Stop reading about vampires and read what Questlove has to say instead. MO' META BLUES is a magical kaleidoscope about a high concept, low maintenance genius named Ahmir. Like him, it's smart, funny, sweet and in a thousand places at once. Read it or rot on your vine.”

— AMY POEHLER

“I truly love this book. I felt like I was having a conversation with Ahmir, and I may have even said aloud a few times, ‘What? No way!’ It's everything I want to know about someone who is obsessed with music ... his love for music (contemporary/revolutionary/cool) is tireless. I am forever a fan of Questlove's fanaticism.”

— FRED ARMISIEN

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO QUESTLOVE

AHMIR "QUESTLOVE" THOMPSON and BEN GREENMAN
Still Bill. It got to the last song of side 2, “Take It All In and Check It All Out,” which starts with a great keyboard part but then goes to this lean guitar line, and I started playing along on the ashtray. I was strumming like I was Bill Withers or Benorce Blackmon or whoever was playing. Except that I was playing on an ashtray, and the ashtray had a jagged bit where a chip had been taken out of the glass. It cut my hand pretty bad and I cried like crazy—like a little kid, which I was.

It’s the same with my first Soul Train memory, which is from earlier in 1973, sometime in the winter. I was in the bathtub and didn’t want to stay there. What kid does? I came running out of the bathroom into the living room and I fell toward the radiator, which branded me. For the next sixteen years of my life, there was a train-track-like burn from the radiator right up the outside of my leg. Anyway, at that very moment, Curtis Mayfield was doing “Freddie’s Dead” on the TV. And not just “Freddie’s Dead,” but one specific part of the song, the modulated bridge where the horns-come-in. Even now, when I hear it, it traumatizes me. There’s nothing technically scary about it, but it’s forever welded to the memory of falling into the radiator. I’m not the only one with that kind of association. D’Angelo told me that to this day, he cannot listen to Marvin Gaye’s “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” without feeling terror. That’s strange to me, because when I hear that song I think of yuppies singing it in The Big Chill, reliving their youthful optimism. It’s a light song for me, a party song, frothy. But for him, it’s a dark place, and I’m not sure he even knows why. It’s related to something in his childhood, something buried deep. I even tested him during the Voodoo tour. We were backstage, with people milling around, and I put it on the radio. He immediately stiffened, turned around, and said “Take that thing off.”

What’s funny about that Soul Train memory—or tragic, depending on your sense of humor—is that small memories like that can permanently distort your perspective. After the “Freddie’s Dead” incident, I was really afraid of Curtis Mayfield in general. Back then, I judged records based on how the logo looked rotating on the turntable, and the Curtom logo—psychedelic lettering with a sun drawn behind the middle—was tense for me. And when I decided to pick “(Don’t Worry) We’re All Going to Go,” which was the opening track on Curtis. It was an unfortunate choice. All any three-year-olds

I wasn’t a normal kid.

My father used to say half-jokingly that there was a little concern over whether or not I was okay. Maybe it wasn’t a joke at all. The concern was about my personality, which seemed too eccentric. I don’t think “autistic” was a common term back then, but I later found out that they had taken me to a doctor to see if something was really wrong.

It wasn’t that I was violent or temperamentaL In fact, my mom said it was a blessing because I never gave her trouble. It was the opposite—they knew exactly how to sedate me, which was to sit me in front of something that held my interest and then just leave. I’d develop a deep relationship with that thing, whether it was Soul Train or a record on a turntable. But that led to a secondary worry, which was that I was falling inward into some kind of trance. Once, when I was very young, my dad installed a light with a rotating shade around a lightbulb, one of those lamps that works like a kind of carousel. He pressed the switch that caused the shade to turn and, according to him, I just disappeared inside myself. Five minutes passed, then ten, then fifteen, and I didn’t seem any less interested in the rotating lamp. Then my parents started noticing a broader pattern of me trying to spin stuff. I would take my sister’s bike and watch the wheel
go around and around. I would take my father's records and twirl them on my finger. They had a moment where they thought I might be interested in cars, because I was driving the records like a steering wheel. That was my whole entertainment for a while there, but to my parents, it was almost like a bad habit that they wanted me to drop. But I haven't dropped it, not at all. To this day, my life revolves around circles. My drums are circles. Turntables are circles. My logo or autograph, which I developed over the years through doodling, is composed of six circles. My life revolves around that shape.

