

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE POPCORN INDUSTRY

WHEN MISTA James Brown cut loose like a caged tiger in the summer of '69 on "Mother Popcorn", what do you suppose he was talking about?

"YEEAAHH. YEEAAHH. POPCORN."

"Some like it fat, some like it tall. Some like it short, skinny legs an' all. See, it's gotta be a mutha for me!"

One thing's for sure, he wasn't talking about no little roasted kernels of maize. He was talking, as usual, about his big black budans self. And throughout the '60s they didn't come any budder than James Brown.

For while soul music was out courting the white wallet with astounding success — aesthetically and otherwise — the flamboyant Brown was getting jam up and jelly tight and almost singlehandedly creating the second most universal four letter word: Funk.

He gave it up and he turned it loose and when the time came he gave it a name too with "Ain't It Funky".

And that is also what he was talking about on "Mother Popcorn" — James Brown and funk being virtually synonymous. For the uninitiated, some explanation is in order.

Funk ain't, as the dictionary has it, outmoded slang for fear and cowardice — although it does imply surrender; giving yourself up to the syncope. Nor is it merely an academic term for the dropped beats and re-arranged accents that create said syncope.

Bootsy Collins calls it a feeling: "It hits you everywhere. . . . It's a way of living, you feel it all over and you either receive it or you reject it."

And as James Brown goes on to say in "Mother Popcorn": "There was a time when I was all alone. I had a secret all of my own. Somebody dug me, said now I see what you're doing brother, stay ahead of me."

Prophetic words, though not quite the way the self-proclaimed Godfather Of Soul intended. For it might be unjust to say his output has declined in either quantity or quality, but there's no denying that Brown is no longer the superdude.

He may still be the King but there's a new generation for whom he's been sitting on the throne so long it's irrelevant.

Their parents buy James Brown records, they buy the music that Brown in no small way helped open the doors for and in some cases is direct size to: The Ohio Players, Earth, Wind & Fire, The Commodores and the Parifunkadelic Thing, of which Bootsy's Rubber Band is a part.

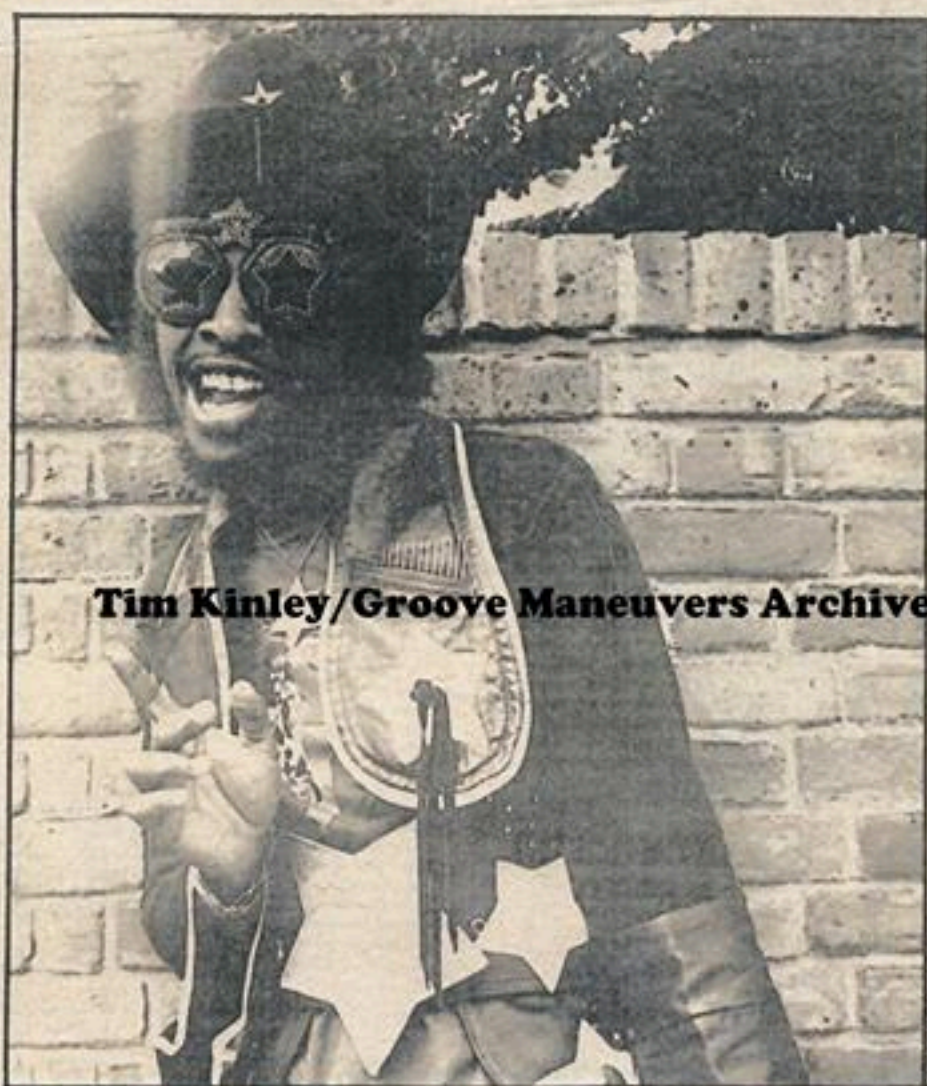
It's ironic then that "Mother Popcorn" was the last of Brown's hits to feature the famous '60s band. He hooked up for his next venture with a bunch of unknown session musicians who had been bustin' chops on dance-craze potshots with Hank Ballard and supper-club blues with Arthur Prysock as the house band at King Records' studio in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Bass player William Collins, his elder brother guitarist Phelps Collins Jr., and drummer Frankie Waddy became part of The James Brown Band.

