



One Nation Under a Groove (1971)

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Steve Tumble in the shadow of Funk



# One NATION Under A Dude

Famous for his classic P-Funk cover artwork, Pedro Bell is still freaky after all these years. Steve Tumble takes a moment to stand in his shadow.

In December of 1980, Pedro (rhymes with "speedo") Bell walked into a doctor's optical center looking for a pair of glasses. About four years later he found himself in a hospital bed, his eyes proved to be an incredible medical case that he never would have believed. "My blood pressure was 160 over 60—in layman's terms, I was past the point of no return." Diagnosed with acute hypertension, Pedro was in intensive care for two days and in recovery for four more. "I got diagnosed with possible brain damage, my kidneys are on yellow alert and my eyes never did recover. I'm a permanent outpatient. I was diagnosed legally blind in August '95," he explains.

Pedro Bell busted into public consciousness in 1973 as the artist who visualized the ass-shaking, mind-expanding sounds of George Clinton and P-Funk. A Chicago-bred skeletism mixed with psychedelic color, strong narrative and a pen and ink illustrative sense turned P-Funk album covers into an adventure for the mind. "I dropped P-Funk a hand-designed envelope duplicating a dollar bill with the words 'FUNK' on the back and 'P-FUNK' on the front," he says.

remembers Bell. P-Funk manager Rob Goddard dug the mail and enlisted Bell to create the cover art for Cosmic Slop. Working with complete creative freedom and almost no art direction, Bell freestyled the cover, with Clinton seeing the final product on the delivered album. "Back in those days George knew nothing about UFOs and stuff. Back then, in the early '70s, all that space thing came from me."

Bell continued to create for P-Funk, producing mind-bending covers for Standing on the Verge of Getting It On, Tales of Kidd Funkadelic, Let's Take It to the Stage, Hardcore Jollies, R&B Skeletons in the Closet, and more. His personal favorite, however, is *The Electric Spanking*. "I made a mess of money on that one," emphasizes Bell. The year was 1981 and the recording industry was awash in censorship, second guessing, and Tipper Gore-fueled paranoia. "They paid me to censor the cover," he explains. After much ballyhoo, a long, all-expense paid trip to LA and numerous revisions, the original artwork was moved to the center of the album gatefold and the outside art was toned down to avoid a censorship spectacle. In 1991, both *Cosmic Slop* and *Hardcore Jollies* were voted into Rolling Stone's Top 100 Album Covers of All Time.

Bell gives credit to his father, "a frustrated artist," and his piano playing mother for opening his mind to art. Further influence came from Ed "Big Daddy" Roth and specifically, the Robert Williams-designed ads in *Hot Rod Magazine*. "Hellified ads and monster t-shirts," raves Bell. "Big Daddy's cars were beyond!"

Of course, the artist still draws a heaping plateful of his inspiration from "The Funk," which Bell explains as "the perfect relationship of music and mind."

Despite his diminished sight, today Bell is busier than ever. Working with his two man crew of Seltu Hayden and Tym Stevens, Bell produces art for his funkified zine, *Zepp*, various magazines, and the recording industry. He's also in the process of writing six books, two screenplays, creating a video game and raising his son Derek, illuminatingly nicknamed Irate, Jr. "Ain't no pity in checkerboard city," answers Bell when asked about the dark irony of his condition. His work continues to entertain, freak, educate, illuminate and open the minds of viewers three decades after he first grabbed funk fans by the optic nerves. By his own accord, Bell still has plenty of work to do. "I ain't dead yet," he says with a triumphant chuckle. ■

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Steve Tumble is a Chicago-based writer in dire need of