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Film Review: *Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)*

By Cameron Smith

In the summer of 1969, a music festival was held in New York state. Hundreds of thousands attended. The festival, however, did not take place in Bethel, New York, home of the infamous Woodstock festival (August 15, 1969–August 18, 1969). The event, known as “The Harlem Cultural Festival,” took place in Harlem, New York, several months before the world-renowned Woodstock Music and Art Fair.¹ Held on weekends from June 29 through August 24, the festivities were filmed at a park in Harlem.² Although buried in the sands of time, this musical and multiethnic phenomenon was resurrected by one of music’s finest archaeologists. In his directorial debut, Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson (b. 1971) presented a documentary film about the festival, revealing a legacy that had been forgotten over decades, eclipsed by a music festival that celebrated the carefree attitude of the hippie era. Released in 2021, the film *Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)* offers an alternative to Woodstock and highlights the importance of African American culture through coverage of the Harlem Cultural Festival.³

Along with his many accolades, Questlove is the iconic drummer of the hip-hop conglomerate known as The Roots, and he provides the supporting sound to the quippy dialog of current *Tonight Show* host, Jimmy Fallon (b. 1974).⁴ What is lesser known about Questlove is that he stays busy outside of his role as a

¹ *Woodstock*, directed by Michael Wadleigh (1970; Warner Bros).

² Gind2005, Black Woodstock 1969, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Black_Woodstock_1969.jpg.

³ *Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)*, directed by Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson (2021, Searchlight Pictures).

⁴ *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, produced by Lorne Michaels. NBC Studios, New York, 2014–present.

drummer and has tackled many side projects and provided decades of soundscapes to music, entertainment, and hip-hop culture. The recently released Oscar-winning documentary, *Summer of Soul*, exemplifies his devotion not merely to the arts but to upholding the rituals of African American culture and contemporary music. Hip-hop culture is known for elements such as DJs, breakdancers, graffiti writers, and MCs (Masters of Ceremony). In addition to his love for hip-hop music, Questlove is a superfan of pop as well as rhythm and blues. His influence and devotion to music have given birth to documentaries and books showing the complexity of the African musical diaspora.

Born Amhir Khalib Thompson in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1971, the prolific artist who became known as Questlove was raised in a world governed by rhythm. His father, Lee Andrews (1936–2016) was the lead singer for Lee Andrews & The Hearts; his mother, Jacquelin Thompson (n.d.), held her own as a member of the Philadelphia soul conglomerate, Congress Alley.⁵ In the cross-section between the revolutionary counterculture movement of the 1960s, and the burgeoning disco era of the 1970s, Questlove became enthralled with the African American dance show, *Soul Train*, which aired from 1971 to 2006. According to a New York Times article entitled, “The Passion of Questlove,” his obsession with the dance series was such that Questlove missed the recording of a career-defining single he produced because he was in Japan digitizing old episodes of *Soul Train*.⁶ This penchant for music explains why he formed “The Roots” crew in high school and demonstrates his continued devotion toward Black musical tradition. What began with Questlove playing backup bucket drums to crewmate Tariq “Black

⁵ National Public Radio, “Ahmir Thompson Reflects On His ‘Roots,’” NPR, March 13, 2009,

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=101868609>.

⁶ Jasmine Hughes, “The Passion of Questlove,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2021,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/12/magazine/questlove-summer-of-soul.html>.

Thought” Trotter’s (b. 1973) rhymes on the streets of Philadelphia, morphed into a pivotal hip-hop band.⁷ Whereas a hip-hop group was typically composed of a DJ and MC, an evolution including live instrumentation was taking place, connecting old school musical traditions with the new.

When Questlove began his work on the documentary, he stated:

I am truly excited to help bring the passion, the story, and the music of the Harlem Cultural Festival to audiences around the world. The performances are extraordinary. I was stunned when I saw the lost footage for the first time. It’s incredible to look at 50 years of history that’s never been told, and I’m eager and humbled to tell that story.⁸

The Harlem Cultural Festival, referred to by some in later years as the “Black Woodstock,” was conceived by Tony Lawrence (c. 1936), a singer and community-activist, to celebrate African American culture. In the film, civil rights activist Reverend Al Sharpton (b. 1954) praised New York City Mayor John Lindsay (1921–2000)—a liberal Republican—as a co-facilitator of the event, calling the mayor popular amongst the Black population. However, writer Raymond Robinson (n.d.) of the New York *Amsterdam News*, a Black owned newspaper, hinted at the inevitable: The world would lionize Woodstock and forget about Harlem. He wrote, “The only time the white press concerns itself with the black community is during a riot or major disturbance.”⁹

⁷ “The Roots,” The Roots, accessed May 31, 2022, <https://the-roots.weebly.com>.

