

FUNKADELIC

by Vernon Gibbs

music

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It was one of those incredible mid-autumn nights at the Apollo and Funkadelic was on the bill. I forgot who else was with them, it may have been the Three Degrees or the Three Angels or the Four Tops. I remember Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions because they were the ones we had gone to interview, but it doesn't really matter who else appeared because as usual the Funkadelics stole the entire affair in spite of an unusually tough and at first incredulous audience.

It happens all the time. Whenever any member of the black "underground" appears on stage with the straight r&b rockers, the straights usually end up as an afterthought, an anticlimactic conclusion to performances that rival in visceral energy and esoteria value anything that the Apollo has seen since the days of jazz masters and those unreal swingers that don't play that theatre anymore. What has probably happened is that the Apollo culture—still oriented toward pink Cadillacs, orange suits, diamond tie-pins, Las Vegas and Hollywood, and the pimp society that yet flourishes on 125th St.—in spite of all the talk about "REVOLUTION" finds itself unable to recognize the seeds of a new movement even as it is beginning to form.

That is why the Apollo would put the Last Poets on the same bill with Jerry Butler and the Funkadelics on the same show with Curtis Mayfield, who as close as he may be to the tradition of the "underground" is still in a different world.

That is exactly like placing Frank Sinatra with the Mothers of Invention.

Before I go any further it might be wise to define terms like "underground" and "revolution," words that have grown in importance since "peace" and "love" died with the election of Nixon-Agnew. Unfortunately many undergrounders take themselves too seriously, wearing rightism like a religion and dirty daggers like a uniform. Too many of us do not realize that Woodstock Culture is full of the same bullshit and hypocrisy that make Nixon-Agnew mid-America mentality the flaccid joke that it is. That is why the Airplane, archetype rock and roll revolutionaries of Woodstock, is overdrawn on bank accounts, and why Stokely Carmichael, the originator of the phrase "Black Power", has gone into political oblivion, living on money being paid him by the Federal Government. (Why do you think he retired? Was it because black people had been freed by his rhetoric?)

The underground and the revolution are both largely pseudonyms from a way of life that is largely only visually instead of technically different from the straight world. So when I speak of the Last Poets and the Funkadelics or Grand Funk as being part of an underground different from the Cadillac-aspiring culture, it doesn't mean that they won't end up in Cadillacs too, but that their path to those plush interiors will be less obvious.

The first time I heard the Funkadelics I knew I was into something different. It

was the summer of '69. I wasn't getting laid too often and consequently I was bored. I didn't have an FM set and WMCA has not yet adopted the progressive rock format that they gradually switched to a few months later. The big "RL" was the only half way decent music that I had the facilities to tune in on, and as all good music historians know '69 was a bad year for soul music, all the vintage stuff having been produced in '67 and '68. Otis had gone, Aretha was having problems and Wilson Pickett was churning out shit. Motown, that black plastic tower glowering over the city of Detroit, had long forgotten what funky music was like. The blues were hardly ever heard on AM and never heard on black radio except for an occasional single from B.B., Albert or Bobby "Blue" Bland.

Into these doldrums came two significant events, both singles. The first one turned out to be the Isley Brothers disguised as The Brothers Three who had an interesting minor hit called "Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out." The second was the Funkadelic single "Music For My Mother" which to my increasingly critical ears sounded like pure gold—shortly followed by "I'll Bet You" which was the realization of a dream.

Apparently 100,000 people in Detroit agreed with me, because those singles sold that many copies each—just in Detroit. This is the fifth time in a year that I have written about the Funkadelics and I still think that they are gonna be one of the biggest bands in the country. All you

need is one listen or one show and you'll be on the Funkadelic wagon too.

