

Tim Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives

RECORD REVIEW INTERVIEW Parliament/Funkadelic

BY STEVE IVORY

Several hundred concert mongers loom outside the Stanley Theatre, in the heart of downtown Pittsburgh. Casually conversing and discreetly toking cheap weed, these folks seem to have made a social event out of not having access inward — without tickets for the show, they've come to "hang", anyway. The real party, however, strides inside, where several thousand P-Funk fans (P is for Pure) are dutifully sweating in the aisles to the opening strokes of "One Nation Under A Groove", the latest dance anthem from Funkadelic, the proposed rock exponent of the "Parliament-Funkadelic Thang", a bizarre musical movement whose chief banner carriers are Parliament/Funkadelic.

Onstage, the lights shine down on what looks to be a regiment of frenzied gypsies. The face of Michael Hampton, Funkadelic's kid whiz lead guitarist, is obscured by a dark hood that tops his cape, while the only items between vocalist/guitarist Gary Shider's manhood and this audience is his customary silver skyscraper platform boots and a Holiday Inn towel which is wrapped around the lower portion of his lean torso like an oversized diaper. Surrounded by a tribe of background singers, they, along with bassist Boogie Mosson, keyboardist Bernie Worrell and drummer Tyrone Lampkin, effortlessly keep in the pocket a blistering groove that, judging by the activities of this frantic crowd, is obviously as contagious as back up keyboardist Junie Morrison suggests in the popular ad-lib opening of "Groove":

So wide you can't get around it / So low you can't get under it / So high you can't get over it...

For the information of all you unaware souls, Funkadelic is the world's premier funk band. Been funk'n' royally for years. Long confined in the shadows of popular music, to be sure, Funkadelic is an idea whose time has finally come. Funkadelic emerged in the mid-sixties with a rare breed of funk rock akin to Hendrix and Sly. Memorable Funkadelic albums from that era like *Maggot Brain* and *America Eats Its Young* made their mark in the Black rock circles, but Funkadelic seemed doomed to the obscurity of the feeble Westbound label, until 1976, when the band split for a deal with Warner Bros. *Hardcore Jollies*, the first LP of the agreement, was a sparkling effort of Funkadelic's usual funky, experimental rock and roll. Unfortunately, Warners was feeling its way through Black music promotion

back then, and the popularity of *Jollies* was further hindered, ironically, by *Kidd Funkadelic*, the last compiled tracks of the Westbound relationship.

That's now old news, thanks to *One Nation Under A Groove*, a powerful collection of new Funkadelic material, '79. The title track, an ultra-rhythmic scorcher,

has dominated the national R&B charts for several weeks and is now invading the pop charts. In the meantime, Warner Bros. reports *One Nation* to be the "hottest single and album we have on our entire roster. We can't press 'em fast enough." To further quench the thirst of feverish funk fanatics, the *One Nation* track is available in four versions — the cut from the album, a 45 single, and a 12-inch disco version whose flip side features an instrumental version during which guitarist Hampton lets loose. From all indications, to coin Funkadelic's phrase, "Funk's Getting Ready To Roll."

"We knew it was coming all along," says a confident, relaxed George Clinton from his hotel room. Clinton is P-Funk's leader, messiah, referee, and officially, "Maggot Overlord." Even casually dressed in satin jacket, matching pants and sneakers, he looks square compared to his stage image of high platforms, assorted thrift shop attire, and that ever-present platinum blonde wig that frames his painted face. In conversation, he explains himself well when speaking of P-Funk and the business that goes along with it. The man's no dummy. "Since this new funk has broken, Funkadelic is finally getting the break it

Funkadelic: The new funk has broken.



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deserves. If the masses think *One Nation Under A Groove* is the bomb... which it is ("Bomb" is another P-Funk cliché, basically meaning "the ultimate"), they should have heard the old stuff, the albums that didn't sell. Or better yet," he beams, holding an unfiltered cigarette that has long since gone out, "wait until they hear the new stuff. This is just the beginning."

It's somewhat ironic that Funkadelic, as a self-contained musical entity, is the last to share in the every-building success that Clinton's P-Funk stable is enjoying, a success that Funkadelic virtually spawned, since most of the P-Funk artists have emerged directly from that band. Parliament, Funkadelic's more commercial alter-ego (only ardent P-Funk fans know that Parliament and Funkadelic personnel are one and the same) records for the Casablanca label, pulling in a steady flow of gold and platinum awards. Unlike Funkadelic's unpredictable, spontaneous rhythmic rock and screaming guitar solos, Parliament's recordings boast ludicrous musical concepts composed around characters like "Starchild", "Dr. Funkenstein", and "Sir Nose Devoid a Funk", silly lyrics and assorted groove chants over powerful, bottom-heavy funk vamps. The style is best exemplified on albums like *Mother-ship Connection*.

