

Tim Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives

"We were James Brown, the Temptations and the Stooges on acid," says the master of funk

TO MOST PEOPLE, funk is a style of music, the sassy, electric Seventies stepchild of classic R&B. To George Clinton, it is "anything



it need to be to save your *life*." "You can get so frustrated in life that you just want to jump out the window," he declares with a messianic gleam in his eye.

"Funk tells you, 'Go ahead, man, but nobody gonna pay you any attention if you do.' It's a way of getting out of that bind you get in, mentally, physi-

cally. ¶ "It's loose – it ain't that fuckin' serious," he continues, running a hand through his trademark coiffure – shoulder-length braids laced with long strands of Day-Glo thread. "To me, funk is 'Okay, let's start jammin',' and people just follow." ¶ He should know. Clinton has been promoting "party" politics onstage and on record for more than two decades with the expanded family of

Photograph by Frank Ockenfels 3

BY DAVID FRICKE



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singers, musicians and associated celebrities that originally composed his two main groups, Parliament and Funkadelic, and that now operates simply as the P-Funk All-Stars. During the Seventies, Clinton transformed black popular music with a propulsive, flamboyant mélange of locomotive polyrhythms, screaming Hendrixian guitars, sharp R&B vocal harmonies, acid-damaged rapping and jazzy brass that married the anarchic spirit of psychedelic rock with the good-foot properties of James Brown's down-home soul. (To fortify

the funk, Clinton hired a number of former J.B. sidemen, including Fred Wesley, Maceo Parker and William "Bootsy" Collins, who went on to solo fame.) Over that already explosive mix, Clinton preached his singular gospel of mind expansion and sexual liberation, using a potent mix of ghetto realism, ribald wit and P-Funk slang. For visual sizzle, he took the glitter-rock look totally over the top, culminating in the 1976-77 *Mothership Connection* tour, which featured Clinton descending from an enormous spaceship.

The result was a long series of musically visionary and commercially successful albums by both groups — among them, Parliament's *Up for the Down Stroke* (1974), *Mothership Connection* (1976) and *Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (1978) and Funkadelic's *Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow* (1970), *Maggot Brain* (1971) and *One Nation Under a Groove* (1978). Today, the entire P-Funk catalog is being sampled silly by young rap stars like De la Soul, Digital Underground, Jungle Brothers and Public Enemy, while the black-rock movement spearheaded by Living Colour and Fishbone is taking Clinton's original electric R&B concept to a new futurist plane.

Born in North Carolina, the teenage Clinton formed the original doo-wop version of the Parliaments in the mid-Fifties in Plainfield, New Jersey, where he ran his own barbershop. During the mid-Sixties, Clinton landed a staff writing gig at Motown Records, where, he admits, he picked up a lot of his tricks. "I learned how to write with clichés, puns and hooks," he says. "So when I got Parliament-Funkadelic, I just went stupid with it. Instead of one or two hooks, we'd have ten hooks in the same

" 'Sgt. Pepper,' 'Tommy,' Sly Stone, Bowie — that's where we were coming from.' "

song. And puns that were so stupid that you could take 'em three or four different ways."

The Parliaments finally went Top Twenty in 1967 with the gritty soul classic "(I Wanna) Testify." When Clinton became embroiled in a court battle over rights to the Parliaments' name, he simply realigned the group, bringing the backing band up front and calling it Funkadelic. In 1970 he won the legal battle and started recording Parliament (he dropped the *s*) and Funkadelic, beginning a decade of extraordinary productivity that included numerous splinter groups and offshoot productions signed to a multitude of record labels. Financial and legal complications forced him to put P-Funk on ice for a few years, but he returned to the charts in 1983 with the hit single "Atomic Dog."

Being a crucial influence on rap and pop music in 1990 doesn't take up all of Clinton's time. Now fifty, he's working on a new solo album for Prince's label Paisley Park (he released *The Cinderella Theory* last year), and he is featured in *Graffiti Bridge*. He recently produced an album by the First Family of Funk — essentially the P-Funk All-Stars fronted by Clinton's longtime singer-guitarist Gary Shider. There is also a feature film in the works based on the Parliament albums *Mothership Connection* and *Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*.

Clinton also keeps touring, doing marathon four-hour shows with P-Funk for his still-growing rainbow coalition of fans. "It's like a religion," he says proudly. "At the same time, though, I'm sayin' it ain't nothin' but a party."

How do you feel about the resurgence of interest in and rampant sampling of the old Parliament-Funkadelic records?

