Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson’s “Summer of Soul”: A record of the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival

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“Summer of Soul (… Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)” is the documentary film debut of Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson (born January 20, 1971 in Philadelphia). The film is focused on the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival, a little known but significant musical event that took place in the famous Manhattan neighborhood.

“Summer of Soul” premiered last January at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the Grand Jury and Audience prizes, before being acquired in late June by Searchlight Pictures and the streaming service Hulu. It was given a wider theatre release in July, before being picked up by Disney+, where it is now also available for viewing. The film is the first entry produced by the Disney-affiliated Onyx Collective, a “content label” whose primary focus, according to executive Tara Duncan, is to provide “a home where creators of color are inspired, empowered and have unparalleled access to reach audiences around the world” (more on this below).

Thompson, best known for his work as a leading member of the Philadelphia-based, pioneering hip hop band The Roots, assembled his documentary from footage recorded by the late director-producer Hal Tulchin. Several attempts were made to turn the material, with its many remarkable performances, into a film, but only in 2019, during preparations for the 50-year anniversary of the event, did this finally come to fruition.

The Harlem Cultural Festival, nicknamed the “Black Woodstock,” was held in Mount Morris Park and brought together a veritable Who’s Who of popular and jazz performers, most of them but not all are African American. The free concerts on six Sundays in July and August were attended by some 300,000 people.

The event was organized in part by the City of New York, with additional funding from Maxwell House coffee. It featured remarkable performances from the varied likes of Sly and the Family Stone, The Staple Singers, B.B. King, South African performer Hugh Masekela, percussionist Ray Barretto and singer Nina Simone.

An awe-inspiring moment in the film occurs early on when a young Stevie Wonder, not yet 20 years old, takes the stage and makes his way to the venue’s drum set to wail away in perfect form with his live band. “Once I saw Stevie Wonder do that drum solo, I knew that was my first 10 minutes. That’s a gobsmacker,” relates Thompson in an interview with the *New York Times* .

The film is punctuated by numerous such captivating moments. David Ruffin (previously of The Temptations) delivers a strong rendition of his former group’s hit “My Girl.” The duo of Mavis Staples and legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson offer a particularly powerful performance of “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” with the musical backing of the Breadbasket Orchestra and Choir, in honor of the late Martin Luther King, Jr., who was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, a little over a year before the Harlem Cultural Festival.

The documentary brings out the personalities of some of the event’s organizers, as well as interviews with attendees. Night club singer Tony Lawrence, originally from St. Kitts, the main promoter and director of the event and a “hustler in the best sense,” according to a commentator, was able to bring the event together with “half commitments” to various parties while working with considerable material limitations and logistical hurdles. “There was no money, no budget, no lights,” says Tulchin in the film. This meant that the event would be held only during the daytime on the weekend, facing the sun.

In the mid-to-late 1960s, beginning at the height of the civil rights movement, riots and rebellions swept inner cities across America, a reaction to unbearable conditions of poverty and police oppression. The upheavals exposed the depth of the growing crisis of American capitalism and the fact that much more was needed than the right to vote for one of the two major parties or the right to integrated accommodation.

“There was quite a bit of anxiety that year [1969] … it felt like the system was letting you down,” comments one festival attendee to the camera. Mahalia Jackson’s vocals in particular convey not only the grief afflicting the generation emerging out of the civil rights movement, but also the great moral strength and courage of those who made sacrifices for it.

The motives of city officials, including New York City Mayor John Lindsay, for mounting the festival were not only cultural but political. The year 1969 marked a shift in how the

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bourgeoisie confronted its mounting political difficulties. Massive opposition was developing to the Vietnam war, at home and abroad, while the US also faced military setbacks inside Vietnam itself. Moreover, one million or more workers went on strike in the US every year between 1969 and 1978, part of a global wave of class struggle.

