



# The MANY FACETS of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

THE PROFESSOR, 'FINDING YOUR ROOTS' HOST, AND AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES PIONEER GETS THE PRESS CLUB'S LUMINARY AWARD

BY JON REGARDIE

When it comes to discussing Henry Louis Gates, Jr., it's almost easier to list what he *hasn't* accomplished than what he has done. Consider just a portion of his resume: He teaches at Harvard and is the director of the university's Hutchins Center for African & African American Research. He's a noted author, literary critic and genealogist. He unearthed several of the oldest novels ever written by African American authors. In 1981 he was part of the first class of MacArthur "Genius" grant recipients.



In 1998, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. made the address when Harvard University conferred a special honorary degree upon Nelson Mandela.

Harvard's Department of African American Studies in 1996: Gates, forefront, with members, from left, Werner Sollors, J. Lorand Matory, Evelyn Higgenbotham, Cornel West, John F. Kain, and Kwame Anthony Appiah.

Then there's the way his scholarly work dovetails with the entertainment industry: Two films he executive produced, *The Black Church* (for PBS) and *Frederick Douglass: In Five Speeches* (HBO), earned Emmy nominations. His six-part PBS series "The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross" earned a Peabody Award. The 10th season of "Finding Your Roots," the immensely popular PBS series Gates hosts, bows in January. The next month, his PBS four-hour documentary "Gospel" debuts.

So how does the man who goes by Skip and who tonight receives the Los Angeles Press Club's Luminary Award for Career Achievement, do it all? The answer is surprisingly simple: He gets his sleep.

"I have no embarrassment about going to sleep when I get sleepy," Gates said a few days before Thanksgiving. Speaking from a beach in Miami where he was enjoying a vacation, and as he got ready to crack a biography of W. E. B. Du Bois by David Levering Lewis, he added. "I can have guests at dinner, and if I get sleepy my wife takes over. She's a night owl. She's a professor. She likes to do research till 2 or 3 a.m. sometimes. By 10, I'm probably in bed. So sleep is very important to me."



Gates's documentary, "Africa's Great Civilizations," looks at 200,000 years of African history.



Gates grew up in Piedmont, West Virginia, where his father worked in a paper mill. He attended Potomac State College, then transferred to Yale where he studied history. He earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English Literature at the University of Cambridge. There, he found a mentor in the Nigerian playwright and essayist Wole Soyinka, who would help inspire Gates to study African and African American literature.

An academic career ensued, with stints at Yale, Cornell and Duke, before he settled at Harvard in 1991. After arriving in Boston, Gates recalled, he and Kwame Anthony Appiah—who writes "The

Ethicist" column in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*—received a directive from Henry Rosovsky, dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

"He charged us with building the greatest center of African and African American studies in the world, and he was serious," Gates said. "He gave us the resources to do it, and Anthony Appiah and I threw ourselves into it."

It was an early and crucial step in the process of U.S. institutions recognizing the importance of African and African American studies, and Gates discusses it with pride. He details the rich ros-

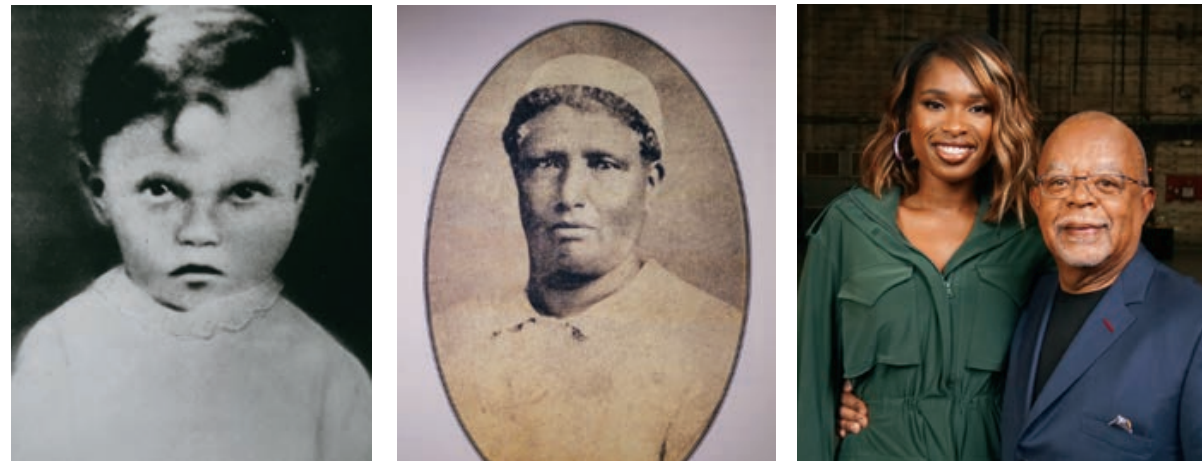
Far left: Marguerite Howard and Paul Coleman, parents of Gates's mother Pauline Coleman.