I love it. In time, everything comes back around, and I was getting ready to fight nostalgia, make sure that people weren't coming from that point of view. And I didn't even have to fight it because with sampling, it

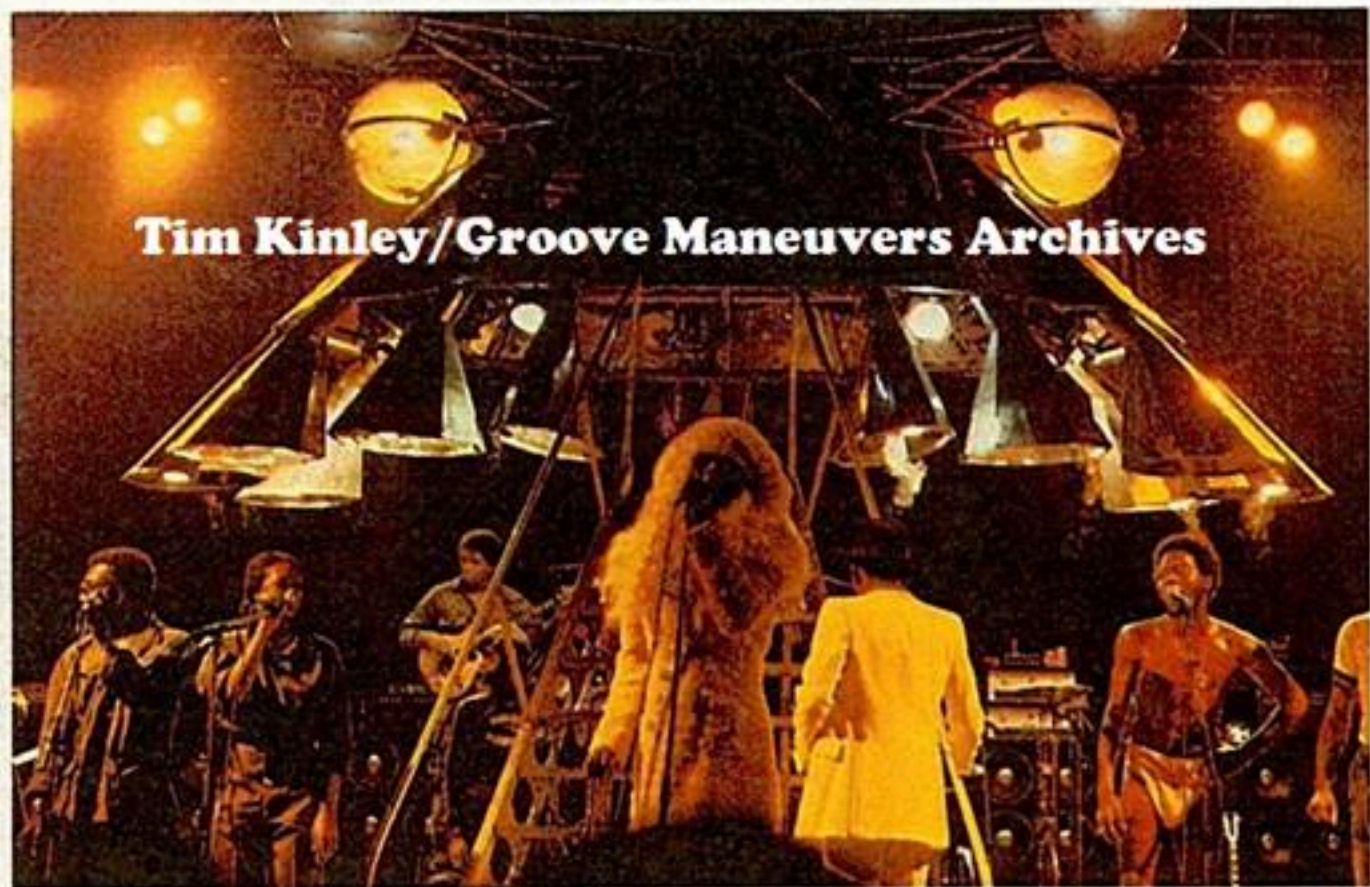
songs sound like they were made today for today. We were talking about heroin and Vietnam. Today you could just substitute cocaine and South America.

According to P-Funk legend, your idea for a fusion of modern R&B, psychedelic rap and freakout ritual was the result of a gig the Parliaments played with Vanilla Fudge in 1967.

