



Amplify With Lara Downes

Questlove is charting the history of America through its music

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Lara Downes



Credit: NPR

Ahmir "[Questlove](#)" Thompson is a timekeeper by profession. As a drummer, he's the co-frontman of the Grammy-winning hip-hop band [The Roots](#). He is also a historian, an author of [books](#) and a maker of films that illuminate the ways in which music is shaped by time and culture, and shapes it in turn. So his relationship to time exists very much in the present — as a creator of rhythmic structure, controller of tempo and catalyst of energy — but also in the past, as each drumstroke recedes immediately into the echoes of history.

Questlove's directorial debut, *Summer of Soul*, won the Academy Award for best documentary feature in 2022; his latest film, *Sly Lives!*, is a masterful portrait of the legendary funk innovator *Sly Stone*. There's a moment in that documentary when a young Maria Shriver, in footage from a 1982 interview, asks Sly about the songs he wrote in the late '60s, when, in her words: "Just about everything in this country was in disarray." She asks him: "Did that make your job as a musician more difficult, or easier?" Without missing a beat, Sly answers: "Easier! Those are the kinds of things that make you feel like working and writing, playing, doing what you do — really trying to say something."

Those words made me pause and rewind a few times. Because these days, disarray is a condition transforming the lives and work of artists around the world. It was shocking to me that Sly's answer was so confident and clear, while we are grappling with such confusion about navigating the chaos of our own time. There may be many reasons why response and resistance in 2025 pose different challenges than in 1968. But also, I realize, Sly's answer came with the benefit of hindsight. Maybe it was only by looking back across the years that he could understand what it had meant to bear artistic witness to such upheaval.

My conversation with Questlove kept circling back to one unchanging truth: Time moves so quickly. As we walk through this life, our ability to perceive the contours of the present that surrounds and sometimes overwhelms us is limited. It's only by looking backwards that we can see where we were and where we were going, and understand what we were doing and what we were trying to say.



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