

Tim Kinley/Groove Maneuvers Archives

George Clinton Funkin' Into The New Millennium

by B. Love

"One Nation Under A Groove/Genesis" down just for the funk of it." —George Clinton
Perhaps better than any lengthy description I could come up with, these two lines from Parliament-Funkadelic's classic hit, "One Nation Under A Groove," perfectly sum up the nature of the George Clinton and P-Funk's lasting appeal. More than 30 years after the original formation of Parliament, which strangely enough began as a New Jersey-based doo-wop group, Clinton and his colorfully costumed, 28-member P-Funk All-Stars are still constantly touring, bringing sellout audiences made up of fans of all ages, races, colors and creeds together to get down to the funky sounds and let their freak flags fly. The band was just finishing up their headlining gig on this summer's second annual House of Blues Smokin' Grooves Tour when we got that long-awaited call from the original Funk Daddy, George Clinton (AKA Dr. Funkenstein), who had beamed down from the Mothership just long enough to make a funky B. Love Connection.

I saw you here in Atlanta a few weeks ago at Smokin' Grooves. How's the tour working out for you so far?
It's kickin'! We're definitely having a good time, and we've got about a week and a half left to go.
You guys only get to play for an hour: are you really able to get into the groove in that short a time?
Yeah, it took us a minute, but we adjusted to it. It's kind of like in the '60s when we used to do the hops. We usually play for four or five hours, but what we do now is we just play the hits back to back to back to back to back; then after the hour, we rush to a club and jam with somebody.
(Laughs) You've got to get it out of your system, huh?
Yeah, that's what lets us get our act out. But it's good for the young kids, because we just hit 'em with the songs that you know pretty good. Everybody knows that we ain't got but an hour, and since we play a greatest hits set, we get a lot of our older fans in there. How many members do you have touring with you?
Every-oh! But we get a whole bunch of new fans every time we do these kinds of shows. The same thing happened with Lollapalooza and Fuji like politically incorrect 1994 film in which the band appeared. We're barely able to afford to do it, but I'd rather do it and pay for it out of my pocket and get the new fans than to not do it.
But why do you need so many members in the band? I know you've had some personal financial problems in the past (Clinton reportedly had to put P-Funk's legendary Mothership in hock and had his fans foreclosed on), couldn't you trim a few members and keep some of that money for yourself?
Yeah, but the thing is, right now, people pretty much know each one of us. We've even got some of the members of Bootsy's band here. The idea is that we're so close to getting all that was owed to the group back in the '70s from the samples and publishing and royalties that as long as people know that we're all still pretty close together, they're more sympathetic to our side of the story. They're not like, "Those old fools, they spent their money! They was drunk, they was high, they was crazy, they fought..." People don't have too much sympathy if that's the case, but now they can't say that because we're all pretty close. Some may leave for a week or two and come back, but everybody's real close at hand because now, for the first time, I'm pressing charges on our behalf. We can afford legal fees now.

You're going after the people who owe you the back royalties?
Mostly the publishing companies that forged our handwriting and altered documents. If you don't have the money, you can't fight, but now we're in pretty good shape and the public knows where it's at. Now that we're close together, we're sure that we'll get what's owed to us now, and even if we don't get it, we're doing good on our own anyway. I had to make it on my own before I started fighting for that old stuff. There's so much involved in this, it'd be the biggest story in the history of music for everybody to get the quarter of a million dollars that they're all due. It ain't like it ain't there, because this guy was collecting sample money like it was going out of style to the tune of 35 or 40 million dollars. So I keep everybody as close to me as I can. Shit, if I cut 10 people off the payroll, I could go

home with \$75,000 a week, but that's not the point. The point is that this is a big, historical thing, and it really won't peak until ALL of us get something. I ain't no goody-good motherfucker. I just think it'd be good business if everyone could score right now.

Well, as the sort of ringleader of the circus that is P-Funk, how do you keep it all together and organized?
Well, we actually can afford it now. We make more money now— with no hit records than we ever made before. We just bought a brand new spaceship—

Oh, really? I thought this was the Mothership.
No, that's a brand new one. We caught hell getting it on the road because somebody stole it, but we recovered it. We survived last year's 20th Anniversary Tour, we parked the spaceship for a minute because a lot of venues couldn't afford it, but now with Smokin' Grooves, we were able to bring the Ship out. That's one reason we took the gig, it's a very low amount of money for us, but we were able to show ourselves and the Mothership to some new people.

Yeah, I've seen you seven times over the last 10 years, but this was the first time I'd seen the Mothership.
Oh yeah?
Yeah, I've seen you every time you've come through Atlanta: Lollapalooza, the House of Blues show...
Oh, that was a beautiful show. The mayor was there, Evander Holyfield, even Chelsea Clinton! She came in there, she said, "We play your music in school!" (Laughs) We've got so many new fans now of every nationality and every age. We're actually doing pretty good.

How did it feel when you stepped out of the new Mothership onstage for the first time?
Well, we only had two times to rehearse with it because like I said, somebody stole it, but it really felt good. We had Bootsy [Collins, bassist] and Bernie [Worrell, keyboardist] there, even though people have tried to poison our relationship, and we were able to pull it all off for a good three months. We never stay upset with each other for long, but people do seem to come between us here and there. People go and come, but they miss playing with us, so most of 'em end up coming back for a month or two, get a little money, then go off to cut records some place else. Most of 'em now just say they want to take a leave of absence, which is much easier than getting upset and leaving.

