

Unconfuse Me with Bill Gates

EPISODE 03: Questlove

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QUESTLOVE: Somehow, I just saw the future. Something told me plant-based is going to be the future.

[music]

BILL GATES: You know, if you're honest with yourself, as you learn something, you're a little bit confused. Confusion is admitting that you don't know everything you should and trying to get that broad overview. I call that 'getting unconfused.'

Welcome to *Unconfuse Me*. I'm Bill Gates.

[music]

BILL GATES: My guest today is Ahmir Questlove Thompson. Most of you probably know him as the drummer of The Roots. He's got six Grammys, one Oscar, done a lot of books, and also works on food systems, including a meatless cheesesteak. Today we're going to talk about how he's bringing plant-based foods to reluctant consumers, and also his deep love for music and storytelling. So welcome.

QUESTLOVE: Thank you for having me.

BILL GATES: I think both of us like the word games.

QUESTLOVE: You're a Wordle guy?

BILL GATES: Yeah, every day.

QUESTLOVE: Do you have a Wordle group chat, or do you just play by yourself?

BILL GATES: There's me and four other people. Every morning, it's like, oh somebody got a three. Damn.

QUESTLOVE: I'm in three different Wordle group chats. *[laughs]*

BILL GATES: Oh, cool. Today's word, have you done it yet?

QUESTLOVE: I didn't play, but my group chat is angry.

BILL GATES: It's hard.

QUESTLOVE: Usually, I let them go first. They do it first thing in the morning. I do it at the end of the day, usually like at 11 p.m.

BILL GATES: Oh, nice, just in time.

QUESTLOVE: So, based on their reactions, I can tell if something is a double letter. I can tell if it's super angry, and it's like their sixth-- fifth or sixth attempt, then I know, well it must be a K or a Z or an X. So, I have an advantage to it.

BILL GATES: I'd say today is one of those days. *[laughs]*

QUESTLOVE: It's good to know you're a Wordle addict. That's good.

BILL GATES: What got you into the plant-based food area?

QUESTLOVE: For me, food has always been the greatest social adhesive. Once I started doing Fallon, I became friends with Anthony Bourdain, and he was sort of mentoring me in terms of food being art and that sort of thing. I threw these things called 'food salons.' We decided to go rogue one night, hey, let's shock everybody and just have, like Shake Shack as the meal for tonight. It just so happens that my partner, Alexis Rosenzweig, had read this article about a guy named Patrick Brown, who apparently had this new technology, Impossible, where this hamburger cooks well and all this stuff. My thoughts back then with anything vegetarian or vegan, I was like 430 pounds, I was a junk food – I'm from Philadelphia, I breathe cheesesteaks. So, it just so happens that Patrick happened to be in town.

BILL GATES: Amazing.

QUESTLOVE: It was, hey, let's do a thing, a blind taste test and Shake Shack versus this plant-based thing, it's supposed to be a hamburger that tastes like hamburger, but plant-based. And I was like, yeah, that should be fun. I just wanted a party trick. I did three of the tests, and every time I chose the Impossible Burger. Somehow I just saw the future. Something told me plant-based is going to be the future. I'm a guy that always rolled my eyes at anyone who said, "Oh, you shouldn't eat animal flesh." That was back in 2011, 2012. Ten-plus years later, I've been in a lot of first round investments for Impossible, NotCo, Eat Just, RightRice, Magic Spoon Cereal, Appeal. There's a lot of them. But I just feel as though that's the future, and I want to be the person that plants the seed.

BILL GATES: Yes, one thing that's cool is that it gets rid of the animal cruelty thing, but it's also a big climate thing.

QUESTLOVE: Yes, absolutely.

BILL GATES: I came to it more from that climate angle, and I got to meet Patrick Brown, who's a very great scientist. They're doing well, but a lot of people want him to make it even slightly better. They have a good roadmap, so I'm optimistic.

