

# **Funk Is Its Own Reward: The Moving Power of Parliament Funkadelic**

**An Honors Thesis by Vladimir Gutkovich**

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## **Introduction: Make My Funk the P-Funk!**

*“While most critics want to put the holy trinity [Beatles, Stones, Zeppelin] on a pedestal, with the world domination of hip-hop culture and the large role that P-Funk has played in the sound of hip-hop music, I dare say that P-Funk’s impact can be felt much more strongly thirty years later than of those three bands. When I asked Dr. Dre, the quintessential post-modern producer who has changed the course of pop music three times in two decades, who he listened to growing up and was his biggest influence, he said P-Funk. Not the Beatles.” – Andre Torres, Editor in Chief, Wax Poetics magazine, (Issue #18 2006, p.12)*

*“From the hard-core “maggots,” “clones,” and “funkateers” to the typical fan, P-Funk articulated a new worldview, often more relevant than the religious practices of their relatives in the detached decade of the 1970’s. Those who chose to pay attention found that one could get deeper and deeper into P-Funk and never reach the bottom.” – Rickey Vincent, author, “Funk: The MUSIC, The PEOPLE, and the RHYTHM of THE ONE” (St. Martin’s Griffin 1996, p.253)*

One of the most influential musical collectives of the twentieth century goes by many names: Parliament Funkadelic, the Funk Mob, Uncle Jam’s Army, Parliafunkadelicament Thang, P-Funk, simply “the P,” or most recently, the P-Funk All-Stars.<sup>1</sup> Whatever one calls them, the group is best described as a *phenomenon* in it’s own right: a discography spanning four decades and well over two hundred worldwide releases (several of which sold over a million copies); scores of musicians, vocalists, artists, and other contributors; dozens of affiliated offshoot groups; numerous feature film and television appearances as well as a video-game cameo –

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<sup>1</sup> The name “P-Funk” can be understood as at least three abbreviations: for Parliament Funkadelic; for “Pure Funk;” or for “Plainfield Funk,” referring to the birthplace of the collective, Plainfield, New Jersey.

these are among the accomplishments of P-Funk.<sup>2</sup> When one adds the creation of an original cosmology/philosophy – a surrealistic, prescriptive and ultimately uplifting hodge-podge of wisdoms and ideas from the world over, adapted to American cultural realities –and the fact that P-Funk is widely credited as *the* key predecessor of hip-hop music, the magnitude of the Funk Mob’s significance begins to be understood.

The Parliament Funkadelic sound was relentlessly danceable, tight, funky, and hip to the prevailing aesthetics (musical and cultural) of the era. At the height of their popularity, the collective also happened to contain some of the most legendary funk musicians of all time: Fred Wesley (trombone), Maceo Parker (tenor saxophone), Bernie Worrell (keyboards), and Bootsy Collins (bass) are all, even today, widely considered unparalleled masters within the funk idiom. Working in tandem with these masters were talented vocalists steeped in the soul and gospel traditions; psychedelia-infused guitarists and rhythm sections; and George Clinton, a truly visionary producer and showman. The music these people created – a fusion of the African-American traditions of rock, R&B, jazz, gospel and blues with European classical and operatic concepts – was presented at shows more closely resembling massive spiritual congregations than mere music concerts.

This paper will explore the P-Funk phenomenon from a number of relevant angles. The analysis will focus on Parliament Funkadelic’s music, political/philosophical vision, and performance – all culturally contextualized – particularly in the period between 1967 and 1980: that is, roughly from the beginning of the collective’s recording career through the height of their popularity. An

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/motherpage> (3/10/07)

accompanying theme will be the power of P-Funk's music, and especially of their live show, to induce *ecstatic trance* in the audience – this matter will be discussed primarily by way of extended footnotes.<sup>3</sup>

The sources drawn upon in writing this text vary greatly. Unfortunately, there has been astonishingly little written work – especially in academia – devoted to Parliament Funkadelic, and only slightly more on the funk music idiom in general. Therefore, the analysis will be primarily based on the music itself, album liner notes, rare footage of P-Funk performing live in the late 1970's, articles written by P-Funk aficionados and admirers of varying scholarly standing, and first-hand reflections by band members as well as those who have seen the Funk Mob in concert. The corollary discussion concerning the achievement of trance states draws from several academic sources, most notably Judith Becker's "Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion and Trancing," (Indiana University Press, 2004) which represents a fresh synthesis of previous thought on the topic.

The subsequent material will be organized into chapters, sections, and subsections, respectively. The first chapter, "The Birth and Rise of the P-Funk Empire: A Discography Synopsis," will serve as an introduction to Parliament Funkadelic, and will include biographical information alongside a chronological presentation of the first two decades of the collective's growth – that is, discography, major turning points (musical and otherwise), and addition of new members to the

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<sup>3</sup> Generally, much important and moreover *interesting* material will be found in footnotes throughout the paper, and so I encourage the reader to pay as much attention to them as to the main body of text. Often, information will be relegated to footnotes not because it is of secondary significance, but because the flow and readability of the main text would otherwise be adversely affected.

group. Many points concerning P-Funk's music, influences, philosophy/cosmology, and live shows will be introduced here, to be further explored later in the paper.

The second chapter, "Everything Is On The One: The Music of the Funk Mob," will focus on the *music* of Parliament Funkadelic, and will be divided into four sections. The first, "Musical Beginnings," will discuss the development of the P-Funk sound, including influences and the contributions of various band members. The second section, "Everything is on the ONE!" will concentrate on the importance of "the One," in its musical sense, to the music of P-Funk. This section will also feature a brief discussion on the evolution of funk music in an African-American musical tradition context, as well as notes about James Brown's influence on P-Funk. The third section, "Controlled Chaos," will introduce the importance of improvisation and what can be described as "tight fluidity" for the music of the Funk Mob, while the fourth and final section, "Funk as a Way of Life," will present the idea of non-dichotomy between band members' musical and "non-musical" (i.e. not band-related) lives.

The third chapter, titled "Funkentelechy: The P-Funk Vision," is devoted to the meaning behind Parliament Funkadelic's music. By analyzing lyrics, chants, album illustrations, liner notes, and performances, among other things, the complex original cosmology/philosophy of the Funk Mob will be revealed. The first section, "Funk Used To Be a Bad Word," will constitute a discussion on the origins and meanings, and the significance therein, of the word "funk" itself. The second section, "The Politics of P-Funk," will concern itself with the political context and voice of P-Funk's music, and will be further subdivided into three subsections: i. "P-Funk Vs.

American Wrongs” will focus on Parliament Funkadelic’s relationship with American policy, foreign and domestic, during the 70’s; ii. “P-Funk and Black America” will discuss the group’s cosmic take on race relations in America, and the powerful impact P-Funk had on Black audiences; iii. “One Nation Under a Groove” will present P-Funk’s general political prescription, as well as discuss the group’s lyrics’ relationship with women and the mother figure.

The third and final section of chapter three, “Transcendentalism: The Church of Funk,” will analyze the unique, transcendental cosmology, mythology and philosophy of P-Funk. The first subsection, i. “The Dogma of P-Funk,” will present the cast of characters in Parliament Funkadelic’s invented universe, as well as introduce the afro-centric cosmology that contains them. The second subsection, ii. “Funk Is Its Own Reward: The Prescriptive Philosophy of P-Funk,” will discuss one of the most compelling aspects of the Funk Mob’s art: their coded, profound and ever-present philosophy, and the associated prescription for individual, communal, and universal betterment.

Chapter IV, “Parliament Funkadelic Live: No Ordinary Funk Show,” will focus on P-Funk’s live act – as crucial a component of their success and far-reaching influence as any other – and be divided into four sections. The first, “Learning to Play *LIVE*,” will discuss how the collective discovered and developed their style of presentation. The second section, “Larger Than Life: Costumes, Characters and Charisma,” will consider the importance of costumes, on-stage personas, and wild antics for P-Funk’s show. The third section, “Visualizing the Myth: Props at P-Funk Shows,” will discuss P-Funk’s use of props and pyrotechnics to reinforce both the

power of the music *and* of the ideas within it at performances. The fourth and final section, “P-Funk and Dancing: Salvation By Way of (Communal) Booty-Shaking,” will focus on the importance of dance and especially communal dance, or “rhythmic entrainment,” to the achievement of Funkentelechy – that is, the realization of P-Funk’s ideals of transcendence and universalism – at a live Parliament Funkadelic show.

The fifth chapter, “‘Mothership Connection’ Live,” will present a verbal, temporally constructed in-depth analysis of a live performance of the Parliament song, “Mothership Connection” (*Mothership Connection*, Casablanca 1976).<sup>4</sup> The analysis will concern itself with the musical development of the song, as well as non-musical – i.e. theatrical or verbal – interactions between the band and their audience, and will serve to reiterate key points made throughout the paper.

The concluding chapter is aptly titled “Ain’t No Party Like a P-Funk Party, ‘Cause a P-Funk Party Don’t Stop!” This final chapter will briefly discuss P-Funk’s career from the 80’s onward – George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars still record and tour – as well as the influence Parliament Funkadelic has exerted on popular music, and especially hip-hop, in America. It will also serve to summarize the main assertions of the paper, and suggest that the power of funk music, and particularly that of P-Funk’s musical-philosophical-theatrical art, lies in its ability to entrance the audience – to elevate individuals and communities out of an every-day, status quo consciousness. A partial discography of the Parliament Funkadelic collective will be found in “Appendix A,” while “Appendix B” will introduce the author’s thesis

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<sup>4</sup> The performance of “Mothership Connection” to be analyzed in Chapter V is found on rare live footage of P-Funk while on the “P-Funk Earth Tour” tour, in Houston (December, 1977).



compositions – seven original P-Funk influenced funk/hip-hop/soul songs performed at Wesleyan University – and accompanying scores.

The reader will find that the writing style in this paper fluctuates between a standard academic voice and a more colloquial, enthusiastic tone. There are two reasons for the use of “non-scholarly” language and/or syntax in the forthcoming pages. The first is the adoption of the subject’s linguistic schema: Parliament Funkadelic’s *language* – and the associated mannerisms and slang of their (and more generally funk music’s) socio-cultural constituency – is inseparable from P-Funk’s artistic product. Indeed, as we shall see later, their original, twisted, unmistakably Black American dialect was an integral part of the Funk Mob’s musical *and* social appeal. Therefore, the occasional use of colloquialisms derived from the funk music idiom – especially from the language of P-Funk – is necessary in an analytic paper such as this, which attempts to accurately convey the phenomenon of the subject matter.

The second reason for the scattered use of non-academic language in this paper is the same reason the author chose to write about P-Funk: I am an unapologetic “Funkateer.”<sup>5</sup> I remember walking into B.B. King’s on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York City, sometime in 2002. I arrived late, and the band was playing “Funkentelechy.” The harmonies and the horns bombarded me; it was on the “ONE”; the repetitive i-IV chord progression felt like an ancient, sublime wisdom. I was immediately exhilarated. As the show progressed, it all became clear: *this* was the truth! *This* was the crying and the laughter. *This* was salvation! “Free your mind and

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<sup>5</sup> “Funkateer” is a term used by P-Funk and fans to describe hard-core fans, and/or followers of the way of Funk as told by Uncle Jam’s Army. Other such signifying labels include: “Maggots” (derived from “Maggot Brain”), “Clones” (derived from “The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein), and “Funk Soldiers.”

your ass will follow,” chanted the ringleader, George Clinton, with all the sweat and stature of a messenger from a higher order. My recollections are imprecise, as this took place many years ago, and was but the first of several P-Funk shows. What I do know is this: I’d never danced so hard nor sang so loud – and, for the author, at the time a 17-year old Russian Jewish immigrant living in Queens, it was among the most profound, deeply religious experiences ever experienced.

Ever since, Parliament Funkadelic’s music has been supremely influential in the development of my musical taste, as well as my style of performance and composition – and the collective’s message has been equally important in the evolution of my world-view. Thus I, the author, could not uniformly write about P-Funk in a decidedly removed, scholarly tone, as it would feel unnatural for writer and reader both. Furthermore I believe that to accurately analyze and convey the essence of the Parliafunkadelicament Thang, one must, to some degree, approach the subject on *its* terms – an approach which necessarily includes an integration of P-Funk’s linguistic interface into the written text.

The following paper is far from a complete, all-encompassing analysis of Parliament Funkadelic’s contributions to the lives of those touched by the collective’s art. Nor does it come close to delineating the full range of P-Funk’s influence on American pop music and culture. These unavoidable shortcomings aside, the coming pages *do* present a comprehensive, focused discussion of the P-Funk phenomenon – one that synthesizes much of the existing material on the subject, and stands as both an homage and a broad, original analysis of one of the most important musical collectives of our times. “Make my Funk the P-Funk: I Wants to Get Funked Up! “

## **I. The Birth and Rise of the P-Funk Empire: A Discography Synopsis**

*“Funk ain’t never going anywhere, its always coming!” – George Clinton*

George Clinton, mastermind behind the Funk mob in its many incarnations, was born on July 22, 1940 in an outhouse in Kannapolis, North Carolina, but raised in Newark, New Jersey. In 1955/56, Clinton first called on classmates Grady Thomas, Calvin Simon, Clarence “Fuzzy” Haskins and Raymond Davis (all from Clinton Place Junior High School in Plainfield, NJ) to create The Parliaments – a doo-wop group. Doo-wop reigned supreme at this time, and the Parliaments’ sound was fashioned after groups like the Coasters, the Drifters, and the Flamingos. However, the influence of Clinton and his mates’ Black church background was already noticeably present.<sup>6</sup>

Over the next few years, the Parliaments recorded a few 45’s and proved their worth in the local “chitlin’ circuit,” as it was called, playing every gig they could get their hands on. A failed Motown audition in ’62 didn’t discourage the group, and they kept going at it. At this point, most of the Parliaments cut hair together in a Plainfield barber shop (The Black Soap Palace), and continued to make demos while Clinton, the businessman of the group from the start, routinely went to Detroit to shop the recordings.

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<sup>6</sup> Vincent, p. 258; Rogers (in *Wax Poetics*), p.39

In 1966, the Parliaments began recording for Revilot Records, and in the spring of '67 one of their songs, "(I Wanna) Testify," hit #3 on the R&B charts and #20 on the Pop Top Forty. A tour was planned – including a headlining slot at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, NYC. The group was lacking a backing band, and enlisted another Plainfield native (and barbershop employee), sixteen year-old Billy Nelson, to play rhythm guitar. Nelson soon switched to bass, and recruited Eddie Hazel (lead guitar), Ramon "Tiki" Fulwood (drums), and a bit later Tawl Ross (rhythm guitar) and the incomparable keyboard genius Bernie Worrell. Nelson named this new (and younger) backup band "Funkadelic." The musicians, influenced by peers such as Jimi Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, replaced the "aesthetic of Motown for that of a hippified psychedelic rock" (Rogers, 39). A major turning point occurred in 1967, was when the band borrowed Vanilla Fudge's huge amplifiers at a show, and discovered the heavy, in-your-face sound they were searching for.

In 1968, Calvin Simon (vocals) returned from Vietnam, and George Clinton formed the holding company Parliafunkadelicment Thang Inc., one of the first of a long career of business moves and countermoves that at times kept P-Funk going and at others threatened to destroy the collective. After legal disputes between the Parliaments, Revilot, and Motown arose, the Parliaments were prevented from finishing their first full-length album. 1968 was also the first time intra-group conflict, mostly with Clinton, led to band members quitting. In this case it was Fulwood, Nelson and Eddie Hazel, all of whom would return by 1970 – when Funkadelic released their self-titled debut album, *Funkadelic* (Westbound, 1969), and *Free Your Mind... And Your Ass Will Follow*, also under the Westbound label (1970).

The Parliaments became simply “Parliament” (a clever move by Clinton, designed to legally break with Revilot), and released *their* first album, *Osmium* on Holland-Dozier-Holland’s Invictus Records. Thus was born the Parliament-Funkadelic recording career. Throughout the next three decades, the two groups (really one collective) played and recorded interchangeably, with George Clinton presiding as producer, mastermind, and front man for both. “While both ‘groups’ feature[d] premium gospel-tight vocals, Funkadelic was more funk-rock and guitar heavy, while Parliament, adorned with slick horn arrangements, was more funky R&B” (Rogers, 42).

By the end of 1970, the seeds of what would become an unmatched phenomenon in American popular music were turning into saplings as P-Funk shows grew increasingly notorious for antics which included on-stage nudity, vulgar lyrics, and unmatched psychedelic energy. A former rival of the Parliaments, Sammy Cambell of the Del Larks, recalls seeing Funkadelic at the Apollo Theater on a night when George Clinton dropped his robe on stage: “The girls, they just freaked the fuck out, man. They bugged out. I looked at him [Clinton] and freaked out myself, thinking, ‘What the *fuck* is wrong with George?’ The band was like, ‘Fuck it’” (Rogers, 42). At the same time, the songs *themselves* already hinted at the original profound mythology/philosophy that would be integrated into the P-Funk universe. For example, the title track from *Free Your Mind... And Your Ass Will Follow* (Westbound, 1970) begins with a repeating, effect-laden chant, “Free your mind and your ass will follow: The kingdom of Heaven is within!” Another track, “Eulogy and

Light,” features George Clinton providing a sweeping spoken word commentary that concerns itself with poverty, greed and inequality in the United States of America.

In 1971, Funkadelic released *Maggot Brain*, which features the hauntingly beautiful title track, a ten-minute long electric guitar solo by Eddie Hazel. The first time I heard “Maggot Brain,” I cried. It turns out the tune is the product of George Clinton asking Eddie Hazel to “think of the saddest thing he could (Hazel imagined the death of his mother), then express it through his guitar” (Thompson, 140). Guitarist Garry Shider recalls, “Maggot Brain... A brother crying his soul out. Maggot Brain is a state of mind. To get you out of the heroin mood. The way I understand it, George put Eddie in the middle of a whole bunch of amps, just surrounded him with amps, and just said, ‘play’” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 14:35). The album also continued to develop the P-Funk world-view of universality and individual triumph: George Clinton begins “Maggot Brain” with the following sermon:

“Mother Earth is pregnant for the third time, for ya’all have knocked her up. I have tasted the maggots in the mind of the universe – I was not offended... For I knew I had to rise above it *all*, or drown in *my own shit*.”

By the end of ’71, however, money issues and power struggles led to the original Funkadelics quitting the band (although Worrell, Tiki Fulwood and Eddie Hazel would return), and drugs incapacitated Tawl Ross. Tyrone Lampkin became the drummer as P-Funk pushed forward into a new era.

In 1972, Funkadelic released the double LP *America Eats Its Young*. This seminal album, “replete with horns, strings, and a political bent, is a turning point, and showcases the contributions of dozens of musicians – notably J.B. alums Bootsy

and Phelps Collins, as well as Plainfield natives Garry Shider and Cordell Mosson – and illustrates Clinton’s growth as a producer and Worrell’s as an arranger” (Rogers, 42). Many of these musicians, most notably “Bootzilla” himself (Bootsy Collins) and vocalist/guitarist Garry Shider, became integral and long-lived members of the P-Funk mob. Later that year, Clinton struck a deal for Parliament with Neil Bogart’s Casablanca Records, thus allowing basically the same band (Parliament-Funkadelic) to record simultaneously for two different labels, and effectively to be able to put out twice as many records per year. 1972 was also the year artist Pedro Bell, who would design much of the classic P-Funk album covers and liner notes, joined the posse.<sup>7</sup>

In 1973 Funkadelic released *Cosmic Slop*, on the Westbound label. The album’s two most noteworthy tracks are the title track and “March to the Witch’s Castle.” The former is an irresistibly funky, Curtis Mayfield-esque exploration on identity and the pervasive inequality and corporatism running rampant in the world, featuring the hook “I can hear my mother call” – possibly referring to a plaintive Mother Earth (a revered and oft-appearing character in P-Funk lyrics). The latter (“March to the Witch’s Castle”) is a “wailing, electric hymn, seeking spiritual guidance for returning veterans and their nation. It has incredible power and a plain anti-war sentiment.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1974 and 1975, George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic continued to grow and hone their unique collective sound and lyrics. In ’74 Funkadelic released *Standing on the Verge of Getting It On* (Westbound), and Parliament released *Up For*

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<sup>7</sup> For an interview with Pedro Bell, as well as samples of some of the art he created for P-Funk, see p.84 of *Wax Poetics* Issue #18.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from Brian Benson, “Transcendentalism,” at <http://www.birdhouse.org/words/benson/transcendentalism.html>

*the Downstroke* (Casablanca). This Parliament album was the most advanced to date in terms of slick arrangements, danceable grooves, and repetitive and catchy harmonized vocal hooks. The bridge of the title track, “Up For The Downstroke,” for example, features the following hook repeated incessantly in a super-funky rhythm, with a new harmony stacked every other repetition:

“I don’t care about the cold baby,  
‘Cause when you’re hot, you’re too much  
When you’re hot, you’re hot!  
Look at what ya got!”