So here I was at the Apollo on a semi-climatic night in the middle of October or November. Funkadelic takes the stage and get themselves together. Now the Apollo audience is a tough one having seen many strange things in their time. Living in Harlem, they have little choice. They hardly glance at strangely attired dudes parading 125th or Lenox anymore. They have been through the Revivals and the 7th Avenue Back-to-Africa-Movement parades and have lived the strange cold life of the streets all their lives. They've seen stabbings in the garbage-lined alleys and pregnant women beaten byirate lovers, they've lived out all the seeming stereotypes.

Nothing they had ever experienced could possibly have prepared them for the Funkadelics. Most of them had heard the Funkadelic singles and probably the majority of the audience was aware that the Funkadelics used to be the Parliaments and due to a complicated arrangement still were. Of course you remember the Parliaments. Who could forget that glorious summer when Jackie Wilson made his fiftieth return from the dust with "Higher and Higher" and the Parliaments were right in there getting higher with "I Wanna Testify." Who could forget those tedious sweat-drenched Saturday nights when various ghetto studs would gather in someone's ghetto basement to compete with each other for status and women, by pioneering a new dance or improving on an old one, while the Parliaments "testified" in the background.

On this basis the Apollo audience was probably expecting a Parliament-type imitation Temptation, Flames, Four Tops, James Brown Five blue-suit-with-red-shoes-steppers, oohing and aahing while the band did rinky tink horn-law runs in the background. The Funkadelics, who are officially the band that backs the Parliaments in concert but who record separately (the Parliaments don't record), came on stage dressed in "hippie" garb: bell bottoms, beads, fringed vests and sandals, one or two of them barechested. All of this was very daring in '69, because the Apollo people were and still are into silk pants and patent leather shoes. At that time processes had been only dead for about one year, James Brown being the last to give in.

Their dress was laid enough, but they immediately began playing raw-growl, chafin'-chompin' music, the blues. Then they would go into a hard rock jam, the lead guitarist flouting riffs copied note for note from Hendrix, who never played the Apollo. The audience sat still not knowing how to react.

Here were five hard looking brothers playing the "whitest" music they had heard. Most of the audience couldn't really tell the difference between the blues (our music) and hard rock (derived music). To them it was all nothing but loud funky guitars. Then the Parliaments came on, dressed in even more indescribably weird clothes, the lead singer cloudy and opulent, his head shaved like an Indian's.

"If you will suck my soul, I will lick your funky emotions. Let me slide a yard of tongue up your mind. Give me your mind and let me play with it for nothing is good unless you play with it."

Acid Talk.

But now at least we are operating on more familiar if not degenerate terms. Sexual patter is not new to the Apollo audience even though the rest of the ensemble is. With the suggestive droolings of the lead singer, a new ray of light shines down on the proceedings. "So he



wants to fuck, all he wants to do is fuck after all, he isn't the hippie degenerate his clothes and actions lead us to believe he is, and look the others are dancing like all good healthy soul brothers do. Say this isn't too bad after all."

By the time this thought is registered the lead singer is crawling along the floor, seeming to lick it and people are beginning to have second thoughts about the Funkadelic state of mind. They've seen people high before, but this is madness. Yet in the end good ol' funky music wins and the conservative Apollo audience is on it's feet cheering for the first time in recent memory. If you don't believe it, go to the Apollo for any show. No matter who plays I will bet you any amount of money that they won't get an encore or even a decent ovation. I have seen the midnight show nearly empty of people by the time the headliner is on his last song. The audience usually just gets up and leaves.

Later in their dressing room, I was too nervous to put my tape recorder together, so one of the leaders of the group had to do it for me. It was a pretty inconclusive interview anyway.

The next time I saw them at Unganos and was even more impressed. This is what I wrote for Rock Magazine: "Allow the cobwebs in your imagination to disintegrate, let frozen pot dreams realize themselves and run rampant through the clogged alleys of your mind, transgress time and space, leap over hard realities, dash screaming into midnight, squirm under the cold glare of power and then you will begin to get an idea of what the Funkadelic sound is. Towering bass, frenzied twisting agonized guitar, softly pulsating organ, and five ex 'doo wops' ram their way into the core of your funky soul, kicking in the ivory door and spewing



rainbow come into your agonized protestation."

