University of Alberta

"Ready to Spread": P-Funk and the Politics of Signifyin(g)

by

Benjamin Grant Doleac

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Ethnomusicology

Department of Music

Fall 2011
Edmonton, Alberta

ABSTRACT:

The practice of appropriating a sign, icon or trope with an already-established meaning and investing it with a new meaning to produce a sign that retains both original and revised meanings is one example of what scholar Henry Louis Gates calls "Signifyin(g)". I argue herein that musician George Clinton and his band P-Funk encode a subversive political program and a philosophy of life – a radically hybrid vision of cosmic liberation which I will call "heteroglossic utopia" – in their music, lyrics, visual iconography, stage performances and indeed their entire underlying social formation through the practice of Signifyin(g). In making this claim I draw extensively on a historical survey of Signifyin(g) practice in African American literature and music, the scholarship of Gates, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Paul Gilroy, and a series of interviews I conducted with Clinton and members of P-Funk while following them on tour in July of 2010.

Acknowledgements

Just two years before I started my Master's degree program in ethnomusicology, I never would have imagined I could actually parlay my obsession with the music of P-Funk into a legitimate thesis project. I have a number of people to thank for their help, advice and encouragement along this two year journey. Firstly I would like to thank George Clinton and P-Funk themselves, for creating such a rich and expansive body of work whose relevance is only beginning to be understood, for freeing minds and asses around the world over a period of more than 40 years and counting, and for letting me into their world so graciously. Special thanks go out to all the band members, associates and crew who were kind enough to agree to interviews: Michael Hampton, Lige Curry, George Clinton, Bernie Worrell, Rico Lewis, Overton Loyd, Carlos Murray, Steve Boyd, Quazeadelic, Ron Ford, Chuck Haber, Kim Manning, Greg Thomas, Danny Bedrosian and Ricky Rouse. Extra special thanks to Carl Gray, idx1274, and Michael "Clip" Payne for helping me get my foot in the door and for continued correspondence and support. And a very special thanks to Barbarella Bishop for driving me home after the Philadelphia show.

My acquaintances within the P-Funk universe made fieldwork a whole lot easier; my colleagues and professors at the University of Alberta provided invaluable guidance and encouraged me to follow through with this project. First and foremost is my supervisor, Michael Frishkopf, whose patience, generosity, advice, instruction and faith in my work enabled me to get the project off the ground, conduct a proper field study, synthesize my research and ideas in writing, and to complete this thesis in a (relatively) reasonable amount of time. I owe Michael a major debt of gratitude for his efforts. A hearty thanks as well to Michael MacDonald, whose conference paper at SEM 2008 drew me to the University of Alberta, and who continued to provide support and advice even as I occasionally fumbled my responsibilities as a teacher's assistant for his pop music courses. Thanks additionally to Maryam Moshaver and Teresa Zackodnik, who were kind enough to sit on my thesis committee, and whose feedback throughout the past few months has been essential. Three of my fellow students and friends in ethnomusicology have provided editorial advice and suggestions for additional sources: Kat Danser, Matt Knight and Patrick Smith. Thanks and good luck to each of you in your future endeavors. Thanks to Pam Cruse, Chris Garos and Katie Albert, and James Schoen and Sarah

Weingarten for giving me places to stay while I followed P-Funk on tour. Finally, thanks to my family and friends for continued love and support.

Table of Contents

List of Figures & Illustrations

Chapter 1
Introduction: What is P-Funk?

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, and I shall play with it
For nothing is good, unless you play with it
And all that is good is nasty!
Fly on, baby.[1]

So intones a distant, authoritative voice at the beginning of "What Is Soul," the seventh track on the eponymous debut album by Funkadelic. From what body, human or alien, does this voice issue forth? What do the words mean? How can something be "good" and "nasty" at the same time? How does Funkadelic answer the titular question? To paraphrase the title of another track, what's a Funkadelic?[i]

This thesis is in part an attempt to resolve such questions, to make sense out of the alien encounter that is the P-Funk experience. "What Is Soul" and *Funkadelic* (the album) are versions of the P-Funk experience, just as Funkadelic (the band) is one among many incarnations of P-Funk. What does "P-Funk" mean, and for whom?

The question can be read – and answered – in multiple ways. At the most basic level, "P-Funk" is a contraction of the name "Parliament-Funkadelic," an umbrella term for the constellation of recording, performing and visual artists operating under the supervision of singer and former barbershop proprietor George Clinton from the late 1960's to the present. The P-Funk collective is at once both a single entity and several distinct acts; for reasons of both creative license and legal discretion, Clinton signed the same core of musicians to several different record labels under several different names in the 1970s. Chief among these names were "Parliament" and "Funkadelic," each attached to a distinct musical identity. Parliament played James Brown-influenced dance music, while Funkadelic played heavy rock music. The two acts were in fact one band, and together they were known as "Parliament-Funkadelic," or P-Funk for short. Clinton retired the names "Parliament" and "Funkadelic" after their recording contracts lapsed in

[i] The album's opening track, "Mommy, What's a Funkadelic?"

the early 1980s, and since that time the ensemble has toured and recorded as "George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars." Although P-Funk has always maintained a devoted cult following, the group achieved its greatest commercial success in the late 1970s, and to this day the band's live show draws primarily from its 1970s repertoire.

The name "P-Funk" has additional connotations: "the Motherpage," an extensively researched fan site, states that the name may also stand for "pure funk" ("uncut funk, the bomb" as Clinton puts it on the song "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up"[2]) or for "Plainfield funk," in tribute to the band's hometown, as late guitarist Garry Shider suggested.[3] In fact, the abundance of acknowledged and possible meanings for the term is emblematic of Clinton and P-Funk's overarching aesthetic strategy, which is to harness a multiplicity of significations within a single signified, whether it be a word, visual icon, or a musical performance.

Historical Background

Originating as a doo-wop quintet in the 1950's, P-Funk and its audience have evolved over more than half a century of musical and cultural upheaval. The group's sprawling history encompasses myriad stylistic shifts and personnel changes, and consequently any attempt to define their musical or social essence is fraught with difficulty. Though P-Funk began their recording career as a Motown-styled vocal group and were essentially an "acid rock" group styled after Jimi Hendrix in the early Funkadelic years,[ii] they are perhaps best known today as icons of the "funk" movement. As both trope and musical style, funk is a close cousin to "soul"; both words emerged as signifiers of black cultural and musical authenticity in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s. Both soul and funk drew heavily from the emotive displays, call-and-response exchanges and subtly differentiated repetitions of black church music, but while soul generally employed traditional pop song structures and foregrounded vocal performance, funk emphasized repeating rhythmic patterns and extended passages of instrumental interplay. In funk, as in no popular American musical form that preceded it, the groove, not the song, was king. James Brown is widely credited as the chief progenitor of the funk genre; singles such as "Say It Loud (I'm Black and Proud)" (1968) combined an increasingly sophisticated backdrop of orchestrated

[ii] Approximately 1968-1971.

syncopation with Brown's shouted racial affirmations. Sly and the Family Stone further popularized the style in 1969 and 1970 – and anticipated P-Funk's cross-cultural utopianism – by combining Brown's rhythmic innovations with rock instrumentation, conventional popular song forms, gospel dynamics, utopian sloganeering, a sexually and racially integrated lineup and an extravagantly "far-out" visual aesthetic derived from the hippie movement.

It was Clinton and P-Funk, however, who transformed "funk" into an ethos, and in the process arguably laid the groundwork for funk to be recognized as a distinct genre and as a musical movement. Where 1970s contemporaries like the Ohio Players, Kool & the Gang, War and Earth Wind & Fire made their names with dynamic, high-energy performances and hip dance music[iii], P-Funk offered – and continues to offer – a complex mythology, an esoteric, self-referential lexicon and, as I will argue, an entire life philosophy. It is telling that while some of these acts have continued to profit from tours well after their commercial prime, only P-Funk – who never had a top 10 single in the U.S., unlike the other acts I've mentioned – has maintained a devoted fan base. In part this is a matter of sheer perseverance, as P-Funk has toured virtually nonstop for the past 20 years. Yet the group's fans are united not just by the shared experience of a P-Funk concert but also by Clinton's singular post-hippie sensibility. Unlike many other black musicians after the 1960s, Clinton preaches a politics of inclusion. The early Funkadelic albums are informed by black nationalism if not really of it, but later records – especially those produced for Casablanca Records under the name Parliament – softened the militant rhetoric and introduced elements of absurdist humor, a cast of mythical comic-book alter-egos, and an outlandish, science fiction inspired storyline that served as both commercial hook and origin myth for the P-Funk universe. Beginning with the Earth Tour in 1976, the group's extravagant stage shows brought Clinton's mythic universe to life with enormous stage props like the Mothership (Fig. 1-1), elaborately bizarre costumes, and quasi-religious call-and-response chants between band and audience.

[iii] albeit occasionally bolstered by affirmative race credos, pan-African mysticism, and – in the case of Earth Wind & Fire – grand stage spectacles

Figure 1-1: Clinton (as Dr. Funkenstein) emerges onstage from the Mothership (P-Funk Earth Tour, 1976).

In concert and on recordings, Clinton and a motley group of dramatis personae constantly toed the line between chaos and order, with the downbeat-heavy ("on-the-One") grooves and lockstep precision of the rhythm section and the horns offset by farting synths, screaming guitar leads, monstrous stage props and Clinton's improvised raps. Even the group's biggest hits skirt the edge of cacophony. If P-Funk's rhythms were too eccentric, their structures too loose and their humor too black for mainstream (read: white) audiences in the disco era, however, they began to make more sense after the allusive slang poetics and radically poly-textural beats of hip-hop became the pop norm.

Personal Background

I have been a P-Funk devotee since about 2003. As a white male from a relatively wealthy family in a small New England town, I began my project as, by most appearances, an outsider to the world of P-Funk. My formative experiences were likely very different from those of George Clinton and his cohorts; growing up in an affluent, overwhelmingly white rural environment, I learned all I knew of black urban life from books, television and the radio. Nothing in my experience necessarily suggests that I'd be ripe for Clinton's cult, yet I gravitated towards the group because I found Clinton's comic sensibility and way of looking at the world to be commensurate with my own. After

purchasing Parliament's gleefully preposterous *Motor-Booty Affair* (1978), an underwater concept LP that opens with a rap from Mr. Wiggles the Worm (an homage to Jocko Henderson, a legendary "personality jock" from the early days of Rhythm & Blues radio), I was smitten with Clinton's comic-book imagination, his absurd juxtapositions of science and scatology, the group's teeming, overstuffed grooves and the anything-goes approach to both form and content. If my attraction to the group and to African-American culture in general was partially rooted in exoticism, I hardly think my experience is unusual in that regard. Most ethnomusicologists are driven by some semblance of xenophilia, a fascination with cultural difference and the insider-outsider dynamic, and a desire to make the strange familiar. As long as researchers do not abuse their position by exploiting the trust or the resources of their confidants, the ethnographic enterprise and its underlying aim – to learn the values, customs, and ways of meaning of a cultural group from the inside out – can help to foster cross-cultural understanding.

In pursuing this project, I hoped desire to make some sense of a discursive universe, a sign system and ways of meaning that were both foreign – or fundamentally "other" – and strangely familiar to me. In the P-Funk universe, otherness is not simply celebrated, but actively cultivated. On *Mothership Connection*, Clinton's messianic Star Child is literally an alien being – another, or an other, species; the group's stage costumes, sets and album covers draw from the otherworldly realms of fantasy and science-fiction; and the lyrics to songs such as "Freak of the Week" and "(not just) Knee Deep" promote the liberatory power of eccentricity in thought and appearance. As Kodwo Eshun writes in *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, "P-Funk compels you to succumb to the inhuman, to be abducted and love it."[4] Where mainstream society fosters fear and revulsion of the other and the alien, P-Funk and its fans embrace otherness. Outcasts, eccentrics and other undesirables are all welcome in P-Funk's tent; in fact, these otherwise marginal figures become prophets and heroes in Clinton's mythological world. As Clinton remarked in a 1978 interview, "When someone stops conforming, everybody else calls him nuts, right?"[5] For P-Funk, "crazy" is a complimentary term.

I first encountered P-Funk through their recordings. Having learned about the group through various record guides and through their near-ubiquity as sample sources for early Nineties hip-hop, I purchased Funkadelic's *One Nation Under a Groove* and Parliament's *Mothership Connection* in high school, but it wasn't until several years later that I became an active fan. The album covers, the comic book narrative in the liner

notes, the aural contours and formal structures of the music were new and unfamiliar, but the lyrics to the songs in particular seemed utterly alien. Peppered with indecipherable signifiers, George Clinton's words were almost a foreign language to me: song titles like "Grooveallegiance" and "The DooDoo Chasers (Promentalshitbackwashpsychosisenema-squad)" were only the tip of the iceberg. The essential strangeness of my first encounter with P-Funk never left me, and in a sense my interest in P-Funk – first as a fan and now as a scholar – has always been motivated by a search for meaning. Like many P-Funk fans I've spoken to, I want to get to the root of Clinton's mythic universe.

I developed an interest in African American literature and theory around the same time that I began to explore P-Funk's recordings. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s classic *The Signifying Monkey* stood out among my readings: though the book's subtitle was *A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, the concepts Gates introduced in the book offered a means of interpreting a wide array of black expressive culture. As a white male from a small town in New Hampshire, I was, for lack of a better word, an interested outsider to African-American music and culture, and *The Signifying Monkey* offered an illuminating insider's perspective. The book inspired me to consider not just *what* P-Funk and other musicians meant but *how* they meant.

The Signifying Monkey would remain the central theoretical source text for my thesis, but the book that actually inspired the project in the first place was a work of fiction. Ishmael Reed's comic novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, a major source of inspiration for both Clinton's P-Funk mythology and Gates' theory of Signifyin(g), proved to be the catalyst for my current project. After I read the book in the summer of 2009, it became apparent that Clinton's work had a clear lineage in African-American literary and oral tradition, and that the strategies of appropriation, revision, repetition and commentary in P-Funk's music had literary parallels in Reed's work. Although I initially envisioned a study of Reed's influence on Clinton's music, I expanding my scope after finding that I could begin to explicate both using Henry Louis Gates' theory of Signifyin(g).

The Theory of Signifyin(g)

The practice of appropriating a sign, icon or trope with an already-established meaning and investing it with a different and often opposed meaning to produce a sign that retains both its original and revised meanings is one example of what Henry Louis Gates calls "Signifyin(g)." In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates writes that "the process of

semantic appropriation" which occurs in black Signifyin(g) "has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance… decolonized for the black's purposes 'by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has – and retains – its own orientation.'" [6] By coining a new variation on an established term (of European origin) to describe the practice, Gates himself Signifies; by capitalizing the first letter and bracketing the letter g, Gates is able to represent both the "white" term and the "black" variation (spoken by black people as "signifyin'") simultaneously. The absent g, Gates writes, "stands as the trace of black difference."[7]

As practiced by the Signifying Monkey of black folklore, Signifyin(g) is one version of what Gates calls "repetition with a signal difference."[8] More broadly, it is the sum of black rhetorical games that hinge on the possibilities of the double-voiced utterance[iv], the signifier which alludes to a multiplicity of signifieds; supplementing his earlier definition, Gates writes that it is "an especially expressive mode of discourse that turns upon forms of figuration rather than intent or content."[9] Signifying and the "double-voiced" utterance are central features of African-American vernacular, a means of producing black subjectivity through revision and subversion of a mainstream discourse which is otherwise marked by the absence of blackness. For Gates, blackness is not an essence but a trope which must be reproduced continually.

George Clinton and P-Funk: Music and Signifyin(g) Practice

For nearly 50 years, George Clinton has made extensive use of "double voice," parody, and intertextuality in a dynamic critique/celebration of African and Anglo American cultural history and tradition, appropriating and upending a broad range of musical and literary formulae in the process. In short, Clinton and P-Funk produce new meanings by subverting established verbal, visual and musical tropes and symbols through the process of Signifyin(g). Clinton's lyrics offer burlesques of nursery rhyme, advertising slogans, and occult pseudoscience, while P-Funk's music liberally borrows from sources ranging from doo-wop to baroque. Album covers bring Clinton's Afrofuturist utopia to life by Signifyin(g) upon iconic visual texts, as in the psychedelic

[iv] As Gates notes in *The Signifying Monkey*, the "double-voiced utterance" is a rhetorical analogue of what W.E.B. DuBois calles the "double consciousness" of African-American identity (207).

sci-fi revision of "Raising the Flag At Iwo Jima" that adorns the cover of Funkadelic's *One Nation Under A Groove* (Figs. 1-2 and 1-3).

Figure 1-2: Joe Rosenthal, "Raising the Flag At Iwo Jima" (1945). Taken during the Battle of Iwo Jima, the photograph quickly became one of the most widely recognized images of World War II in the United States.

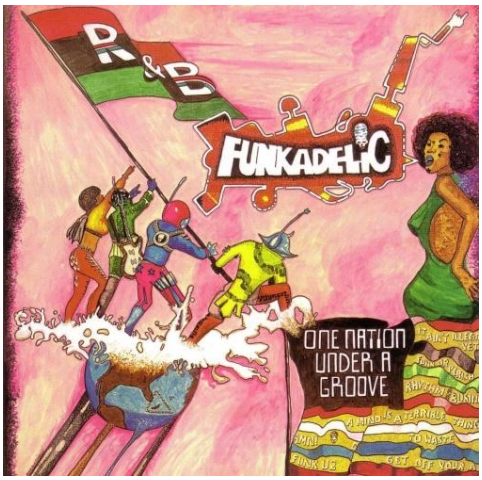

Figure 1-3: Pedro Bell, *One Nation Under a Groove* LP Cover (1978).

On record and onstage, Clinton plays both trickster figure and divine mediator, combining them in the persona of wily extraterrestrial disc jockey Star Child. Like all trickster figures, from the mythic prototype Esu-Elegbara (about which more in chapter 2) on down, Clinton outsmarts enemies of the Funk through rhetorical indirection and verbal wit. Like Esu, Clinton manifests himself in multiple guises, and appears to shift between different identities at will; his on-record aliases include mad scientist Dr. Funkenstein, dance-floor commander Uncle Jam, the aforementioned Star Child and the underwater rhymester Mr. Wiggles.

"Repetition with a difference" might well be George Clinton's artistic credo; amidst the layers of intertextual reference that constitute P-Funk records and performances are allusions, quotations, paraphrases and reprises of the group's own past works. George Clinton's chants and slogans, and the instrumental riffs that back them up – the verbal and musical "hooks," so to speak – are like so many interchangeable parts, liable to appear in several different songs, usually with subtle alterations each time out. Thus the guitar vamp that opens Parliament's 1970 song "I Call My Baby Pussycat" reappears in Funkadelic's 1976 "Hardcore Jollies"; by the time I saw the latest edition of

Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic at a series of shows in July 2010, the same vamp was typically used to signal the close of the set.

Drawing both from outside sources and his own past works, George Clinton's games of intertextual reference only intensified after digital sampling and sequencing technology was introduced in the 1980s. With the rise of rap groups weaned on their parents' Parliament and Funkadelic records, the game became a two-way street; artists such as Digital Underground, Ice Cube, and Dr. Dre frequently sampled or interpolated multiple P-Funk records within a single song: Snoop Doggy Dogg's Dre-produced "Who Am I (What's My Name)?" for instance features vocal hooks lifted from Parliament's "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)" and "Give Up the Funk" and a musical backdrop fashioned from Funkadelic's "(Not Just) Knee Deep" and Clinton's "Atomic Dog." By 1993's *Hey Man…Smell My Finger*, Clinton himself got in on the sampling game, fashioning composite grooves out of his own past records. The apotheosis of rap's tributes to P-Funk came with Ice Cube's 1994 single "Bop Gun (One Nation)," the lyrics of which are a pastiche of Clinton's best lines. Clinton featured prominently in the song's video. To this day, he makes frequent guest appearances on rap records, sometimes referencing P-Funk's past in the process and sometimes devising new turns of phrase.

Clinton's rhetorical gift is so infectious that journalists and scholars writing about P-Funk often assume the leader's cosmic-jive voice. P-Funk profiles by Rickey Vincent[v], Greg Tate[vi], Mark Willhardt and Joel Stein[vii] – among many others – all borrow liberally from the highbrow/lowbrow inversions and impolite triple-entendres of the P-Funk lexicon. As a "P-Funk virgin" (to quote band videographer Carl Gray)[10] and a fresh recruit of Uncle Jam's Army round about the spring of 2003, I found Clinton's verbal wit and conceptual flair irresistible; the group's absurdist space-opera narratives[viii], anarchic

---

[v] The chapters "The P-Funk Empire: *Tear the Roof Off the Sucker*" and "The Metaphysics of P: the *Mothership Connection*" in Vincent's book *Funk* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996) detail P-Funk history and mythology in an authorial voice that borrows liberally from the P-Funk lexicon, but the group's slangy linguistic inversions figure strongly throughout the entire book; in fact, Clinton himself provides the foreword.

[vi] "The Atomic Dog: George Clinton" in Tate's *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) summarizes the band's early struggles to find an audience as follows: "Funkadelic was too wacky for the souled-out splibs and too black for the spazz whiteys who believed hard rock only came in caucasoid and got nothing to do with bloods getting happy feet besides" (30).

[vii] Mark Willhardt and Joel Stein, "Dr. Funkenstein's Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication: George Clinton Signifies," in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, ed. Kevin J. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 145-172.

[viii] See Chapter 5 for examples: *Mothership Connection* (1975), *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (1976), *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (1977), et. al.

and mischievous sense of humor, and covert intellectualism all distinguished them from both their less-ambitious contemporaries and most of the later artists they inspired.

P-Funk and the Politics of Signifyin(g)

I argue herein that George Clinton and his group Parliament-Funkadelic encode a subversive political program and a philosophy of life – a radically hybrid vision of cosmic liberation which I will call "heteroglossic utopia" – in their music, lyrics, visual iconography, stage performances and indeed their entire underlying social formation. I argue furthermore that they accomplish this through the black rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g). In the process of Signifyin(g) the writer/speaker ambiguates the relationship between signifier and signified and thus reveals the partiality and situatedness of language itself. By inverting and refiguring the established tropes of white hegemonic and black nationalist discourse, Clinton suggests that neither has an absolute claim on the truth and that an ambiguous third way is possible. Like his Afrofuturist forebears Sun Ra and Ishmael Reed, Clinton forges a new path amidst the detritus of exploded binaries, dueling discourses and vanquished absolutes.

Methodology

After reading *Mumbo Jumbo* and formulating the basics of my project, I developed a tripartite approach: an ethnographic field study supplemented by a literature review and an in-depth analysis of several of the group's 1970s recordings. My preliminary research largely revolved around black literary theory, the funk genre, African-American music from the outset of the 20th century and black cultural politics from the 1960s to the present. Given the tremendously broad scope of my initial research and the abundance of extant scholarship on each of the topics I've listed above, the only practical approach was to begin with literature on Signifyin(g) and studies directly related to P-Funk, its music and its history and work outward.

