



**SHEFFIELD DOC/FEST 2021**

# Summer of Soul

+ *Pre-recorded Q&A*

In the summer of 1969, The Harlem Cultural Festival was filmed in Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park). After that summer, the footage was largely forgotten – until now. Ahmir ‘Questlove’ Thompson presents a transporting film that includes never-before-seen concert performances from Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone, Sly and the Family Stone, Gladys Knight & the Pips, Ray Baretto, Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach and more.

**[bfi.org.uk](https://www.bfi.org.uk)**

The year is 1969. At Mount Morris Park in Harlem, New York City, Nina Simone, the ‘High Priestess of Soul’, stands on a psychedelic stage, looking regal in a yellow dress and a towering top knot. She’s just finished a rousing performance of ‘To Be Young, Gifted and Black’, and she tells the audience – a vibrant sea of mostly Black women, men and children – that she has something to read to them. It’s a poem by David Nelson of the Last Poets, called *Are You Ready, Black People?*

‘Are you ready to smash white things?’ Simone reads from a piece of paper. ‘Are you ready to build black things?’ The crowd responds with cheers. It’s a magical moment: somewhere between music and protest, between celebration and a call-to-action.

The scene captures the spirit of the Harlem Cultural Festival of 1969, the subject of the archival documentary, *Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)*. Spearheaded by the Caribbean singer and concert producer Tony Lawrence with support from New York City’s then-mayor John Lindsay, the festival hosted a string of heavyweight talents – Stevie Wonder, David Ruffin, Sly and the Family Stone, Gladys Knight and the Pips, B.B. King, and more – over six consecutive weekends of free concerts that drew nearly 300,000 people.

Sensing that something memorable was about to go down, the TV director Hal Tulchin decided to shoot the whole event on spec and videotaped nearly 40 hours of performances in the gorgeous summer sun. Tulchin was certain that networks would be interested in what he called ‘Black Woodstock’, riffing on the other music festival happening just 100 miles from Harlem around the same time. But nothing came to fruition for decades until, in 2017, just before Tulchin’s death, the producers of *Summer of Soul* finally came on board and recruited Ahmir Thompson (aka Questlove, the frontman of the Roots) to direct.

As *Summer of Soul* – which opened this year’s Sundance Film Festival – unfolds, the fact that it took so long for Tulchin’s footage to see the light of day feels increasingly puzzling. Not only is the material stunning on its musical merits alone, but it also thrums with history, with the political and cultural currents of Black life in the 1960s. Questlove excavates these themes deftly through talking-head interviews with attendees, critics and the artists themselves, some of whom encounter the footage for the first time.

A striking sequence illustrates the film's time capsule-like power. A dashiki-clad Reverend Jesse Jackson speaks of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death just a year ago, in 1968, after which Mahalia Jackson and Mavis Staples join forces to perform 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand', the song King had requested for his mass right before he was assassinated. As the two women bring the audience to rapture, Staples recalls in voiceover how awed she was when Jackson asked her to help sing the song. A community mourns, a crowd exults, and the baton passes from one generation to the next – all in one scene.

Questlove uses each of the film's performances to conjure a different facet of the era and the community that the Harlem Cultural Festival emerged from. Ray Barreto's drums lead into an exploration of Afro-Caribbean culture, while Hugh Masekela's trumpets prompt a reflection on growing Pan-African consciousness. A virtuosic sequence illustrates how music helped African Americans articulate an alternative history of their times. The Staple Singers' performance of 'It's Been a Change' – featuring the line 'there will be a man on the moon' – is intercut rhythmically with archival man-on-the-street interviews about the moon landing. White interviewees respond with patriotic zeal, while their Black counterparts, some of whom are interviewed at the Harlem festival, decry the waste of resources that could have gone to alleviating poverty.

Some of the most joyous shots in *Summer of Soul* are those of the crowd, which paint a picture of all that coalesced around the festival. Rows and rows of Afros bob to the music, little girls and boys can be seen perched atop their parents' shoulders, vendors hawk food and drink on the sidelines and the Black Panthers patrol the venue, providing security in lieu of a reluctant police. In the years in which Tulchin's footage languished in obscurity, *Summer of Soul* lived on in the dreams of its attendees, some of whom vividly recall the smell of 'AfroShe and chicken' and the feeling of being a part of something generation-defining. With *Summer of Soul*, Questlove gives solidity to their memories, ensuring their due place in the annals of American history.