You've been touring off and on now for over 30 years. How do you keep it fresh night after night?
I love what I'm doing, that's all it takes. It may sound like a cliché or something,

but all I got to do is think about the alternatives (chuckles). Ain't none! (Laughs) A job is a hard motherfucker to find, and we do what we do good. Plus, I never let myself think that we've made it because I'm into the pursuit of happiness. As long as I keep that in mind, I still feel like I've got somewhere to go. If you start thinking you've made it, you're gonna think that you're too good to do this, too good to do that, and all that shit will begin to hurt ya. I can still enjoy playing

at a gym with no monitors, and whenever there's a real bad problem, all I have to do is remember playing in a gym with no monitors and things don't seem so bad (laughs).
Do you ever miss the more stripped-down early days of Parliament, when things were more simple?
Yeah, we did that at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame when we got accepted. We sat back there with the Young Rascals, who used to live in the same projects as we did in New Jersey, and we were almost late to accept our award

because we were singing all these doo-wop songs that we used to sing when we were 17 years-old between gang fights. They were in one gang and we was in another, but whenever there was a talent show, we was all friends. So we sat back there, all of us in 50-year-old, laughing and talking about that shit while our wives and girlfriends were looking at us like, "Wow..." That's probably the most fun I had in a long time. There was a lot of silly fun going on.

How have your audiences changed over the years?
Now, everybody comes to the show at the same time (laughs). We get 'em from 7 or 8 years-old all the way up to 70. I'm in Good Burger. I did the soundtrack for "How To Be A Player." I was on Space Ghost last week. I try to organize all of that kind of stuff just a little bit at the time. I ain't trying to be no actor, but I try to keep my mug out there.

Outside of your live shows, I think that what people really connect with about P-Funk is all the classic songs. How do you feel when all the rappers started sampling those old grooves? Were you resentful?
Not at all, because if they hadn't done it, it would've been on the K-Tel packages on TV; come on, but they wouldn't have got nothing. When they sampled it, they made my statement about clones come true referring to his prediction that P-Funk would eventually inspire clones who would carry their message, which is forward into the 21st century.

You've been touring P-Funk samples that you thought were especially cool?
Well, I always thought that Public Enemy did great with theirs,

because any sample you use where you can't tell it's in there and you just get the flavor and the vibe of it, I think that's the coolest. But then on the other hand, somebody who can use the entire thing and still make it work, like Digital Underground did, that's cool too.

Were you ever paid for any of those samples?
Well, we were paid by Ice Cube and a couple of other ones. Digital Underground [who gave one of their albums the title, Sons of the B.E. and used P-Funk samples for nearly every song] paid us; we're real close to them, and I even did their last record with them. Most of the groups paid, but the record companies and the publishers didn't give it to us. Damn! I'd be one pissed off brother!

How do you stay in such good spirits?
Well, you can't kill 'em but once (laughs). And then you can't get your money! (Laughs) Ten million dollars ain't worth that! I'd rather just keep on doing what I'm doing. And I'll get it.

P-Funk's most popular songs—"Flashlight," "One Nation Under A Groove," "Maggot Brain"—are over 20 years old now. Do you ever worry that your newer songs don't get the same reception from your fans?
Nah, because they're beginning to sample them now. Our songs take a long time to turn popular. Songs like "Standing On the Verge," "Gomic Slop" and "Maggot Brain" never never hit when we got 'em out, but over the years you begin to appreciate the music. Bernie is a great musician, Gary [Shider] is a great singer—we've got a lot of great musicians in the band.

P-Funk tours endlessly, even when there's no new album to support, so how do you decide when it's time to record a new album?
Well, I'm making records all the time, it's just when a record label has accepted to take it for us (laughs). But now what we're doing is we're putting 'em out ourselves through the Internet. We got one out now called Dogg Dogg that's been out for almost a year, and that record is selling so much. That's the same thing France is doing now. He's selling so many records over the Internet and at his live shows that you don't have to sell but 10% of what you used to sell to get the same money. And since our records are not fly-by-night, they last a pretty good while.

With your event-like live shows, constant touring, the lack of radio play for new material, and sporadic album releases, is P-Funk the black Grateful Dead?
I'd definitely say that, because we have a good percentage of their fans following us around. That's what makes us play so long now—they'll stay for five or six hours, and we like to play like that. We'll play all the hits, then we like to just jam, and they appreciate that. They know all of our songs, and when we do medleys, they'll make up their own names for the medleys (laughs). That fucks me up!

Do you allow people to tape your shows?
Yeah, we let 'em tape it and film it, too. That's what kept the group alive—the trading of the bootleg tapes. Matter of fact, we took some of the good bootlegs and put 'em out ourselves. We found out the Grateful Dead did that, too. We might get a concession to sell blank tapes, rent 'em a tape recorder and sell 'em the tapes (laughs).

You're getting a little older now: how long do you think you can keep up your hectic touring schedule?
That's why we came up with the concept of cloning: there's a whole bunch of clones just waiting for me to move over so they can jump right in.

P-Funk's gonna keep going after you retire?
Hell yeah! The people are P-Funk. They've done a couple of tours without me there: the group was scared, but they just told 'em I wasn't there and to go ahead and funk, because the Mothership will land. Bootsy came out of the Mothership. Shit, he almost took my job! But I ain't planning on going nowhere.

We're approaching the new Millennium now. Do you guys have any spectacular plans?
We're gonna play with Prince, Pearl Jam and Leroy Kravitz, but we don't know where yet. We're already planning it, and everything's gonna be explosive on that night. Everything's gonna light up and people are gonna think it's the end of the world, but it'll be the beginning... ☺

