

# RATTLE DEEM BONES!

Tim Kinley/Groove  
Maneuvers Archives

**Got the crossover blues?**

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**Too many R&B Skeletons In the Closet?**

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**Nothing a little rump-bumping,**

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**booty-shaking funk won't cure,**

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**says Dr. Funkenstein. Alter ego**

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**George Clinton agrees that a spoonful of**

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**boogie makes the medicine go down.**

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BY BILL MILKOWSKI





"First there was Frankie Lymon, then James Brown, then Sly and Jimi,  
and then we came along."

—George Clinton, a.k.a. Starchild, Mr. Wiggles  
and Dr. Funkenstein.

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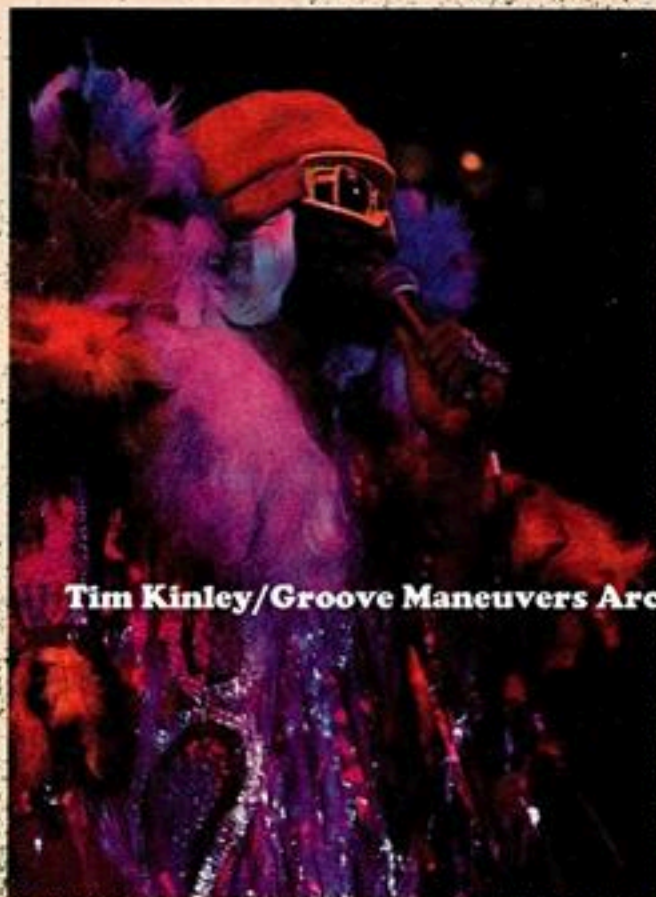


NO, GEORGE CLINTON DID NOT invent funk. But credit this former hairdresser from New Jersey with turning funk into a philosophy. Ever since the formation of his Parliament/Funkadelic organization back at the turn of the Seventies, George has been espousing the philosophy of The Funk, offering his brand of booty-shaking music as an answer to all the world's problems.

In 1978 he penned an anthem for this growing movement, the classic "One Nation Under A Groove." Over the years his output has been nothing short of prolific, whether it was in the context of Funkadelic, Parliament, Parlet, the Brides of Funkenstein, Bootsy's Rubber Band or any of the other offshoots of the original mothership. Last year, in addition to collaborating with tech-wiz Thomas Dolby on *Some Of My Best Jokes Are Friends*, Clinton produced the Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Freaky Stylee* and *The Federation of Tack Heads* by his brother Jimmy Giles and the Tack Heads. Busy man.

