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Making It Funky: The Signifyin(g) Politics of George Clinton's Parliafunkadelicment Thang

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Free Your...

"Free your mind, and your ass will follow." -Funkadelic, from the song and album of the same name

George Clinton set forth this founding tenet in his ideology of funk in 1970, as a druggy mantra to a swirling psychedelic guitar jam. While the phrase may originally have been intended as a variation on the solipsistic hippie slogan "Turn on/tune in/drop out" (the line that followed promised, "The Kingdom of Heaven is within"), it took on a very different resonance by the mid-'70s, when Clinton and some of his 20-odd bandmates in Parliament and Funkadelic would rap the phrase, along with other exhortations such as "Think! It Ain't Illegal Yet!" and "Shit/Goddamn/Get Off Your Ass and Jam," over a dense groove of horns, synths, and Bootsy Collins' bottomless bass, while concert audiences in the tens of thousands danced, sweated, and chanted along.

In the years that followed, music critics have more often than not misappropriated the slogan as "free your ass and your mind will follow." [1] The original phrase resurfaced in popular discourse last year, however, on *En Vogue's* dance-rock crossover hit "Free Your Mind," which bowdlerized the second half of the line to "...and the rest will follow." And currently, MTV News' regular public affairs segments are presented under the logo, "Free Your Mind" (as in "this week, in 'Free Your Mind' news...").

This potent epigram's longevity and adaptability demonstrates the complex ways in which Clinton's theorization of the relationship between mind and booty continue to influence contemporary ideas about the politics of music. The common reversal of the phrase isn't exactly a distortion of the P-Funk (short for Parliament/Funkadelic) philosophy, in its implication that the first step toward intellectual liberation is to allow one's body to be carried away by the communal, physical pleasures of dance music. But this revision of Clinton provides too comfortable a hierarchy, assuming that freeing the "ass" is simply a means to the end of freeing the "mind." The need to turn Clinton's phrase inside-out to make it fit demonstrates how Clinton consistently destabilizes conventional distinctions between "body" and "mind," "music" and "message." As one critic wondered on hearing the original Funkadelic track, "Is that ass as in 'shake your ass' or ass as in 'save your ass'?" [2] —in other words, is the freed mind followed by the booty or the soul? And how could you tell the difference? Likewise, when Clinton describes his music as "doin' it to your earhole in 3D," how can the "mind" itself be understood as anything but another organ? Intellectually rigorous, intentionally "stoopid," insistently physical, continually abstract, P-Funk demands that you think with your body and, as Greg Tate puts it, "dance with your mind." [3]

A Brief History of Parliament-Funkadelic

Born in 1941, George Clinton began his musical career in 1955 when he formed The Parliaments, a doo- wop quintet based in Plainfield, New Jersey, where Clinton owned a barbershop. In the early 1960s, Clinton moved

the band to Detroit in attempt to land a deal with Motown records. While Motown chief Berry Gordy signed Clinton to a staff writing position, he declined to record the Parliaments, deciding their sound was too similar to the Temptations'. Recording instead for the small Revilot label, the Parliaments had their first hit in 1967 with "(I Just Wanna) Testify." Reaching #3 on the R&B charts and #20 on the pop charts, it would be Clinton's biggest commercial success until the mid-70s.

While in 1967 the Parliaments were still a rather conventional soul group in the Motown mold, over the late '60s the band underwent a radical change as Clinton and the rest of the members began hanging out with hippies, taking drugs, and listening to Jimi Hendrix, Sly and the Family Stone, and white Detroit hard-rock bands like the Stooges and the MC5. Originally a suit-and-tied soul act, they began appearing on stage in ripped bedsheets, diapers, or nothing at all, while playing a loud, trippy, and often intentionally ugly blend of R&B and psychedelic rock.

In 1970 Parliament (the "the" and "s" dropped from their name) recorded Osmium, named after the heaviest metal on the periodic table. Legal troubles with their former record companies, however, made it impossible for the band to continue to record under their name, and so they began recording for a different label under a new name: Funkadelic. Over the early '70s, Funkadelic released a series of albums that built them a devoted cult following if little mass attention.

By 1974, with the legal battles resolved, Clinton signed Parliament to Casablanca records. (Technically, "Funkadelic" was the backup band, "Parliament" the lead singers, and each group guested on the other's albums.) While continuing to put out Funkadelic records, Clinton decided to make Parliament lighter and more commercial, with fewer guitars and more horns.

