time with the sternly self-improving single 'Don't Be a Drop Out'. Funk was the perfect vehicle for such a message, every whipcrack beat taut with the virtues of discipline and hard work. If this famously tough taskmaster could keep his band in line (he fined them $50 for drinking on the job or wearing a wrinkled suit), then why not the nation's black youth? He launched a Stay in School campaign, granting $500 scholarships to black students at every stop on his tour, and received a citation from Vice-president Humphrey.

Black radicals, however, had different ideas about how Soul Brother Number One should apply his enormous influence. As Brown proudly remembered, 'Stokely said I was the one person who was most dangerous to the movement at the time because people would listen to me.' And if Carmichael's Black Power speech in Greenwood had fractured the fragile multiracial unity of the civil rights movement, then the formation of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in October cracked it wide open.

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It was the brainchild of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, two community organisers in Oakland, California. They took their logo from the Lowndes County Freedom Organisation that Carmichael had established in Alabama and their revolutionary theory from Mao Tse-tung, Frantz Fanon and Robert F. Williams. Non-violence was no longer the tactic, integration no longer the goal. In their ten-point programme they combined reasonable demands for decent housing and education with

rather more dramatic ambitions: freedom for all black prisoners, all-black juries for black defendants, exemption of black men from military service and a UN-supervised plebiscite to decide on black self-rule.*

Newton and Seale were brilliant self-publicists. They gave the Panthers a uniform to match their platform – all-black – and a novel structure: Seale became chairman and Newton minister of defence. Eldridge Cleaver, whose radical prison writings had been collected under the title *Soul on Ice*, was appointed minister of information while on parole from Folsom Prison. No sooner had they launched the party than they began building an arsenal, raising funds by selling copies of Mao's *Little Red Book*. A new rumour began to sweep the ghetto, claiming that the government was preparing concentration camps to incarcerate black dissidents. The guns were key props in the Panthers' revolutionary theatre. A year earlier, a news helicopter had burned images from Watts on to the retinas of viewers nationwide: TV was the new battleground.

In May 1967 twenty armed Panthers drove from Oakland to Sacramento, home of California's new Republican governor, Ronald Reagan, to protest the proposed Mulford Act, which would prohibit the bearing of loaded guns in public places. By the time the Panthers entered the capitol building, uniformed in leather jackets, berets and guns, a forest of cameras was waiting to transmit the new face of black militancy across the nation. After being escorted from the debating chamber by police, Seale read his 'executive mandate' four times so that the journalists could take down every word. 'The time has come,' he declared, 'for black people to arm themselves against this terror before it is too late.' Once the media reported this 'invasion', the Panthers became white America's new bogeymen. To the surprise of nobody, the Mulford Act passed.

* The founding Panthers were obsessed with Dylan's 'Ballad of a Thin Man', which Newton interpreted, somewhat fancifully, as a parable about racism.

If the Panthers directed most of their scorn towards the white power structure (not white people per se, although the subtlety of the distinction was lost on many followers and foes alike), then they reserved some for the aspirant black middle class. At a rally in San Francisco the poet Amiri Baraka told the black bourgeoisie, 'We're going to try to burn you black, because if we don't burn you, nothing will but the actual fire, which we're trying to desperately bring about.'

And which performer better represented black bourgeois aspiration than James Brown?

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In October 1966 Brown received a surprise visitor to the stage of the Apollo. The devoutly unfunky Nelson Rockefeller, who was running for re-election as governor of New York, surprised him with a handshake and a photo op. Brown smarted at the intrusion. 'OK, you got what you wanted, now go,' he told the governor before continuing the show.

Brown later boasted that he had never voted in his life ('I cast my vote with ideas and concepts'), but he was a prize catch for any politician courting the black vote. He counselled Hubert Humphrey about the gathering storm in the inner cities, although by that stage the vice-president hardly needed telling. 'I think I was providing the Democrats with one of the few non-white views they had of things from the street,' Brown later boasted. 'Dr King himself wasn't a street person. I was. I came from a ghetto and was close to the people in the ghettos all over America.'

Brown liked underdogs who thrived on their wits. 'My story is a Horatio Alger story,' he once said.* 'It's an American story, it's the kind that America can be proud of.' He believed passionately in equality of opportunity but always with the sobering addendum that black people needed to earn their place through hard work and self-discipline.

* Alger (1832–99) specialised in 'rags-to-riches' novels.

During the summer of 1967, as Brown's latest, greatest funk missive 'Cold Sweat' swept the country, the fire that Baraka was calling for finally engulfed inner-city America. In over sixty towns and cities, local confrontations with the police blossomed into full-blown riots, with the worst violence occurring in Newark and Detroit. H. Rap Brown, the twenty-three-year-old firebrand who had just replaced Carmichael as chairman of the SNCC, was practically licking his lips when he told an audience in Cambridge, Maryland, 'Detroit exploded, Newark exploded, Harlem exploded! It's time for Cambridge to explode, baby. Black folks built America. If America don't come around, we're going to burn America down, brother.' When, following his speech, a local elementary school was set on fire, H. Rap Brown was arrested and charged with inciting riot and arson. Released on bail, he called a press conference which was not notable for its repentant moderation. 'Violence is necessary,' he famously declared. 'It's as American as cherry pie.'

If Rap provided the post-riot rhetoric, then the Panthers provided the imagery. Cleaver staged an instantly iconic photograph of Huey Newton, posing in a wicker throne, tribal shields to either side and an animal pelt at his feet, with a spear in one hand and a shotgun in the other. His image was cemented by his arrest, in October, for shooting dead a rookie Oakland police officer called John Frey. Newton became an outlaw hero to black and white radicals alike and the cry, led by Cleaver, went up: 'Free Huey!'

So when the two Browns, H. Rap and James, sat down to talk at the Apollo in November 1967, there was a chasm between them: the extremist versus the diplomat, the enemy of the white system versus the vice-president's friend. Rap told James about his plans and the singer replied, 'Rap, I know what you're trying to do. I'm trying to do the same thing. But y'all got to find another way to do it. You got to put down the guns, you got to put away the violence.' No, Rap replied, 'you don't understand.' He wanted James to join the struggle, urge his fans to take up

arms. But the singer didn't want a revolution – even if one were to take place, he believed black people would never prevail. 'I agree with you, Rap, we got to get justice,' he tried one more time. 'But people shouldn't have to die. They shouldn't have to die.' A cordial impasse had been reached. The conversation was over.

But James Brown wasn't unsympathetic to his namesake's cause. During his next Apollo residency, he invited his accountant on stage to present a cheque to the H. Rap Brown Defense Fund and closed his tenure with a passionate and pointed speech. 'I know I am black, I always will be black, and you are my people,' he said. 'The way things are going in this country . . . I don't know . . . I may try to run for president.' And then he uttered the line that would eventually wind its way into 'Say It Loud': 'But no matter what, remember: Die on your feet, don't live on your knees.'

