

BERNIE WORRELL

P-Funk's Multi-Keyboard Whiz

By Bob Doerschuk

ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL of P-funk, many of us are trapped in the zone of zero funkativity, never having enjoyed the blessings of supergroovalisticprosifunkstacation as dished out by the chocolate-coated freak in habit form and his cohorts. It is entirely possible that we might not even know what in the world this sad diagnosis means in plain, stale English. But there is nothing mysterious about this not-so-secret code as far as Parliament and its geepies and maggot brains—er, fans—are concerned. They know that in the end it's all funkological anyway.

Anyone can listen to the music of Parliament, though, and hear the sharp, versatile multi-keyboard work of Bernie Worrell, a member of the band for the past 10 years. The 35-year-old New Jerseyite has also played with Funkadelic, Bootsy And His Rubber Band, and other groups in the billowing musical family that centers around Parliament, exhibiting with each of them a combination of classically-trained chops, street-bred soul, and carefully-honed showmanship.

In some respects Parliament, with its boggling stage show, hip insider's lingo (a taste of which is offered above), and long hypnotic arrangements spiced with audience chants and electronic effects,

is more a contemporary black music phenomenon than a band. Its roots run deep, though, reaching back 20 years to when singer/songwriter George Clinton founded a vocal group called the Parliaments that literally sang in a barber shop in Plainfield, New Jersey. Clinton later took the group to Detroit, where they affiliated themselves briefly with the Tamla/Motown label before scoring their first hit in 1967 with "(I Just Wanna) Testify," on the now defunct Revilot label.

While Clinton was convening the Parliaments, his childhood friend Worrell was busy getting his own music together. Bernie's mother had been his earliest musical inspiration. "She sang in church choirs," he remembers, "but she also took private voice lessons and learned some classical pieces, just out of her own interest. Like they say, she had a gift. She could pick out notes on the piano too, so I used to go to the keyboard every day and practice a scale she'd taught me. She observed me, and pretty soon she started wondering if maybe there was something there."

Bernie was only three-and-a-half years old when his mother took him to his first formal piano lesson. "The teacher's name was Mrs. Adelaide Wax-



wood," he noted, "and she is now my godmother. She kept saying, 'Oh, he's too young for lessons,' but her husband, who was principal of a grammar school, convinced her after about two or three weeks to take me as a student and try me out. So she did, and that was how I got started."

It didn't take long for Worrell to master the fundamentals of the instrument. He gave his first concert at the age of four, playing 40 pieces by John Thompson. After moving with his family from his Long Branch hometown to Plainfield four years later, Bernie continued his studies with Faye Barnaby Kent, a former pupil of the composer Edward MacDowell. Two years later the 10-year-old pianist made his orchestral debut with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C.

"It was a child prodigy thing," Worrell explains. "I started out playing Schubert Impromptus, a little Bach, Beethoven Sonatas, and a lot of Mozart—I liked him, but I can never remember the opus numbers. And of course there were the Hanon studies. Classical music was all I played. I knew church music, because I'd played for Baptist church teas and backed my mother up when she sang at funerals, but I had no idea what R&B or rock and roll were; I heard bits and pieces over the radio, but I was never allowed to listen to too much of it. I didn't even know who Elvis Presley was!"

Presley's music was what finally moved Worrell to broaden his own tastes. "All the kids were raving about Presley being on *The Ed Sullivan Show*," he laughs, "so I watched it, and when I finally heard him sing I went, 'Oh!' It just happened like that, and soon I



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anymore. And when I played on [singer] Alice Cooper's Yamaha electric grand in his band's rehearsal room, I said, 'I've got to have one of these!'

"The only defect with the Yamaha is that it goes terribly out of tune," he continues. "I've had trouble with its tuning on the road ever since we got it. The low octaves go way out, so we've tried to find a way of modifying it. We moved that strip of ribbon that's on the soundboard to beneath the big bass strings at the low end, but it still went out of tune whenever the temperature changed. So we have to rely on getting a piano tuner in each town, and some of them are really bad. They'll tell me they've tuned it, but since I've got perfect pitch, it still won't sound right when I come in and check it. It gets touchy, but we're doing the best we can right now."

One characteristic of Bernie's approach to the synthesizer is his use of unusual effects to complement Clinton's vocals and punctuate the insistent beat laid down by the band. On the tune "Bop Gun (Endangered Species)" [from *Funkentelechy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome*, Casablanca (8255 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90046), NMLP 7084], for example, he sets his Mini-

moog to a short attack and decay, and a low cutoff frequency, with the resonance set high, to create the blipping sound of the bop gun—which was invented, incidentally, by Dr. Funkenstein to zap Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk, purveyor of the infamous Placebo Syndrome, according to Parliament lore. Worrell's Pro Soloist spices up another catchy number, "Night Of The Thumpasorus Peoples" [from *Mothership Connection*, Casablanca, NBLP 7022], with a subterranean growl that seems to plumb the lowest depths of musical perception.

