

Dr. Funkenstein

Onstage at the Municipal Auditorium in New Orleans, a giant silver spaceship descended from a 40-foot cardboard blue-denim cap. Out stepped an outrageous creature wearing 9-inch platform boots, fur tails and a flowing Alice in Wonderland blond wig. Ringed behind him was a band and chorus—he called them “clones”—in costumes that might have been inspired by watching “Star Trek” on acid. The audience of 8,500 black teen-agers screamed as the self-described “afonaut” crooned, “I’m the cool ghoul with the bump transplant.”

To call George Clinton, the “Dr. Funkenstein” of Parliament/Funkadelic, bizarre is beside the point. Parliament and Funkadelic—two bands of mostly the same musicians who record for different labels and maintain two different musi-



Tim Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives

cal identities—are to black teens what the Rolling Stones used to be to whites. Their "P-Funk Earth Tour," a lavish \$275,000 production currently crisscrossing the country, is the best theatrical show in rock today. Written by Clinton and designed by Jules Fischer, who also created sets for the Stones, David Bowie and Kiss, the three-act funk opera chronicles Dr. Funkenstein's landing of the Mothership and subsequent attempt to save the world from "funklessness."

Funk, of course, is as impossible to define as soul, but it has more to do with hanging loose than with playing it cool, with being raunchy than putting on airs. "When rock came in it wasn't respected by blacks," says Clinton, "because blacks were into being cool. You didn't want to be funky like Richard Pryor is today because that kind of nigger really embarrassed you. But deep down inside that's all of us."

In their attempt to create an authentic black rock 'n' roll sound, the seventeen touring musicians and singers produce a driving beat that could rouse the dead to boogie. In New Orleans when the band got into "Tear the Roof off the Sucker," the hit single from Parliament's best-selling album "Mothership Connection," most of the audience was doing the bump on top of their seats or dancing in a "Soul Train" line that stretched half the length of the auditorium floor.

Black Humor: Clinton, 35, began doo-wop singing on Newark street corners and formed the Parliaments in 1955. He wrote for Motown and produced one hit single for the Parliaments, "I Just Wanna Testify." They performed on what Clinton calls "the chitlin' circuit" as a stylized early Motown group and never saw a royalty check. "We was always losing our same shoes and ties we was supposed to wear to perform together," says Clinton. After the Beatles came along, Clinton and the gang started hanging out around Cambridge, dropping acid with white hippies, listening to Lenny Bruce and creating their own black humor. Gradually a freakier identity began to emerge and they started calling themselves the Funkadelics, though they never gave up being the Parliaments as well. Then, after large doses of "Star Trek," reading books on cloning and watching Alice Cooper, Clinton invented Dr. Funkenstein this year.

Now, after all the lean years, the Parliament/Funkadelics are getting almost as high financially as they are naturally. In New York recently they stayed at the posh Regency Hotel. "When I get on the elevator, the other passengers look up at the numbers a lot," says Clinton, who off-stage is given to wearing a green Ming batwing suit inspired by the "Flash Gordon" character. "Bein' freaky is my defense against the world bein' so scary." Meanwhile, his 18-year-old daughter has just enrolled at UCLA as a freshman pre-med major. "Funk," says Dr. Funkenstein, "is its own reward."