P-Funk's commercial and conceptual breakthrough came in 1976 with the release of Mothership Connection, the first of a series of science fiction-themed "funk operas." In the late '70s, Parliament-Funkadelic staged a succession of spectacular concert tours, each show climaxing with the descent of a giant spaceship from the rafters. As Clinton's "Parliafunkidelicment Thang" grew, he spun off more and more acts out of the band's personnel, writing and producing records for Bootsy's Rubber Band, the Horny Horns, the Brides of Funkenstein, and Parlet, with each act signed to a different record label. [4]

By the early '80s, however, Clinton's end-run around the corporate organization of the record business had left his organization tangled in legal complications, and the Parliafunkadelic dream came crashing down in internal dissension, lawsuits, and creative exhaustion. A 1983 comeback single recorded under Clinton's own name, "Atomic Dog," was a brilliant update of the P-Funk sound, but his last big hit.

While Clinton has continued to record and tour over the last 10 years, in the mid-'80s his music seemed to have slipped out of public memory, with many of his classic albums falling out of print. [5] His arrangements seemed too lush, his concepts too cartoon-like, his beats too close to discredited "disco." [6] For cutting-edge rappers who were working to strip their beats down to a hard edge of rage, James Brown's more minimal groove was the sample of choice. [7] In 1989, though, when De La Soul ended the reign of the minimalists by bringing to hip-hop a psychedelic richness and playful indeterminacy, they turned to Funkadelic's "(Not Just) Knee Deep)" to provide the groove for the hit single "Me, Myself, and I." The biggest rap single of the following year was Digital Underground's "Humpty Dance," which not only sampled Parliament's "Let's Play House," but in the character of "Humpty Hump" appropriated the villain of Parliament's late-70s funk operas, "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk."

Today, Clinton's influence on popular music is immeasurable. As rap producers have looked to expand the music's sonic palette, Clinton's multi-layered arrangements have become the leading source of hip-hop samples. As rock bands have attempted to find common ground with the increasingly dance-oriented pop marketplace, "funk-rock" bands like Red Hot Chili Peppers and the Spin Doctors have looked to Funkadelic for ways to make guitar-rock sound fresh. And for artists and listeners attempting to theorize the relationship between "music" and "message," Clinton's ideology of funk has provided a way to talk about the politics of

dancing. As Clinton sang on "One Nation Under a Groove: "Here's a chance to dance our way/ Out of our constrictions."

Defining "Funk"

A little etymological background: as P-Funk says, "funk used to be a bad word." Once a term "not mentioned in polite society" [8] meaning "a stink (usually associated with sex)," [9] in the 1950s the word was appropriated by "hard bop" jazz musicians to mean "having an earthy, unsophisticated style and feeling; esp., having the style and feel of the blues." [10] In the 1960s, it came to describe a certain kind of popular music: "percussive, polyrhythmic black dance music, with minimal melody and maximum syncopation." [11] First fully realized by James Brown, this music's sonic possibilities were then refined and expanded in the work of Sly Stone. By most accounts, George Clinton is the third major figure in the history of the genre.

The very history of the term "funk," then, is a classic example of what Henry Louis Gates calls Signifyin(g)—the "double-voicedness" of African-American discourse which empowers speakers to play with language—"repeat with a difference"—in ways which critique, destabilize and reconfigure dominant meanings. [12] In this case, the signification had an even more explicit element of cultural nationalism than in the redefining of terms like "bad" and "cool." As Leroi Jones points out, referring to the initial appropriation of the term by jazz musicians:

The social implication, then, was that even the old stereotype of a distinctive Negro smell that white America subscribed to could be turned against white America. For this smell now, real or not, was made a valuable characteristic of "Negro-ness." And "Negro-ness," by the fifties, for many Negroes (and whites) was the only strength left to American culture. [13]

Coming to maturity during the late-'60s era of Black Power, funk music, even more than "soul" or "R&B," has always been associated with African-American pride in cultural difference—as Joe McEwen points out, its first anthem was James Brown's "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud." [14]

Clinton's Theory of Funkativity

"Funk" is more than a specific example of Signifyin(g); in Clinton's universe, it is a rubric for all forms of Signifyin(g), of African-American cultural resistance. Funk is a transformative process—as James Brown would shout to his band, the goal, whatever the tune, is to "make it funky." Clinton explains to Rolling Stone, funk is a "kind of an attitude....Funk can be anything. Funk is an idea; it's whatever it needs to be in order to survive. We don't take nothing as our bag. Everything is our bag." [15] Or, as he's put it elsewhere, "Funk means that when you're in Chinatown you learn to like Chinese food real fast." [16]

The transformative power of "funk" as can be seen in its effect on language. In Clinton's lexicon, "funk" colonizes other words, repeating concepts with a difference. "Funk" infests "psychedelic" to create "funkedelic." "Funkintelechy," another P-Funk neologism combining "funk," "intellect," and "technology," stands in Clinton's universe for the "force by which Funk gets stronger." [17] The power to attach itself to other words which Clinton invested in the term "funk" has continued beyond his own terms: "techno-funk," "punk-funk," and "cyberfunk" have all been coined in the last ten years to explain mutant musical genres.