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The Black Panthers entered 1968 by forging alliances. The Peace and Freedom Party, a new hardline white anti-war group, proposed a joint candidacy in the November presidential elections: Cleaver for president and Jerry Rubin for VP. In February, the same month the Kerner Commission, in its influential report on the previous year's civil disturbances, warned that 'our nation is moving towards two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal', the Panthers also allied themselves with the SNCC, appointing Carmichael prime minister of the party, Rap Brown minister of justice and Forman minister of foreign affairs. On 17 February, Newton's birthday, they staged a Free Huey rally in Oakland, where Forman delivered a menacing warning: 'We must serve notice on our oppressors that we as a people are not going to be frightened by the attempted assassination of our leaders . . . If Huey Newton is not set free and dies, the sky's the limit.'

Brown, meanwhile, began the year with a different brand of empire-building, buying radio stations in Tennessee, Augusta and Baltimore. By 1969 he would be the proud owner of the

black-run Gold Platter restaurant chain, James Brown trading stamps and a fortune estimated at $3 million. At the end of March he made his first fleeting visit to Africa, playing in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast. But when he boarded the plane in Abidjan on Wednesday, 2 April, he had no idea he was flying back into the most challenging week of his life.

On the evening of 4 April Martin Luther King was shot dead by escaped convict James Earl Ray on the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, while supporting striking black sanitation workers. The question was not whether anger would explode into violence but simply how soon, for how long and in how many places.

Brown was in New York when he heard the news, and appeared on TV urging black communities to 'cool it'. Meanwhile, in Boston, there was talk of cancelling Brown's show the following night. Black councilman Thomas Atkins told the city's youthful new mayor Kevin White, 'If the word gets out in the black community that the city would not let Brown come to town and perform in the wake of King's assassination, all hell will break loose.' On arriving at Logan Airport Brown was met by Atkins, who explained White's concerns on the limo ride into town. The National Guard, he said, was standing by in case of violence. 'It was rush hour, but the streets were deserted,' remembered Brown. 'Sort of like the calm before the storm.'

During the ride, Atkins and Brown discussed Dr King's philosophy of non-violence and the councilman explained his plan: the concert would go ahead with a simultaneous telecast. When Brown, whose admiration for King was outweighed only by his dedication to the bottom line, saw fans queuing for refunds at the Boston Garden so that they could stay home and watch for free, Atkins asked the reluctant mayor to guarantee his considerable fee. 'I never met anything like James Brown,' reflected White, who had never heard of the singer before. 'Man, he was a piece of work.'

At the very last minute, Brown got his money and Boston got

its concert. At the Garden, Brown (crassly introduced on TV as 'Negro singer Jimmy Brown and his group') opened proceedings by introducing White, somewhat generously, as a 'swinging cat'. Side by side, the two men then called for peace in the name of Dr King. Even their surnames combined to form a tableau of racial brotherhood: Brown and White together. It was an emotional show, during which Brown cried and made one of his impassioned pleas for *his* version of Black Power. Outside, on Boston's eerily quiet streets, no petrol bombs were thrown, no stores looted.

But beyond the protective force field that Brown seemed to have cast over Boston, fires raged in 110 other cities. The next day Brown flew to Washington DC, where rioters had come within two blocks of the White House, to survey the damage and dampen tensions. 'Don't terrorise; organise,' he said on television. 'Don't burn; give kids a chance to learn. Go home. Look at TV. Listen to the radio.' And then – why not? – 'Listen to some James Brown records.' His intervention would secure his invitation to the White House and cement his reputation among the country's politicians and opinion-formers as a black man they could do business with. But black radio DJs also played their part in quelling the mayhem. Faced with a choice between the depression of grief and the temporary catharsis of revolt, they gritted their teeth. 'If, in every major city, a black disc jockey had said, "Rise up," there would have been pandemonium,' New York DJ Del Shields told writer Nelson George. 'And that night was also the beginning of the end of black radio. It was never allowed to rise up again.'*

The militants, however, chose pandemonium. Smoothly setting aside the fact they had spent the past two years calling King a useless Uncle Tom, the firebrands of the Panthers and the

* The first musical reaction to King's death came quickly. On 7 April, at a festival in Long Island, Nina Simone's band performed a fifteen-minute version of a song they had just written, 'Why? (The King of Love Is Dead)'.

SNCC made a martyr of him and seized on his death as proof that there was no reasoning with white America any more. The chasm between the integrationists and the radicals had deepened into an ocean trench. On the night of the assassination, Carmichael sought to cool tempers but at a press conference the next day he was ablaze. 'White America has declared war on black people,' he thundered. 'There no longer needs to be intellectual discussion. Black people know they have to get guns . . . When America killed Dr King last night, she killed all reasonable hope.'

One journalist asked what the riots could possibly achieve. 'The black man can't do nothing in this country,' replied Carmichael. 'We're going to stand up on our feet and die like men. If that's our only act of manhood, then Goddammit, we're going to die. We're tired of living on our stomachs.'

Over in Oakland, on 6 April Eldridge Cleaver and a group of fellow Panthers clashed with the police in a thirty-minute gun battle which left Cleaver wounded and teenaged Panther Bobby Hutton dead. Coming on top of the Free Huey campaign, Hutton's death only enhanced the Panthers' martyr status. In a letter to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, such A-list sympathisers as James Baldwin, Norman Mailer and Susan Sontag claimed: 'We find little fundamental difference between the assassin's bullet which killed Dr King on 4 April, and the police barrage which killed Bobby James Hutton two days later . . . Both were attacks aimed at destroying this nation's black leadership.'*

In June Brown and his band flew into Saigon to play for US troops in heat so intense that they needed intravenous drips in order to rehydrate. At night, their bedrooms at the Continental Hotel would shake from gunfire; by day they travelled in a bus with anti-grenade screens over the windows. At a show for 40,000 members of the 9th Infantry Division, the funk was punctuated by the percussive rattle of distant Viet Cong gunfire.

* Country Joe and the Fish dedicated their 1968 album *Together* to 'Bobby Hutton: Black Revolutionary'.

As if that weren't enough to outrage black radicals (even King the ameliorator had fiercely opposed the war), Brown marked his return home with the bumptious patriotism of 'America Is My Home' ('I was talking about the land, the country, not the government,' he later insisted to *Look*. 'This is *home*; we can't leave') and joined Hubert Humphrey at an election rally in Watts. A supporter of Bobby Kennedy until his candidacy ended in assassination, Brown cajoled the floundering Humphrey into publicly promising greater opportunities for black businessmen.