**Devika Girish, *Sight & Sound*, [bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound](https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound), 2 February 2021**

**SUMMER OF SOUL**  
**(...OR, WHEN THE REVOLUTION COULD NOT BE TELEVISED)**  
*Director:* Ahmir ‘Questlove’ Thompson  
©: Concordia  
*Executive Producers:* Jen Isaacson, Jon Kamen, Dave Sirulnick, Jody Allen, Ruth Johnston, Rocky Collins, Jannat Gargi, Beth Hubbard, Laurene Powell Jobs, Davis Guggenheim, Jeffrey Lurie, Marie Therese Guirgis, David Barse, Ron Eisenberg, Ahmir ‘Questlove’ Thompson, Shelia Johnson  
*Co-Executive Producers:* Jonathan Silberberg, Nicole Stott  
*Producers:* David Dinerstein, Robert Fyvolent, Joseph Patel  
*Director of Photography:* Shawn Peters  
*Editor:* Joshua L. Pearson  
*Music Supervisor:* Randall Poster

USA 2021©  
117 mins

**SHEFFIELD DOC/FEST 2021**

**Opening Night: European Premiere: Summer of Soul (...Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised) + pre-recorded Q&A**  
Fri 4 Jun 20:15  
**UK Premiere: Lift like a Girl + pre-recorded Q&A**  
Sat 5 Jun 20:15  
**International Premiere: My Name Is Pauli Murray + pre-recorded Q&A**  
Sun 6 Jun 18:30  
**UK Premiere: The First 54 Years: An Abbreviated Manual for Military Occupation + pre-recorded Q&A**  
Fri 11 Jun 20:20  
**Closing Night: World Premiere: The Story of Looking + pre-recorded Q&A**  
Sat 12 Jun 20:50

EVENTS & STRANDS

**Preview: In the Earth + Q&A with director Ben Wheatley**  
Thu 10 Jun 19:00  
**Preview: Doctor Who: Dragonfire**  
Sat 12 Jun 12:00  
**Relaxed Screenings: The Reason I Jump**  
Fri 18 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:10  
**Woman with a Movie Camera: Wildfire**  
Sun 20 Jun 18:40 (+ Q&A with director Cathy Brady); Mon 21 Jun 18:10; Tue 22 Jun 14:40; Wed 23 Jun 20:50; Thu 24 Jun 14:45

BAGRI FOUNDATION LONDON INDIAN FILM FESTIVAL

**LIFF Opening Night: WOMB (Women of My Billion) + on stage Q&A with Srishti Bakshi and film critic Anna Smith**  
Thu 17 Jun 17:20  
**My Beautiful Laundrette**  
Fri 18 Jun 20:20  
**The Warrior + on-stage career interview with writer-director Asif Kapadia**  
Sat 19 Jun 20:30  
**Ahimsa: Gandhi the Power of the Powerless**  
Sun 20 Jun 15:00  
**Searching for Happiness...**  
Tue 22 Jun 20:50  
**Nazarband Captive**  
Wed 23 Jun 20:45  
**A'hr Kayattam**  
Thu 24 Jun 18:00  
**The Salt in Our Waters Nonajoler Kabbo**  
Sun 27 Jun 15:00

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://bfi.org.uk/join)

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://player.bfi.org.uk)

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

**First Cow**  
From Fri 28 May  
**Surge**  
From Fri 28 May  
**After Love**  
From Fri 4 Jun (Q&A with director Aleem Khan on Fri 4 Jun 17:30; Q&A with director Aleem Khan and actor Joanna Scanlan on Sun 13 Jun 18:40)  
**Gunda**  
From Fri 4 Jun  
**Fargo**  
From Fri 11 Jun  
**The Reason I Jump**  
From Fri 18 Jun  
**Nashville**  
From Fri 25 Jun  
**Ultraviolence**  
From Sat 26 Jun  
Sat 26 June 14:20 + Q&A with director Ken Fero and contributor Janet Alder  
**Supernova**  
From Fri 2 Jul  
**Another Round**  
From Fri 9 Jul  
**Jumbo**  
From Fri 9 Jul  
**Deerskin**  
From Fri 16 Jul  
**Girlfriends**  
From Fri 23 Jul  
**Mandabi**  
From Fri 23 Jul

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop. We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.