⁸ Michael Saponara, “Questlove to Direct ‘Black Woodstock’ Documentary on 1969’s Harlem Cultural Festival,” *Billboard*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/questlove-black-woodstock-documentary-8545166/>.

⁹ Jonathan Bernstein, “This 1969 Music Fest Has Been Called ‘Black Woodstock.’ Why Doesn’t Anyone Remember?,” *Rolling Stone*, August 9,

The festival was held in Mount Morris Park (also known as Marcus Garvey Park), located between Harlem and East Harlem in New York City; as the home of the Harlem Renaissance (1920s and 1930s), the area is significant for its rich cultural history.

Aside from being named after Marcus Mosiah Garvey Sr. (1887–1940), a pan-Africanist and businessman, this location is part of the Mount Morris Park Historic District.¹⁰ While Woodstock was held on a farm on the outskirts of town, the Harlem Cultural Festival was in the middle of the city, giving it a more community-oriented atmosphere.

The documentary first introduces the audience to Harlem through a tapestry of colorful images. Included among the imagery and soundbites is footage of what the city was like in the late 1960s. There was a marked dichotomy between unrest and social life, depicted in scenes of burning buildings and police brutality versus social gatherings and nightlife. As a distant homage to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, the film is reminiscent of the movement that paved the way for intellectual and cultural development. The festival's line-up of prolific artists ranged from a young Stevie Wonder (b. 1950) to a vibrant Nina Simone (1993–2003) and included blues, gospel, jazz, funk, and rock music styles; each performance demonstrated the diversity of the Black and Brown music experience.¹¹

Although both festivals occurred in 1969, there were many differences between The Harlem Cultural Festival and what became known as Woodstock. For example, attendees at the

2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/black-woodstock-harlem-cultural-festival-history-859626/>.

¹⁰ In 1971, The New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission declared Mount Morris Park to be a historic district. Walking tours take visitors past famous Harlem brownstones, across 125th Street, known as “the heartbeat of Harlem,” and the local parks where Black Woodstock occurred.

<https://welcometoharlem.com/tour/mount-morris-park-historic-walking-tour/>.

¹¹ A segment devoted to East Harlem exhibited the music of Mongo Santamaría (1917–2003) and Ray Barretto (1929–2006), an American percussionist of Puerto Rican ancestry.

Harlem festival wore clothing that ranged from church-going attire to brightly colored threads, demonstrating a more sedate experience and a local “home” connection. At the Woodstock event, audience members wore clothing associated with the hippie lifestyle; images of promiscuously dressed and naked men, women, and children permeate the Woodstock film. Chaos was managed differently at both concerts as well. Tony Lawrence was a calming presence when the crowd got riled up at the Harlem festival. Where Woodstock was more of a happy accident, every step of The Harlem Cultural Festival was meticulously calculated, down to the placement of the stage, due to the reliability of natural lighting. There was a sense of connection to the artists and the changing Black identity. The message of Woodstock revolved around safe drug usage, but the message in Harlem concerned political liberation, referencing assassinations and revolutions.

Many elements made The Harlem Cultural Festival an unprecedented force even before it was devised. By the late sixties, events in the country involved two Kennedy assassinations— John F. Kennedy (b. 1917) in 1963 and Robert Francis Kennedy (b. 1925) in 1968—and the assassination of two of the country’s most prominent Black leaders, Malcolm X (b. 1925) in 1965 and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (b. 1929) in 1968. Among African Americans, a climate of tension resulted in a hodgepodge of Dr. King’s non-violent tactics contrasted with the philosophies of Malcolm X and The Black Panther Party, which included the philosophy of self-defense and a proclivity towards self-righteous violence. On top of these fresh political and ideological wounds, there existed friction between the Black communities countrywide and the injustice wrought by police brutality. Depicted in *Summer of Soul* is a montage of images that accentuate this tense and occasionally explosively violent atmosphere. The film encapsulates not merely the streets of Harlem but the entire country. Though a cynic would be downtrodden by the country’s particular course of events, like a phoenix of hope from the ashes that the sixties wrought, hope converged in the gathering at The Harlem Cultural Festival. With around three hundred thousand

attendees and located in a park within walking distance of local residents, it would seem, according to many an attendee, that the cultural festival was somewhat of a miracle whose purpose was to divert the pain-stricken Black community from having to fight for their freedom, and direct them towards a moment of clarity, peace, and self-liberation.

