

Rodney "Skeet" Curtis

FUNK WAR VET

BY MIKAEL JANSSON

"I used to say I'm a veteran of the Funk Wars," chuckles Rodney "Skeet" Curtis. After serving in the Parliament/Funkadelic army for two decades, Curtis is now enrolled in Maceo Parker's funk combat unit and appears on the saxman's latest CD, *Dial M-A-C-E-O* [What Are Records]. The two go a long way back: Maceo led P-Funk's Horny Horns section back in the '70s. The 44-year-old Baltimore bassist has played with Parker for the last two years—and that's a tough job, since a typical Maceo show runs full-throttle for some four hours.



As a kid, Curtis got turned on to guitar after seeing a movie about country legend Hank Williams. But big-handed even as a youngster, Skeet found he was better suited for the bass. Early influences included "the ones on everybody's list: James Jamerson, Stanley Clarke—but more than anyone, Larry Graham." He spent his teens with various local bands, including one with drummer Dennis Chambers. In 1977, when P-Funk mastermind George Clinton needed a bass player for a side project, Curtis got recommended by a fellow Baltimorean, Parliament singer Gary "Mudbone" Cooper. Clinton liked Skeet's playing so much he made him a regular P-Funkster, along with Bootsy Collins, Billy "Bass" Nelson, and others. (Clinton often uses three, four, or more bass players.) Skeet is featured on many albums by different P-Funk congregations, including the Funkadelic classic *One Nation Under a Groove* [Warner Bros.].

Curtis was an obvious choice when Maceo needed a bassist for his solo work. That

meant going from P-Funk's stadium extravaganzas—with their outlandish costumes and props—to playing more intimate venues in a three-piece suit. "Well, it's different and it's not. In many ways it's the same kind of music. Maceo's show has more of a structure, although you have to pay attention to all of his cues: One step back means one thing, a right hand out means another, a nod back means something else. My first shows with Maceo, I was totally lost!" Skeet has also done some writing and production on the side, as well as sessions for Dr. Dre, among others. But Maceo's busy touring schedule leaves him little time. "When you get home from an eight-week Maceo tour, the last thing you want to do for the next couple of weeks is play music!"

Despite being a hard-driving funkster, the self-taught Skeet has a very light touch, his fingers appearing to barely move. "That's just the way I play, I guess. I did a gig recently with keyboardist Russ Ferrante, and he looked at me and said, 'They don't teach that kind of playing in schools!' I never practice. Playing shows with Maceo is enough for me."

selected discography

With Parliament: (on Casablanca) *Rombipulation*; *Glory Hallastoopid*; *Motor Booty Affair*; *Greatest Hits 1972–1993*, AEM. **With Funkadelic:** (all on Warner Bros.) *Electric Spanking of War Babies*; *Uncle Jam Wants You*; *One Nation Under a Groove*. **With Brides Of Funkenstein:** (both on Atlantic) *Never Buy Texas from a Cowboy*; *Funk or Walk*. **With the P-Funk All-Stars:** *Live at the Beverly Theater*; *Westbound*; *The Awesome Power of a Fully-Operational Mothership*, Sony 550. **With George Clinton:** (both on Capitol) *Some of My Best Jokes Are Friends*; *Computer Games*. **With Bernie Worrell:** *All the Woo in the World*, Arista. **With Fred Wesley & the Horny Horns:** *Say Blow by Blow Backwards*, Sequel.

Skeet's main stage bass is a Lakland Deluxe 5-string with D'Addario Slowounds. He also has a Yamaha Patitucci Signature 6 and a fretless Yamaha TRB 5, the latter with D'Addario halfrounds, except for a flatwound *B*. He also has a J-style Moon 5-string, a gift from Dennis Chambers. The drummer presented it to him at a time when Skeet was fed up with playing and considered quitting permanently. "Ain't it good to have friends like that? Once I got that bass, I had to figure out how to use a fifth string, which set me back on track again." Maryland luthier Kevin Brubaker is building Skeet a 22-fret NBS-2 with Bartolinis and "neck-through/bolt-on" construction—the bolt-on neck slots deep into the body.

On the road, Curtis relies on rented amps. "All I need is a good monitor; the onstage amp is for the rest of the band. Regular bass amps sound too muddy for me. I want to hear the full spectrum." Accordingly, Skeet always records direct.

What, then, is the funkmaster's definition of funk? "To me it's going for it and going aggressively, although I don't look aggressive," he laughs. "It's about taking charge. It can be one note in the right spot, or a lot of notes if that's called for—as long as you go for it with all you got."