As a white male writing about "black" music and culture, I am well aware that my representation and interpretation of the P-Funk universe, its sources and its ways of meaning could be problematic. I use the theory of Signifyin(g) as my framework in part

because it engages and interprets African-American expressive tradition on its own terms. Gates and Gilroy share this impulse, though both draw substantially and unreservedly upon the work of European critical theorists as well. Gates makes the point in *Figures in Black* that the European and African-American literary traditions are fundamentally inseparable. Growing up in a society where, for centuries, literacy was a privilege extended to whites alone, the first black writers in America were necessarily informed by the conventions of European and Euro-American literature. As Gates writes in *The Signifying Monkey*, "Black writers, like critics of black literature, learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, black texts resemble other, Western texts."[11] While earlier black literary critics often resisted the Eurocentric domain of aesthetics and theory, both of which proceed from a Western critical tradition that historically dismissed black literature as crude imitations of canonical texts, Gates engages with contemporary critical theory by rewriting and refiguring them "in black." Gates can do this because, as an African-American, he is a rightful heir to the same expressive tradition which surfaces in oral, written and musical texts from Frederick Douglass's *Autobiography* to Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* and from Negro work songs to jazz, ragtime, and funk.

Proceeding from Gates and Gilroy's critical syntheses, I consulted many of the same European theorists – including Bakhtin, Barthes and Derrida – but unlike either I cannot combine and transform these sources as an insider to black expressive tradition. My critical synthesis herein remains the work of an interested outsider; where Gates seeks to "translate" the theory of his forbears "into the black idiom,"[12] I merely use these works as background to supplement Gates and to help explicate the work of George Clinton and P-Funk.

Secondhand sources are no substitute for firsthand testimony, and as an ethnomusicologist I know that the most effective way to understand a musical community – whether it be a performing collective such as P-Funk, a local music "scene" or an entire sociocultural group – is to explore it from within. For this reason, I undertook a two-week fieldwork project following the group on their North American tour in July 2010. My plan was to begin by observing the group and its audience in performance and, from there, work my way into the P-Funk organization by introducing myself and my project. I wanted to get band members' perspectives on what P-Funk means, how it makes meaning, the social and musical dynamics of the group and how they constructed their own identities both individually and as members of P-Funk. Ultimately, I spoke to more

than a dozen members and associates of P-Funk, including Clinton himself. Where possible, I have used band members' quotes to support my points. Even in instances where I let the band members speak for themselves, however, they are framed by my narrative context, my perspective as a listener and observer, and my subjective interpretations of the musical, verbal, visual and performative texts that make up the P-Funk universe. Usually, quotes are taken from much longer interviews, so my editorial discretion plays a considerable role in how band members' voices and perspectives are represented. Finally, my theoretical framework plays a crucial role in shaping the ethnographic narrative.

Overview

As I have mentioned previously, the primary objective of my study is to demonstrate that George Clinton and P-Funk use the black rhetorical strategy of Signifyin(g) to encode a subversive ideology, a radically hybrid identity and a utopian worldview in their recordings, their live performances and their mythology. I do so through textual analysis of musical and video recordings from the 1970s and live performances in 2010, alongside a series of interviews conducted with members of the group over the past 13 months. Before detailing my fieldwork experience, I situate Clinton and P-Funk within a broader historical and cultural context in chapter 2. In chapter 3, I analyze P-Funk performances both past and present and present and provide an ethnographic account of my experience following the group on tour. Later on in the same chapter, I draw upon the many interviews I conducted to explore how P-Funk conceives of itself as a community and as a collective of individuals, and how Signifyin(g) practice shapes the group's social formation and identity. The theoretical framework of my study is explained in detail in chapter 4. Chapter 5 comprises the bulk of my musical analysis of P-Funk's recordings, with extended discussions of the songs "Chocolate City," "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention – B3M)," and "Uncle Jam." My final chapter explores possible directions of future scholarship on P-Funk and Signifyin(g), and considers how the Signifyin(g) politics of the P-Funk universe can have – and have had – a "real-life" impact.

[1] Funkadelic, "What is Soul?" *Funkadelic*, 1970, Westbound W-2000.
[2] Parliament, "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)," *Mothership Connection*, 1975, Casablanca NBLP 7022.
[3] "The P-FAQ!" from "The Motherpage: Makin' Your Funk the P-Funk," http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/motherpage/pfaq.html, accessed July 14, 2011.
[4] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 14.
[5] George Clinton quote from John Abbey, "George Clinton," *Blues and Soul* (December 1978), reproduced in "Rock's Backpages," http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=15269, accessed February 2, 2011.
[6] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)
[7] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 46.
[8] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 51.
[9] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 74.
[10] Author interview with Carl Gray (P-Funk videographer), Dell Music Center, Philadelphia, PA, July 17, 2011.
[11] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxii.
[12] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), xxi.

Chapter 2
"The Funk" of History

By the time I saw P-Funk on tour in 2010, the group had more than half a century of history behind them. Many of the names and faces who make up the group have changed since their late 1970s heyday, but the basic performance approach and the philosophy that unites P-Funk with their fans in shared musical and spiritual communion remains much the same. To appreciate P-Funk as it exists today, as both musical and social/cultural phenomenon requires a consideration of the historical social and political contexts in which Clinton and company developed their elaborate cosmology and produced their most lasting work.

The genesis of the P-Funk concept spans a period of nearly two decades, from the formation of the Parliaments as a doo-wop quintet in 1956 up to the release of *Mothership Connection* – the first of P-Funk's album-length Afrofuturist space operas – and the subsequent P-Funk Earth Tour in 1975-1976. Over that period, Clinton migrated from Plainfield, New Jersey to Detroit, accumulated a decade's worth of experience in the business of rhythm and blues while working at the fringes of Berry Gordy's Motown empire, took his group through a multitude of different incarnations across the soul-funk-rock spectrum, and absorbed a tremendous array of influences ranging from psychedelic rock to radical black Muslim theology and Ishmael Reed's comic novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Each of the various musical styles Clinton explored and texts he accumulated over these years was eventually incorporated into the late 1970s records and concert tours which serve as the foundation of the P-Funk universe and the common currency of the group's audience to this day.

Funk: The Word and the Musical Style

Today, the word "funk" is used chiefly to describe a highly syncopated style of African-American dance music that reached its popular peak in the 1970's. In the *Grove Dictionary of Music*, David Brackett describes the genre's distinguishing features as follows:

> [Funk] features syncopated interlocking rhythm patterns based on straight quaver and semiquaver subdivisions, a vocal style drawn from soul music, extended vamps based on

> a single and often complex harmony, strong emphasis on the bass line, and lyrics with frequent spiritual themes and social commentary.[1]

All of the features Brackett names are prominent throughout Clinton and P-Funk's recorded work. Before examining the role of funk as both lexical signifier and stylistic framework in Clinton's music, however, it behooves us to remember that the words "funk" and "funky" have accumulated a multitude of different and sometimes opposed meanings over the past century. Clinton and P-Funk employ both variations of the term throughout their performances, often playing upon several of its significations at once.

As Clinton exclaimed on Funkadelic's "Let's Take It to the Stage" in 1975, "Funk used to be a bad word!" In a single sentence, Clinton capped the word's seventy five year journey from racially-marked bodily epithet to positive musical and cultural signifier. By that point his fans would have known that, among other things, "funk" referred to a musical subgenre. The name "Funkadelic," of course, played on the musical connotations of the word, its contraction of "Funk" and "Psychedelic" perfectly capturing the group's fusion of heavily syncopated dance music and druggy rock. Yet Clinton's quote also played on the tension between the dictionary and vernacular definitions of a word once deemed unfit for polite company.

The process by which "funk" came to describe a musical style and a positive black cultural essence was profoundly shaped by the ongoing, oft-contentious dialogue between black vernacular and white hegemonic discourses in America. Both of these discursive strains are subject to constant appropriation, revision, subversion, and repetition by the other. Drawing from Gary Tomlinson's idea of musical historiography in "The Historian, the Performer, and Authentic Meaning in Music," I conceive of my work on the historical usage of the word "funk" as it relates to music as a kind of dialogue between the historian, the musicians, and the commentators who have used and defined the term since the turn of the 20th century. Like the music it describes, the word "funk" has no single objective meaning. Its signification has been negotiated throughout history; every context in which the word has been used (newspaper articles, song lyrics, the dictionary, the concert stage, and everyday conversation) and every historical figure who has used it (journalists, critics, theorists, working musicians and laypeople) has shaped the way the word "funk" is ultimately understood. The role of the historian, as Tomlinson writes, is to engage with each of these figures and contexts on their own terms in order to gain a multileveled perspective.[2]

"Funk" is defined by *Merriam Webster's Dictionary* primarily as "a strong, offensive smell"; other definitions include "a state of paralyzing fear" and "a depressed state of mind."[3] All three definitions describe an ostensibly negative or undesirable trait, which could be part of the reason African-American musicians seized the word in the first place. Well before it became a musical genre, the "funk" of human perspiration was an ever-present fact of life for most African-Americans, who followed decades of back-breaking toil under slavery with similarly grueling menial-labor jobs on farms and in factories well into the Civil Rights era. Portrayed in the news, on the stage, in songs and on film as unthinking animals prone to fits of physical and emotional passion, African-Americans could not escape the prison of their own socially-constructed corporeality. Instead of disavowing their bodies, however, blacks countered the degradation and servitude of their day jobs with positive "work" in the church and in the pubs, halls and community centres where music was played. As on the plantation and in the factory, each of these environments found black bodies moving and sweating in close proximity to one another, but while physical exertion only reinforced the realities of racial oppression on the job, it served the opposite purpose in the pews and on the dance floor. In these sites of collective self-affirmation, "funk" was the smell of a positive sweat.

Where etymology dictionaries variously suggest that the word "funk" derives from the dialectical French *funkier* (based on Latin *fumigare*, "to smoke") or from the Flemish *fonck* (meaning "disturbance, agitation"),[4] Robert Ferris Thompson writes in *Flash of the Spirit* that the word originates from the Central African Ki-Kongo word *lu-fuki*, an honorary term which refers to the smell of a hard-working individual. According to Thompson, "This Kongo sign of exertion is identified with the irradiation of positive energy of a person. Hence 'funk' in American jazz parlance can mean earthiness, a return to fundamentals."[5] The connotations of the latter term are markedly closer to the meaning of the words "funk" and "funky" in contemporary African-American musical and cultural parlance; in both its African origins and its linking of physical labor with personal and artistic integrity, the term was a natural fit for the nativist discourse of black nationalism in the 1960s.

Even if "funk" and "funky" are African retentions rather than European inversions, the tension between their Euro- and African-American significations is relevant. The Standard English "funk" refers to a mental state, while the African-American Vernacular "funky" describes a bodily attribute. Where the mind/body dualism of classic European philosophy and aesthetics conceived physical reality as a barrier to

comprehension of beauty and truth, and the puritan Christian morality at the root of American culture saw the body as a source of shame and corruption, black vernacular culture has historically been far more ambiguous about the relationship between physical and metaphysical realms. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) suggests in *Blues People* that this ambiguity is rooted in the traditions black church, an institutional product of the uneasy first encounters of black slaves with the Christian religion of their white masters. Dance was a central component of West African religious and social traditions, but the Christian church forbade dancing as a sinful excess. As a result, the black church developed new traditions that negotiated the precarious boundary between worldly sin and otherworldly salvation:

> Since dancing was irreligious and sinful, the Negro said that only "crossing the feet" constituted actual dancing. So the ring shout developed, where the worshippers link arms and shuffle, at first slowly but then with increasing emotional display, around in a circle, singing hymns or chanting as they move. This shuffle, besides getting around the dogma of the stricter "white folks" Christianity also seems derived from African religious dances of exactly the same nature.[6]

Drawing equally from sacred and secular black musical traditions, the "soul" music of the 1950s and 1960s which immediately preceded the funk movement was still more ambiguous about the relationship between body and spirit. In the hands of performers like Ray Charles and Sam Cooke, soul drew its melodies from black hymns of spiritual transcendence and its lyrics from the more earthy concerns of blues tradition. While the word "soul" suggests the metaphysical self, its use as a descriptor in black vernacular culture was predicated on the presence or absence of physical blackness. As Jones writes, "the 'soul brother' means to recast the social order in his own image. White is then not 'right' as the old blues had it, but a liability, since the culture of white precludes the possession of the Negro 'soul.'"[7]

While black musicians and activists of the 1960s would "recast the social order" through the process of Signifyin(g), their musical forebears in the early 20th century reinscribed the language of the hegemonic culture through the same strategy, encoding a multiplicity of new and suggestive meanings in plain American English. Early blues, among other African-American forms, was often quite frank in its depiction of sexuality; though explicit descriptions of intercourse were rare, blues songs featured strong innuendo. At the same time that body-related vulgarisms like "funky" were reconceived as terms of affirmation and approval, previously innocent terms like "jelly-roll,"

"rocking," and "peaches" were invested with more salacious meanings by such blues pioneers as Bessie Smith and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Yet as soon as they made their way onto records, the rich linguistic subversions of the black vernacular were often bowdlerized or otherwise co-opted by the white-dominated music industry. "Rock and roll," for instance, was black slang for sexual intercourse until disc jockey Alan Freed appropriated the term in order to market R&B music to white teenagers.

Though "funk" was not recognized as a distinct musical genre until the 1970's, musicians' use of the adjectival form "funky" dates back to the first years of the 20th century at least. New Orleans trumpeter Charles "Buddy" Bolden (1877-1931), often described as the first jazz musician, was best known during his brief career for a song called "Buddy Bolden's Blues," or the "Funky Butt." Bolden made no recordings, but his onetime contemporary Jelly Roll Morton made a recording of the song in 1939 with the following lyrics:

> I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say,
> You're nasty, you're dirty, take it away
> You're terrible, you're awful, take it away
> I thought I heard him say.
> I thought I heard Buddy Bolden shout,
> Open up that window and let that bad air out.
> Open up that window and let that foul air out.
> I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say.
> Thought I heard judge Fogarty say,
> Thirty days in the market, take him away.
> Give him a good broom to sweep with, take him away.
> I thought I heard him say.
> Thought I heard Frankie Dusen shout,
> Gal, give me the money, I'm gonna beat it out.
> I mean give that money like I explain you,
> I'm going to beat it out.
> 'Cause I heard Frankie Dusen say.[8]

While it is impossible to determine how faithful Morton's version is to Bolden's rendition(s), the general import of the words likely remains intact. The song's many verses were subject to revision and parody through countless performances by Bolden and others. Without actually using the word "funky" (which may have been omitted at the behest of censors), Morton's take on "Buddy Bolden's Blues" plays on many of the more negative significations of the term, evoking bad odors, dirty people, pimps and petty criminals. The song's title may have referred to flatulence or the odor of perspiration endemic to the close-contact dancing which became prevalent during the

Ragtime era,[9] but the catalogue of "funky" undesirables in the song's lyrics was an honest, bleakly humorous reflection of black life in post-Reconstruction-era New Orleans. To white Americans at the turn of the century, blacks were criminals, savages and sexual predators, and the enactment of the Jim Crow laws in the South formally established that they were not welcome in mainstream white society.

Like most of the city's blacks, Buddy Bolden grew up poor in the Uptown section of New Orleans. He enjoyed his greatest success at a time "in which African Americans had been silenced politically" and music offered perhaps the only opportunity for black voices to be heard.[10] The pubs and halls where he made his name were frequented by professional criminals and prostitutes; performances were often interrupted by fights or police raids. For Bolden and his audience, the threat of violence and/or incarceration was always imminent. With songs like "Funky Butt," Bolden made light of oppressive social realities and turned the physical stigma of blackness into a source of pride. As if to cement the reclamation and affirmation of blackness in musical, discursive and physical space that Bolden, his audience, and his followers effected, Union Sons Hall was unofficially dubbed Funky Butt Hall in his honor.

While the word "funky" may have entered musical discourse through one of Bolden's song titles, his music (and the responses it generated) also exhibited some of the core features and notions of racial essence that came to be associated with the term. Donald Marquis writes that Bolden's music drew on both the intense call-and-response of the church services he attended as a child and the city's brass-band tradition. Like Horace Silver and the "funky jazz" musicians of the 1950's, Bolden evoked the intense emotionalism of the black church to forge an "earthy" alternative to the more outwardly refined musics of the day. According to Marquis, Bolden's early work "took the form of playing 'wide open' on the cornet and of playing in up-tempo or ragging the hymns, street songs and dance tunes to create a musical sound that people were unfamiliar with."[11] At the height of his popularity, Bolden's main rival was the Creole bandleader John Robichaux, who had the advantage of classical schooling but apparently lacked a certain musical edge; Marquis writes that, at joint concerts between the two bands, Bolden often won crowds over with his "newer, more raggedy, more exciting sound that stirred their dancing fancy".[12] The recollections of those who witnessed performances by both the mixed-race Robichaux and the dark-skinned Bolden suggest that the equation of raw emotion and spontaneity with racial authenticity which would permeate the later

discourse around both "funk" and "soul" was already beginning to emerge at the turn of the century.

Buddy Bolden's career was cut short by mental illness; after striking his mother-in-law in the head with a water pitcher in 1906, he endured a series of arrests and was ultimately institutionalized from 1907 until his death in 1931. While Bolden's influence persisted in the work of such jazz pioneers as King Oliver, Kid Ory and Sidney Bechet, his contribution to the lexicon rarely appeared in published sources until the 1950's. It is likely that the regionalism "funky" spread beyond New Orleans in the intervening half-century; blacks migrated en masse from the south to the industrial cities of the North, West and Midwest from about 1910 to 1930, and movements like the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s helped to instill a shared political and cultural consciousness in African-Americans across the nation. Nevertheless, surviving recordings suggest that the use of the term "funky" in music remained exclusive to New Orleans players until after World War II. Cornetist Johnny Wiggs released an instrumental called "Ain't Love Grand (Don't Get Funky)" under the name "John Hyman's Bayou Stompers" in 1928. Although Frederick Ramsey made brief reference to the "Funky Butt" in his 1939 book *Jazzmen*, Jelly Roll Morton omitted the word from the version he recorded as "Buddy Bolden's Blues" the very same year (Morton did, however, include the offending word on a significantly lower-fidelity version captured during an interview with the Library of Congress in 1938[13]). Bechet recorded the song as "Funky Butt" for the King Jazz label in 1947.[14]

The rapid ascendance of jazz from regional to national phenomenon in the early decades of the 20th century may in fact have kept "funk" and "funky" from entering common parlance. Buddy Bolden emerged from the rough neighborhood of Storyville, established by New Orleans city ordinance as a red-light district in 1897. In this environment, coarse music and salty lyrics were accepted and even welcomed. Black composers had been writing music for both white and black formal dancing since the early 19th century, but while pre-ragtime dances were highly structured social events that may have actually reinforced the proscribed cultural order, the rent parties and nightclubs where ragtime and early jazz flourished offered opportunities to transcend social norms with racial pantomime and close-contact physical engagement. Musicians would transform works of the Western canon through "ragging," or impromptu syncopation and melodic embellishment. In the process they opened up an ossifying, European-identified tradition to fresh interpretation and subversion. As ragtime dancing spread from

Storyville to concert halls in the Northeast and Midwest, blacks and whites found themselves together on the dance floor for the first time.

So long as ragtime, the jazz music that succeeded it, and the energetic close-contact dancing that accompanied both were confined to poor black neighborhoods they presented no threat to the moral and legal custodians of mainstream white society. Once the new music began to attract white fans, however, a moral panic took shape. When jazz was first recognized by the national media in the late 1910's, white commentators equated its emphasis on rhythm and syncopation with savagery, ignorance and aggression.[i]

After prohibition drove social drinking underground in 1920, the illicit speakeasies that sprang up to serve the growing population of black and white socialites in America's industrial cities emerged as hotbeds of the new sound, and the "Jazz Age" began in earnest. Playing upon the nation's racial anxieties and lingering Puritan opposition to dance, commentators were quick to emphasize the apparent connections between "savage" rhythms, uninhibited dancing, sexual licentiousness, musical and cultural miscegenation and illicit alcohol consumption. In magazines and newspaper portrayals of the day, the typical black jazz musician resembled no one so much as Gus, the villain of D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, "whose only goal is to rape white women."[15] Painting the jazz phenomenon as a plague or an invasion, some writers even peppered their attacks on the new music with thinly-veiled incitements to retaliatory violence; indeed, the period saw a number of racial uprisings and riots in America's major cities.[16]

While jazz met with an increasingly hostile response the media and the custodians of public morality as it grew from local music to nationwide phenomenon in the 1910s and 1920s, the lewd humor and loose performances – in short, the "funk" – of Bolden's era rarely made it to records of the period. Black jazz musicians were not simply inhibited by commercial considerations, widespread cultural opposition, or primitive recording technology; they were actively denied access to mainstream media and thus were largely absent from the first nationally-available products of the genre.

---

[i] For example, a 1917 editorial in *Literary Digest* argued that jazz was "The music of contemporary savages," that "of all moderns the jazz musicians and their auditors have the most rhythmic *aggressiveness*" (emphasis mine) and that, when performing, jazz bands "shake and jump and writhe in ways that suggest a return of the medieval jumping mania." (from "The Appeal of Primitive Jazz," *Literary Digest*, August 25, 1917, reprinted in *Jazz in Print: An Anthology of Selected Early Readings*, ed. Karl Koenig (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 119-120).

White dominance of the record industry and the jazz mainstream may have accounted for the near-total absence of "funky" song titles and lyrics from records, sheet music and print media in the first half of the 20th century. The first bands to put jazz on record were white, though as Kathleen Tackley notes, such white ensembles as the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (whose 1917 "Livery Stable Blues" is commonly cited as the first jazz record) were brought up in the same New Orleans musical tradition that the city's black jazz players passed through.[17] The figures most often associated with jazz by the popular media in the 1920s were white: Irving Berlin was described as "Broadway's king of jazz" and as a pre-eminent jazz composer, while bandleader Paul Whiteman was dubbed the "King of Jazz" by numerous media outlets. Both enjoyed far greater popularity and visibility during the "Jazz Age" than any of their black counterparts.

The "Jazz Age" itself denoted an era of rebellion and exploration among middle-class white youths not entirely unlike the countercultural movements of the 1960s. The cultural upheavals of the era – those shifts in popular taste that accompanied the emergence of an urban middle class in America – were hardly without precedent; the rise of the bourgeoisie in early 19th century Europe had likewise seen a younger generation turn away from the antiquarian and Classical preferences of the aristocracy and embrace folk music and culture, "the homely, rugged, honest vulgarity of the peasant and artisan."[18] Ironically, the very qualities that detractors used to savage jazz music – its supposed primitivism, its lack of refinement, its apparent spontaneity, and the dangerous sensuality of its rhythms – were invoked in its support by young fans and sympathetic commentators. In "Jazz Latitude," a 1922 essay for the *New York Times Book Review & Magazine*, Burnett Hershey prefaces a romantic account of the genre's global reach by explaining that jazz evolved "from the crude and sensuous dances and savage music" to become "our new national anthem,"[19] From the same year, Carl Engel's defense of "good jazz" in the *Atlantic Monthly* does its level-headed best to distance itself from the barbarities of the dance floor, yet the author can't resist describing the style at its best as "Chaos in order…music that is recklessly fantastic, joyously grotesque."[20] Half a century later, P-Funk's outlandishly vulgar costumes and gleefully grotesque odes to the lower stratum of the body would push the Carnivalesque spirit of early jazz to its limits, yet even at its popular peak the group's following remained too subcultural (and too black) to attract much censure from moral watchdogs and the mainstream media. Clinton's uniquely subcultural position was actually something of a strategic advantage, as it

allowed him to comment, subvert and transgress popular discourse from beyond the reproach of middle America.