In "One Nation Under a Groove," Funkadelic asks,

"Do you promise to funk? the whole funk, nothin' but the funk." "Funk" here replaces "Truth" as the fundamental good in Clinton's utopian society. The relationship between "funk" and "truth" parallels that between "Signifyin(g)" and "signification" in Gates' schema. "Funk" is truth of the second order, in which language, tropes, and music styles are playfully shuffled, revised, and reconstituted to make a different kind of meaning. The classic Parliament and Funkadelic albums of the late '70s Signified on everything from nursery rhymes to rock opera, science fiction to spirituals. These appropriations were not simply chaotic celebrations of indeterminacy; as we shall see, they also served to anchor a powerful vision of counter-

cultural community and political intervention, all in the name of "The Funk." Spreading The Funk To supplement Gates' terminology with a parallel theoretical framework, funk can be described as a version of Ishmael Reed's "Jes Grew," the mysterious plague in Mumbo Jumbo which "enliven[s] the host," leaving people "wriggling like fish...and 'lusting after relevance.'" [18] The comparison to Jes Grew points out two facets of The Funk not illuminated by Gates' notion of Signifyin(g): its physicality and its contagiousness. As I've already discussed, fundamental to funk's transformative power is the way it insists on the embodiment of whatever it touches—to make something funky is to make it felt, literally in the sense of shaking the floorboards, rattling the windows, and practically commanding the listener to dance. This physicality, of course, has a lot to do with sexuality; the closeness of the word "funk" to "fuck" is no accident, and Clinton's Significations often rest on puns between the two, as in "You should've seen the bull when it funk'd the cow." But "to funk" never means just "to fuck;" [19] the point of the pun is how interconnected sexuality and music are in the Clinton worldview. The utopian promise of Jes Grew is that everyone will catch it. Likewise, Clinton does not just celebrate The Funk; he prosteletizes for it. The greatest P-Funk songs are propaganda for the funk; as Barry Walters points out, "P. Funk hits are almost entirely reflexive. It's near impossible to let your mind wander during a P.Funk anthem, as most of the lyrics are about funk itself, funk on the radio, and funk in your earhole." [20] As the chant to "P-Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up) puts it:

Make my funk the P-Funk I want my funk uncut Make my funk the P-Funk I wants to get funk'd up I want the bomb, I want the P-Funk Don't want my funk stepped on Make my funk the P-Funk Before I take it home

The plotlines of Parliament's late-'70s concept albums allegorize the spreading of The Funk. They involve the battles of the hero, Starchild, against Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk (pronounced "devoid of funk"). Starchild's goal is never to kill Sir Nose, but to make him dance—to catch The funk, the way unwilling victims catch Jes Grew in Mumbo Jumbo. On Funkintelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome, Starchild "funkatizes" Sir Nose by shooting him with his weapon, the "Bop Gun." Clinton's overarching theme is, in the words of Robert Christgau, to show "the forces of life—autonomous intelligence, a childlike openness, sexual energy, and humor—defeat those of death: by seduction if possible, by force if necessary." [21]

Community in African-American Music

Clinton's mission is to teach The Funk and spread The Funk, to create a counter-culture of funkateers, "One Nation Under a Groove." As Reed's use of Jes Grew as a metaphor for the rise of both ragtime and jazz suggests, this populist aesthetic of community has a long lineage in African-American music. As Simon Frith writes, "At the center of Afro-American music is the performance.... Black music is immediate and democratic—a performance is unique and the listeners of that performance become a part of it." [22] Paul Gilroy likewise notes,

Black performers aim to overcome rather than exploit the structures which separate them from their audiences. The relationship between the performer and the crowd is transformed in dialogic rituals so that spectators acquire the active role of participants in collective processes which are sometimes cathartic and which may symbolize or even create community. [23]

The hope, in turn, is that this constructed community may live on beyond the end of the performance; as Gilroy continues,

The liberatory rationality which is spelled out in the lyrics, if there are lyrics, is thus manifest in the consumption of the musical culture. The whole dialogic process that unites performers and crowds is imported into the culture's forms. It becomes the basis of an authentic public sphere which is counterposed to the dominant alternative, from which, in any case, blacks have been excluded. The arts which, as slaves, blacks were allowed instead of freedom, have become a means to make their formal freedom tangible. [24]