Furthermore, the album (*Up For The Downstroke*) addressed issues ranging from the Vietnam War (the star-spangled Kong of Babylon doing battle with the Commie Krudzilla, heedless of the people beneath them) to Black pride (“Say it loud, I’m Funk and I’m proud... Funk *used* to be a bad word” – from the title track). Even the liner notes, written by Pedro Bell and George Clinton, tell the story of “a young mortal named Ali, who was indeed the greatest – whupping heads between signifying. But, it came to pass that the law of the land did declare that he would be obligated to exterminate strangers in an unknown land. Ali refused to participate in the wrongful bloodlusts, and he was punished and lost his boxing title....” (Benson, “Transcefunkadentalism”). By this 1974, Bootsy Collins had brought over the concept of “the One” from the James Brown outfit, and it was being increasingly incorporated into P-Funk grooves. ’74 was also the year vocalist Gary “Mudbone” Cooper joined the crew.

In 1975, Funkadelic released *Lets Take it to the Stage* and a greatest hits album, both on Westbound. The most memorable track from *Stage* is the classic “Get



Off Your Ass and Jam,” whose only lyrical content is the title chanted to a truly funky backdrop. This phrase would become one of P-Funk’s enduring catch-phrases/mantras. In the same year, Parliament released the important *Chocolate City*, an album that, musically speaking, foreshadowed the tour-de-force 1976 releases while speaking directly to the frustrations and aspirations of the American Black community. The title track (also the opening track of the album) begins, “What’s happenin’ C.C. [Chocolate City, a spin on Washington D.C.]? They still call it the White House, but that’s a temporary condition too, can you dig it, C.C.?” The album continues in the same vein, describing a Black capitol with Black leaders (e.g. Stevie Wonder, Minister of Fine Arts; and Aretha Franklin, First Lady). 1975 was also the year that vocalist Glenn Goins and drummer Jerome “Bigfoot” Brailey joined P-Funk.

1976 was a landmark year for Parliament Funkadelic, and deserves special attention. It was in this year that funk giants (and James Brown veterans) Fred Wesley (trombone) and Maceo Parker (tenor saxophone), as well as Michael Hampton (guitar) joined the Funk Mob, further funkifying the sound as well as solidifying the “One” in the music. 1976 was the year that Parliament released *Mothership Connection* on Casablanca. The album went platinum (sold over a million copies), spawned the legendary Mothership Tour, took P-Funk’s black cosmology to the next level, and featured such endlessly enjoyable tracks as “P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up),” “Mothership Connection,” “Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication,” and “Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker).” Later that year, Parliament released *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (also on Casablanca), which went gold (sold over 500,000 copies), introduced Dr. Funkenstein

as a mainstay persona of the P-Funk universe, and further propagated the P-Funk religion/prescription with a phenomenal lineup of tunes which included “Dr. Funkenstein,” “Children of Production,” and “Everything Is On the One.”

In 1976, Funkadelic released *Hardcore Jollies* on Warner Brothers and *Tales of Kidd Funkadelic* on Westbound, each of which featured memorable and, of course, extremely funky tracks. Furthermore, 1976 marked the beginning of the P-Funk offshoot groups’ recording careers with the releases of Bootsy’s Rubber Band’s *Stretching Out with Bootsy’s Rubber Band* (Warner Brothers) and Fuzzy Haskin’s *A Whole Nother Thang* (Westbound). Tiki Fulwood, original drummer for Funkadelic, died in 1976, even as the greatest (and only) sci-fi funk opera *ever* hit sold-out arenas across the nation. A several-hundred-thousand dollar spaceship (the Mothership) rounded out outrageous props that, when combined with the dozens of Funkateers that took the stage at any given show, created the Mothership Tour – arguably one of the greatest live music spectacles of its time.

In 1977 Bootsy’s Rubber Band released *Ahh...The Name is Bootsy, Baby!* (Warner Brothers), which went gold, and Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns released *A Blow For Me, A Toot For You* (Atlantic). Funkadelic released another “Best of,” focusing on the early years, and Parliament released *Parliament Live: P-Funk Earth Tour* (Casablanca). Most notably, Parliament released *Funkentelechy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome* (Casablanca). The album went platinum, and the hit single “Flashlight,” which featured Worrell playing a bassline on an early Moog synth, went #1 on the pop charts. The album was also the birthing ground of Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk, the anti-funk super villain character that would remain an embodiment

of “the blahs” and accompanying placebo syndrome for the rest of P-Funk’s still-vibrant existence.

1978 was another golden year for the P-Funk empire: “Bootzilla,” from *Bootsy? Player of the Year* (Warner Brothers) went #1; Funkadelic released *One Nation Under a Groove* (Warner Brothers), which went platinum while the title track hit #1 on the charts; Parliament released *Motor-Booty Affair* (Casablanca), which went gold while a track from the album, “Aqua-Boogie,” went #1; and a slew of side-projects, all produced by Clinton, came to light and released debut albums.<sup>9</sup> Finally, due to money disputes, all of the original Parliaments (except for Ray Davis) left the group just after *One Nation* went platinum.<sup>10</sup>

Over the next few years, Bootsy’s Rubber Band, Parlet, the Brides of Funkenstein, and the Sweat Band, and of course Parliament and Funkadelic continued to release records.<sup>11 12 13</sup> Funkadelic put out *Uncle Jam Wants You* (Warner Brothers), which went gold, in ’79, and *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* (Warner

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<sup>9</sup> Eddie Hazel released *Games, Dames, and Guitar Thangs* on Warner Brothers; Glen and Kevin Goins released *Quazar* (Arista), but Glen Goins died before the release; Bernie Worrell released *All the Woo in the World* (Arista); Fuzzy Haskins released *Radio Active* on Westbound; Parlet released *Pleasure Principle* on Casablanca.

<sup>10</sup> Disputes about money and songwriting credits plagued Parliament Funkadelic all the way through the end of 70’s. Finally the name Parliament-Funkadelic was lost, to be resurrected as P-Funk in the 80’s. Judging from interviews with many of the band members, George Clinton had a knack for screwing his mates out of money and credit, to the point where original Parliaments member Calvin Simon (a Vietnam vet) considered “taking George out, period.” (Rogers, 58)

<sup>11</sup> The Brides of Funkenstein was a group comprised of backup singers Lynn Mabry and Dawn Silva. They used to sing for Sly Stone, but joined the P-Funk collective in 1977. Their first release was *Funk or Walk* on Atlantic Records in late 1978. In ’79 Lynn Mabry left the group, but Sheila Horne and Jeanette McGruder (two more of P-Funk’s backup vocalists, or “Bridesmaids” as they were called) joined and the group put out *Never Buy Texas From a Cowboy* (Atlantic) in 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Parlet was another P-Funk side group comprised of backup vocalists at the core – this one was spearheaded by Mallia Franklin, Jeanette Washington and Debbie Wright. They put out *Pleasure Principle* in ’78, *Invasion of the Booty Snatchers* in ’79, and *Play Me or Trade Me* in ’80, all on Casablanca Records.

<sup>13</sup> The Sweat Band was a splinter group from Bootsy’s Rubber Band, and released their debut in ’80 under Clinton’s then-short-lived Uncle Jam label. A whole book could be dedicated to a discussion of the P-Funk offshoot groups, and I hope the reader will forgive the brevity of their mention in this paper.

Brothers) in '81. *Uncle Jam Wants You* featured the monster track “(Not Just) Knee Deep,” which went #1. Parliament released *Gloryhallastoopid (Or Pin the Tail on the Funky)* in '79, on Casablanca (it went gold), and *Trombipulation* (Casablanca) in '81.<sup>14</sup>

1982 and 1983 were Parliament-Funkadelic's twilight years, as the band fell apart due to catastrophic disputes with labels, and a spiral of drug abuse and intra-band tensions. In '82, George Clinton released his solo debut, *Computer Games*, on Capitol Records: “Atomic Dog” went #1. In '83 much of the band reconvened as the P-Funk All-Stars, added some new players, and released *Urban Dancefloor Guerillas* (Uncle Jam/CBS Associated). This “new” group – a constantly changing collective, really – would survive, touring and recording until the present.<sup>15</sup>

As Mark Rogers, journalist for *Wax Poetics* magazine writes, “A forest of felled trees would be required to capture a Parliafunkadelicment Thang and all of its ramifications” (Rogers, 42). The above sketch is but a superficial account, focusing on a decade of this massively influential American musical and cultural phenomenon. George Clinton and the Funk Mob did not actually, in all likelihood, materialize from a faraway galaxy, or from the Pyramids, for that matter – they are products of an unbroken chain of American (and especially Black American) music, culture, and

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<sup>14</sup> The summer of 1979 was the summer of the famous Funk Festivals, a series of outdoor and indoor concerts that put some of the greatest funk bands of the era on stage together: P-Funk; Cameo; Mandrill; War; Bootsy and the Rubber Band; Ohio Players; the Bar-Kays; Isley Brothers; Brass Construction; Rick James; Chaka Khan; Rufus; and Earth, Wind, and Fire. However, according to Bernie Worrell (genius arranger responsible for much of the P-Funk sound): “We didn't give a shit, 'cause we were the mob, the Funk Mob, Uncle Jam's Army. No real rivalry. What they gonna go? Get their ass kicked. And the music and the vibe would back it up.” (Rogers, 81). An in-depth comparison of P-Funk's music and presentation to that of other funk bands of the 1970's would certainly benefit the analysis found in this paper, but, due to time and space constraints, must be relegated to another, longer work on the subject.

<sup>15</sup> This brief history was primarily based on *Wax Poetics* magazine Issue #18 (Aug/Sept 2006), unless otherwise noted.

struggle. The power of P-Funk - what set them apart from their contemporaries, and ensured their longevity and influence on future artists and idioms – lay in their music, their cosmology/philosophy, and the live show they presented. The following chapter concerns itself specifically with the *music* of Parliament Funkadelic: the origins of the P-Funk sound, what that sound *was*, and why audiences (and musicians) throughout the last thirty-odd years have found it so compelling.

## II. Everything Is On The ONE: The Music Of The Funk Mob

*“The P-Funk beat, characterized by Jerome “Bigfoot” Brailey’s intricate patterns surrounding his throbbing bass-drum kick, Bootsy’s now legendary rhythmic-melodic complexities, Fred Wesley’s meticulous horn arrangements, Bernie Worrell’s gothic, sinister keyboard work, the many guitarists, and Clinton’s brand of operatic vocal hooks, made P-Funk the untouchable thang it is today.” – Rickey Vincent (1996, p.241)*

*“Who Says a Funk Band Can’t Play Rock?!” – Funkadelic (One Nation Under a Groove, Warner Brothers 1978)*

*“Something about the music, it got into my pants” – from “(Not Just) Knee Deep” by Funkadelic (Uncle Jam Wants You, Warner Brothers 1979)*

The Parliament Funkadelic experience lay simultaneously in the music they created, the message they imparted, and the show they presented. These three aspects of P-Funk are impossible to exclusively categorize: for example, lyrics can be conceived of as a part of the music, or as a distinct element that falls into the “message/mythology” category. Thus, some aspects that *could* in theory be discussed in one chapter may be discussed in another, and so in this regard I beg the reader’s patience.

This chapter will focus on the music itself, namely P-Funk’s major influences, key innovators and creative forces behind the music, and approaches to music making. The discussion will touch on many aspects of the music, and attempt to

explain its appeal and longevity from a number of angles. Since the repertoire of the Funk Mob was constantly changing (and their discography enormous), the focus will be on music released from the mid through late 1970's – when P-Funk was at the height of their popularity.<sup>16</sup>

A fundamental element of funk music is its ability to induce a trance in the listener as well as the musician.<sup>17</sup> According to Rickey Vincent, “Perhaps the most

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<sup>16</sup> One can argue that the “core” of P-Funk’s music was unchanged from 1970 onward - and I happen to agree with the assertion. However, I will not take this as an assumption, and therefore my analysis does not necessarily apply to earlier (late 60’s) or later (80’s and onward) P-Funk recordings.

<sup>17</sup> A precursory discussion on “trancing” is now in order. The word “trance” itself comes from the Latin *transire*, or “passing through” (Aldridge 2006, p.18). In its broadest sense, the word implies the experience of a type of altered state of consciousness – but there are, to be sure, *multiple* such states. Gilbert Rouget, who’s *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession* represents a groundbreaking opus, describes the difference between trance and ecstasy as follows: “Trance is always associated with a greater or lesser degree of sensory over-stimulation – noises, music, smells, agitation – ecstasy, on the contrary, is most often tied to sensorial deprivation – silence, fasting, darkness” (Rouget 1985, 10). This distinction can be seen as the difference between the state of consciousness experienced during deep meditation or during a quiet yet intense listening of a piece of music (ecstasy), and that experienced during possession rituals, or on a dance floor enveloped by the groove (trance).

We see references to trance, and particularly the ability of music to entrance, throughout history – as far back as the tale of Odysseus and the Sirens. Clottes and Kewis-Williams have even posited that Australopithecines (1.4 million years ago) likely went into trance, while modern human beings (35,000 to 8,000 years ago) certainly did (Clottes and Kewis-Williams 1998, 81).

Judith Becker, in her *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion and Trancing*, says, “Trancing is a profound mystery. You lose your strong sense of self, of ego, as you feel one with the music, you lose the sense of time passing, and may feel transported out of quotidian space” (Becker 2004, p.25). There are many different kinds of trance. The association between music and trancing defies generalization, and varies greatly throughout world traditions – although music is almost always present as part of the trancing event. Also widely-agreed upon is that trancing is *inextricably related* to the socio-cultural environment it takes place in. Indeed, “rhythm, pitch, loudness and timbre and their sound staging in the perceptive field of a person seem to culminate in a certain sound that – corresponding to the cultural cognitive matrix – induces altered states of consciousness” (Aldridge, et al, 36).

There are, it seems, a limited set of “universal” bodily experiences that accompany trance-states in a cross-cultural analysis. For Judith Becker (whose work represents a synthesis of previous work on the topic), these include emotional arousal, cessation of inner language, loss of sense of self, and an unusual ability to withstand fatigue. Difficulty in remembering what had transpired during a trance state also seems to be a widespread phenomenon (Becker 2004, 29). “Trancing [is] simultaneously physical *and* psychological, somatic *and* cognitive” (*ibid.*).

Trance is also a means of accessing types of knowledge and experience that are “inaccessible in non-trance events, and... not easily described or spoken of” (Becker 2004, 43). Psychologist William James wrote, “Mystical states... are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive dialect” (James 1982, 380-381). The expression/description of these truths varies among trance traditions: for Sufi mystics in Morocco, the “depths of truth” reached while trancing manifest as divine connection – spiritual union with God; while for the Iboga in Gabon (Central Africa), these

important retention from Africa has been the spiritual element of music making, the necessity to bring about trance, to raise rhythm to a cosmic level” (Vincent, 37). This effect – deeply rooted in the African-derivative experience of Black American music – is, in the author’s opinion, integral to the success of P-Funk (and the funk idiom in general).

## 1. Musical Beginnings: “Free Your Mind, And Your Ass Will Follow”

All of the original Parliaments (and most of the original Funkadelics) were raised on Gospel music, and Church was an important part of many of their lives.<sup>18</sup>

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truths have to do more with self-realization and mental healing by way of near-death experience (Aldridge 2006, 101).

Trance involves empirically visible changes in the ANS (Autonomic Nervous System), such as changes in heart rate, skin conductance, respiration and getting “chills” (Becker, 11). Finally, a deep emotional sense of *happiness* usually accompanies trancing throughout the world’s traditions (Becker, 55). Although the phenomenon of trancing is *not* the central focus of this paper, I will continuously attempt to tie in elements of the P-Funk sound (and in later chapters of the mythology/cosmology, and the live show) with this related and relevant secondary theme.

<sup>18</sup> *George Clinton* was “raised with a traditional Black Christian background,” according to Rickey Vincent (258)  
*Calvin Simon*: “My father sang in... gospel groups [in Bexley, West Virginia]. When I was six, I was singing in the senior choir in church.” (Rogers, 45);  
*Grady Thomas*: “I used to sneak over in the morning [sneak away from church on Sundays] and listen to all the gospel groups.” (*ibid.*);  
*Fuzzy Haskins*: “We’d [Haskins and his older sister] also harmonize – she’d be cooking – we’d be singing spiritual songs.” (*ibid.*);  
*Glenn Goins*, one of the most incredible vocalists in the lineup, was also deeply involved with Church in childhood, according to Bernie Worrell (Rogers, 79);  
Original Funkadelic *Billy “Bass” Nelson*: “[My father] was a major influence, [his family] all sang gospel... I loved that church.” (61);  
*Bernie Worrell’s* mother was in the church, and throughout his childhood, he “played pipe organ for the Episcopalians, Hammond Organ for the Baptists, and then piano for her [Worrell’s mother] little shows.” (Bernie Worrell, quoted on Rogers, 74);  
*Frankie “Kash” Waddie* recalls, “Then Eddie [Hazel] took from Jimi [Hendrix] and what he learned from the church.” (Rogers, 99);  
*Garry “Diaperman” Shider*: “We [Shider’s whole family] sang gospel first in a Baptist church” (115).



During the late 50's and early 60's, when they first started making music together, the popular music was doo-wop, and it were groups like the Platters and the Flamingos that the soon-to-be Funkateers were imitating. George Clinton himself was particularly fond of Smokey Robinson and Anthony Newley, the English balladeer.<sup>19</sup> The P-Funk thang started out with pressed suits on, donning slick haircuts and singing doo-wop mixed with elements of gospel. By 1967 the original Funkadelics were fully formed, and playing regularly behind the vocalists. It was the Funkadelics that laid the foundation of P-Funk's hippie-rock/psychodelia side.

The next major step in the evolution of P-Funk's sound happened by chance. In 1967, the newly formed Funkadelics were opening for Vanilla Fudge when their equipment truck broke down. They ended up using Vanilla Fudge's equipment, which consisted of bigger amps and drums than any Funkadelic had used before. Billy "Bass" Nelson recalls, "And the sound, we realized, was the sound we had been reaching for. All we needed was the amps. And we got 'em" (Rogers, 66). From that day forth, Parliament Funkadelic would make sure to be the loudest funk band out there.<sup>20</sup>

The arrival of keyboard player Bernie Worrell into the fold in 1969 was a landmark moment for the P-Funk phenomenon. Worrell grew up in Plainfield, NJ, and would sneak out to hang with Clinton and the Parliaments at their barbershop, to his mother's disdain. A child prodigy born with perfect pitch (Rogers, 73), Worrell was in a tuxedo playing professional classical concerts by the age of six (*ibid*, 74). The influence of this one man on both P-Funk and more generally on American pop

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<sup>19</sup> This information comes from Bernie Worrell (Rogers, 75)

<sup>20</sup> "Although any music is 'tranceable,' much is rhythmically vibrant and *somewhat loud* [emphasis added]" (Becker, 66).

music since the 70's simply *cannot be overstated!*<sup>21</sup> Fuzzy Haskins, original Parliament, recalls the addition of Worrell to the band: "And then Bernie came in, he was the Krazy Glue that held everything together. Bernie was responsible for all the hits you listening to. His knowledge of music, his keyboard playing, he's a genius" (Rogers, 53). Worrell studied classical piano and music at both Julliard and New England Conservatory, and brought elements of European classical musics into the P-Funk mix, along with an intimate knowledge of harmony and arranging (Rogers, 74). George Clinton, for whom Bernie Worrell was "a genius of geniuses," made him band director (which Worrell remained for the rest of his days with P-Funk).<sup>22</sup>

A major contribution of Worrell's to P-Funk's success was his pioneering use of keyboard/synthesizer bass lines. "Flashlight," from *Funken etelchy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome* (Casablanca, 1977), "obliterated the standards of dance music when it hit the radio in early 1978" (Vincent, 246). The key elements of the track's success, other than its inherent funkiness, were technologically based: a super-loud clap track, layers of atmospheric effects and ethereal keyboard lines, and most importantly, the "fullest bass sound ever played" (*ibid*). Bernie Worrell stacked several synthesized base tones, created by the Moog synthesizer, on top of each other to create a previously unimaginably thick and dance-provoking bass line – and "forever changed the bottom groove in popular music" (*ibid*).

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<sup>21</sup> The degree of Worrell's influence on American music is due to: the original style – one blending European classical idioms with dark funk and pop-based musical aesthetics – he presented; the myriad artists he's worked with; and perhaps most importantly the enormous amount of samples he has (willingly or otherwise) contributed to early rap/hip-hop albums. The use of P-Funk samples in the hip-hop age will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this paper.