Like Bob Dylan earlier in the decade, Brown found himself the repository of hopes and expectations that he could not fulfil; unlike Dylan, he lacked the agility to distance himself from them. Never a man handicapped by excessive humility, he believed he could be a friend to Hubert Humphrey *and* Rap Brown, the Panthers *and* the politicians, as if by the sheer force of his willpower – and, yes, his *rightness* – he could please all of the people all of the time. After all, who could object to a black man who clawed his way out of the Southern dirt to become a self-made superstar: a *black* superstar? This was not so much strategy as instinct. So when the Nation of Islam newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* asked, 'Has James Brown Rejected His Black Supporters for White Recognition?', he was baffled as much as angry. 'They called him Sold – S-O-L-D – Brother Number One,' recalled backing singer Marva Whitney. 'And that hurt him.' During his between-song raps at shows that summer, the strong, bright topnotes of his usual self-belief were undercut by an unfamiliar minor chord of gloom and confusion. 'It seems that some of our people think James Brown's a Tom,' he rumbled at an Oakland show. 'But Tom has been dead a long time.'

The Panthers were ratcheting up the pressure on Brown. Representatives visited him to complain about 'America Is My Home'. An anonymous telegram focussed on his employment of white bass player Tim Drummond: 'You have a white man working for you and a black man needs a job.' Death threats arrived at his record label; a bomb scare forced the band to evacuate a hotel in Atlanta.

And yet at the same time, Brown had never been more famous or more admired by the mainstream. Prime-time TV shows, newspapers and magazines courted him throughout the summer. 'Talk about your Black Power,' marvelled Albert Goldman in a *New York Times* profile. 'Take a look at James Brown, mister.'

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Speaking to the *NME* in 1984, James Brown was testy on the subject of his most politically seismic hit. 'When we recorded "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud" it was necessary to get people to come forward but to me it was a come down,' he told Gavin Martin. 'I didn't want to have to record that because it separates them. I had to separate them and give them an identity at one point and join them together later.' (Reading these words, you have to remind yourself that he is only talking about a pop song and not, say, the Treaty of Versailles.)

So you can picture Brown walking into Vox Studios on the evening of 7 August with a heavy heart. He may not have had a gun to his head but he had a grenade at his door and a steady rat-a-tat of criticism in his ears. The song had come together gradually. According to Brown's manager, Charles Bobbit: 'We were sitting there watching television and there was some black-on-black crime going on, and he said, "Mr Bobbit, I'm having trouble with the Black Panthers, they don't believe we're real, and look at this." He said, "Why don't black people love each other? Why can't black people respect each other? Why can't we have pride?"' The music, tough and agile, was written on the day by his bandleader, Alfred 'Pee Wee' Ellis. 'I think I might have been informed about the title, [so] I had that rhythm to go by,' says Ellis. 'He intended to make a statement, and a big one.'

Brown had a notion that the chorus should be sung by a jubilant crowd of children, so he invited the band and crew to bring their kids along to the studio ('I wanted it to sound as if there were a million people singing along with me'), the only catch being that he started work so late that most of the kids had been

packed off to bed by the time the tape was rolling. Undeterred, he dispatched Bobbit to round up some random children from neighbouring streets and restaurants, many of whom were, in fact, white or Asian. 'They were having fun,' remembers Ellis. 'They were in a room with *James Brown*.'

'Say It Loud' demonstrated funk's flexibility as a vehicle for protest. Urgent, commanding and repetitious, the sound was tailor-made for a good slogan. Brown performed it like a preacher, speaking the verses (though throwing in his usual wails and grunts) and leading the choruses. 'Say it loud!' he ordered. 'I'm black and I'm proud!' the kids shouted back. Let others name names or point fingers; Brown was bent on accentuating the positive.

'People call [the song] militant and angry,' he later wrote. 'Maybe because of the line about dying on your feet instead of living on your knees. But really, if you listen to it, it sounds like a children's song.' Once again, he wanted the best of both worlds. To his black critics, it was a song of empowerment. To his white fans – hey, don't worry! – it was just a bunch of kids singing along. Purely as a piece of music, that tension made it electric, the 'die on our feet' line seemingly bussed in from a far angrier song. Ellis remembers the first time they performed it live, at the Apollo: 'James Brown says, "Say it loud!" and the whole audience says, "I'm black and I'm proud!" Just that quick. It gave me chills. That's when it hit me we'd done something important that would last.'

But as a political statement, it became entangled in its own mixed messages. Some radio stations dropped him from their playlists, inspiring him to take out a newspaper advertisement which executed a brilliant semantic foxtrot around the racial vocabulary of the day. 'We know the Negro deejay won't play this record. We know the colored deejay won't play this record, but every BLACK deejay will play this record!' To underline his point, he cut his processed pompadour back to an Afro. 'It was like giving up something for Lent,' he said, lest anyone doubt the scale of his sacrifice. 'I wanted people to know that one of the

most prized things I let go of was my hair. It was a real attraction to my business. But I would cut it off for the movement.'

If 'Say It Loud' was not the sole catalyst for a new wave of racial consciousness in pop then it was certainly the flagship, selling 750,000 copies in its first two weeks. Before 1968, blackness was encoded in such uplifting generalities as 'change' and 'respect', but following 'Say It Loud', black musicians embraced a new candour. Sly and the Family Stone recorded 'Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey' ('Don't call me whitey, nigger,' responded Sly's backing singers equably), and Curtis Mayfield's Impressions released 'Mighty Mighty (Spade and Whitey)', followed by such melanin-conscious Mayfield solo songs as 'Miss Black America' and 'We the People Who Are Darker than Blue'.*

One person who chose not to capitalise on the impact of 'Say It Loud', however, was Brown himself. His next political song was rather less contentious: the Christmas single 'Santa Claus Go Straight to the Ghetto'. Come 1969 and he was back to preaching the gospel of capitalist self-sufficiency with 'I Don't Want Nobody to Give Me Nothing (Open Up the Door, I'll Get It Myself)'. No Santa Claus (or his state-funded alternatives) for him. Although he backed Humphrey through to election day, he didn't turn down an invitation to play at Richard Nixon's inaugural ball in January. 'He had a lot of respect for Nixon,' says Ellis. 'He had a van that he used to ride me around in and tell me he had secret listening devices that Nixon had given him. I don't know if it was even true!'

The Panthers, meanwhile, were in bad shape. In September 1968 Huey Newton was sentenced to two to fifteen years for voluntary manslaughter and wounding. Eldridge Cleaver, fearing he would be killed by the police while awaiting trial, fled into exile in Cuba, and thence to Algiers. Bobby Seale was awaiting trial for his role in the recent unrest in Chicago. The alliance with the SNCC had fallen apart amid such bad blood that James

* Brown's song was directly quoted by both the Temptations ('Message From a Black Man') and Bob Marley ('Black Progress').