As Clinton told one reporter, "I'm a hippie at heart. I'm not anti-establishment in a sense that I want to tear down the structure, but I want to provide the people with an alternative to the structure." [25]

Black and White Audiences of P-Funk

Clinton's use of an example from a predominantly white subculture demonstrates that while his vision was rooted in the cultural practices of African-Americans, his utopia of "One Nation Under a Groove" was not a separatist one. The battle in his sci-fi universe was between funky and unfunky, not black and white. Clinton's models for constructing a mass counter-culture, in fact, were the Beatles, the band that for a while could claim to be "bigger than Jesus." During P-Funk's late-'70s heyday, Clinton could tell one writer, "If you know what Liverpool was like when the Beatles hit, you know what it's getting to be like wherever we go." [26] His goal, as one writer puts it, was "Beatle-size fame,...funkmania." [27]

Clinton wanted it all: mass popularity among blacks and whites, while never compromising his African-American roots. He frequently criticized other artists attempting to "cross over" for "fakin' the funk." Explaining Funkadelic's attempts to get played on FM "rock" radio in the late '70s, he told Pablo "Yoruba" Guzman, "We ain't crossin' over; we just gonna sneak behind enemy lines." [28] In the face of white radio's racist resistance to a black rock band, however, Clinton never managed to attract a large white listenership. In P-Funk's late '70s heyday, the concert audiences were almost entirely black, and as Barry Walters points out, "as radio turned departmentalized and segregated, P.Funk became the ultimate black FM signifier." [29] Like Jes Grew, The Funk was overcome before it could infect the entire nation; as Ken Tucker wrote in 1984, "the dream—of Beatle-size fame, of funkmania—is over." [30] This should hardly be considered a failure; indeed, the disappointment voiced by some white critics in the '70s that P-Funk hadn't attracted a mass white audience often seemed to assume that their millions of black fans somehow didn't count. [31] Clinton's music created and continues to create a powerful, implicitly political sense of community among his fans; and in any case, his influence among musicians and listeners of all colors today is inescapable.

Creating Community

The P-Funk albums of the late '70s were examples of what One Nation Under a Groove could sound like. They embraced and expressed a liberating aesthetic of community with individuality. Carefully arranged yet open to each artist's individual improvisation, P-Funk's jams blend horns, guitars, synthesizers, percussion, and an array of voices in arrangements of astonishing richness and complexity, with the depth of the groove only enhancing one's appreciation of each performer's individual expression. And because Clinton had assembled a collective of astounding talent and diversity — including former James Brown band members William "Bootsy" Collins on bass and Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley on horns, classically-trained Bernie Worrell on keyboards, and vocalist Phillip Wynne, former lead singer of the slick soul band the Spinners — the music never collapsed into chaos.

Clinton's vocal arrangements alone are powerful models of community-with-individuality. No one individual functions as the "lead singer;" Clinton himself only shows up for a few raps on the P-Funk albums of the late-'70s. Often, five or six vocalists may sing "lead" on different songs on one album, with still other voices, sometimes altered by studio effects, popping up to offer commentary or cary along the album's plotline. Group choruses skewer the tight soul harmony the Parliaments once practiced; voices in Clinton's arrangements go off at odd angles, spread across octaves, and range from nasal squeals to gospel bellows, yet still cohere to create a sense of unity more powerful for the diversity it encompasses.

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.

Once the fans have gone home, the challenge is to keep the sense of community alive through more mediated forums of communication. For P-Funk fans, the primary forum for this alternative public sphere in the 1970s was black radio, which, as I have already discussed, in part found its own self-definition through P-

Funk's music. Clinton directly addressed how radio creates this mass-mediated community in a series of raps on Parliament records in the voice of a DJ for the mythic radio station "WEFUNK." These raps solidified Parliament's status as emblematic of black radio, and helped Parliament fans to think of their records as not just isolated commodities, but as nodes in a communication network linking together fans across the globe more powerfully than any single radio station could. And by taking on the voice of a DJ, Clinton was able to communicate directly to his audience without the barriers of stage or song. (Not surprisingly, many rappers have borrowed this conceit in their quest to find more direct modes of expression.) As Barry Walters points out,

Appropriately, the best Parliament records were about black radio and its ability to unify its audience through the airwave differentiation...By parodying the slick black jock rap style, Clinton addressed his audience directly...while choirs of harmonized voice burst forth like idealized listeners demanding the kind of funk only Clinton could deliver." [32]

Afrocentric Science Fiction

If black radio offered the possibility of a limited real-life alternate public sphere, Clinton's vision also held out the possibility of something more sweeping: a futuristic Black Nationalist utopia.

