



Tim Kinley/Groove
Maneuvers Archives

MUTHA FROM ANOTHER *planet*

HIS NAME was George Clinton. Born in 1941 in Kannapolis, North Carolina, he moved to New Jersey at age 14 and was electrified by hearing Frankie Lymon And The Teenagers on the radio (also an inspiration for Anthony Braxton, of all people). He started working at a barbershop and doing street-corner singing, recording doowop singles in 1958 and 1959 for the Hull label. His group was called The Parliaments. Doo-wop was street vocal music, the 50s equivalent of rap.

Doo-wop's plaintiveness sugar-coats extraordinary vocal fireworks; the ease of setting it up led to grass-roots creativity unsurpassed (in terms of record company interest) until punk. Tens of thousands of vocal groups formed, thousands made singles. Cordell "Boogie" Mosson (bassist) remembers that he, guitarists Gary Shider and Eddie Hazel, bassist Billy Nelson and keyboardist Bernie Worrell (all later Clinton cohorts) would "stand on the corner and sing harmonies together".

The key to Clinton's longevity as a subversive in the record industry is the way he has kept alive this street-gang mentality – though he has never been shy of extending and elucidating his politics. The bizarre and fantastic – the extraterrestrial trappings and regressive play – allow him to indulge in in-group jokes whilst freeing him from a need to "represent" the street in all its limitations (the problem that retards both Oi-punk and gangster-rap).

In the 60s the freedom to use drugs and political radicalism were all of a piece. Guitarist Gary Shider felt acid improved his playing: "It enhanced it. It gave me a broader scope of what was going on". Like a lot of music of the drug culture (compare The Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead) early Funkadelic is often more exciting in the concept than in the hearing. Whereas Hendrix – like Charlie Parker from the 40s – leaps out of the period like a firecracker, this is patchy stuff; sluggish funk topped by distorted guitar. Clinton became a genius as a producer, but his combination of unstoppable groove and dizzying leftfield detail took a while to arrive. *Maggot Brain's* "Wars of Armageddon" (1971) hints at the relentless techno-funk that will produce Clinton's dance masterpieces of the 80s.

But the album covers! *Free Your Mind And Your Ass Will Follow* (1970) is worth acres of stoned singalongs for the gatefold: the naked female model is situated so that her head appeared on the front of the gatefold ("Free Your Mind . . .") while her buttocks appear on the back (with the legend "And Your Ass Will Follow"). Human anatomy was not used on a sleeve so creatively until Prince put his navel on the spine of *Parade*.

*Since the 60s, extraterrestrial funk warrior
George Clinton has done battle
with the Placebo Syndrome.*

Ben Watson charts tactics and strategies.

WHAT'S FUNK, then?

When James Brown recorded "It's Too Funky In Here" in 1979 the lyrics were a throwback; to when "funky" meant redolent of human odour. It is now used for what pre-rock-and-roll people call "swing": the elusive quality of rhythmic propulsion black music has in abundance. Swing, though, was a music of elegance and pleasure: funk refers to roots, sweat and getting-down. This is a self-conscious blackness, which explains its humour, its sex and its extra-terrestrial trappings. This is blackness joking with itself.

After whites redirected the R&B bandwagon (calling it rock 'n' roll), soul reasserted blackness by tapping into the emotional extremes of black church song. However, vocal catharsis is not the only response to oppression. There is the strand of R&B which explores ghetto jive: Louis Jordan, Jack McVea ("Open The Door, Richard"), Richard Berry ("Louie Louie"), Screaming Jay Hawkins, Little Richard, Esquerita (whose name is a pun on excreta). All this extended the complex and painful humour of blackface: laughing at and against an intolerable situation. Who could pick up this mantle in an age of rock and civil rights?

THE NOTES to *Cosmic Slop* (1973) evolve from ghetto protest to anti-militarism with the same ineluctable logic as Malcolm X and more recently Ice-T (one of Pop's only opponents to the Gulf War). But Clinton needed to find music as hard-hitting.

He nearly found it with Parliament. It was the same crew of musicians, but the music is clipped and disciplined, evidently "straight" dance music in comparison to Funkadelic. *Chocolate City* (Casablanca, 1975) is a classic of huffa-puffa, hippie/tribal mid-70s funk. The multi-tracked wah-wah guitars and booting horns sound great.

At the heart of funk, maintains Clinton, lies the bass. *R&B Skeletons In The Closet* (1986) was directed at "all those R&B artists who crossed over and can't get black. In order to get that crossover appeal they tell them to use less bass or don't say the word *funk*". You can hear funk bass emerge in the "party" albums Johnny Otis recorded in the late 60s — *Cuttin' Up*, *Cold Shot*, *Sugarcane* (produced for violinist Don "Sugarcane" Harris), *Live At Monterey*. His son Shuggie plays hip, a new style. It foretells the essence of funk in an R&B chrysalis. (Funkadelic guitarist DeWayne McKnight listed Shuggie Otis first in a list of inspirations that included B.B. King, Kenny Burrell and Hendrix). The other pioneer was Larry Graham's slap-bass with Sly & the Family Stone.

The two brothers that were to define the bass/guitar sound for Clinton and hence for funk — Bootsy and Phelps Collins — joined Funkadelic hot off a year's stint with James Brown. Jimmy Nolen, guitarist for Brown both before and after Phelps, was a veteran of the Johnny Otis Roadshow and played on Otis' hit "Willie And The Hand Jive". From the Godfather of R&B to the Minister Of The New New Super Heavy Funk: more *bass!*

Brown claimed that he sorted out Bootsy's playing: "When I met him he was playing a lot of bass — the ifs, the ands, and the buts. I got him to see the importance of the *one* in funk — the downbeat at the beginning of every bar. I got him to key in on the dynamic parts of the one instead of playing all around it. Then he could do all the other stuff in the right places — *after* the one." (This advice was celebrated in "Everything Is On The One" on Parliament's *Clones Of Dr Funkenstein* in 1976.)