QUESTLOVE: Yes, the cool thing about, especially with Impossible, is that was back in 2012, 2013, I think, and I was impressed then. But since then, they've improved and improved. The thing that I always felt as though there's a lot of social issues, especially with black people in the inner city, that we have yet to get to. I'm a person that always wanted to know why are the worst foods, the high sugar foods, the fatty foods, why is that so accessible? Why is that so cheap? And one day,

Magic Johnson was a guest on *The Tonight Show*. I happened to be looking at the production notes, because I have to play a walk-on song, and I usually craft the walk-on song about whatever they're there to promote. I looked, and it was Magic Johnson's TGI Fridays. I went down to his room. I'm like, wait, you're here to promote your Fridays restaurant? I was kind of ribbing him about it. And he's like, "No, this is the most important of all my ventures. This is the most important one." When he explained it to me, that was my Doc Brown flux capacitor, eureka moment. He told me that where he strategically placed these Fridays are in neighborhoods in which you can't even get a salad within 20 or 30 blocks. Now I'm from West Philadelphia, so we would have to go all the way out to Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, to buy food instead of going to the local neighborhood supermarket. That's because there was a variety of fruits and vegetables and fresh things there. So once he said that, I realized like, oh, okay, this also explains my weight and all this, the fattiest foods in the world were accessible to me. I kind of want to change the narrative because I think people have this impression. First of all, there's just no education on how it's made. There's a lot of misinformation, and then on top of that, the reason why I invested in the Impossible Cheesesteak, was I wanted to show Philadelphians locally that just because it's plant based doesn't mean that it's boring or bland. Just starting there, people are opening their ideas.

BILL GATES: I haven't tried your cheesesteak yet.

QUESTLOVE: Goldbelly.

BILL GATES: People like it?

QUESTLOVE: Yeah, my biggest fan is Obama.

BILL GATES: All right.

QUESTLOVE: I love all types of food. I know that people just generally don't like a know-it-all, even if it's to the detriment of their own life and health, but I think there's a way to just plant seeds. Like the way that I introduced the cheesesteak, I struck a deal with my local team. I'm from Philadelphia, so at Phillies games we had plant-based cheesesteak and whatnot. It was a hit because most of them gave us feedback like, "Wow, this really does taste good, it doesn't taste like cardboard." I definitely foresee a future in which alternative foods can sustain us and help us.

BILL GATES: Well, we need that. Of all the climate areas, the one that people are probably least aware of is all the fertilizer and cows, and that's a challenge. But when you meet people like Patrick Brown, you go, wow.

QUESTLOVE: Pat's intense.

BILL GATES: He's intense. Yes.

QUESTLOVE: Right now, I'll say that it needs a perfect cheese to it. So right now, it's vegetarian based because we're using real cheese. The second that there is a plant-based cheese that tastes good, and we have high standards with how it tastes, so as soon as that happens, then we're really going to change the game.

BILL GATES: Yeah, I have a few companies that are working on that. I know we have a number of mutual friends, including Nathan Myhrvold.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah! Yeah, man.

BILL GATES: That guy is amazing.

QUESTLOVE: Nathan to me was the closest experience I had to a Willy Wonka, where you're seeing like, robots that you're not supposed to know about. We had a 20-course meal. The world doesn't know that food science can really be fun and creative and that it's art. I love Nathan to death.

BILL GATES: Yeah. Nathan is the one who taught me that animal fats melt at different temperature than these plant fats. So one of the keys to getting the cheese that's going to meet your high standards, is to somehow chemically make fats that are really the same as what you're used to. The tongue feel; that ingredient makes a huge difference. Now there's some people who think they can do that and make it even less expensive. It's incredible the number of companies.

QUESTLOVE: I also just love the interest of it. There's a school in New York City called the – I don't know if you ever heard, the Food and Finance School?

BILL GATES: Hmm.

QUESTLOVE: The Food and Finance School is a school that's sort of the equivalent of a performing arts high school, like the *Fame* school.

BILL GATES: Cool.