The first record they made together was a hipshaker; never did Brown sound more like he had his mojo in gear than on "(Get Up I Feel Like) Sex Machine". Along with a recent shift to upfront black consciousness, it opened a whole new bag for Brown. Bootsy — as he later came to be known — was 16 years old at the time.

While others his age were mostly either sweating over their high school diplomas, or out learning the more serious kind of ringolevio street game, Bootsy was touring America and Europe, winding up Brown's dancing machine and combat training for his current role as CBolly Banoilone a/k/a Cordell Boogie Mason a/k/a Casper The Friendly Ghost a/k/a Bootzilla a/k/a The Player.

Otherwise known as the more whimsical, tuneful and (let's not beat around the bush) commercially aimed side of George Clinton's masterplan for world P-funk salvation. Free your ass, goes the saying, and your mind



Tim Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives

PHOTO: PENNIE SMITH

. . . a.k.a. A Visit To The Funk Factory a.k.a. A Meeting With A Black Man In Daft Glasses a.k.a. PAUL RAMBALI talks to superfunkster BOOTSY COLLINS

will follow.

Despite appearances, when he joined Brown, Collins was no spring chicken. Growing up in a fatherless family it was brother Phelps, eight years the elder, who shaped his interests.

"I grew up around him, watching him. He listened to Lonnie Mack and he had a band playing that stuff. He'd shun me away. 'Get away kid, you bother me.' I wanted to play his guitar. When I was about nine I used to sneak in and play it while he was on his paper round. He caught me one day and he wore me out. I saw the light."

In the interests of domestic harmony a 29 dollar guitar was bought for the young Bootsy. Within a few years he had switched to bass and was a member of his brother's band, playing James Brown, Archie Bell and all the big Motown hits in local bars. Then came the JB connection.

Brown had been Bootsy's main man for as long as he could recall, and I wondered if he wasn't a little intimidated by playing with him, especially considering Brown's reputation as a hard taskmaster, decking pay for bum notes or missed cues.

"That all went on before we got there. When we got there," he recounts, "because we were young and aggressive that changed his attitude. He lightened up a little bit.

He was still James Brown though. He was still strict. I had never been around people like that, I had never been under a job situation before. All I did before that was a paper round. I didn't really know what I was doing — I was just learning."

But Bootsy learnt fast — as evinced by the lived "Sex Machine" album and the "Superbad", "Soul Power" and "Hot Pants" singles — and so by '71, school was over.

"We had material we wanted to do. We wanted to stretch out and we couldn't do it there. That was during the acid days and the band felt like steppin' out, didn't want to back no singers up."

Silent tribute must be paid here to one Sly Stone. Although Bootsy says the only person he was into at the time was boss Motown bassman James Jamerson, it's obvious from later developments that Sly's day-glo Family Stone with their riotous all action front line and boundary breaking musical and related social ideas were turning Bootsy's head. The Brown band became The House Guests, and George Clinton — eager to replace his recently disbanded Funkadelic — saw them one day in Detroit.

"He thought he was seeing Funkadelic on stage when he saw us. But I think we were more extreme,"

laughs Bootsy. "Our image looked wild. We had seen hot pants in Europe, girls wearing them. We were dudes wearing hot pants. We were young and figured anything would go and it went." And Clinton went for it and The House Guests became Funkadelic.