That was one of the first gigs we did when we went out on the road with "Testify." It was a show at a college in upstate New York. We did three nights with Vanilla Fudge and the Box Tops, and we had to use the Vanilla Fudge's equipment, because we didn't have any. And goddamn! That shit was so bad. It was extremely loud. So I went out and bought Jimi Hendrix's *Are You Experienced?*, Cream's album, a Richie Havens record and Sly's *Whole New Thing*. I gave them to Eddie [Hazel, guitarist] and Billy [Nelson, bassist] in the band. They were just fifteen, sixteen at the time. And the second night we used the Vanilla Fudge's equipment, we knew what to do with that motherfucker.

Was Hendrix a big influence on Funkadelic?

He was it. He took noise to church. With that



P-FUNK'S 1976-77 'MOTHERSHIP CONNECTION' TOUR WAS HIGHLIGHTED BY CLINTON'S DESCENT FROM A SPACESHIP.

sounds like brand-new music. When De la Soul's record got real big, this lady we know, her son is ten years old, and she kept telling him that "Me Myself and I" was really P-Funk. And he said, "You think everything is James Brown and P-Funk!" So she went and got a copy

feedback, you could almost write the notes of that feeling down. His music, like the Beatles', was way past intellectual. That shit was in touch with something else. Once I saw what he was doing, I knew what to do with it on our thing.

There's a review of a show Funkadelic did at Ungaro's, in New York, in 1970, in which the group is described as "a black soul version of the Stooges." Was that an apt description?

It was like the Stooges! I had a head with a dick shaved onto it right down the middle with a star on one side and a moon on the other and bald all around that. I was crawling all around the floor sticking my tongue out. We were James Brown on acid, the Temptations on acid, the Stooges — that's how people described us. Because we didn't just get costumes and look like hippies. We really were silly! When we got into town for a gig, I'd get to the Holiday Inn, take the Holiday Inn towel, cut four holes in it, and that was my diaper. I'd take the sheet off the bed, use that. Or take the drapes down and use them. We got away for three years without having to pay for costumes.

But even in the early Seventies, it was one thing to be white

of "(Not Just) Knee Deep" [*Uncle Jam Wants You*, 1979], and since De la Soul used so much of it on the track, he heard it and fell in love with it. The lady says she can't keep the kid out of her records now. And now you got M.C. Hammer using "Turn This Mutha Out!" ["P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)," *Mothership Connection*]. Kids come up to me and say, "Man, he's ripping you off. They payin' you for this? That 'Humpty Dance,' ain't that yours?" Yeah, it is [laughs].

The remarkable thing about the P-Funk revival is that the young black rappers have picked up on the continuing relevance of the lyrics of those records, not just the musical grooves.

I like Public Enemy especially because they're using the philosophy. Like, *America Eats Its Young* [Funkadelic, 1972] sounds just like what they're saying today. Those

and crazy onstage, like Iggy Pop or Alice Cooper. It was quite another to be black and crazy. You must have seemed pretty scary to some audiences.

We were ten crazy niggers. With Jimi Hendrix, it was cool because it was him and two white boys. People don't go for ten niggers doin' that shit — pullin' off your clothes and runnin' around. But we had a hard-core following. The pimps used to tell us, "The whores won't work when you come to town." The slogan was, "Pimps, whores and hippies." That was the audience we'd get.

On early Funkadelic classics, like "Mommy, What's a Funkadelic?" and "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow," you created the trademark P-Funk style of long, spacey jams topped with bluesy, socio-cosmological rapping. Were those tracks first developed onstage?

That was what the whole stage show was about, the chants and all. In fact, most of the stuff I said on those records I said onstage first.

But there was actually a strong social- and political-activist slant to P-Funk's peace-love-and-acid shtick.

I'd hung around Boston and Harvard for a long time, got into debates with people about B.F. Skinner and Timothy Leary. The shit was really political. It wasn't just being free and love and peace. The Vietnam War was really fucking things up. And the dope thing — I was from a place where everybody was a junkie. "Maggot Brain" and things like that were all about "How you gonna straighten yourself out when the things you're using, the drugs, your brain, are all fucked up?"

concepts. He was never the same two times out. There was the Beatles with their concept *Sgt. Pepper*, the Who with *Tommy*, David Bowie and Sly. That's where we were coming from. By the time I got the name Parliament back, I knew the psychedelic thing was all but gone. So I went with glitter. When it came to *Motherhip Connection*, I knew I had a hit record ready to go. So I bought the spaceship for the stage show, using all the record royalties to pay for it. And when we went glitter with Parliament, it was all structured. No matter how crazy it looked, it was really thought-out.