Above: The 2013 documentary, "The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross" examines African American history.

Right: The Gates family with brother, Paul, and Henry bookending his parents Henry, Sr. and Pauline; a young Henry Jr.



Left to right: Grandfather Edward St. Lawrence Gates, known to family as "Pop," was known for his award-winning tulips in hometown Cumberland, Md.



Pops's grandmother was Gates's great-great-grandmother, Jane Gates, an illiterate mulatto laundress and nurse who managed to buy her own home now known as the Jane Gates Heritage House.

Singer Jennifer Hudson appeared in a 2021 Gates documentary called "The Black Church: This is Your Story, This is Our Song" about the 400-year history of the Black church in America.

ter of professors who have been hired and Ph.D. programs created, as well as the Hutchins Center's own 23,000-square-foot-headquarters. "We built this. None of this existed 32 years ago," he declared.

There have been challenges, notably in 2009, when the man who studied and wrote about racial injustice was arrested by Cambridge police. News reports detailed how, after returning home from a trip, and being dropped off by taxi, Gates had trouble with his door. A white woman concerned about a Black man trying to enter the residence called 911. Police responded, a dispute ensued and Gates—who had already entered his house—was taken into custody. The encounter sparked a national discussion of law enforcement and racial profiling, and President Barack Obama waded into the fray, saying the police "acted stupidly" in arresting someone at his own home. It would lead to the famous White House "beer summit" with Obama, then-Vice President Joe Biden, Gates and the officer who arrested him all coming together.

While the incident generated outsized attention at the time, far more has been said over the years about "Finding Your Roots." Gates noted that the program had three iterations, starting as a one-off

look at the ethnic past of prominent Black figures such as Oprah Winfrey and Chris Tucker, and then a brief series with a wider set of participants, among them Yo-Yo Ma and Meryl Streep. Audiences watched in large numbers, and it coincided with the rise in home tests that allowed people to trace their own ancestry.

"It blew the lid off the thing," Gates said. "By this time the science of DNA had become so sophisticated and we rode that wave."

"Finding Your Roots" debuted in 2012, and remains a hit. Each episode focuses on a pair of celebrities, but Gates is the centerpiece, serving as the warm, knowledgeable and inviting host who manages to connect both with the person sitting three feet from him, and the viewer at home. Emotions can be pitched as Gates presents each subject with a "Book of Life," the term for the scrapbook of records the team uncovered, and a family tree. Surprises are plentiful; in season nine actor Joe Manganiello learned that he was part Black and descended from slaves.

The roster of people who have sat with Gates is mind-boggling, from Alejandro Inarritu to Anderson Cooper to Angela Bassett to Aziz Ansari—and that's just some of the ones whose first name starts



Gates has two adult daughters: Liza and Maggie.

Oprah Winfrey appeared in one of the first incarnations of "Finding Your Roots" which examined the ethnic past of Black celebrities.

with A. The real lure of "Finding Your Roots" is that everyone's ancestry is diverse and complicated—that includes people watching.

"You might be phenotypically an African American, you might be Roman Catholic, you might be a Muslim, you might be a Buddhist, you might be of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage, but that's not all you are," Gates said. "It's one of the things you are. That is another important lesson about 'Finding Your Roots.' None of us is just one thing."

That goes for Gates, too, and TV host is just one facet of his life. He is also the husband to Cuban-born historian Marial Iglesias Utset and the father of two adult daughters. He is a former chair of the

Pulitzer Prize board. His portrait, by Yuqi Wang, hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

So really, how does Gates fit everything in? He confesses that in addition to getting his sleep, he is powered by loving what he does.

"I do what I do because it's fun and gives me an enormous amount of pleasure," Gates said. "My father told me to pick a career that made work into a hobby. So my work is my hobby, my hobby is my work. In other words, my vocation is my avocation. I never get tired of it. I can't imagine retiring.

"People say, 'Retire.' I say, 'Who are you talking to? That other guy behind me?'"

Barbara Eden

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