<sup>22</sup> Will Calhoun provides poetic praise for Worrell: "If you could stick a microphone in the Milky Way, that's what you're gonna get: Bernie Worrell" (Rogers, 82)

From the early days onward, improvisation played a central role in the P-Funk sound (Rogers, 75). Clinton, bandleader, business-head, and front man, always allowed the band creative freedom, and mostly acted as a “referee” who coordinated the musicians more than he created the music (Marsh, 92-93). George Scribner, the band’s first manager, has recalled that “George loved taking creative spirits, musically or otherwise – and giving them a platform, and opportunity to create” (Marsh, 83). A great example of creative freedom and emphasis on improvisation in the Parliament Funkadelic fold leading to the creation of powerful music is the story behind “Maggot Brain” (*Maggot Brain*, Westbound 1971).<sup>23</sup> The importance of collective improvisation – itself an integral part of the Black American musical tradition – to P-Funk’s musical creations, in the studio and on stage, cannot be overstated.

A major environmental influence on the music of P-Funk (throughout most of the career of the collective) was drugs. Commonplace in the music scene (especially the rock scene) during the late 60’s and 70’s, drugs played a definitive role in shaping the music and style of P-Funk, especially on the Funkadelic side (Ellis, 118). Listening to the title track from 1970’s *Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow*, the psychedelic elements are immediately apparent – the first minute of the track is comprised of atmospheric effects and breathy voices invoking the listener to “Free your mind, and your ass will follow: The kingdom of heaven is within!” A

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<sup>23</sup> Quoting from earlier in this paper: ...The tune is the product of George Clinton asking Eddie Hazel to “think of the saddest thing he could (Hazel imagined the death of his mother), then express it through his guitar” (Thompson, 140). Guitarist Garry Shider recalls, “Maggot Brain... A brother crying his soul out. Maggot Brain is a state of mind. To get you out of the heroin mood. The way I understand it, George put Eddie in the middle of a whole bunch of amps, just surrounded him with amps, and just said, ‘play’” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 14:35).

philosophical George Clinton then tells us, “Freedom is free of the need to be free...”<sup>24</sup> While these lyrics/mantras foreshadowed the depth of the P-Funk vision, they also illustrated the hippie/psychedelia culture of the time, and the drugs that came with it. Indeed, Rickey Vincent writes, “the drug experience in P-Funk is as integral to the P-Funk experience as perspiration is, because everything had something to do with a higher consciousness in some shape or form” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under A Groove,” 15:50).

## **2. Everything is on the ONE!**

With the addition of William “Bootsy” Collins (bass), Frankie “Kash” Waddy (drums), and Phelps “Catfish” Collins (guitar) in 1972, a critical element of P-Funk’s music had arrived: the “One.” The Collins brothers and Waddy had all played with James Brown before joining the P-Funk camp, and what they (and later Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley) brought over from their experiences with the Godfather of Soul was as crucial to the P-Funk sound thereafter as anything else. Therefore, we must now take a moment to indulge in a brief discussion on James Brown, an (excruciatingly abbreviated) account of funk music’s evolution, and the theory of the “One.”

In a 1992 essay titled “The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African American Music,” UC Berkeley Music Professor Olly Wilson outlined some fundamental structural qualities in African-American music, which stem from an “African

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<sup>24</sup> George Clinton recalls, “We’d be tripping on acid... I was laughing, joking – I’d say ‘ooga booga,’ just babbling. And then I would say something like ‘free your mind and your ass will follow,’ and to me that was funny as hell” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 16:40)

conceptual approach” (Vincent, 34). These include: *the tendency to approach the organization of rhythm based on the principle of rhythmic and implied metrical contrast; the tendency to approach singing or the playing of any instrument in a percussive manner; antiphony, or call-and-response musical structure that emphasizes audience participation and involvement; the tendency to create a high density of musical events within a relatively short time frame; and a tendency to incorporate physical body motion as an integral part of the music-making process (ibid.)*. ALL of these are integral elements of the funk that James Brown spawned and P-Funk took to the next level, and all of these act as explanatory variables for the power and popularity of the music and the shows of P-Funk.

James Brown was the “raw, primitive precursor” to the P-Funk sound (Vincent, 86). His influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century American – and by extension global – pop music is staggering, and his innovations, which conform to Wilson’s fundamental elements of African-American music, were extensively utilized by P-Funk as well as countless other artists. In the mid 60’s, James Brown realized that all instruments, as well as his voice, were *rhythmic* components of the groove, and would later describe this realization as the key turning point of his creative career.<sup>25</sup> From that point on, much of his music was grounded in the interweaving of rhythms and polyrhythms.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> James Brown: “I had discovered that my strength was not in the horns, it was in the rhythm. I was hearing everything, even the guitars, like they were drums. I had found out how to make it happen” (Vincent, 74).

<sup>26</sup> The interplay of rhythm and polyrhythm, an essential part of much African music, is directly related to the achievement of trance states throughout world trancing traditions (Aldridge, et al, 37). For example, West African and Moroccan trance musics associated with induced transcendental experiences are extremely polyrhythmic, simultaneously incorporating triple-meter and quadruple-meter rhythms while (like much of James Brown’s funk) remaining on one harmonic base (chord), and utilizing many distinct timbres played in rhythmic counterpoint by at least several musicians/trancers (Aldridge, et al, 120, 122).

The *call-and-response* dynamic is a familiar one in American blues-based musics, and is directly linked to African musical roots. Slave songs to gospel, Dixieland to bebop – all of them incorporate call-and-response, whether it is within form, improvisation, or vocals. James Brown, like most of the P-Funk mob, came from a Black church tradition where he was surely exposed to the power of call-and-response: the minister singing a phrase or asking a question, and the solidarity and joy experienced when the whole congregation answers in unison. The Godfather of Soul utilized call-and-response in much of his music (i.e. call: “Say it loud!” and response: “I’m black and I’m proud!”), and when the Collins brothers and “Kash” Waddy joined Uncle Jam’s Army, they reinforced this practice in P-Funk’s repertoire. By the time *Let’s Take It To The Stage* (Westbound) and *Chocolate City* came out in 1975, P-Funk was extensively using chants and slogans – stated by the band and repeated by audiences – to increase the appeal of their music (i.e. “Shit, goddamn, get off your ass and jam!” from “Get Off Your Ass and Jam” (*Let’s Take It To The Stage*, Westbound 1975)).

James Brown was famous for controlling the band, the energy of the music, and ultimately that of the audience, with precise *movements of his body* (Rogers, 98). P-Funk, too, was famous (especially in the early Funkadelic days) for what they did with their bodies at performances. As Anne Danielsen writes in her “Presence and

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The ritual music (connected with trancing) of the Iboga, in Gabon, also exhibits extended use of complex polyrhythms, and a primarily two-chord structure (Aldridge, et al, 106-108). Furthermore, in the women’s initiation ceremonies of the Mitsogo people (of the Iboga), music is the *sole inducer* of possession trance – the hallucinogenic drugs that accompany most such ceremonies in Gabon are *not* taken until after the trance is achieved. Even in the ancient Greek world, “uneven” rhythms were considered to be intoxicating and were apparently used in the Dionysiac obsessional ceremonies (which themselves originated from Asia Minor) (Rouget 1990, 166). Perhaps the extended use of polyrhythmic aesthetics in funk music, and especially in the funk of James Brown and P-Funk, helped to bring dancing audiences into veritable trance-states – and thus ensured the power and success of the idiom.

Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament,” “funk grooves aim to move the body” (Danielsen, 139-140). Scot Hacker, author of “Can You Get to That? The Cosmology of P-Funk,” writes, “the musical definition [of funk] is apparent – it is that which moves, irresistible, an ineluctable conclusion of motion (“dedicated to the preservation of the motion of hips” [P-Funk lyric from “Dr. Funkenstein” (*The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Casablanca 1976)], and of course it’s always On the One” (Hacker, 1994). Which brings us to perhaps the *most* important contribution Brown made to the P-Funk camp, by way of the musicians that played with him and then later joined the Funk Mob: the concept of the “One.”

The “One” is a deep concept with as many takes on it as there are those whose lives it has touched. It simultaneously represents a musical idiom, a philosophy of mind, and a prescription for a better world. As such, part of the discussion about “the One” must wait for a forthcoming chapter dealing with the P-Funk philosophy/cosmology. Here I will concern myself mainly with the *musical* concept of “the One,” and its significance within the Funk Mob’s music.

Frankie “Kash” Waddy says, “He [James Brown] taught us the One theory, which we brought over to George [Clinton]. The One is a frame of reference. It’s where you start and come back from. Continuous cycle... He’d say, ‘Where’s your One at? You ain’t got no One; you gotta have a One!’” (Rogers, 98). Bootsy Collins also mentions the importance of learning about the “One” from James Brown (Ellis, 107).<sup>27</sup> The “One,” in its most superficial sense, refers to the downbeat, or the first

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<sup>27</sup> James Brown himself said, “I think Bootsy learned a lot from me. When I met him he was playing a lot of bass – the ifs, the ands, and the buts. I got him to see the importance of the *one* in funk. I got him to key in *on the dynamic parts of the one* instead of playing all around it. Then he could do all his other stuff in the right places – *after* the one” (Danielsen, 121).

pulse in any given measure or phrase – and suggests that this is the most important beat in funk music. Danielsen describes the power of the “One,” in this sense, as “crucial” (Danielsen, 121), and Rickey Vincent connects the concept of the “One” directly to African roots: “Traditionally, West African music did not emphasize melodies that meandered along the rhythms; the music emphasized *rhythm itself*, and in doing so, it ventilated around The One... Ultimately, to be “on the one,” the musical performance is not only emphasizing an ancient rhythmic pattern, it is emphasizing the essential openness toward all participants to the groove” (Vincent, 37).

Repetitive cellular structures are another fundamental and idiomatic element of funk music. The groove, that magical thing so inherent to funk – and so hard to verbally describe – is established by *repeating* interlocking rhythmic and melodic statements, played tightly. As Cynthia Rose, a James Brown biographer, writes, “Funk is not a reconciliation of opposite rhythmic impulses, but the fusion and transcending of their essential *conflict*” (Vincent, 71). The “One” then, is the *grounding* element. It is what tethers polyrhythms and multi-metered events to a unified center. It is not merely the downbeat – it is the idea of solidity in the midst of fluidity, the musical juncture at the end and beginning of every unit (in funk usually one, two or four measures). The “One” allows many rhythms and musicians to do their own thing and yet maintain a tight, dance-invoking groove. “Locked, yet fluid, when everything is “on the one,” a harmony among all people is achieved,” writes Vincent (37). Finally, the power of the “One” in its musical sense is to provide a



heavy, steady pulse for dancing, which itself is an integral part of the funk experience.

When Bootsy, “Catfish,” and “Kash” took over the role of rhythm section for P-Funk, they brought the concept of the “One” with them – and George Clinton immediately dug it and began to incorporate the concept into Parliament Funkadelic’s music, along with all the other things gleaned from the James Brown brand of funk, like *tightness*.<sup>28</sup> According to drummer Frankie “Kash” Waddy, “George [Clinton was] like, ‘Yeah, okay, on the One, that’s how it works? Okay, cool. Oh, ya’ all go crazy too, okay.’ We taught him that One theory and he still uses it to this day” (Rogers, 99). The “One” became a central concept in P-Funk grooves, especially those of Parliament, and correspondingly the music got ever more funky and irresistibly danceable. Rare is the P-Funk track that doesn’t hit the downbeats tight and hard. Jerome “Bigfoot” Brailey (drums) joined the crew in ’75, and brought with him an even heavier downbeat pulse. By the time Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley, both James Brown alums, joined in 1976, the “One” and P-Funk were inseparable. 1976 also happened to be the year Parliament went platinum for the first time, with *Motherhip Connection* (Casablanca), and then gold with *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (Casablanca).<sup>29</sup>

### 3. Controlled Chaos: P-Funk’s Anti-Formula

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<sup>28</sup> According to Bootsy Collins, “to be funky is one thing, but to be tight and funky – that’s what we learned from James [Brown]” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 18:30).

<sup>29</sup> *Motherhip Connection* sold over a million copies (Platinum sales), and *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* sold over 500,000 (Gold). These sales achievement markers are, of course, an aspect of industry hype and gimmickry. However, the numbers are useful because they *do* reflect, if imperfectly, how well the records in question were accepted by the public, and hint at how widely the influence of the records would spread.

Parliament Funkadelic's music, like their shows, is characterized by a unique blend of order and chaos. This style was first realized when the tight vocals of the Parliaments met the psychedelia-infused rock of the Funkadelics in 1966/67. The instrumentalists would jam hard and constantly experiment with the music, while the vocalists contributed tight harmonies and arrangements (Rogers, 75).

As previously mentioned, Clinton always had a penchant for encouraging creativity and freedom in his band. When the Collins brothers and Frankie "Kash" Waddy joined P-Funk in '72, they came with the discipline learned from the tightest-run band of the times (James Brown's), and brought "order" to the mold while also enjoying the opportunity to artistically "go nuts."<sup>30</sup> Waddy described the music as, "Entropy. The measured amount of chaos" (Rogers, 96). In fact, "controlled chaos" is also the way Maceo Parker (tenor sax) and George Clinton describe the music, and the live show, when reflecting on classic P-Funk days in the documentary "My First Name is Maceo."<sup>31</sup>

As more and more players joined the collective, the element of "measured" chaos grew.<sup>32</sup> The significance of this aspect of P-Funk's music is similar to that of their use of polyrhythms: it created the intoxicating effect of many musical events happening simultaneously (a la Olly Wilson's *high density of events within a*

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<sup>30</sup> According to Frankie "Kash" Waddy, "What he [Clinton] did, as opposed to James [Brown], is he legitimized us going *nuts*" (Rogers, 99).

<sup>31</sup> "My First Name is Maceo". Rhapsody Films, Directed by Marcus Gruber. 1996.

<sup>32</sup> The sheer amount of musicians and vocalists that performed simultaneously is remarkable: "The number of people onstage was always huge. There'd be at least 7 or 8 singers, including a backup or three. One or two keyboardists. Between 3-5 guitarists. A couple of drummers. A 4-piece horn section. Percussionists. Bass players. There could be up to 30 people up there!" ("The Motherpage": [www.duke.edu/~tmc/motherpage/pfaq.html](http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/motherpage/pfaq.html), accessed 1/15/07). In addition, on recorded tracks Bernie Worrell would layer several keyboards and effects on top of the mix, adding even more "controlled chaos."

*relatively short time frame*) while maintaining a solid, cohesive pulse that kept it all “on the One.”

#### 4. Funk As A Way of Life

Finally, a key element of Parliament Funkadelic’s music was the high regard in which members of Uncle Jam’s Army held their creations. They *meant* what they played, deeply and fully. Frankie “Kash” Waddy explains, “See, funk to me is a way of life... What you hear on those records, we were living them, believing in them, and that’s why they stand to this day” (Rogers, 100). Although passionate honesty in music making is characteristic of countless musicians, it is still worth mentioning – the P-Funk sound would have been vastly different if its members *weren’t* creating the music with love and sincere devotion to the songs and the funky vision that lay within them.

The Funk Mob’s music results in part from a unique blend of influences: gospel, jazz, classical, R&B, rock, and James Brown’s proto-funk all figured into the mix.<sup>33</sup> The *rock* element was especially important in the evolution of the P-Funk sound. Ron Scribner, P-Funk’s manager between form 1969 through 1973, explains,

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<sup>33</sup> Having not yet discussed any direct *jazz* influences on P-Funk’s music, I will take this opportunity to do so. An obvious one is that of Sun Ra. George Clinton once said, “Sun Ra? Yeah, he’s out to lunch alright – same place I eat at!” (Hacker, 1/15/07). Both drums and percussive bass were at the heart of Ra’s music (Wilmer, 79, 80), and his extensive use of keyboards, synths and effects was likely noticed by Bernie Worrell (Wilmer, 79). Further direct jazz influences came by way of Fred Wesley and Maceo, along with previous horn sections. Wesley specifically played some serious jazz gigs before joining James Brown, and often dreamt of playing jazz full time – and it’s Fred Wesley’s horn arrangements that are found on some of P-Funk’s most successful creations (such as *Mothership Connection* and *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*) (Vincent, xii, from foreword to “Hit Me, Fred,” an autobiography by Fred Wesley).

“The plan was to take the Funk and *rock-itize* it, and put it out to the masses” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 12:23), while LaBelle musician Nona Hendryx says, “Theirs was really a bringing together of rock and funk. And the feel was... *exactly right*” (*ibid.*, 13:40). As Garry Shider (guitar/vocals) recalls, “By the time we got to *Mothership [Connection]*, that’s when it really became a funk opera. There weren’t any Black acts like that... Jimi [Hendrix] was doing rock. Ours was just purely funk. Which is gospel, R&B, blues, jazz – all of it just mixed up. Then Bernie – he’ll figure out any keyboard, and go that Berklee University on your butt: Bach, Beethoven and all that kind of stuff... Back in the day, nothing was planned: you’d just lay it out” (Rogers, 117-18).

At its core, the P-Funk sound was that of funk music. Howard C. Harris, in his book *The Complete Book of Improvisation, Composition and Funk Techniques*, describes the essence of funk music as follows: “Funk is a style of music in which elements of jazz, pop, rock, gospel and the blues are fused to create a rhythmic, soulful sound. Funk thrives on rhythm, and the art of it depends on the level of togetherness between the performers. It is, in essence, togetherness in motion” (Vincent, 16). “Keeping together in time” (i.e. “togetherness in motion”) is an integral facet of the funk music idiom – and has been described by prominent scholars as a key factor in the evolution of human language and society. Indeed, historians J.R. McNeil and William H. McNeil make the following assertion in the first chapter of their world history text, “The Human Web”:

“One important landmark in this evolving process [of improving communication ability and societal cohesion] was the invention of song and dance, for when human groups flex their big muscles and keep together in

time by moving and giving voice rhythmically, they arouse a warm sense of emotional solidarity that makes cooperation and mutual support in dangerous situations much firmer than before. As a result, song and dance became universal among human communities. This behavior is as distinctive of our species as speech itself.” (McNeil and McNeil 2003, 13)

The profound effects of “keeping together in time” will be revisited in forthcoming discussions on P-Funk shows, dancing, and the achievement of trance-states.

An analysis of a live version of “Mothership Connection” (*Mothership Connection*, Casablanca 1976) will be found in Chapter V of this paper, and will serve to reiterate key points discussed in this preceding chapter. Now we turn to one of the most profound aspects of the P-Funk thang, the politics and philosophy of Parliament Funkadelic – Transcefunkadentalism.

### III. FUNKENTELECHY: THE P-FUNK VISION

*“In the beginning, there was Funk.” – George Clinton*

The popularity, influence, and longevity of the Parliament Funkadelic thang lies in the fact that it was more than just music, more than just a great live show – it was a *phenomenon*. Over the years, George Clinton and his funk mob developed a profound, expansive, and inclusive world-view. It was simultaneously a philosophy and a cosmology, an affirmation of post-African values and Black nationhood, a mythology and a prescription for a better world. The ideas were expressed primarily through lyrics – chants, mantras, incantations, and spoken word, as well as plain sung lines. The words, in combination with the music, the artwork adorning P-Funk albums, and the live show P-Funk put on, provided audiences with something that more closely resembled a deep religious experience than it did a music concert.

I believe that P-Funk’s original message lay at the heart of the magic of Parliament Funkadelic: it took the collective out of the realm of music-makers and into that of cosmic apostles that could entrance and uplift their massive congregation, and ensured their preeminent importance in the history of both American music and American culture. In the pages below, I will discuss the P-Funk vision, organizing the discussion as follows: I. The super-musical meanings and connotations of funk

music and of the word “funk” itself; II. P-Funk and the America they lived in: the political/liberating voice of P-Funk; III. The dogma of P-Funk’s universe; and IV. The space-based, transcendental philosophy of P-Funk, and their prescription for individual and global betterment. Throughout, I will attempt to tie aspects of the P-Funk totality to African and African American philosophical/religious roots (as well as those from various world traditions) to try and explain the power of the P.