Parliament's concerts in the late 1970s would begin with a strange monologue, spoken in the manner of the opening narration to a science fiction epic. One version was recorded as the "Prelude" to *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*; a slightly different version is reprinted in the liner notes to *Tear the Roof off the Mother: 1974-1980*, a Parliament retrospective album:

Funk upon a time, in the daze of the Funkapus, the earth was on the One. Funk flowed freely and freedom was free from the need to be free. Even Cro-Nasal Sapiens and the Thumpasorus Peoples lived side by side in P(eace).

But soon there arose bumpnoxious empires led by unfunky dictators. These priests, pimps and politicians would spank whole nations of unsuspecting peoples — punishing them for their feelings and desires, constipating their notions and pimping their instincts until they were fat, horny and strung-out. The descendants of Cro-Nasal Sapiens fell in line, for their credo was "Get over by any means necessary." They slicked their hair and lost all sense of the Groove.

The descendants of the Thumpasorus Peoples knew Funk was its own reward. They tried to remain true to the pure, uncut Funk. But it became impossible in a world woo'd by power and greed. So they locked away the secret of Clone Funk with kings and pharaohs deep in the Egyptian pyramids, and fled to outer space to party on the Mothership and await the time they could safely return to refunkatize the planet. [33]

This narrative, a sci-fi variant of the story of Osiris and Set in *Mumbo Jumbo*, outlines the universe of Parliament's concept albums. The climax to P-Funk's concerts of the late '70s was the landing of the Mothership, signifying the return of the exiled Thumpasorus Peoples to earth. As the giant mock-spaceship was slowly lowered, the band would play the title track to *Mothership Connection*, which transforms the dream of returning to the Motherland of Africa into a journey across the galaxy. Signifyin(g) upon the spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," the band chanted, "Swing down sweet chariot-stop/And let me ride." Science fiction supplants religion, as "The Funk" becomes a new kind of deliverance.

Clinton's Signifyin(g) on science fiction, long one of America's most lily-white preserves, was a bold and original critical step. (Also a trend-setting one; *Mothership Connection* appeared a year before *Star Wars*. [34]) In the mid-'70s there existed to my knowledge only one published black science fiction writer, Samuel Delany. (There did, however, exist one other black musician who dealt in sci-fi themes: jazz giant Sun Ra, who claims to be from Saturn and is a major influence on Clinton's style, music and persona.) Most sci-fi universes, as Greg Tate points out, are "full of a zillion species of extraterrestrials and only caucasoid humans." [35]

The particular power of science fiction for African-Americans, as Delany critic Robert Elliot Fox points out, is that blacks especially have a critical stake in future worlds. They constantly have had to struggle to transform dreams into realities, to redeem, as it were, the core of possibility within fantasy. [36]

As Delany himself told Greg Tate, "We need images of tomorrow...and our people need them more than most." [37] Tate goes on to point out parenthetically, "That Delany was for so long the only black science-fiction writer reminds me of Eugene Genovese's observation that black Americans have tended toward pragmatic rather than prophetic leadership." [38] Clinton's outrageous scenarios offer both a critique of white America's vision of the future (as one critic writing on Clinton in the late '70s paused to wonder, "exactly why were all the main characters in Star Wars and Close Encounters white?" [39]) and a prophetic vision of African-American possibility — of Jes Grew infecting not only America, but the galaxy.

Funkintelechy

Clinton's sci-fi storylines also served to thematize one way in which P-Funk was already charting a course into the future: through the use new musical technology. Cornel West points out,

Parliament ushered forth the era of black technofunk — the creative encounter of the Afro-American spiritual-blues impulse with highly sophisticated technological instruments, strategies, and effects. [40]

Bernie Worrell's synthesizer squeals, Sir Nose's distorted vocals, and Clinton's multitracked mix put African-American musicians at the cutting edge of musical technology, and set the stage for, as Greg Tate puts it,

Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa, the Teller and Truman of hip-hop's Manhattan Project (inasmuch as they engineered and advocated war and peacetime use of the fusion funkbomb Einstein Clinton's theorems made possible). [41]

Flash's and Bambaataa's discoveries, in turn, brought on the culture of sampling which has now returned Clinton's actual recordings to the musical mainstream; while Parliament never charted a Top Ten record, the current third-best-selling album in the country, Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*, contains copious P-Funk samples. As Mumbo Jumbo concludes, "Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around." [42]

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A P-FUNK SAMPLER SONG LISTING

Side A

1. "Free Your Mind And Your Ass Will Follow" (excerpt), Funkadelic, Free Your Mind...And Your Ass Will Follow, Westbound Records, 1970.
2. "Prelude," Parliament, The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein, Casablanca Records, 1976.
3. "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)," Parliament, Mothership Connection, Casablanca Records, 1976.
4. "Mothership Connection," George Clinton/Parliament- Funkadelic, The Mothership Connection: Live from Houston, Capitol Records, 1986. Original version on Parliament, Mothership Connection, Casablanca Records, 1976
5. "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention-B3M)," Parliament, Funkintelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome, Casablanca Records, 1976.