In the web of discourse around jazz in the 1920s, the arguments of supporters and critics alike rested upon a perceived musical essence that was racially marked, implicitly if not overtly; raw emotion, physical engagement and spontaneous expression are all characteristics associated with blackness and black music in American discourse both vernacular and official. More than thirty years later, popular understandings of "funk" and "soul" music would center on similar ideas of racial essence, not least in the definitions put forth by black musicians themselves. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Ishmael Reed played upon notions of authentic black music as spontaneous, organic, and dangerous by conceiving black cultural essence as an infectious disease called the "Jes Grew." Reed took the name of the disease from a paraphrase of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by writer, anthologist and Harlem Renaissance figure James Weldon Johnson, who noted sarcastically in his Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* that "The earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, 'jes' grew'."[21]

As the Depression hit and the youths of the Jazz Age moved into adulthood, jazz was streamlined and domesticated, moving from the boardinghouse to the concert hall and becoming the soundtrack for an entire generation of upwardly mobile whites in the guise of big-band "swing". Like ragtime and "Dixieland" jazz before it, swing was a black-originated style embraced by whites as hip dance music, and the public faces of the genre in the movies and on the radio were largely white as well: bandleaders Gene Krupa and Benny Goodman were each dubbed the "King of Swing" at different points and, along with Glenn Miller, led their respective bands through segments in numerous 1940s films.

With white appropriation of jazz reaching its midcentury peak, black musicians mounted successive revolts: the bebop era of the 1940s offered furiously paced, abstractly harmonized music with an emphasis on small-group improvisation and an esoteric jargon designed to alienate mainstream interlopers and appeal to a small intellectual elite,[22] while the "hard bop" of the 1950s countered the smooth orchestrations and European-style harmonies of "cool" jazz with a renewed embrace of blues changes and gospel-derived call-and-response patterns.[23] Hard bop's back-to-basics approach signaled an ideological shift in the jazz community towards a politics of black racial affirmation, and it was in this context that the word "funky" became a musical descriptor once again. Frank Kofsky writes that the genre name "hard bop" itself was probably

coined by a jazz critic striving to understand the new music; the title preferred by the musicians was "funky…a uniquely *black* idiom [with] no precise equivalent in standard English."[24] Writing nearly 20 years before Gates, Kofsky cites "bad" and "funky" as examples of the black linguistic process of transforming a term into its dialectical opposite, so that to call a musician "funky" is to laud him for the "*specifically black qualities*" of his playing (italics original).[25]

Indeed, by the middle of the 1950s jazz songs and albums with the word "funky" (or "funk") in the title began to appear in profusion: Horace Silver's "Opus de Funk" (1953), Charlie Parker's "Funky Blues" (1952), Jimmy Smith's "Funk's Oats" (1957), Gene Ammons' *Funky* (1957), and Cannonball Adderley's "That Funky Train" (1957), among others. The term began to surface in jazz-related articles in nationally-circulated magazines and newspapers around the same time, indicating that mainstream recognition might not be far off. In 1954, *Time* magazine published a brief article on the language of "modern jazz addicts" which defined "funky" thusly: "adj. Authentic, swinging."[26] Twice in 1957, the *New York Times* described pianist Horace Silver as "funky." Silver recalls in his 2006 autobiography that his father was greatly offended by this description: "He didn't know the jazz meaning of the word."[27] In the space of a single generation, a word which had been employed by both blacks and whites to demean the black poor had first been reclaimed in the black vernacular as an affirmative marker of racial authenticity and then absorbed into the mainstream as the name of a hip jazz style. As early as 1961, black lifestyle magazine *Ebony* reported on this transformation:

> In the beginning the qualities deemed soulful (earthiness, emotional and spiritual vigor) were canonized under the general term – funky. One of the best indications of the thrust of the movement is the fact that this word, originally disreputable, quickly became acceptable in journalistic circles.[28]

The above-quoted article – Lerone Bennett Jr.'s "The Soul of Soul" – is typical of the written discourse around "funky" music in the 1960s in its linkage of funk, soul and the black church. Bennett insists that soul (and by extension, its analogue "funk") is a feeling, an essence, and a performance attribute rather than a concrete musical genre. He describes pianist Horace Silver as one of the "leaders of the soul-funk school," and quotes Milt Jackson on the gospel origins of the "funky" playing style. Drawing further connections between "funk" and "soul," Bennett argues that "a new note of racial pride" is evident in the "soul" revolution, and that Horace Silver's use of the word "funky"

(along with song titles like "Filthy McNasty") is a "blue note of defiance".[29] Amiri Baraka, writing in 1966, describes Ray Charles and Horace Silver as Gospel-bred avatars of "the funk-groove-soul revival" who "'rescued' the music from the icebox of cool jazz, which finally turned out to be a white music for elevators, college students, and TV backgrounds."[30]

Because the word "funky," like so much black urban slang, was seized upon and debased through overexposure by the mass media, it was largely superseded in the early 1960s by the word "soul".[31] Kofsky, writing in 1970, argues that the two terms are in many ways synonymous, and indeed the *Ebony* article quoted above explicitly links the terms, but through 40 more years of subsequent musical, critical and historical discourse "soul" and "funk(y)" have taken on rather different significations.

Coming into vogue at the height of the Civil Rights era, the word "soul" quickly took on extramusical resonance. At first connoting the melding of sacred (gospel) and secular (rhythm and blues) black musical realms by Ray Charles, James Brown, Sam Cooke, "soul" came to describe virtually anything that was "authentically" black, particularly after continued white resistance to reform and integration precipitated the radicalization of the Movement and the rise of Black Power in the latter half of the 1960s. African-American cuisine became "soul food"; black fashion became "soul style"; black men became "soul brothers" and black women "soul sisters."

As the hopes of the Civil Rights movement were dashed amidst continued opposition and discrimination, writes Brian Ward, "Many blacks sought an antidote to white assumptions of cultural superiority by self-consciously valorizing their own culture and celebrating peculiarly African-American experiences and practices as the critical repositories of identity and worth."[32] It was in this climate that the soul phenomenon emerged. Black listeners began to retreat from the pop mainstream and embrace black music almost exclusively, and as a result *Billboard* magazine reinstituted a separate black music chart in 1965. African-American popular music, in turn, became "blacker,"[33] as musicians and producers rejected string orchestration and studio gloss in favor of stark arrangements and naturalistic production, borrowed freely and overtly from the tropes and inflections of gospel, and – most crucially for the present discussion – increasingly emphasized syncopation and the interplay of the rhythm section. James Brown and Aretha Franklin, the two most iconic figures of the soul movement, would establish their authenticity in both musical and political terms, forging an affirmative black identity through lyrics and performance and successfully foregrounding the musical signs of

"blackness" on their recordings. Where Franklin would signify blackness by emphasizing her gospel roots, however, Brown would "blacken" his sound – and in the process lay the groundwork for funk – by stressing rhythm above all else.

While the word "funk" did not surface in Brown's own songs (aside from a 1967 cover of Dyke and the Blazers' recent hit "Funky Broadway") until 1969, his hits "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" (1965) and "Cold Sweat" (1967) introduced most of the hallmarks of the style: a strong emphasis on the first downbeat ("the One"); a repeating, groove-based structure built on heavily syncopated, interlocking patterns of guitar, bass, drums and horns; the foregrounding of the rhythm section; and an emphasis on rhythmic rather than melodic development, with chord changes and traditional pop song form subordinated to the groove. Robert Palmer, in a much-cited passage from *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, writes that Brown's crucial innovation was "to treat every instrument and voice in the group as if each were a drum."[34] In the same essay, Palmer vouches that Brown's music is misunderstood and attacked by white critics because its organizational principle is fundamentally African: "Where the European listener may hear monotonous beating, the African distinguishes subtle polyrhythmic interplay."[35] Palmer's contention that Brown Africanized his music by putting rhythm on top – and the related assertion which follows implicitly, which is that funk is somehow more African than its stylistic precedents – has been repeated so frequently by fellow critics and music historians that it is now virtually a cliché; even a biographical profile published the U.S. Department of State insists that "Brown's focus on rhythm and timbre demonstrates his strong conceptual links with African music style."[36]

In retrospective interviews and in his own writings, Brown himself drew heavily on essentialist notions about black music when attempting to explain the inspirations behind his work and the ultimate significance of funk. Throughout his 2005 autobiography, Brown argues that soul, funk and "the One" are inborn, natively black characteristics, deeply rooted in the indigenous music and culture of Africa. Extending the idea of funk as something that comes from within, Brown describes funk as a "little baby" that was "kicking around inside" of him just before he recorded "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag" (widely considered to be the first funk song) in 1965.[37] "If soul music was all about the heart," he writes, "than [*sic*] funk was the choreography of those feelings…mixed and measured with a certain Black pride."[38]

Though Brown's politics were often simplistic, he explicitly acknowledged the black nationalist cause with 1968's "(Say It Loud) I'm Black and I'm Proud." An anthem

among African-Americans, it was also Brown's last top 10 Pop hit for nearly two decades. Yet Brown racked up 10 number one singles on the R&B charts in the seven years that followed "Say It Loud." His loss of the (white) pop audience and continued popularity amidst the (black) soul audience was symptomatic of the racial divisions that resurfaced among American music audiences after the mid-1960s. And even if Brown's embrace of black nationalist politics was tenuous at best, he became an icon of black power and economic self-sufficiency through example; at his peak, Brown personally supervised, promoted and scheduled all of his own tours and controlled a vast musical empire of recording acts and radio stations. For Brown, black capitalism and black pride were synonymous.

Brian Ward writes that funk is "in every sense a music of motion, with a lot of melodic, harmonic and rhythmic cross-currents scuttling around."[39] While the style's hyperkinesis makes a virtue out of musical movement, its performative component foregrounds and valorizes physical exertion – the "good sweat" *lu-fuki* transformed from principle to practice. Indeed, Brown was long promoted as "The Hardest-Working Man in Show Business," and his performances were famously sweaty, frantic affairs: the physical "work" of the performance itself became a major part of the show. A typical performance would climax when Brown, drenched in sweat, would feign collapse. One of his bandmates would then appear from the wings, drape Brown in his signature cape and help him offstage, but at the last moment Brown would marshal his strength, rise up and dash back onstage to continue the performance. This same gesture, a symbolic death and rebirth and an affirmation of black perseverance, would drive audiences wild night after night. The pregnant pyramids and descending Motherships of George Clinton's elaborately staged mid-1970s shows with Parliament-Funkadelic would make the undercurrents of death, rebirth, exodus and redemption in funk performance even more explicit.

Even while Brown and his disciples began to define funk as musical aesthetic and performance practice, they were still called "soul" musicians. By the late 1960s, "Funk" and "Funky" were staple terms in black popular music, though "soul" still dominated the discourse. Like "Rhythm and blues/R&B" before and after, "soul" had become shorthand for all popular music made by and marketed to African-Americans, and as such it subsumed "funk" as an independent concept until George Clinton and his P-Funk erected a mythology around the word in the 1970s.

"What special analytical problems arise if a style, genre, or particular performance of music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it?" asks Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*.[40] Yesterday as today, "soul" has retained a strong popular association with musical, cultural and racial authenticity. "Funk" and "funky," retain significant, though somewhat more tenuous associations with race, essence and authenticity. From the mid-1960s to the near-present, "soul" has served as a byword for black cultural essence among musicians, critics, and Movement leaders alike; James Brown himself was designated "Soul Brother No. 1," and "The Godfather of Soul," both titles sticking for decades after he pioneered funk. If soul is analogous to the spirit and essence of blackness, funk is the "work" implicit in the promulgation of blackness as trope and text. While at its root "funk" remains connected with black cultural essence, its application as such has been less consistent. Even George Clinton – who lampooned the notion of soul as black essence on 1970's "What Is Soul?" – never explicitly defined funk as an essentially black characteristic. In fact, several band members I spoke to emphatically denied that "funk" was a racially circumscribed trait.

Soul singles of the late 1960s employed the words "funk" and "funky" with increasing frequency; chart hits from 1967 to 1970 included "Funky Broadway" by Dyke and the Blazers, "Ain't It Funky Now" and "Funky Drummer" by James Brown, and "Do the Funky Chicken" by Rufus Thomas. Each of these songs associated funk with dance and intense, uninhibited bodily engagement – both cultural signifiers of blackness – but none were explicitly political in nature. By 1969, the word "funk" began to appear in the still-growing popular music press with some regularity, but it was applied rather haphazardly. *Rolling Stone* magazine, for instance, used the word in 1969 to variously describe the music of blues singer Big Mama Thornton[41] and English rockers Procul Harum.[42] And although San Francisco's multiracial Sly and the Family Stone were one of the era's most popular acts in any genre and have since been credited for introducing funk to the (white) mainstream, they were typically described as a rock or "psychedelic soul" act at the time.

P-Funk and the Genesis of the Funk Movement

It was likely not until former doo-wop singer George Clinton introduced the loose aggregate of musicians known alternately as Funkadelic, Parliament or P-Funk in

the early 1970s that the word "funk" came to describe an entire musical movement. From his band name on down, George Clinton foregrounded the word. On songs like "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow," "Funky Woman," "Get Off Your Ass and Jam," and "Take Your Dead Ass Home," Clinton used crude language strategically, playing on the difference between black and white significations and redefining impolite terms as words of praise and pride. Drawing from the Ki-Kongo *lu-fuki*, which links the smell of hard work with good luck, Clinton defined "the funk" as a positive life force, and "the One" which held it together as the unifying principle of the universe. Through a series of concept albums and increasingly theatrical tours beginning with 1975's *Mothership Connection*, Clinton built an elaborate mythological narrative around the Funk as mystical principle and irrepressible essence, with both heroes whose sacred mission was to spread and "clone" the Funk (Star Child and Dr. Funkenstein) and villains whose aim was to suppress it (Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk). As enacted by Clinton's ever-changing ensemble in concert and on record, funk became a forum for collective creation which Luis Jacob says "opens spaces of shared experience for musicians and dancers alike."[43]

A Brief History of P-Funk

Paul Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic* that the "special power" of black diasporic cultural forms in the west "derives from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity."[44] With P-Funk, George Clinton embodied that doubleness by Signifyin(g) on the black and white meanings of "funk" simultaneously (as with "Let's Take It to the Stage") and recording and releasing music by a single ensemble under two different band names: Parliament and Funkadelic. Aside from Parliament's horn section, the personnel of the bands was identical, yet they were conceived as separate entities. While Funkadelic played acerbic, heavy rock music with overt lyrical references to sex, drugs and apocalypse, Parliament foregrounded vocals, horns and JBs-style dance rhythms. "What appeared as two acts," writes Rickey Vincent in his 1996 book *Funk*, "was actually one entity with many dimensions, as most African-Americans inevitably experience as a result of their struggle in a white country."[45] Taken together, Parliament, Funkadelic, and their numerous satellite groups – all drawn from the same core of musicians and singers – are commonly known simply as P-Funk.

The Parliament-Funkadelic dichotomy emerged only after Clinton and company entered a music marketplace that was – and still is – organized along racial lines. P-Funk's origins date back to 1956, when the teenage George Clinton founded a doo-wop quintet called the Parliaments (Fig. 2-1) in Newark, New Jersey.[ii] Over the next decade, the group moved to Detroit and cut a series of unsuccessful singles before "(I Wanna) Testify" hit the national charts in 1967. Shortly thereafter, Clinton and other members of the group began experimenting with LSD and listening to psychedelic rock music, and after recruiting a five-man backing band built around guitar prodigy Eddie Hazel, Clinton signed the group to Westbound Records under the name "Funkadelic" in 1969.

Figure 2-1: The Parliaments, 1960s (Left to Right: Ray Davis, Calvin Simon, Clarence "Fuzzy" Haskins, George Clinton).

Commercially speaking, Funkadelic was neither here nor there: as a black rock group, their only contemporaries were Jimi Hendrix and Sly and the Family Stone, neither of whom played concerts nude or flirted openly with Satanism (Funkadelic, meanwhile, did both). In Clinton's own words, Funkadelic was "too white for the blacks, and too black for the whites. Whites could go for one black guy up there [onstage], but not ten of them."[46] The group built a substantial cult following, but the essentialist binary which coded "rock" as white and "soul" as black kept mass success out of reach. In 1974,

[ii] Around the same time, Clinton began working as a barber at the Uptown Tonsorial Palace in neighboring Plainfield, which became the group's base of operations in short order thereafter.

Clinton was joined by former James Brown bassist William "Bootsy" Collins, and in short order Parliament was born as a post-soul dance ensemble on Casablanca Records. In a 1978 interview with *NME*, Clinton flatly stated that he pursued a more accessible and conventionally "black" sound with Parliament as a ploy to attract listeners to the heavier sounds of Funkadelic:

> It took me a while to realise that I wasn't getting played on no white stations because I was black and I didn't get played on black stations 'cause to them it sounded like I was white. So then I had to go back and meet 'em halfway with the Parliament situation, the horns and things, and then hand-walk 'em up to where Funkadelic is at. Even from there we had to take Bootsy to get 'em real young to walk 'em to Parliament to walk 'em to Funkadelic. Now they're gonna pledge groovallegiance to the united funk of Funkadelica.[47]

Although Clinton suggests that the Parliament sound was a concession to the racialized pop marketplace, the friendly surface of Parliament's music was a cover for the often subversive political content of the lyrics: 1977's "Bop Gun" invokes a slogan of the civil rights movement ("We Shall Overcome") in an allegorical call to arms against the forces of musical, cultural and political conformity (or the Placebo Syndrome, as Clinton calls it); 1978's "Aqua Boogie" reconceives black survival in America as an inimitable dance ("With the rhythm it takes to dance to what we have to live through/You can dance underwater and not get wet"); and the Malcolm X-quoting "Chocolate City" exhorts the chocolate denizens of America's cities to keep pushing forward.

Clinton's coded message of racial affirmation and utopian politics of inclusion constituted a rebuke to the despair and hopelessness many African-Americans felt after the collapse of the Civil Rights coalition in the late 1960s. As upwardly mobile whites fled to the suburbs after World War II, the African-American population in many of America's major cities exploded. Segregation and systematic economic and political disenfranchisement left many blacks at a disadvantage, however.[48] By the 1960s, newly "Chocolate" cities were racked by crises of resources, housing, crime and ghettoization, all problems that Clinton and his bandmates faced firsthand. In Newark, New Jersey and in P-Funk's neighboring hometown of Plainfield, the concerns of local African-Americans over inadequate and expensive housing, the lack of black representation in city government, and especially police brutality, culminated by the summer of 1967 in a race riot. The Parliaments were actually performing in Newark when the riots started, but

when they fled for their adopted second home of Detroit, a racially motivated riot had erupted in that city as well (see Figs. 2-2 and 2-3).[49]

Figure 2-2: Newark riots, Newark, New Jersey, July 1967.

Figure 2-3: 12th Street riot, Detroit, Michigan, July 1967.

While Newark and Detroit boiled over with political unrest and racial antagonism in the 1950s and 1960s, P-Funk began to take shape in George Clinton's barbershop and later in the recording studio. The Uptown Tonsorial Palace, in Plainfield, and United Sound Studios in Detroit, functioned as safe havens and spaces for creative expression amidst the escalating tensions on the streets outside. Clinton once remarked that "everybody in [Plainfield], damn near, shot dope."[50] Ron Ford, a singer for P-Funk and Plainfield native whom I spoke to backstage while following the group on tour in the summer of 2010, contrasted the space of the barbershop with its urban environs thusly:

> We had a safety zone, the barbershop was a safety zone for young kids. 'Cause all around us was drugs-infested. You go into the barbershop, you were safe. They ain't gonna let nobody mess with you. You know, George, Grady, Fuzzy, they weren't gonna let anybody mess with us. And we was just kids – 13, 14…You know how you see those schools or signs where they say, "This is a safe haven for kids," they got a little sticker on the window, to let you know that a kid, if you get in trouble, you can run there? They invented that shit. (*Laughs*) 'Cause you could run to the barbershop and be safe.[51]

The barbershop and the studio found a mythic corollary in the black White House of Parliament's "Chocolate City," a temple of African-American cultural and creative achievement. In the mythic spaces of the P-Funk universe, as in the Plainfield barbershop where the group was born, collective creation and celebration of difference prevail over degradation, division and conflict.

P-Funk On Stage

P-Funk's stage show developed over more than a decade. As the five original Parliaments expanded first into a ten-member black rock band and then a loose-knit, revolving-door musical and artistic collective in the late 1960s and early 1970s, their concerts grew longer and more theatrical. In the mid-Sixties, Clinton has said, the Parliaments donned costumes and developed comic stage routines in order to set themselves apart from the smooth style of their Motown rivals:

> After we started making it a bit, and we saw that the Temptations and Four Tops had that shit sewed up, and doo-wop was gone for the most part, we had to come up with something else. Crazy was our next thing. Coasters, the Contours, the Isley Brothers, that was our next thing that we was good at: clowning. We was cool at first, and then when we sang fast songs, we was goofy. Played pregnant, played titties and wigs and shit like that, like the Coasters.[52]

Clinton suggests here that his first forays into comic theater were driven as much by market considerations as by creative will. Furthermore, the "clowning" antics of the Parliaments were part of a larger vocal group tradition. By about 1968, when the Parliaments evolved into Funkadelic, their performances began to depart much more sharply from rhythm and blues convention. Funkadelic's lengthy, guitar-driven jams shared more with "acid rock" peers like Cream, the Grateful Dead and the Jimi Hendrix Experience than with any Motown act, while their increasingly eccentric costumes expanded upon the visual aesthetic of psychedelic soul pioneers Sly & the Family Stone. By adopting unprecedentedly outlandish stage attire, Funkadelic offered a one-upping response to the white counterculture of the era. Though the group's change in direction and image appears to have been driven in part by Clinton's desire to stay current, separating artistic from commercial intentions becomes nearly impossible from this point in P-Funk history. Clinton's own statements, in *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History* and elsewhere, suggest that he was inspired chiefly by the hippie movement's emphasis on self-expression and the "metaphysical types of thangs" that psychedelic rock bands had begun to explore.[53] His moment in the spotlight with "(I Wanna) Testify" having passed, Clinton sensed that further opportunities for mainstream success were remote, so he simply followed his muse: "We knew we wasn't gonna get on the radio

back then that easy, so we wasn't losin' nothing by just going crazy."[54] According to other band members, "going crazy" entailed onstage nudity and performing while high on LSD; allegedly, Clinton even took the scatological fixation of his lyrics into the realm of performance art at one show by urinating on an audience member.[55]

No similar transgressions are evident from the arena performances of the group's late-Seventies peak. In fact, Clinton had made a conscious decision to scale back the more confrontational aspects of P-Funk's stage and studio performances as early as 1974, when he resuscitated Parliament[iii] as a post-JBs dance band in an attempt to win over the mainstream black audience. Yet while the group's stage shows thereafter were less blatant in their offenses common decency, they also became increasingly grandiose and theatrical. After releasing *Mothership Connection*, the first of Parliament's Afrofuturist concept LPs, Casablanca Records president Neil Bogart gave Clinton $250,000 to bring his interplanetary narrative of exodus and redemption to the concert stage. The P-Funk Earth Tour of 1976, which *Rolling Stone* described as "a Space Age Mardi Gras,"[56] exposed the group to arena-sized crowds and won them a massive national following. Each show climaxed with the landing of the Mothership, a massive, spaceship-shaped prop from which George Clinton would emerge – in the guise of Star Child or Dr. Funkenstein – as if being born.