Forman had a nervous breakdown and checked into a psychiatric ward, while Stokely Carmichael was making plans to move to Ghana with his wife, Miriam Makeba. Throughout 1969 no fewer than 348 Panthers were arrested over clashes with police or allegations of conspiracy, while many others turned informant. Yet FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, whose COINTELPRO programme was busy infiltrating the Panther ranks, still deemed them 'the greatest threat to the internal security of the country'.

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When Brown performed 'Say It Loud' in Dallas, just days after its release in August 1968, he set it up carefully, asking black fans to shout 'I'm black!' and everyone else to join in on 'I'm proud!', and galloped through it in under three minutes, as if it were something he needed to get out of the way. 'Thank you,' he said earnestly. 'The atmosphere seems so clean now. We can really get together now.'

But later, he would complain that it cost him a portion of his white audience that would never return. 'I paid the price for "Say It Loud",' he claimed. 'The white community took it entirely the wrong way, as a kind of aggressive statement meant to induce fear.' Naive enough to believe that he could control listeners' reactions to his songs, he was horrified that 'Say It Loud' had gotten away from him and found a new calling as a radical battle cry, but how could it not? When Olympic sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood on the podium and silently raised their gloved fists towards the Mexican sky in a Black Power salute on 16 October, many black viewers would have found themselves mouthing Brown's words. 'They thought I was saying kill the honky,' he complained. Meanwhile, those who really *were* saying 'kill the honky' maintained their belief that he was an establishment suck-up. He was like a man trying to lash down a tarpaulin in a gale: however hard he sweated, there was always one corner coming loose.

'He thought he was all-powerful and could do all that,' says

Ellis. 'And sometimes he pulled it off.' But, he adds gruffly: 'It was about James Brown first and foremost. He had so much opportunity and he could have done so much stuff to help people, when most of the stuff he did was a scam. It was about him being seen as the leader of our community. Luckily he landed on a good platform [with "Say It Loud"], and I'm glad he did.'

Brown blamed the drop-off in bookings the following year on white hostility to 'Say It Loud'; he was back, he sighed, 'preaching to the choir'. His friend and band member Bobby Byrd claimed that, on the contrary, it was Brown's new association with the hated Nixon that drove fans away. The truth, like 'the most important black man in America', was somewhere in the middle.

prove I'm one of the people. I was doing it against my instincts.'*

For the rest of what Phil Ochs angrily described as the 'sodomized Seventies', rock stars would confine their politicking to single issues: Dylan's 'Hurricane' (1975), about wrongly convicted ex-boxer Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter, or Randy Newman's droll satires on American bigotry and belligerence in songs such as 'Political Science' (1972) and 'Rednecks' (1974). Apartheid, nuclear power and the environment were also potential subjects, but no cause united people like the war had. After the last US helicopter left Saigon on 30 April 1975, Phil Ochs' brother Michael told David Crosby, 'It was like now that the dragon was slain, everybody was lost.'

Many others would eschew social comment completely. Even as soul music took up protest songs with a vengeance, rock turned inward. The touchstones were *Crosby, Stills and Nash*, Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*, Joni Mitchell's *Blue* and the back-to-the-land aesthetic of Dylan's former backing group, the Band. In a lofty defence of political apathy, Pete Townshend talked about creating 'a realistic and self-contained microcosm working effectively and humanely within a corrupt and apathetic democracy'. This withdrawal into apolitical introspection was intensified, in some cases, by vast wealth and heavy drug use. 'I cared mostly about my next fix,' Crosby candidly confessed in his memoir *Long Time Gone*. 'I didn't care too much about people starving in Afghanistan.'

The new disconnection from politics was encapsulated in one of 1972's breakthrough hits. The debut single from the Eagles, a new country-rock outfit from Los Angeles, was 'Take It Easy', a cheerfully pragmatic hymn to surrender which advised listeners: 'Lighten up while you still can / Don't even try to understand.'

* His 1973 album *Mind Games* (working title: *Make Love Not War*) did contain one political song, 'Bring on the Lucie (Freda People)', but critics either overlooked the message or, like *Creem*'s Lester Bangs, didn't rate it: 'This ain't Frantz Fanon, it's the same fat limey who sang "Twist and Shout".'

11

'You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out'

Gil Scott-Heron, 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised', 1970

Poems that kill

Gil Scott-Heron, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (Flying Dutchman LP, 1970). This album featured the first recording of 'The Revolution Will Not be Televised'.

In the days leading up to 19 May 1968, twenty-year-old Abiodun Oyewole was nervous. The young poet was booked to appear at a birthday tribute to the late Malcolm X in Mount Morris Park, Harlem, and he didn't have a clue what to perform. Although he had studied poetry at high school in Queens, and discovered performance poetry after seeing a theatrical recital of verses by the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, his sole political poem to date, 'Wall Street Journal', was about the exploitation of Martin Luther King's death the previous month – not really appropriate for a Malcolm X tribute.

In need of inspiration, the budding poet took a walk around Harlem, soaking up the language of the street corner. '"What is your thing" is what everybody was saying,' he remembers in the book *On a Mission*. 'It meant What are you doing for the revolution? What are you doing for the movement? . . . Everybody had to have a thing.' Oyewole wrote a poem called 'What Is Your Thing?' His fellow performers also threw down the gauntlet to the black community: David Nelson asked, 'Are You Ready Black People?' while Gylan Kain observed, 'Niggers Are Untogether People.' That day, the three men became the Last Poets.

'I was the baby in the group,' Oyewole told *Perfect Sound Forever*. 'Kain was the greatest, most intense poet I'd ever heard in my life, especially dealing with the subject of "niggers" and how he made it clear how detrimental it was for us to follow that pattern.' The three men came on stage at Marcus Garvey Park performing a chant Oyewole had heard during coverage of a demonstration at Howard University. 'Are you ready, niggers?' they asked. 'You got to be ready.' Soon the whole crowd was chanting along. *Readiness* was one of the watchwords of the era. Readiness for what? Revolution, of course.

*

The Last Poets came together during an episode in the history of black America when it seemed that there was no ceiling on what changes might come. 'There wasn't any question about whether there was going to be one or not,' Oyewole writes. 'The revolution was inevitable.' Artists were expected to join the propaganda effort. 'All art must reflect the Black Revolution,' declared Ron Karenga of the black nationalist US Organization, 'and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid.' Compared to the half-hearted revolutionary chic of white rock bands, this was serious business. The Last Poets named themselves after reading the poem 'Towards a Walk in the Sun', in which US-based South African poet K. William Kgositsile argues that the fight against the oppressor will at some point make art irrelevant: 'The only poem you will hear will be the spearpoint pivoted in the punctured marrow of the villain.' 'Therefore,' David Nelson extrapolated, 'we are the last poets of the world.'

