

Q&A



THE ROOTS

Whether rocking late night or redefining hip-hop, Questlove gets it done

MAKE NO MISTAKE, THE AVERAGE modern person has a very full to-do list from day to day. But does yours look anything like Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson's? Today he's driving from his native Philadelphia to New York City, where he's due to help put on a pair of Jay-Z performances at Carnegie Hall. That's just a side project, of course—his main gig is behind the drums leading the Roots, the veteran hip-hop group he and rapper Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter formed in 1987 and which since 2009 has been the house band for TV's *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, also based in New York. Plus he has to do all the stuff we ordinary humans do. "My goal for today is to broker between the orchestral director and the rhythm section for Jay-Z's shows, renew

my driver's license and choose a movie for me and my girl to see later," he notes. It was between tapings and rehearsals in the Roots' cramped *Late Night* dressing room that the premier band recorded 2010's *How I Got Over* and the critically acclaimed new *Undun*—a concept album tracing the death and life of a fictional midlevel drug dealer. How can one man oversee all this frantic music-making? "I make time," Questlove says. "I found out that a human being can only do, at maximum, five things a day. Really, they can only do three things a day well." Among the many things Questlove does well is expound on his music, so he interrupted his travels to explain how the Roots' extracurricular activities helped to shape *Undun*.

Undun is a dark album ... And how can we make such a dark record in the dressing room of the happiest place on earth? If you could only see that dressing room! (laughs) We first recorded *How I Got Over* there, and it was like, man, times are changing. Part of the reason we had to convert our dressing room into an actual studio was that only two studios we used to record at in New York were left: Electric Lady and MSR Studios. So we did it in our dressing room out of necessity—though I was worried whether we could get a great quality record in such an uncomfortable space.

How did you? I've noticed the more uncomfortable we are, the more focused we are. When

we're in a very relaxed atmosphere, that's very distracting and we're not as focused on making music as when we're in weird circumstances. Like *Illadelph Halflife* [1996] and *Things Fall Apart* [1999], it was winter when we were recording—and sometimes the heat would be on and sometimes it wouldn't. I do my best work when I'm in circumstances where I have to focus. Some studios give you more amenities than they do great studio equipment. You get caught up in the break room, you're playing pool or video games and the next thing you know six hours have gone by. With a very small, 15' x 15' room, the Roots managed to make probably our best two records—and change our clothes in time for the show.

How do you avoid distractions? We've been together for a long time now, and we're also observers of human nature. So we know how easy it is to sabotage a situation, especially in an ADD environment like that. Somehow, album after album, our focus just gets better. I think we're influenced by the Motown system of factory working. When we work on stuff, you automatically know when it gets unanimous approval. But when you do something and it's met with a lukewarm reception, it's not going to fly—and you just have to go back and do it again.

What did you redo on *Undun*? This is the first time we worked more on the lyrical end than on the musical end. Our executive producer Richard Nichols and I were discussing the direction and he said, "Let's do a concept." Immediately, I thought, "Tariq isn't going to want to stick to a script. It's going to be a hard way to go." But Tariq really shocked me—he was actually the mature one in the process, while I threw at least three fits during this album. (laughs) All my foreshadowing, like, "Man, it's going to be trouble, he's not going to do a fourth take of that or a rewrite of that nine times over," was wrong. For example, on his first four lines on "I Remember," he went through nine rewrites. And not simple rewrites: He spends an hour to 90 minutes per verse. Every verse on this record had between nine and 15 rewrites, and there was no complaining.

Why so much rewriting? There's a Danish filmmaking technique called Dogme 95—these filmmakers got together and established all these restrictions and rules for filmmaking. You had to shoot using only a handheld camera, you could use only natural light, you were not allowed to use [directorial] credits or a musical score. It's

basically a list of things you're not allowed to do. Making this album was similar. For starters, someone had to act as a script supervisor, to make sure no one went into first-person. The MCs had to be the character, and they had to be the thoughts in [the main character's] head. Also, we wanted this to be shorter than 40 minutes, so you've really got to get to the point.

Why a concept album now? I always wanted to do it. Probably the most beautiful thing about the Fallon situation is that it allows us to focus a long time on music. Previously we had been road dogs

How did you adapt to *Late Night*? One of the hardest things was getting used to playing together as a unit. We hadn't played in a studio together as a unit since those first two records. I remember the first time we were in the Fallon studio together, it was almost like looking at someone naked. It's easy if you put us in front of a crowd—we'll give you a show. But facing each other in the room, it was like, "What do I do? Do I count off?" It was as if we didn't know how to play. It was weird for three weeks, and then we got over it. Then it became fun. More practicing, more playing, has gelled us in a way I can't explain.



Clockwise: Questlove, James Poyser, James "Kamal" Gray, Damon "Tuba Gooding Jr." Bryson, "Captain" Kirk Douglas, Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter, Mark Kelley, Franklin "F. Knuckles" Walker

doing 250 nights a year, with very inconsistent studio habits. Four days here, one day here, go on the road for four months, come back, one day here, go back on the road. *How I Got Over* and *Undun* are probably the only Roots albums, with the exception of *Do You Want More?!?!?!?* [1995] and *Organix* [1993], which were created with no interruptions of any kind. I was able to spend 10 hours a day for 29 days in a row working on this record. I now know what a difference production habits make, so I don't want to create any record unless I'm uninterrupted.

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How did that affect songwriting? We compose between five and 10 songs for the show every day that we're shooting. Out of 100 Roots songs, 15 are really good, and of those 15, I'll say that five are banging—and of those five, two are worthy of an album. So you rinse and repeat, over and over.

—Eric R. Danton



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