Side 2

1. "One Nation Under a Groove," Funkadelic, One Nation Under a Groove, Warner Brothers Records, 1978.
2. "Tales of the Funky," Digital Underground, Sons of the P, Tommy Boy Records, 1991. (Digital Underground are Clinton's most self-conscious heirs in hip-hop; the "P" in the album title stands for "Parliament-Funkadelic," and "Tales of the Funky" is a tribute to Clinton and a reminiscence of P-Funk's heyday. The song also samples several P-Funk classics, including "One Nation Under a Groove" and "Mothership Connection.")
3. "The Signifying Monkey," Dolemite, from the film Dolemite, 1975. (This doesn't have anything in particular to do with P-Funk, but I'd mentioned it to you earlier, and thought you might want to hear it.)

NOTES

1. Some examples: "...if your ears say you've heard some of these grooves before, don't tell your ass about it and your mind'll never be the wiser" (Robert Christgau, Christgau's Record Guide: The '80s (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 94). "...you gotta accept Clinton's funk with your ass, or else your mind ain't never gonna follow" (Barry Walters, "George Clinton: Learning to Funk the Bomb," Village Voice, August 6, 1993, p. 63). "BDP may not succeed in freeing my ass every time, but my mind's almost always ready to follow" (Ted Friedman, Review of Boogie Down Productions' Edutainment, Spin, October 1990). All of these cases could imply that the authors actually misremembered the phrase, or might simply demonstrate how critics have chosen to reformulate the phrase into a more explicit distinction between cause and effect. (In my own case, I admit that I sometimes get the phrase confused.) Less excusable is The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock'n'Roll, which claims to be an authoritative source on the history of rock'n'roll, getting the quote backwards in its entry on Parliament/Funkadelic: "One of its many mottoes was: "Free your ass and your mind will follow." ("Parliament/Funkadelic," in The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock'n'Roll, eds. Jon Pareles and Patricia Romanowski (New York: Rolling Stone Press/Summit Books, 1983), p. 417.
2. Robert Christgau, Rock Albums of the '70s: A Critical Guide (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), p. 144.
3. Greg Tate, Flyboy in the Buttermilk (New York: Fireside, 1992), p. 41.
4. I should point out that while, for the sake of convenience, I am writing as if Parliament-Funkadelic were the product of a single man's vision, P-Funk has always been a collective endeavor. The contributions of numerous musicians were critical, and most P-Funk songs were collectively written. In addition, many of the overarching concepts may have been dreamed up by Pedro Bell, the artist responsible for the sci-fi scenarios and critical commentary on Funkadelic's album covers and inside liner notes from 1973 on. Credit must also go to Overton Lloyd, who drew a series of comic books packaged with the

Parliament albums which dramatized the battles between the hero "Starchild" and his enemy, "Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk." Exactly who deserves credit for what remains a subject of bitter dispute among P-Funk alumni. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper it seems more important to discuss the P-Funk concept in its totality than to try to sort out individual contributions. (For more on these disputes, see Pedro Bell, "Pedro Bell: Drawnamic Maestro of Optical Infotainment," interviewed by Rob Michaels, *Motorbooty*, 1989.)

