

The Pop Life

Robert Palmer
in Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives



Richard E. Aaron

Bootsy" William Collins, who performs tomorrow night at the Felt Forum
"I get people at our concerts from six years old on up. Our music's simple"

Bootsy' grows into role as prince of funk.

BOOTSY? William Collins often sticks a question mark after his nickname, as in the title of his latest album, "Bootsy? Player of the Year" (Warner Brothers). And why not? Bootsy, who also calls himself Bootzilla, Casper (the friendly ghost) and the Player, dares

his fans to take him seriously. Plenty of them do. His shows at the Felt Forum tomorrow night will be packed with Bootsy fans, and his recent album is already gold, with sales in excess of 500,000 units.

Bootsy and his Rubber Band probably wouldn't relish the title, but in a sense they are the Kiss of black pop. Their records are designed to appeal to youngsters, with Bootsy talking baby talk, bragging about himself and delivering long stream-of-consciousness routines of no great moment, often surrounded by a babble of party voices. In "Bootzilla," his current single, Bootsy describes himself as a monster baby doll, and another tune on the album borrows a phrase, "May the Force Be With You," from the most popular kiddie movie of recent years.

But underneath the cuteness, Bootsy's Rubber Band boasts what may be the definitive funk rhythm section of this decade. The James Brown band of

1968-72—the band that shaped contemporary funk idiom, a brand of black pop that involves razor-sharp cross-rhythms and uses bass, guitar, keyboards and horns as percussive instruments—was powered by Bootsy Collins on bass; Phelps Collins, brother, on guitar, and Frankie Waddy on drums. Six months after they left Mr. Brown's band, Mr. Waddy and Mr. Collins brothers joined the Parliament-Funkadelic troupe led by George Clinton. They still work with Mr. Clinton on recordings, but now Bootsy seems to be outstripping Parliament-Funkadelic in terms of popularity and touring. The Rubber Band tours only with him.

Speaking on the telephone from Memphis, where he was in the early stages of his present tour, Mr. Collins was more like a professional musician than a monster baby doll. He is especially interested in talking about the electric bass, as well he might be, since he has helped establish it as the most important instrument in the funk rhythm section. These days it often seems that the bass is a lead instrument, at least in funk and reggae.

"The real monster bass player of this era was Larry Graham," Mr. Collins said. Mr. Graham was the bassist for Sly and the Family Stone before starting his own group, Graham Central Station. "Before him it was James Jamerson of Motown. I also really like Stanley Clarke, who put the bass in another phase of music." Mr. Collins is a jazz bassist who was most recently with Return to Forever, solos on the instrument with a speed and fluency that would be beyond most professional guitarists. Mr. Collins appreciates his work but says he has no desire to move in a jazzier direction: "Sly's got that thing pretty well covered."

Asked about his own music, Mr. Collins seems to be equal parts Sly, Jimi Hendrix, James Brown, and George Clinton. Mr. Collins says "it's still basically funk, but with more emphasis on melody and more melody in addition to that basic rhythm. We like melody even if it's just nursery rhymes on top of the funk." Mr. Collins uses several nursery rhymes on his latest album, a trick that Sly and the Family Stone put to good use during the 1960s. "They're in the back of people's minds," he says, "so when people hear it they relate to it and accept it. I get people at our concerts from six years old on up, and I like it. Our music's simple. I guess. A lot of things are happening if you really listen to it, but it's still basically simple." Perhaps in terms of melody, harmony and sentiment it's simple, but rhythmically Mr. Collins's music is impressively complex.