The Last Poets, like the Watts Prophets and Gil Scott-Heron, operated at the nexus of black America's two most radical art forms: poetry and jazz. The most celebrated and controversial poet of Black Power was Amiri Baraka, formerly LeRoi Jones. After Malcolm X was killed, he abandoned his white family and beat-poet friends and moved to Harlem, where he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre. His 1965 poem 'Black Art' was a two-fisted manifesto for black poetry as intellectual warfare: 'We want "poems that kill." / Assassin poems'. Even now, it makes the reader flinch, due as much to its lurid misogyny and anti-Semitism as its stabbing verbal energy – anticipating the vexed power dynamic of militant hip-hop by twenty years, the oppressed becomes the oppressor.* Many young black poets responded to his call for a new species of warrior verse. 'He was taking strides outside the boundaries,' Oyewole told *Perfect Sound Forever*. 'He was a major influence and a true mentor of the Last Poets.'

* He repudiated these sentiments in 1980's 'Confessions of a Former Anti-Semite', later putting them down to 'trying to be super-militant'.

If the ideas behind 'Black Art' had a soundtrack in 1965, it was the avant-garde jazz of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Archie Shepp and Albert Ayler – Baraka even recorded a jazz version of 'Black Art' with drummer Sunny Murray. Shepp, a fearsome saxophonist who commemorated Malcolm X on the eerie 'Malcolm, Malcolm – Semper Malcolm', told Nat Hentoff of the *New York Times*: 'Jazz is the product of the whites – the ofays – too often my enemy. It is the progeny of the blacks – my kinsmen. By this I mean, you own the music and we make it . . . I play about the death of me by you. I exult in the life of me in spite of you. That's what the avant-garde is about. We're not simply angry young men – we're enraged, and I think it's damn well time.'

Jazz and poetry went further and cut deeper than Motown ever could. While soul music's voices of protest were firmly entrenched in the mainstream music industry, circumscribed by concerns over airplay and how much rhetoric their existing fans would tolerate, even their most outspoken lyrics paled beside Eldridge Cleaver's battle cries. But just as Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) invented a DIY black cinema which operated outside of Hollywood, the new breed of black performance poets delivered messages undiluted by commercial considerations. Larry Neal, one of Baraka's allies in the Black Arts Movement, used to have heated discussions about the need for a truly radical black lyricist: 'Suppose James Brown read Fanon.' The new black wordsmiths offered a partial answer.*

*

During their first months together, the Last Poets swiftly aligned themselves with the revolutionary vanguard. They performed at Panther functions and invited the Panthers' own poets to appear at their East Wind poetry workshop on 125th Street. That summer, director Herbert Danska filmed three of the Last Poets

* The Panthers fielded their own revolutionary musicians, singer Elaine Brown and Temptations-style soul band the Lumpen, although their appeal proved rather limited.

– Nelson, Kain, and late arrival Felipe Luciano – rhyming on the streets and rooftops of Harlem. The movie, *Right On!*, would later be hailed by producer Woodie King, Jr, as 'the first totally black film', making 'no concession in language or symbolism to white audiences', but by the time it was released in 1970, things had become complicated. The film's three stars had broken away, calling themselves the Original Last Poets, leaving Oyewole with percussionist Nilija. 'We wanted to have a collective of men, different heads, with everybody not thinking the same but our ideologies similar enough for us to get on the stage,' said Oyewole. 'That proved to be, beyond everything else, the biggest test.' But one day the pair received an important visitor at East Wind, a hard-nosed young man from Ohio named Umar Bin Hassan.

Hassan had grown up in the tough Elizabeth Park housing projects of North Akron. As a teenager, he took part in the 1966 Hough race riots, battling the National Guard in the streets of Cleveland, and fell in with local black nationalist Ahmad Evans. When he saw the Panthers on TV, marching into Sacramento: 'That shit blew my mind . . . I fell in love with these brothers instantly.' His trigger to start writing poetry was a magazine picture of Amiri Baraka, arrested, bandaged and bleeding after the 1967 Newark riots, with the caption: 'Smash those jelly white faces.'

In February 1969 Hassan moved to New York and dropped in on the Last Poets, whom he had met the preceding year at an arts festival in Ohio. Oyewole found him a place to stay and invited him to make a guest appearance with him at a show. 'There's a brother here from Ohio,' Oyewole told the crowd. 'You decide if he's a Last Poet.' After Hassan performed two of his poems, the typically combative 'Nigger Town' and 'Muthafucka', the crowd shouted, 'Yeah, make him a Last Poet!' A few months later the Poets recruited another new member, a former paratrooper and Muslim convert called Jalal Mansur Nuriddin, and it was this line-up that recorded the 1970 album *The Last Poets*. 'Jalal almost didn't get into the group,' Oyewole told *Perfect Sound*

Forever. 'Nobody liked him. *Everything* he said was rhymes. All the damn time. He didn't talk to you unless it was a fucking rhyme. But I'm really tolerant.'

The first line you hear on *The Last Poets* is Oyewole's: 'I understand that time is running out.' Behind him, his bandmates strike up a sinister chant, 'Tick tock, tick tock.' The effect, which carries through the whole album, is both bracing and claustrophobic. While each track is credited to a single Last Poet, the others crowd around him, chanting, whooping, muttering, breathing, moaning, creating a mood of humid urgency: there is too much to say and not enough time in which to say it. America itself is in the crosshairs ('The Statue of Liberty is a prostitute') but so are slack, unrevolutionary black people: *niggers*. The word was only cautiously entering soul music by 1970, but here it is sprayed like bullets, each hard *g* a shock to the ear: 'Niggers Are Scared of Revolution', 'Wake Up, Niggers'.* The album is a series of demands that only the most revolutionary black man could hope to meet, an unforgiving ultimatum designed to shock listeners out of their perceived complacency. According to the black writer Darius James, the album 'dropped a bomb on black Amerikkka's turntables. Muthafuckas ran f'cover. Nobody was ready.'

There was, of course, not a hope of airplay, but 'Wake Up, Niggers' reached a hip audience when it was used in Nic Roeg's *Performance*, starring Mick Jagger. Signifying a cold blast of reality into the cloistered, dope-fogged atmosphere of a rock star's lair, it mirrored the real-life contrast between the decadent detachment of the rock artistocracy and the fierce hunger of black militants. The album broke into the national Top 30, through word-of-mouth: a remarkable feat. It also attracted the attention

* That year, the mild-mannered Curtis Mayfield shocked listeners with his introduction to '(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below We're All Gonna Go', an apocalyptic twist on multiracial unity: 'Niggers! Whiteys! Jews! Crackers!' The Temptations' satirical, Whitfield–Strong song about white flight, 'Run Charlie Run' featured the line 'The niggers are coming,' much to the band's consternation.

of COINTELPRO, the covert branch of the FBI which, since 1956, had been surveilling, infiltrating, harassing and sabotaging 'subversive' groups, with especial attention paid to the civil rights and anti-war movements.

