

Dr. Gates gets honest about Abe

Written by Kam Williams

Henry Louis “Skip” Gates, Jr. was born in Piedmont, West Virginia on September 16, 1950 to Henry, Sr. and Pauline Coleman. Today, he is a world-renowned scholar and educator and the Alphonse Fletcher Professor at Harvard University.

In his capacity as a public intellectual, he has served as host of “African-American Lives,” a PBS series which employs a combination of genealogy and science to reconstruct the family trees of the descendants of slaves. And just last year, he co-founded “The Root,” a sophisticated website dedicated to the concerns of the black intelligentsia.

Here, in conjunction with the celebration of the bicentennial of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, Professor Gates discusses two new projects revolving around the 16th President, his book, “Lincoln on Race and Slavery,” and his PBS special, “Looking for Lincoln.”

KW: Hi Dr. Gates, I’m honored to have this opportunity to speak with you.

SG: No, it’s my pleasure.

KW: Where should I start? What approach did you take in terms of producing your new PBS series on Lincoln?

SG: Lincoln’s myth is so capacious that each generation of Americans has been able to find its own image reflected in the mirror of Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln is our “Man for All Seasons.” There’s a Communist Lincoln, a Republican Lincoln, Lincoln the writer, Lincoln the orator, Lincoln the atheist, Lincoln the Christian, Lincoln the war criminal, Lincoln the Savior of the Union, the Confederate Lincoln, the African-American Lincoln, etcetera. So, I wanted to look at all these myths about Lincoln, deconstruct them, and see what the actual man was like. And, frankly, I also wanted to confront the complexity of his attitudes towards slavery and racial equality, which weren’t exactly the same thing. For, while he was fundamentally opposed to slavery, it took him a while to embrace racial equality.

KW: As a person who majored in black studies, I appreciated the fact that you included Lerone Bennett and a discussion of his 650-page biography of Lincoln, “Forced into Glory.” Bennett’s ordinarily overlooked when it comes to Lincoln scholars, since he indicts the 16th President as a racist who very reluctantly freed the slaves.

SG: Thank you. First of all, I admire Lerone Bennett. When I was 18, I read his essay in Ebony Magazine, “Was Abe Lincoln a White Supremacist?” At the time, I didn’t have the intellectual sophistication to judge his evidence. But of course it was a shock when I read it.

KW: Did you enjoy doing research for the series?

SG: It was a delight! [Chuckles] Doing this film was a learning experience for me, because I hadn’t explored much of the Lincoln scholarship other than George Fredrickson’s last book. [Big Enough to Be Inconsistent: Abraham Lincoln Confronts Slavery and Race] I went back to read Lincoln’s own words and what historians had to say about him.

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KW: What did you learn?

SG: That he was an enormously complex man... that he had his flaws, but he changed. He progressed. He changed during the Civil War. Through the efforts of Frederick Douglass and the achievements of the 200,000 black men who fought in the Union Army, he came to have new respect for black people. And, in fact, in his last speech he advocated the right to vote for the black veterans and for the "very intelligent Negroes." That's what made John Wilkes Booth kill him. Booth was in the audience, and said, "That's it. That means [N-word] citizenship. And I'm going to run him through." So, Lincoln literally gave his life for espousing black rights.

KW: On the show, historian Doris Kearns Goodwin says, "It's not Lincoln's fault that he was mythologized. Lincoln had to live in his times." You responded to her by saying, "Doris was right," and "I've come to admire him." How did you get to that point?

SG: I really got to that point in the middle of that interview. I had been walking around upset with Lincoln's reluctance to support equal rights and his determination to free the slaves but to encourage them to migrate to Panama, Haiti or Liberia. Doris said, "You're upset because you feel like you've been lied to. But Lincoln didn't lie to you. The historians did." There's a cult of Lincoln among some historians who feel almost like they're the disciples of Christ. Lincoln is like a secular Christ in America. So, once I could get straight about who to be upset with, I was fine.

KW: Another thing you said which upset me was when you spoke about Lincoln's being the seminal story in American History. Do you really think that Lincoln has replaced the Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence and the rest of the Colonial Period?

SG: Oh, sure, absolutely. The primal event in American History, other than the founding itself, is the Civil War, saving the Union, defending the Constitution, and redefining the Declaration of Independence to include all men, which Lincoln did. Lincoln was very consistent about that. So, whereas you can't have subsequent events without the founding, it really was the Civil War which was the truly great American Revolution.

KW: Tell me a little about "Lincoln on Race and Slavery."