It might be useful here to explain some of the workings of Clinton's enterprise. There are about 30 people involved, mostly musicians, who are known collectively as the Mothership (the term also has other more nebulous meanings in Clinton lore).

This pool of musicians appear in three guises: Funkadelic, Parliament and Bootsy's Rubber Band. This is a smart move on Clinton's part as it allows him to use the same musicians with three record companies and make, presumably, thrice as much money.

Thus when the Rubber Band first surfaced in '76 it was as a result of Clinton deciding that Bootsy was a natural born star and the rest of the world should somehow be made hip to the fact. Bootsy still works closely with Clinton — "like Laurel and Hardy" is how he describes the relationship — co-writing and co-producing for all Mothership ventures.

But Bootsy's Rubber Band are the saccharis side of things. Songs like "What's A Telephone Bill?" and

"Very Yes" — unlike Parliament's massive crazy parables about such things as the erosion of true values (The Placebo Syndrome) — have little or no intrinsic intelligence value.

This might all, however, be part of Clinton's plan to lure innocents aboard the Mothership. Bootsy's cutesy style has gone down like candy with the six to twelve year olds, or "geepies" as Bootsy fans not yet weaned off Sesame Street are known.

"They like me," he says, flashing a broad toothy smile that in part helps explain the attraction. "I guess it's the superhero thing. They were looking for a superhero and I said 'Well here I am'. The Justice League of Funk. Right now I'm Clark Kent."

Except Clark Kent wouldn't be found wearing a brown and orange starred leather jump suit and rhinestone studded, star-shaped glasses in the middle of the day at a business-like Bayswater hotel. If this is his off stage alter-ego, the mind boggles . . .

And yet don't be misled, for beneath the silly exterior — which is in fact more of a hip microcosm of in-jive for maggot brains to communicate with — there beats a stoned soul heart.

"Stretchin' Out In Bootsy's Rubber Band", the first album, may not have given many clues. It introduced the "Psychoticbuntpschool" and proved that Bootsy had been paying attention in class. But last year's "Ahh . . . The Name Is Bootsy Baby" was just about the best soul album of its kind since The Ohio Players' "Skin Tight."

Never mind that its successor, "Bootsy? Player Of The Year" didn't quite make the self-set grade, that album served notice that Bootsy could be smooth as velvet or loose as dirt (see "Munchies For Your Love" and "The Pinocchio Theory" respectively, off the wall and in the groove at the same time. All this and no disco. Speaking of which . . .

"All I can say is it's happening," he shrugs. "People like to dance. The music's just bang bang bang over and over, ain't nothing I can learn from it. If I had to go that way I don't think I could. I can either funk or walk, and I'd rather be walkin'."

But it isn't disco that's the real enemy, according to Bootsy. That's just a symptom. He explains the Pinocchio theory and the character of Sir Nose on Parliament's last album:

"The concept was, 'you will dance. I don't care how much you say you ain't gonna dance, you will dance.' We said don't fake the funk or your nose will grow — Pinocchio — that's where Sir Nose came from; he was faking the funk. He wouldn't dance, he was too cool to do anything. And that's the way the world is, too cool to give up to the funk. That's why everybody's walking around with noses."

Ignoring the shaky logic, I asked how long things have been in such a sorry state. Bootsy thinks it's been too long, though he admits there are some exceptions.

"For me it was James and Sly. When I was coming up that was it. They really gave up some serious funk. I wouldn't say nobody else was funk'n', but I'm talking about serious funk'n'."

"And soon, the Mothership is gonna have all the muthas on board. James Brown, Sly, all of them. We're gonna get together with the ones that gave up the funk. We realize who they were, and we're in a position now to . . .

Anybody can get the glory," he charges. "All we want to do is take it to the stage."

Curiously enough, beyond the glitter silliness and showtime aspect — the latter has always been a part of black music — there's some interesting attitudes at work.

When Bootsy talks about taking it to the stage or turning the mutha out he means just getting in there and giving it to the audience on real terms, no fatuous ego-tripping, no condescending.

The audience has to give up its funk for the band to give up theirs, and vice-versa. Like when at the 100 club in '76 Johnny Rotten harangued the crowd with contempt for their cooler-than-thou posing, the message is: participate, party.