Funk Across the Millennium

The lavish science-fiction spectacles of P-Funk's late 1970s concerts had a profound impact on many African-American youths, as I will illustrate in the next chapter. The group's nationwide prominence and success as an arena act was relatively short-lived, however. By 1980, a series of bad business decisions and a changing marketplace effectively forced P-Funk back underground. Other funk acts suffered similar fates, as the rapid popular ascendancy and equally swift decline of disco, essentially a simplified version of funk adapted to traditional pop song form, forced bands to adapt or risk commercial oblivion. By the 1980s, funk reached a low ebb in

[iii] *Osmium*, the first record Clinton produced under the name "Parliament" (as opposed to "The Parliaments"), was released in 1970. A one-off release for former Motown songwriting team Holland-Dozier-Holland's Invictus label, the album featured a handful of curious stylistic experiments but otherwise shared more with the heavy rock of Funkadelic than with the later Parliament albums Clinton produced for Casablanca Records.

popularity, though superstars Prince and Michael Jackson had success with music that was profoundly influenced by the style. Funk would be written about in retrospective terms as early as 1980, when *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* devoted a chapter to the genre.

Hip-hop borrowed freely from funk music from the moment of its birth in the mid-1970s, at block parties in New York's economically devastated South Bronx where disc jockeys would mix and spin the popular black dance music of the era. By the time the style became a commercial phenomenon in the early 1980s, artists paid tribute to funk music not just in their musical borrowings but in song titles (Afrika Bambaataa's "Renegades of Funk") and even in group names (The Funky 4 Plus 1). After electronic sampling was introduced in the middle of the decade, hip-hop artists were able to reappropriate and reassemble excerpts from classic funk songs on their own recordings, and as old recordings by James Brown, Kool and the Gang and P-Funk were mined to create new music a revival of interest in the funk genre began to take shape. Beginning with his 1992 album *The Chronic*, producer Dr. Dre synthesized the music of George Clinton with the violent "gangsta" rap of his own former group, N.W.A, to create a hybrid genre that was later dubbed "G-Funk" in the popular press. Other fusion genres began to take shape at the same time: white groups the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Faith No More pioneered the "funk metal" style, while electronic and jazz hybrids flourished throughout the decade.

When I spoke with Clinton in 2010, he traced a line from Ishmael Reed's Jes Grew through "the Funk" and into the present with hip-hop. All were effectively variations on the same principle, he told me: "That slang and the rhythm of black folk." Noting the resiliency of the funk principle, he remarked that "it pops up everywhere – I mean right now, in hip hop, it's spreading around the world."[57] The enduring popularity of Clinton's music and the global reach of the rhythms and the slang of African-American vernacular culture would seem to confirm that the Funk has never stopped spreading.

Since at least 1986, when James Brown was inducted as a charter member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, mainstream American society has given its official approval to the funk genre, thus assuring musicians and fans alike that funk is no longer a "bad word." Concurrent developments in black vernacular culture – particularly the rise of increasingly explicit and confrontational hip-hop – suggest that such gestures are both absurdly late and ultimately meaningless. As soon as hegemonic culture – the music

industry, the news media, and the moral watchdogs of church and state – eliminates a perceived threat from the lower stratum by assimilating it, another perceived threat emerges to take its place. Signifyin(g) – in words, music, performance and visual iconography – depends for its effect on the opposition of hegemonic and vernacular cultures and discourses. To the extent that its sign systems, tropes, and ways of meaning retain the power to subvert, shock, offend the stewards of cultural hegemony, the "funk" of black vernacular discourse remains a living, thriving, and progressive force.

---

[1] David Brackett, "Funk," in *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46626, accessed December 7, 2010.
[2] Gary Tomlinson, "The Historian, the Performer, and Authentic Meaning in Music," in *Authenticity and Early Music: A Symposium*, ed. Nicholas Kenyon (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 115-136.
[3] *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. "funk," accessed June 11, 2011, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/funk.
[4] Glynnis Chantrell, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 222.
[5] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit* (New York: Random House, 1983), 104-105.
[6] LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963; New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 43.
[7] Jones, *Blues People*, 219.
[8] Jelly Roll Morton, "Buddy Bolden's Blues," on *Last Sessions: The Complete General Recordings*, 1997 (Rec. 1939), Verve 403.
[9] Peter Tamony, "Funky," *American Speech* 55, No. 3 (Autumn 1980), 210-213.
[10] Ned Sublette, *The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009), 109-110.
[11] Donald Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz*, Revised ed. (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Press, 2005), 43.
[12] Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 62.
[13] Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 110. The 1938 Library of Congress recording is available, under the name "The Great Buddy Bolden, part 1," on *Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax*, 2005, Rounder 11661-1890-2.
[14] Sidney Bechet, "Funky Butt," recorded 1947, available on *Sidney Bechet: Masters of Jazz Vol. 9*, 2006, Storyville Records 101 8509.
[15] Maureen Anderson, "The White Reception of Jazz in America," *African American Review* 38, No. 1 (Spring 2004), 136.
[16] Anderson, "The White Reception of Jazz in America," 141.
[17] Katherine Tackley, "Jazz Recordings as Social Texts," in *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture and Technology*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 175.
[18] Derek Carew, "The Consumption of Music," in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 241.
[19] Burnett Hershey, "Jazz Latitude," *The New York Times Book Review and Magazine*, June 25, 1922.
[20] Carl Engel, "Jazz: A Musical Discussion," originally published in *Atlantic Monthly* (August, 1922), reprinted in *Jazz in Print (1856-1929): An Anthology of Selected Early Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Karl Koenig (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 200.

[21] James Weldon Johnson, "James Weldon Johnson's 1922 Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*," *Modern American Poetry*, accessed June 11, 2011, http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/johnson/preface1.htm.
[22] LeRoi Jones, "The Modern Scene," in *Blues People*, 181-202.
[23] Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 69.
[24] Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, 43.
[25] Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, 44.
[26] "Far-Out Words for Cats," *Time* 54, No. 19 (November 8, 1954).
[27] Horace Silver, *Let's Get to the Nitty Gritty: The Autobiography of Horace Silver*, ed. Phil Pastras (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 102.
[28] Lerone Bennett, Jr., "The Soul of Soul," *Ebony* 17, No. 2 (December 1, 1961), 112.
[29] Bennett, "The Soul of Soul," 116.
[30] Amiri Baraka, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)," in *Black Music* (1968; New York: Akashic Books, 2010), 233.
[31] Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*, 44.
[32] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 182.
[33] Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 183.
[34] Robert Palmer, "James Brown," orig. published in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, ed. Jim Miller (New York: Random House, 1980), reprinted in *The James Brown Reader*, ed. Nelson George and Alan Leeds (New York: Plume, 2008), 146.
[35] Palmer, "James Brown," 147.
[36] "Profiles of James Brown and Aretha Franklin," U.S. Department of State, http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/July/20080813200637eaifas0.2157053.html, accessed September 16, 2011.
[37] James Brown, *I Feel Good: A Memoir of A Life In Soul* (New York: New American Library, 2005), 82.
[38] Brown, *I Feel Good*, 87.
[39] Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 351.
[40] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1994), 75.
[41] Morthland, John, "Big Mama Thornton: *Stronger Than Dirt*," *Rolling Stone* (November 1969), http://www.rocksbackpages.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/article.html?ArticleID=12348, accessed September 17, 2011.
[42] John Mendelsohn, "Procul Harum: *A Salty Dog*," *Rolling Stone* (May 31, 1969), http://www.rocksbackpages.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/article.html?ArticleID=14164, accessed September 17, 2011.
[43] Luis Jacob, "Funkaesthetics: One Alien-nation Under a Groove," in Luis Jacob, Pan Wendt and Adrian Piper, *Funkaesthetics* (Toronto: The Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 2009), 22.
[44] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1994), 72.
[45] Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music. The People, and the Rhythm of The One* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), 235.
[46] David Mills, Larry Alexander, Thomas Stanley and Aris Wilson, *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 73.
[47] George Clinton quote from Cliff White, "Funkadelic: The Noble Art of Rhythm 'n Biz," *NME* (November 18, 1978), http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=2275, accessed September 17, 2011.
[48] Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Ewing, NJ: University of California Press, 2004), 4-5.

[49] Mills et. al., *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 24.
[50] George Clinton quote from *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History*, 50.
[51] Ron Ford (vocals, Parliament-Funkadelic), interview with author, Cork and Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.
[52] George Clinton quote from *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History*, 8.
[53] George Clinton quote from *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History*, 33.
[54] George Clinton quote from *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History*, 32.
[55] Mike Hampton and Lige Curry quotes from *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History*, 94.
[56] Joe McEwen, "Funk," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* (New York: Random House, 1980).
[57] George Clinton, interview with author, Cork and Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 15, 2010.

Chapter 3
Entering the P-Funk Universe: Experience and Stories

P-Funk in Performance

Night after night, P-Funk and its audience work together to turn George Clinton's vision of heteroglossic utopia – or "One Nation Under a Groove" – into a temporary reality. Signifyin(g) in music, lyrics, verbal exchanges and dramatic spectacle, Clinton and P-Funk bring to life the absurd narratives of interplanetary exodus and deliverance in concert performance, inviting the audience into an Afrofuturist realm that knows no boundaries of race or class.

Like their records, P-Funk's live shows emphasize the essential unity of the "low" body with the "higher" mind and spirit, conflating multiple realms and suggesting that bodily engagement through rhythm, dance and scatological humor is a path to spiritual transcendence. In P-Funk's early live shows, Clinton would sometimes strip naked while limning out the P-Funk gospel. Later on, the band's costumes emphasized and sometimes exaggerated particular physical attributes; on 1979's *Motor-Booty Affair* tour, for instance, vocalist Jeanette McGruder wore a long prosthetic nose and a bodysuit with a comically enlarged posterior. Stage props were invested with various bodily functions and life processes – procreation, death and decay, consumption, even ejaculation.

Though both costumes and props have been downscaled in recent decades, P-Funk's emphasis on audience participation and collective transcendence through music and dance remains undimmed. The music and artwork of the group's 1970s LPs make Clinton's grotesque humor, his conflations of high and low realms and his utopian carnival vision explicit in sound and image.[i] It is in concert more than anywhere else that Clinton and P-Funk put this vision into practice.

[i] The Carnivalesque and the "grotesque body," both concepts introduced by philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, are discussed in greater depth in chapter 4.

P-Funk in Concert: A Historical View

P-Funk has utilized each element of its live show since 1976 – music, dance, dialogue, costumes and various props – to stage a very loosely structured, participatory drama of death, rebirth and renewal. When I spoke to Clinton in 2010, he explained that the dramatic arc of the group's Mothership-era shows was deliberate, drawing equally from science fiction and the "rock operas" that were then in vogue:

> That [tour] was somethin' to do with *Sgt. Pepper* and the Beatles and what the Who did, you know with the rock opera, I tried to do a funk opera – you know, [the rock musical] *Hair*, all of those friends of ours. So when we started the Mothership we was tryin' to do a funk opera. I always liked *Star Trek* and all that. So we was tryin' to do something that was spaced out.[1]

While visual records of the group's earlier live work are scarce, P-Funk performances from the Earth Tour and afterward have been documented on video and audio recordings both professional and amateur. The most extensive document of P-Funk's mid-Seventies shows remains a commercially-produced video recorded at Houston's Summit Arena on Halloween of 1976. The video allows for an instructive comparison with the structure, lineup and band-audience dynamics of the contemporary P-Funk show. P-Funk scholar Rob Bowman published an essay-length analysis of the 1976 Houston show in 2010; my analysis of the same performance draws on his insights.

At the outset of the 1976 show, an unseen emcee introduces the band as coming "direct to you from Chocolate City." On the one hand, this statement could be read as implying that the group has just arrived *from* Clinton's imaginary black fantasia, but on the other hand it could mean that "Chocolate City" is the stage – or even the arena – itself; in other words, that P-Funk constitutes Chocolate City, makes Chocolate City, and brings Chocolate City to the audience each time it performs. In concert, P-Funk is constantly engaged the process of *becoming* – becoming Chocolate City, becoming the One (Nation Under a Groove), becoming the Funk, becoming itself. Immediately following the emcee's introduction in the 1976 concert is "Prelude," which is as good a P-Funk origin story as any:

> *Funk upon a time, in the days of the Funkapus*
> *The concept of specially-designed Afronauts, 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 coinhabitants of kings and pharaohs
Like sleeping beauties with a kiss
That would release them to multiply on the image of the chosen one: Dr. Funkenstein.
And funk is its own reward.
May I frighten you?[2]

Taken straight from Parliament's then-current LP *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, "Prelude" underscores the above recitation – delivered by Clinton in a voice that has been artificially deepened through tape manipulation – with a pseudo-Baroque string synthesizer solo by Bernie Worrell. Worrell's high-flown improvisations, Clinton's deep voice, and the oddly formal, near-Biblical syntax of the passage all serve to imbue Clinton's absurd juxtapositions and language inversions with an air of pseudo-profundity. The style of the passage marks it indubitably as an origin myth; striking in both its odd familiarity and its essential strangeness, the piece fairly demands further explication. In a few short lines Clinton first links two distant realms – ancient Egypt and outer space – through the common denominators of funk and black identity. Astronauts become "Afronauts," the mad scientist Dr. Frankenstein becomes "Dr. Funkenstein," and the "Clone Funk" that will unite the two lies dormant in the pyramids. Clinton here sets the stage for a grand reawakening, and as the band takes the stage a sustained major chord swell from guitar and keyboards effects a sort of cosmic rebirth – the sound of a new world in the process of becoming. Appropriately enough, guitarist and singer Gary Shider appears in his trademark diaper to sing the opening number, "Cosmic Slop." Shider's scant outfit plays on the staple P-Funk themes of black physicality and spiritual rebirth, and his gospel-inflected vocalizations lend a religious fervor to the performance, particularly on the song's opening chant: "Space people, universal love." Midway through the song, the group Signifies further on the concept of birth when male and female vocalists begin to emerge from the belly of the pyramid as if it were a mother's womb.

Wearing a large black cape, a futuristic, spike-fringed red leather outfit and a strange red hat with holes that allow his Afro to spill out on both sides (see Fig. 3-1), George Clinton takes the center of the stage as lead Afronaut on the next number. Throughout the performance, Clinton alternates between singing and speaking, frequently

interjecting with catch-phrases and punch lines from across the group's recorded catalogue. While the song the group performs on his entrance is nominally a medley of "Let's Take It to the Stage" and "Take Your Dead Ass Home," Clinton shouts lyrics that originated in other contexts over the top of the groove. First he addresses the crowd by paraphrasing lyrics from the *Free Your Mind…* and *Mothership Connection* albums: "What's happenin' Houston? Y'all ready to give up the funk? I want you to free your mind and your ass will follow tonight."[3] Later, over the same groove, Clinton leads the crowd in a jovially profane chant from a 1975 song: "Shit, goddamn, get off your ass and jam!" In neither of these instances is Clinton singing the "wrong" lyrics; lyrical and musical phrases from disparate songs are almost infinitely interchangeable in P-Funk's performances, and the intensely intertextual nature of their shows lends credence to the principle of cosmic unity inherent in the Funk and the rhythm of the One.

Figure 3-1: George Clinton in one of his many stage costumes for the P-Funk Earth Tour, 1976.

As the show progresses, the entire ensemble accumulates onstage, and singers testify and gesticulate with an intensity of physical and emotional engagement that melds sexuality with religious fervor. Fuzzy Haskins straddles the microphone and thrusts his pelvis in a phallic display on "Standing on the Verge of Getting It On," while Glenn Goins and a choir of backup singers give forth with gospel moans in between each line on "Gamin' On Ya/Come in Out of the Rain."

Like other shows on the Earth Tour, the Houston performance climaxes with the landing of the Mothership, which Clinton prefaces by addressing the audience. He asks, "Do you believe in the Mothership? Are you hip to the Mothership? Do you want to ride?

Do you want the Mothership to land here?" He then instructs the crowd: "Prepare for the second coming of Dr. Funkenstein." As the crowd's fervor reaches a fever pitch, Clinton asks them to rise from their seats with their hands in the air. The Mothership lands to the strains of the song "Mothership Connection," which builds from a gospel derived chant ("Swing down sweet chariot, stop, and/Let me ride") to an ecstatic full-band climax, with a loud boom and a deafening cheer as it touches down on the stage.

As Rob Bowman notes, the combination of cosmic sloganeering, hypnotic gospel chants, Clinton's preacherly call-and-response with the audience and the dramatic spectacle of the Mothership landing itself imbued the Earth Tour performances with the unmistakable air of a black church service. Bowman spoke to several members of both band and audience who were present at P-Funk concerts in 1976, and he writes that "Virtually everyone who sent me an email or did interviews referred to the spiritual aspect of the shows."[4] Vocalist Mallia Franklin spoke of the group's relationship with the crowd as one of preacher and congregation: "They weren't the audience. They were part of us. They were the ameners in the church. A good pastor, if he can rouse the church, do they keep coming back? That's what it was to me. Dr. Funkenstein was able to do that."[5]

Unlike today, the audience at P-Funk's mid-Seventies shows was predominantly black. For young fans like Carl Gray, now employed as Clinton's videographer, the costumed denizens of the P-Funk universe were something akin to superheroes. White youths already had mythical heroes in comic books, Saturday morning cartoon programs and in the live shows of theatrical rock groups like Kiss (label mates of Parliament whose heavily made-up, fire-breathing antics may well have influenced George Clinton's concept for the P-Funk Earth Tour). By contrast, Gray explained to me, black "media heroes" were a new phenomenon in the mid-1970s, with such figures as blaxploitation detective John Shaft and rock star Sly Stone just then emerging as fantastic, larger-than-life embodiments of black achievement and self-assertion.[6] P-Funk brought blackness even further into realms of fantasy and spectacle that were once accessible only to whites. From the pyramids of ancient Egypt to the far reaches of outer space, the Earth tour placed African-Americans in spectacular new contexts and opened up new realms of possibility for its audience. Rob Bowman, who interviewed several people who'd attended the Earth Tour shows, writes of the effect that the spectacle had on black fans:

> Many fans, reviewers, and audience members pointed out the power that the image of P-Funk as Black heroes had for them, stating that such representations ultimately helped to

> transform their own self-image and suggested possibilities in their lives that previously they had never imagined.[7]

Visually, the Earth Tour was grander and more overtly theatrical than the group's present-day live jaunts. Massive stage props and Mothership landings aside, however, the basic structure and flow of P-Funk's contemporary performances are remarkably similar to those of their heyday. Now as before, distinctions between the ending of one song and the beginning of the next are nebulous; Clinton inserts lyrics and catchphrases from across the P-Funk catalogue into new musical contexts throughout performances; songs mesh rock and funk, collective exchange and individual expression in constantly shifting proportions; and extended vamps build towards successive climaxes that envelop both band and audience.

Signifyin(g) Onstage

More than 40 years after the Parliaments begat Funkadelic, the loose aggregation of freaks, dropouts, dreamers and screamers known collectively as P-Funk continues to tour. Contemporary performances, of course, differ markedly from the elaborately staged spectacles of the P-Funk Earth Tour (not to mention the high-volume rave-ups of the group's early 1970s performances, of which the only publicly available documentation is *Live at Meadowbrook 1971*, an archival release on Westbound that was apparently recorded on an off night). Much of the personnel has changed; stage props are few; costumes are outlandish though rarely extravagant; and typical show lengths have contracted from well over 3 hours to less than two-and-a-half. The Mothership, centerpiece of the quasi-religious climax of P-Funk's mid-1970s shows, was apparently abandoned behind a Maryland gas station in 1982.[8] Many core contributors from the group's most commercially and creatively fertile era have either left or are deceased: Bernie Worrell and Bootsy Collins, both highly-respected session players, have not performed regularly with the group since the early 1980s, while guitarist Eddie Hazel passed away in 1992. On June 16, 2010 – less than a month before the shows I attended – the group suffered perhaps its most devastating loss to date when Garry Shider, rhythm guitarist and chief live vocalist with P-Funk for nearly 40 years, passed away at the age of 57.

Though outer-space sets and key personnel are now gone, P-Funk continues to fill mid-size venues throughout North America and Europe year after year. Downscaled production values and ever-shifting personnel necessarily result in a very different concert experience than one would have witnessed in 1976, but the performances I attended were consistently engaging, and the audience response was almost always palpable.

My firsthand knowledge of live P-Funk is necessarily quite partial; before the nine shows I witnessed in the summer of 2010, I had only seen P-Funk once, at a New Haven show in the fall of 2003. Since all I know of the group's live shows before 2003 has been gleaned from video recordings and interviews, I cannot claim to be an authority on any performances other than those I attended. Apart from the following section, my analysis of P-Funk's performances pertains mostly to a series of shows in July of 2010.

Experience: P-Funk At Showcase Live, July 3, 2010

Before I arrived at my first show of the tour on July 3, my only firsthand knowledge of P-Funk's live show came from a performance I attended nearly seven years before, in the fall of 2003. At that time I'd been collecting and listening intently to the group's recordings for about six months, but I was totally unfamiliar with the structure of their live show. I'd seen clips of P-Funk performances here and there, but I wasn't aware of how amorphous and outwardly chaotic a typical show could be. It was often impossible to tell where one song ended and another began, and it was frequently unclear what song was actually being played at a given moment. I remember enjoying the group's performance of "(Not Just) Knee Deep," but much of the show left me puzzled. Compounding my confusion was the presence of keyboardist Bernie Worrell, apparently a guest for the evening. I had admired Worrell's work on record tremendously; then as now, I regarded him as one of the great popular virtuosos on his instrument and as Clinton's most important collaborator after Bootsy Collins. Like the rest of the group, however, his live performances differed dramatically from his studio work. In fact, his improvisations throughout the show were so off-kilter and eccentric that I remember thinking he was intentionally sabotaging the performance due to some unspoken disagreement with Clinton.

I came away from the show vaguely disappointed; in 2003, P-Funk seemed aimless, exhausted, burnt-out – that was my impression at the time, anyway. Not wanting

to repeat a disheartening experience, I avoided the group's frequent concerts for several years even while listening feverishly to their records and finding as much information as I could about their history. Now I think I may have missed something, because when I finally saw P-Funk again in 2010 I thought they were fantastic. For all I know, the band may have been tighter and more cohesive the second time I saw them, or I may have been more impressed because my expectations were lower than the first time I'd seen them. But the band's approach to well-worn material seemed genuinely fresh in 2010, and their energy was infectious.

