

Summer of Soul

“I Heard it Through the Grapevine,” “Everyday People,” “Oh, Happy Day,” “When I Sing the Blues,” “Let the Sunshine In”—sounds like a roll call of major black music from last century. And it is, as all of these pieces, and many more, were delivered in long-forgotten music performances at the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival, which was held at [Mount Morris Park](#) (now Marcus Garvey Park) in Harlem. The festival, promoted by raconteur and MC Tony Lawrence, lasted for six weeks in June-July 1969 and totaled an audience of some 300,000 souls. It now can be joyfully witnessed in “Summer of Soul (Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised”).

Despite its standing-room only attendance and stand-out performers such as Stevie Wonder, Mahalia Jackson, Nina Simone, The 5th Dimension, [The Staple Singers](#), [Gladys Knight & the Pips](#), and [Sly and the Family Stone](#), the festival, coming during the same summer as Woodstock, never entered the general public’s consciousness. While most of the music was considered “soul” at the time, the playlist was quite inclusive and also featured gospel, jazz, pop, Afrobeat, funk, and even Latino numbers. One of the absolute high points of the concerts is when gospel legend Mavis Staples sings “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” then passes the microphone to Mahalia Jackson (her mentor), and the two finish the number in an electrifying duet (and the crowd goes nuts!)

Though forty hours of footage of the Festival was recorded live on videotape, it was later placed in a basement, where it languished for about 50 years, unpublished. Years later, producer Robert Fyvolent became aware of the footage, and eventually acquired film and television rights to it from its original producer and cinematographer, Hal Tulchin. Then, in 2018, producers brought it to the attention of musician and drummer Questlove Thompson (now the leader of Roots, the house band for “The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon”). The footage survived and was able to be resurrected and edited down by its director after many months to become one of the best American concert films in recent memory (while its look and sound are great, it does show its age only because it was shot before high-definition imagery). It premiered at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival and garnered the Grand Prize.

“Summer of Soul” is also a wonderful time capsule into Black consciousness in the later 1960’s, a period of Black Power burgeoning, flamboyant, African-inspired dress and costume, and the opening of new avenues for Black expression. The film brings out this awareness through over-voice narration from attendees at the event, one of whom remembers the crowd as if he “was seeing royalty.” The crowd shots, pervasive throughout the film, are

vivid reminders of a high point in Black life, a whole people grooving to the rhythms of its diverse culture.

It will be hard to keep your feet from tapping and your body from moving watching “Summer of Soul.”

(This film, not rated but probably a “PG,” runs for 117 sparkling minutes.)

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