No sooner had the album been released than the group was in flux once again. While Nuriddin wanted to be a star like his hero Miles Davis, Oyewole had had enough of poetry. 'I began to feel that being a poet was a pitiful example of being a revolutionary,' he remembered. First, he joined the Harlem Committee for Self-Defense, an offshoot of the Panthers. Then, at Shaw University in North Carolina, he fell in with student radicals. Oyewole and a friend stole some firearms and mounted an armed robbery on some local Klansmen, which led to a manhunt, arrest and almost four years in jail. Thus ended Oyewole's revolutionary adventure. 'Back then, I wanted to see everything burned and people hanged,' he told *Perfect Sound Forever*. 'I wanted to see riots. The one thing that stopped me in my tracks was this guy speaking at one of our forums: "You can't really be a revolutionary until you know the kind of world that you want your kid to live in." . . . These people were looking for another concept.'

Oyewole's most startling poem was 'When the Revolution Comes' (1970), in which he envisioned 'guns and rifles . . . taking the place of poems and essays' and 'black cultural centres' as 'forts supplying the revolutionaries with food and arms'. 'There I was, on the front lines of this great would-be revolution,' recalled Oyewole. 'I thought, how could I be a catalyst for this Armageddon? I wondered how can I say something that hasn't been said before?' But he was caustically sceptical about black people's readiness for such an uprising: 'Until then you know and I know niggers will party and bullshit.' And the first line would prove influential on another young black poet, Gil Scott-Heron: 'When the revolution comes, some of us will probably catch it on TV / With chicken hanging from our mouths.'

*

Gil Scott-Heron was born in Chicago in 1949 and spent his childhood with his grandmother in rural Tennessee, where he was playing piano by the age of four and writing detective stories by eleven. At thirteen he moved to the Bronx to live with his mother and earned a scholarship to the prestigious Fieldston School. He wrote a high-school paper on Langston Hughes, who encouraged him to apply to his own alma mater, Pennsylvania's Lincoln University. It was there he befriended a musically gifted younger student called Brian Jackson, with whom he formed a nine-piece band, Black and Blues, the start of a long and fertile creative alliance. 'We hit it off immediately,' Jackson told writer James Maycock. 'I thought, "What a way this man has with words!" . . . I figured if we can do the music right, we can draw enough people in to hear this.'

Scott-Heron took a year out from university to move back to New York and write his debut novel, a socially conscious urban thriller called *The Vulture*. He never returned to Lincoln to finish his degree; there were too many exciting opportunities coming his way. After writing a second novel, *The Nigger Factory*, set in a black university, and a volume of poetry, *Small Talk on 125th and Lenox*, he approached Bob Thiele, whose fledgling Flying Dutchman label was affiliated to Scott-Heron's publisher. Thiele didn't have the budget to finance a full musical recording but gave Scott-Heron the opportunity to perform his *Small Talk* poems as spoken word, backed by three percussionists (Jackson, still studying at Lincoln, was unavailable). The breathless liner notes which ran alongside the cover image of a skinny, intense young man slouched in a ghetto doorway promised, 'Gil Scott-Heron takes you Inside Black . . . His is the voice of the new black man, rebellious and proud, demanding to be heard, announcing his destiny: "I AM COMING!"'

From the start, Scott-Heron wanted to bring a new dimension to black music. 'There are 360° of the black experience,' he told *Rolling Stone*'s Sheila Weller, 'but the same *one* kept being sung about: sex-and-love, love-and-sex.' He was equally certain

of the style he wanted, inspired by Baraka and, further back, the West African tradition of the wandering bard, or *griot*. 'It seemed practical within a system where very few of our people can read with the type of interpretive perception that's necessary to deal with poetry,' he explained. He cited among his inspirations Langston Hughes, Huey Newton, John Coltrane and Nina Simone: 'She was black before it was fashionable to be black.'

Whereas the Last Poets had the theatrical vigour of actors or preachers, Scott-Heron was more of a raconteur. The live recording of *Small Talk on 125th and Lenox* is peppered with charming banter and appreciative audience laughter and he sings three tracks at the piano, displaying an aching tenor very different from his tough, sardonic speaking voice. He also puts the need for a stable home and a good education before revolutionary rhetoric, scolding street-corner radicals for damning other black men with Maoist hellfire ('Brother'), and telling 'a paleface SDS motherfucker' to 'go and find his own revolution' ('Comment #1'). 'Whitey on the Moon' has its eye firmly on the bottom line: 'I can't pay no doctor's bills / With Whitey on the moon.' The album's indisputable highlight, however, is the poem which would overshadow all the rest: 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised'.

When *Small Talk* sold well enough to finance a second album, Scott-Heron decided to give its standout track another outing. Jackson had by now been ejected from Lincoln for protesting against the Eurocentric curriculum, and was free to bring his prodigious songwriting and arranging skills to bear. Consequently, *Pieces of a Man* (1971) was a completely different beast. Suddenly, the 'New Black Poet' was singing richly textured soul-jazz songs such as the addiction narrative 'Home Is Where the Hatred Is' and the celebratory 'Lady Day and John Coltrane', with a full band behind him.

The only poem on the disc was the revamped 'Revolution', now in possession of a muscular, prowling bass line and darting flute which made Scott-Heron's words both more commanding

and more seductive, and let his sly sense of humour breathe. His subject was a revolution of the mind, not the gun. 'That was satire,' he later told writer Rob Fitzpatrick. 'People would try to argue that it was this militant message, but just how militant can you really be when you're saying, "The revolution will not make you look five pounds thinner"?'

Scott-Heron unpacks the Last Poets' image of a revolution without commercials into a hallucinatory, channel-hopping tour of white popular culture, with cameos from, among others, Nixon, Agnew, Steve McQueen, Jackie Onassis and the Beverly Hillbillies. The language of advertising and TV news coverage is satirically *détourned* with immaculate precision; Scott-Heron is a pretty persuasive announcer himself. Double meanings abound: long-running soap opera *Search for Tomorrow* is contrasted with 'black people . . . looking for a brighter day'. 'The revolution will be no re-run, brothers,' he concludes. 'The revolution will be live.' Though not the first song to attack TV's mind-numbing power (Frank Zappa did so on 1966's Watts-inspired 'Trouble Every Day'), it was the first to use the medium's vocabulary against itself, twisting pre-chewed banalities, like papier-mâché, into new and subversive messages. The song would come to define him above all others, to his mild annoyance. 'The song that people decide to attach to you – the one they identify you with – is not often giving the other ones a look-in,' he told Fitzpatrick.

The spoken-word format attracted artists who wanted to go beyond sloganeering. 'You have to be able to perceive things with clarity, in depth as well as superficially,' Scott-Heron told the *NME*. 'If you're attempting to get people to think, which undoubtedly [James Brown] was, you have to get your information together otherwise it becomes terribly transparent that you haven't done your homework.' He called his albums 'survival kits on wax'. 'I sometimes thought he was a little too blunt, he kinda beat people over the head with it,' Jackson told James Maycock. 'But you know what? Sometimes that's good for you!'