When I formulated my fieldwork project for this thesis in the spring of 2010, I was apprehensive about seeing P-Funk in concert again, but my fears were allayed by the first show I attended on July 3. As a scholar entering the field, my intentions going into this first performance were twofold: I wanted to begin sketching out the experience of a P-Funk show, and I wanted to network with band members, fans and crew in order to schedule interviews later on. At the same time, I was attending as a fellow P-Funk fan and hoping to enjoy the show.

The July 3rd concert took place at Showcase Live, a medium-sized theater and bar with a standing room capacity of about 1,000. The venue is part of Patriot Place, an enormous entertainment complex surrounding the New England Patriots' Gillette Stadium that opened in 2008. I arrived at the venue at approximately 6:30 PM, and after getting something to eat I headed into the venue around 7:10. Being new to the field, I was nervous about approaching fans and audience members, so I decided to write out a personal introduction that I might use before informal interviews. When I reached the entrance, I was dismayed to find that the doors opened at 6:00 and not 8:00 as I had thought; I probably wouldn't be able to approach band members until after the show. Several people, most of them African-Americans, were waiting outside the venue before the show on and around a balcony that extended from the side door. I didn't know whether or not they were connected with the band (either as family, friends or touring crew), so while I contemplated approaching one of them and introducing myself I felt uncomfortable doing so out of the blue. Already my racial self-consciousness was kicking in; I worried, perhaps correctly, that I would reveal my own unfounded race assumptions by approaching random African-Americans and asking whether they were connected somehow with P-Funk. Looking back, I realize that before and after shows – though not during them – I was acutely conscious of my own whiteness. Right or wrong, I often hesitated to approach black audience members for fear of saying or doing the

wrong thing, whatever that might be, or making inappropriate race-based assumptions in my questions. At the same time, I think I used my racial qualms as an excuse for my reluctance to approach strangers.

When I entered the venue, I attempted to scope out the crowd for individuals I might approach, but I ultimately shied away from impromptu audience interviews. I noted that, demographically and ethnically, the audience was almost completely integrated – the crowd was about two-thirds black and one-third white, and fans ranged from middle-aged couples both white and black to younger, apparently unattached men and women. If I had to guess, I'd say the crowd at Showcase Live was somewhat older and wealthier on average than at most other performances I attended; in Montreal and New Hampshire, for instance, the crowd skewed more towards college-aged fans. A disc jockey was spinning an assortment of vintage funk songs, and people were slowly migrating from the bar to the dance floor when I headed back to the lobby. There I saw a bearded, middle-aged man with a ponytail and a tie-dyed shirt selling tee shirts and merchandise. Sensing, reasonably, that he was part of P-Funk's touring company, I approached him and introduced myself. When I explained my project to the vendor, he seemed jaded, noting that several others had embarked on similar projects before me. I think he may have suspected that I was just using him as a stepping stone to speak to more "important" people, which was not the case at all. I told him I might return to ask him some questions later and excused myself to try and plot an effective approach. I returned to the inside of the venue, where the dance floor was filling up as show time approached.

Still reluctant to approach audience members cold, I went back to the lobby to follow up with the t-shirt vendor. He opened up as he became aware that I was genuinely interested in his experience with P-Funk. Noting that he had achieved a measure of success independently of the group as an electronic noise musician, he asked to be identified in writing under his stage name, "idx1274". A Detroit native now based in Oregon, idx1274 told me that he'd been touring with P-Funk since 1989, when after a period of inactivity the group reformed and began to tour intensively. I inquired about the reunion of the group since I wasn't clear about what had transpired and he told me that in 1986 the group had been forced to retire from the road: "Everybody got 20 bucks and a bus ticket home."[9] Apparently George had had to declare bankruptcy and the group

basically didn't exist for the next three years.[ii] The popularity of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, whose second album George had produced, prompted a popular resurgence for P-Funk and the band reformed for a return to touring in 1989. Today, idx1274 shares both a professional and familial bond with P-Funk as godfather to guitarist Michael Hampton's daughter.

idx1274 became the first of a handful of important contacts within the P-Funk organization, most of them part of the group's touring support staff rather than core musicians. All were eager to share their stories with me; later in this chapter I recount many of my discussions with them and with band members. What struck me in speaking to various members of the P-Funk organization was that, more than with most other bands I had ever witnessed, the fine distinctions between fans, support staff, and performers were frequently blurry if not altogether indeterminate. Many in the group's touring company appeared to be friends or associates of core members who had carved out roles for themselves, either onstage or off, through sheer perseverance. In every city, the already-massive P-Funk contingent mushroomed as longtime fans, friends and family joined the band backstage. At concerts in Stamford, CT and Sayreville, NJ, security simply threw up their hands, unable to exert much control over the traffic between the backstage area and the concert floor. The physical space in and around venues seemed to become more fluid, the walls and barricades more porous, when P-Funk played. Though security typically performed to the best of their abilities, I doubt it would have been difficult for a committed fan to work his or her way backstage or even onto the tour bus at most concerts I saw. From what I witnessed, fans were always treated as colleagues – fellow Mothership travelers, if you will – rather than distant, adoring masses.

After conversing with idx1274 for a few more minutes, I decided to head back inside the venue. The disc jockey hinted that George Clinton and P-Funk were coming soon. I knew that Clinton himself typically wouldn't appear until about a half-hour into the set, so when a small group of men took the stage with instruments in hand I didn't know whether the show was beginning or the roadies were setting up. A tall, dreadlocked man in a black cap, black tank top and jeans (who I later identified as drummer Frankie "Kash" Waddy, a former Bootsy Collins and James Brown sideman) took to the front of the stage and offered a short spoken dedication to deceased guitarist Garry Shider. He then engaged the crowd by initiating a chant: "We want the funk." Then Michael "Clip"

[ii] One problem, apparently, had been that throughout his mid-1980s tenure on Capitol Records, Clinton was billed as a solo act; the vendor told me "George never wanted to use his own name."

Payne, the group's touring emcee, gave a spoken introductory monologue adapted from 1976's "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)" in a voice that sounded uncannily like Clinton's: "P-Funk…uncut funk…the Bomb." With the audience primed, Waddy took to the drums and the band launched into "Bop Gun."

Unsurprisingly, the specter of Garry Shider's recent passing hung over P-Funk in July 2010, frequently surfacing in the interviews I conducted with his bandmates. Instead of taking a break from the road to mourn privately, however, P-Funk used their shows to pay tribute to Shider's life and legacy. At the start of group's performance in Montreal, drummer Frankie "Kash" Waddy actually called the show "A dual celebration," commemorating both Shider's legacy and P-Funk's first show in the city since 1994. As Ron Ford later told me, Shider's death left "a hole in the funk," but the band would carry on because "that's all we can do."[10]

As the band struck the first note of "Bop Gun" and a group of costumed singers paraded onstage, my fears of an underwhelming show disappeared entirely. From the first note to the last, the group fostered a collaborative performance environment, inviting audience participation throughout. Midway through the first song, singer Steve Boyd led an extended audience chant of "Gotta get over the hump," the crowd's fervor intensifying with each repetition of the phrase while Boyd essayed gospel-styled improvisations over the top. Such repeating chants are the essence of the P-Funk live experience. The grooves extend toward infinity in a rhythmic rapture, opening a gateway to Clinton's cosmic utopia through beat-hypnosis.

"Bop Gun" segued without break into "Gamin' On Ya," lasting just a few minutes before a momentary pause. Third was "Undisco Kidd," which retained the basic chord structure but only a few lyrics from the original 1976 recording. In the first portion of the song, Steve Boyd would make an overture to the "ladies" in the audience, singing variations of the song's original lyrics, which also functioned as an introduction for female lead Belita Woods:

> *Move your sexy body*
> *Let me see you wiggle and move it all across the floor*
> *Slide your sexy body*
> *Every time she wiggle she make the men holler for more*

Musically and lyrically, each repetition of the phrase was slightly different from the one that came before it; here P-Funk embodied the Signifyin(g) principle of "repetition with a difference."After a few minutes, Clip Payne introduced "Miss Belita Woods," who took

center stage, riffing on variations of the line, "out of all the ladies in the world, you chose me," while the other vocalists joined in on a harmonized response: "It's in the way she moves." Later in the same song, the group demonstrated its flair for intertextual reference by quoting portions of the Supremes/Temptations hit "I'm Gonna Make You Love Me" and Marvin Gaye's "Inner City Blues" in an extended call-and-response between female vocalist and backing chorus. Stretching out on the two-chord vamp of "Undisco Kidd" for over twenty minutes, P-Funk showcased their ability to suspend time by teasing out a groove indefinitely.

Before the next song, Clip Payne laid down the P-Funk law for the benefit of the audience. "You are pretty much obligated to make noise," Payne told us. At a P-Funk show, he noted, "It's always 4:20 in the afternoon."[iii] Payne dedicated "Cosmic Slop" to Garry Shider; it had been his first solo vocal feature upon joining the group in 1973. Steve Boyd took the lead in Shider's absence. During the song's guitar solo, George Clinton emerged from the wings sporting a red suit jacket and a white baseball cap with the brim pointed slightly to the side. His trademark multicolored dreadlocks were gone, and he doffed a pair of sunglasses he'd worn on entrance before the song was complete. Clinton gestured wildly with his hands to the band and then to the crowd, appearing to direct the group at points, counting off measures, playing air guitar, mugging at the crowd, freeze-framing, leading the audience with various types of hand waves and finally putting up the devil horns as the song came to a wild conclusion.

Eventually Payne introduced Clinton; many audience members appeared not to recognize the P-Funk ringleader without his dreads and exchanged glances and short comments to the effect of "Is that him?" "Yeah, that's him right there. You see?"[iv] As group members exchanged hugs and handshakes, Payne noted that there was a lot going on up onstage, with horn players Greg Thomas and Bennie Cowan just returned to the fold and playing with the band again that night. The group launched into "Mr. Wiggles" and Clinton reproached the band to bring it down a little: "Y'all gonna turn that shit…keep that shit down." Clinton rapped, "We gonna bait up my hook and see what we can catch," and the groove built back up slowly. "Don't that shit feel good?" Clinton remarked. As the song progressed, Clinton made swimming gestures with his hands and held his nose, waving his hand above his head and squatting to simulate a dive. The 68-

[iii] "420" is an informal term for marijuana culture.

[iv] At later performances, traveling P-Funk illustrator Overton Loyd solved the problem of identifying Clinton for the audience by drawing up a sign that simply read "GEORGE CLINTON" and holding it aloft next to the band's leader as he emerged from the wings.

year-old singer was not as limber as he had been in the 1970's, but though his performance was less frenzied he retained a mischievous sense of play that seemed to infect both band and audience. Although Clinton sang less than Steve Boyd or Belita Woods, his presence always seemed to galvanize the group, which delved deeper into games of intertextual reference, crowd-engaging call-and-response and genre pastiche once the leader took the stage. After Clinton's entrance the show's running order was typically far more variable than in the first 25 minutes. Several group members later indicated to me that in lieu of a set list, Clinton would call out each of the songs to the band during the show.

After "Mr. Wiggles" ended, the group went into "Aqua Boogie," with Clinton grunting and scatting over the band. Dropping one of his trademark raps, Clinton rhymed, "It would be ludicrous to think that we are new to this. We do this. Sheeeit!" The band launched into "We Want the Funk" and Payne exhorted us to join Uncle Jam's Army, with group members marching in place onstage. Without pause the group played through the song and went into another groove with the vocalists singing "Wind me up!"[v] before transitioning into "Up for the Downstroke." Partway through, George again instructed the band to bring it down and all but the rhythm section dropped out; George then introduced "Miss Belita Woods," who began a vocal line I'd never heard before, and the group went into a song that I couldn't identify. A gentleman resembling Sir Nose – later identified by Clip Payne as Los Angeles bluesman Gene "Poo-Poo Man" Anderson – came to the front of the stage and led the crowd in a back-and-forth chant of "James Brown." He and the group sang an excerpt from Brown's hit "The Payback" over the band's vamping.

As "The Payback" gave way to "Rumpofsteelskin," Clip Payne introduced Greg Thomas for a sax solo which followed. Kendra Foster, who wore a frilly gray dress, followed Thomas with a vocal solo which led into "Bounce 2 This," which eventually morphed into a heavy rock guitar showpiece for Ricky Rouse. Following straight after and without a break were solos by Belita Woods and Kendra Foster, the latter leading with a chant of "This shit ain't over…" and eventually returning to the chorus of "Bounce 2 This". Over the crowd's chanting of this chorus, Kendra sang a short, wordless jazzy solo before the song wrapped. George Clinton announced each of the female vocalists for a round of applause while illustrator Overton Loyd emerged from the side of the stage

[v] A line from Bootsy Collins' "Bootzilla," from the album *Bootsy? Player of the Year* (Warner Bros., 1978).

and held up a sign that read “DIVAS.” “One Nation Under a Motherfucking Groove,” Clinton remarked.

Clinton launched into the opening monologue from “Maggot Brain,” which segued seamlessly into a chant of “Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will follow. The Kingdom of Heaven is within.” He left the stage and the band went into “Maggot Brain,” with Michael Hampton taking the solo. In the midst of Michael Hampton’s guitar wails, Overton Loyd returned with a sign reading, “A Noiseful Joy.” He followed with signs hailing guitarists Mike Hampton and Ricky Rouse. “Maggot Brain” closed with an uptempo guitar jam; at the song’s conclusion George Clinton reappeared and Loyd held up a poster reading “Garry Shider Lives in You.” The band tore into “Flashlight,” and as in many other songs the groove mutated as band members took solos (in this case, trumpeter Bennie Cowan, accompanied by George on “air” trumpet) before returning to the main theme. A second detour followed, with George introducing his granddaughter Sativa, who rapped the weed paean “Somethin’ Stank”. George began scouring the audience during Sativa’s rap, and as a couple of marijuana joints were passed up to him from the audience it became clear he’d found what he was looking for. George put both joints in his mouth and took a few drags before passing them around to the rest of the band. A guy in front of me in the audience exclaimed in disbelief to his friends at the fact that the group was actually toking up onstage: “They got weed!”

A tight “Atomic Dog” followed before the group jammed on the riff that opens Parliament’s “I Call My Baby Pussycat,” which prompted the audience to jump up and down in place. The jam then turned into “Red Hot Momma,” with Kim Manning taking the lead vocal and George chipping in hoarsely. Dressed in a skintight white sheath dress with leg slits on both sides, Kim swirled around and gyrated seductively while the band played for several minutes after the vocal portion of the song. George signaled the band to go into what I’ll call the “breakdown” section, where the instrumental riff was answered by Kim’s soaring vocal cries. The next song featured Clinton’s rapping son Tracey “TreyLewd” Lewis. I didn’t know the song, which was hooked on the phrase, “On the other side of the door.” Tracey’s segment was relatively brief, and he exited while chants of “Gogga googa” and “Shit, goddamn, get off your ass and jam” followed over the same basic groove. As the show came to a close, Overton Loyd held up a sign reading “Who P’d in George’s Afro?”

Even without pyrotechnics and massive stage props, P-Funk’s live show is something of a sensory assault. Participatory chants, poly-textural grooves, and a

collision of musical and visual styles overwhelm and overstimulate the viewer with a radical, joyous multiplicity of signs and signifieds. The open-ended format of the group's shows puts their anti-hierarchical ethos of indeterminacy and collective celebration of individual difference into practice, highlighting both individual and collective performance, blurring distinctions between songs and styles, and enveloping both band and audience in a shared space of temporary utopia.

After the conclusion of the July 3 show around 10:45 PM, the DJ played more classic funk tunes (including "Not Just Knee Deep" and "One Nation"). I wandered outside the venue, hoping to get a glimpse of band members. Most exited from a side door that led to a balcony where fans were sitting; I should have approached one or two group members but I only managed a quick overture to Belita Woods, who was walking towards the bus when I called her and rather clumsily told her what I was doing. After I explained the project she mentioned that she'd been in a band called Brainstorm in the seventies with a hit called "This Must Be Heaven." She told me I should look the group up, and I thanked her and handed her my business card as she walked away. I caught a glimpse of George Clinton leaving the venue through the same exit, but he was being ushered by a handler back to the buses and it appeared to me that either he or the handler did not want to be bothered. I didn't want to appear rude so I didn't approach him. I went back and forth – literally – about approaching guitarist Michael Hampton, who was talking to two appreciative young women when I first approached. Not wanting to cut in on his after-show plans, I waited for him to finish but was again hesitant to approach when he began speaking to a young couple near the buses.

Gaining Access

I need not have worried about approaching members of P-Funk before or after shows; as I soon learned, P-Funk is remarkably open and cordial with fans, and once band members knew I was interested in their stories, most were happy to sit down and chat with me. I finally overcame my hesitation during the band's July 7 performance at Hampton Beach Casino, and as a result I made two crucial contacts. Before the show, Carl Gray was at the back entrance with his camera interviewing fans. When I told Gray about my project, he immediately turned the camera on me and told me to talk about P-Funk for a few minutes. Flattered, I said all I could think of and gave Gray one of the business cards I had made.

After the show, Michael Hampton was hanging out next to the stage and I decided to approach him. He recognized me from the Foxboro show, where he'd seen me approach and had actually called after me when I turned away. At first I commended his solo on "Maggot Brain" and remarked that I was stunned he was able to find something new in the song with every performance. Hampton was more than happy to oblige with an interview and said we could do it that night if I was ready. Apparently sensing some hesitation or nervousness on my part, he followed almost immediately (amiably enough, I should add) with "you're not ready." I told him what I was doing, gave him my card, and then waited for a minute as other fans approached; I didn't want to deny them the chance to speak with him.

When the other fans had left I told Michael I'd love to interview him right then but that I needed to get my tape recorder, which I couldn't bring inside with me due to the venue's restrictions. We agreed to meet outside after I fetched my tape recorder. I ran back to my car and grabbed it and then ran back towards the back steps of the venue, next to which the tour buses were parked. I looked around for Michael but didn't see him, so I approached Carl Gray, explained the situation and asked him if he knew where Hampton was. Carl asked around to see if anybody knew where Michael had gone and we ended up walking around for the next 10 or 15 minutes looking for Michael. Eventually I told Carl it wasn't absolutely necessary that I meet with Michael right then as I would be at the next evening's show too; I didn't want to be a bother and force Carl to go out of his way, but he assured me it was no problem. As another 15 minutes passed, the buses started up and Hampton finally appeared on the back steps; I guess he'd been in the venue the whole time we were looking. I told Mike that we'd talk the next afternoon as it looked like their buses were getting ready to leave.

Offering assistance to research participants in exchange for their time is a great way to build rapport, and I soon found that if I could help band or crew with anything it was likely to put me in their good graces. When I sat down to interview Michael Hampton at a Chinese restaurant before a show in upstate New York, I told him I would pay for the meal, and after I ran two errands for band members backstage at a show in Dewey Beach, Delaware, I wound up with several hours of interviews from a half-dozen different members. Simply by explaining my project and establishing contact with as many members as I could after shows, I was able to work my way into the heart of the P-Funk organization in about a week's time.

Audience and Geography

One thing I learned while attending shows up and down the Eastern seaboard was that there's no such thing as a "typical" P-Funk fan. Given the group's historical fan base, I assumed that crowds would be made up largely of older African-American and younger white fans. In fact, it was very rare that crowds divided neatly along lines of age, race, gender or class. Except at shows in Philadelphia and Brooklyn, audiences were decidedly mixed, and did not necessarily reflect the racial makeup of their immediate surroundings. At Patriot Place in Massachusetts, for instance, the crowd looked to be about two-thirds black.[vi] Although black and white fans often arrive in racially homogenous groups, once the show starts and everybody is on the floor the crowd becomes an integrated entity unto itself. Hispanic and Asian fans were significantly less numerous Typically there were more males than females at the performances I saw, but women always had a substantial presence – probably 30 to 40 percent of the audience at any given show.

Only two shows drew racially homogenous crowds, and both were distinct from the other shows I attended for a number of other reasons as well. The audiences for shows at Brooklyn's Wingate Park and Philadelphia's Dell Music Center were overwhelmingly black, which may have owed more to the demographics of the surrounding area than anything else. Both shows were largely sponsored by African-American community organizations, and as a result they were effectively marketed and promoted as "black" events. Significantly, the only other show I attended in a major city was in Montreal, but where that show had been a part of an international jazz festival that sprawled across several downtown venues, both the Philadelphia and Brooklyn shows occurred well outside of the downtown core and adjacent to predominantly black neighborhoods. The cityscapes of Prospect Lefferts Gardens (next to Wingate Park) and Strawberry Mansion (surrounding the Dell Music Center) are marked by rows of brick buildings in disrepair and deserted industrial space. As a lone, conspicuously white, middle-class male, I had mild pangs of anxiety arriving in both locales. Though my concerns might have reflected unfortunate race and class assumptions, they were partially corroborated after the Dell Music Center show when George Clinton himself apparently instructed his daughter, Barbarella Bishop, to drive me home after noticing that I was about to hop on the subway.

[vi] This was surprising, since Massachusetts as a whole is just 6 percent black.

Collective Creation and Individual Will

Throughout this work, I often use "George Clinton" and "P-Funk" interchangeably. I do so advisedly, as Clinton is the philosophical and spiritual leader of the group and is repeatedly identified as such in the interviews I conducted with other band members. Furthermore, Clinton is the primary author of the words to P-Funk's songs, and since this project centers on language it makes sense for me to focus on the chief arbiter of the P-Funk lexicon. Nevertheless, Clinton's work – and indeed the entire P-Funk philosophy – depends on a great degree of collaboration. Just as Clinton is an expert mediator between disparate discursive and metaphysical realms, he also mediates between, and synthesizes, the work of a varied group of individuals. P-Funk emphasizes collective expressions of individuality, so while members and fans pledge allegiance to "One Nation Under a Groove" – and while followers of P-Funk identify as "clones" and soldiers of Uncle Jam's Army – the group's philosophy simultaneously encourages a shared celebration of difference. In the P-Funk universe, "freaks" and outcasts are idealized for their willingness to think independently and to resist the hegemonic value system of the dominant culture. Funkateers are united by their deviancy, joined in their radical multiplicity.

P-Funk is both a collective working under a shared vision and a group of individuals from highly diverse musical and cultural backgrounds. Gathering from the interviews I conducted, it appears that many aesthetic and social rules within the P-Funk organization are implicitly understood rather than explicitly stated, and that boundaries between the core of the P-Funk organization, the social and familial circles of the group's individual members and the domain of the group's audience are highly permeable. Although P-Funk had a relatively stable performing and recording lineup as Funkadelic in the early 1970s, money disputes and drug problems drove several founding members to quit, and with 1972's "America Eats Its Young" the band became something of a revolving-door musical collective. Clinton regularly recruited new members throughout the 1970s as his vision evolved, and while members of the rapidly expanding P-Funk group often came and went for a variety of reasons, musicians were always welcome to return; as Carlos Murray, George's personal assistant and the current portrayer of Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk, told me, "Nobody ever gets fired"[11] from P-Funk, no matter how

many times they leave or how much trouble they cause. As a result, P-Funk exists in a constant state of flux, with the band's performing lineup often varying from one show to the next as members join for select dates and leave periodically for other projects. Furthermore, most if not all of the members I spoke to had side projects which were effectively satellites of the P-Funk Mothership.