Some of the more standard sounds frequently imitated by synthesists—such as big band parts—are actually played by Parliament's brass and reed section, the Horny Horns, in arrangements written out by Worrell, leaving him free to explore more abstract effects or to play string lines. Eventually he would like to see the latter job taken over by live string players as well. "I've been playing the strings myself," he points out, "but there's nothing like the sound of the authentic wood string instruments. I get tired of that ARP String Ensemble. You can hear that synthesized quality, and sometimes it bothers me, because how can metal sound better or richer than wood? I thought of using a Mellotron instead, but it's a fragile instrument and the tapes would just get messed up on the road. I've heard a lot of key-

board players who are down on it, so I didn't even try to get one. I'll really appreciate it when I can start doing some more string arrangements."

Despite his interest in off-beat keyboard sounds, Worrell doesn't rely heavily on effect pedals. In fact, he only uses two devices, an MXR flanger and a Morley Power-Wah, and both are employed on just one instrument, the Clavinet. "You don't need the pedals on synthesizers," he explains. "I did have an MXR phase shifter that I used on the String Ensemble one time, but I didn't like it. Your effects are already there with the Yamaha Polyphonic, the Minimoog, or whatever. I just like to keep the Yamaha grand straight, like a concert grand, so the Clavinet is the one that gets it all!"

Worrell feels that the changes he has seen Parliament go through over the years have reflected trends in popular music to some extent. "Back in the old days our music was a lot funkier than now," he observes. "It was less structured, with some heavy rock overtones. We'd just go into a chant thing and start to jam. The costumes were a little freakier then too, and George was more into what they'd call vulgar language—that was when he used to strip onstage, and he wore a freaky haircut. It was wild then, but it's changed. You

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can't do that now, not the way we were doing it before. We're still not a conservative band, but we've disguised it.

"I'm into the costume thing myself," Bernie laughs. "At tonight's gig I wore a gorilla mask I bought in a novelty store. It was the first time I wore a mask with the band, but I didn't dig it, because I don't like having my ears covered and not being able to see when I'm playing. At the beginning of the show I wore it for maybe ten minutes, and then I found myself tipping it up on top of my head. Our show is still evolving with us, but I'm really just concerned with the music, with keeping it together, making sure that everything is rolling smoothly, with everybody in tune, and nobody rushing ahead or falling behind me. We like to think of ourselves as a good rock and roll funk band, with tinges of jazz and classical coming through from me and now from Junior—that's Walter Morrison of the Ohio Players. He's been playing his own Minimoog and Clavinet with us on tour, and I think he's going to be joining the thing too."

The influx of fresh personnel into the Parliament family is a major reason why Worrell has stayed with the group for so long. The staleness he felt in other areas of music has been contin-

ually offset by the new faces, new bands, and new ideas that steadily flow in and out of the P-Funk community, erasing every trace of the dreaded Placebo Syndrome. "It used to bother me that we played a lot of one-chord stuff, or songs without many changes," Bernie says, "but that was true maybe three or four albums ago. The tunes now have more chords, more patterns and structures. We're cutting a lot more ballads now, because we're branching out with the other acts we have, like the Brides Of Funkenstein [back-up singers], so it gets more interesting at times.

"When Parliament is not on the road, the members can go out with one of our other groups and help them out, or do studio work," he continues. "There's a variety of things you can do. Lately both George and myself have been going out on the road helping Bootsy [Collins, bassist] and his band because he's having a few problems with his sound company, although I don't necessarily want to go out on the road right now myself. If I did it would be within the confines of Parliament; my act would go on first, and then I'd change and come right back on with the group!"

Whether working on his own project or with Parliament, Bernie prefers to do his studio playing alone, without the pressures of dealing with other musi-

cians. "It's just too slow for me sometimes to work together with a group in cutting a record," he explains. "I don't have to bother with the attitudes or the egos that way. When I record with Parliament, I go down with George, Gary [Shider, guitarist], or whoever it is, to help put the rhythm track together. Then most of the time everybody will cut out, and I'll come in and do all the overdubs to fill it in here, or help it out there. At times I'll do the rhythm track with the other guys, so it's about half and half, but I like to come in and overdub after everything else is done."

From his vantage point of commercial success with Parliament, Bernie can now look back over his career, from his early days in classical music on to the present, and be satisfied with the directions he has chosen to follow. "Your technique does go down over the years from playing rock," he admits, "and my mother is kind of disappointed that I didn't become a classical musician. I'm glad that I had that kind of training; I think everyone who plays keyboards should go through it, although not everybody is going to. I liked classical music, but I couldn't go for how they would talk about rock and roll or R&B back then. They put classical music up on a pedestal. Well, the hell with that! Music is music, and that's what it all boils down to." □