QUESTLOVE: Where you have music, drama, dance, creative writing, learning production. This school is the culinary equivalent to that, and these kids are way more advanced in their thinking. When you're younger, there's no limit, there's no cynicism, you're just constantly at play. This school pretty much teaches you everything about the food world. So yes, there's like baking and cooking and pastries, but there's also like cutlery, how to photograph food, on their rooftop they have an irrigation system, they're raising fish up there. I started a program, it's the food entrepreneurialship program, in which 20 or 25 of the students for four weeks go out to Silicon Valley where a lot of these future-food companies are located. A lot of these kids might not have had access to plant-based food technology or any of those things. They're so advanced in knowing and creating what is needed for sustainability. I have absolutely no doubts that in five to ten years, we'll even be further down the road with it.

BILL GATES: Yeah, it's great to see science and art and culture kind of coming together.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah.

BILL GATES: What's your guilty pleasure snack food?

QUESTLOVE: [*trills*] Okay. My guilty pleasure snack food. As a Philadelphian, there's a company called Tastykake, and it's tri-state. Tastykake is kind of like our localized version of what Hostess is:

a Twinkie, a Yankee Doodle, that sort of part-cupcake, part-whatever. So, there's something called the Butterscotch Krimpet, which in its heyday, wow. What's your guilty pleasure snack food?

BILL GATES: The one I can't avoid, so I just make sure it's not around, is See's Candies has a peanut brittle that is both salty and sweet, and the mouthfeel is pretty amazing.

QUESTLOVE: Is it bad for your teeth?

BILL GATES: No, it's just a lot of sugar. A lot of calories, and you don't fill up much, so if you have a whole box there, next thing you know, you're just chomping away.

QUESTLOVE: Right, okay.

[music]

BILL GATES: Another thing that's kind of unusual is you have a gigantic record collection.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah, I do, in terms of volume, I have about 200,000 records.

BILL GATES: Amazing.

QUESTLOVE: But I don't want people to think that I just went out and individually, like got 200,000 records. The way that the record industry was, say, in the '50s, '60s, and the '70s, there would be something called one-stop-shops, and one-stop-shops are the people that order in bulk every type of record. Then they'll service those records to restaurants that have jukeboxes, bars, diners that have jukeboxes, local mom-and-pop record stores. What's happening is that a lot of those one-stop-shop owners are passing away. Oftentimes, it will be a family, and they had a one-stop-shop, and they're like, "Well, we have like 30,000 pieces and we don't know what to do with it."

BILL GATES: Yeah, I thought I'd gone past vinyl, but then my friend Bono gave me a turntable. And he was very thoughtful, he gave me about twelve records that he thought I'd like. Next thing I knew, I was using it.

QUESTLOVE: I heard this. I heard this.

BILL GATES: Speaking of vinyl, we've got a turntable here. I asked you if you might bring a record. So, what have you got?

QUESTLOVE: Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, this is some of the greatest jazz orchestral work that there is. There's a really awesome cover of "Get Out of My Life, Woman," which was a common song back then. I want to play the cover of "Get Out of My Life, Woman."

BILL GATES: Fantastic.

QUESTLOVE: It's a double album. Jazz great Joe Williams is singing on this version. This album, this is from my personal collection. I lived in England for a time and this was one of the first records I purchased.

[music – “Get Out of My Life, Woman” by Joe Williams and Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra]

QUESTLOVE: I believe this is ‘70. Yes. It’s one of the records from my childhood.

BILL GATES: Cool.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah.

BILL GATES: So that’s...?

QUESTLOVE: Thad Jones and Mel Lewis, yes.

BILL GATES: So that’s Thad Jones?

QUESTLOVE: Yes.

BILL GATES: And that’s Mel Lewis?

QUESTLOVE: Yes.

QUESTLOVE: Joe Williams, a gentleman that’s been singing like with Duke Ellington since you know, the ‘40s, is singing on this.

BILL GATES: Okay, cool.

[music fades]

BILL GATES: I also have a record for you. This is Sly and the Family Stone’s *Greatest Hits*, I’ll bet you have a lot of copies of this, but this is actually signed by the artist.