5. Parliament's records for Casablanca and Funkadelic's for Westbound have now been rereleased on CD. However, Funkadelic's later albums for Warner Brothers, along with the Bootsy' Rubber Band, Horny Horns, Parlet, and Brides of Funkenstein albums, all remain out of print.
6. See below for a more extended discussion of P-Funk's complex relationship to disco.
7. This isn't to suggest that Clinton's influence ever disappeared completely; much of Prince's music of this period, for example, is inconceivable without Parliament- Funkadelic.
8. Joe McEwen, "Funk," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, ed. Anthony DeCurtis, James Henke, and Holly George-Warren (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 521.
9. Leroi Jones, *Blues People* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperback, 1963), p. 219.
10. Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, tk), p. 436.
11. Pareles and Romanowski, eds., p. 208.
12. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). I should point out here that my purpose in using Gates, as well as Ishmael Reed, to discuss George Clinton is not an attempt to "legitimate" or "elevate" a popular discourse to the level of literary theory. Nor am I seeking to "impose" Gate's theory on Clinton's music. To do either, I think, would be to engage in condescension similar to that Gates describes as the mistake of attempting to mechanically apply "European" theory to African-American literature. Of course, Gates' theory, rooted in studies of African- American language use, has much to offer; but it remains self-consciously a theory of literature; I agree with Greg Tate that "Gates' notion of a black tradition built only of figurative language seems a bit text-bound and bookwormish..." (Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, p. 147). Funk not only has its own tradition; in Clinton it has its own theorist, and my purpose is simply to use Gate's and Reed's formulations to better illuminate Clinton's.
13. Jones, pp. 219-220.
14. McEwen, p. 521.
15. George Clinton, from interview with David Fricke, *Rolling Stone*, September 20, 1990, p. 75.
16. George Clinton, quoted in Greg Tate, "George Clinton: The Genii in the Genome," *Village Voice*, May 20, 1986, p. 75.
17. "Funkencyclo-P-dia," liner notes to *Tear the Roof Off: 1974-1980*, Casablanca/Mercury Records, 1993.
18. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1972), p. 4. This similarity hasn't gone unnoticed; as Joe McEwen writes: "Like the amorphous and liberating plague "Jes Grew" in Ishmael Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*...funk...aimed to put its audience in the grips of a new fever..." (McEwen, p. 521). Clinton himself has also expressed his admiration for Reed.
19. Except perhaps for cases like Prince's "Erotic City," in which, in order to get the song played on the radio, Prince claimed the chorus's hard-to-discern lyric was "funk so pretty you and me," rather than, as it seemed,

"fuck so pretty you and me."

20 . Barry Walters, "George Clinton: Learning to Funk the Bomb," *Village Voice*, August 5, 1985, p. 63.

21 . Christgau, *Rock Albums of the '70s*, p. 292.

22 . Simon Frith, *Sound Effects* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 17.

23 . Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 214. I should point out that I find Gilroy's statement, as well as Frith's, much too broadly generalized; Miles Davis, certainly one of the very greatest black performers, sometimes played with his back to the audience. In addition, "overcoming" and "exploiting" the separation between performer and crowd are not the simple polar opposites Gilroy suggests them to be; I would argue that the slick dance routines and elaborate costumes of Motown-style soul acts (including the original Parliaments), for example, serve to highlight the staginess of the performance while at the same time embodying a cosmopolitan ideal with which the audience may strongly identify. The point is that the relationship between artist and audience need not seem transparent to create a sense of community; as Tom Carson points out about Clinton's extravaganzas, "ritualistic stylization, no matter how novel (and tongue-in-cheek) Clinton's uses of it, has never implied a lack of direct feeling in black music, with its passion for showbiz conventions" (Tom Carson, "Keep Rolling," *Village Voice*, April 5, 1983, p. 59).

24 . Gilroy, p. 215.

25 . "Man Who Makes Millions Pushing P-Funk," *Jet*, December 7, 1978, p. 22.

26 . Clinton, interviewed by Ken Tucker, "George Clinton's Message: Don't Fake the Funk," *New Times*, August 5, 1977, p. 62.

27 . Ken Tucker, "The Walrus is George," *Village Voice*, January 24, 1984, p. 65. "The Beatles are my all-time favorites," Clinton told Greg Tate. "They were at the right place at the right time, and they made the best out of it" (Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, p. 39).

28 . Clinton, quoted in Pablo "Yoruba" Guzman, "Funk at the Temple," *Village Voice*, October 22, 1979, p. 77. In an earlier interview explaining Funkadelic's moving from the independent Westbound label to Warner Brothers Records, he explained,

The thing that sold me on Warners was their promotion. All a promo man has to do is visit the FM station and convince 'em, like they gotta do with any rock group that's a little different. Now, if they play Kiss on FM stations, they'll play anything on FM stations, but as it is, they're fakin' the funk" (Ed Ward, "The U.S. Funk Mob: 'We Can Be As Bad As We Need To Be,'" *Village Voice*, July 25, 1977, p. 39.).

29 . Walters, p. 63. The almost all-white rock critical establishment, as well, largely ignored P-Funk at their peak, despite the fact that Clinton's "funk operas" and concept albums exhibited the kind of "experimental" scope and audacity that critics' darlings like David Bowie and the Who were being praised for during the same period. (The stage and set for the Mothership Connection tour, in fact, was designed by Jules Fischer, who had orchestrated much-lauded extravaganzas for Bowie and the Rolling Stones.) As Robert Christgau, one of the few white critics who did pay attention, pointed out in 1983, Clinton is "a master of such supposedly Caucasian specialties as stance and persona and pop mind-fuck" (Robert Christgau, "Pazz & Jop '82: Funkintelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome," *Village Voice*, February 22, 1983.) Nevertheless, none of P-Funk's late-'70s masterworks placed anywhere near the Top 10 of the *Village Voice*'s "Pazz & Jop" poll of rock critics. Not until the mid-'80s did most critics begin to look back and realize what they'd missed. And even today, when Clinton is praised, it's often with backhanded compliments which seemed to suggest that as opposed to white "art-rockers," Clinton's claim to the high conceptual ground was only a put-on: "So what if George Clinton...is a ripoff artist" (Jimmy Guterman, *The Best Rock'n'Roll Records of All Time* (New York: Citadel Press, 1992), p. 85.) "If the Parliafunkadelicment Thang sometimes seemed like a scam..." (Dave Marsh, *The*