### **1. Funk Used To Be a Bad Word**

Before it was the name for a genre of music, the word “funk” had negative connotations, signifying bad odor and bodily excretions, or a somber mood. Rickey Vincent tells us that jazz musicians in French-speaking New Orleans were the first to start using “funky” to describe music, ascribing it to an “earthy quality of style derived from early blues” (Vincent, 32, from *Webster’s Dictionary*). From its earliest non-musical uses, the word “funk” alluded to organic, mysterious elements of life: sex, grime and the less-than-openly-discussed range of human impulses. This connotation of “funk,” a connotation implying acceptance of, and love for, all the “*nastay*” things that make us human, would become a central theme in P-Funk’s take on humanity: the Funk Mob would consistently blend vulgarity with respect, sex with worship, the basest instincts with the highest spiritual callings.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Scott Hacker describes the non-musical connotations of “funk” beautifully: “The other usage of the term refers to the smell of funk -- earthy musk, the purple smell of global vagina, the source of jazz in sweat, saxophone jism, the smell of spontaneity and origination, funk giving birth to funk, the fertile rhythms of the song cycle life and death, conception and birth in dirt and secretions, the visceral funk of sweat and sex, pussy rotation, the stank thang, the glory of juices in vapor reacting at base level in the gut, gut bass thumping spleen... in all fertility awareness the funk figures as smell, cosmic

Many of the world's traditions, especially in Africa and Southeast Asia, urge followers to see life in this way.<sup>35</sup> In *Muntu: The New African Culture*, Janheinz Jahn writes, "On the basis of African philosophy, there can be no strict separation of the sacred and profane" (Vincent, 262). Vincent goes on, "the Funk is rooted in ancient spiritual systems in which sexuality and spirituality are united in harmony with the essential *life force*" (*ibid*). As discussed in the previous chapter, Parliament Funkadelic's founding members all came out of the Black church tradition, and so they took the "sacred" they learned there, and mixed it with the "profane" – that is sex, lust, nakedness, etc. – that was increasingly finding social legitimacy in the early days of the hippie movement. The term "funk," and later P-Funk, embraced the legacy of African society's more open acceptance of sex and dirt as a part of life. This was liberating for audience members, especially those of African origin, because it simultaneously affirmed non-Western values and rejected the cold, sterile and introverted atmosphere of the America they grew up in. Rickey Vincent writes, "The music and concepts drew listeners into a coded philosophy of Black nationhood, of freedom of expression and personal salvation through the use of symbols and double meanings that had deep roots in Black music and religious traditions" (Vincent, 254). Indeed, "When Cap'n George is at the helm, you know you're going to ride in outrageous style to your repatriation. The Mothership takes off in the middle of a concert in Detroit and lands in the middle of a Yoruba fertility dance. The scenery changes ever so slightly, but the song remains the same" (Hacker, 1/17/07).

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progenation, funk of dame nature in labor harmonizing with funk of loose booty boarding the Mothership, the smell that leaves us "standing on the verge of gettin' it on" (Hacker, 1/15/07).

<sup>35</sup> The Indian sub-continent's tantric texts come into mind (Kama Sutra, for one), as does Buddhism's insistence on non-dichotomy and the embracing of all things as part of one whole.



It is of huge significance that P-Funk chose the word “funk” to represent all that is good and holy in the universe, and in humanity. It truly used to be a bad word: in the early days of P-Funk’s popularity, radio stations wouldn’t let them talk about “funk” on the air! George Clinton, according to Bootsy Collins, would then say to them (the DJ’s), “Well, motherfunk ya’all then.” In fact, it was the *people*, according to Bootsy, that came up with the chant “We want the funk!” as a response to the media’s censorship (Ellis, 109)! The word *itself* became a linguistic symbol of defiance, liberation from society’s constraints, and affirmation of organic human values.

## **2. THE POLITICS OF P-FUNK**

### **i. P-Funk Vs. American Wrongs**

*“You gotta have some funk in you not to get mad.” – George Clinton (Rogers, 136)*

*“The music of Funkadelic is an urban soundscape – not always pretty or appealing but perhaps the truest representation of urban life offered in black music.” – The Rolling Stone Record Guide (1978)*

Parliament Funkadelic was finding its sound at a time when seemingly *everything* was pretty messed up: the Cold War, Vietnam, race riots, and the disappointing early days of the Civil Rights Movement were intimate parts of the bands’ young adult lives. As Black Americans growing up in predominantly Black neighborhoods, the Funk Mob experienced first hand the injustices, inconsistencies,

and failures of their country.<sup>36 37</sup> These experiences, especially in the early days of P-Funk's career, directly shaped their message and world-view, and thus created the foundation for much of their lyrical and artistic content.

Funkadelic's 1971 release *Maggot Brain* (Westbound) was already sporting directly political tracks. "Wars of Armageddon," for example, is a ten-minute long excursion of guitars, drums, effects, shouts, and hard-to-decipher recordings of human speech. Roughly two minutes into the song, we hear what seems to be a sound recording of a demonstration: "What do we want? Freedom! When do we want it? Now!" Funkadelic's next LP's title speaks for itself: *America Eats Its Young* (Westbound, 1972). Tracks like "If You Don't Like the Effect, Don't Produce the Cause," "Wake Up," and "We Hurt Too" were direct affronts on American domestic and foreign policy. At this time, P-Funk was still new to the preaching thing, and was a bit heavy-handed in the delivery. Later, they would master the humble, observer-based approach that increased the strength of their message while maintaining an attitude free of righteousness. 1972 was also the year that artist Pedro Bell joined the P-Funk posse: immediately, his liner notes and album illustrations beautifully complemented the abstract style of cultural criticism being perfected by Parliament Funkadelic.

One of the first major issues that P-Funk paid major attention to in their music was the Vietnam War. After Calvin Simon came back from the war, he, like so many

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<sup>36</sup> Some members, like original Funkadelic Billy "Bass" Nelson, grew up in decrepit projects (Rogers, 61).

<sup>37</sup> An important early experience for the Funkadelics was their presence at the Detroit race riots of '67. The band was on tour with "(I Wanna) Testify" at the time, and got caught right in the middle of it. Fuzzy Haskins recalls, "We was on the floor; people getting their fingers, arms, wrists cut off for their jewelry. National Guard had us all pinned up against the wall. Took our uniforms out of the car, starting stomping on them, lookin' for weapons. We were just afraid of being shot" (Rogers, 50). Meanwhile, Calvin Simon was in Vietnam, "getting attacked with mortars" (*ibid*).

veterans, was psychologically damaged (Rogers, 50), and the rest of the band saw this first-hand as they tried, initially unsuccessfully, to return Simon to his old self. Fuzzy Haskins recalls, “Finally, we got him out of that soldier uniform. After we funk-ed him, we had to funkify him,” and Grady Thomas remembers, “We had to baptize his butt in the funk again” (Rogers, 51).<sup>38</sup> The issue was a very personal one for P-Funk, and figured prominently in their music.

Funkadelic’s 1973 release *Cosmic Slop* (Westbound) featured the song “March to the Witch’s Castle,” which, “recorded near the end of the Vietnam War, [is] a wailing, electric hymn, seeking spiritual guidance for returning veterans and their nation. It has incredible power and a plain anti-war sentiment” (Benson, 1/15/07). Aside from the haunting vocal/guitar line, the lyrics of this atypically solemn track are especially worth paying attention to. There is no singing, just a deep voice praising veterans and condemning the useless suffering they went through (while placing the blame square on the shoulders of the U.S. government). Strong religious and philosophical elements are found in the track at 4m 49s, when the following incantation is heard: “Oh lord, give us the strength to understand ourselves, for we *are* mysterious animals... man. And as the boys march home to the witch’s castle, we will all need your help.” Similarly, Funkadelic’s 1975 album *Let’s Take it to the Stage* (Westbound) satirizes the Vietnam War. By this time, P-Funk is increasingly using symbols and metaphors to get their message across: “The notes of the 1975 album *Let’s Take It the Stage* satirize the Vietnam War as a Godzilla movie, two monstrous powers bound to do battle, heedless of the people beneath them: ‘The star-spangled Kong of Babylon was unleashed to bully tidbit morsels of faraway

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<sup>38</sup> Note the use of “funk” here in the place of “holy water,” within Thomas’ baptism reference.

lands. And one dawn's light brought the greedy presence forth, to confront another, the Commie Crudzilla” (Benson, 1/15/07).

## ii. P-Funk and Black America

*“I don't know. Funk it. Just funk it. Do the best you can. It ain't meant to be bad. If it gets that way, it's cause someone wasn't payin' attention.” – George Clinton (Rogers, 127)*

“One could conceive of their [P-Funk's] work as folklore, and perhaps some of the first post-industrial black American mythology,” writes Rickey Vincent (256). Indeed, one of the most powerful, unique, and fundamental aspects of the P-Funk experience was their take on Black history, racial inequality, and African-American aspirations. Although in the beginning, neither Whites nor Blacks knew quite what to make of the seemingly insane Funkadelics, the world-view that P-Funk would come to espouse is intimately connected with Black power, equality, and liberation.<sup>39</sup>

From the early days, P-Funk was attracting attention for being wild on stage. The simple fact of a bunch of young Black guys doing the things that the group did was fresh and liberating for audiences, especially Black ones. Ron Galloway, who now runs the premier trading website for all things P-Funk, says, “Hey they just got me when I first saw them as Funkadelic in 1972 at T.S.U. and I've been following everything they do since. I think that the rebelliousness and attitude was what got me first. I mean NOBODY (at least nobody black) had the nerve to do and say what GC [George Clinton] did back then. It was just Tha BOMB!!! They were so opposite of

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<sup>39</sup> “We was too white for the blacks,” Clinton relates, “and we was too black for the whites” (Marsh 73).

every other group that was around, I mean I just admired their balls to even look the way they did.”<sup>40</sup>

A decade before controversies over the African roots of civilizations surfaced, Clinton and the Funk mob were talking about how Africans (presumably bad moths from outer space) built the pyramids.<sup>41</sup> By extension, “P-Funk was claiming that symbolically, blacks were *responsible for civilization* (Vincent, 254). Shock G, hip-hop artist and member of the Digital Underground collective, recalls, “George was clowning with it, and he sounded more like one of my homies I went to school with. He got me into history, to be honest with you. All of a sudden I liked the whole idea of the pyramids, and I was connected to it for the first time, rather than it being [said in a preaching tone] ‘you know your heritage,’ blah blah ... I ain’t wearing no Dashiki! George broke it down and made the pyramid builders seem like regular old brothers chilling on the corner” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 30:00). George Clinton himself reflects, “Once we did *Chocolate City* – putting black people in situations they have never been in, and it worked – I knew I had to find another place for black people to be. And space was that place” (Marsh, 97).

Parliament’s 1975 album *Chocolate City* (Casablanca) broke boundaries and instilled P-Funk as a major voice of the Civil Rights Movement. The concept of the album was the “Blackification” (and funkification) of Washington D.C. into

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted directly from an email sent by Ron Galloway to the author. Ron Galloway’s website is <http://www.funkyvideos.com/index.htm>. He was also kind enough to ship me rare videos of P-Funk performances in their heyday. My gratitude to Mr. Galloway is boundless.

<sup>41</sup> Sun Ra’s influence in this regard is evident: “Both Clinton and Ra prescribed “Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy”, *both preached the origin of funk in the furthest recesses of the galaxy* [emphasis added], both employed kinekaleidoscopic theater in their shows, fusing outrageous entertainment unabashedly with the most profound of philosophies/cosmologies” (Hacker, 1/15/07).

“Chocolate City,” or “C.C.” for short. The title track consists of a funky background with George Clinton’s spoken-word commentary dubbed over it, and the “shout chorus” is “Gainin’ on ya! We’re gainin’ on ya!” The lyrics are nothing short of revolutionary, suggesting the imminent Black takeover of America. The album cover depicts D.C.’s most famous monuments being melted/covered by chocolate, and the “special thanks” on the inner jacket of the record read simply, “God bless you Chocolate City, and your vanilla suburbs.”

Furthermore, P-Funk disassociated intelligence and sophistication with *whiteness*. Rickey Vincent explains, “[W.E.B.] Du Bois’ reference to ‘two warring ideals in one dark body’ has dogged the racial experience in America, as racial minorities are constantly labeled as ‘sellouts’ when status, education, or success is realized. Yet P-Funk transcended this conundrum, as the notions of intellect, education, or sophistication were totally removed from any association with white status” (Vincent, 235). P-Funk’s lyrical content, as well as Pedro Bell’s liner notes, asserted that “Black” speech and slang was in every way the equal of its “White” counterpart. Overton Lloyd, P-Funk album artist explains Pedro Bell’s significance in this regard: “Pedro Bell is a paradigm shifter. In other words, before he came along we were sort of trapped in a certain box of language. He opened up the possibility of empowering the way Black people talk” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 21:31). Thus, P-Funk’s music and message became “the *ultimate* in African-American liberation” (Vincent, 235).

Pedro Bell (artist, liner-note designer for P-Funk), who was put in charge of the fan club and corresponding fan mail in the late 70's, sums up the powerful impact P-Funk's cosmology/mythology on America's black population:

“There were people who was writing stuff like, ‘I live in Okaloosa, Louisiana, and they don't try and teach nothing about Black history where we live. The only thing we learn over here is picking cotton and slavery, and then y'all came out and you talk about spaceships flown by Black people, and talking the Egyptians were really from Africa and was a supercivilization of people of color.’ Man, these people were truly outdone by knowing that this was even possible!” (Hill, 90)

P-Funk's politics were rarely heavy handed, and instead opted for coded, abstract representations of the human (and especially Black) condition. Their suggestions concerning the place of Black people in world history and in the American present helped to elevate P-Funk from being simply a band – to the position of spiritual and political guides for a whole nation.

### **iii. One Nation Under A Groove**

*“Do you promise the funk? The whole funk, and nothing but the funk?!” – from “One Nation Under a Groove” (One Nation Under A Groove, Warner Brothers 1978)*

Parliament-Funkadelic's politics were not reserved for Black America only. Rather, they concerned themselves with the *whole* of American society, and especially with the hope for a united nation (a united world), living by the principles of funk. Their take on women, for example, was sometimes misinterpreted as chauvinist, because of the open vulgarity and sexuality that was common in P-Funk's lyrics and stage behavior. However, female imagery and reverence for the mother

figure was, from at least *Maggot Brain* (1971) onward, a recurrent theme. Mother Earth/Mother Nature figured prominently, as did the (human) mother figure.<sup>42</sup> Tracks such as “Freak of the Weak” (*Uncle Jam Wants You*, Warner Brothers 1979) and “Red Hot Mama” (*Standing on the Verge of Getting It On*, Westbound 1974) present women as funky, and most importantly multi-dimensional characters (Vincent, 262). Vincent writes, “P-Funk manages to revere the struggles of women and pursue them with open and ribald sexual aggression at the same time (261).

The lyrics of “One Nation Under a Groove” summarize the P-Funk political prescription: “One nation/under a groove/getting down just for the funk of it/One nation/ and we’re on the move/nothing could stop us now!” This refrain is followed by P-Funk asking the people to take an oath: “Do you promise the funk? The whole funk, and nothing but the funk?”<sup>43</sup> By replacing “truth” with “funk,” the Funk Mob elevates the concept to the highest level. With the “One Nation” lyrics, they suggest the utopia that only funk can deliver us into. P-Funk’s politics were not about revenge, material gains, or punishment. Rather, like the bop gun that makes Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk dance (see next section), the prescription was, and is, to save humanity by bringing *all* people together under the same funky groove – “Everybody on the One!”

Brian Benson writes, “As a malcontent manifesto, the complete text of the Cosmic Slop notes could be rewardingly paired with any combination of

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<sup>42</sup> Mother Earth is mentioned in “Maggot Brain,” and other tracks. “Cosmic Slop” (*Cosmic Slop*, 1973) features the repeating line, “I can hear my mother calling” and praises the mother for managing to make a hard life bearable. Furthermore, the cover art of *Cosmic Slop*, which features the dark image of collared and miserable-looking female figure, is easily interpreted as an outcry against the defilement of Mother Nature (Vincent, 261).

<sup>43</sup> From “One Nation Under a Groove” (*One Nation Under a Groove*, Warner Brothers 1978).



Transcendentalist works – just have plenty of dictionaries at hand. In a twisted mixture of nonsense, street jive, and grand erudition, they [P-Funk] make plain a reverence of nature, a disdain for consumerism, and a desperate belief in the need to do one's one thing" (Benson, 1/20/07). Some of the most powerful elements of Parliament Funkadelic's creations were the philosophy, cosmology and visionary prescription of Funk they wove into their works. Although intimately connected with the politics of P-Funk, the original transcendental philosophy of the Funk Mob warrants its own section entirely...

### 3. TRANSCEFUNKADENTALISM: THE CHURCH OF FUNK

*“Funk is whatever it needs to be, at the time that it is.” – George Clinton*

#### iv. The Dogma of P-Funk

*“They say the bigger the headache, the bigger the pill, baby. They call me the big pill.” – Dr. Funkenstein (“Dr. Funkenstein,” from *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Casablanca 1976)*

We may never know exactly how and when George Clinton and the Funk Mob began creating an entire cast of characters, each representative of funky and unfunky forces in the universe, respectively. We *do* know that as youths, “Bootsy” and “Catfish” Collins read lots of comic books, and developed an appreciation for the power of superheroes to represent good and evil, and to spark the imagination of an audience (Ellis, 103). Furthermore, the Parliament Funkadelics wore ridiculous costumes even at the very beginning of their career, but at that point the costumes were mostly randomly chosen, and adorned simply for the effect of creating an even crazier stage presence (Rogers, 55). Vincent tell us that in the early days of Funkadelic, Fuzzy Haskins wore long johns, Grady Thomas looked like a genie, Calvin Simon wore a wizard’s pointed hat, and George “resorted to ripping holes in hotel sheets, poking his head through, and heading onstage” (Vincent, 234). Perhaps the power of impersonation thus showed itself to George Clinton and the band, and *later* they gave specific and meaningful roles to characters. This much is certain: by the end of the 1970’s an entire dogma of Funk was established, and the associated

characters graced songs, album covers, and concerts consistently thereafter.<sup>44</sup> Before we turn to the cosmology and the philosophy of P-Funk's universe, let us take a moment to discuss some of the superheroes and supervillains – all Black, of course – that played central roles within the P-Funk “religion.”

Michael O'Neal, in a 1987 thesis titled “The P-Funk Aesthetic,” wrote: “Sir Nose and Starchild, and Dr. Funkenstein, as animated (as opposed to real) superheroes, give black children a sense of animation in their own likeness that previously they have been denied – especially by the media. These superheroes offer them a mythic sense of possibility” (Vincent, 256-57). The three primary P-Funk characters are Dr. Funkenstein, Star Child, and Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk. They are all ancient in nature, and all have important roles to play in the endless battle between the Funk and the Placebo Syndrome.<sup>45</sup> Dr. Funkenstein was generally played by

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<sup>44</sup> “For the religiously inclined, P-Funk offered up an entire array of minor gods, an intangible and omnipotent metaphysical reality (the funk itself), and a whole flotilla of ministers... The roots of this church lay deep in the African polyrhythmic pantheon; its disciples (“Maggotbrains” or “Funkateers”) consisted of anyone who sought a quasi-cohesive view of a universe which included a god who danced, and who knew that having a loose booty to shake was as crucial to the keeping of the faith as the rosary was for the Catholic” (Hacker, 1/15/07).

<sup>45</sup> Scott Hacker provides as good a summary of the P-Funk cosmology as any I've found, and so I quote it here at length:

“Dig: The secret of funk was placed inside the pyramids 5,000 years ago. If we had stayed tuned (To pyramid power? Connect this to the Chariots of the Gods milieu of the same era, and the visiting spacemen theme of P-Funk) to The One, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in. “Mother earth is pregnant for the third time. We all have knocked her up.” It took the arrival of Dr. Funkenstein to unearth the funk and usher its viral spread over the de-funkatized surface of the planet.

The problem with earth is that it is devoid of funk -- earth is the “Unfunky UFO” -- due to the unfunky operations of the white house, the pentagon, Nixon, businessmen and greed in general, and an overall lack of supergroovalisticprosifunkstication. The symbol for the collective greed/war mentality is embodied by Sir Nose, D'Void of Funk (“I have always been D'Void of Funk, I shall continue to be D'Void of Funk...”), who relentlessly pimpifies the people “By sucking their brains until their ability to think was amputated...pimpifying their instincts until they were fat, horny, and strung out” in pursuit of “financial security or an eternal supply of TRIM,” the result being that “the very source of life energies on earth have become the castrated target of anile bamboozelery from homo sapiens' rabid attempts to manipulate the omnipotent forces of nature.”

The ruthless whoring of Funkentelechy has brought Mother Nature to her knees, and we're pinned beneath them. “The frenzied incipience of pimpification hath risen to the point of cosmicide.” In other words, we all have a bad case of the Placebo Syndrome, having traded in “the real thing” for a civilization comprised of cheap imitations, which is now crumbling around us. The Placebo Syndrome

George Clinton – who, after the Mothership Tour of 1976, was prone to waiting for up to an hour until enough funk force had been created in the audience before appearing – and appear he did, coming out of a spaceship, a floppy Cadillac, or at the very least a cloud of smoke. Star Child (Dr. Funkenstein’s main clone/disciple) and Sir Nose were played by various P-Funk members throughout the band’s career, but were easily identifiable at shows (Sir Nose usually came out slinking, severely overdressed and wearing an elongated nose-mask).<sup>46</sup>

The P-Funk characters were not so different than those of Star Wars, except that the “Force” was the “Funk,” and the superheroes and villains were Black and danced instead of fighting. Album artist Overton Lloyd explains: “So it was Star Child playing the Luke Skywalker role, I guess Dr. Funkenstein was being Yoda, and of course Sir Nose was being the Darth Vader” (Edson and Hill, 124). The characters were an integral part of the P-Funk live performance experience: they boosted the theatrical aspect, and helped to elevate the shows to pseudo-religious transcendental events by involving the audience – booing Sir Nose, or screaming for Dr.