Even without the circles, I knew straight off the bat that I wasn't like other kids, not the ones in my neighborhood in West Philly. My parents wanted me to survive, to thrive, and so they sacrificed everything so that I could have the better things in life—private schools, music lessons. You always hear stories of parents who put themselves out so that their son didn't end up in jail in general population. I'm not sure that's where I was headed. I had a different set of issues. I never went outside and played. I rarely interacted with other kids. It wasn't until a little later, when I started staying at my grandmother's house, that I had a brother figure in my younger cousin Mark. That was how I learned about normal kid stuff: bikes, basketball, catch-a-girl-freak-a-girl. What kind of nine-year-old takes advice about how to get a girl from a five-year-old?

"You just go up and give her a note that says 'Do I have a chance?'} and then three lines under it, Yes, No, and Maybe," he told me. I was that nine-year-old.

Our house was rich with records, maybe five thousand vinyl LPs. My father took everything that interested him, from rock to soul to folk to country. If he liked it, he liked it. He was broad in his tastes in that way, although if he was left to his own devices, he went for vocals. He was a singer, and he came from the school of Nat King Cole, so his tastes veered into tasteful soft rock with clear melodies: the yacht rock of its day, decades before anyone called it that. He liked Tapestry, 10cc, Bread. He loved singing along to the radio, tuned to Magic 103, putting out that dentist's-office music.

The rest of the family helped to complete the picture. My sister went to all-white schools, so to blend in, she listened to mainstream rock music. She brought it all home: Ziggy Stardust, Queen, The Eagles. I was a very small child at that point, but all my rock vocabulary can be...
traced back to her and her need to be socially accepted by her circle. Later on, in fact, when I heard records like the Beastie Boys's *Paul's Boutique*, it all came back to me. And then there was my mom. If anyone in my family is what you'd think of as a crate digger, it would be her. I don't mean that she went looking for specific records, more that her judgment in music was based on the way things looked at that moment, a kind of indescribable cool. If she saw a funky album cover by psychedelic artist Mati Klarwein, she'd snap it up, so that's how the house started to fill up with all those early seventies jazz-funk records like *Bitches Brew* and Herbie Hancock and Santana. She got drawn into the package, and if the package looked cool, that was enough for her. As it turns out, many of those records would be used as break beats in the future, so in a way it was an early education for my career in hip-hop.

Even though my father worked in the music industry through the seventies and beyond, he believed that music died as a result of two crucial punches, one in 1973 and the other in 1979. The first punch came when James Brown put out *The Payback*. My father felt ripped off: it was like $17.99 for eight songs; three of which were longer than ten minutes, the longest of which, ironically, is “Time Is Running Out Fast,” which is almost thirteen minutes. It wasn't running out fast enough for my father. “Where are the hits?” he wondered. “This is like one endless song.” I don't mean that he wondered internally in some kind of interior monologue. I mean that he asked that question out loud, repeatedly. “Where are the hits?”

The second album that punched him in the gut was Stevie Wonder's *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants*. It was too abstract, too spacey, too private, and not enough of anything else. All at once he just stopped buying records.

Those LPs, disappointments for him, were birthright moments for me. He just said to me, “Here. You take these.” They had wounded him and he wanted to move them away from him so that he could feel right again. So I started to study them: how they did what they did, how they stretched beyond what the artists had done before. *Journey Through The Secret Life of Plants* became my *Dark Side of the Moon*, my psychedelic masterpiece. I didn't have that experience with Pink Floyd and I didn't have it with Jimi Hendrix either, but I got it with Stevie Wonder, headphones on, tranced out, moving through space in my mind.

I loved the way that music was the center of our house, though I think I knew even at the time that it wasn't normal. Something strange was happening at 5212 Osage; I was getting a Harvard-style music education in a Joe Clark, *Lean On Me* environment. If you take an inner city ghetto where there's crime and violence and drugs—and there was all that around us all the time—the last thing you think you're going to find is a family that's teaching its afro'd four-year-old son the difference between Carole King's original “It's Too Late” and the Isley Brothers' version, which is this ten-and-a-half-minute blues-rock epic that opens up side two of their 1972 album *Brother, Brother, Brother*.

And it wasn't just about listening to other people's music. My early adventures with the Christmas Eve drum set turned into something more substantial, and by the time I was five, I was taking drum lessons. Right away, I learned something interesting about drum lessons: they don't let you touch the drums. Instead, they make you take tap-dancing lessons, because tap is a good way to coordinate your hands and feet. I was a latter-day Sammy Davis, Jr., a real Philly hoofer. In fact, my very first TV interview—which was also the first time I garnered complaints from other kids' parents because their daughters were hidden behind my afro—was for a dance performance. I was interviewed by Jack Jones, a local television legend who was working for KYW-TV, the local Channel 3. (Interestingly, KYW-TV is one of the oldest TV stations in the world: it started in the thirties as W3XE, when it was an experimental station used by the Philco Corporation, which was manufacturing some of the first
And that made you want to be part of it?

