

# 'Summer of Soul' – Much to Savor

**OPINIONATED JUDGE**

BY **DARLEEN ORTEGA**



## Film beautifully portrays 1969 celebration of Black culture

If you look up “Summer of Soul” (or “When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised”) on Metacritic, you will find that the ratings of this phenomenal documentary—a first directing effort by Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson—has evoked “universal acclaim” from critics. And rightly so. But let us pause to reflect on what the trajectory of this particular work of art has to teach us about our collective selves—what it takes for Black artists to gain recognition in this country, and the losses that accompany every hard-fought gain.

Visionary New York promoter and entertainer Tony Lawrence conceived and organized a series of free concerts over six weeks in 1969, dubbed the Harlem Cultural Festival. The project required vision—it was held at what was then known as Mount Morris Park (now Marcus Garvey Park) and drew a combined total of 300,000 people in a dazzling celebration of Black culture that was unique for the time. New York Mayor John Lindsey supported the project and, when the New York Police Department refused to provide security for the artists,



Mavis Staples and Mahalia Jackson perform at the Harlem Cultural Festival in 1969, featured in the documentary ‘Summer of Soul.’ Photo courtesy Searchlight Pictures.

the Black Panther Party stepped in.

The event was an unqualified success. Acts as diverse as the Fifth Dimension (then at the top of the pop charts), Stevie Wonder (then 19 and pounding out a re-

markable drum solo and astounding keyboard work), a youthful Gladys Knight and the Pips flashing Motown moves, the Edwin Hawkins Singers delivering their hit rendition of “O Happy Day,” gospel legends Mahalia Jackson

and the Staples Singers, Sly and the Family Stone, Nina Simone, and blues great B.B. King performed to buoyant crowds, and television producer Hal Tulchin captured 40 hours of footage. It all happened the same summer as Woodstock—and as director Thompson has pointed out, had the Harlem Cultural Festival involved any of the excesses of that better-known event, it might have attracted more, albeit negative, attention. Tulchin tried for many years to attract funding to turn the footage into a television special or documentary film, dubbing the event “Black Woodstock.” But no one was interested. The footage tragically sat in his basement for almost 50 years.

Thompson’s background as a drummer, bandleader, D.J., and music historian makes him the ideal person to bring us this cast-aside treasure. These 50 years lat-

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**Times Are Changing**  
 Summer. The season so many of us have waited for, with its promise of cheerful weather, camping, daytrips, and street fairs — so much to do! And, this year, we're able to make summer plans with fewer cares around social distancing and masks. As vaccination levels increase, our worries start to lessen. Dare we say it? Life feels like it's getting back to normal this summer.

But right on the heels of those comforting thoughts, some of us still have doubts. We're encouraged to continue taking precautions for public health. Many of our favorite summer gatherings are still holding off. Even the sunny skies and warm weather sometimes turn into too much of a good thing. Coping with all the change can feel like a bit of a roller coaster. For some of us, issues like problem gambling can be harder to control when life still feels so uncertain.

**Help is Available**  
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**Why Wait?**  
 Most people who get started with OPGR report that they only wish they had done so sooner. The program helps see you through some of the challenges ahead and gives you the confidence, the support structure to feel better. All it takes is a phone call, a text or an online chat to put you on the path toward the calm and fulfillment you deserve.

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