To add another layer of complexity to the spectacle of The Harlem Cultural Festival, Neil Armstrong (1930–2012) and Buzz Aldrin (b. 1930) became the first humans to walk on the moon in July 1969. While collectively, perhaps, the country was fascinated, considering this feat occurred during the Cold War Era (c. 1945–1991), interviews from *Summer of Soul* capture a range of emotions felt in response to the event. The consensus from many Black voices was one of dissatisfaction and one of duality; on the one hand, there was an acknowledgment that this was a step forward for science from some, but largely the main feeling was that this feat was unremarkable in comparison to the tangible oppression Black citizens of the era were dealing with, and to a large extent are still dealing with in modernity.¹² This response to such a monumental event, especially one voiced by the people of Harlem, reflects who was in the crowd that day: an informed people, but at the same time an agitated group who felt that their definition of what progress meant did not align with what the country felt was a step forward.

When Questlove restored the legacy of The Harlem Cultural Festival, so too was the purpose behind this phenomenal spectacle restored. From the documentary's brilliant colorful visuals to the way each scene captured sublime moments of Black and Brown identity, joy, and independence, there are many ways in which this festival both converged and significantly diverged from the messages left behind by Woodstock, all while being its own entity driven by definitions of progress unique to the period. The element that separates Questlove and *Summer of Soul* from the

¹² *Summer of Soul*, 1:27:47 to 1:29:59.

Woodstock festival—and the numerous different cultural geodes that form this tapestry of rhythm, music, and life—is “Black Joy.”

Reiterated by Questlove in interviews and throughout his career, Black Joy represents the sublime moments in African American lives that have often been obfuscated by a linear view of Black history. For example, Black history is often confined to slavery and civil rights movements, essentially dehumanizing Black people, which eliminates the idea that there could be any joyous events in Black people’s lives. The fascination with Woodstock as a phenomenon is not misplaced, but in overshadowing The Harlem Cultural Festival, it represents the erasure of Black Joy in favor of the idyllic peace and love movements that captivated the 1960s and 1970s. Woodstock was famously known for the phrase, “Don’t Take the Brown Acid,” which epitomized the carefree and laissez-faire attitude that prevailed in the 1960s counterculture. Conversely, one attendee of The Harlem Cultural Festival described the smell of fried chicken as a memory that he kept.¹³ The comparison between the acid in the highly publicized Woodstock event and the smell of fried chicken in Harlem is representative of nostalgia and shows that what is valued in Black culture is truly different from the stereotypes of drug use and laziness that have branded Black people in American culture.

The significance of Questlove’s documentary, *Summer of Soul*, is more than just the musical aspects rediscovered in this film. This documentary reveals a different side to Black identity, offering an alternative to the monolithic depictions of Black history. Not only did Questlove make history by winning an Academy Award and a Grammy for the film in 2022, but he also brought the conversation back to a joyous event of Black excellence that had been hidden. He restored a sense of meaning to music and reminded viewers of the ability to create bonds between people.

¹³ *Summer of Soul*, 22:25 to 23:59.

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Author Bio

Cameron Smith is a senior at California State University, San Bernardino pursuing his bachelor’s degree in history. A self-described “learning enthusiast,” his interests include reading a good book or article, political banter, gaming, writing, learning about the cosmos, or walking his dog. He has always been open to new ideas and believes strongly in self-discovery and pursuing education. A student of life, music, and especially the culture of hip-hop, the idea for examining “Summer Of Soul” came from a proposal by his mother, California State University, San Bernardino alumni, Cecelia Smith, and history professor Dr. Jeremy Murray. With aspirations to complete his degree by the year’s end and potentially take the LSAT, Cameron hopes to utilize the knowledge he has gained through hip-hop, education, and life to advance his career. Although this is his first published piece he hopes to create more through his unyielding passion for life and education.



Reviews