Now George is back with another package of cryptic comments, Martian rapping and topical satire married to that relentlessly funky beat. It's *R&B Skeletons In The Closet*, "an album for all the R&B artists who have crossed over and can't get Black," explains Clinton with a laugh. The clever Pedro Bell cover art, always a treat in itself, further explains this Clinton concept in cutting cartoon detail. On the back is, among other things, a chart entitled What To Drop To Go Pop, listing such rules and regulations to guarantee stardom as: "Don't wear 'dreads,' cornrows, 'naturals' or any garment that looks Third World. (This is America, buddy!); Don't use a lotta slang and stuff in your lyrics, because it'll be easier for somebody else (in Vegas, probably) to make 'their' versions of your song; Do smile and appear grateful a lot when you get on teevee. It's besides-the-point that airbody's getting rich offa you and there's still no money to buy your mama a house, like you promised; Forget where you came from because airbody knows that anybody who lives in the projects more than two years is never going to make it. You probably ripped off your friends to help





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WHO YOU JIVIN' WITH THAT COSMIC DEBRIS? Clinton gets all funky up in concert (clockwise, from left to lower right), at NYC's Record Plant with Thomas Dolby (right), and on Saturday Night Live (upper right).



PHOTOS BY JOHN BELLISIMO

your career anyway. If your conscience bothers you, make a tax-deductible contribution to a ghetto that you didn't live in."

There's hordes of other tongue-in-cheek tips on how to successfully crossover into the mainstream white pop market, all involving extreme compromise and personal degradation.

"In order to get that crossover appeal, these artists are told to use less bass or don't say the word 'funk' or something like that so that they can get played on pop radio," says George. "And once you do that and sell all those records, you start gearing your music for that market. Before you know it, all the R&B you had

in you is completely hidden!"

*IM&RW* was recently granted an audience with the main pilot of the mothership, George Clinton. The following interview took place in the Manhattan offices of Capitol Records.

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**IM&RW:** Is there anyone in particular you're referring to with this concept of "Crossing over and can't get Black"?

**George Clinton:** I ain't talkin' about nobody in particular. Airbody wanna pick names of who they think I'm talkin' about. Can't be Lionel Ritchie 'cause he write pop songs too good. That's just one

of those things he do. He probably can't sing "Brickhouse" no mo'...you know what I'm saying? But he ain't got to worry about what I'm talkin' about. His records automatically go on pop radio when it comes out. But all of us ain't Lionel Ritchie now. I mean, he sincerely write that stuff (laughs). And it works. And he took it one step further; he wrote it for country, which is probably the most lucrative market in the whole music business. So you can leave him out of it. It definitely ain't about him. I ain't gonna say who it is about, but it ain't him or Michael Jackson. And

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Motown acts don't even count 'cause they was always pop and R&B. They was like music for young America.

No, I'm talkin' about the dilemma of artists who start off makin' R&B records, then they get one record that crosses over and gets a lot of white acceptance. A lot of money's made and then they start gearing their records specifically for that. They start playing pop music and they can't get back to R&B themselves.

And it's happening as a concept with radio stations too. Stations are trying to compete with each other. They start playin' pop music and they can't get back to R&B themselves. And so, artists begin making records specifically for what they hear on the radio. People start copying whatever is the trend. Like, Maurice White did "Stand By Me." They'd have to beat me with a stick to do that. I mean, they would have to kill me to do that. And even if it would've worked, it wouldn't have meant nothin'. Earth, Wind & Fire was too great of a group...they set too much of a standard to...I mean, that wasn't even a good song to do. So it was just like, "Oh, no!" when I heard Maurice do that song.

**IM&RW:** What about Prince? Has he got any R&B skeletons in the closet?

**GC:** Prince is good. I mean, he can do anything he wanna do. He do pop music very well and he do R&B music very well. And he keeps his hand in it all the time. When he don't do R&B music he makes sure Maserati do it. Or he make sure Time do it. He make sure that his R&B staff is out there to let you know that he can do it. So he do it right. He's doing it with intelligence.

**IM&RW:** Marketing.

**GC:** Yeah, he do it with some marketing. He makes sure he get everybody. And he know he wasn't jeopardizing himself when he was making all those real pop records and wasn't getting any airplay. Time was gettin' all the way over, which kept the thang happenin'. And when his thang finally did work, he was able to go and do pop music the way he wanted to and do R&B music the way he wanted to. I mean, he do some funky records ... within his pop sound. The Beatles and Sly (Stone) was the only ones that could get real pop and real funky at the same time, and do it as an art. Prince can do that.