Apart from such lessons in the fundamentals of funk, Bootsy had a chance to work with Fred Wesley, the trombonist arranger, and later poached him and his horn section for Clinton. With the bass so cast as the definition of funk, it is small wonder Bootsy emerged as *the* spin-off star with a slew of Bootsy's Rubber Band albums.

Although Brown had an inventive attitude towards records (he pioneered seven-inch singles in two parts in order to release eight minute songs, recorded a pioneering live album *At The Apollo* at his own expense despite industry derision and insisted on ahead-of-its-time impact in terms of production) he restricted his musicians by his soul-man egotism — the shows were all about James.

Wesley comments on his move from the JB's to Funkadelic: "I was very happy to move from the James Brown thing, that

was really structured, to where I had a free hand to do whatever I wanted — just do your thing!"

Brown also had little idea of the possibilities of the *album*, sleeves being hastily assembled after-thoughts. George Clinton is equalled only by Frank Zappa and Prince in his fascination for every aspect of production: his albums become whole environments for their purchasers. In cartoonist Pedro Bell he found his visual Bootsy. *Uncle Jam* (1979) attempts to list every one of the "Uncle Jam Funk Army" who have written in to the fan club. On the back of *The Electric Spanking Of War Babies* (1980) a little frame shows excited buyers in a record store: "Willya look at this — dese guys are heavee!" "Okay, I'll put Stink Floyd back" "(Sniff!) It's just like the old days of Frank Zappa . . ." says the baldie. "Oh Wow — hey, we got any dope at home?" asks someone else of his mate in a Devo t-shirt. Sexual materialists all.

THE MOTHERSHIP Tour of 1977 — which featured a descending flying saucer from which Clinton emerged in outrageous gear — is legendary, as is the wonderful *One Nation Under Groove* (1978). Wesley cannot remember any four-hour gigs, but fans remember five-hours-and-upward. Only Go Go provides a similar link back to the days of the R&B roadshows, swing and Duke Ellington.

Wesley always liked the band's dress sense — Gary Shider bounding around playing guitar dressed in a nappy — figuring that it required a Sci-Fi explanation: "I used to look at George sometimes and wonder — is he really from outer space? Are these guys really here on a visit? At that time it seemed to me that here were some people that came in from outer space and maybe the first thing they saw on earth was a baby with a diaper, so he thinks, so that's how they dress, so he put one on! It dawned on me that maybe these people had misconceptions about what clothes to put on. One guy dressed like he must have seen a fire hydrant first."

The disco boom of the late 70s, which Clinton rode as a subversive black undertow, took him with it in the early 80s when disco collapsed and the record industry suffered the worst recession ever (wise consumers built their Funkadelic collections from the sale racks). Casablanca released *Trombipulation* for Parliament in 1980, then disappeared in a cloud of cocaine and lawsuits.

However, two years later Clinton managed to get a contract with Capitol, a hit — "Atomic Dog" — and, paradoxically, a string of albums that are more effective than any of the Funkadelic "classics": *Computer Games* (1982), *You Shouldn't-Nuf Bit Fish* (1983), *Some Of My Best Jokes Are Friends* (1985) and *R&B Skeletons In The Closet* (1986). Bootsy Collins also tightened up: *Ultra Wave* (1980), *The One Giveth* (1982) and *What's Bootsy Doin'* (with a cameo appearance by violinist Billy Bang) move the feet as well as making highly political jokes. "We just don't stop — we'll drive you nuts" they sang and at last the music lives up to the slogans.

THE KNOWING alienation of Kraftwerk — which dramatizes the means of production-line pop — swept dance

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music in the late 80s. Prince, though, proved to be a fan of Clinton's insistence on the live show: he sorted out his legal problems, jammed with him at his Minneapolis nightclub and released *Cinderella Theory* in 1989 on Paisley Park. Recycling old beats and samples, rap has always packed an historical awareness (an innovation that parallels rap's *nemesis*, bop neo-conservatism): "Tweakin'" featured a work-out with Chuck D and Flavor Flav of Public Enemy. A new album – *Smell My Fingers* – is in the pipeline, as is a film from the Hudlin Brothers (of *House Party* fame).

It is not really possible to imagine George Clinton perpetrating the dilutions and sell-outs he criticizes in those around him – what is he going to turn himself into, a matinee idol? He is either firing on all cylinders or lost, defeated, suppressed by an increasingly streamlined record business. Like the undersung Swamp Dogg, George Clinton proves that a stress on blackness need not endlessly deploy the myth of authenticity and roots, but can also invent and fantasize, project the myth backwards into the nursery, forward into space.

The hocus-pocus of pyramid mysticism is a sad cul-de-sac for black consciousness, and *Trombipulation's* crazy meeting of hieroglyphics and plastic elephant trunks allies imagination with its true ally: absurdity, not mysticism. (Sun Ra knows this – does Anthony Braxton?)

"Black dada nihilismus", recited Amiri Baraka in 1964, never quite getting the right relation of word to music to take the poetry out of the Greenwich Village coffee house. Thanks to his survival in the record industry, George Clinton's black dada infantilismus operates on a world stage, educating as it mocks, questioning as it indulges. Not for nothing does the sleeve note of 1974's *Standing On The Verge Of Getting It On* run:

"On the Eighth Day, the Cosmic Strumpet of MOTHER-NATURE was spawned to envelope this Third Planet in FUNKACIDAL VIBRATIONS. And she birthed Apostles Ra, Hendrix, Stone & CLINTON".

I'll funk to that.

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