

The Roots

by Harry Allen

“Yo: I’m about to flip on these motherfuckers.”

Tariq Luqmaan Trotter, best known as Black Thought, lead vocalist for the Roots, says this matter-of-factly; less a threat than the day’s forecast. It’s an otherwise bright, clear, summer day in the Hamptons—Long Island, New York’s gold coast; 37 miles of power, fantasy, and wealth. The Roots—Tariq, percussionist Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson, keyboardist Kamal Gray, bassist Leonard “Hub” Hubbard, guitarist Ben Kenney, vocal percussionist Kyle “Scratch” Jones—have all been invited here to play a private party. (Erstwhile band vocalists Rozell “Rahzel” Brown and Malik “Malik B” Abdul-Bassit rarely play with the band these days, and are not at the event.) They’ve been promised a two-night stay at the PlayStation 2 House—a mansion, technologized by Sony and furnished by W Hotels—a private room for each band member, free use of the facilities, and a personal chef on premises. Needless to say, the band is looking forward to a weekend of fun and frolic.

Manager Rich Nichols arrives after the Roots, following five hours of driving from Philly to meet a frenetic, bulldog of a man, the house manager. “You have to leave. You have to leave. You can’t be here, it’s too hectic around here. We’re locking up,” Rich recounts. “But then there’s, like, six white girls laying around the pool in bikinis,” notes Nichols.

Nichols explains to the man, who will come to be known by the group as “gay Hitler,” that he’s the band’s manager. Ignoring this, the man turns to Nichol’s white female colleague, a producer, and, repeating himself, starts talking to her

as though Rich is not there; something he will do repeatedly throughout the weekend.

The next morning the band, allotted only four rooms for six members (Nichols sleeps in a chair while the Jazzyfatnastees, Scratch and others stay at a nearby residence), are woken at 8 am by house personnel, who insist the Roots must leave the premises while the house is cleaned. Showers are delayed when the group discovers that there are no washcloths. Questlove recalls, “I had to dry off with a robe provided by the W Hotel. I don’ know: There was Playstations everywhere, but there wasn’t soap.” Adds Nichols, “I washed up with a fuckin’ sock.”

Later, because there’s no chef, and the only things in the house to eat, determines co-manager Hope Wilson, are “corn chips, salsa, and peanuts,” Questlove has to take the Roots, their staff, and their guests—20+ people in all—out for dinner. The bill: \$1,200.

Rolling solo, Nichols returns to the PS2 house, to find a hand-drawn sign on the front door: “ENTER THROUGH THE BACK DOOR: BAND, CREW, STAFF.” Not having auditioned for the remake of *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*, he ignores the placard. Inside the house, he may or may not see the orange and black KEEP OUT signs in the doorways of the home’s four living rooms. In the kitchen, eating some pasta, Tariq notices that, every time he moves, a woman cleans the spot he’s just left; a process Questlove later likens to “fumigating.”

Outside, in the pool area, it kind of looks like a scene from *Last Year At Marienbad*; everyone’s just standing around, as though under museum glass. Questlove makes polite conversation, but keeps surveying the distance, as though expecting something to happen. And it does. The house manager starts

to scream about a spread of Italian food tins some band members have set up in the kitchen, mere minutes before his event begins. “This food is *ugly*! Get this ugly food out of here!” he squeals.

Tariq is unclear on what he’s hearing. “I’m like, ‘Is he talkin’ about those dudes [with food] over there playing the video-games, Tina, or me sitting here, eatin’ the fuckin’ pasta?’ And she’s like, ‘You. Eatin’. The Pasta.’ And I’m like, ‘I don’t believe this shit.’ So, I’m standin’ here, I finish eatin’ the shit, and, immediately, of course, they started cleanin’ up all around me, even before I got done.”

Nichols intercedes. “Dude,” he says to the house manager, “I know you’re trying to do your job, but you’re acting weird, you’re freakin’ everybody out, and if this shit continues, the guys are just gonna not do the show. They’re just gonna leave.”

The house manager goes nuts and starts screaming “FUCK! GET OUT! LEAVE THEN! LEAVE!”

Rich loses it: “YOU LITTLE PIECE OF SHIT! YOU FUCKER!”

The home manager, aghast, moves about twenty feet back. “FUCK YOU!”

Rich follows him. As they argue, the event’s talent agent runs up to make peace. The house manager threatens to sue her. “You’re gonna go *down*!”

One of the homeowners, nearby, has been absolutely silent up to this point. (Even earlier when Hope, in frustration and full earshot, blears, “They’re treating us like *niggers*!,” he moves not an eyebrow.) With the threat that the band will leave, though, he ends the silent treatment, urging the group and manager to

calmly look at the larger picture, and speaking in a dreamy, “everything’s-cool” kind of voice: “If nothin’ else, *maaan*, this is a really *sexy* party, man. I mean, there are a *laaht* of *sexy* people here, and, you know, you come *owwwt*, you have a drink, you know, and then if you say you don’t wanna go on, then we take it from there. But, like, we made it this far. Like, what if like I gave you a nice spliff, man? Or, you want a beer?”