**IM&RW:** Are you aware of what the Black Rock Coalition is up to? They're a group of young musicians here in New York, many of them Funkadelic disciples, who are banding together to try and open up more opportunities for black musicians who play rock. Basically, they're trying to combat the notion that if you're not white, you can't play rock.

**GC:** Are they playing the new rock? I mean, 'cause rock for rock's sake is pretty much not around anymore. Rock for white audiences today is not rock any-

"They still don't know who I am, how much of this is accidental, or is it cosmic or what? Nobody really knows what. And I don't try to know. I just feel it as it goes along."

more either, unless you talkin' about the groups that's not really making it. To me, the new rock bands would have to be the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Fishbone and the Beastie Boys. That, to me, is some fresh rock. It's definitely not...well, I like Van Halen and all that, you know. But that kind of rock and roll...TV done wrote that. Foreigners (sic) and all them sound very good, but that to me is like polished rock and roll. So if these Black Rock Coalition bands are playing rock and roll like Mother's Finest used to play it, they're gonna have to know that it is a hassle. The thing is, they're always gonna have that built-in adversity. That's a part of the thing I like about rock and roll is there's always the hassle of getting it played. So they have to get the coalition together, but they can't be pissed off about it 'cause it was our own fault as black people that we lost rock and roll. We disassociated ourselves from it because it wasn't hip, it wasn't

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cool. You couldn't even have proved to most people that black people had done rock and roll, even though everybody know that Chuck Berry and them cats were the ones who did the beginning of it. But we turned our backs on the blues and rock and roll and it was taken away from us by the English. Not taken, because we wasn't even trying to keep it. We didn't even own it. Hadn't a been for Jimi Hendrix, wed' a lost blues and rock and roll forever.

**IM&RW:** You never lost touch with rock and roll or the blues.

**GC:** I was coming out of Motown, basically. Straight doo-wop. "I Wanna Testify" was a big hit back in '67. They called us acid doo-wop. And then it came to the Seventies and I changed it to the funk ... what Earth, Wind & Fire and Ohio Players was doin'. But I had one thing that they didn't have. I had played with all the rock groups in the Sixties, so I knew about *Tommy* and *Sgt. Pepper*. I knew about Frank Zappa and Alice Cooper and all them. When I first came out big with Funkadelic, I spent all my money on the biggest, shiniest props and costumes I could find. See, money talks. Money make anything work. The minute we advertised that we paid \$350,000 for the spaceship (which George landed on stage in) and \$5,000 on leather suits, we were right in the league with Alice Cooper and them. So with the mother-ship we were immediately in *Time*, *Newsweek*, everybody started doin' stories on us at one time. That in itself helped us to do what this coalition is trying to do now. They can do it. I don't think they should be negative about why it ain't our music or why it's not noted to be our music or why it's hard to get across with it. They just got to balance it with a concept, if they want to eat. There's a lot of black groups that are just now wanting to begin to play rock, but they got to have something fresh. They just can't come out playin' rock 'cause Led Zeppelin and all those took that shit to some high places. And we've done some different things with it. Sly, Prince, Fishbone too. I'm sure these bands you talk about can play their ass off, 'specially if they been weaned under Michael (Hampton) and Eddie (Hazel, the dynamic guitar duo from Seventies Funkadelic fame). But they just have to find where to go with it. They gonna have to find their concept and make it work. And that is hard. It's tough for cats who can play pretty good and wanna be rock too. Those concepts are in conflict in some kinda way. Like the Chili Peppers...they can play their ass off but they prefer not to play as good as they can play. Same way we used to do. We made it simple and gave it that glitter that make anything work. But I always knew that if we ever had to prove it, we could probably play better'n

anybody. We had two drummers at one time that was probably the best drummers around. The fans were hip enough to know, "Man, they can play when they wanna play." But entertainment...that's what it's about. We always made sure that throughout a four hour show you got some entertainment and you got some serious playing from different members of the band. And I was like a referee. But we basically here to entertain you.