Though P-Funk began life in 1956 as a vocal group, the group has since grown encompass musicians from a multitude of different traditions, visual artists, dancers and at least one videographer. Some band members I spoke to came from conservatory backgrounds or had other formal schooling, while others were harmony-group veterans and still others were self-taught instrumentalists. Because the group's history is now so vast, at least three generations of musicians play together onstage. Keyboardist Danny Bedrosian is around my age (28-29), and several of the band members' children who occasionally fill in onstage are younger; Clinton, who turned 70 this past July, may not be the oldest member.

In the section that follows I discuss how band members and associates conceive of P-Funk collectively and how they view their own roles within the group, with special attention to the ways members integrate their own musical and cultural backgrounds into the ensemble. I detail band members' personal histories, as told to me, and the influences that have shaped their approach to music and performance.

The P-Funk Collective: Band Members' Stories and Perspective

MICHAEL HAMPTON

A native of Cleveland, Michael Hampton (born 1956) grew up listening to top 40 and album-rock radio until he was "turned on" to Funkadelic by a friend named Michael Robie. Entranced by the group's phantasmagoric album covers, Hampton began to teach himself Funkadelic songs by ear. Hampton's early guitar influences were remarkably diverse: "I always liked B.B. King and Wes Montgomery, Jimi Hendrix and Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page and Brian May. Sugarfoot from the Ohio Players." Hampton joined the band in 1974, when he was just 17. Lead guitarist Eddie Hazel had been forced to leave due to legal troubles, and Clinton needed an immediate replacement. Hampton won his spot by auditioning at an after-show party in Cleveland with a note-perfect rendition of "Maggot

Brain," Hazel's signature piece. Hampton told me that, rather than substantially altering solos originated by Eddie to suit his own style, he tries his best to stay true to Hazel's vision.

I asked Hampton what "funk" meant to him. Though he didn't offer a concise definition, he told me it was a "feeling" that he could identify whenever he hit upon it:

> When you know you got the funk, or the feeling that you're sure you're in the pocket, that's a satisfying feeling…I've been playing long enough to know that it's a feeling…just being able to play to express myself through the instrument, and to have people feel the same way. Get that feedback.[12]

LIGE CURRY

P-Funk bassist Lige Curry (born 1953) was present at the party where Mike Hampton was hired; the two were cousins and grew up together in Cleveland. Curry explains his background in the excerpt that follows:

> I was born in Flint, Michigan. My mother, she divorced my dad, and she moved to Cleveland, where I met Michael [Hampton] – those were my cousins, my mother's brother, those were his kids. And we met each other and we just kicked it as kids. Our musical taste was pretty much the same thing – we liked a lot of rock and roll stuff…In school we started runnin' into different cats, exchanging albums back in those days, like "Hey man, can I borrow that album, can I borrow this album?" We ran into some guys, and one guy had a *Maggot Brain* record and we borrowed it and found out – we had been listening to Led Zeppelin and Cream and all them cats like that back in the Seventies, but we had never ran into a bunch of guys that were black that were playing rock and roll like that. You know, if anybody should be the head of the Black Rock Coalition it should be Funkadelic!

I told Curry that when I purchased *Maggot Brain* I was surprised to learn that Funkadelic was actually a rock band. While his cousin joined the group in 1974, Curry's own opportunity to join didn't come until 1979. Before he became a touring member, Curry had taken advantage of his business degree and landed a job at the P-Funk offices in Los Angeles. One lucky day, guitarist Garry Shider came by and made him the offer: "Hey man, you know you gon' be playin' bass!"

> When I started playing [with P-Funk] in '79, it was really like a dream come true. Michael had already been in the band for about four or five years at that time, I had went to college for a while…but I didn't graduate. You know, I got out here on the road and I ran into P-Funk on the road. They were having problems with the bass player, who

> wanted to go back to school hisself, named Rodney "Skeet" Curtis. He ended up going back to school, and I was leavin' [school]. (*laughs*)

Curry took a moment to reflect on the legacy of P-Funk and the funk movement, noting that the style had largely gone underground but the spirit lived on:

> I look at it now, man – we generated so many new people from the time that I came in, even, and so many people that went on to do other things. But that's what it's all about – the more you clone, the more you know you gonna [grow], and that whole cloning concept of the period is so heavy now, you know. Funk is still one of those rare styles of music. You don't find too many funk bands anymore. I would like to say funk has turned into more of a hip-hop type of thing – you find some funky hip-hop artists, but ain't too many funk bands anymore. It's evolved into another thing. You just have to step up to the plate and get with it.

In a later conversation, Curry returned to the subject of cloning (the central regenerative process of the P-Funk universe), marveling at the fact that older generations continue to pass the P-Funk legacy down to their children:

> Curry: It's all about clones, cloning. It truly is, man – when you look at how everything, from generation to generation, is passed down –
>
> Ben Doleac: The funk perpetuates itself. It spreads.
>
> Curry: Yeah, dude, there's kids in there that ain't never seen it before, that their parents are saying, "Go check it out." And there's people that's done seen it a whole lot of times. That's the blessing in it – being able to do it and know that this is some legitimate stuff we're dealin' with here. It's documented. So I'm excited about that every time we get onstage or get ready to tour, Overton [Loyd] do an album cover or George make another song, or whatever…That's what makes you – that's the drive.[13]

GREG THOMAS

Originally hailing from Baltimore, trumpeter Greg Thomas grew up in a musical household. Both parents were musicians and educators for Baltimore Public Schools. Thomas told me his parents "taught us to be diverse – they played all kinds of music, so I got to listen and play all kinds of music."

> I used to listen to everything – Blue Öyster Cult, Deep Purple, Yes. You know, I grew up with a heavy rock influence, heavy jazz influence – "Bird" Parker, you know, all the jazz cats, I grew up listening to Benny Goodman, Pete Fountain. Then I grew up listening to classical, you know, Leontyne Price, Pavarotti, and I was also an opera singer in college.

Before joining P-Funk, Thomas played in a band called Uncle Remus with bass player Rodney "Skeet" Curtis, drummer Dennis Chambers, and his (Thomas's) brother. In 1977, Skeet left the group and joined P-Funk on the invitation of singer Gary "Mudbone" Cooper, who was also from Baltimore. Like most members, Thomas got involved with the group through existing social networks; he likened the process of being invited to join P-Funk to getting a call from a friend when a job opportunity opens up, which is exactly what happened to him. As Thomas told it, Skeet Curtis first phoned him in 1978 when P-Funk ran into a scheduling conflict. P-Funk's regular horn section –Fred Wesley, Maceo Parker, Richard "Kush" Griffith, and Rick Gardner – was unable to meet touring commitments with the main group because they were already on a tour with Bootsy's Rubber Band, a P-Funk offshoot led by bassist William "Bootsy" Collins. Curtis contacted his former bandmates and asked them to audition for P-Funk, and in short order P-Funk had a new horn section.[vii]

I asked Thomas to explain how playing with P-Funk was different from his work with other bands. He gave the following response:

> With a lot of bands, the set is rehearsed and it goes like that from top to bottom with no variations. With P-Funk, no show is the same, because George lets everybody do their thing and we experiment, we get into our improvisation vocally, musically, and, you know, the show can take a turn. We might finish a song with P-Funk, and then the keyboard player or the bass player might go into another song, and he might say "Yeah, let's do that," you know. So then we start playing that song, where with other groups sometimes it's just a set list, you go down that set and you don't variate, you know, it's kinda cut and dry. But with P-Funk it's always, you gotta be on your toes, you gotta be ready for what's coming, and, you know – it's spontaneous.

I asked Thomas what "funk" meant to him. Like Michael Hampton, he responded that funk was a "feeling, either you have it or you don't. And you can come from any ethnicity or any gender and be funky, you know. Funk is a way of life, it's a feeling in your soul." Finally, I asked him whether he thought there was any one overriding message in P-Funk's music. He replied:

> Hey man, [it's] just "Keep the funk alive." That's why we're out here. That's my overall message, "Keep the funk alive"…It's being revitalized in other people's music, you know, other people are sampling and other people are doing spinoffs of P-Funk and James and Sly and whoever, but you know, the roots are there, the funk roots are there. So that's the main thing – "Keep the funk alive, the funk will never die." We got kids in

[vii] Dennis Chambers would join P-Funk a few years later after playing with the Brides of Funkenstein, yet another offshoot of the Mothership.

> South America, halfway 'round the world in Japan, Europe, you got kids playing the funk and rappin' and breakdancin'…the whole concept is just continual.[14]

MICHAEL "CLIP" PAYNE

I didn't have to ask P-Funk emcee Michael "Clip" Payne (born c. 1957) for an interview; after I'd spoken to Lige Curry on the band's tour bus, Payne actually asked me when I was going to talk to him. Payne had thought a lot about the meaning and the purpose of the Funk; I spoke more extensively with him than with any other member of the group, and he never ran out of things to say. A Detroit native, Payne first met P-Funk in the recording studio in the late 1970s. He describes himself as a "maintenance man," and he continues to do odd jobs for the group out on the road even while emceeing concerts, running WeFunk Records, and leading the bands Drugs and 420 Funk Mob. He told me how he came to work with P-Funk as follows:

> What brought me to P-Funk was wanting to be a recording engineer, because I had been to a few sessions as a kid – I sat and watched Edwin Starr record "25 Miles to Go." It was a school field trip, and they were telling us about quality control. 'Cause I'm from Detroit, so, you know, your options in Detroit are, like, Motown music, working in the car factory, or work for Battle Creek – music sounds a little nicer than the other two….[the producer of the session said] at the end of the trip that his name was Mr. Whitfield[viii]…Weeks later or maybe months later the song came out, and I would just remember watching the whole process. All I could ever think about was the process of making that hit record, and I just said, "I could do that."
>
> I went to United Sound to see if I could get into the recording studio, but I didn't have the parents' check, credit card, or permission, so – I would come to the door each time and not really know what to say when it got to the money part. One day while working a completely different job, I met George, who asked me to go pick him up some biscuits or something, some gravy or something at a restaurant. And then we go into the studio, and when I came in with him, the engineer said he'd seen me…a zillion times, so he knew I must really want to be there. He said most of the kids that came there, they did it because they could afford it, but they didn't really do it because they were passionate about it. So he said, while I was in there with George, he said "You can come back all the time, 'cause I see that you really love it in here. See I'm the main engineer, and I got a ear and a passion for it, and I never been to school for it." That was the engineer that was running United Sound, Jim Vitti…He had plans for me to be an engineer, he was teaching me his role, but George was also thinking of me as being a good A&R person, which is what I picked up. I didn't know what it meant, but I think the Edwin Starr session kinda rubbed off on me, and that's what I brought in the door.

After Payne's children came on to the tour bus for a little while, our discussion got off track, but the presence of his children gave him an opportunity to reflect on family life on

[viii] Norman Whitfield, legendary Motown producer.

the road: "Funk is psychedelic family values. They're not necessarily wack." Payne's quip got us onto the subject of the meanings of "the Funk".

> "Funky" is a metaphor…When I was younger, it would be like this – it would be like, if Ray Charles was singing a secular song, but he dared to play a blasphemed church song under it. So it's funky in the point that it's right there at the threshold of being – you know, you used the metaphor for fear. It's that where he goes, where, "Should he or should he not?" Even though it becomes pop later, it's forethought, not the afterthought. Afterthought is, "Ooh, that's funky!" Forethought is artistic, it's scary, it may be groundbreaking, it may get the Ku Klux Klan out to whoop his ass, it could get the church people to shoot him. So it's all that – it's a risk…Michael calls it "the silence in between"…it's the space where nothing's happening – how do you manipulate it, control it.

Later I asked Payne whether he thought P-Funk was political, and if so, how. He likened the group to a sort of anti-political party: "We're the obsoletion of the parties."

> It's a political party that's not left or right, because it's too – "They smoke cigarettes, they don't, they drink, they don't. They do this, they don't. They read too many books, they don't," and everything in between, so we're that…we find out, if you want to test on how to make a complete clusterfuck of people work the American way, as crazy as it is, the tribe is on. And we've actually managed to do it peacefully, lovingly, and for the sake of karma. We learn karma. This is good fortune that we're here, this is good fortune that we share. And that's the P.[15]

STEVE BOYD

Vocalist Steve Boyd began his career as the singer with a Detroit group called Five Special. In the fall of 1978, Five Special had a recording session booked at United Sound Studios, which also happened to be P-Funk's studio headquarters. The facility had two main recording rooms, and P-Funk was working in the "A" room while Five Special was next door in the "B" room. I told Boyd that I knew Five Special from a song called "Why Leave Us Alone" – one of the tracks the group recorded at United Sound – and he gave me the story behind the song:

> I'm the lead singer on that particular track, and the handclaps on that particular track are done by George Clinton, Michael "Clip" Payne, P-Nut, Lige Curry, and Bernie Worrell…I started working with them within six months of meeting them in the studio. I was in Studio A and then I was in Studio B, I'm running up and down the hallway at United. So I'm doing both at the same time…I did my first road gig with them in, like, '85. And there was a series of maybe eight gigs through the Midwest, and then that was it, because George just wasn't really concerned with goin' on the road at this time. He just did those gigs on a whim or somethin'. But the total focus was the studio, 'cause we

> had, at United Sound we had a lot of people coming through there, making good money with groups like Well Read, Red Hot Chili Peppers…

I asked Boyd whether he thought P-Funk had a core philosophy:

> At this point, it's like a religion. And you know how religion is, nobody can really explain, you know? You can just go with the feeling and the spirit of it, if you believe in it.

I noted that when Boyd came out to sing "Bop Gun," it was a quasi-religious experience, and I related the story of how I'd gotten a solo in the Harvard gospel choir by auditioning with "Bop Gun." I noted that because I was nervous and unsure of how to improvise/work the crowd in the gospel tradition I didn't actually end up singing the solo in the concert. I opined that the problem was I hadn't been able to shed my inhibitions and reservations. I stated that doing so was what I thought funk was all about.

> Well, the funk is all about being free and uninhibited, and just – I'll take a term from the Red Hot Chili Peppers – "Rock out with your cock out," and just let your balls hang out. And that's the Funk. Do the best you can all the time, you know. Don't even trip, no matter what they say. You did it.[16]

CARL GRAY

Carl Gray (born c. 1955) describes himself as "The World's Only Rock Star Cameraman." Although he doesn't play an instrument with P-Funk, he has made himself a vital part of the group's performances; throughout shows, Gray weaves his way from the stage to the audience and back with camera in hand, capturing band and audience and encouraging fans to express themselves in front of his lens. A native of Stamford, Connecticut, Gray first saw P-Funk at the Apollo Theater in New York at age 15. "My nickname was Light Bulb," he told me, "and now the Light Bulb has hooked up with the Flash Light, so I was destined to be here."

> Inauguration night, Washington D.C. – I lived in D.C. [at the time] – George Clinton played the Red, White and Blue Ball. To make a longer story short…I was the only videographer there…I shot the show, and Sly Stone came out – it was like a historical event. So a couple weeks later they were gonna be in Connecticut…I went to Connecticut, to Richfield, and I hooked up with him there…he looked at the footage that I had and he said, "This is great. Would you like to film us on a daily basis?" And I'm like, "Is water wet? Do birds fly south for the winter? Do leaves fall off of trees in the Fall?" Like, "Yeah, of course."

Gray became the band's official videographer, and he credits Clinton's open-mindedness for allowing him to make a performance out of his role: "George gives you that freedom to be creative." He continues to marvel at the fact that he's been "grafted in" as a part the P-Funk family. "I have a bunk on the bus, wow! That's a beautiful thing, man, and everything George has said he would do for me he's done."[17]

KIM MANNING

One of a handful of white P-Funk members, Kim Manning had never even heard of the group before moving out of the small, very conservative Oklahoma town where she grew up. "My town was so religious that we didn't even have MTV," Manning told me. Trained as an opera singer, she had also studied ballet and classical violin. Manning learned about P-Funk from friends who listened to Phish and the Grateful Dead. Every time she intended to go to a concert and check the group out she ended up with some other commitment, however, until one day when she was in Los Angeles:

> [At the time] I was being, like, a hippie – I was basically traveling around in a Volkswagen bus and being a street performer, patchwork skirts, the whole nine. I met a girl that knew George, and she was like, "Oh, you gotta come to this show." So I went to the show, and at the show…I started meeting some of the members. And then I had an audition in L.A. for this music theatre company, so I went down there and [P-Funk] happened to be playing in L.A., so I went to that show too and I was on the bus hanging out and George came on and he gave me this big hug…He laughed and he was like, "I'm just gonna have to take you with me!"…That night…on "Maggot Brain" he brought me out and I started dancing for the crowd – I was also a ballet dancer…I think everybody that saw that knew that something was gonna change, and my friend was all like, "Oh, you know, she can sing, she can dance, she's really talented, blah blah blah." So a few days later I got a call from my mom and she was like, "I've been trying to get a hold of you, some guy named George Clinton keeps calling and he really wants for you to come to the studio," and so that's how it happened. I went to the studio and I never left.

Manning spoke highly of Clinton's role. I asked her what she thought his most essential contribution was:

> [George Clinton's] talent, I think, is synthesizing talents and synthesizing styles and backgrounds, you know, 'cause we all come from such different places, you know. Like, when I joined the band I had never sung a note that wasn't on a staff…these people come from gospel-y backgrounds and some people come from a jazz background, and I'm from the opera…somehow he hears everyone's voice and he finds a place for it. That's how he

> creates. It's like a master where he just kinda looks around and says "Ok, sure, I'll take…" He agrees to everything, I think that's what it is – "Yeah, I like that, I like that – sure, you go there and you do this."

Kim stressed that the band's live dynamic involved a great degree of cooperation and trust between the musicians. She said that intuition, openness and a faith in each other's instincts were essential to the success of the performance:

> I'm into the philosophy of, like, just follow what [George Clinton] says. And I never worry about who's new to the band or who's singing what part – I just don't even care. All I do is do what he says and do my best to support him, and as long as I can keep up with him I figure I'm doing my job. That's a hard enough job, because he'll throw – we'll be in the middle of one song and all of a sudden he'll throw in another song in the wrong key and we have to find the harmonies on the spot.

Kim repeatedly likened the group to a family, arguing that the spirit of the Funk kept them together: "Once you've been funked – once you've really funked, it never goes away." Like a family, the group is "always around each other," touring for some 200 days out of the year. I asked Kim how the touring experience stays fresh:

> It never gets old because it's always changing. Like we don't have set lists, right? I remember the first time someone mentioned [the] idea of a set list to me…I was like, "Set list? What's that?" I'd been with the band for four years, and I had no clue what a set list was. And I think that's part of how it stays fresh – you never know what song's gonna be next, and within that you never know who's gonna be up singing…so it's always fresh, it's always new every day. It's never the same show – never…We're road dogs and we like gettin' on the Mothership and flyin' around, and that's why we're here.[18]

Joining the P-Funk Family

Though I hadn't even met George Clinton three days earlier, I ended my two-week journey on July 17th (Fig. 3-2) in the back seat of his daughter's car as she drove me to the apartment where I was staying. Clinton wanted to make sure I got home safe. Such generosity is not only characteristic for Clinton, who offers a livelihood to perhaps 60 people and their families by keeping P-Funk on the road for 200 dates a year; it is also emblematic of P-Funk's relationship with their fans, who are less the hero-worshippers of rock tradition than an extended, ever-growing family. Backstage at the last show in Philadelphia, both Clip Payne and Carl remarked that the bonds they make with fans, crew and supporters are lasting. "You locked in, Ben, for life," Gray told me.

Figure 3-2: The author with George Clinton, July 17, 2010.

Later, when I contacted Gray about obtaining some of his video materials and following up with George Clinton, he noted that Clinton was presently locked in a copyright battle with the owner of Westbound Records; he wondered if I could help publicize Clinton's situation. I suggested I could set up a video chat with Clinton for a university course I was assisting on the music industry. While the chat ultimately didn't transpire, it occurred to me thereafter that the relationship between P-Funk and its fans was symbiotic. As both fan and scholar, one of my aims is to bring greater public and academic attention and support to Clinton's art and philosophy. In a sense, my intentions are evangelical: the Funk is gospel, and I'm ready to spread it as far as I can.

---

[1] George Clinton, interview with author, Cork and Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 15, 2010.
[2] Parliament, "Prelude," *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, 1976, Casablanca Records 842-620-2.
[3] George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, *The Mothership Connection: Live 1976* (1976; Los Angeles: Shout! Factory, 1998), DVD.
[4] Rob Bowman, "On the One: Parliament, Funkadelic, the Mothership, and Transformation" in *Music Traditions, Cultures and Contexts*, ed. Robin Elliott and Gordon E. Smith (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010), 274.
[5] Bowman, "On the One," 276.
[6] Carl Gray (P-Funk videographer), phone conversation with author, March 25, 2011.
[7] Bowman, "On the One," 273.
[8] Chris Richards, "In Maryland, George Clinton, Parliament-Funkadelic, and a missing Mothership," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/04/11/AR2010041103996.html.
[9] idx1274 (P-Funk merchandise vendor), conversation with author, Showcase Live, Mansfield, MA, July 3, 2010.
[10] Ron Ford (P-Funk vocalist), interview with author, Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.

[11] Carlos Murray (P-Funk dancer, George Clinton's personal assistant), interview with author, Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.
[12] Michael Hampton (P-Funk guitarist), interview with author, Northern Lights, Clifton Park, NY, July 8, 2010.
[13] Lige Curry (P-Funk bassist), interview with author, Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.
[14] Greg Thomas (P-Funk trumpeter), telephone interview with author, July 23, 2010.
[15] Michael "Clip" Payne (P-Funk emcee), interview with author, Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.
[16] Steve Boyd (P-Funk vocalist), interview with author, Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.
[17] Carl Gray (P-Funk videographer), interview with author, Dell Music Center, Philadelphia, PA, July 17, 2010.
[18] Kim Manning (P-Funk vocalist), interview with author, Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.

Chapter 4
Signifyin(g), Afrofuturism/Anti-Anti-Essentialism and the Carnivalesque: P-Funk in Theory

My name is the One, some people call me the Funk
Here's a toast to the boogie!

I've got jam in my legs, and I'm ready to spread
All around the world for the Funk[1]

- Parliament, "Theme From the Black Hole," 1979

The entire P-Funk universe – its mythology, its musical output, its social formulation, its performance style, and most of all its ways of meaning verbally, musically, and visually – hinges upon the rhetorical practice of Signifyin(g), a form of figuration which exploits the tension between black and white discourses. Through the act of Signifyin(g), Clinton and P-Funk confront the underlying ideology of Euro-American imperialism and its attendant legacy of race and class oppression, earning a psychic victory by making both absurd. The post-Enlightenment rationalism which was used to justify the enslavement of an entire race is turned on its head through P-Funk's unlikely blend of myth, science, and scatology. The Signifyin(g) act also serves as an ambiguating response to the rigid binary thinking that characterizes both European rationalist and black nationalist/nativist discourses. Though outwardly opposed to one another, these discursive strains share a hierarchical epistemology, an acceptance of racial difference as natural fact, and a belief in fixed or immutable essence that often works in tandem with accepted racial, ethnic, sexual and aesthetic categories. P-Funk uses Signifyin(g) to explode essentialist and hierarchical value systems from within, melding myth and science, essence and anti-essence in a series of responsive, all-encompassing lexical acts that expose the limitations of "either-or" binaries and replace them with the more ambiguous "either-*and*."