The transition in the White House from the discredited Democratic administration of Lyndon B. Johnson to the Republican Richard Nixon also marked a shift in how the American ruling class dealt with this opposition. The powers that be worked deliberately to integrate a small minority of African Americans into positions of power and privilege. Particularly after the assassination of King, a section of the civil rights establishment was brought into the apparatus of state power, including the likes of Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson and John Lewis.

Another tendency, associated with black nationalist separatism, took a different but no less reactionary tack. Along these lines, the film refers to Stokely Carmichael, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords and others. The film and Thompson hit their ideological "stride" with various sequences dealing with black cultural nationalism and related trends that sought to turn their back to what was termed "white society."

In a backward and pointless segment, the director juxtaposes clips of white Americans reacting favorably to the July 1969 moon landing with those of African Americans responding less than enthusiastically to the same event. Fittingly, the soundtrack to this is poet-songwriter Gil Scott-Heron's 1970 poem "Whitey on the Moon."

Fortunately, the film also takes more promising and thoughtful directions, in the performances and commentary, for example, of Marilyn McCoo (of the Fifth Dimension), Harlem native Ray Barretto ("In my blood I've got black and white, red, Puerto Rican, Indian. I'm all messed up. But I got soul. … In every face I see, I see a part of you, and you, and me …") and the outstanding set put on by Sly and the Family Stone, the genre-bending and multiracial band, who perform their classics "Higher" and "Everyday People."

The Fifth Dimension's McCoo delivers one of the film's most memorable lines, when she dismisses efforts to racially pigeonhole her group. "Sometimes we were called 'the black group with the white sound.' We didn't like that. … *How do you color a sound?* "

On stage, this very healthy idea is contradicted by the performances of drummer Max Roach and vocalist Abbey Lincoln (touted as " *our* black power couple") and by Nina Simone. Simone closes her set by reciting a poem calling on her audience to "smash white things."

According to Thompson, he wished to present Simone's performance as his "most potent message, the most potent presence" of the festival. Simone comes across in the film, as in life, as a highly contradictory figure. In "Summer of Soul," the singer, songwriter and classically trained musician performs "Backlash Blues" and other well-known songs in her supremely confident and defiant charm, but her espousal of black nationalism is unappealing and works against the broader impact of her music.

"Summer of Soul" contains contradictory impulses, reflecting the different phenomena in question. First, the cultural festival itself has an objectively significant artistic character, expressive of the extraordinary richness of American popular music. Second, one has to take into account the views and opinions, including confusion and worse, of the original performers, "militants" and otherwise. Third, there is the matter of how Thompson has tendentiously assembled the material, including his rather selective use of interviews and the decision to place Simone at the conclusion. (She actually appeared in the second to last concert on August 17.)

Thompson tends to juxtapose socially and politically disparate sentiments, playing up some elements, diminishing others and inevitably emphasizing the more racialist views. While Thompson is honest enough not to leave out the most striking and even egalitarian sequences, his overall effort is being used to lend credence to reactionary ideological and social forces. He is reinterpreting the events in the context of today's overwhelming official ruling class backing for identity politics.

Not accidentally, one of the globe's largest media conglomerates, the Walt Disney Company (with revenue of $69.3 billion in 2020), is promoting "Summer of Soul" through its Onyx Collective.

According to *Deadline*, the "collective's" next production will be a docuseries inspired by the *New York Times* ' 1619 Project and produced by billionaire media celebrity Oprah Winfrey. The 1619 Project purports to "reframe" US history by placing "the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans" at its "very center." The WSWS has thoroughly documented the *Times* and its collaborators' efforts to downplay and falsify the history of the American Revolution, the Civil War and other significant political and social events through a purely racialist reinterpretation.

The effort in "Summer of Soul" to promote black nationalism and identity politics has to be seen in this general context. Fortunately, insofar as the film salvages and presents the Harlem Cultural Festival, it deserves viewing for its variety of unforgettable artists and also for what it shows about the period—with its potential for mass radicalization.

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