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has given the body politic weak knees, which are doomed to give out from under us at any moment. We no longer feel the pulse, or smell the deep draughts of the Cosmic Slop which generates the funk. "When the signal is too weak, you're in the syndrome."

But hark! We do have booties and we do have boots, so let's move 'em! "When the syndrome is around, don't let your guard down. All you got to do is go on a bump." We have the strategic assistance of Star Child, who takes careful aim and shoots at Sir Nose (who inhabits the Nose Zone, or the Zone of Zero Funkativity) with his Bop Gun, funkating him in the luminescent sheen of its rays. In concert, guitarist Gary Shider flew over the crowd, wearing diapers of course, blasting at the crowd with a strobe light attached to a space-age rifle, "Chasing the Noses away," which forces Sir Nose to "give up the funk" and dance. "We shall overcome...we got to shoot 'em with the Bop Gun." To gather the collective energies of the funkateers into a mobilized force, Uncle Jam's Army was created to snuff out Sir Nose wherever he may lie.” (From Appendix: The Cosmology of P-Funk in a Nutshell, by Scott Hacker: <http://www.birdhouse.org/words/scot/pfinkapdx.html>, accessed 1/16/07)

<sup>46</sup> The concept of Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk came out of the idea of faking the funk: if you fake the funk, your nose will grow. It was originally manager Tom Vickers’ idea, which was “overheard as usual by George Clinton” (Vincent, 255).

Funkenstein's arrival – and providing a visual component to the vision/philosophy being presented in the music.<sup>47</sup> Parliament Funkadelic's vision, or philosophy if you will, lay at the heart of the band's music and proposed *raison d'être*, and it is to this fascinating aspect of the Funk Mob phenomenon that we now turn.

#### **v. Funk Is Its Own Reward: The Prescriptive Philosophy of P-Funk**

*“Maggot Brain is a state of mind, and then the condition and position of your ass.” – George Clinton (from “Maggot Brain,” Maggot Brain, Westbound 1971)*

The philosophy of P-Funk comprises the main body of their vision for a better world. It is rooted in African and Black religious practices, exhibits similarities to Eastern philosophies such as those of Buddhism, and espouses a universalist approach to salvation – an approach that, in a post-Freudian sense, prescribes getting down with your funky self as a route to happiness. Greg Tate – who according to Vincent has internalized funk as part of his understanding of Black culture in a holistic analysis like that of LeRoi Jones' – writes, “Funk used to be a bad word. Now everybody's trying to get knee deep... Uncle Jam [George Clinton] also gave it a metaphysic, proposing that the bottom of the human soul, its base elements one might say, are what makes life a song worth singing” (Tate 1992, 17).<sup>48</sup>

George Clinton, P-Funk's creative guru and main songwriter, was apparently a voracious reader who “would always have a book in his hands” (Marsh, 53). Brian

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<sup>47</sup> The importance of costumes and well-known characters to inducing trance in participants will be discussed in the chapter concerning itself with P-Funk's live act – for now let it suffice to say that the characters acted as symbolic cues for the audience's behavior.

<sup>48</sup> “The writer with the breadth and insight of LeRoi Jones's earlier work is Greg Tate, who until [1995] has only published articles, and one compilation of writings in 1992” (Vincent, 29).

Benson suggests that Clinton read philosophy texts, and may have encountered the literature of the American transcendentalists: “Clinton, having coined the term funkentelechy, has plainly read philosophy. An entelechy is ‘a realization or actuality as opposed to a potentiality... [or] a vital agent or force directing growth’ (“Entelechy”). While I have not found sources that speak specifically of his reading material, it certainly seems possible, perhaps likely, that Clinton encountered the Transcendentalists, and that they influenced the music of Funkadelic” (Benson, 1/16/07).

Elements of the P-Funk ideology can be found as early as Funkadelic’s first album, *Funkadelic* (Westbound, 1970). On “What is Soul?” George Clinton lays out a version of P-Funk’s mission:

“Behold, I Am Funkadelic  
I am not of your world  
But fear me not, I will do you no harm  
Loan me your funky mind  
So I can play with it  
For nothing is good unless you play with it  
And all that is good, is Nasty!”

Here we already see references to the larger-than-life self-image P-Funk would adopt, and an insistence on the truth and goodness of the “base elements” of the human experience.

At least as early as 1974, P-Funk was given a creation myth and a supernatural meaning in Pedro Bell’s story of how Mother Nature “birthed Apostles Ra, Hendrix, Stone, and CLINTON to preserve all funkiness of man unto eternity... But! Fraudulent forces of obnoxious JIVATION grew. Sun Ra strobed back to Saturn to await his Next Reincarnation, Jimi was forced back into his basic atoms; Sly was co-

opted into a jester monolith... and only seedling George remained. As it came to be, he did indeed, beget Funkadelic to restore Order Within the Universe” (from liner notes, *Standing On the Verge of Getting it On*, Westbound, 1974: qtd. in Hacker, 1994). From then on, P-Funk presented itself as nothing less than an army of good, dedicated to rendering salvation onto the humans who so badly needed it (by way of internalizing the Funk and getting down, of course). A latter mythical narrative of the origins of the Funk and its progenitors is found in the spoken-word lyrics of “Prelude” (from *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Casablanca 1976):

“Funk upon a time, in the days of the funkapus, the concept of specially designed afro-nauts, capable of funkatizing galaxies, was first laid on man-child, but was later repossessed, and placed among the secrets of the pyramids, until a more positive attitude towards this, most sacred phenomenon, clone funk, could be acquired... there in these terrestrial projects, it would wait, along with its co-inhabitants of kings and pharaohs, like sleeping beauties, with a kiss that would release them to multiply in the image of the chosen one, Dr. Funkenstein. And Funk is its own reward. May I frighten you?”

The amount of quirky, profound mantras found in the P-Funk discography is staggering, and warrants a paper in its own right. Written at a time when Eastern philosophies were successfully infiltrating the American mindscape, much of P-Funk’s philosophy is reminiscent of Buddhist, Daoist, and other South Asian texts.<sup>49</sup> Vincent writes, “the vision of P-Funk is clearly oriented toward uplift – of the individual, of black people, and of all people” (259). The chant, “Free your mind and your ass will follow/The kingdom of heaven is within,” for example, brings to mind

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<sup>49</sup> “Clinton’s philosophies are at least as old as the translations of the black Indian tantric scriptures, which proposed during biblical times that “each man is a Shiva (a deity: star) and can attain his power to the degree of his ability to consciously realize himself as such” (Vincent, 260).

the Buddha's prescription of freeing your mind of clutter in order to achieve enlightenment, as well as Buddhism's take on personal power and the lying of all possibilities (and indeed all of the universe) within one individual.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of individual responsibility and potential for growth is revisited on "Unfunky UFO," where a repeated harmonized chant tells the listener, "You've got/all that is truly needed/to save a dying world from its funklessness" (Vincent, 259), and again on "Good Thoughts, Bad Thoughts," where George Clinton chants/speaks the following lines:

"The infinite intelligence within you knows the answers,  
Its nature is to respond to your thoughts...  
You rise as high as your dominant aspiration  
You descend to the level of your lowest concept of yourself  
Free your mind and your ass will follow  
The kingdom of heaven is within."<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the recurrent mantra "Funk is its own reward" implies that "finding the Funk is synonymous with finding *oneself*," while, per Clinton and P-Funk's good sense, allowing the listener to figure out what that meant for *them* (Vincent, 260).

The P-Funk philosophy was ultimately one of cosmic unity. Upon completing an interview with George Clinton in 1976, journalist Abe peck wrote, "Clinton's spirituality had more to do with cosmic oneness than this earth's religions" (Vincent, 258). This "cosmic oneness," a take on the universe where everything is intimately interconnected, is directly rooted in African spirituality, according to Vincent (258),

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<sup>50</sup> From Funkadelic, "Free your mind and your ass will follow" (*Free Your Mind...And Your Ass Will Follow*, Westbound 1970).

<sup>51</sup> "Unfunky UFO" from *Mothership Connection* (Casablanca, 1976); "Good Thoughts, Bad Thoughts" from *Standing on the Verge of Getting it On* (Westbound, 1974).



and is a central tenet of the P-Funk philosophy. Hits such as “One Nation Under A Groove” (which went #1) brought the associated prescription to the masses.

The related concept of “the One” figures prominently in the P-Funk ideology. As previously mentioned, the “One” is more than a simple reference to the importance of the downbeat in funk music – it is also an insistence on universalism. When Clinton would chant, “Everything is on the One!” he expressed more than the funky tightness of the band: “on the One” was a joyful exclamation of the oneness of *everything*, and especially of *everyone* present. The duality of the musical/spiritual concept of the “One” insisted that when an earth-solid, interlocking funk groove met an audience of rhythmically entrained homo-sapiens, the inherent oneness of humanity, and indeed of the universe, was realized.<sup>52</sup>

“What Clinton and his funky tribe did was create an alternate worldview, complete with creation myths, funky superheroes, and a framework for black fantasy and spiritual cultivation that could withstand the pressures of living in a white world” (Vincent, 263). By combining a first-hand understanding of the struggles of black America with an original philosophy (which itself was a hodge-podge of treatises from various places and times) of transcendentalism – transcendentalism stemming from collective rhythm and “togetherness in motion” – P-Funk articulated a unique vision of cosmic unity and true liberation. This philosophy, combined with phenomenal dance-inducing funk music and a live act without equal, ensured the unmatched, still-felt effects of Uncle Jam’s Army.

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<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Clinton described the inspiration of one of his biggest hits, “One Nation Under A Groove,” as: “Everybody on the One, the whole world on the same pulse” (Vincent, 259).

A key element of the success of P-Funk's vision was that the band did not take itself too seriously. George Clinton and other members have "maintained that P-Funk was never meant to be taken seriously" (Vincent, 253), and the message within the music and the lyrics was designed to be interpreted by each individual as they saw fit. Scott Hacker writes, "Despite all of their self-inflatulatory bravadaccio, P-Funk were nevertheless unflaggingly humble before the great unnamable face of the big cookie. Such humility is a necessary underpinning to any sincere encounter with or metaphysical proclamation on the nature of mind-universe. Without it, they would come off as self-serious charlatans, wielders of the scepter of pompousness." He continues, "Their [P-Funk's] cosmology combines the best of the principles of the world's great Gnosticisms. The sense of undifferentiated cosmic unity inherent in Buddhism, the paradox, humor, and dance of Sufism, the ecological implications of quantum mechanics via the implicate order of the universe's interconnectedness, and the surrealism of psychedelic awareness" (Hacker, 1/16/07).

Ultimately, it was P-Funk's live act that created the foundations for their success and influence – it created Funkadelic's earliest buzz, ensured a continuously growing fan base through the 70's, and eventually culminated into a veritable transcendental (trance) event. Philosopher Ra Un Nefer Amen writes: "It is of great importance to note that of all the intense pleasures that Man can experience, only two – orgasm and ecstatic trance, can be deliberately induced. This explains the fundamental nature of Black religious practices... which are centered around ecstatic trance" (Vincent, 263). This is exactly what P-Funk did: created a musical-religious-cultural event that elevated the audience out of their daily grind, indeed out-of-their-

bodies, and into a super conscious (or perhaps subconscious) trance. To the Parliament Funkadelic concert, then, we now turn...

#### IV. PARLIAMENT FUNKADELIC LIVE: NO ORDINARY FUNK SHOW

*“This is a chance, this is a chance, to dance your way out of your constrictions.” – from “One Nation Under a Groove” (Warner Brothers, 1978)*

*“Equal parts tribal dance (“gaa gaa goo gaa!”), church revival (“swing down, sweet chariot/stop and let me ride”), and call-and-response nightclub hype (“we love you Dr. Funkenstein/your funk is the best!”), the P-Funk act drew from a ribald, uncensored entirety of the black tradition in mind-blowing ways no one had yet even attempted.” (Vincent, 245)*

By the time the legendary Mothership Tour kicked off in late 1976, Parliament-Funkadelic’s live act was nothing short of a transcendental phenomenon. If you were there, here’s what you’d likely see, hear, and feel: forty or more musicians and vocalists on stage, all decked out in outrageous costumes, playing loud and tight dance music – Funk at its core, with elements of so much more – and dancing in a state of controlled chaos. The stage is replete with props as the band begins to “do it to you in your eardrum.” Chants, mantras, and call-and-response lyrics involve you from the start – *especially* so if you already know them by heart, as most of the screaming, writhing audience around you does.

As the grooves get deeper and deeper into your soul, you find yourself dancing along with everyone else, begging for the arrival of the messiah himself – Dr. Funkenstein. And then, when enough fervor and desire has been achieved, arrive he does. The Mothership lands on stage, and the pimp of all pimps, the Funk guru and dispeller of the Placebo Syndrome, George Clinton, emerges from it. He tells you that tonight, the Funk *will* prevail – and you believe him. For the remainder of the show, a few hours at least (although it becomes difficult and unnecessary to be aware

of the passage of time), you and the universe are “on the One.” When the music stops playing and its time to go home, you are exhausted and profoundly happy – you are truly and fully funky up, and all is right in the world.

It was at the P-Funk show that the previously discussed elements of their art were fully expressed: the music, philosophies, liberation ideology, and message of Funk were *all* ultimately experienced in the live setting. Ted Friedman, in a paper written about P-Funk (“Making it Funky: The Signifyin(g) Politics of George Clinton’s Parliafunkadelicment Thang,” 1993), contends:

“The practical actualization of P-Funk’s idealized community, in turn, occurs at the P-Funk concert, which centers around the active participation of fans, dancing in the aisles and chanting the P-Funk slogans along with the band on stage. At the P-Funk show I attended a few years ago, the shared love of the music among fans was so powerful that for the hour before the band even took the stage, the crowd spontaneously joined together in a series of a cappella chants -- something I’ve never seen at any other concert.” (<http://music.eserver.org/text/Friedman-Making.it.Funky.html>, accessed 2/25/07).

I believe that P-Funk’s unique combination of Funk music, costumes, theatrics, metaphysics, and spiritually based band-audience interactions led many to experience a veritable trance state.<sup>53</sup> Even if this assertion cannot be proven as a

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<sup>53</sup> When examining trancing in its various forms, cultural and environmental context becomes crucially relevant – at least as much so as the music that induces, accompanies, and/or guides the trance experience. Judith Becker writes, “It is undeniable that strong rhythms and drum timbres have a direct impact on our bodies as physical organisms. There is no necessity to insist on the primacy of any one of the senses of embodiment over the others. We can transcend outdated epistemologies and approach trance as an *embodied enactment* happening *within and because of dense cultural networks of knowing and feeling*... sound properties of music accompanying trancing can be both biological and cultural” (Becker 2004, 39-40, italics added).

Becker also points out that “trance behavior, within a community, is highly predictable” (Becker, 42). Especially when it is of a religious nature like that of spiritual possession trances (Balinese Rangda festival, Pentecostal “speaking in tongues”), the trancer has foreknowledge of what is expected of him/her – knowledge stemming from previously observed trancing rituals. For example: In the Rangda/Barong ceremony in Indonesia, the “trancers who attack Rangda and then turn their knives against themselves do so on cue, so to speak” (Becker 2004, 67) – it is as if the actions are

generality, one thing is certain: P-Funk's live show was integral to their success and longevity in the American musical/cultural sphere. What follows is an attempt to describe and analyze the Parliafunkadelicament performance. I will non-exclusively focus on the late 70's shows – The Mothership, P-Funk Earth, and Flashlight Tours – for these were arguably the climax of the P-Funk phenomenon (for both the collective and the audience). My analysis is based on rare footage of the concerts, first hand-

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scripted, even though they are then acted out in a relatively un-meditated fashion while entranced. For the purposes of this paper, this very important point about trancing may seem somewhat irrelevant – at a Funk show, there is no obvious set roles/behaviors expected of the crowd, not even of the most “entranced” members of the audience.

In a sense, this makes the dance/groove-based trance experienced at a P-Funk show all the more organic – without behavioral expectations one is free to experience it all as one *feels* it. This could take the form of dancing, jumping in rhythm, chanting with the band, or just letting the performance hit you as you stand there, dazzled (or combinations thereof). At P-Funk shows I myself have attended, all of these reactions were present (indeed I have in turn acted out all of these forms).

Taking a closer look, however, we *can* actually deduce certain behaviors expected from the audience. Some of these behaviors are called forth or encouraged by the performers. The most obvious of these are the call-and-response phrases and collective chanting prevalent at P-Funk shows. In a broader sense, dancing styles take culturally determined forms: for any given period, there is a popular dance style (or styles) for any given musical form. These styles, which are today created/popularized by music videos and reproduced in clubs, are propagated by example and spread quickly. Thus, we can expect that, for example, during the “Mothership Tour” of 1976, there were certain dancing styles associated with Funk music that were likely dominant at shows.

Trance states are best (maybe only) achieved when there is encouragement and support from the environment surrounding them. This applies to both the general cultural norms, and to those specific to the event (e.g. the P-Funk show). Dancing, chanting, and all the other “commonalities” found at P-Funk shows would less likely prevail if these activities were entirely foreign to the cultural norms of audience members. Furthermore, on the event-specific level, these physically, musically, and psychologically engaging activities (dancing, singing, shouting, etc.) were and are encouraged by the event-leaders (e.g. George Clinton), often with specificity in terms of both the desired action and the time to do it. Thus, cultural expectations/norms at a P-Funk show *did* allow for and encourage behaviors that go hand in hand with trancing – in this case rhythmic entrainment, communal chanting, and generally being free, even expected, to go nuts.

It is also noteworthy that the African-American tradition, in both the Church and precursory musical forms such as blues and gospel, are particularly associated with some of the interactive phenomena worked into P-Funk shows (i.e. call and response, chanting along with the source of the sermon/music, and moving together in rhythm). Thus, for much of the Black youth that made up a majority of P-Funk's audience at most shows in the late 70's (Rogers, 118), the aforementioned behaviors were already well-integrated into their schema of expected behaviors in both *religious and musical contexts*. By getting people to dance and simultaneously participate in a quasi-religious ceremony (complete with ministers, mantras, incantations, and glorious props and lighting effects), P-Funk shows possibly brought many into an out-of-body trance state.

accounts from audience and band members, the few texts on P-Funk that I found, and my own experiences seeing the Funk mob live.<sup>54</sup>

## 1. Learning to Play *LIVE*

Even when the Funkadelics were playing the local New Jersey and Detroit circuits, the band had begun to develop a unique and powerful live show. Calvin Simon, original Parliaments member, recalls playing simple audience-participation games as early as gigs played at Plainfield High School, in the band's hometown.<sup>55</sup> Shows as early as the late sixties and early seventies inaugurated the P-Funk tradition of playing *long* shows. Cholly Bassoline, the band's manager between 1974 and 1979, recalls, "Parliament Funkadelic performances in the late 60's early 70's were probably the ultimate happening... You didn't have to get high to be high. First of all there was no time limit – the show could go on for three, four, five hours. It was never-ending: people would come and go, and people would... dress and undress" ("Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove," 17:05).

Costumes – or sometimes the lack thereof – were also integrated into the routine from the start. The band originally starting donning thrown-together get-ups because they just couldn't keep their suits and "doo-wop" clothes in order (Rogers, 55). Some members, like Calvin Simon, attributed meaning to their chosen outfits: "I used to paint my face going back to African relatives; there was significance to it"

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<sup>54</sup> Endless gratitude once again to Ron Galloway, archivist of all things P-Funk, for providing me with rare live footage of P-Funk.

<sup>55</sup> Calvin Simon: "We always got the audience involved" (Rogers, 47). Audience participation ensured a more enjoyable experience for concert-goers, and allowed them to interact and co-create with the band.

(Rogers, 55). Others opted for shock value: George Clinton, for example, earned himself a reputation for coming out wearing nothing but a sheet over his head (Vincent, 234). “Visually, the group appeared like a group of ghetto circus clowns, with an overamped rock sound that never seemed to end” (*ibid.*).