For the purposes of this thesis, I view P-Funk's recordings, performances, artwork, mythology, and philosophy as a matrix of texts. Though this approach may appear to privilege the written word – and indeed my framework is largely based in literary theory – the point of looking at the group's artistic output in this manner is not to

fix each musical, visual, or performance example in time or as a complete and static final product but to emphasize the principle of intertextuality that underlies both the theory of Signifyin(g) and the vast majority of P-Funk's work.

Understanding any text, historical or contemporary, requires an exploration of the context in which it was produced. By engaging with historical context, we often find that a text was produced in response to one or many other texts. George Clinton and P-Funk respond, sometimes explicitly, to other verbal, musical and visual texts through their work and produce new meanings through those responses. "One Nation Under a Groove," for instance, turns "the Funk" into religious icon and truth principle by Signifyin(g) upon two American oaths: "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" becomes "Do you promise to funk/the whole funk/Nothing but the funk,"[2] while the song's title plays on "One Nation Under God."

Signifyin(g) itself is a fundamentally responsive gesture. Henry Louis Gates developed the theory of Signifyin(g) in response to theories advanced by leading African-American literary critics such as Houston Baker and ascendant at the time in the academy. Rooted in the sacred traditions of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Fon of Benin, Signifyin(g) became a tool of spiritual sustenance and covert psychic resistance to violent white masters in the African diasporic ("black Atlantic") culture that developed as a product of the colonial slave trade.[i] Though stripped of both political agency and legal ownership of their own bodies, black slaves retained the power of figuration and encoded acts of lexical resistance to dominant European-American norms, values and ways of meaning through the process of Signifyin(g).

The Web of Discourse

Borrowing a term from Mikhail Bakhtin to build on Gates' theories, musicologist Gary Tomlinson describes Signifyin(g) as an African-American mode of "dialogism," a way of mediating "between black vernacular(s) and the discourse(s) of white hegemonic culture." Signifyin(g) is the process by which one finds meaning in the space between discourses, a means of playing on – and transcending – the linguistic difference which

[i] Quoting Frederick Douglass in *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates notes that slaves would mask songs of lament with apparently joyful melodies and coded language, "using antiphonal structures to reverse their apparent meaning" (67). The result of this Signifyin(g) act was that many white observers believed slaves were singing out of happiness and contentment.

separates the dominant from the oppressed.[3] Figures of Signification lose their rhetorical power when they are co-opted by the dominant discourse, and as black vernacular culture has been subject to appropriation and commercial exploitation since the birth of the American entertainment industry in 19th century minstrel shows, it must remain in a constant state of flux in order to maintain the "trace of black difference." "Funky" (and its derivative, "funk") is just one in a long succession of words reconfigured by African-Americans as tokens of authentic black expression. In hip-hop – which proceeded from and largely replaced funk as the dominant aesthetic of black popular music in the 1980s – such words such as "thug," "ghetto," and "ill" have been reclaimed as markers of authenticity and affirmative resistance. As these terms – and the Signifyin(g) acts that produced them – are devalued through mainstream exposure, new terms are adopted to replace them.

By riffing on the multiple layers of signification in African-American slang terms, George Clinton Signifies upon terms which have already been transformed through earlier Signifyin(g) acts. The subversive political import in the act of "flipping" a word or an icon inheres in the tension between the new (black) and old (European) meanings of the term. When the word "bad" emerged as a complimentary term in black slang, for instance, the word retained a trace of its conventional (and opposite) meaning; in its revised usage, the word encoded a lexical act of black resistance. When black musicians reappropriated the words "funk" and "funky," the earlier significations remained, along with the capacity of both words to offend. By employing an impolite, racially marked epithet to describe a positive essence, these musicians signaled their resistance to white-dominated mainstream discourse. This fusion of opposed meanings within a single sign which breaks down the "either/or" binary, upsets reified systems of value and plays upon what W.E.B. DuBois called the "double consciousness"[4] of African-American existence.

The Signifying Monkey, Mumbo Jumbo and the "Text of Blackness"

In the introduction to his 1987 book *Figures and Black*, Henry Louis Gates explains that he developed the theory of Signifyin(g) to counteract the essentialist assumptions and ideology that underlay most criticism of African-American literature, by both black and white writers, throughout the twentieth century. Since African-Americans

were systematically denied access to the written word through slavery, the attainment of literacy and mastery of the written word later came to be seen as a way for blacks to demonstrate their common humanity.[5] As black literary movements were inextricably tied up in the push for progress and racial equality, African-American literature was given the task of conveying "the private world of black pain and degradation, determined by a pervasive white and unblinking racism."[6] Criticism of African-American literature engaged almost exclusively with content rather than form, and "rhetorical value judgments [were] closely related to social values."[7] As a result, works were valued to the extent that they were "authentic" expressions of the black voice and the black experience. Gates argues that while more contemporary critics like Houston A. Baker moved away from a model that aspired to Western literary ideals and white acceptance, they continued to prize content over form and to conceive "blackness" as "an entity" and an immutable essence "rather than as metaphor or sign."[8] In opposing this view, Gates argues that any African-American tradition must be engaged on its own terms. The theory of Signifyin(g) is an attempt to do just that. It is a refutation of notions of racialized essence, a recognition that any cultural or racial essence that emerges from a tradition is not permanent or fixed but must continually be produced by its avatars.

Gates conceives of "blackness" as a trope and a text that is produced through the Signifyin(g) act. In so doing he consciously draws upon the search for the "text of blackness" described in Ishmael Reed's 1972 comic novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (which, not coincidentally, was a major source of inspiration for George Clinton's P-Funk mythology), a farcical, fabulist account of the controversy and hysteria surrounding early jazz and the ragtime craze in American cities during the 1920s. Although the book's plot is purposefully convoluted and difficult to follow, the basic story revolves around the emergence of the "Jes Grew," an "anti-plague"[9] which emerges in 1920 and sets about freeing the minds and bodies of young people both black and white from New Orleans to Manhattan. The Jes Grew whips its victims into an ecstatic frenzy, singing joyfully, dancing "belly to belly and cheek to cheek"[10] with one another, "wiggling wobbling rambling and shambling,"[11] with visions of the African interior flashing before their eyes and drums, banjos and kazoos ringing in their ears[12].

As the Jes Grew continues to spread, enemies and supporters of the radically shifting social and aesthetic order emerge, and Reed's narrative blurs fact and fiction in ever more confounding scenarios. On the one hand are the Atonists of the Knights Templar, stewards of European rationalism and the Western tradition who seek to destroy

the Jes Grew by recovering the Book of Thoth, the written text that enables its dissemination. Their primary agent is the magazine editor Hinckle Von Vampton, whose name is a thinly-veiled allusion to Harlem Renaissance patron Carl Van Vechten[ii]. Von Vampton employs an undercover black agent named Woodrow Wilson Jefferson to track down the Book of Thoth, which is circulating, undetected, among a small group of black intellectuals. On the opposite side of the Atonists are the HooDoo priest PaPa LaBas and his followers, native carriers of the Jes Grew who are working to ensure its continued spread. Like Von Vampton, Papa LaBas is on the trail of the Book of Thoth, but instead of destroying the Jes Grew by burying the book his mission is to unite the Jes Grew with its text so it can thrive fully.

The book ends with the revelation that the struggle over the Jes Grew originated in an ancient conflict between the Egyptian prince Osiris and his brother Set. Jealous of his brother's fertility cult, which appeased nature through song, dance and celebration and produced bountiful harvests, the rational and imperious Set had Osiris murdered and his followers suppressed. The dances of Osiris, however, had been recorded in book form by his disciple Thoth and passed on to his widow, Isis. Lost for centuries, the book was rediscovered in 1118 by Templar librarian Hinckle Von Vampton, who attempted to translate the text. Estranged from its proper heirs, however, the text changed and brought misfortune upon the Knights Templar. In order to keep enemies off his trail, Von Vampton paid a group of native "J.G.C.'s" (Jes Grew Carriers) to take the Book out of his hands and conceal it amongst themselves. When one member of the group, a cohort of LaBas named Abdul Sufi Hamid, took it upon himself to translate the Book, the Jes Grew struck a path across America. In a letter to LaBas written just before Abdul's death at the hands of Atonist pursuers, Abdul confides that he was disgusted with the contents of the Book and threw it in the fireplace after completing his translation. The manuscript of his translation, meanwhile, was lost in transit. Unfazed after reading the letter, LaBas avers to his daughter Earline that the "anti-plague" is indestructible: "Jes Grew has no end and no beginning."[14]

Mumbo Jumbo is an allegory, a double-voiced critique of attempts to pin down, contain and define "blackness" as an entity and a cultural essence. Jes Grew is an uncontainable force in search of the "text of blackness," yet it continues to spread even as that text, the Book of Thoth, never actually materializes during the course of the

[ii] As Gates notes, "the Harlem Renaissance was the first full-scale, patronized attempt to capture the essence of Jes Grew in literary texts" (*The Signifying Monkey*, 224).

narrative. The text only comes to life through the actions of J.G.C.'s ("Jes Grew Carriers"): ragging a Sousa march, dancing the Funky Butt, playing the Dozens, or Signifyin(g) in any form. European rationalists (like the Knights Templar) and orthodox black nationalists (like Abdul Sufi Hamid) seek to destroy the Jes Grew by destroying its text, but because both are in thrall to fixed ideologies, binary thinking and epistemological absolutes, they fail to apprehend the indeterminate, open-ended nature of both the anti-plague and its enabling text.

In 1985, author Rickey Vincent asked Clinton how he'd come up with the concept of "The Funk" as a force "spreading throughout the universe," and Clinton replied, "Have you read *Mumbo Jumbo*?"[15] I interviewed Clinton briefly when I followed the group on tour in the summer of 2010, and when I explained how I was trying to situate his music within the black Signifyin(g) tradition he posed the same question to me. *Mumbo Jumbo* was published in 1972, and in formulating the P-Funk mythology, Clinton drew key elements from Reed's text. Like the Book of Thoth, the text that will allow the Funk to proliferate was created in ancient Egypt and hidden away for centuries. Like the Jes Grew, the Funk is a force in search of a medium. In Reed's text, that medium is the HooDoo priest Papa LaBas[iii]. In the P-Funk universe, Clinton and the clones of Dr. Funkenstein are the mediums who enable the Funk to regenerate and disperse. And like the Jes Grew, the Funk is an infectious disease viewed by its vectors and protectors as the life principle itself and condemned by its enemies as a plague and a threat.

Black Authenticity and "Anti-anti-essentialism"

The Jes Grew of Reed's text encompasses HooDoo, ragtime, jazz, and the blues, all manifestations of the "Text of Blackness." By the time George Clinton emerged with P-Funk at the end of the 1960s, "soul" and "funk" were the contemporary "Texts of blackness," so to speak. Both words signified "authentic" blackness in speech, action and art while at the same time denoting emergent musical genres. Countless musicians played on the many connotations of the words "soul" and "funk" in song titles and lyrics, but only Clinton took the time to actively critique the notions of "soul" and "funk" as fixed essences and hidden texts of blackness. On 1970's "What is Soul," from Funkadelic's

[iii] The name "Papa LaBas" is derived from the Haitian and New Orleanian names for the divine trickster Esu-Elegbara, about which more later in this chapter.

self-titled debut, Clinton lampoons the usage of the word as a shorthand for black cultural authenticity, answering the titular question with a series of absurd juxtapositions:

> *What is soul?*
> *I don't know, huh!*
> *Soul is a ham-hock in your cornflakes!*
>
> *What is soul?*
> *I don't know, huh!*
> *Soul, soul is the ring around your bathtub!*
> *…*
> *What is soul?*
> *Man, I don't know, huh!*
> *Soul is chitlins foo young!*[16]

Each iteration of the title, coupled with the answer, is delivered as a tripartite call-and-response between a male choir and George Clinton. With "I don't know," the choir gives its own unsatisfactory answer before Clinton delivers the punch line. Two of Clinton's answers play on the appellation "Soul Food," which designates traditional African-American cuisine. "Chitlins foo young" and "a ham hock in your cornflakes" mix soul food staples with incongruous Chinese and American dishes. Alone, both dishes represent non-black cultures, so when Clinton introduces chitlins to one and a ham hock to the other and calls the result "soul," he suggests that "soul" – or black cultural essence – can be produced simply by introducing icons of blackness and black culture to the products of other traditions. Since Clinton laughs after each response, however, his sincerity is uncertain. Clinton's second response – "Soul is the ring around your bathtub" – calls up images of dirt, poverty and squalor, all tropes of the struggle for economic survival and social acceptance that precipitated the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, hence essential signifiers of authentic blackness. Even here, however, Clinton is playing and teasing rather than sermonizing, and his multiple responses put the lie to the notion of soul as a single definable essence.

In their resistance to easy binaries, their double-voiced critiques of European rationalist and Black nationalist discourse, their embrace of linguistic and epistemological indeterminacy, and their investment in African myth, Clinton and Reed share an ideological orientation that is akin to what Paul Gilroy calls "anti-anti-essentialism." In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy argues that debates over black music and culture have generally been split between two positions. The essentialists associate black music "with tradition and cultural continuity" and argue that "Any fragmentation in the

cultural output of Africans at home and abroad is *only* apparent rather than real and cannot therefore forestall the power of the underlying racial aesthetic and its political correlates."[17] For the essentialists, the whole of African diasporic culture is held together by a fixed and unchanging essence which is predicated on "an absolute sense of ethnic difference." The anti-essentialists, on the other hand, argue for a post-modernist approach that rejects tropes of blackness out of hand, dismisses racial mythologies and internally cohesive models of black culture and seeks "to abandon the ground of the black vernacular entirely."[18] By deconstructing the notion of blackness as a fixed essence while at the same time embracing the power of blackness as trope, myth and rhetorical principle, Reed and Clinton refute both the essentialist and the anti-essentialist positions. Neither essence nor anti-essence, "blackness" for Clinton and Reed is an uncontainable, immaterial force that spreads through the Signifyin(g) act.

The Signifyin(g) Trickster

The hero of the Signifyin(g) tradition is the trickster figure, a folk archetype whose essential characteristics are succinctly described as follows by Ayanna Smith:

> A trickster in the African-American tradition is one who flouts the norms of society, using cunning, humour and deceit to obtain personal gain. Often this character embodies a limitation of some sort, one who is likely to be trod upon by others with more power or physical strength. Thus, it is superiority in wit that allows the trickster to gain the upper hand.[19]

Descended from the divine conduit Esu-Elegbara, the trickster is a master of figuration and a mediator between realms. Instead of relying upon physical force he uses his mind and his mouth to gain the upper hand in struggles.

The Signifying Monkey, namesake of Gates' groundbreaking book and a character whose lore survived the devastating process by which black slaves were systematically robbed of their language, their native culture, their religion, their families and their identities in the passage across the Atlantic, is the prototypical trickster figure. A physically small but quick-witted character, the Signifying Monkey repeatedly outsmarts his larger and more powerful enemies, the Lion and the Elephant, through wordplay, ambiguity and coded expressions.

The Signifying Monkey thwarts his antagonist through "a trick of mediation"[20]; unlike the Lion, he is able to move nimbly between the literal and figurative "poles of signification."[21] The task of mediating between these two levels of discourse is invested with divine significance in traditional West African cultures. In his explication of the Yoruba mythology from which the "Signifying Monkey" tales are derived, Gates notes that Ifa, the sacred corpus of the Yoruba people, contains both the sacred texts and their commentaries[22]; Esu-Elegbara, the divine trickster who interprets Ifa and imparts the will of the gods to mankind, is frequently depicted with two mouths which represent the "double-voiced" nature of his utterances.[23] The Signifying Monkey's spiritual ancestor, Esu is a figure of indeterminacy and ambiguity, a mediator between discursive and metaphysical realms which are not easily reconcilable[24]. In the guises of Star Child, Dr. Funkenstein, and various other personae, not least the eponymous record producer listed on the sleeve of every P-Funk LP, George Clinton acts as the Esu-Elegbara of the P-Funk universe. Like Esu, who is often depicted "as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis,"[25] Clinton is forever producing new meanings and reproducing his own (black) subjectivity through mediation and figuration; as Dr. Funkenstein, he actually clones himself in order to spread the Funk. The alien Star Child, meanwhile, literally travels (and thus mediates) between worlds aboard his spaceship, touching down on Earth in order to reveal the secrets of the Funk to the stationary "Citizens of the universe." To quote Willhardt and Stein, themselves referencing a Parliament album title, Clinton "*is* the Mothership Connection."[26]

While Dr. Funkenstein evokes both *Mumbo Jumbo*'s HooDoo Priest Papa LaBas and the mad scientist archetype of popular fiction, Star Child (who first greets us, on Parliament's *Mothership Connection*, in the guise of a disc jockey) is an alien being on a mission to bring humankind in touch with the unfettered spirit of early African civilization (according to P-Funk lore, the secrets of the Funk are buried within the ancient pyramids of Egypt). Both characters bring together a mythical past with a technologically determined future in a mode that Mark Sinker and a number of other recent scholars call "Afrofuturism."

As described by J. Phillip Rollefson, the Afrofuturist program is dedicated to exploding the ideological divide between the essentialist/Africanist perspective of radical black nationalists and the anti-essentialist deconstructionism of postmodern scholars.[27] Both positions are explicated in detail by Paul Gilroy, who writes in *The Black Atlantic* that the discourse of "authenticity" in black popular music is a primary manifestation of

the essentialist paradigm.[28] Simultaneously borrowing from and undermining anti-essentialist notions of a post-racial, utopian future and essentialist notions of authenticity and soul, Afrofuturists upset both sides of the black identity debate:

> I suggest that the strategic anti-anti-essentialism of Afrofuturism is a critical project with the mission of laying the groundwork for a humanity that is not bound up with the ideals of white Enlightenment universalism. This…is where Afrofuturism's third way becomes apparent.[29]

The "third way" Rollefson describes is markedly more ambiguous and poses greater hermeneutic challenges than the established routes of science fiction ("white magic") or African "voodoo" myth ("black magic"). Instead, Afrofuturism offers an amalgam which Clinton's spiritual forebear, the jazz musician Sun Ra, called "Myth-Science."[30] Culling from Judeo-Egyptian narratives of exodus and rescue, Sun Ra replaced the tragic history of Africans in transit along slavery's Middle Passage with an interplanetary tale of redemption, and George Clinton took note. "Myth-Science" and Clinton's Afrofuturist concept LPs with Parliament are explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Performing Hybriditity/The Carnivalesque

While P-Funk's many albums preach resistance to political and ideological repression through the communal celebration of individuality, their live shows celebrate collective transcendence – the act of "dancing out of our constrictions"[31] together. Using groove-based repetition, improvisatory verbal and musical interchanges between band and audience and outlandish stage attire, P-Funk creates an environment where radical individuality and hybrid identity is performed both on and off stage. P-Funk shows straddle and ultimately blur the border between fantasy and reality, combining rock and soul, black and white, myth and science, essence and anti-essence in unexpected and constantly shifting proportions. Amidst the multiplicity of voices both vocal and instrumental, "the Funk"/"the One" (which, like Parliament/Funkadelic, are both separately defined and simultaneously one and the same, as in the Parliament lyric "My name is the One/Some people call me the Funk"[32]) holds as the mythic center and sustaining force around which the entire performance revolves and evolves.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the Carnivalesque offers a useful framework for making sense of the P-Funk concert experience, in which the hierarchies and binary

oppositions that separate performer from audience, life from art and mind from body are exposed and summarily exploded. In Medieval Europe, Bakhtin writes, the carnival functioned as a "second world and a second life outside of officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less" [33] and in which "all were considered equal."[34] Predicated on comic rituals and humor that turned the entrenched order of extra-carnival life on its head, carnival offered a temporary utopia, a space of unfettered social exchange, communal laughter and rebirth in an alternative order. Saints, bishops and kings, the representatives of religious and political hierarchy, are subject to parody and ridicule, yet the festive laughter of the carnival is both mocking and life-affirming, directed at all equally as members of the human community.

Medieval carnival festivities typically coincided with the official feasts of the Church. Where carnival subverted existing social hierarchies, Church feasts reinforced the established order, asserting the stability of the present by ritually consecrating moments of rupture and change in the past. As carnival crystallized into a tradition, however, it came to compliment rather than undermine the official Church feasts in function and purpose. A knowingly finite expression of collective catharsis and a clearly demarcated time and space where ordinary rules of conduct and rank were suspended, carnival ultimately came to support the prevailing social order by establishing specific occasions when its rules could be ignored.

In concert, George Clinton's heteroglossic utopia is necessarily less enveloping, its freedom less total than that of the Medieval carnival (or even such contemporary descendants as Mardi Gras). Unlike carnival, the P-Funk show clearly "belong(s) to the sphere of art,"[35] closer in format and function to the comic theater spectacle than the immersive festival experience. Band and audience are separated by the buffer of the stage; both are constrained by the rules and contained by the physical space of the venue. Yet Bakhtin suggests that carnival is an essence as much as it is a form, an essence which pervades folk humor and art up to and including George Clinton's surrealist space pageants. Bakhtin writes that carnival reflected the "two world condition"[36] which permeated Medieval consciousness – the hierarchical, serious order of the official sphere and its comic obverse in folk culture. This condition, analogous in a way to black "double consciousness," finds its representation in Bakhtin's "double-voiced word," later adapted by Gates as the central feature of black "Signifyin(g)." Contained though the spectacle of a P-Funk show may be, moreover, its sustaining principle – "The Funk" – is conceived

and understood by both band and audience as an uncontainable essence, forever growing, endlessly self-renewing, and "ready to spread."