It was a boom time for black spoken-word recordings, with and without musical backing. Motown's Black Forum imprint issued albums by King, Carmichael, Baraka and Black Panther Elaine Brown, among others. Nikki Giovanni presented the WNET TV show *Soul!* between 1970 and 1972, with guests including poets (Baraka, Gylan Kain), politicians (Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson), and household names (Muhammad Ali, Bill Cosby, Sidney Poitier). Already a published poet, she recorded *Truth Is On Its Way* (1971), a hybrid of poetry and gospel, with the New York Community Choir.

The same year, the depleted Last Poets released their second album, *This Is Madness*, with a memorably stark advertisement. 'IF YOU'RE WHITE, THIS RECORD WILL SCARE THE SHIT OUT OF YOU,' it read in block capitals, white on black. 'IF YOU'RE BLACK, THIS RECORD WILL SCARE THE NIGGER OUT OF YOU.' And in South Central Los Angeles, an equally forceful coalition of militant poets made its debut.

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The Watts Writers Workshop had been founded by Budd Schulberg, screenwriter of *On the Waterfront* and *A Face in the Crowd*, in the aftermath of the riots. During that period, young black people flocked to Watts to be part of the new creative scene as money flooded in from charities, government agencies and Hollywood liberals. In 1966 one newcomer was Texas-born Amde Hamilton, fresh out of prison after a four-year stint for drug possession. He only visited the workshop because he was out of work and needed something to eat. 'Watts people were the lowest on the totem pole, even in the black community,' he says. 'We were the poorest, we were the farthest out. The workshop was a place where people came to express themselves. There was singing, dancing, acting, writing.'

Hamilton got to know two other young poets: Richard Dedeaux, an aspiring actor from Louisiana, and Otis O'Solomon from the Deep South. Despite initial reservations about their

differing styles ('Anthony [Amde Hamilton] would go out there and talk about tearing up the world and we'd try to put it back together in some way,' explained Dedeaux), they teamed up for a talent show at the Inner City Cultural Centre. They were calling themselves Watts Fire until a female poet on the same bill rechristened them the Watts Prophets. They won second place, and began reading across the country – schools, prisons, parks, nightclubs, housing projects – but their militant message was not an easy sell. After one club performance, the owner told O'Solomon, 'You guys are going to make a lot of money, but not in this club.'

'What made the Watts Prophets so different was that we were so visual,' Hamilton told writer Brian Cross. 'Each poem was to us a complete play and each poet contributed to that. We didn't just stand on stage or walk back and forth . . . we would act it out.' If theatre was one pillar of their approach, then jazz was another. 'The cat in the front can be freestyling and blowing his solo and the cats in the back are supporting him, like a rhythm section,' Hamilton explains. 'It was like if Charlie Parker would walk in on Diz and Monk – they might not have anything written down but they all knew their parts.'

At first, the Prophets were oblivious to the similar work being done by the Last Poets. 'We didn't know them and they didn't know us,' says Hamilton. 'They were all the way east and we were all the way west. They talked mostly about whitey and revolution; we talked about ourselves. We weren't trying to be revolutionaries; we were trying to save our community.'

When Laugh Records, home of comedian Richard Pryor, heard about the Poets, it set up a subsidiary label, ALA Records, to release a compilation of poems from the Watts Writers Workshop. *The Black Voices: On the Streets of Watts* (1969) featured four poets, who were meant to record three poems apiece, but Hamilton was so fierce, so urgent, that he ended up dominating the record with nine. Indeed, he performed so energetically that he strained his back and had to rap his final contributions lying on the floor.

Beside the others' jazzier, more self-consciously poetical contributions, he sounds like some raging, unflinching prophet of doom: *poems that kill*. In just six seconds, 'The Meek Ain't Gonna' is a gangsta rap mission statement twenty years before the fact. 'The meek ain't gonna inherit shit,' Amde spits, 'cuz I'll take it!'

During 1970 the Prophets demonstrated their popularity by performing for eighteen weekends straight at Maverick's Flat, an influential club on Crenshaw Boulevard. Their skills honed by performing day and night, they cut their debut album, *Rappin' Black in a White World* (1971), in a single take, with musical accompaniment from former Motown songwriter Dee Dee McNeil. The poems, most of which are less than two minutes long, merge into one sustained piece. They can be thrillingly bellicose: 'AmeriKKKa' hijacks JFK to ask, shockingly, 'Ask not what you can do for your country but what in the fuck has it done for you?' But the best moments, especially the four-song, piano-led 'What Is a Man' suite, call on a more personal mode of storytelling. 'We were vomiting,' says Hamilton. 'We had a stomach full of pain. But it wasn't just rage. It had a lot to do with love and trying to understand what was happening to us.'

Audiences were, understandably, divided. 'White folks were afraid of us, black intellectuals was ashamed of us,' Richard Dedeaux recalled to writer Jeff Chang. 'And,' Amde Hamilton chipped in, 'the grassroots loved us!' By 1971, black audiences were ready for tough new voices.

*

The newest icon of the Black Power revolution wasn't even a real person. His name was Sweetback, and he was the star of America's first ever hit black movie, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. Melvin Van Peebles, the thirty-seven-year-old who wrote, directed, edited, scored and starred in the movie, was following his own Guerrilla Cinema manifesto, the first part of which read: 'NO COP OUT. I wanted a victorious film. A film where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other's eyes.'

Van Peebles dedicated his movie, an X-rated paean to black manhood, to 'all the brothers and sisters who had enough of the Man'. Among its acts of cultural sacrilege was the use of famous freedom songs to soundtrack the barely pubescent Sweetback's seduction by a much older woman. On its release in April 1971 the Muslim paper *Muhammad Speaks* condemned it as a 'mangled, crippled, white supremacist, non-thinking, savage, inhuman version of Black people', but Black Panther Huey Newton was smitten with its uncompromising vision, urging his brothers to watch the 'first truly revolutionary Black film made'. Plenty did: it became the biggest-grossing independent movie of all time. Perhaps Newton envied Sweetback's ability to stick it to the Man and emerge triumphant. His own life was proving rather more complicated.

Newton's manslaughter conviction had been reversed on a technicality the previous year, and he emerged from prison, free on bail until his retrial, on 5 November 1970. A crowd of 10,000 supporters greeted their hero's release with untrammelled jubilation. Newton, however, was returning to a different party from the one he had left two years earlier. During his time in jail, Black Panther membership had declined amid rancorous infighting, fuelled by COINTELPRO's dirty tricks. Despite the revivifying jolt provided by Newton's release, healing the party's wounds was a tall order, and Newton, wracked by paranoia and impossibly high expectations, was not the man for the job.