SG: In this book, I examine three strands of thought. Imagine a braid of hair. Most of just us say, "Lincoln freed the slaves, therefore he liked black people." That's the braid, but it turns out the braid has three strands. One strand is how he felt about slavery; another is how he felt about racial equality, and the third is colonization. We find contradictory impulses in Lincoln at least through 1863 when he finally begins to do the right thing, and all three strands are re-connected into a new braid.

KW: What do you think about our new president?

SG: I think Barack Obama is going to be one of the best presidents in the history of this republic.

KW: Is there a question you've never been asked, that you wish someone would?

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SG: [Chuckles] I've pretty much been asked everything... Here's one: Why do I do what I do?

KW: Why do you do what you do?

SG: Because I love black people, and my goal is to restore black history from on the grand scale, the broad sweep of history, down to the level of each black person's family tree.

KW: Speaking of family trees, will there be a third season of African-American Lives?

SG: My next series is called "Faces of America," where I'll be tracing the roots of two Jewish-Americans, two Arab-Americans, two Latino-Americans, two Asian-Americans, two West Indian-Americans, two Irish Americans and an Italian-American. So, we'll be employing the same genetics and genealogy format, but for the broader American public. I'm very excited about it.

KW: When I interviewed Lisa Kudrow, she told me a similar British TV-series is helping her trace her roots which had sort of hit a dead end with the Holocaust as far as she knew.

SG: Yeah, these genealogy shows are popping up everywhere now. And most of them are the sons and daughters of African-American Lives, so I'm very proud of that.

KW: I remember you traced most of your roots back to Ireland.

SG: Only on my father's side. I definitely have something called the U Neill Haplotype on my father's sign, which means I'm related to 8% of all the men in Ireland. [Chuckles]

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

SG: Sure, I was afraid the American people weren't going to do the right thing and overcome centuries of discrimination by voting for the better candidate. A month ago, my 95 year-old father had pneumonia and I was afraid.

KW: 95! God bless him!

SG: Thanks. A little fear is a good thing. Being paralyzed by fear, however, is not a good thing.

KW: Why did you stay at Harvard during the great exodus of so many other African-American professors after they were mistreated by then Harvard President Larry Summers (who is now in the Obama administration)?

SG: I stayed to defend what I, Cornel West, Anthony Appiah, former Harvard President Neil Rudenstine and our other colleagues had all built. I felt that it would be vulnerable, if I left. That's why I stayed, and it was the right decision.

KW: How are Harvard students different from Princeton students?

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SG: I've never taught Princeton students.

KW: Wait, I live in Princeton, and I used to see you around town and even met you here at an NAACP function.

SG: I was at the Institute for Advance Study while on leave from Harvard. But I didn't teach. I was on sabbatical. However, I would imagine that the students are just as smart and as energetic and wonderful as the students at Harvard. They're from the same gene pool. [Chuckles]

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

SG: I'm a very happy person. My life has been such a fantasy, I'm sometimes afraid that I'm going to wake up and it'll turn out that I've been in a coma.

KW: That's the vibe you give off, like Alicia Keys, who has a very grounded vibe.

SG: Yeah, she's very centered.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

SG: A biography of Alain Locke by Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth.

KW: The Rudy Lewis question: Who's at the top of your hero list?

SG: My mother, Pauline Coleman Gates, who is deceased, and my father, Henry Louis Gates, Sr.

KW: What was the biggest obstacle you've ever had to overcome?

SG: I had an infected hip replacement, a 300,000 white blood cell count, which is huge. So, I had to have emergency surgery, because I could have died. I wasn't frightened, but that was the biggest obstacle. That's when you've descended into the valley of the shadows, and you have to fight to come back. And fortunately, I made it.

KW: The music maven Heather Covington question: What music are you listening to?

SG: I almost exclusively listen to Soul Street on XM Radio, Channel 60. It's R&B from the Fifties and Sixties. I'm just an old-school black man.

KW: The Laz Alonso question: How can your fans help you?

SG: I want them to watch my programs and then give me their feedback and tell me what they think. That's the best way they can help.

KW: What advice do you have for young black kid who wants to follow in your footsteps?

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SG: Overall, by staying in school, deferring gratification and believing in the power of education is the way that we can help ourselves as a people.

KW: How do you want to be remembered?

SG: As a man who loved black people, and who fought to preserve their great cultural traditions!

KW: Thanks again for the time, Dr. Gates.

SG: Thank you, buddy.

To see a trailer for Looking for Lincoln hosted by Skip Gates, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p91V-BHfe6k>