## **2. Larger Than Life: Costumes, Characters, and Charisma**

In later shows, the costumes would become integrally connected with the characters and the mythos of P-Funk. Audiences instantly recognized such mainstays as Sir Nose, Dr. Funkenstein, and Star Child by their costumes, and greeted them accordingly. In the PBS documentary, “One Nation Under a Groove,” George Clinton tells us, “characters last longer” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 30:54). Vocalist Dawn Silva (P-Funk, Brides of Funkenstein) recalls, “It was a funk opera, and everyone had their own certain roles and characters – parts that they played” (*ibid.*, 31:39). Indeed, P-Funk’s outlandish costumes were a major part of why audiences (and perhaps even the band themselves) were able to “buy into” the ridiculous cosmic plays being acted out in front of them. By masking, and thus in a sense transcending, their plain humanity, the collective’s philosophical-musical messages became more readily accepted by the crowd in front of them.<sup>56</sup>

As previously mentioned, early in their career P-Funk discovered the power of playing at seriously *loud* volumes, and continued to do so for the rest of the collective’s years. George Clinton recalls, “We thought the vibe was more important

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<sup>56</sup> In many of the world’s trancing traditions, costumes and disguises serve this exact purpose. For example, the Rangda Festival in Bali centers around a trancer completely costumed as the divine witch Rangda (Becker, 84). In other traditions, face-paint figures prominently in trancing events.



than people actually hearing us” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 12:34).<sup>57</sup> Along with a huge sonic impact, Parliament Funkadelic always delivered a sheer *intensity* of physical performance on stage. You see – forgive me but I cannot think of a satisfactory alternative phrasing – the band *just didn’t give a fuck*. “We knew then it was about making faces, jamming, and having a good time,” says Clinton (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 12:50). With the help of large doses of psychoactive drugs, the band members consistently went totally wild on stage. Bootsy Collins explains, “You know, being a Funkadelic, you had to be one of the wildest, craziest mugs in the world. Brothers just didn’t do the things we did” (Ellis, 108). George Clinton was the undisputed king of taking stage antics to the next level: from his early habit of writhing naked on stage, to the later trademark of symbolically masturbating into the audience (using a microphone stand), Clinton would never cease to shock, thrilling most while infuriating some (i.e. censors). Ultimately, P-Funk’s on-stage shenanigans served a valuable purpose – to free themselves and in turn, by example, their audiences from societal constrictions, constrictions which *must* be left behind if the Funk is to overcome and a trance experience is to be attained.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Judith Becker informs us that much of the music associated with trancing events is at least “somewhat loud” (Becker, 66)

<sup>58</sup> Parliament Funkadelic’s antics, as well as the costumes and the props, were all a part of the “controlled chaos” achieved by the live P-Funk show. In addition to the wild actions of individual band members, the sheer number of people on stage contributed to the effect. Bernie Worrell recalls that there were “up to forty people on stage. Including techs, fifty. It was crazy” (Rogers, 79). Such an entourage of funky, dancing performers such as P-Funk’s ensured that it wouldn’t be “nothin’ but a party, ya’all” (quote from George Clinton on “Mothership Connection” (*Mothership Connection*, Casablanca 1976)).

### 3. Visualizing The Myth: Props at P-Funk Shows

Props and pyrotechnics figured prominently in the Parliament-Funkadelic shows, especially in the late 70's when the collective enjoyed enormous financial backing. Besides the relatively commonplace (for large acts) explosions and dazzling lighting effects, P-Funk would always use original and unique props – props that were tied in to the P-Funk philosophy, the lyrical content of both recorded tracks and Pedro Bell's liner notes, and Bell and Overton Lloyd's artistic renditions of the Funk Mob's intergalactic Black narrative. The props seen at the P-Funk Earth Tour, for example, included a floppy Cadillac (out of which Clinton emerged for the first time at shows), an Egyptian pyramid topped by the all-seeing-eye, Garry Shider's (the diaper-man) Bop Gun, and of course the mighty Mothership itself. During the Flashlight Tour, a giant working flashlight made an appearance, as did a two minute, fifty second-long cartoon – based on Lloyd's album art - depicting Starchild, Sir Nose and the rest of the P-Funk heroes acting out their ceaseless battle of Funkenetelchy vs. the Placebo Syndrome. These props helped the band and especially the audience to temporarily escape reality, and to instead become engrossed in the alternate universe of the Parliafunkadelicment Thang.

Throughout the many years of P-Funk's career, audiences seemed to include just about everybody. According to George Clinton, “[audience members were] Blind, crippled, crazy, Black, White, tall, short, aliens... I mean, we've had every kind of audience imaginable” (Rogers, 127). Some years the audience was primarily White, while at other times, it was primarily Black. Frankie “Kash” Waddy explains,

“So it went from all White [in the early days] to all Black to a majority White now. It’s crazy” (Rogers, 100), and Garry Shider recalls, “Seventy-two got kicking: mixed, Black, White. By ’75, ’76, it got really Black. Funk was a bad word. Ain’t been that long since it got in the dictionary... It was all Black music to me. It was one big jam/funk party then” (Ellis, 118). Whatever the makeup of the audience was at any given show, however, one thing was for sure: they *would* get funky up!

The P-Funk shows – especially those of the second half of the 70’s – were *so much more* than just live music concerts. They were spiritual, transcendental events that elevated audiences to higher states of being. Scott Hacker writes, “by coming to jam along, you were taking sacrament, not stage” (Hacker, 1/17/07). As discussed previously, nearly all of the original Parliaments and most of the latter additions to P-Funk had a strong Black church background, and their performances always reflected the fact. Even in the often-muddy surviving recordings and videotapes of classic-era shows, the powerful and intensely spiritual vocals of Glenn Goins evoke shivers and ineffable longing (for the Mothership and everything it represents). Anne Danielsen writes, “Glenn Goins would take everybody to Church” (Danielsen, 26), and the sentiment is reflected in the recollections of remaining band members (Rogers, 79). Call-and-response chants and endlessly repeated metaphysical mantras, as well as rhythmic (and sometimes counter-rhythmic) clapping, served to involve the audience – to grant them the pleasure of contributing a unified, enormous voice to the sound coming from stage.

Often shows began with an invocation or metaphysical speech, such as the one from “Prelude” (*Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Casablanca 1978) presented in a

deep voice over Worrell's sinister organ intros (e.g. P-Funk Earth Tour, Houston '78). Most audience members undoubtedly already knew the stories and the mythos, from albums and perhaps previously attended shows, and jumped right in, singing hooks with the band.<sup>59</sup> The props, pyrotechnics, and costumes further contributed to draw audiences into the music and the philosophical motifs underlying it. Yet the most important element of the show – the greatest gift rendered by the Funk mob onto their audience, and the key to the incredible, transcendental experience of attending a P-Funk show – was, and is, the induction of dance.

#### **4. P-Funk and Dancing: Salvation by Way of (Communal) Booty-Shaking**

“According to Clinton, the funk grooves were nothing less than a means of arriving at a spiritual focus while also providing bodily release to an afflicted audience.” (Daneilsen, 115). It was this “bodily release” that funk music seemed especially capable of inducing. At their shows, Parliament Funkadelic *relentlessly* poured out tight, funky, loud and undeniably danceable music. Scott Hacker writes, “The unity of the dance is given unto the dancers...it is not their responsibility to keep

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<sup>59</sup> This point is of crucial significance: at Church, part of the power of singing together comes from the familiarity with the repertoire, and the associated meanings. Judith Becker argues that the “*habitus of listening*” is of supreme significance to the attainment of trancing states – in other words that the pre-conceptions and foreknowledge of aspects of the trancing event are key elements in inducing trance in participants (Becker, 70, 84). Indeed, Becker writes, “The *habitus of listening* of the *bebuten* trancer on encountering Rangda would have to include not only the gamelan music and the presence of the witch but also a complex of beliefs about the negative forces of the cosmos, their effects on human communities, the embodiment of these forces in the divine witch Rangda, and the methods by which she may be contained or controlled” (84).

This passage could quite easily be transposed onto the P-Funk show, as follows: “The *habitus of listening* of the funk concertgoer on encountering Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk would have to include not only the music of P-Funk and the presence of Sir Nose and his funky antitheses Star Child and Dr. Funkenstein, but also a complex of beliefs about the forces of the universe as preached by P-Funk, their effects on human communities, the embodiment of these forces in the P-Funk characters, and the methods by which the Placebo Syndrome may be overcome (i.e. dancing the “blahs” away).”

in step, but their privilege to have "The One" channeled through the band's antennae and onto the dance floor. Even if you have no intention of dancing, your protons are going to go ahead without you. It can't be helped" (Hacker, 1/17/07). For hours on end, P-Funk would party with their audience, and everyone would dance, and dance, and dance! By the end of the night, the crowd was exhausted and elated. Frankie Waddy recalls, "I'd look into the audience and I actually felt sorry – people were, like, propping each other up" (Rogers, 100).

Dancing was right at the heart of the whole P-Funk thang. In their philosophy/cosmology, dancing was the ultimate weapon against all that was wrong and un-funky in the world. The Bop Gun, the greatest weapon known to man, simply made people, including Sir Nose, dance to the music. "Free your mind and your ass will follow" and "One nation under a groove" are just a few of the myriad examples of P-Funk's lyrics placing the utmost importance on dancing. Indeed, the defining characteristic of Sir Nose, the anti-Funk super-villain, was that he wouldn't dance. Funk music in *general* is a *dance-music* idiom, and P-Funk made it their mission to rock the dance floor like no other band could.

Some historical and anthropological works have argued that *rhythmic entrainment* (i.e. moving together in rhythm, or communal dancing) has the profound effect of creating feelings of solidarity among human beings. Judith Becker writes, "scholars such as Benzon and Freeman have made bold claims concerning the evolutionary importance of musical entrainment [i.e. dancing together in rhythm]" (Becker, 153).<sup>60</sup> Ethnomusicologist Charles Keil has repeatedly made a similar

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<sup>60</sup> "Freeman argues that rhythmic entrainment is a supremely powerful tool for creating social cohesion", and "Like Freeman, Benzon suggests that the evolution of music and the evolution of man

argument: “All humans were full participants once upon a time and I believe we still experience much music and perhaps some other portions of reality this way. I also believe we need more of this participatory consciousness if we are to get back into ecological synchrony with ourselves and with the natural world” (Keil and Feld 1994: 97). This quote is *stunning* in its prescriptive similarity to P-Funk’s message, for both suggest that dancing is a necessary step toward reconnecting with Mother Nature, each other, and ourselves. In the final analysis, dancing with others simply makes human beings *feel good*, and P-Funk’s ability to facilitate massive, seemingly endless dance-parties is both a marker of the power of their music (and performance), and a partial explanation for their widespread and long-lasting success.

The Parliament Funkadelic show was the ultimate synthesis of all that the band, its music, and the complex message therein embodied. I myself have experienced the glorious ecstatic state that P-Funk still induces, as have millions of fans throughout the last forty years.<sup>61</sup> My first P-Funk All-Stars show was one of the

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as a social being are coterminous, that communal musical activity and rhythmic entrainment may have facilitated the survival of humankind by facilitating social bonding” (Becker, 154).

<sup>61</sup> I would like to quote at length a beautifully worded review of a P-Funk show at Bard College by Akie Bermis, taken from *The Bard Free Press* Vol.3, Issue 7:

- *On Funk...*

by **Akie Bermis**

“At last, George ascended to the platform and there was an explosion. The temperature rocketed up 12 degrees in an instant, outside the stars began to twinkle arrhythmically, the funk became funkier, and I—nerdy ming— began to dance. I was in the tumult when the show began its final climactic passion throes. I was in the very thick of the funk, 400+ bodies heaving together (in a severely lewd cheek-to-cheek fashion) trying to hear the sermon.

Oh yes, the lights flashed, George shook his head and bade us sing—and we sang. George commanded us to shout—and we shouted. George said jump—and we jumped. We jumped in our hot, sweaty bacchanal like the floor was falling. If you were in the funky orgy with us, then you catch my drift. It was like home amidst the beat and the melody, the light and the obscurity, the profanity and the pristine joy. Ah yes, it was the magic of the one and only Dr. Funkenstein.

And when he left, we screamed till our throats taste of blood and bile. And it was good. What makes it most special, though, was that we were there for it. When George Clinton came out and made himself like Clausewitz or Isocrates or Aristotle, and gave us his treatise: *On Funk*. A simple thesis statement, and I was digging it from the first down beat all the way home. This sage told us, that night,

most deeply religious experiences of my life! In order to further describe and analyze the live P-Funk phenomenon, I will now present a step-by-step temporally-structured analysis of a live performance of “Mothership Connection” taken from rare video footage of Parliament Funkadelic on tour in 1977, with the “P-Funk Earth Tour.”

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at Bard College, between glory and legacy, from his vast wisdom that funk is love. Put that in your pipe and smoke it Funk is love.”

## V. “MOTHERSHIP CONNECTION” LIVE<sup>62</sup>

*“That’s the connection, the whole theme, the whole everything right there” – Bernie Worrell about “Mothership Connection” (Rogers, 80).*

Almost an hour into the set, Parliament Funkadelic is in full effect, wrapping up “Children of Production” (*The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Casablanca 1976) with a fade-out repeated vocal line (“We’re gonna blow the cobwebs out your mind”). As the lights and the voices dim, the pickup to the primary “Mothership Connection” groove (the “A section”) kicks off the song with a bang, to the crowd’s roaring approval. The “One” (the downbeat) is, of course, emphasized with a heavy kick drum hit along with the bass, guitar, and keyboard line, and furthermore the last three eighth notes of each second measure (henceforth bar and measure are interchangeably used) are played in unison, as a means of emphasizing the return to the “One” on the downbeat of the following bar. Barely three measures into the song, George Clinton

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<sup>62</sup> The following breakdown of “Mothership Connection” live is taken from a video recording of P-Funk’s performance in Houston, Texas in December of 1977, while on the “P-Funk Earth Tour.” I will use the main body of this chapter to describe the musical/visual events in a temporally-structured manner, while footnotes will provide added analysis and points of interest.

I have found no way to assert with certainty the exact lineup of musicians at this particular show, but the personnel credited on the live album of the tour (*Parliament Live: P-Funk Earth Tour*, Casablanca 1977) are probably much the same as those found at the Houston gig. They are:  
Vocals: George Clinton, Calvin Simon, Fuzzy Haskins, Raymond Davis, Grady Thomas, Garry Shider, Glen Goins, Debbie Wright, Jeanette Washington  
Horns: Fred Wesley, Maceo Parker, Rick Gardner, Richard Griffith (\*definitely not the lineup seen at Houston show)  
Bass: Cordell Mosson, Bootsy Collins  
Guitars: Garry Shider, Michael Hampton, Glen Goins, Eddie Hazel  
Drums & Percussion: Jerome Brailey  
Keyboards & Synthesizers: Bernie Worrell  
Extra-Singing Clones: Lynn Mabry, Dawn Silva, Gary Cooper  
Horn Arrangements: Bernie Worrell & Fred Wesley  
Rhythm Arrangements: Bootsy Collins & George Clinton



energetically delivers a version of the speech found on the recorded version of

“Mothership Connection”:

“Well, alright! Star Child here, citizens-of-the-universe recording agency. We have returned to claim the pyramids. We are partying on the Mothership! I am the Mothership Connection... Getting down in 3D, light year groovin’. If you hear any noise, it ain’t nothin’ but me and the boys out here tonight. We are turning the mutha out tonight – are you ready to get down like that? ARE YOU READY!?”

During the short speech, the horn section had already begun their counter-rhythmic harmonized riffs, and when Clinton finishes speaking, the horn riffs are exposed as the funky, jazzy, rhythmically complex creations they are.<sup>63</sup> The rhythm section and horns play alone for four bars, and then Clinton yells “SING!” and all the vocalists sing in harmony, “If you hear any noise/It’s just me and the boys/Hit me/You’ve got to hit the band.” This chant/sung lyric is repeated twice (over eight bars).

The vocalists and horns then drop out, the groove gets a bit softer (in volume) and crisper, and George Clinton gets back on the microphone, interacting with the crowd while the groove goes on under him:

“Well alright! Starchild here. We’re gonna turn the motherfucka out. I want ya’all to put a glide in your stride, a dip in your hip, and come on to the Mothership. Can ya’all do the loose booty? [then rapping, in rhythm] Can you do the bump? [commands] Sing!”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Bernie Worrell and Fred Wesley are credited with creating the horn arrangements on “Mothership Connection” (<http://www.answers.com/topic/mothership-connection-bonus-track>, accessed 2/25/07).

<sup>64</sup> When Clinton improvises, asking the crowd if they could “do the bump,” James Brown’s influence becomes immediately apparent, for Clinton *raps* the line to the groove, in a clearly James Brown-esque manner.

The vocalists come back in, along with the horns, and sing “If you hear any noise...” two times (eight bars) while the horns play in the background. The next four bars feature the horn melody, with George Clinton rapping “Ain’t it funky now?!” between licks. At the end of the 4-bar phrase, Clinton turns to the guitarists, says “double up on it!” and stands back, dancing, as the two-bar long guitar/bass/keyboard riff that has been repeated *in unison* since the beginning of the song is harmonized within the Dorian scale. The rhythm section plays this newly harmonized, freshly thickened riff for eight bars while Clinton raps little funky nothings in the background. On beat 3.5 of bar eight of this section, the rhythm section and horns hit a *huge* harmonized chord (along with a cymbal crash) to lead back into the main groove.

At this point George Clinton and Glenn Goins start singing a theme which will return again and again throughout the song: “The Mothership connection/is here!” The word “Mothership” here falls flat on the “One,” serving to further reinforce the downbeat. The mantra is repeated nine times, with horns playing their riff behind every other repetition, and Glenn Goins improvising harmonies in his spiritual, gospel-based tenor. In between phrases, Clinton encourages the crowd to participate (i.e. “Everybody sing!”). At the end of the section, Clinton once again tells the rhythm section to “double up” and the harmonized rhythm-section-only groove is played four times, eventually leading back into the main groove and the harmonized “If you hear any noise...” vocals accompanying it.

As the vocalists sing, “If you hear any noise,” for the second time, Clinton sings/chants/warns in a deep tone: “If you ain’t gonna get it on, take your dead ass

home.” “If” and “take” fall on the downbeats of this two-bar phrase. Clinton keeps on repeating the phrase, and by the third repetition the vocalists join him and continue to repeat the phrase while Clinton stops singing to yell “louder!” every few bars. By the seventh repetition Clinton commands the crowd to sing with the band, pointing his microphone into the audience. After another three refrains, the vocalists cut out and the rhythm section groove stands alone as Glenn Goins takes the lead microphone into his hand, and asks, “Houston: Where are the party people? We want everybody to sing this time! Come on!” He then gets the crowd singing “If you ain’t gonna get it on, take your dead ass home!” four times (eight bars).

On the downbeat of the first bar of the next “section,” Glenn Goins switches up the chant, to “The Mothership connection/is here!” as the horns simultaneously begin playing their riff. Goins extends the microphone into the audience once more, and all the vocalists cut out – at which point we hear the crowd chanting, *loudly*, “The Mothership connection/is here!” over and over, while Clinton, Goins, and vocalists encourage them in between phrases to “Say it louder!” Meanwhile a horn riff, instantly recognizable but not found on the album version of “Mothership Connection,” is heard for the first time: it is a harmonized, *sharp* blast of the first seven notes of Warner Brother’s “Looney Tunes” theme song!

The riff hits on the downbeat, and for the rest of the four-bar phrase all we hear is the groove, and the crowd continuing to chant. The next sixteen bars are the same: the “Looney Tunes” riff hits on the downbeat of the first of every four bars as Clinton gets the crowd singing/chanting louder and louder. After four repetitions (four phrases, sixteen bars), a truly *funky* thing happens: the horn riff grows! The

phrase now starts, as it has, with the “Looney Tunes” figure, but on the second beat of the second bar of the phrase it continues with a pure-Funk JB-esque harmonized riff. This “built-up” four bar phrase is then repeated eight times.<sup>65</sup> Halfway through, Clinton shouts, in rhythm, “En Garde! Defend yo-self! We shall overcome!” and Glenn Goins answers by singing “Where’d you get that funk from?” After the eight repetition of the “built-up” horn phrase, the vocalists start to sing the next major mantra: “I got to get over the hump.”

The horns drop out, and the rhythm section drops in volume but not intensity, and “I got to get over the hump” is repeated *over and over*, once per bar, for thirty two bars. Meanwhile Clinton, Goins and the vocalists fill in the gaps with shouts and pleas for *everyone* to sing, encouraging the crowd to chant along with the band. After thirty two repetitions (thirty two bars), the horns come back in the with the revamped “Looney Tunes” riff, this time making it fall on beat two of the first of every four bars. Beat one – the “One” – is now occupied by a thick, harmonized vocal “Ahh!” while other vocalists (including bass Fuzzy Haskins) continue the “I got to get over the hump” refrain as it was before. The band continues in this manner, and in a few bars Glenn Goins talks to the crowd, telling them about the Bop Gun:

“Ya’all are already hip to the Bop Gun, then... Ya’all already know about the Bop Gun? See the Bop Gun is something you got to get hip to. The Bop Gun will help you get over the hump, cause when ya get shot with the Bop Gun, it will make you dance”

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<sup>65</sup> Needless to say, Clinton and the band are all dancing throughout the whole song – creating a visual as well as an aural cue for the audience to dance and become rhythmically entrained.