It didn't hurt. I got into hip-hop because of what wasn't there yet, because it was nascent. I wanted to be part of it and the production process. Because of the whole MIDI revolution, even as an untrained musician you were able to create. I loved music, but I had missed the boat on being a trained musician. I was studying electrical engineering. I wanted to make toys and games for a second. I studied poetry with Sonia Sanchez for five semesters. She'd put you through your paces both academically and spiritually. Every class was like this crash course in life lessons, and every week you left the room a different (dare I say better) person. My experience with her was about the words. From the words came this language and from that language came a music, an expansive music. So, the actual music that I was interested in was this distinct thing, falling far off any sensible career path and even further off from what I was actually capable of doing. I loved Dolphy and Ayler, Monk and Hemphill, Strayhorn and Shepp, but I was never going to play with that level of inspiration. And then there was hip-hop, perhaps the most elemental, black DIY music since the days of the proto-blues. Hip-hop attracted me as someone who loved music but whose facility was a precious little thing. I began to realize that hip-hop was something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue. It had my attention and my attention was enfolded into that of an entire generation.

What do you do when just listening to the music you love isn't enough?

I guess you do what I did, which was to become a serious music-press nerd, the kind of kid who collected back issues of Rolling Stone and memorized all the record ratings. The magazines soon became as important to me as the albums they were writing about. I loved the Robert Risko illustrations in Rolling Stone, the portraits that accompanied the lead reviews in each issue. On the walls of my bedroom I created a kind of Risko wallpaper made from hundreds of reviews. And every Saturday I would go down to the Philadelphia Main Library's reading room and go through back issues of Rolling Stone. It was so ancient back then: you had to request the periodical and wait for it to come out to you on a microfilm reel, after which you hooked it up on the reader, which was kind of like a reel-to-reel tape recorder, and found out what critics had written about the records, whether it was Hall and Oates or Cameo or the Zombies or Warren Zevon or Parliament. Take Her Satanic Majesty's Request, the Rolling Stones record from 1967. It wasn't very acclaimed at the time, because it was considered derivative of the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. I had my own ideas of the record that came from listening to it, but I also wanted to know the ideas that other people had at the
time. I immersed myself quickly, and I don't think I've ever really gotten dry.

There are artists who will tell you that they care what a record sells, or whether they get to put their video in rotation at this channel or website or whatever. I can say with confidence that I'm indifferent to those things. Even today, my esteem comes from record ratings. When I started out with the Roots, *The Source* was the standard, but for me, *Rolling Stone* was still the mountain that had to be climbed. In my head, I imagine that when I'm dead, when I can no longer defend my records or explain them, the periodicals will stay forever, like they did in the reading room at the Philadelphia Main Library, and those reviews will become the final word on the things that I've created. Maybe I imagine it this way because I expect that the people of the future will be people like me. Who's to say that when it's time to look up the history of the Roots, and some kid wants to learn about *Phrenology*, that *Rolling Stone*’s review, or *Spin*’s review, or the *Source*’s, or Pitchfork’s, won't tell that kid everything he or she thinks? Those words will still be there. The words are always there.

Even so, I don’t want to suggest that I’m totally beholden to what reviewers believe. I have a strange relationship with good and bad reviews. If a great artist makes an album that critics don’t like, or that they’re suspicious of, I make a beeline straight for that record. I’m the music snob who takes up the “wrong” records, like *U2’s Rattle and Hum*, which was maligned at the time for being slavishly imitative of American music. That game—trying to guess how a record will be received, and why, and if it’ll be overrated or underrated—has always appealed to me. When I was a kid, I used to listen to records before I read the review and try to guess what ratings that record would get from major magazines. No—it was worse than that. I would have a friend tell me what *Rolling Stone*’s lead review was, and then I would get the record and figure out in my head what rating I would give it. Sometimes my review was too high, and I’d read to find out why. Sometimes it was too low, and I’d see if I bought the critic’s rationale for the higher rating. When *Ragged Glory* came out in 1990, I didn’t know much about Neil Young. I think that was the first record of his I bought. I listened to it and I knew it was strong: lots of guitar noise; a big, thick, sludgy sound; a kind of clear-eyed darkness in the lyrics. I did my internal calculations and thought to myself that it was probably a four-star record. Then I checked *Rolling Stone*. The headline was “Neil Young’s Guitar Ecstasy,” and the writer, Kurt Loder, gave the album 4½ stars. That blew my mind. Holy shit, I thought, they just declared him the lord Jesus Christ.