Even before his release, he had made enemies in his own party over the case of George Jackson. Convicted for armed robbery when he was eighteen, Jackson had become a noted radical behind bars, founding the Marxist Black Guerrilla Family and joining the Panthers. While incarcerated in Soledad Prison, California, in January 1970, he was accused of murdering a white prison officer in revenge for the fatal shooting of three black prisoners. He and two other prisoners charged with the killing became known as the Soledad Brothers, and Jackson's writings while in solitary confinement made him an international celebrity.

While Jackson awaited trial, his seventeen-year-old brother

Jonathan hatched a quixotic plan to secure his freedom. From his exile in Algiers, Eldridge Cleaver promised armed support for Jonathan's plan to seize hostages to barter for his brother's release, then hijack a plane to fly him to safety in Cuba. Newton thought the plan ridiculous and withdrew Panther support. Undaunted, Jonathan Jackson pressed ahead, with guns owned by UCLA professor Angela Davis, single-handedly taking hostages at Marin County courthouse. The resultant shootout left Jackson, two escaping prisoners, and Judge Harold J. Haley dead, and three others wounded.

Some Panthers blamed Jonathan Jackson's death not on his own recklessness but on Newton's cowardice. Newton further alienated the rank-and-file by refusing to discipline the erratic and self-serving David Hilliard, who had run (and, some thought, run aground) the party in his absence. In fact, Newton seemed more interested in the spoils of celebrity than the challenges of leadership. Courted by Hollywood liberals, he acquired a taste for cognac, cocaine and groupies. *This* was the man whose iconic, warrior-like portrait still adorned so many walls? *This* was the man entrusted to lead the revolution? In February 1971, members of the Panther 21, a group of Panthers on trial for conspiracy to bomb buildings and assassinate police officers in New York, wrote an open letter praising Weatherman for its support and accusing the Panther leadership of 'tripping out, pseudo-masochism, arrogance, myrmidonism, dogmatism, regionalism, regimentation, and fear.' Newton responded by expelling the Panther 21.

Panthers disenchanted with Newton turned to Eldridge Cleaver. The FBI stoked tensions by sending Cleaver forged letters, allegedly from party members, urging him to take charge. In March Newton appeared on morning TV show *AM San Francisco* to discuss the Panthers' forthcoming Intercommunal Day of Solidarity at Oakland Auditorium, and the powder-keg exploded. On the phone from Algiers, Cleaver savaged Hilliard's leadership and demanded that Newton reinstate the Panther 21. Furious at this challenge to his authority, Newton promptly expelled Cleaver;

Cleaver, in turn, expelled Newton and the Oakland leadership. Broadly speaking, the east coast chapters backed Cleaver while the west coast stuck with Newton, triggering fratricidal civil war. Despite Newton's charm offensive – concentrating on free clinics and food programmes as well as political campaigning – members abandoned the party in droves. As for George Jackson, he was shot dead in San Quentin prison on 21 August. Prison authorities claimed that he had died during an escape attempt which also killed three guards and two white prisoners; Jackson's supporters claimed he was the victim of a political assassination.* Either way, yet another black revolutionary icon was gone. Elsewhere, the US Organization's Ron Karenga was jailed for torturing two female followers, the FBI shut down the Mississippi compound of the black separatist Republic of New Afrika, and the nadir of a traumatic year was yet to come.

On 9 September around a thousand inmates of Attica Correctional Facility in New York State rioted and took control of the prison, taking thirty-eight prison officers and civilian employees hostage. After four days of negotiations, state troopers retook Attica during a bloody assault which left twenty-six inmates and nine hostages dead. A subsequent state commission noted that this was the worst day of violence between Americans since the massacres of Native Americans in the late nineteenth century. The commission warned that, without speedy reform, there would be more confrontations to come: 'Attica is every prison, and every prison is Attica.'†

* Nina Simone's 'I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free' was played at his funeral.

† In 1972 jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp marked the previous year's twin horrors with the fervid 'Attica Blues' and 'Blues for Brother George Jackson'. The Jackson case also inspired a brief spasm of what Tom Wolfe diagnosed as 'radical chic' among the rock aristocracy, with Bob Dylan's first topical song in eight years, 'George Jackson', and tributes to Angela Davis from the Rolling Stones (the crass, lecherous 'Sweet Black Angel') and John Lennon ('Angela').

Sweetback may have gotten away with fighting the system but in the real world, for George Jackson, the Attica rebels and the warring remnants of the Black Panthers, the revolution, televised or otherwise, would not be happening at all.

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Although COINTELPRO was disbanded in April 1971, the government continued to monitor black artists in other guises throughout the decade. Unbeknown to the Watts Prophets, one black employee of the Watts Writers Workshop, Darthard Perry, was an FBI informant codenamed Othello; to his great regret, Amde Hamilton was the man who hired him. In a remarkable TV interview some years later, Perry revealed how much importance the bureau placed on art in the black community. 'You can take their culture and use it against them,' he said, emphasising that the FBI's archive of African-American books, magazines, videos and records exceeded that of a well-stocked Harlem library. His white FBI supervisor, he said, 'could name some jams of Miles Davis that I hadn't even heard of. He could name some books I hadn't even read pertaining to black culture.' In 1975 Perry crept into the Workshop with two cans of kerosene and a highway flare and burned it down. 'It got to me a great deal,' he admitted with an unreadable expression. 'I loved that theatre. I built the stage.'

After *Rappin' Black in a White World*, the Watts Prophets couldn't find a label to put out the follow-up, *Hey World*, and would not release another album together until 1997. 'Our goal was to open up an area of expression for people who had no area of expression, and we were totally successful at that,' says Hamilton. 'But we didn't make a dime.'

The Last Poets, now driven by Nuriddin, continued but by 1975 Hassan had gone. 'First, I started selling cocaine, then taking it, then [became] addicted to it,' he admitted. 'These were times when I didn't want to be a Last Poet, but I couldn't get away from it. I used to give poetry readings in crack houses.

People would say, "Ain't you . . . ?"'

Scott-Heron would lose several years to drugs himself in subsequent decades, but during the 1970s he enjoyed a creative blue streak. There are many reasons why he thrived where the Last Poets and the Watts Prophets did not: he had a consistently loyal musical partner, major-label backing and a far more flexible and mellifluous style. Moreover, while the other groups were inextricably linked with the Black Power era, Scott-Heron was ahead of the curve on issues from Watergate ('H2Ogate Blues') to apartheid ('Johannesburg') to nuclear safety ('We Almost Lost Detroit'). 'You have to make your voice heard,' he told Rob Fitzpatrick. 'There's a difference between being a piano player from Tennessee and an international crusader for some kind of right or wrong. This was not what I was trying to do.'

As the revolutionary flame dimmed, he was perfectly attuned to the ashy realities of inner-city life. In the words of his 1974 album, it was *Winter in America*.