The vocalists now add a third, interweaved “I got to get over the hump” line, sung high and in a counter-rhythm to the main repeated phrase. Glenn Goins asks the band and the crowd,

“Ya’all feel like singing for a while? See, in order for us to get down, we need ya’all to get down too. We need everybody in here to groove! I don’t know about ya’all, but I feel alright. You know everything is cool, and we’re trying to get over the hump... And we shall!”

The band jams like this for a long time, and the horns start adding the funky extension to the “Looney Tunes” lick, eventually omitting the “Looney Tunes” element entirely and leaving only the extension riff (and then later picking it up again). The ensuing section is improvisation at its finest – “controlled chaos” at work. The singing is relentless as we *hear* and *see* the vocalists get more and more into their interlocking parts. The volume and density of the rhythm section’s groove gradually increases, and then comes back down, making space for George Clinton to address the audience. He says:

“Watch me. Do ya’all believe in the Mothership? *Do you believe in the Mothership?* If ya’all believe in the Mothership, raise your hand! We’ll see if we could get that motherfucka to land on the stage right here. Ya’all got to help us get over the hump! DANCE!”

The “I got to get over the hump” refrain is then repeated sixteen more times (with horns and counter-melodies, of course), with the rhythm section “doubling up” halfway through, adding harmonies and guitar distortion to the groove. The sixteenth bar announces a return to the original groove, and an end to the “over the hump” refrain, with the horn/rhythm section chord on beat 3.5.

The vocalists then harmonize the line “If you hear any noise, its just me and the boys, getting down. You’ve got to hit the band!” two times, and George Clinton says to Goins, “Glenn, I think it’s about that time.” Glenn Goins takes the microphone and sings, “When you hear this rumble, you feel your conscience grumble, hit me! You wanna hear the band.” This is the cue the band’s been waiting for (the same cue found in the album version of “Mothership Connection”), and with precision P-Funk moves on to the “B section” of the track, leaving the previous groove behind for good. It is now about fifteen minutes since the beginning of the song, and the Mothership is on its way...

The epic “B” groove has now begun – decidedly more minor and mysterious, it starts out with drums playing only alternating bass drum and hi-hat hits on every eighth note; bass, guitar and keys playing more fluid, dense lines (compared to the “A” section groove); and the horns repeating a powerful stacked and harmonized four bar riff. The horns cut out after four repetitions (sixteen bars), and the rhythm section grooves alone, ethereally, for eight bars. And then Clinton comes in singing the unforgettable hook alone: “Swing down/sweet chariot stop/and let me ride.”<sup>66</sup> He repeats this line – which sits in two bars – twice (for four bars), singing it on the root of the key (F# minor). Then the harmony a fifth above, sung by a female backup vocalist, joins in. The two voices continue to repeat the invocation several times. Soon more and more harmonies join, adding a voice every four bars. The sparse

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<sup>66</sup> The “Swing down” chant was a reference to the traditional black church hymn. “When Gabriel’s horn blow, you better be able to go” was at the end of the song. In this case, however, the chariot was not an angel, but a spaceship with funky black crew that has ‘returned to claim the pyramids’” (Vincent, p.254).

groove remains unchanged behind the voices, and Clinton keeps encouraging the crowd to sing with the band.

The next major event in the live performance happens when George Clinton tells everyone – band and audience – to clap their hands on the “ands,” or the offbeats. The claps coincide with Jerome Brailey’s hi-hat hits, and strengthen the off-beat density of the groove. The vocals are still singing, “Swing down...” as the crowd becomes *a crucial instrument* in the band, adding its mighty percussive counter-clap to the overall sound. After about thirty two bars, Clinton asks Glenn Goins to come up front, while telling the audience and the band to keep the off-beat clap rhythm going, and telling the rhythm section to “Keep it steady back there.” Glenn Goins then takes a short guitar solo, while asking the crowd to clap “a little louder.” He then returns to playing the funky rhythm guitar line he was playing before, closes his eyes, and begins to sing: “I wanna ride... Yea, I wanna ride.”<sup>67</sup>

Goins sings “I wanna ride” four times (over eight bars), with a female vocalist responding with the same lyric. Then Goins starts preaching to the crowd: “Do you believe in the Mothership’s coming?” he asks, four times – with the last two harmonized by the female vocalist. Glenn Goins then sings “I wanna ride” three

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<sup>67</sup> Glenn Goins was, as previously mentioned, an extremely gifted and spiritual singer. Bob DeDeckere, P-Funk’s road manager from 1976 until 1981, recalls, “There was an intro to the Mothership landing where Glenn Goins would take everyone to church. Glenn had the most churchified voice you have ever heard in your life. It was a sanctified testimony from him, when he would start with “I think I hear the Mothership coming... And the crowd would just get caught up in the fervor, and as the ship would come down – you could hear the roar” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 27:30).

Rickey Vincent writes about the lead-up to the Mothership landing (when Goins would improvise vocals): “The performance preceding the descent of the Mothership was laden with funky ritualism, meditative chants, a series of massive symbolic stage props brought onstage, and a gospel churchlike invocation to bring the ship down. After a considerable frenzy had been built up, the chant “Swing down, I wanna ride” signified it was time for the landing” (Vincent, 257).

more times, holding the final note for three bars before taking the microphone out of its stand and singing, “I believe that the Mothership’s coming! I wanna ride!” He scats on this line, improvising deep, blues-y melodies using variations on the above text. His voice, closed eyes, and body language suggests a religious fervor that helps the crowd feel the moment with yet more intensity.

Eventually, he addresses the crowd: “Can ya’ all help me sing one time?” and leads the band and the audience in singing “Swing down/sweet chariot stop/and let me ride” with ever-increasing energy and volume. The band’s volume grows accordingly, and *all* of the vocalists harmonize the mantra, repeating it ceaselessly as the horns join the band, playing their original “B” section riff. The harmonies, wails, and licks get exponentially louder and more intense, and it becomes hard to separate notes from noise as we see a living-room sized spaceship, replete with flashing lights and fireworks, begin its descent from somewhere behind and above the stage. It has now been twenty-three minutes since the song had begun. As the Mothership lands on stage, the band surrounds it and bows to it as the music comes to a deafening, distorted fermata (held) ending – second in volume only to the crowd’s roar.<sup>68</sup>

As the smoke clears and the music dies down, George Clinton comes out of the Mothership’s hatch wearing a white fur pimp outfit, sporting a cane and

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<sup>68</sup> The Mothership itself was *so much more* than just a stage prop. Scott Hacker writes, “The Mothership symbolized the possibility of a spiritual, not a physical, return to blood and to roots, to the swirling gasses and dust of galactic conception, to the smell of freshly plucked wild yams, amorphous and still covered in the funk of the earth” (Hacker, 1/17/07).

Audiences *loved* the giant ship. Jeanette Washington, vocalist and member of Parlet, recalls, “When the spaceship would come down, my adrenaline would go up because the people – they were just so excited... And then boom, its there, and everyone is screaming all over the place. And I’m like, ‘they’re really eatin’ that stuff up; they really like it, they probably think this is a real spaceship or something. They were *eating it up*” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 29:00).



sunglasses. Bernie Worrell plays the most sinister, funky version of the “Little Drummer Boy” you could imagine on the synthesizer as Clinton descends from his spaceship. The band hits the next song, “Tear The Roof off the Sucka (We Want the Funk!)” in full force, and the crowd – along with the band - gets back to the business of achieving Funkenetelchy, fighting all that is wrong in the world by *getting down together!*

## **Conclusion: “Ain’t No Party Like a P-Funk Party, ‘Cause a P-Funk Party Don’t Stop!”**

*“It is the funk beat that now pulses through modern music more than any other.” - Vincent, 1996 p.22*

*“[P-Funk is] the most sampled music collective on the planet.” – Matt Rogers, Wax Poetics Magazine Issue #18, p.39*

*“Just remember: funk ain’t going nowhere. Funk ain’t going an-y-wheere!” – Garry Shider (Rogers, p.118)*

### **1. George Clinton and P-Funk’s Careers Since the 1980’s**

By the end of 1978, early signs of Parliament Funkadelic’s impending unraveling were apparent. After completing *One Nation Under a Groove* (Warner Brothers, 1978), which went platinum, original Parliaments members Fuzzy Haskins, Ray Davis, Grady Thomas, and Calvin Simon left P-Funk for good. According to them, George Clinton’s shady business dealings left them feeling underpaid and under-credited (an accusation Clinton has faced repeatedly throughout his career), and soon thereafter Glenn Goins and Jerome Brailey followed suit. Brailey even started a new band called “Mutiny” and produced an album titled *Mutiny on the Mamaship*, a direct attack on Clinton, his ego, and his purported double-crossings (Vincent, 248).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> According to original Funkadelic bassist, Billy “Bass” Nelson, the truth behind interpersonal relations in the P-Funk camp was darker than most ever imagined: “It really hurts me to my heart, man... It’s just a pity. Could’ve been wonderful for all of us, but [was] literally destroyed because of selfishness, greed, ignorance, and hatin’ each other. For anybody to say that wasn’t the deal, they don’t know what they’re talking about, ‘cause that’s exactly what took place in Parliament-Funkadelic, man” (Rogers, 68).

As the 1970's came to a close, intra-band tensions and spiraling substance abuse threatened to tear apart the Funk Mob. Soon thereafter, a disagreement between George Clinton and Warner Brothers (over Warner Brother's insistence on censoring the album cover to *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* (Warner Brothers, 1981)) set off a crushing chain-reaction: first, Warner Brothers took back funds and began to back off; then Columbia; and finally Casablanca, which had been sold to Polygram. Within two years, funds and interest from the very labels that enabled P-Funk to rise to the top in the 70's were gone, and the doors to Parliament Funkadelic were shut ("Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove," 42:20). But it wasn't over yet!

By 1982, the band had seemingly totally fallen apart, and George Clinton released his first solo album, *Computer Games* (Capitol Records, 1982). A single song from this album would become a legend in its own right – recognized widely as a classic of Black popular music, and becoming “perhaps the most sampled rhythm hook of all time” (Vincent, 250): this song was “Atomic Dog.” Despite being practically blacklisted from the industry, George Clinton managed to get “Atomic Dog” on the charts and eventually, with reluctant national airplay, the song hit #1 on the R&B charts – and stayed there for four weeks!

While “Atomic Dog” was slow in gaining official recognition, it became an instant underground dance-floor classic. Characteristically P-Funk, the track featured a heavy synthesizer line, typically absurd lyrics (e.g. “Why must I feel like that/Why must I chase the cat?”), and Clinton's unapologetic sexual bravado. It would go on to be adopted as the theme song for the Black fraternity Omega Psi Phi, and “a slew of

artists copied the hook note-for-note on their sexiest sides” (Vincent, 250).<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, “Atomic Dog” was the first video ever shown on BET’s (Black Entertainment Television) “Video Soul” when the show debuted in 1982, further immortalizing George Clinton and P-Funk as immensely important figures in the rise of Black popular culture in America (<http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/motherpage>, 1/17/07).

Using the momentum from the success of “Atomic Dog,” George Clinton put P-Funk back together. The new band, led as before by Clinton, featured some old members, some younger additions, and a new name: The P-Funk All-Stars. Since the release of their 1983 debut album, *Urban Dancefloor Guerrillas* (Uncle Jam/CBS Associated Records, 1983), the P-Funk All Stars have been touring and recording consistently, keeping the original P-Funk sound and repertoire alive while creating new material, venturing into new idioms (hip-hop), and continuing to exert their influence and funky wisdom by collaborating with groups like the Red Hot Chili Peppers and even the Dave Mathews Band. Clinton’s granddaughter now performs side by side with the original Dr. Funkenstein, who is older and sports a grey beard, but without a doubt still possesses (and exerts) his formidable powers as head minister of the Funk.

The P-Funk All-Stars, unlike so many groups re-united for tours long after the height of their popularity, still compel audiences with unmatched live performances.

Frankie “Kash” Waddy (drums), who has continued to play with the band on and off

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<sup>70</sup> Karyn White’s “Walkin’ the Dog,” Teddy Riley’s “Do the D.O.G.G.,” and Ice Cube’s “The Nigga You Love to Hate,” “My Summer Vacation,” and “Ghetto Bird” are a few of the earliest uses of elements of “Atomic Dog” by other artists. Later, hip-hop masters Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg would extensively borrow from the track to create “Snoop Doggy Dog,” the idiomatic West Coast hip-hop classic that heavily helped to spark Snoop Dogg’s still-strong career.

until the present, tellingly recalls a 2004 gig when a rising hip-hop giant – like so many before him – made the mistake of *following* the Funk Mob onstage:

“...We did a show with Kanye West about two years ago when he was starting to get big in the game. His ass wanted to headline an outside thing in Montgomery, Alabama. He was respectful when he met us, but to the promoters he insisted being the headline. We said, “You don’t really want to do that.” And after he performed he came to us and apologized: “I don’t know what I was thinking; there is no way in the world I will ever try to go [after] you guys again.” (Rogers, 100)

George Clinton himself has produced and developed numerous groups throughout the last two decades, including the Red Hot Chili Peppers (for their second album in 1985) and Digital Underground (for *Sons of the P* (1991), an homage to P-Funk featuring Clinton himself). Other members have started their own groups, or worked extensively with other major acts – Bernie Worrell, for example, helped to develop and played with The Talking Heads for several years in the 80’s. Iconic artists such as Rick James and Prince openly admit the extent of P-Funk’s influence on their music: Rick James, for example, recalls on PBS’s P-Funk documentary *One Nation Under a Groove*, ““George gave me a lot of hope... What [P-Funk was] doing definitely motivated me. Definitely colored some of my music... [I would think], ‘well, how would George approach this?’ I think a lot of us do that” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 44:50).<sup>71</sup> In addition, the P-Funk All-Stars as a collective have appeared numerous times on television – a 1986 appearance on

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<sup>71</sup> The author also believes that the P-Funk sound’s influence is *clearly* heard in some of Michael Jackson’s biggest Quincy Jones-produced hits, like “Thriller” and “Wanna Be Startin’ Somethin’.” The connection especially makes sense in light of the fact that in the late 60’s, “some of Clinton’s irreverent songwriting made it into Motown, such as... “I’ll Bet You” to the Jackson 5” (Vincent, 232).

*Saturday Night Live* and a 1987 appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman* inaugurated a long line of talk show appearances.

In 1997, Parliament Funkadelic was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame – a well deserved if somewhat belated honor. PBS’s documentary shows a clip from the award ceremony: forty-odd grinning, somewhat old-looking funkateers on stage, and an uncharacteristically solemn and teary-eyed George Clinton paying homage to those countless other members of Uncle Jam’s Army who couldn’t be there because of distance or death. Ultimately, however, P-Funk’s legacy will perhaps be best preserved not even by the collective itself, or their recordings, but by the role the Funk Mob played in the creation, growth, and ultimate takeover of hip-hop as today’s American – and by extension, world – popular music and culture.

## **2. Parliament Funkadelic and Hip-Hop**

*“... We’re the most sampled group of all time. The DNA for hip-hop.” – Frankie “Kash” Waddy (Rogers, 100)*

*“Dr. Dre should have a holiday for Bernie Worrell” – hip-hop icon Mos Def (qtd. in Rogers, 73)*

In 1988, rap group Public Enemy’s landmark album *It Takes A Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* kicked off the popular era of hard-core rap (otherwise known as gangster rap): the first single from the album, “Bring the Noise,” was based on a sampled loop from Funkadelic’s 1975 tune, “Get Off Your Ass and Jam,” and ushered in the golden age of P-Funk sampling in hip-hop production. For several

years thereafter, George Clinton and P-Funk samples became the loops of choice for some of hip-hop's most influential artists.<sup>72</sup>

In 1989 producer Prince Paul looped a snippet of Funkadelic's "(Not Just) Knee Deep" (*Uncle Jam Wants You*, Warner Brothers 1979) for De La Soul's "Me, Myself, and I," and that "got them [De La Soul] over the hump into pop radio" (Rickey Vincent on PBS's *One Nation Under a Groove*, 47:30).<sup>73</sup> Soon afterward, in 1990, platinum rappers Eric B and Rakim sampled Funkadelic's "No Head, No Backstage Pass" (*Let's Take It To The Stage*, Westbound 1975).

The legendary Oakland-based hip-hop group Digital Underground, in turn, paid unapologetic allegiance to the Funk Mob throughout its early career. Digital Underground's 1989 platinum-selling album *Sex Packets* featured a song titled "Underwater Rimes," a direct shout-out to Parliament's 1978 hit "Aqua Boogie" (*Motor-Booty Affair*, Casablanca 1978). The rap group's third album, titled *Sons of the P* (1991), proclaimed their direct descent from "the Father of Funk" (George Clinton), borrowed P-Funk's style of using cartoon characters to enhance the band's image, and featured Dr. Funkenstein himself on the title track.

Digital Underground member Shock G admits, "George [Clinton] and Bernie [Worrell] were the fathers of my thought process," and discusses P-Funk's influence on hip-hop: "You want to talk about hip hop and P-Funk, Bernie was the first one

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<sup>72</sup> According to Rickey Vincent, "it was at this point [1988] that the Clinton/P-Funk loop surpassed James Brown as the jingle of choice (just as P-Funk surpassed the JB's funk as the groove of choice in the 1970's). With the range of black rap music opening up to wider realms, the P-Funk catalog became the staple, and the standard by which stylistic breadth was conceptualized in hip-hop sampling. Other known rap acts like Schooly D ("Saturday Nite"), EPMD ("Who's Booty," "So Watcha Sayin"), and De La Soul ("Me, Myself, and I") began to incorporate obvious and not-so-obvious P-Funk loops into their music" (Vincent, 251-252).

<sup>73</sup> De La Soul members Dove and Posdunous explain an aspect of their respect for P-Funk, "Parliament and Funkadelic was just... the kings of [breaking out of the norm]" ("Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove," 48:14).

doing them gangsta string lines... that became so known for the ghetto boys, the real hard hip-hop artists” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 48:30). Shock G also relates how not only the music of P-Funk, but also the message therein, was profoundly important for both Black America *and* his personal evolution:

“When I was a kid, I loved “Flashlight,” but I didn’t know what it was about... I never knew it was “Flashlight” the action, not the noun: it was the verb. He was saying, ‘Flashlight, shine some light on us in this situation we in in these United States... Help Nose find the funk, shine some Light on all the house brothers... Sir Nose is the brother who can out-European a European.” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 32:30)

Rapper Greg Jacobs (a.k.a. “Humpty Hump”), also of Digital Underground, recalls the magic of working with George Clinton on *Sons of the P* in 1991:

“He led me onto a theory that we’re just conveyors, we’re just, you might say, the people that are directing the energy in the funk, but he seems to feel like it’s a collective spirit that comes from the whole rhythm of the world, the rhythm of people... One of the things George [Clinton] was about, was capturing that in the studio.” (Vincent, 252)

World famous hip-hop artist Ice-Cube also pays his dues to P-Funk in PBS’s documentary. He recalls first getting turned on to Parliament Funkadelic as a child: “Just the covers, their album covers would just get my attention. And I would read the little comic strip, and then I’d hear my brother listening to this crazy psychedelic space... funk record. I was hooked” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 20:00), and goes on to confirm that “Gangsters love Parliament and Funkadelic – they love it” (*ibid.*, 48:47). Toward the end of the documentary, Ice Cube reverently admits,



“I know that if it wasn’t for them [P-Funk], I wouldn’t do hip-hop as raw as I do. I wouldn’t know that it’s cool for you to be who you are, say what you feel, and do it how you want to do it – that it’s cool to do it like that. I learned that from George Clinton and Funkadelic more than anyone else in the music business.” (“Parliament Funkadelic: One Nation Under a Groove,” 50:25)

Hip-hop’s greatest tribute to the Funk Mob, however, was forged in 1992 by legendary producer and rapper Dr. Dre. His three-million-album-selling LP *The Chronic* – the rap record of the year in ‘93, and the world’s introduction to the now infamous Snoop Doggy Dogg – was “the most explicit sampling tribute to P-Funk at the time, and *The Mothership Connection* was the basis” (Vincent, 241). The hit title track, “The Chronic,” adopted P-Funk’s hook, “Make my funk the P-Funk,” simply changing “funk” to “shit,” and “P-Funk” to “chronic.” Another single from the album, the Grammy award-winning hit “Let Me Ride,” looped the B-section vocals and some of Bernie Worrell’s synthesizer phrases from “Mothership Connection,” while the accompanying music video featured clips of Glenn Goins singing at a live P-Funk show in the late 70’s, beckoning the Mothership down. Dr. Dre’s use of P-Funk loops, synthesizer lines and hooks essentially *created* what is now known as the West Coast rap sound (Rogers, 41), and the rapper/producer publicly acknowledged P-Funk’s role in his music by calling his newly developed style, as presented on *The Chronic*, “G-Funk” (short for Gangsta-Funk), and wearing a “Maggot Brain” t-shirt in his music video of “Dre Day.”