CONTEMPORARY POP

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type was established and popularized by Larry Graham (former bass player of Sly Stone) of Graham Central Station and the other by George Clinton of Parliament-Funkadelic. The music of Graham Central Station is an expansion of the style associated with Sly and The Family Stone. It centers around the percussively played bass of Larry Graham. His technique of pulling the strings coupled with the repetitive and phrase length melodic bass lines establishes a rhythmic drive that identifies his music. The combination of various rhythmic patterns played in the rhythm and horn sections provide a polyrhythmic foundation for the shouted and percussive group-style singing. The unique vocalstration of gospel-voiced harmonies by the mixed group (males and females) add to the rich, full and funky sound. The use of a wide range of vocal techniques for varying tone quality in addition to electronic devices for vocal distortion ("Now Do-U-Wanta Dance") add the final components to Graham Central Station's brand of funk. The songs "Release Yourself," "Feel the Need," "The Jam," "It's Alright," "Stomped Beat-Up and Whopped," and "Pow" incorporate all of the elements mentioned above.

George Clinton is the mastermind and producer of "P-funk." This style provides the musical foundation for his groups—Parliament-Funkadelic, Bootsy's Rubber Band, Parlets and Brides of Funkenstein. P-funk contains many elements that are found in the funk of Graham Central Station. Emphasis is placed on group singing, the vocal sound is more percussive than melodic and voice distortion is prominent. Clinton, in developing the style of P-funk exploited the use and meaning of the term. Many of his song titles including, "P. Funk," "Give Up the Funk," "Dr. Funkenstein" and "One of Those Funky Thangs," center around the word "funk." The lyrics of his music not only encourage people to "get up, jam and funk" but they also advocate "freeing the mind and moving into another planet of thought"—the planet of funk. Clinton through his lyrics, therefore, expounds on his philosophies and concepts about funk.

Perhaps the most noticeable difference between Graham's and Clinton's style of funk is the tempo. The metronome speed of Graham's music ranges between 116 and 144 while Clinton's songs center around 88 and rarely exceed 104. The instrumental style of Clinton, which is similar to the James Brown style, varies greatly from that of Graham. Although the bass plays an important role, the overall instrumental sound is lighter in texture. Melodic lines of the rhythm and horn sections are based on stratified repetitive motives. The shortness and spacing of these motives result in danceable polyrhythmic and polyphonic structure that can be heard in Brides of Funkenstein's "Disco to Go."

The scope of funk was expanded when Clinton introduced new ways of achieving mood and textual variety. In establishing mood changes, he often superimposes the spoken voice over group singing or switches from the group sound and full instrumentation to a "rap" section accompanied by sparse instrumentation. In these sections the voice is often distorted as that heard in Parliament's "Mothership Connection," "Rumpofsteelskin," and "Sir Nose D' Voidoffunk." Although voice distortion primarily is used in spoken sections, it occasionally changes the tone quality of group singing as in Parliament's "Night Of The Thumpasorus People" and Brides of Funkenstein's "War Ship Touchante." The various ways in which the synthesizer is used adds another dimension to the P-funk sound. It not only functions as a melodic, sustaining and percussive instrument but is used to achieve interesting effects. In "Night of the Thumpasorus People," it adds to the mysterious character of the song.

The musical diversity of Clinton's band members contribute to the unique and broad scope of his P-funk sound. Elements from jazz (Parliament—"P. Funk and Gamin' on Ya"), rock (Funkadelic—"Cholly" and Parlets—"Misunderstanding") and disco (Parlets—"Pleasure Principle") are combined with Clinton's innovations to provide variety in his songs and diversity on his LPs. James Brown's stylistic influences to P-funk cannot be overlooked, especially that many of Clinton's players (William "Bootsy" Collins, bass; Phelps "Catfish" Collins, guitar; Maceo Parker, sax, and Fred Wesley, trombone) at one time played with James Brown. Trademarks of the James Brown sound can be heard in the instrumental styles, in horn arrangements (Parliament—"Mothership Connection," "Dr. Funkenstein" and "Mr. Wiggles"; Brides of Funkenstein—"Amorous") and in the use of phrases such as "Ain't it funky now" in Parliament's "P. Funk" and "Feet don't fail me now" in Funkadelic's "One Nation Under a Groove."

George Clinton and Larry Graham have been successful in creating new trends in black music. They provided the basic ingredients for funk which have been imitated and expanded upon by other groups. Graham's bass and vocal styles have been combined with Clinton's lyric themes, instrumental and vocal styles to form the pool of musical ideas used by several new and established groups. Recordings of ADC Band ("Long Stroke"); Shotgun ("Mutha Funk/Don't You Want to Make Love"); Con Funk Shun ("Shake and Dance With Me"); Rose Royce ("First Come, First Serve"); Chuck Brown & The Soul Searchers ("Bustin' Loose") and Isley Brothers ("Take Me to the Next Phase/I Wanna Be With You") are considered to be in the funk style. The sound of each of these groups is distinct, yet features which blacks associate with funk appear in their charted recordings or in several LP cuts.