What did you think of your main competitors at the time,

"Public Enemy are like Dylan. What he did for rock & roll, they're doing for rap."

the other black superstar bands, like *Earth, Wind and Fire* and the *Ohio Players*?

The Ohio Players, I'd known them for a long time, back when we started Funkadelic. They were one of the hottest club bands around. But to me, all of them, when they got pop, they were just doing watered-down versions of Sly.

During the mid-Seventies height of Parliament-Funkadelic, you released as many as three albums a year between the two groups, not to mention splinter projects like *Bootsy's Rubber Band*, the *Brides of Funkenstein* and the *Horny Horns*. How did you manage to cut so many records so fast?

We would just go into the studio and cut. I would be in one studio and to keep people out of my hair, I would tell 'em to go up to another studio and make something,

It's irritating. I loved Donna Summer's records. But too much of it . . . The slogan behind "(Not Just) Knee Deep" was, "Let's rescue dance music from the blahs."

Could you hear any P-Funk influence in the early rap hits by the Sugarhill Gang, Kurtis Blow or Grandmaster Flash?

Sequence, that girl group on the Sugarhill label, they used "Tear the Roof off the Sucker" [from *Motherhip Connection*]. Right from the giddyap, they were using my records. Early on, I knew rap was gonna stay. Because so many people got so irritable about it. It reminded me of '55, when rock & roll first came along. "Wop-bomp-a-lu-bomp" — what the hell's he saying? Gets on my

nerves." Public Enemy gave rap class. They, to me, are like Bob Dylan. What he did for rock & roll, they're doing for rap. And Eric B. and Rakim are like Jimi Hendrix, as far as technique.

What about Prince? Can you spot your influence on him?

He's the cleverest, man. Even though there is an essence of what we do in his thing, he can do that with any music that's out. With "Raspberry Beret" and that whole album [*Around the World in a Day*], he did the same thing with the Beatles that he's done with us. He can sound a lot like us, but he's got a whole lot of other shit going.

What does he actually take from P-Funk?

Just the nerve, mainly. You can't pinpoint a lick or two. He doesn't copy that close. He's too good for that. His version of what we do is more like the nerve and his style of doing business.

How about Michael Jackson?

He's the baddest motherfuckin' performer there is. I wish he would let somebody like a Prince produce him. Anybody else would end up just producing him the same way. Nobody would take him out.

If you were going to produce a Michael Jackson album, what would you do?

I would do him literally James Brown. Because he can do that unlike anybody else. I knew him when he was eight, nine years old, when he was singing our song "Testify." I saw him do stuff like "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag" and "I Got You." I would just get Fred [Wesley], Bootsy and all them, just do a James Brown record with him. Because he's got that world audience and somebody has got to make him give them a fresh version of his shit, like it's supposed to be done.