Needless to say, the Grammy Award-winning band does not perform that night, with the exception of *maybe* a 5 minute drum intro accompanied by vocal percussionist Scratch doing just that, followed by Black Thought announcing that the band would not be performing. Days later, ?uestlove, whose drugs-of-choice are record and weird-T-shirt buying, recalls the owner’s offer with nausea. “Like, you guys want some crack?” Coming to me live via cell phone from L.A.’s Roscoe’s Chicken & Waffles where he’s shooting a commercial for BET.com, the sensitive, Afro-coifed beat-box sighs resignedly, recalling the previous weekend. “It’s such a – such a blur that I’m still numb about it, and it’s such – it was so overwhelming, and I’m so numb about it, that I can’t even get clear about it. Like, I never met such a group of passive-aggressive, condescending...polite *assholes*. And I just hate – I *hate* bein’ in a position where I’m looked down on.” As for the noisy house manager, “The way he did it was so passive, we were just *prayin’* he’d say the word ‘niggers,’ so some shit could jump off. It’s like, this whole ‘business suit over the Ku Klux Klan uniform’ is like a shield, and you can’t act on it.”

Follow the Roots around long enough, and the issue of *struggle* surfaces and resurfaces, over and over again, like a nagging doubt, or an unpaid debt. They labor in direct contrast to an industry that promotes the apparent *absence* of struggle as a value—the ease with which record labels make hits is about what these companies typically brag.

For others, however, the Roots ongoing, uphill climb serves as an inspiration to those who believe in the group's muscular and unconventional music; those who believe that art should come out of self-denial, not luxury; those who believe that if you keep hitting Number 1, chances are you're not really pushing yourself.

Consider: Pretty much everybody who's going to know about or like the Roots already does. (Notes Tariq, "I feel like we definitely have, probably about 450,000 diehard fans who are gonna buy every record we put out.") Most of these are the folks who already own their five albums—*Organix*, *Do You Want More?!!!??!*, *Illadelph Halflife*, the gold-certified *Things Fall Apart*, *The Roots Come Alive*—and whom are eagerly awaiting their sixth and upcoming, *Phrenology*. Meanwhile, others consume their powerful live shows with gusto—for example, their Smoking Grooves dates this past summer with Lauryn Hill and Outkast—lining up repeatedly for these drench-a-thons when the band hits town, not to mention following them from city to city for some of the hundred-plus shows the band rips during a *slow* year.

Still others trade asides with ?uestlove -- or "Qoolquest," as he is known on the world wide web -- on the band's Okayplayer.com site. Here, the group's hardest-core fans can also tattle on other artists in the Roots family—Common, the aforementioned Jazzyfatnastees, Jaguar Wright (of Coca-Cola "Nu Soul" commercial fame ["Just let it *flow*...", Black Thought assures her], D'Angelo — or

those musicians with whom, though less frequently, the Roots have also worked: Nelly Furtado, N*SYNC's Justin Timberlake, Joan Osbourne, trumpeter Roy Hargrove, Jay-Z, Zap Mama, Moby; talk about some hellified sidemen.

Now, all of this is, admittedly, success. And, most of all, as their prominence in the Coke commercials intimates, the Roots', to a great extent, are responsible for the current popularity of vibe-y, liquid-y, smooth and achingly harmonized Philadelphian R&B music; that of artists like Musiq, Bilal, and Jill Scott. On the band's influence, Questlove is philosophical, though not necessarily modest. "The flagship person never gets the proper credit for innovation," he says, elliptically. In other words, "I'm just saying that I don't recall anyone in 1992 with a Fender Rhodes/upright bass/live drums outfit sounding like we were sounding. Q-Tip has a term for it: *nigger drums*. For me, acid jazz just didn't have no 'mmp' to it. No Brand New Heavies song I heard ever made me just wanna fuckin' lick a shot."

But therein lies the rub, and the Roots' struggle: Are they simply R&B's *hardest* group...or hip-hop's *softest*? These are not merely metaphysical musings. In the decade since the combo was formed, the Roots, though today spoken of highly by their peers, are still something of outsiders in hip-hop.

Even more, however, they've come to represent somewhat of an evolutionary dead end; i.e., as opposed to inspiring a host of copycats, they are still the only group that does what they do. Originally, "we thought, 'Hey, we're just takin' this innovative art form to another level,'" admits Questlove. "But we kind of found out that we were getting' treated like the boy in the plastic bubble. We could be in the room with you, but we weren't allowed to come outside. And it's that way now. We're *our own island*." Today, Ahmir is wont to note, many of the artists who

once opened, or would have opened, for them—Jill Scott, India.Arie, Beanie Siegel, among others—headline today, and have switched places with the group.

Whether any of this changes, some say, depends on what the band does next.

Bugs Bunny: How about me readin' the bumps on ya head?

Steve Brody: I ain't got no bumps on me head!

Bugs Bunny: (Pulls out a mallet and rapidly whaps Brody seven times on his cranium.) Now ya have!