QUESTLOVE: Jesus H. Christ! Wait. [*laughs*] This is what you call prime stunting. Like this is – Jesus Christ. Actually I’m coming here straight from the set. I’m working on my follow-up to *Summer of Soul*, which is the Sly and the Family Stone documentary. Whoa!

BILL GATES: Well, that’s great. I watched last night *Summer of Soul*, which was a blast.

QUESTLOVE: Thank you. There’s no way I can have a real conversation with you right now because I’m like, wow, this is amazing. Thank you.

BILL GATES: Yeah.

QUESTLOVE: I appreciate it.

BILL GATES: We’ll have to ask them how many they signed like that. Maybe not that many. It’s pretty cool.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah. Wow. That’s – that’s – that’s rare. That’s so rare.

BILL GATES: In your movie, *Summer of Soul*, it was great when you got those artists, to see them now that they're a lot older.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah, to see them watch themselves.

BILL GATES: They were.

QUESTLOVE: My producer Joseph says that that's the best part of the movie, like the *Harry Met Sally* interstitial of them watching themselves. You've got to understand that just randomly, these two strangers came to me with 40 hours' worth of footage, and they were like, "We know you love music, Questlove. Here, take this and direct it." The way that human nature is, I think we're so cynical and we're so distrusting, it was almost like, "Why are you guys coming to me? Did Spike Lee or Ava DuVernay say no? Am I the last on your list? Is the audio bad?" There has to be a reason why you can't find a director to do this. It took me maybe six or seven months to finally come to grips that, okay, this is your new mission. But for me, the one thing I was worried about was I knew that people of age of the Harlem Cultural Festival, anyone over 45 and up, would instantly gravitate to it, but how was I going to attract someone younger? It would have been easy for me to, like, call up Drake. Drake's uncle is Larry Graham.

BILL GATES: Oh, you're kidding? I didn't know that.

QUESTLOVE: The inventor of funk. Right. Drake's name is Aubrey Graham. If people follow Drake on social media, then you know that Drake's father is just as famous as Drake is. Drake's father's brother is Funkmaster Larry Graham. That's the type of grasping for straws that I was trying to do. Like, maybe I can get Drake to talk about his uncle or something like that. But what I discovered was that the commonality between millennials and Gen Z with what was happening in the Harlem Cultural Festival, this 50-year gap, was we were starting to see a parallel movement of the political uproar and the social uproar and the tension of the time that started the Harlem Cultural Festival, which was the killing of Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy, and we lost our leaders, and what's happening in the Nixon administration coming in and a lot of programs getting cut. We were going through the same thing with unarmed killings and protest and not knowing if we're going to live, or if we're safe. That was what bonded the time periods together, and I think it's a way better story than what I thought it was going to be.

BILL GATES: No, it ended up being phenomenal.

QUESTLOVE: Thank you.

BILL GATES: It's amazing how much of the music I knew because that's the music of when I grew up.

QUESTLOVE: You know what's weird? That was probably the main battle between me and some of the producers, the exec producers, because the thing is that in my mind, I wanted goosebump performances. I'll give you an example: Stevie Wonder. During Stevie Wonder's 40-minute performance, he's doing his mega-hits. He still had "Yester-Me, Yester-You, Yesterday," "I Was Made to Love Her," "Ma Cherie Amour." He had the hits. But the one song in which I got goosebumps watching him perform was also the one song that showed you what Stevie Wonder was

about to do in the future. We got a glimpse of what '70s to '90s Stevie Wonder was about to do. They were like, "Well, no one knows the song, *Shoo-Be-Doo-Dab-Day*. So you want to make this a seven-minute performance and start with a drum solo at the beginning?" But for me, it's an amazing performance, and that's what we have to go with, not the hits. Let's go with the amazing performance. I'm glad that we won that battle.

BILL GATES: Yeah, a lot of gospel.

QUESTLOVE: Yes.

BILL GATES: It's great stuff.

QUESTLOVE: Yes.

BILL GATES: There's this song which I always thought was "When Jesus Walks." It turns out it's "When Jesus *Washes*"— and of course, now it makes more sense, because it's really from the Bible. I never knew what were they talking about.