Parliament Funkadelic’s influence on hip-hop simply cannot be overstated. Aside from the extensive sampling of P-Funk records by producers since the late 1980’s, Uncle Jam’s Army contributed some of hip-hop’s most idiomatic sounds and

stylings: the throbbing, thick and heavy bass sound that defines so much of hip-hop music was first popularized by Bernie Worrell's layered synthesizer bass line on "Flashlight" (*Funkentelechy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome*, Casablanca 1977), as was the super-loud clap track which even in 2007 finds its way into endless hip-hop radio hits.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, some of P-Funk's sayings wound up as common hip-hop music/culture expressions (e.g. "faking the funk"). Perhaps the Funk Mob's ideas never died, because of their profoundly positive, uplifting effects on so many individuals, especially in the American Black community. But P-Funk's music (and musical influence) *was* brought back to life – back into the spotlight, at any rate – by way of hip-hop music, and thus further immortalized as some of the most compelling, endlessly appreciable, and *applicable*, musical art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. Rising Above it All: P-Funk and Trancing

*"Trying to put that thang called Funk into words is like trying to write down your orgasm. Both thrive in that gap of time when words fall away, leaving nothing but sensation."* – Barry Walters, *Village Voice* (qtd. in Rogers, 73)

*"Theirs is an enchanted world and is its own reward."* – Judith Becker (*Deep Listeners*, 155)

Throughout this paper, I have drawn parallels between the Parliament Funkadelic phenomenon and research concerning "trance" traditions from the world over. Although many musics, shows, and events, respectively, can and *have* evoked

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<sup>74</sup> The P-Funk musical aesthetic – and, more tenuously, that of the funk music idiom in general – of a bottom-heavy, "four on the floor" drum beat, along with their repetitive cellular structures and emphasis on bass line-driven grooves (all circulating around the "One"), defines a very significant portion of the hip-hop beat repertoire. This suggests, as hip-hoppers and funkateers alike know, that hip-hop is the direct offspring of funk, or perhaps its continuation. Maceo Parker puts it best: his current band features an MC that ends a rap, one I'd heard at least twice in concert, with: "If it wasn't for funk, there wouldn't *be* no hip-hop!"

“trance states” in participants and audience members, I believe P-Funk’s unique combination of music, philosophy/cosmology, and performance was (and to a lesser degree, still is) particularly well suited for transporting large groups of human beings out of quotidian space, and into “a kind of syncope, an absence, a lapse, a ‘cerebral eclipse’” (Becker, 25) – a state of mind and body, known by many throughout history, often described as an unparalleled spiritual experience. This effect, in turn, can help to explain the popularity and lasting influence of P-Funk, and the cult-like following the collective has enjoyed for the last thirty-odd years.

The Funk Mob’s sound was danceable, tight, funky, and acutely in tune with the musical and cultural aesthetics of the times. Furthermore, the collective’s original blend of popular American – and especially Black American – musical traditions exhibits close parallels to musics associated with trancing: it is loud; it often has a high density of events occurring simultaneously; it tends to retain one, or at most a few, tonal centers; and the structure is often comprised, as is idiomatic of funk music, of repetitive cellular structures.

As argued by Gilbert Rouget, Judith Becker, and other scholars of trance traditions, music *by itself* has little or no direct, causal relationship with the induction of trance states (Becker, 25): only with the presence of a habitus of listening, or a complex set of cultural and personal foreknowledge and expectations, is music capable of triggering and sustaining the mysterious, mystical, and profound experience we call trancing. P-Funk created such a habitus by drawing on the Black Church spiritual aesthetic – which was already somewhat internalized by many Black Americans, and White Americans to a lesser degree – and re-interpreting it for their

cultural present, adding original elements which vibed with the audiences for which the collective performed.

The metaphysical vision presented by P-Funk – that is, the prescriptive philosophy of Funk – was an uplifting, surrealistic hodge-podge of wisdoms, ideas, and ideals drawn from cultures the world over, custom-tailored to American popular (as well as political, racial and ethical) culture. Uncle Jam’s Army disseminated an entire belief structure – and an Afro-centric, space-based cosmology to go with it – via their albums (the music and lyrics, as well as the art and liner notes that came with it). Thus, when audiences arrived at P-Funk concerts, they already had some *foreknowledge* of the meanings and aspirations associated with the event: a “habitus” *did* exist at the shows, making a congregational trance-event possible.

In performance, Parliament Funkadelic involved the audience aurally, visually, and physically. If the loud, funky music created by a veritable mob of dancing, partying musicians wasn’t enough to get you going, the band – and especially George Clinton – made it their mission to get *everyone* to get down and dance. Involving the audience with chants, clapping, and encouragement, the Funk Mob turned all that were present into full participants, and achieved communal rhythmic entrainment (i.e. everybody moving together in rhythm). Rhythmic entrainment, in turn, creates a sublime feeling of cohesion and unity in the entrained group, and is often an aspect of trancing rituals and events. Costumes, props, and pyrotechnics further enabled the congregation to transcend reality, and instead enact a feverish attempt to achieve Funkentelechy – to *realize* the vision of Funk: a vision of

personal and global betterment, one based in the acknowledgment and indulgence of root humanity and the unlimited potential of human beings.

The music and the “religion” of P-Funk were coterminous: the philosophies were embedded in the music, and the music, in turn (along with the dancing, chanting, and singing), was an integral element of the prescriptive philosophy of Funk. It is easy to imagine both the music and the vision as being modern descendents of pre-colonization West African concepts – both musical and philosophical. Funk is, after all, a dance-music idiom based in harmonic, rhythmic, and vocal concepts drawn from the great African-American musical heritage – a lineage of styles going back to slave songs in the antebellum South, songs which were themselves transported to this country in the hearts and minds of abducted Africans. Aspects of the P-Funk vision, too, have much in common with traditional West African world-views (i.e. reverence of “Mother Nature,” importance of community and especially communal dancing, and open acceptance of what Greg Tate called the “base elements” of the human soul (Tate, 17)).

In the final analysis, whether or not the bulk of Parliament Funkadelic’s success could be attributed to the collective’s ability to induce trancing at their shows is simply a side note – a particular line of inquiry I find both fascinating and compelling. The Funk Mob stands regardless as one of the most important and influential musical collectives in the history of American popular music. The relative dearth of study and praise (academic or otherwise) of the group belies the ingenuity, profundity, and lasting power of P-Funk. Judith Becker concludes her book, “Deep Listeners,” by writing, of individuals who have experienced trance states and/or

continue to do so: “Theirs is an enchanted world and is its own reward” (Becker, 155). George Clinton mirrors Becker’s final words, thirty years prior, in the “Prelude” to *The Clones Of Dr. Funkenstein* (Casablanca, 1976): laying out the ultimate meaning of Parliament Funkadelic’s super-musical, prescriptive vision for a better self and a better world, Dr. Funkenstein declares, “Believe... and funk is its own reward!!”

## APPENDIX A: A Partial Discography of Parliament, Funkadelic, George Clinton, and the P-Funk All-Stars

\* This partial discography is based on information from "The Motherpage"  
 <<http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/pfunk.html>>

\*\* " " indicates a re-release

### ----- Parliament -----

**Osmium** 70^ Invictus 7302  
**Up For The Down Stroke** 74\* Casablanca NBLP 7002  
**Chocolate City** 75\* Casablanca NBLP 7014  
**Mothership Connection** 75\* Casablanca NBLP 7022  
**The Clones Of Doctor Funkenstein** 76\* Casablanca NBLP 703"  
**Live / P-Funk Earth Tour (2LP)** 77\* Casablanca NBLP 2-7053  
**Funkentelechy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome** 77\* Casablanca NBLP 7084  
**Motor Booty Affair** 78\* Casablanca NBLP 7125  
 " " (CD 6/5/90) Casablanca 8426212  
 " " (Picture Disc) Casablanca NBPIX 7125  
**Gloryhallastoopid (Pin the Tail...)** 79\* Casablanca NBLP 7195  
 " " (CD 10/23/90) Casablanca 842 622-2  
**Trombipulation** 80\* Casablanca NBLP 7249  
 " " (CD 8/14/90) Casablanca 842 623-2  
**Parliament's Greatest Hits** 84\* Casablanca 822637-1 M1  
 " " (CD 10/19/87) Casablanca 822637-2  
**The Best NonStop Mix Compilation** 91 Polystar  
**First Thangs** 93\* HDH 3909-2  
**Tear The Roof Off: 1974-1980 (2CD)** 93\* Polygram 314514 417-2  
**The Holland Group Presents: George Clinton and Parliament** 94\* Aurific  
 MMCD-0605  
**Best Of Parliament: Give Up The Funk** 95\* Polygram 3145 26995 4 61695

### ----- The Parliaments -----

**I Wanna Testify** 94^ Goldmine/ GSCD 52

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## **Funkadelic**

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**Funkadelic** 70\* Westbound WB 2000/W 216  
" (CD 2/13/90) Westbound CDSEW 010  
**Free Your Mind And Your Ass Will Follow** 71\* Westbound WB 2001/W 217  
" (LP 1990)/(CD 5/4/90) Westbound SEW 012/CDSEW 012  
**Maggot Brain** 71\* Westbound WB 2007/W 218  
" (LP 1989)/(CD 10/16/89) Westbound SEW 002/CDSEW 002  
**America Eats Its Young (2LP)** (CD 1/8/91) 72\* Westbound 2 WB 2020/W 221  
**Cosmic Slop** (CD 6/17/91) 73\* Westbound WB 2022/W 223  
" (Picture Disc 92) Westbound CDSEW 035  
**Standing On The Verge Of Getting It On** 74\* Westbound WB 1001/W 208  
" (CD 11/25/91;Pic Disk 92) CDSEW 40  
**Let's Take It To The Stage** (CD 5/12/92) 75\* Westbound W 215  
" (Picture Disc 92) Westbound CDSEW 044  
**Funkadelic's Greatest Hits** 75 Westbound WB 1004  
**Tales Of Kidd Funkadelic** 76\* Westbound W 227  
" (Picture Disc 92) Westbound CDSEW 054  
**Hardcore Jollies** 76\* WB BS 2973  
" (CD 11/2/93) Priority P2 52873  
**Best Of The Early Years Volume One** 77 Westbound WB 303  
**One Nation Under A Groove** 78\* WB BSK 3209  
" (CD 11/2/93) Priority P2 53072  
**Uncle Jam Wants You** 79\* WB BSK 3371  
" (CD 11/2/93) Priority P2 53875  
**The Electric Spanking Of War Babies** 80\* WB BSK 3482  
" (CD 11/2/93) Priority P2 53874  
**Connections and Disconnections** 81^ Lax 37987  
**Who's A Funkadelic** (same as C&D) 92\* Rhino R2 71087  
**Music For Your Mother: Westbound Singles** 92\* Westbound 2WBCD-1111  
(2CD)  
Picture CD Box Set Volume 1 92 Westbound  
Picture CD Box Set Volume 2 92 Westbound WBOXPD 5  
**The Best Of Funkadelic: 1976-1981** 94\* Charly CDGR 104

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## **Clinton, George**

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**The George Clinton Interview** 76 Casablanca GC BD CST-1  
**Computer Games** 82\* Capitol ST 12246  
**You Shouldn't-nuf Bit Fish** 83^ Capitol ST 12308  
**Some of My Best Jokes Are Friends** 85^ Capitol ST 12417  
**R & B Skeletons In The Closet** 86^ Capitol ST 12481  
**Mothership Connection: Live from Houston** 86 Capitol 15021



<b>The Best Of George Clinton</b>	86 Capitol	ST-12534
<b>Atomic Clinton! (Cassette Only)</b>	88* Capitol	4 XL-9765
<b>The Cinderella Theory</b>	89* Paisley Pk	9 25994-1
<b>Sample Some of Disc, Sample Some of DAT</b>	93* AEM	25701
<b>Sample Some of Disc...V II</b>	93* AEM	25741
<b>Hey Man...Smell My Finger</b>	93* Paisley Pk	9 25518-4
<b>Paint The White House Black</b>	93* Paisley Pk	41057-4 (CD-5)
<b>Martial Law</b>	93 Paisley Pk	PRO-A-5998 (promo)
<b>Walk The Dinosaur</b>	93 Capitol	D-PRO-79811
<b>Sample Some Of Disc...V III</b>	95* AEM	25881-4

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**Parliament-Funkadelic-P.Funk All Stars**  
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<b>Dope Dog</b>	93 One Nation	(none)
<b>Music From The Motion Picture _PCU_</b>	94* Fox	078-22-1009-2 (CD-5)
<b>Dope Dogs</b>	95^ P-Vine	R-400782
<b>Dope Dogs (European Version)</b>	95^ Hot Hands	HOTH CD 1/LP 1/MC 1
<b>Police Doggy</b>	95^ P-Vine	PCD-4201
<b>Follow The Leader (CD5)</b>	95^ Hot Hands	HOTH 1 5 018524 087303

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**P.Funk All Stars**  
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<b>Urban Dancefloor Guerillas</b>	83* Uncle Jam	BFZ 39168
<b>" " (CD)</b>	CBS Assoc	ZK 39168
<b>Live At The Beverly Theatre In Hollywood</b>	90* Westbound	2WB 1110
<b>Go For Yer Funk (Clinton Family V.I)</b>	92* AEM	18901
<b>P Is The Funk (Clinton Family V. II)</b>	93* AEM	25651-4
<b>Bubblegum Gangster (Remixes) (CD-5)</b>	93* AEM	25661-4
<b>Plush Funk (Clinton Family V. III)</b>	93* AEM	25671
<b>Dance On The Wild Side</b>	93* AEM	25691-4
<b>Greatest Hits Live 1972-1993 (4 CD)</b>	93* AEM	25821-2
<b>If It Ain't On P-Vine, It Ain't P-Funk</b>	93^ P-Vine	PCD-750
<b>Greatest Hits Live 1976-1993 (Japan)</b>	93^ P-Vine	R 300356-59
<b>Ultimate P-Funk Breaks</b>	93^ P-Vine	
<b>Greatest Hits Live 1976-1993 (European)</b>	94^ Sequel	NEF CD 273
<b>Testing Positive 4 The Funk (Family IV)</b>	94* AEM	25721-2
<b>A Fifth Of Funk (Family V)</b>	94* AEM	25761-4
<b>P-Funk Unreleased Remix</b>	94^ P-Vine	PCD-2752
<b>Hydraulic Funk</b>	95^ Westbound	CDSEWD 097
<b>The Best</b>	95^ P-Vine	PCD-3740

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## **APPENDIX B: Vladimir Gutkovich's Thesis Recital**

Parliament Funkadelic has been perhaps *the* major influence in my development as a musician. When composing and arranging the music to be played at my thesis recital (titled, “Funk Is It’s Own Reward: It Ain’t Nothin’ But a Dance Party!”), I attempted to take concepts and approaches gleaned from years of listening to P-Funk, and fuse these ideas with a hip-hop musical aesthetic. Here, in “Appendix B,” I am including all seven original scores, preceded by a brief accounting of how the Funk Mob’s influence found its way into some of my charts.

### **Foreword to Thesis Recital Scores**

#### **“Its All Been Thunk (Yo Ass Is Made For Shakin’)”**

In the opening song, “Its All Been Thunk (Yo Ass Is Made For Shakin’),” the groove gravitates around the one, with a “four-on-the-floor” backbeat aesthetic. After an alto sax solo, the vocalists come in one by one, adding a new harmony with each repetition of the following lyrics:

“Yo ass is made for shakin’  
There won’t be no mistakin’  
What the Funk will do to you.

There won’t be any fakin’  
‘Cause the music that we’re makin’  
Will Funk you through and through.”

The “stacking harmonies” approach is reminiscent of the bridge in “Up For the Downstroke” (*Up For The Downstroke*, Casablanca 1974), or the B groove – “Swing down sweet chariot...” – in “Mothership Connection” (*Mothership Connection*, Casablanca 1976). The lyrics themselves reflect a need for dancing, and the power of the Funk to enable ecstatic dancing – concepts paralleling P-Funk’s vision. The horns in “It’s All Been Thunk,” for their part, first exist as a response to the vocal line, and then later counter-rhythmically interact with the vocals.

### **“Theme of Crème (The Shame)”**

This song represented the only truly critical piece in my performance. The chorus lyrics state, “For all the things my people’s done/For all the children dead and gone/I feel no guilt/But oh the shame!” P-Funk’s direct influence in this song is evident in the section preceding the second verse, where I initiate a communal call-and-response chant: I invite the audience to think of all the things that are truly *un-funky* in their world (leaving it up to them what exactly that is), and have them yell out “Funk that!” and “Funk that shit!” at precise, polyrhythmic points in the groove. This audience-participation “game” is meant to involve the crowd in the music, while also encouraging them to vent their frustrations while dancing together to the song. In addition, it proposes the idea that “Funkifying” the negative forces in our lives is the thing to do, as opposed to avoiding, hating, or hurting them.



## **“Hip Hop Vehicle”**

This track, designed to be a questioning of traditional hip-hop values, reflects P-Funk’s influences, directly and indirectly. The chorus lyrics, which are rapped by the MC, read:

“I’ve got my mind on Armani, an army on mind  
And the fruit tastes sweet, but it’s surrounded by rind  
And you can’t feel the beat unless you’re loving the grime  
I’ve got too many watches, and not enough time.

It’s not the place that makes a person, but the person the place  
And yea this life could be trash, but to live ain’t a waste  
Them people show off their cash, when they can’t show their face  
In Funk lies salvation, let me give you a taste!”

After “give you a taste” the horns play three sharp harmonized blasts, leading up to the triumphant-feeling IV chord (from the i), and then move into an instrumental bridge. This MC → Horn trajectory is itself a call-and-response dynamic, while the lyrical content is reminiscent of Parliament Funkadelic’s complex, love/hate approach to pop-culture and the material hype that goes with.

## **“Stunna-Fine”**

This arrangement of Gershwin’s classic, “Summertime,” reflects P-Funk influences in the interplay between horns, MC and singers – a structural call-and-response dynamic is attempted. The form of the song is essentially comprised of the repetition of the following: a melodic statement by the horns (in a 3 against 2, polyrhythmic manner set atop a P-Funk style four-on-the-floor groove), followed by a lyrical/melodic statement by harmonized vocalists, in turn followed by a rapped

lyrical statement by the MC. When not acting as the main voice in the “shout chorus,” the horns provide harmonic and rhythmic background figures for the vocalists and MC.

### **“We Need The Funk”**

“We Need the Funk” is the song that most clearly exhibits the influences of the Funk Mob in my compositional style. The four-on-the-floor groove, the prominence of the “One,” the counter-rhythmic interlocking horn lines in the choruses, and the harmonized, held vocal lines in the verse (as well as the shouted response, “we need the funk”) are all direct descendents of the P-Funk formula. The verse,

“You know, it ain’t hard to find  
You know, it’s a state of mind  
You know, it ain’t hard to find  
You know, it’s about that time,”

is sung in a held three-part harmony, while the rest of the band (and the audience) respond to each line with a shouted, “We need the funk!” During the chorus sections, the horns provide harmonized rhythmic figures – the saxes and the horns (trombone and trumpet) have a call-and-response thing going – while the singers and MC repeat, “We’re gonna keep that party, keep that party going, get up!” and invite the audience to join them. The final chorus section is designed, and written, to be repeated as long as desired, awaiting a cue from myself to lead the band into an polyrhythmic ending lick. The general aesthetic of the song is to evoke the feeling of a never-ending groove/party, a la P-Funk’s relentless live jams.

## **“Finale: We Won’t Stop Listening”**

This final track is comprised of a James Brown-esque horn melody alternating with an operatic, P-Funk-inspired section in a half-time feel groove. Once again, the density of events per measure and the jammed out feel of the “operatic” section, as well as the harmonized vocal line, reflect the P-Funk aesthetic that consistently finds its way into my musical vision.

The *performance* of my thesis music also exhibited many lessons gleaned from the Parliament Funkadelic brand of funk. I encouraged all of the musicians working with me to dress in costumes according to their tastes, as long as it was outrageous. By doing this, I created a colorful and differentiated presence on stage – thirteen funketeers playing and dancing in heterogeneous cohesion. Generally speaking, too, I tried to instill the vibe of “controlled chaos” in the band; that solos and certain other sections should last as long as they need to. By not confining the musicians and the song forms in rigid structures, I hope I was able to create a more fluid, reactive sound – one that allows linear motion in the pieces to proceed according to the energy of the moment.

The following scores are NOT exact representations of how the music was eventually performed at my thesis recital, for reasons of “fluidity” mentioned above. Rather, they should be interpreted as skeletal and easily amendable blueprints, outlining forms, chord changes, melodies, and riffs. Many of the vocal parts, for example, are not included at all because I *verbally* taught the melodies, harmonies, and lyrics to the singers. The scores will suffice to give the reader a very good idea

of the songs composed/arranged for my thesis, but are in reality work-in-progress outlines used primarily to guide musicians and myself in rehearsal.