— “*Bowery Bugs*,” 1949

Phrenology is a pseudoscience, based on the research of 18th century Viennese physician Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828). Gall conceived that since “the skull takes its shape from the brain, [then] the surface of the skull can be read as an accurate index of psychological aptitudes and tendencies”; so says scientific historian Dr. John van Wyhe, in his “The History of Phrenology on the Web.”

So, for example, adds Wyhe, “a prominent protuberance in the forehead at the position attributed to the organ of Benevolence was meant to indicate that the individual had a ‘well developed’ organ of Benevolence, and would therefore be expected to exhibit benevolent behaviour.”

The Roots, at keyboardist Kamal's insistence, took *phrenology* as the name of their latest album—over their original title, *Introducing the Roots*—merely to indicate that this CD is “for the heads.” However, the potential for a more cheerless interpretation seems to underlie the choice. For example, that “phrenology” is a metaphor for the crude science of which the Roots, themselves, have been victims, both as men, and as musicians: That of relying on otherwise meaningless physical manifestations—head shape, skin color, preferred musical instrument—to determine the essential nature—idiot, criminal, “jazz head”—and qualities of a human being.

That, and the fact that, musically, rumor has it, *Phrenology* is hard as a skull. Though a blissful duet (“Complexity”) with Jill Scott and Black Thought hearkens back to the Rhodes-saturated sound of “Silent Treatment” and other Roots low-tempo jawns, this may be the band's most sonically diverse, musically ambidextrous album to-date. On one side, there's "Complexity." Near the middle, prodigy Cody Chestnutt's acoustic guitar banger, “The Seed.” On the left, the malodorous paranoia of “Water.” A frightening, 10:14-minute opus, constructed from an ear-pealing juxtaposition of natural and manmade sounds, it is possibly the saddest, most mournful piece of music this writer has ever heard; something akin to the sound of a complete and total psychological meltdown, amplified a billion times. (And prepare yourself for the blast-shielded beat Black Thought mines in the track's intro.) You absolutely will never hear “Water” on the radio, but, after the Grammy Award-winning “You Got Me,” with Erykah Badu, it will probably be the band's most famous record, simply because it is their most radical, on an album, says Questlove, that is “probably the most radical shit we've ever done.”

Forging radical shit requires Tariq to change up. “Tariq rhymes about rhymin’, like, at least 80 percent of the time,” says manager Nichols. “This album is a little different.”

This album, says Black Thought, “I strive to be vulnerable in my work. I’ve kinda learned that you can’t give people a one-sided perspective of yourself as an artist, that you need to have dimension. And very often, especially in hip-hop—in this sort of music that we make—the vocalist is always, ‘I’m The Best And This is Why.’”

“That’s all well and good, ‘cause that’s the foundation; that’s what made the music what it is,” continues Black Thought, “but the artists whose songs meant the most to the world were those people who were vulnerable. Like, those were the heroes: The people who were, like, ‘I’m No Hero.’ That’s what I’ve been working on, and that’s what makes the process so costly and long. Because, I want it to not only make sense, but I want it to...(pause)...I want it to kinda be *perforated*, so I seep out a little bit.”

The other reason Black Thought had to step up is that *Phrenology*, according to Questlove, is the Roots’ first “Malik-free record.” As for why the longstanding co-vocalist, who, in fact, has not performed regularly with the group since 1994, is absent, Questlove is, unusually, mum. He does note, though, that “Water” is dedicated to—*pointed at* might be a better way of putting it—the missing Malik.

Black Thought, however, is straightforward when set to define Malik’s problem. “Just drugs. Drugs and street life. Drugs, the street,” and an apparent crisis of faith that “has the potential to fuck your head up if you’re not grounded enough.”

“Let’s talk about the Lincoln Center show we did,” says manager Rich Nichols, whose job it is to steer the band through *Phrenology*’s rough waters. “Roots are there, muthafuckas rhymin’ back and forth, [Talib] Kweli’s up there doin’ shit. *Jay-Z walks out onstage*. Before he does *anything*, there is more fuckin’ applause than at any point during the show.”

“Now, you can’t fuck with that,” Rich says straightforwardly. “That is a bunch of people bein’ exposed to your ass over and over again beyond your music. That’s, ‘I’m in the same room with the guy from television!!’ Now, if you don’t have that particular shit, if your songs ain’t popular—despite bein’ good and having their own aesthetic, if that shit doesn’t lock with the commerce—your celebrity shit’s gonna fuckin’ plummet! The music is the soundtrack to the celebrity.”

Can the Roots prosper in such a mercenary world, where art is merely product, and the artist merely a product holder? Questlove fully intends to do so. Working on his theory that audiences give even the best artists only five-years, then ignore them, after which the artists must “apply” for more attention — like a lease — he affirms, “I am renewing my license. I’m going for my doctorate now, and I’m gonna pass the test with flying colors.

In other words, there’s no desire to rest on whatever they’ve already earned by way of struggle. “We gotta act like it’s 1993 all over again.”