QUESTLOVE: What it was, right.

BILL GATES: I mean, it's baptizing people there. Well, it's amazing the number things you get up to. You've got books. You've got this new movie. You're on TV almost every night.

QUESTLOVE: Yes.

BILL GATES: That's a heck of a schedule.

QUESTLOVE: My father was an oldies doo-wop legend back in the '50s. What makes my situation unique is that I'm also the last generation raised by parents that didn't trust or believe in babysitters. So, you had to go to work. You had to work with your parents. By seven, they're teaching me how to iron, and steam, and clean outfits, and go to the cleaners and that sort of thing. By the time I was nine, it was very normal for a nine- or ten-year-old to go to a nightclub and ask for a ladder, give me a razor blade so I can cut these light gels, and switch out light gels and everything. When I was ten, I was operating the system inside nightclubs. It was just normal for a ten-year-old to operate a smoke machine, and the lights and the spotlight. Then one day, my dad's drummer got in a motorcycle accident. My dad was just like, "Well, okay, you know the show. So, you're the new leader." My first gig, that gig was at Radio City Music Hall.

BILL GATES: Wow.

QUESTLOVE: Weird enough, right?

BILL GATES: Nice place to start.

QUESTLOVE: My dad felt like it was a jackpot moment because he doesn't have to pay his guy \$700 a week. [*Bill laughs*] For me, I was the richest eleven-year-old in existence. So, give Ahmir 200 bucks. He'll buy a bike, he'll be happy. I became his bandleader, that was the modus operandi. Whatever job was available, you did. I think that that's what I inherited from my family. By the time

I got to Fallon, I was teaching at NYU. I was starting the Questlove's Food thing. I was writing books. I had my podcast. I was deejaying at all odd hours of the night. There were still The Roots, literally on *The Tonight Show*. I invested in a hoodie store. I thought the more jobs you had, that defines your value. Then once everything was taken away in the pandemic, and we had nothing and silence, I realized that for health reasons, that resting, silence, meditation, that's just as important. I'm just trying to get to a place where I'm enjoying boring stuff, like naps and nothing, you know. The guy that used to always work. But I'm still writing books and directing.

BILL GATES: [*Laughing*] Seven jobs, yeah.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah, yeah.

BILL GATES: No, it's nice. The pandemic did get us to step back a little bit.

QUESTLOVE: I figured the path to sanity, for me, was I somehow just went back to being an eight-year-old, started drawing and sketching, started watching cartoons, started things that I wouldn't dare do in my busy, too-busy-to-have-fun time. What did you do?

BILL GATES: Well, it was a very unusual time for me because the Gates Foundation has a lot of experts on vaccines and infectious disease. In fact, most infectious disease is in Africa and poor countries, and rich countries are very lucky. There isn't that much. There's some TB, there's some HIV, but not a lot. One of our concerns was that in the rich world, you have all this oxygen, and even though those systems are overloaded, in poor countries, you have way, way less. We were trying to say, okay, how quick can we get a vaccine? How quick can we get an antibody? Now, the fact that we were involved and writing checks, we wrote \$2 billion of checks, in a way, you suspend your emotional reaction, because you're, okay, I'm a fireman, let's go in here and do all of that. It was only about a year in, when we finally got the vaccine, to step back and say, wow, that was crazy.

QUESTLOVE: So, you immediately felt the pressure and the weight of the world on your shoulders, like "I have to use my resources to save the world."

BILL GATES: And we can help with this, yes, because it's our area. In 2015, I actually gave a speech where I said, "Hey, everybody ought to be concerned about this." And sadly, we didn't get ready.

QUESTLOVE: Mathletes versus athletes, mathletes versus athletes.

BILL GATES: Then there was all this insanity about misinformation that maybe I was benefiting from it or maybe Fauci was making money off of vaccines, things that were so the opposite, that even today, I kind of think, hey, is that a joke? But then you run into people who actually believe these things. That was a crazy time. Even now as we realize, okay, the kids who didn't get their schooling or some level of depression that is still higher.