Amen!

The Funkadelics probably won't be in New York until early next year, but you don't have to wait until then to share in the Cosmic Funk Movement. Their two albums *Funkadelic*, and *Free Your Mind* will be enough.

The first track on *Funkadelic*, is a nine minute soul kiss, during which the leader explains, "I tried to escape this music. I thought it was for the old country folks. I came to New York, got my hair slicked, but I had no groove." "I Bet You" has an ominous bass line that establishes the pace from the beginning. From there the band builds around it, long willowy lines snaking between the speakers, the violent chirping of a million stoned crickets.

"Music for My Mother" is my favorite Funkadelic song, a solid—incredibly so—beat laid down by a persistent bassman, a melody that just seems to flow in ragged snatches downstream, a relentlessly dashed vocal line bringing back pictures of jun-

kies dying in hallways on 117th St. "I Got a Thang" is pure Hendrix-Sly, Jimmy's willowy wah-wah lines taken intact underscored by Sly's phrasing.

"Good Old Music" which begins side two is merely an excuse for each performer to show off his talents and is full of spicy guitar runs, wah wah bass and ever-rising organ swells. "Quality and Satisfy" is the first time I have heard young black dudes do a traditional twelve bar blues number. This one is done with a double lead guitar as well as an overdubbed fuzz tone and is one of the best tunes on the album. It shows that Funkadelic has really assimilated all the techniques that the white underground has developed through use of the black man's blues and the white man's acid.

Here the influence of Hendrix is most obvious, as the lead guitarist crashes through the haze with long drawn out droning whines, just like Hendrix at Woodstock. Ed Hazel's lead guitar work leads me to believe that he is just as good as Hendrix was in '67 and could conceivably develop into the next black god of Woodstock Nation. The last song "What is Soul" answers the often asked question with statements like "Soul is Chitlin' Foo Young," "soul is ham hock in your Corn Flakes," "soul is a joint rolled in toilet paper" and "soul is rusty ankles and ashy knee caps." *Funkadelic* is an album which never lets up, the pace is solid without being stolid.

Free Your Mind is more electronic gimmickry than solid funk, it isn't as good as *Funkadelic*, an admittedly difficult task since *Funkadelic* was one of the ten best albums of the last year. The first track, "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow", is an exploration and development of the theme "Free Your Mind and Your

Ass Will Follow" and doesn't say much else—again Hazel is outstanding on lead.

A lot of people will want to know what makes the Funkadelics different from the average high school psychedelic band. The difference is not in speed or imagination, two counts on which Eric Clapton comes in far ahead of B.B. or Albert King. There is such a thing as feeling, a trite-sounding stereotype which nevertheless is true. And the Funkadelics show it since they play music similar in technical structure to Led Zeppelin or middle-Cream, yet Hazel can put more "feeling" into a guitar run than either Page or Clapton are aware exist.

Side Two begins with "Funky Dollar Bill" and here the social commentary begins to become more pointed. The lyrics aren't too good—as a matter of fact they are downright lousy—but they get the bitter message across. "I Wanna Know if it's Good to You" is very close in melodic content to "I Got a Thang" and is strangely reminiscent of Sly and his friends, only better, the guitars buzzing like mad bees in a flower garden, warbling through dark gaps in the fabric, cutting like uncontrolled buzz-saws. "Some More" is a deliberately distorted tune, while "Eulogy and Light" is a spoken bastardization of The Lords Prayer, in which the immortal line "Fuck down by the river side" is uttered. The song is mainly an attempt to signify some of the problems which affect black people and is one of the boldest attempts I have heard. The poetry is magnificent and the production matches the words perfectly, the voice increasing in speed until it fades into a dim blur.

Funkadelic, in person and on wax, make some of the most dynamic music I have ever heard. Pick them up if only for your own education.