I was and am so devoted to the review process that I write the reviews for my own records. Almost no one knows this, but when I am making a Roots record, I write the review I think the album receive and layout the page just like it’s a *Rolling Stone* page from when I was ten or eleven. I draw the cover image in miniature and chicken-scratch in a fake byline. It’s the only way I really know how to imagine what I think the record is. And as it turns out, most of the time the record ends up pretty close to what I say it is in the review.

That’s the kind of kid I was, even early on, trying to balance the pleasure I felt in hearing music with the pleasure I felt knowing that certain albums were considered critically superior. Soon enough, this led to a pretty strange set of preferences. I remember being a teenager and being ashamed of my musical tastes, at least some of them. My Brian Wilson and Beach Boys fandom, which is as important to me as anything else, was almost like a porn stash. Hide that shit, someone’s coming! You couldn’t look like me and be black in West Philadelphia and love the Beach Boys the way I did. I remember the first time I really came out of the closet for Brian Wilson. It was years later, after the
Roots were already going. I was with J Dilla and Common and suddenly realized that there was a loop I wanted from “There Must Be an Answer.” When I pulled the record out, they just looked at me like I was crazy. *Pet Sounds?* They probably thought I had put my hand on the wrong record. Now that kind of thing is cool. Everything is accepted as part of everything else. There’s a broad hipster continuum. But back then, there were so many times that I had to explain to myself why “I Just Wasn’t Made for These Times” meant so much to me.

So there was my obsession with Brian Wilson. There was Led Zeppelin. There was Miles Davis. There was Michael Jackson, of course—there was always Michael Jackson. But as much as I loved all those artists, as much as I saw their genius, the fact of the matter is that for a while, there was only Prince. It may be hard for kids now to recover a sense of how out there Prince was in the early eighties, how far above the crowd he was operating, especially since the Prince of now is kind of the opposite of the Prince then. But in the early eighties, people spoke of him as a genius, and they weren’t kidding, not even a little.

I have a vivid memory of reading the review of *Dirty Mind* in *Rolling Stone* in 1980. Ken Tucker wrote it, and he said something about how the record was an example of lewdness cleansed by art, and about how it was dirty but it certainly wasn’t pornographic. I had been following Prince since his first album, and I knew the second record pretty well, with “I Wanna Be Your Lover,” but it wasn’t until *Dirty Mind* that it hit me—he was big news. The fact that a relatively new, relatively unproven artist could get a 4½ star review from *Rolling Stone* blew my mind. It must have been around that time that I started to take the idea of a review seriously. I had a germ of an idea in my mind even at that age, and it came into focus pretty quickly, that I wanted to make records that were part of that same set, records that critics would admire and that would be marked as important.

You know: 4½ star records. A few years later, even though my whole room was wallpapered with *Rolling Stone* reviews and Risko drawings, I reserved a special place for Prince: I put his reviews right over my bed, on the ceiling, where I could see them all the time.

The same way I had become an independent businessman to get my hands on “Rapper’s Delight,” I started to come up with schemes to get Prince albums. It wasn’t like it is now. You couldn’t just go online and have access to all the music in the world. You had to go to record stores, with money in your pocket, and acquire albums. If they were out of stock, come back next week. When Prince’s *1999* came out, back in 1982, it touched off a saga that lasted a half-decade. I would say, conservatively, that I purchased that record eight times between 1982, when it first came out, and 1987, which is when I stopped getting on punishment for having it. Every time I bought it, my parents managed to take it away from me, and then I’d have to go and get it again. It was a war of attrition, and the only one who won was Prince.

The story of that record and how my parents and I saw it so differently is the story of my family, in a sense. When I was young, in the mid-seventies, my parents were how I’ve described them to this point: this funky, hip, post–civil rights, postrevolutionary bohemian black couple. They listened to all the cool music and wore all the cool clothes and had all the cool attitudes. In the early eighties, though, something switched over in them, and they became the black Ned and Maude Flanders. Beginning in 1983, they listened only to Christian radio, which included whatever soul stars had moved over to religious pop—Donna Summer, say. It wasn’t that other music was banned, exactly. We still listened to Stevie Wonder, but there were other acts that were clearly on the other side of the line. By this point, I had rejoined my parents for tours sometimes, and one night in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, we were in a hotel room on the road.