QUESTLOVE: Resonated, yes.

BILL GATES: For me, personally, and maybe a little bit like you, it was so jarring that it did get me to think about my life and what I value, friendships and things. So, I can't tell you that it was all negative. It was scary.

QUESTLOVE: But just to keep you sane, would you go to video games or just for a moment of sanity, how did you –

BILL GATES: I got to do a lot of reading. One nice thing was because I had no meetings I had to go to, I started exercising, particularly playing tennis a lot more. It really knocked me out of my normal pattern. There are some very positive aspects of it. Now when we're going back to normal, I'm sure you're like this, everybody wants you to resume *all* the things you were doing before, and you have to kind of force yourself to say "Wait a minute."

QUESTLOVE: Don't do that.

BILL GATES: There's some of these things that weren't bad, but now, I'm living a somewhat different set of priorities. I have to add it all up. You can't do all the stuff that you learned to like during the pandemic, and then all that stuff you did beforehand.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah, I, too, thought, okay, let me go back. But then I actually morphed into the person I used to laugh at. I don't think I was big on meditation or gratitude or yoga or stretching or morning walks or my health, or any of those things. That was the paradigm shift that I needed. It's almost like I needed the pandemic to sort of morph into who I am now. Wow, thanks for sharing that with me.

[music]

BILL GATES: So what name does your family call you?

QUESTLOVE: I've always been Ahmir. There was a period where they would call me by my middle name, Khalib, playfully.

BILL GATES: Ah.

QUESTLOVE: But no, I've always been Ahmir, especially when I forget to take the garbage out or do the dishes, whatever. It's more like Ahmir with twelve exclamation points at the end. What name does your family call you?

BILL GATES: Well, my dad was also Bill, and he was quite tall, so people called him Bill or Big Bill. I'm the third. So in my family, the nickname is Trey. Everybody calls me Trey, which then, when people from outside the family are around, people are calling me that.

QUESTLOVE: Your name is Trey?

BILL GATES: Yeah, that's my name.

QUESTLOVE: Dawg, that's a hood name. *[laughs]*

BILL GATES: *[laughs]* Is it?

QUESTLOVE: *[laughs]* I wasn't expecting that one. All right. Yeah, I've got a cousin named Trey.

BILL GATES: Do they give you a hard time about the name Questlove?

QUESTLOVE: No, but it's weird now because there's this dual life thing. Everybody in hip hop does the government name thing and then their moniker. I didn't want to be Questlove. I didn't want a title.

BILL GATES: Oh, okay.

QUESTLOVE: Back in high school when Tariq was naming us, I decided that I wanted to be a question mark. *[makes question mark noise]* When we started doing the press rounds, a lot of the European press just thought my name was Mark. "So, Mark, da-da-da-da." I was like, "Wait, why are you calling me Mark?" And they're like, "Question Mark?" And I was like, "Oh, no, no."

BILL GATES: *[laughs]* "This is not going to work."

QUESTLOVE: By our third album, *Illadelph Halflife*, I decided that I'm going to go with an old school rendition of that name. So, if you're old school, you're either going to be Rock, Ski or Love.

BILL GATES: Yeah, sure.

QUESTLOVE: I mean, you're a power broker, so you should be "Trey-Rock." That's your name. I'll be Questlove and you're Trey-Rock. *[laughs]* You know I'm going to call you that till the day you die.

BILL GATES: All right.

QUESTLOVE: Yeah.

BILL GATES: Well, thank you. It was great talking to you today and a lot of fun.

QUESTLOVE: I enjoyed it. Thank you. And thank you for this.

BILL GATES: Yeah.

QUESTLOVE: I got to frame this. It's amazing.

[music]

BILL GATES: *Unconfuse Me* is a production of the Gates Notes. Special thanks to my guest today, Ahmir Questlove Thompson.

[music fades]

QUESTLOVE: Just crates and crates and crates and crates of records. I'm up to 200,000, but it's also like I have 300 copies of, like, Culture Club's "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" on 45, that I don't need.

[*Bill laughs*]