

GEORGE CLINTON

By Clint Roswell

Tim Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives

It seems every time dance music gets itself into a blue funk, there's always George Clinton to snap us out of the pop fizzle. In his latest musical manifestation, under the alias of Uncle Jam, Clinton has sounded a nationwide asking all his soldiers of funk to "rescue dance music from the blahs." His urgent calling couldn't have been timed better.

While disco may have led us back to the dance floor, and punk provided something to shout about, neither appears able to carry on the commotion stirred by its initial thrust. And so the big beat is back to funk, with all its rhythmic permutations, as the only lasting cure for terminal rock blues.

The move to funk has become a more popular, and valid, musical expression of the Eighties. It doesn't offer the pretense of being politically relevant, since by its own nature funk is a socio-

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cultural amalgam of integrated Afro-American styles.

"The funk just keeps on getting stronger," says Clinton, the creative maestro behind Parliament Funkadelic, perhaps the most innovative fusion dance band of the Seventies. "I call it getting on the one, feeling the charge of the rhythm in your body and soul, just getting into a groove that's gonna take you away. Y'know, free your mind and your behind will follow."

Clinton often sounds like a subterranean preacher-man whose sole mission is to convert the unenlightened using funk as the center of his universe, and his legion of fans cherish his extraterrestrial leanings.

"There are those who, still drenched in their deodorant-filled lives, aren't ready to accept the funk. But to those who can listen, they will hear the

message of our music. We're not trying to be political, it's social. We all live on one planet that's not all that big anymore with television, radio and communication by satellite.

"Now the message we've been saying for years, and I feel we should be one nation under a groove, is that I don't care if you're Russian, Chinese, black, white or green, we have to get out of the dehumanized shell society has made for us. There's something better out there, and it's in all of us, and that's music, and if we can pursue those urgings, we can all be free. That's what funk is all about."

The notion of funk being an internal energy source of the human spirit appeals to Clinton. He has dramatically tried to present this in his music in figurative terms. Whether its just the simplified P-funk energy sign (a hand-signal where the forefinger and pinkie

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are raised in a fist), or his flair for the outrageous, evidenced by the last tour when the group opened its concerts in the "Space Mothership" which descended from the rafters (on huge pulleys, of course), Clinton has tried to unite his audience. It is Clinton, the grand-master of funk, who has come back to earth with the key to unharness our souls.

"The theatrics are something that just give everybody a laugh," says Clinton, who often wears a blond wig on stage for what he calls "shock effect."

"I wanted to give the black audiences something black promoters have never done because it's too expensive. A lot of the extravaganzas we put on are financed from our own pockets. We're into giving people a good time, not getting rich."

Making money hasn't corresponded with making albums for the 40-year-old Clinton, who despite churning out dozens of LPs over a 20-year period, has only recently been able to feel financially secure. This security has enabled him to take on the role of producer and form his own production company, which has become almost as significant as his music because it has allowed him to spread the funk. And his relationship with William "Bootsy" Collins, the gifted rhythm guitarist, has led to funk offshoots like Zapp, whose debut LP was listed among the nationwide Top Ten albums last fall, The Gap Band, and solo work.

"It's important to keep things fresh and moving with different ideas," says Clinton. "I've always tried to experiment with different sounds, instruments, much more on a conceptual basis. I've had no problems about getting into a rut because as soon as I feel comfortable with something, I change it."

"A lot of the time we'll get together and put a tune together on something that I feel. Maybe I'll hum a bar or two, or ask one of the guys to try and put a particular sound out, and then we'll mold it into its shape and proper form."

"I'm not worried about getting dated because a lot of things we do, we're just giving it back—like the *One Nation Under A Groove* album. Some girl came over to me after a concert at the Capitol Center in Washington and said, 'that was grand, I felt we were one nation under a groove in there.' You have to keep your ears to the street because that's where the people are."

But judging from recent developments, the anthem that moved all

funkophiles to dance appears to be just another campaign promise; friction has divided the funk empire, once the soul province of George Clinton's Parliament Funkadelic.

The internal politics of P-funk has become a source of contention within the record industry. Two different labels have recently released albums with the Funkadelic group trademark, despite pointedly different lineups. Both albums take dead aim at one another, as if engaged in what is now being touted as a funk-ed-up civil war, and neither side appears ready to surrender its title as the supreme planetary power of funk.

