

Virtuosos of the Funk

Bernie Worrell & Junie Morrison

Tim Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives

by Barry Michael Cooper

You've heard them before, maybe in other forms like the Gap Band, Raydio, or even the Bar-kays. The sound is Eighties proprotech funk: Prophet 5's that wail and shout electronic spirituals, mini-moogs that punch out pulsating bass rhythms in the background. Call these two men geniuses, call them high-tech deacons, waveform ministers fluctuating into the New Age. But whatever nomenclature you decide upon, one thing is certain; Bernie "Da Vinci" Worrell and Walter "Junie" Morrison are the drum majors for the Eighties.

Even though they gained more commercial acceptance after his departure, Junie Morrison was a major part of the Ohio Players. Some say he was the Ohio Players. Maybe. But so much for ego gratification. Junie, a 29-year-old native of Dayton, Ohio, played an important role in the *facsimile* acceptance (Funkadelic will never play prime time tee vee) of Funkadelic. He wrote and arranged most of *One Nation Under a Groove*, and "(Not Just) Knee Deep," their only million selling album and single on Warner Bros. He has recorded five solo albums, two most recently on CBS. *Bread Alone*, his first album on Columbia received widespread critical acclaim, but almost no air-play. His experimental funk and avant-garde pop on that album and the newest, *5*, (with cuts like "Rappin' About Rappin'," "Victim Of Love," and the title cut) will probably bring to mind Stevie Wonder, George Duke and Sly Stone.



Photos by John Billissimo/RETNA

Bernie Worrell

Junie is both simplistic and complex. His relaxed eloquence goes hand-in-hand with his mocking Peter Lorre drawl. He is mystical, humorous, and clever.

How do two keyboard geniuses like you and Bernie Worrell work together without any static?

Well for one thing, Bernie has been a seasoned professional ever since he could walk. And I always say the person who fails to see the genius in the person next to him is a sorry lot.

What kind of music did you listen to that had an influence on what you are playing?

I started listening to the Association, the Everly Brothers, etc. Then I moved to Tennessee for a while, and got into country and western, listening to people like the Statler Brothers, Floyd Kramer and gospel country. Eventually, I discovered FM radio in my sophomore year of high school and got into black music. It was a shock. Lord have mercy, what is this?! Jazz. I couldn't believe how fast those mugs were playing.

Did you listen to James Brown at all?

Yeah. It was between James Brown and the 1812 Overture. They had a great battle. Those two concepts were running neck and neck with me.

Do you like working with George Clinton?

I think that Parliament Funkadelic and George and all of the sister organizations are totally interesting. It's like no other. It's exciting and has all the benefits that you ever wanted to indulge in—if you decided to indulge in them—and it's also life, with tragedies and joys.

Also life, with tragedies and joys. It's ironic that Junie said that, or maybe it's not; because P-Funk is having more than it's share of tragedies at this point. Simply stated, the Parliament Funkadelic empire is crumbling. Performers aren't getting paid, big promises have been broken. And if there is anyone more qualified to know this internal decay, it's Bernie Worrell. For more than 13 years, Bernie (a native of Longbranch, N.J.) has singlehandedly shaped and refined the sound of P-Funk. He is the most imitated music (move-music) keyboardist around today. After his innovative keyboard artistry on "Flashlight," funk music has not been the same. He manipulates the bass

sounds on the mini-moog so well that a lot of bass players can't follow him. When listening to Bernie, one might envision neo-Jungian archetypes of Brahms, Thelonius Monk, Horace Silver, Eddie Palmeri and maybe even Boris Karloff. His music is an eclectic mix of classical, jazz, absurdist, gothic horror (his opus on Funkadelic's "Tales Of Kid Funkadelic" is a classic), percussive Latin, and emotional Baptist Church. Although he is now a member of Talking Heads, and no longer under contract to George Clinton, Bernie Worrell was, is, and will always be the sound of P-Funk.

At what age did you learn how to play the piano?

I was three and a half, when I had my first piano lesson. I was what is known as a child prodigy. At 10, I performed a concert with part of the Washington Symphony Orchestra, and part of the Plainfield Symphony Orchestra in Jersey.

When did your preference for classical music change?

It was in high school—the same time I met George—when I was watching the Ed Sullivan Show. Elvis Presley was on and I said, "What is this?" And my high school used to give dances, and George and his doo-wop group, the Parliaments as they were known then, would perform. He had heard about me, and I heard about him, and I did a couple of charts for him.

Did your classical training stop at that point?

No, it continued on to college, where I attended the Boston Conservatory. I stayed there until half a semester before my graduation, and then my father passed away, and I didn't have the funds to continue. So I just started hanging out in Boston, playing different clubs like Basin Street. Jim Nash of the New England Patriots owned it. I was the band leader for Chubby and the Turnpikes, who are now known as Tavares. I also toured with Maxime Brown for three years, until George gave me a call and said, "Come on Bernie, we're ready." And that was the beginning of Funkadelic.

Who are some of your influences?

I like Herbie Hancock, Ahmad Jamal, Oscar Peterson, Van Cliburn, Stevie Wonder, Joe Zawinul.

When you play, sometimes your



Junie Morrison

music takes on a mix of cartoons and gothic horror. Why?

You just said the key word—mix. All music is relative, so you have to illustrate all sides; good and evil, light and dark. I play minor modes sometimes, and minor modes are dark. One of my harmony teachers gave me a color chart of music. Different keys give off different colors. Stevie (Wonder) knows this, too.

I didn't see you at the recent P-Funk concert at the Ritz club in New York.

Yeah, but my name was in the paper just the same saying I had performed. George has people thinking I'm still there even when I'm not. I'm not under contract to him anymore.

Why?

Because his need has turned to greed, that's why. And a lot of the crew that are just waking up from the "fog" are seeing the same thing, and are walking away.

How's life with Talking Heads?

It's great, because it's pretty relaxed and easy. I hooked up with them through a mutual friend of mine and George's, Nancy Huang. I really enjoyed doing the recent European tour. I like working with David, Jerry, Chris, and Tina, because they like to experiment with different types of music, and so do I.

What have you been doing lately?

Well, I've been working with a Scottish rock artist, Jessie Rae. We did a cut call "Rusha", which is part of the video presentation at the Ritz. I also have a single out called "Stereo Radio" on Cue 2 Records in Detroit, which I recorded with a group named Spacer. In the meantime, I've just been freelancing on sessions and gigs. Eventually I'd like to be in a comfortable recording contract situation, minus the bad business vibes, so I can create!