**IM&RW:** And you did deliver some food for thought, similar to what Frank Zappa has been doing all along.

**GC:** Yeah, he was one of the people who influenced me on that. We had slogans like "Think, It Ain't Illegal Yet" and "Free Your Mind And Your Ass Will Follow." And we kept a lot of the lyrics vague. See, we ain't gonna make it easy for you 'cause as soon as you figure us all the way out, it's over for us. I mean, they still don't know who I am, how much of this is accidental, or is it cosmic or what? Nobody really knows what. And I don't try to know. I just feel it as it goes along. All I'm doing is mixing a lot of different styles I learned from the Beatles, Sly, Jimi, Motown, and I mix 'em so thoroughly it sound accidental.

**IM&RW:** What is your method in the studio?

**GC:** I just pick the right people, the right engineers, the right songs and put 'em all together. I just let people do their jobs. I think too many producers go into the studio with preconceived ideas and they can't get away from it. But once you marry your ideas, you're in trouble. I learned that from Motown. You'd come in with something and say, "I got the greatest record in the world," and they tell you, "Go rewrite it. Forget all that you done." So what I finally ended up doing was stop even finishing a song before I get to a studio. 'Cause a lot of it has to do with the vibe of the moment. Now I'm just making the shit up as I go along. I make up the words as I go along. I put it together as I go along, so it never get on tape for me to fall in love with before I get to the studio. I hate to get married to a part on a record and then divorce myself from it 'cause then my ego say, "You wrote that. It's got to be great." No, I mean, I would not be hired as a producer if somebody would come and watch me work. You watch me in the studio...I don't know what I'm doing, 'cause I've already picked the people who do what they do best. I just get the people and leave 'em alone.

**IM&RW:** You started out with straight ahead doo-wop and now you're dealing with microchip technology.

**GC:** That's where it's going and I try to get there fo' everybody else. When I look up and see the reality of where stuff is going, whether I like it or not...I seen too

many people fight against rock and roll in the Fifties and early Sixties, saying "It'll die." I don't wanna make that mistake in my old age. 'Cause that's what puts a lot of people out of the business. Me? I run to the shit that looks like it's gonna be the thang. Fairlights, Linn drums, all that.

**IM&RW:** And you have Anthony Bryant doing some pretty serious scratching on the "Mix-Master Suite."

**GC:** Yeah, that's my favorite cut on the album, all those clashing parts ... rapping, scratching, Broadway musicals, strings. Actually, when scratching first hit, it got on my nerves when they'd start scratching records against records in the wrong keys. But since the kids love it ... that was just my old age and my ear trying to tell me that this wasn't happenin', but I know better 'cause I've seen this already with fuzz tones and wah wahs in the Sixties.

**IM&RW:** You're open to change and your albums sound different from one another.

**GC:** Yeah, like "Chocolate City" is different from "Mothership Connection" is different from "Atomic Dog" is different from "Mix-Master Suite." I wanted to keep this one unrelated to P. Funk sounds that you've known from us. I ran out to L.A. and did most of it there with one or two people from the band—Maceo (Parker), Amp (Joseph Fiddler), (David) Spradley. But predominantly, I did this one with a lot of new people (like Steve's Steve Washington, who plays bass, trumpet, keyboards and programs some drum machine). I didn't want this to resemble nothin' that we had ever done. I like takin' those risks. I didn't come back and try to copy "Atomic Dog." I took a chance on going so far away from that record that it was like a whole 'nother group again. I like the adversity. I mean, without humps there'd be no gettin' over. Back in the Seventies we had a million and a half black fans. We didn't even have to cross over. If we woulda crossed over then, we'd probably be over now. I'd probably be a big executive. But I'm glad it didn't happen that way. I'm glad that we made it hard on ourselves. It's like we don't wanna make it to that point 'cause, I mean, to me, the pursuit of happiness is what's happenin'. If you catch it, it's yo' bored ass. And where you gonna go from there? It's about chasin' it. That's the fun.

**IM&RW:** The secret is in the striving, not the arriving.

**GC:** It really is. Damn! When you catch happiness, where is there to go? What's there to look forward to? Why bother to get up in the morning? There's nothing to reach for after that. So, I'm still reaching.