Then there's the "Monster Rock" of Bootsy's Rubber Band, essentially a super funky power group headed by Space Bassist William "Bootsy" Collins, a James Brown alumni and the first, and by far most successful, act to splinter out of Parliament/Funkadelic. Bootsy lovingly refers to his mostly pre-teen followers as "Geepies" and "Funkateers". So far they haven't let him down: Each of his three Warner Bros. albums have been certified gold (selling in excess of 500,000), with an upcoming fourth expected to reach platinum (one million units). Want females in your funk? How about Parlett or the Brides of Funkenstein. Parlett, a funk-ed-out girl group trio records a brand of funky disco for Casablanca, while the Brides, a duo, have their first album, *Funk Or Walk*, on Atlantic.

And there's more. The Horny Horns, a brass contingent led by Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley, also James Brown band graduates, have had one LP on Atlantic, while P-Funk keyboardist Bernie Worrell, who as a prodigal child wowed hometown New Jersey audiences with classical recitals until he first heard Rock and Roll ("It freaked me out; I couldn't believe it"), has just turned in master tapes of his first solo album to Arista Records. Clinton produces all of these acts and shares songwriting credits on virtually all of the emanating music. Thus, it's no wonder that his musical peers contend that Clinton is spreading himself too thin, that his creative well will soon run dry.

"That's what they think," retorts Clinton, "and that's where they're wrong. I could sit here and say I'll never run outta funk, but the fact is, I'm not the only one working here in the first place. When I'm producing Bootsy I don't have to be there all the time... Bootsy may lay down a bass line, I could care less; he turns the track over to me and I do what I'm going to do to it. Same thing with Parliament. Bernie will go in and lay down some synthesizers, I'll listen to it and decide where to go from there. In Detroit, we might be in three or

four studios at once — The Rubber Band recording rhythm tracks in one, Parliament laying down vocals in another, and Funkadelic working across the hall. I don't have to be everywhere at once, because I have people in each band that knows what I want. I'm not working alone."

George Clinton has always been the enterprising sort. Years ago back in Plainfield, New Jersey, he was the hustler about town who kept a big car and pocket change. The original members of Parliament, vocalists Fuzzy Haskins, Grady Thomas, Calvin Simon and Ray Davis, worked in a barber shop Clinton used to run. Back then, they were do-woppers who entertained customers with street-corner renditions of R&B ditties. They eventually approached Motown, then based in Detroit, but Clinton was the only one they used, as a staff songwriter for their music

when those audiences finally admit to themselves that we're just as good as any white rock band. But right now we're not worryin' about getting the white audience to our show — ain't no room in the places, anyway — the Brothers sell 'em out. But what we're out here doing now — there's no question about it being rock and roll."

And it's true. The current P-Funk roadshow is opened by the Brides of Funkenstein, who offer a tight twenty minutes or so of energetic Parliament-influenced funk, but when the members of Funkadelic finally wander out on stage after the intermission, there are no spaceships, smoke bombs or bop guns — all gimmicks used during Parliament's P-Funk Earth Tour last year. Instead, much to the initial surprise of many ticket holders in the audience, there's no set pattern to the show. Songs often wander into the repertoire at



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"Which one is George Clinton?"

publishing arm, Jobete. They *did* record Parliament during that period, however, and had a hit called "I Wanna Testify". When Clinton temporarily lost legal possession of the Parliament name, he then formed Funkadelic and signed with Westbound. Shortly afterward, Clinton regained the title and combined the two, with Parliament handling vocals for the freaked out Funkadelic.

So far, crossover action hasn't been a problem for P-Funk, since the bulk of their gold and platinum is attributed solely to Black record buyers, though Parliament's "Flashlight" single, and now Funkadelic's "One Nation" have been two of the biggest black crossover records of the year. However, boogie is basically Parliament's turf, and the big question remains as to whether Funkadelic can get white rock audiences to accept them as a legitimate rock and roll band.

"We ain't really worried about it," says Clinton to the big question mark. "It would be nice, and it'll happen eventually,

a moment's notice, and when grooves do run rampant, they don't get away without Michael Hampton piercing their trance-like effect with a ringing solo. "That's just Funkadelic's attitude," snickers Clinton, when told that the Funkadelic set boasts little or no structured pattern. "Sometimes I don't know what song the cats are gonna break into until they've done it. This way it's all free, fresh and new. On this tour, the cats finally get to just play. Doing the Parliament shows are so constructed so it's good to have a little live action sometimes, just everybody being loose. It ain't nothin' but a party."

Finally, George is reminded of another appointment he has to take care of before tonight's gig. But before exiting, he notices his visitor's garb. "Man, you better get yourself some of the green," he says, referring to the green military khakis the band wears onstage, symbolizing One Nation. "This thang is gonna conquer the earth and take over the moon. You part of the Nation — you'd better look the part."