The fallout may be hazardous to your dance health, says Clinton, smitten with anger over another group cashing in on the Funkadelic name. On *Connections and Disconnections*, three former members of Clinton's funk family—Fuzzy Haskins, Calvin Simon and Grady Thomas—ask the musical question "Who's a Funkadelic," the most rousing number of an otherwise methodical album on Lax Records.

Clinton counters with a powerful, moving *Uncle Jam Wants You*, with the regular doo-dah funk mob featuring Bootsy Collins on guitar, Bernie Worrell on keyboards, and Billy "Bass" Nelson all on hand for a spectacular state-of-the-funk-art recording on Warner Bros.

While there is no question that Clinton, the gutsy singer and songwriter, is indeed the driving force behind Funkadelic, the splitting of the ranks has worked against both musical entities.

"Funkadelic is not a group, or even an LP, but a state of mind," says Clinton. "I feel Funkadelic is being taken advantage of by some very tacky people, the businessmen, and I've been forced to do something legally that I'm not into doing."

"After the successful *Mothership Connection* tour, there was a falling out where there were a few guys, namely Fuzzy, Calvin and Grady, who just weren't doing their share. They were taking royalties without giving ideas. I just felt that after 20 years of struggling to make that big record, I should be able to continue to keep on growing without the burden of three guys whose musical ideas were no longer in step with mine. It became too big a burden on me to provide for everybody."

"I thought we were all family, but it

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just wasn't working out. I'd sit down with Bernie or Bootsy and we talked about Funkadelic without putting an owner's tag on it. It was our idea and we didn't look on it like a possession. And the result of that is some people have tried to take advantage of our openness. Going to court is something I find very distasteful, but I'm forced to do it. I haven't worked hard all my life for this to happen to me."

Funk has been the vehicle for Clinton to escape the clutches of his past and this current legal turmoil has only brought out the best in him musically. His characterization as Uncle Jam has reinforced his purpose: to spread the gospel of funk. It may be his best album to date, surpassing even the classic *Mothership Connection* LP, which proudly boasts the rejoinder "Give Up The Funk (Tear The Roof Off The Sucker)." The musicianship of Bootsy and Bernie Worrell is clearly devastatingly in step. The featured cuts on this newest LP, "Knee Deep" and "Uncle Jam," once again put Clinton in the forefront

of dance music.

He is convinced that his exalted position was fated. Born in Charlotte, N.C., the impoverished Clinton clan moved north to Newark, N.J., when Clinton was just beginning to have street smarts but too young to fully enjoy them.

"In my neighborhood in Newark, in order to be successful enough to get out, you had to do either of three things. You had to play professional baseball, sell drugs or be a musician.

"Well, I couldn't hit, my brother O.D.'d and I really didn't think I could sing. But there was this guy on my block, he was an alcoholic who would hang out on the street where I lived, and every day when I came home from school he would not let me pass to get home unless I sang him a song.

"I was 14 at the time, and he was too big for me to get away from, but I really didn't know any songs. So I started making 'em up, and he liked 'em, and I would sing these songs and then he would let me go."

But Clinton started liking what he heard. He sang in the shower and the school bathroom until a few of his friends decided to form a group. They needed money for stage costumes and

equipment so they took on jobs at a factory—a hoola hoop factory.

"It was funnier than hell," he recalls. "We would work really hard, but every time the boss would leave first, we would steal a whole bunch, take the train into New York City, and sell them on the street. That's how we made our money. Finally, we had enough money to record a demo. We handed it in to a lady at ABC Records and she signed us a few weeks later."

That was 25 years ago and the funk has grown with him. Clinton takes great pleasure that this musical form has crossed the racial barriers to become popular.

"Everybody's getting funky nowadays," he says. "I'm glad groups like the Clash and the Police and the Talking Heads are doing it. I would have liked the black groups who were doing it first to get the recognition, but that's not the point.

"The point is everybody's getting down and the world is becoming a funkier place to live, and music is helping things along."

The celestial king of funk who has inspired a galaxy of rhythms in his own image looks up at the sky and thanks the heavens for making it all possible.