Heart of Rock & Soul: The 1001 Greatest Singles Ever Made (New York: Plume, 1989), p. 347.) Clinton remains outrageously on the margins of the rock'n'roll canon: Gutterman's book places The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein, its lone P-Funk representative, at #42, Marsh's highest listing of any P-Funk song is at #524, and Clinton still does not merit his own chapter in the newly revised edition of The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll.

Like white rock critics' belated recognition of Clinton, the current success of white funk-rock bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers can in large part be seen as a classic example of white America's discovery and appropriation of an African-American style years after its creative peak — c.f. the white blues bands of the 1960s. Many of the hip-hop songs which use P-Funk samples, in fact, function less as recontextualizations than as rereleases — raps which simply piggy-back on P-Funk songs which should've been hits the first time around, but remain unknown to most white listeners (and perhaps many black listeners as well, as the "Urban Contemporary" stations of today, even more conservative than their late-'70s counterparts, rarely play P-Funk oldies).

30 . Tucker, p. 65. I say "overcome" rather than "dissipated," because P-Funk was engaged in a struggle; as Greg Tate puts it,

On black radio they functioned as active opposition to a form of record industry sabotage dubbed "disco" — or as I like to pun it, disCOINTELPRO, since it destroyed the self-supporting black band movement which P-Funk (jes) grew out of" (Tate, Flyboy in the Buttermilk, p. 156).

I would moderate Tate's point by arguing that disco itself was a powerfully liberating movement subverted by a racist (and heterosexist) power structure. Clinton's own criticisms of disco were always somewhat disingenuous; much of Parliament's best music sounded a lot more like disco than Clinton, anxious to distinguish his band as purveyors of the "pure, uncut funk," wanted to admit. To a large extent, in fact, Clinton's attack on disco (the slogan to "(Not Just) Knee Deep" was "let's rescue dance music from the blahs") was probably in the spirit of friendly competition and self-assertion rather than outright distaste; as Clinton himself somewhat more generously acknowledged in 1986, "Disco itself was funk. But all they did was take one funk beat and sanitize it to no end. It's irritating. I loved Donna Summer's records. But too much of it..." (Clinton, interviewed by Fricke, p. 77.) Nonetheless, Tate is certainly right that the industry-hyped disco boom of the late '70s killed many independent funk bands, and allowed record companies to take tighter control of black music by putting creative control in the hands of behind-the-scenes producers who could never develop the clout and autonomy of world-famous performers. (For an excellent discussion of the politics of disco, see Tom Smucker, "Disco," The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll, pp. 561-572. See also Richard Dyer, "In Defense of Disco," On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 410-418.

31 . See, for example, Ed Ward's 1977 profile of P-Funk: "Still, the key to mass acceptance for Funkadelic lies with the white audience" (Ward, p. 39). Likewise, Tom Smucker worried in 1978 that P-Funk was "wearing out and getting boring, just when white people had a chance to discover it." (Tom Smucker, "Parlentelechy v. the Bullshit Syndrome," Village Voice, February 6, 1978).

32 . Walters, p. 63.

33 . Untitled, from the liner notes to Tear the Roof off the Mother: 1974-1980. My guess is that this text was initially printed in the liner notes to Mothership Connection, but as the reissue I own does not include all the original packaging, I cannot tell for sure.

34 . This point is made by Nelson George in his "Chronicle of Post-Soul Black Culture." (Nelson George, Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 13.

35 . Tate, Flyboy in the Buttermilk, p. 160.

36 . Robert Elliot Fox, *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delany* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. 94.

37 . Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, p. 165.

38 . Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, p. 166.

39 . Smucker, "Parlentelechy v. the Bullshit Syndrome," p. 49.

40 . West, p. 287. West's use of the word "technofunk" is somewhat confusing, as music critics usually use the term to refer to the synthesizer-dominated dance music of the early '80s. But his point remains valid.

41 . Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, p. 186.

42 . Reed, p. 218.

Posted by tedf at March 1, 2005 12:55 AM

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