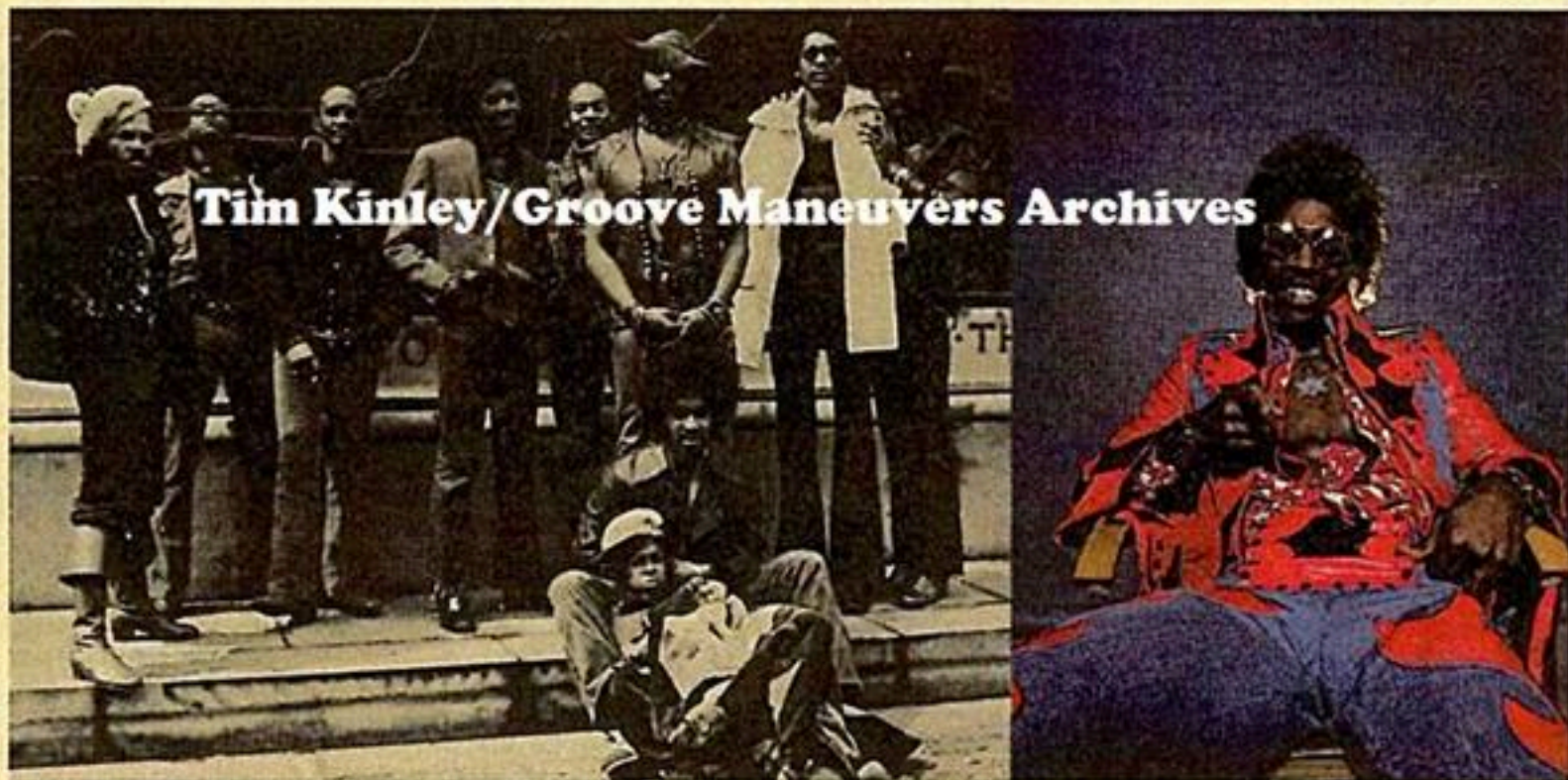
How do you feel about the current state of black mainstream pop, particularly the rise of slick crossover crooners

like Freddie Jackson and Peabo Bryson?

It's watered down. There's nothing fresh about that. They're just trying to redo the old soul stuff. But that's okay, because it just leaves more room for the real funk when it comes along.

What effect do you think the sound and ideology of P-Funk will have on black popular music during the Nineties, especially with AIDS, crack and the homeless problem devastating black communities?

Our obligation is to survive, to show that it's possible to survive no matter what the fuck is going on. Because if you give up, if you just go ahead and keep shootin' dope knowing that the needle could have AIDS, it's too late to think. You're already past the ability to make a decision if you've just given up. Hopefully, our survival will inspire people so that they can make these decisions, to want to live and contribute.



PARLIAMENT-FUNKADELIC IN THE MID-SEVENTIES; BASSIST AND SONGWRITER BOOTSY COLLINS, THE LEADER OF BOOTSY'S RUBBER BAND

When you reactivated Parliament in 1974 with the album *Up for the Down Stroke*, how was it going to be different from Funkadelic?

No psychedelic guitars for Parliament and no horns on Funkadelic. We broke those rules a couple of times, but for the most part, that was the main difference. Funkadelic was the rock & roll band, with guitars dominating, the crazy stream-of-consciousness lyrics. Parliament was going to be as close to structure as we could get. I later used a lot of Funkadelic theory to do Parliament, but it was more structured. There were melodies, real songs, a straightforward message.

Parliament also took David Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* look to new extremes with the wild spangled suits, huge stacked-heel boots and the spaceship you used on the *'Motherhip Connection'* tour.

David Bowie was one of my favorites. He always had

We had so many people wanting to do things that we had to buy a studio just to keep 'em cutting. Every time I sent people somewhere else to work, they'd come back with two or three tracks that I could use. And it helped keep all those important people together. And they got a payday; they got a session check or put out an album themselves. The one talent I had was the ability to keep people together. I knew how to keep personalities in place, how to use them. That is still the most important thing I do in P-Funk. I can get anything out of anybody. And I'm talking about some of the craziest motherfuckers in the world that nobody else wants to deal with.

How did you feel about disco, which started peaking commercially just as P-Funk went into its Eighties chart slide?

To me, disco was like fucking with one stroke. You could phone that shit in. Disco itself was funk. But all they did was take one funk beat and sanitize it to no end.