

Understanding Dat "Parlia- funkadelicment Thang"

by Vernon Dais

CHOCOLATE CITY

Parliament
Casablanca (NBLP 7014)

LET'S TAKE IT TO THE STAGE

Funkadelic
Westbound (W-215)

Parliament-Funkadelic may be the only band under the heavens with an authentic dual identity, a strange situation concocted by George Clinton, former Motown songwriter and self-proclaimed overlord. Gleaning some sense from Clinton's schizophrenic motives has left critics and public scratching their collective pates in bewilderment. Is Clinton what he would appear—one of your authentically mad geniuses—or an audacious charlatan, another jive niggah acting cutesy?

The final verdict is now beyond doubt. Last year's release of Parliament's *Up For The Down Stroke* and Funkadelic's *Standing On The Verge Of Getting It On* was a largely unheralded but welcome shot of twin barrelled dynamite matched on a creative level only by Grammy-garnering Stevie Wonder. 1975 witnesses a repeat. Parliament's claim to being the pre-eminent vocalists of progressive soul is further strengthened by *Chocolate City*. Funkadelic, those outre-garbed acid messiahs, dare the competition to heed the cry of *Let's Take It To The Stage*. Led by keyboardist-arranger Bernie Worrell, the most incredible "non-jazz" black musician extant, Funkadelic transforms their boastings into a display of hard-rocking power.

Quite obviously Clinton and Co. have method behind their madness, even if an explanation of that madness still eludes most folks. Why two bands when one should do? (The two Clinton crews record separately but appear *en masse* on stage.) Credit the wild spark of genius within Clinton that would not allow him to persist as just another cog in the Motown machine. Instead, he sought a degree of artistic expression usually not afforded to the r&b performer. Clinton and his conceptions are representative of an anomalous breed amongst r&b song-



Funkadelic takes it to the stage

writers and lyricists—the visionary of unbridled imagination. R&b, in keeping with its historical origins, concerns itself with the practical frustrations and everyday yearnings of the inner city denizens who constitute its prime audience. Which means that the 45 reigns supreme in the "soul" industry and hits, hits, hits, pave the way to the throne. Traditionally, albums have been assembly line affairs—the pre-planned two or three hit singles, the mandatory cover versions of recent r&b/pop chart-breakers, and the rest, filler. The Funkadelic albums have been Clinton's vehicle, as an independent-minded black artist, to challenge these implicit limitations.

Those limitations were not drawn in the studios of Memphis, Detroit, or Philly but in America's treatment of its black population. The Funkadelic-Parliament phenomenon is only a minor reflection of the clash of dual cultures (East and West) within the Afro-American: the conflict of being "black" and "American" simultaneously. Parliament relates directly to the inner city ethic of the '70s; Funkadelic conveys a message which examines the ethic against the backdrop of American society.

Retaining near-forgotten virtues of strong communal and family ties, Afro-American art owes final responsibility to the greater black community. The songs of r&b serve that obligation by centering around the themes of material success and human dignity. Other areas of thought are generally restricted. Groups aspire to drive the biggest Cadillacs and Rolls Royces,

own the finest houses, wear the flashiest clothes, and learn the funkier dance steps.

At best, r&b's eternal commitment to the human heart is a source of simple but timeless power long cherished by its black performers and eagerly sought by their white counterparts (from Presley to Bowie). Romance is the driving force of the universe; men and women embrace, curse, and find love on some two-way street, maybe only to lose it on a lonely highway. But the fierce competition to be first to break the latest hit makes r&b a choice target for payola scandals (the Gamble-Huff indictments being fresh news) and prey to an unhealthy sort of industry conservatism. A talent like Ben E. King can wait a decade between hits. Rod Stewart launches a successful solo career while ex-Temptations singer David Ruffin languishes somewhere in the Motown bureaucracy. Even a Stevie Wonder must literally threaten his way to greater artistic license. Catering to the latest trends means exposing good performers to the spectre of planned obsolescence. (Gladys Knight and the Pips were fortunate to switch labels when they did.)

Against this system, George Clinton waged his one-man rebellion. During the mid-'60s, he led the doo-wopping Parliaments, complete with matching green sharkskin suits, toured the nation's Apollos and RKO Albees and scored several hits ("I Wanna Testify," "All Your Goodies Are Gone") notable for Clinton's clever juxtaposition of nursery rhymes, TV slogans, and black idiomatic speech. When the hits dried up, Clinton became a company songwriter for Motown.

Motown, whose overseas reputation had captivated the Stones, Beatles, and Jeff Beck, was taking a back seat to the Airplane, Byrds, Sly Stone, *et. al.* In league with thousands of other discontents that fateful summer, he began dropping acid, then left Motown to produce for Westbound Records, a small Detroit label, bringing with him the instrumental back-up band from his Parliament days.

Fellow acid-heads, they became the focal point for increasingly bizarre activities. Funkadelic became their handle, purveyors of what they called "psychedelic funk." Their first two albums were WEIRD—incomprehensible mixtures of Hendrix, Sun Ra, Zappa, and Muddy Waters overlaid with Clinton's mock-serious polemic. The albums wound up in the bargain bins but the concept refused to die easily. Funkadelic became soulful hellions prophesying an American

apocalypse. The maggot and the death's head were adopted as their symbols, representative of the dehumanization of "De Twat, Moider City, U.S.A." where the automobile was God and the rising homicide rate demanded blood sacrifice.

Unfortunately, Clinton's messianic energies fell beyond the ghetto sensibility that afflicted the majority of the Afro-American community. Like Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, James Baldwin and so many others, Clinton risked becoming irrevocably isolated from mainstream black thought. (Conversely, James Brown, the ranking symbol of the black man who owns his piece of the pie, personifies the hopes of the average black.) So Parliament (the "s" no longer fashionable) was resurrected to deal with those desires.

Parliament utilizes Funkadelic's wit but leaves the freaky concepts at home. *Chocolate City* is a fine example of their smartly stylish expertise. Horn charts are bold and imaginative without resorting to the jazz-posturing of the Ohio Players. Vocalists George Clinton, Grady Thomas, Ray Davis, Calvin Simon, and Clarence Haskins are fabulous whether switching leads, executing smooth-as-silk four-part harmonies, or just cutting up.

Let's Take It To The Stage holds back on controversial philosophizing and substitutes some truly hilarious pot-shots at Funkadelic's boogie-funk competition. Funkadelic intends to make it clear who's boss and it ain't the "Grandfather," "Fool and the Gang," "Graham Cracker Station," or "Earth, Hot Air, and No Fire." The hot black guitars of Gary Shider and Mike Hammond, Tiki Fulwood's jungle-bred percussion, the fuzz-bass feats of Cordell Mosson, and Bernie Worrell's 88-keyed fury blast forth with the energy characteristic of rock 'n' roll at its uninhibited best.

Most groups slave to maintain one standard of excellence, only to encounter frustration. But the "Parlia-funkadelicment Thang" is (are) more than two-headed wonder boys. Alongside Stevie Wonder, George Clinton has become the major innovative force in r&b. His wit and imagination are unbounded; his lyrics a distinct advancement from the "shoogety, boogety, dance, dance, dance" sameness of black muzak. But Clinton's greatest contribution is his weirdness, his determinedness not to opt for stultifying respectability. Like the early Stones, Clinton and his bunch mock convention and in doing so leave us all a little freer. George Clinton should be a national resource.