

Memoir Analysis: *Mo' Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove*

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Hailing from the streets of West Philadelphia where he was swimming in records and sounds in both his home and school environments, Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson lived (and still lives) his life fully immersed in the culturally-rich community of music. Tied together by an undying love for rhythm and sound, the music community is as dynamic as the artists who created the glue that holds these sound geeks together. While Questlove grew up with an almost religious affiliation for music, which he described as “a set of spiritual instructions,” it was the sub-community of hip-hop music that inevitably stole his heart and his mind (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 182). It was within this hip-hop community and the stage that it provided him that Questlove was able to recognize and respond to a community at unrest.

Looking through Questlove’s history of interaction within the hip-hop community, one can apply Rothman’s (2001) *Locality Development* model of community organization to better understand Questlove’s motives and actions. This model which stresses cooperation and the importance of building and maintaining group identity and community can be applied to Questlove’s work within the hip-hop community (Minkler, Wallerstein, & Wilson, 2008). For the purposes of understanding the broader reach of the hip-hop community, however, the limits of this existing model must be stretched to encompass community organization that spans geographical limits and that defines community as a “sociological construct” that completes “actions based on shared expectations, values, beliefs and meaning between individuals” (Bartle, 2003, para. 7). With this theoretical perspective, one can filter through Questlove’s life achievements and his work within his band the Roots to identify moments of sincere community organization.

Beginning in the mid-to-late 1980s when most hip-hop acts were groups, Questlove (then still Ahmir Thompson) began his career of hip-hop activism admiring the productivity of this group model, “the sense of community and of a larger purpose” as artists organized and put out collective efforts and ideas (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 5). Witnessing acts of hip-hop building community through tracks like Prince’s “When Doves Cry” from the album *Purple Rain*, Questlove saw the way something as simple as a song could revolutionize societies and bring people together. It was during this time that Questlove realized hip-hop as a social movement and devoted himself to being a part of this community of change, and by the early 1990s, Questlove’s band the Roots had become what he calls the third group in the second wave of the hip-hop movement (Thompson & Greenman, 2013).

Questlove discovered his own influence on the community when he realized the international reach of his craft. As the band embarked upon European tours to earn a financial safety net before launching new albums in the U.S., Questlove observed other hip-hop artists playing to international crowds and began to understand how enormous and diverse the hip-hop community is. He describes that in the early 90s “there was some worldwide cachet at that point to being an American rap group,” ultimately, “if you were from the States, and you were a hip-hop act, you were important” (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 96). With this understanding of the power and responsibility of being hip-hop artists, Questlove and the Roots approached their work with sensitivity and thought, ensuring that every album worked “on three levels: as a reflection of [their] own career, as a reflection of the hip-hop scene, and as a reflection of the world at large” (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 202).

As the group style of hip-hop acts faded away and the genre began to be dominated by flaunting materialism and individual acts, the theory of cooperation and group identity above all

else turned suddenly into a hostile environment of luxury and competition, something that budding artists on the street could not relate to. Here the theory of *symbolic interactionism* can be applied to understanding the sudden evolution of music and style as a way to relate to one another to a method used to distance oneself from the other (Hustedde & Ganowicz, 2002). As hip-hop artists were trying to remain fresh and relevant within the changing environment, they would anticipate the responses of other artists by upping the ante with each new album and in so doing, pushed hip-hop further and further away from the streets where it originated. In order to maintain humility among this increasingly materialistic vibe of hip-hop, the Roots became a neutral common ground in the civil war that was raging between hip-hop's haves and have-nots as "something that was supposed to be a community was being torn apart by infighting, ego, [and] crosscurrents of jealousy" (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 135). The Roots anticipated the tension and the building narcissism of the new individualistic hip-hop and attempted to maintain the community of cooperation with their style of music-making.

Despite the changes in the hip-hop community and the added consumerism within the music industry as a whole, the Roots were able to maintain their collective and cooperative identity and portrayed this through their music. With each calculated and thought-provoking album that the Roots released, the group was able to sustain a consciousness throughout and "push back against the idea that records were simply products, or isolated snapshots that weren't connected, spiritually and even physically, to the albums that came before and the albums, as yet unmade, that would come afterward" (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 142). Though each subsequent Roots album related to the last, there was also a recognizable evolution of their thought as each album was released in a different time and this pertained to the states the band, of hip-hop, and of the world that were distinct at that time. The conscious flow of the Roots'

albums is an example of both the locality development model of community organization and of symbolic interactionism theory as their work continued to enhance group identity and cooperation while responding symbolically to the changing environment.

The first example of a critically conscious album released by the Roots was their 1999 album *Things Fall Apart* which offered their perspective on the old-school hip-hop community as it was being threatened by new-school hip-hop artists. From this artistic medium, Questlove and his fellow bandmates were able to question the recent changes in hip-hop and provided a grounds for which the debate between old-school and new-school styles could be waged. As Questlove explains it, “we were part of a music that had, at least early on, been so new, so true to itself, but there had been a corruption from the outside, and what was once there was gone” (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 165).

In 2006, the Roots released another critically aware album, *Game Theory*, as a response to what they found to be going wrong in the world at that time. Though they released two albums between this one and *Things Fall Apart*, this politically charged album is important to note because it demonstrates the beginning of their shift toward producing albums as a sort of direct action call for social change. This “art record,” which grew out of “the rubble of Katrina and the confusion of the band’s middle age, was also a pained love letter to Philadelphia, which had become a virtual war zone, with twelve to fourteen murders per week” (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 237).

The explicitly political direction the Roots had taken did not end after the release of *Game Theory*, and in fact it only grew with their subsequent album *Rising Down* which was released in the politically charged environment of the year 2008. This album, which took on the financial crisis, the media’s distortion of the news, addictions to prescription drugs, and the

threat of technology, was built mainly around society's response to Obama's rise in power, though it was released before his election. Questlove describes this album as "a fearless look at the tricky business of black male identity" during a time when a single African American man was gaining (and losing) power and respect within an (almost) entirely white entity (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 242). The Roots made clear in this album how the changing political environment and the backlash from such changes would not be lost on the hip-hop community.

From these examples of Questlove and the rest of the Roots as enforcers of locality development and symbolic interactionists within the ever-changing context of the hip-hop community, it is clear how relevant their work was on the hip-hop stage. For someone who might not have considered hip-hop as a social movement before diving into this memoir, I offer this final thought from Questlove, "Pick any era and I can retrieve a vast array of awesome thought-provoking hip-hop artists who were genuine political thinkers, artists who were genuine comedians" (Thompson & Greenman, 2013, p. 152). Hip-hop is a worldwide stage upon which artists have the opportunity to inspire social movements and change, Questlove is just one of those revolutionary artists that recognizes the opportunity for empowerment that hip-hop has provided him and rises to the occasion again and again.

References

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