As noted in chapter 2, the word "funk" itself evokes bodily odor, and the sweat of black bodies in motion in particular. In embracing the term and elevating it to the status of mystical life principle, George Clinton made explicit the conflation of mind, body and spirit at the center of the P-Funk philosophy. The Bakongo term *lu-fuki* and the African-American "funky" identify body odor as positive energy, a signal of virtue through hard work; George Clinton expands the term to embrace all manner of bodily functions and excretions, private parts, and the birth, death and decay of the physical body itself. Consider Clinton's opening rap on "Maggot Brain":

> Mother Earth is pregnant for the third time,
> For y'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.[37]

Here Clinton imbues massive, inanimate objects – the Earth and the universe – with the physical organs and life processes of the human body, conflating the inconceivable expanse of the cosmos, the metaphysical realm of the mind, and the material realm of the living body. While the universe decays the Earth proliferates, and Clinton the cosmic medium "rise(s) above it all" even while feasting on the products of metaphysical pestilence. "Shit talk" abounds on P-Funk's albums and in live shows up to the present day; in the studio, and onstage, profane raps bump up against cosmic preaching and philosophical sloganeering time and again. To quote Bakhtin once again, P-Funk's lyrical, visual, and performative emphasis on the "material bodily image," and their refusal to separate the bodily sphere from the metaphysical/spiritual/philosophical realm, is a kind of "grotesque realism."[38] Bakhtin writes that grotesque realism is a staple characteristic of carnival folk humor in which "the bodily element is deeply positive."[39] Degradation through immersion in the earthly realm and "the lower stratum of the body" – the realm of "defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth," leads ultimately to rebirth and renewal. Like Rabelais, Cervantes and other grotesque realists of Renaissance literature, George Clinton is deeply fascinated with the lower stratum of the

body. With P-Funk he elevates its embrace into a philosophical credo and a tool of liberation: "Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow."[iv]

Discursive Space and the Heteroglossic Utopia

Grotesque realism is one means by which George Clinton and P-Funk celebrate the messy reality of human life. Yet like the carnival revelers, P-Funk embraces bodily functions and engages in degradation primarily through verbal and dramatic representation. Clinton and P-Funk invoke filth, copulation and defecation through music, lyrics, dance and stagecraft but do not literally immerse in it. Grotesque realism, like Signifyin(g), is a rhetorical tool with which P-Funk brings together the "high" and "low" of culture, metaphysics, and discourse. Through Signifyin(g), degradation of hegemonic and official discourses, and other forms of rhetorical play, P-Funk undermines the artificial boundaries through which social hierarchies are maintained and opens up a cosmic space where disparate dialects, ways of meaning, value systems and identities are celebrated, exchanged and melded into a dynamic whole. This space is what I refer to as the "heteroglossic utopia."

I borrow the term "heteroglossia" from Mikhail Bakhtin, who uses it to describe the coexistence of multiple speech types or varieties within a single language.[40] In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin describes the phenomenon of heteroglossia as follows:

> The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases)…[41]

In heteroglossia, Bakhtin finds "the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification" at work.[42] He argues that linguists and philosophers of language have consistently focused on "the firmest, most stable, least changeable and most-mono-semic aspects of discourse" at the expense of "the decentralizing tendencies in the life of language" as it actually unfolds.[43] Heteroglossia embodies these tendencies most notably in the everyday dialogue of independent social actors, where meanings are contested and words take on multifarious significations, intentions and effects beyond their dictionary definitions. The overriding aim of the essay quoted above is to propose a stylistics of the

[iv] Title track of Funkadelic's second album (Westbound, 1970).

novel, a literary genre which Bakhtin argues is defined by its use, manipulation and dialogization of heteroglossia.[44] In the novel, Bakhtin writes, Mikhail Bakhtin multiple speech and dialect varieties within a single language are shaped by a single author and oriented towards a singular narrative object.[45]

I propose herein that Clinton's music is likewise heteroglossic in nature. Like the author of a novel, George Clinton deploys, mediates between, comments upon and frames multiple vocal and instrumental voices in dialogue within a single musical superstructure. The analogy between heteroglossia in the novel and heteroglossia in P-Funk's music is inexact – while Clinton often assumes the guise of multiple characters in dialogue within a single song, his voices are accompanied by those of other vocalists and musicians, sometimes assuming characters of their own invention. What's more, unlike the novelist, Clinton is not the sole author of his works; while he retains ultimate authority over all of the group's output and has the final say over any recordings that are issued, the musical, verbal and visual texts that comprise any P-Funk performance originate with individual performers just as frequently as they spring forth, fully formed, from the leader's mind. While Clinton is most likely responsible for a majority of the lyrics, most of the music on Parliament and Funkadelic's classic 1970s records was composed by other members. Keyboardist Bernie Worrell, guitarists Garry Shider and Eddie Hazel, and bass player Bootsy Collins all contributed immeasurably to the writing and production of P-Funk's most critically and commercially successful releases. Clinton's role was in synthesizing the disparate talents of his collaborators with a unified purpose; as Collins once noted, Clinton is "a music chef."[46]

Unified by Clinton's oversight, the P-Funk universe is predicated on a radical multiplicity of cultural reference points, discursive strains, musical traditions and systems of meaning. Paradoxically, P-Funk needs to maintain the linguistic, cultural and semantic disparities in order to undermine them; the tropes of racial essence and binary oppositions of the established order need to exist in order to be recognized and problematized. I am reminded here of an aphorism offered by the Brides of Funkenstein[v] on "Never Buy Texas From a Cowboy": "Without humps, wouldn't be no gettin' over."[47] And as the popular P-Funk concert chant goes, "We got to get over the hump."

On record and in concert, Clinton, P-Funk and the audience enact a provisional utopia through the play of difference. Language plays a crucial role in maintaining the structure and the outward appearance of difference, which is why tropes such as "soul,"

[v] One of P-Funk's myriad offshoot groups, established by Clinton (a.k.a. Dr. Funkenstein) in 1978.

"funk," Reed's "Jes' Grew" and Gates' "text of blackness" are so important to P-Funk and to the Signifyin(g) tradition. P-Funk questions the existence of absolute, concrete, and immutable differences between races, sexes, classes and cultural groups by unloosing the signs and symbols of cultural difference and playing with the tropes of racial authenticity, cultural essence, and post-modern anti-essence.

By pitting discursive strains over and against one another, Clinton exposes the hidden intentionality and the partiality of all language. For Clinton and P-Funk, language can conceal as well as reveal, can entice and by opening up sonic, visual, physical and metaphysical spaces in which multiple discourses come into contact and conflict with one another, every one of them potentially subject to revision, subversion, parody and all manner of modification. The untidy musical, verbal, and social exchanges of a P-Funk performance symbolize the messy plurality of humanity.

Signifyin(g) in Theory and Practice

I use Gates' concept of Signifyin(g) as my primary theoretical model because it offers the clearest and most forceful route to unpacking and comprehending P-Funk's work, both in and of itself and within the larger matrix of musical and verbal discourse, history and tradition. Signifyin(g) is not just a central feature of black vernacular tradition; it is also a mean of commenting upon that tradition and situating it in relation to other traditions and discursive strains. Since it rests upon "a trick of mediation," Signifyin(g) effectively provides its own critical exegesis.

Using the theory of Signifyin(g) as a framework allows us to understand how P-Funk makes meaning; to situate the group and its work within the context of African-American vernacular tradition and within the history of black Atlantic expressive culture; and to appreciate the way Clinton and P-Funk's work responds to, comments upon and interacts with both black expressive tradition (and the black nationalist/nativist political currents that venerate and support that tradition) and the discursive hegemony of European rationalism (together with its complicity in colonialist exploitation).

Introduced by Gates more than two decades ago, the theory of Signifyin(g) is not without its shortcomings. In "Signifying Nothing," for instance, D.G. Myers argues that, by adopting the "vocabulary of deconstruction" and predicating the existence of an African-American literary tradition on what is effectively an essence – the "trace of black

difference – Gates ends up vindicating the European postmodernist and essentialist philosophies which the Signifyin(g) act is supposed to undermine. Yet in the P-Funk universe, Signifyin(g) is not used to discredit opposing perspectives, systems of value and ways of meaning entirely, but instead is a means of suggesting that each has an equally viable claim on the truth.

Through the act of Signifyin(g), P-Funk advances a philosophy that shares with Gilroy's "anti-anti-essentialism," Eshun's Afrofuturism and Bakhtin's Carnivalesque an opposition to binary thinking, a rejection of epistemological and ideological absolutes, and an embrace of rhetorical indeterminacy, radical plurality, multiple subjectivities, ambiguity, hybridity and chaos. Clinton and P-Funk's use of Signifyin(g) in music, lyrics, and artwork of their recordings is explored further in chapter 5.

---

[1] Parliament, "Theme From the Black Hole," from *Gloryhallastoopid*, 1979, Casablanca Records 842-622-2.
[2] Funkadelic, "One Nation Under a Groove," from *One Nation Under a Groove*, 1978, Warner Bros. BSK-3209.
[3] Gary Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies," in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons*, ed. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 66-67.
[4] W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[5] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures In Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 45.
[6] Gates, *Figures In Black*, 45.
[7] Gates, *Figures In Black*, 39.
[8] Gates, *Figures In Black*, 39.
[9] Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972; New York: Atheneum, 1988), 6.
[10] Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 21.
[11] Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 139.
[12] Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 5.
[13] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 224.
[14] Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*, 204.
[15] Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music. The People, and the Rhythm of The One* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), 177.
[16] Funkadelic, "What is Soul?" from *Funkadelic*, 1970, Westbound W-2000.
[17] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993), 100.
[18] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 100-101.
[19] Ayanna Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," *Popular Music* 24, No. 2 (2005), 179.
[20] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 56.
[21] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 55.
[22] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 10.
[23] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 7.
[24] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 6.
[25] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 6.

[26] Willhardt and Stein, "Dr. Funkenstein's Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication," 150.
[27] J. Griffith Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, No. 1 (Spring 2008), 90.
[28] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 99.
[29] Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis," 91.
[30] Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis," 93.
[31] Funkadelic, "One Nation Under a Groove."
[32] Parliament, "Theme From the Black Hole," from *Gloryhallastoopid* (Casablanca, 1979).
[33] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968), 6.
[34] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10.
[35] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.
[36] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 6.
[37] Funkadelic, "Maggot Brain," from *Maggot Brain*, 1971, Westbound WBCD 2007.
[38] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 23.
[39] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 23.
[40] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryn Emerson and Holquist (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1981), 262.
[41] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 263.
[42] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 272.
[43] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 274.
[44] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 300.
[45] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 292.
[46] Bootsy Collins quote from David Mills, Larry Alexander, Thomas Stanley and Aris Wilson, *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), 87.
[47] The Brides of Funkenstein, "Never Buy Texas from a Cowboy," from *Never Buy Texas from a Cowboy*, 1979, Atlantic SD 19261.

Chapter 5
Signifyin(g) in Practice: P-Funk on Record and Onstage

If funk is the radical essence that underlies every aspect of the P-Funk universe, Signifyin(g) is the rhetorical strategy Clinton employs to bring that essence forth. The group's recordings, live performances, artwork, iconography and mythology are all rife with instances of Signifyin(g); this rhetorical practice is a central facet of the group's radically hybrid identity. Onstage and on record, P-Funk mediates between disparate discursive realms by Signifyin(g) upon a variety of "borrowed" verbal, musical, and visual texts; in doing so, the group brings these discursive realms together and impregnates each with "the Funk."

Signifyin(g) on Record

> *I am Sir Nose'd D'Voidoffunk*
> *I have always been devoid of funk*
> *I shall continue to be devoid of funk*
> *Star Child, [cue horns] you have only won a battle!*
> *I am the subliminal seducer*
> *I will never dance*
> *I shall return, Star Child!*[1]

These words open track 2 of Parliament's 1977 album *Funkentelechy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome*, part three in the interplanetary saga of Star Child, commander of the Mothership and paragon of all things funky. Our hero at last has a nemesis. Sir Nose, as his name suggests, is entirely "devoid of funk;" the maker of the "Placebo Syndrome" – a plague that induces passive mass consumption – he seeks to rid the universe of the unruly Star Child and his gospel of freedom through funk. Yet Star Child gleefully intrudes with an eerily familiar horn figure that enters immediately after the mention of his name. Drums, synthesizer, bass, guitars and a chanting choir enter successively, and before Sir Nose can finish the band drowns him out entirely. Our hero has strength in numbers. Entering with a rap at 1:20, Star Child seems utterly unfazed by Sir Nose's threats.

Both Star Child and Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk are portrayed on record by George Clinton. While the Star Child persona is represented by Clinton's "natural" speaking voice, the "Sir Nose" voice is distinguished by tape manipulation and a grotesque panoply of studio effects. Rudely interrupting Sir Nose's monologue, the horn figure

which signals Star Child's presence is a lift from "Merrily We Roll Along," best known to most Americans as the theme for Warner Brothers' *Merrie Melodies* cartoons. As the track progresses, the horn figure returns at odd intervals amidst verbal allusions to children's nursery rhymes and television advertisements, layers of electronic synthesizers, and still more layers of electronically altered voices. Clinton's recorded oeuvre is rife with such collusions of technology and allusion.

The Signifying Monkey tales cited by Gates in his work of the same name turn upon the Monkey's proclivity for stirring up trouble through the use of figurative language. Typically, the Monkey starts a conflict by repeating an insult which supposedly originated from the Elephant to his friend the Lion; offended, the Lion resolves to fight the Elephant, who easily beats him. Eager to deflate the Lion's self-proclaimed status as "King of the Jungle," the Monkey repeatedly tricks Lion into fighting Elephant, the true "King of the Jungle," through virtuosic wordplay. Unable to see through the Monkey's lies or, more importantly, to perceive the difference between literal and figurative language, the Lion is fooled time and time again.[2] The Monkey, then, is the prototypical trickster figure: an inveterate mischief-maker who, through rhetorical play, is able to thwart his physical betters. As Ayanna Smith writes, "It is superiority in wit that allows the trickster to gain the upper hand."[3]

A modern-day trickster, Clinton's Star Child shares the Monkey's propensity for oblique insults, rhetorical indirection and intertextual punning. The following example, from "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk," is typical:

> *Has anybody seen ol' Smell-o-vision?*
> *Where is Sir Nose'd?*
> *If y'all see Sir Nose*
> *Tell him Star Child said:*
> *"Ho! Put that snoot to use you mother!*
> *'Cause you will dance, sucker!"*[4]

Note that Clinton/Star Child never addresses Sir Nose directly; even though Sir Nose may be well within earshot, Star Child's taunts are (loudly) addressed to a third party. Gates calls this form of rhetorical indirection "loud-talking" and identifies it as a common "mode of Signifyin(g)."[5] Star Child also draws attention to his enemy's most prominent physical feature through a remarkable pun that conflates two senses; if "Sir Nose" is so named to recall the perception that white people and self-loathing black "sellouts" talk through their noses, Star Child suggests here that his doubly unfunky nemesis actually *sees* through his nose as well. Star Child/Clinton also draws an implicit

parallel between the ersatz cool of Sir Nose and the crass insincerity of television[6] and evokes a recent P-Funk maxim: "If you fake the funk your nose will grow."[7] Finally, Star Child offers his retort to the obstinate Sir Nose's song-opening monologue, promising to make the "sucker" dance. Like the Signifying Monkey rapping to the Lion, Star Child caps off a series of playful insults with a direct threat.

Musical Signifyin(g)

The comic dialogues, metatextual raps, and discursive lyrical oppositions of Clinton and P-Funk's 1970s albums are matched by equally dialogic music. Led by conservatory-trained keyboardist Bernie Worrell and former James Brown bassist Bootsy Collins, the instrumentalists in the collective fashion a dense backdrop for Clinton's cosmic jive-speak that borrows elements from gospel, jazz, heavy rock, blues, American folk, and baroque music. While Parliament's albums are frequently organized around a loose narrative, Funkadelic albums are typically more diffuse, though individual songs often parody particular genres: Funkadelic's "Atmosphere" (1975) undercuts a Bach-derived organ fugue with a barely audible voice delightedly intoning sexual slang, while Parliament's "Mr. Wiggles" (1978) tops an Ellington-style swing blues with Clinton's impersonation of 1950s radio DJ Jocko Henderson and helium-voiced responses from an artificially sped-up chorus of "fool fish."

Examples of verbal quotation, paraphrase and direct allusion are more immediately apparent in the P-Funk oeuvre than instances of musical quotation. While the former are typically supplied by Clinton in one of his various guises, the latter are most often traceable to keyboardist Bernie Worrell. A child piano prodigy and graduate of the New England Conservatory, Worrell pioneered the use of keyboard synthesizers in African-American music alongside Stevie Wonder. Whereas Wonder's synth tones often mimicked acoustic instruments, however, Worrell explored the capacity of the instrument to channel sounds and voices both earthly and extraterrestrial. In the aforementioned Bach parody "Atmosphere," Worrell's monophonic Moog synthesizer line flutters and dips over and under his own electric organ track, its timbre at once eerily pure and sci-fi freaky. While both the melodic contours and certain aspects of the instrumental tone suggest a flute line, Worrell's synth also strongly recalls the keyboard line from the Ohio Players' 1973 novelty hit "Funky Worm." In its alien purity, the synth signifies both the

"white" ideal of technological perfection and the proclivity for rhythmic and timbral eccentricity in "black" funk music (what J. Phillip Rollefson calls "hyperfunk"[8]).

In music and in words, P-Funk builds on the work of its Afrofuturist forebears by investing the technological fantasia of science fiction with signs of blackness, establishing a black presence in otherworldly realms where blackness was otherwise conspicuously absent. While the rude eruptions of Bernie Worrell's synths and Bootsy Collins' "Space Bass" infuse sci-fi posthumanism with the "funk" of black bodies in motion, George Clinton's absurd cosmic narratives and pseudo-scientific jive speech update the "Myth-Science" hybrids of jazz musician Sun Ra.

Clinton's project of reclaiming black spaces both imagined and material – and refiguring hegemonic concepts of both fantasy and reality in black-specific terms – was first made explicit on Parliament's 1975 album *Chocolate City*, just about six months before the P-Funk mythology began to take a definite shape with the Star Child saga on *Mothership Connection*. The album's title track was a valentine to the growing number of black-majority cities in America which envisioned a slew of black popular icons in the White House and celebrated the power of a black plurality in electoral politics:

> *Hey, uh, we didn't get our forty acres and a mule*
> *But we did get you, CC, heh, yeah*
> *Gainin' on ya*
> *Movin' in and around ya*
> *God bless CC and its vanilla suburbs*
>
> *Blood to blood, players to ladies*
> *The last percentage count was eighty*
> *You don't need the bullet when you got the ballot*
> *Are you up for the downstroke, CC?*
> *Chocolate city, are you with me out there?*[9]

Here, Clinton inserts the "trace of black difference" by rebranding "D.C." as "C.C.," (an ambiguous abbreviation which could also stand for "Capital City") "First Lady of Soul" Aretha Franklin becomes the First Lady of (black) America (and here Clinton plays upon the popular notion of "soul" as black essence), and, in a paraphrase of a Malcolm X speech,[i] the "bullet" of black-on-black crime is replaced by the strength-in-numbers of the "ballot". The album cover, meanwhile, frames the iconic sights of the nation's capital on a chocolate candy coin.

---

[i] "The Bullet or the Ballot," Cleveland, Ohio, April 3, 1964.

Kathryn McKittrick and Clyde Woods write in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* that "essentialism situates black subjects and their geopolitical concerns as being elsewhere (on the margin, the underside, outside the normal), a spatial practice that conveniently props up the mythical norm and erases or obscures the daily struggles of particular communities."[10] On "Chocolate City" and on the Afrofuturist concept albums that followed it, George Clinton transported black subjects and their struggles from the margins to the center, constructing a revisionist political/mythic discourse to replace the old norm. With the lyrics to "Chocolate City," Clinton invokes the modernist ideals of progress and mobility in order to construct a counter-narrative and mount an insurrection on the geographic and psychic space of hegemonic (white) culture and discourse. While social scientists of the postwar era had told a story of divestment and decay following the exodus of whites from America's inner cities, Clinton vaunts black political gains and cultural achievements. "Can't you feel my breath, all up around your neck," raps Clinton, emphasizing the physical presence of blackness that drove whites to the "vanilla suburbs" in the first place.

Behind Clinton's verbal insurrection, Parliament launches a musical insurgency, engaging themes of black presence, black plurality, pre-modern "soul" as cultural essence, the progressive ideal of movement as musical and political principle and the postmodern, anti-essentialist fantasia that Kodwo Eshun calls the "futurhythmachine,"[11] using guitar, bass, piano, synthesizer, drum machine, horns and a chorus of supporting voices. The instrumental backing starts sparsely with stabs of guitar, bass and piano, building with the sustained notes of horns and strings as Clinton's monologue unfurls. About 45 seconds in, Clinton gives marching orders to the chocolate masses with the exclamation "To the capital!" and the groove kicks into action. A backing choir of voices chants "Gainin' on ya," while Bootsy Collins' bass and Bernie Worrell's piano begin to fill in the remaining empty spaces, and the cross-talk of horn and brass instruments is underlain by a clockwork drum-machine rhythm. In short, the musical space becomes more populated and more kinetic at the same time, with several "chocolate" voices giving forth around Clinton's declamations. Bootsy Collins' liquid "space bass," Bernie Worrell's soaring string synthesizer and the churning robo-industrial drum machine rhythm all hint at the blurring of alien, posthuman (post-racial?) fantasy and corporeal reality evident in the "Myth-Science" musico-philosophical hybrids of Clinton's spiritual forefather Sun Ra and explored more fully on Parliament's subsequent space-opera concept albums.

Clinton introduced his wrinkle on "Myth-Science" with Parliament's *Mothership Connection* in 1975, "an outer-space opera centered on the conflict between the Protectors of the Pleasure Principle and the Perpetrators of the Placebo Syndrome."[12] The mad scientist Dr. Funkenstein and the interplanetary dance-floor missionary Star Child represent the former; Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk, introduced in the song that bears his name, embodies the latter. Crucially, the three central characters – each a distinct manifestation of the Myth-Science hybrid – are portrayed by Clinton himself. Like Esu-Elegbara and all other trickster figures, Clinton "escapes pigeonholing" and succeeds as a mediator by multiplying his subjectivity[13]. The protagonist of Clinton's space opera, Star Child, is introduced in the guise of a radio DJ – a technologically mediated presence who soon emerges as the master of his own multiple mediums. Star Child is a literal mediator between worlds, an extraterrestrial Christ figure (the savior of humanity, an "Endangered Species" according to one song title) whose Mothership touches down on Earth to "reclaim the pyramids" and carry the "Citizens of the Universe" to space. Where Star Child is a hybrid of Judeo-Egyptian mythology and science fiction, his Mothership is a loan from black Muslim theology,[ii] which held that "a select group of black people are in fact superhuman and will be saved from Earth by a 'mothership' as the white race perishes in flames."[14] Rollefson suggests that Dr. Funkenstein, who brings to life an army of clones, is a composite of Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein and the Nation of Islam's evil Yacub: A literal hybrid of black-nationalist and European post-Enlightenment fictions [15]. Dr. Funkenstein is P-Funk's creator figure, the God to Star Child's Christ, a keeper of the Funk mythos who multiplies his own subjectivity with the aid of science[16].

P-Funk's mastery and inversion of both rationalist and nationalist discourses, techno-utopianism and racialized naturalism, myth and science is borne out through their music. Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic* that African-American musicians have been dogged by disputes over racial "authenticity" since the heyday of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the late nineteenth century[17]. In the popular discourse, racial authenticity is embodied by the word "soul"; referring to both a musical genre and an implicitly black cultural essence, the word encompasses those reified constructs of racialized authenticity and naturalism that characterize the black nationalist and white imperialist positions alike. In P-Funk's music, it is the rhythm section – bass, drums and rhythm guitar – which typically provides a quorum of musical "soul," establishing and maintaining a heavily

[ii] See Elijah Muhammad, "The Mother Plane," available on the Nation of Islam's website: http://www.nationofislam.org/themotherplane.html (accessed September 17, 2011).

syncopated 4/4 groove with a pointed emphasis on the first downbeat (in the manner of James Brown). Representing the techno-utopian paradigm of the anti-essentialists, Bernie Worrell's synthesizers and various electronic audio effects evoke the cyborg fantasia of science fiction (alongside its musical corollary in sci-fi film soundtracks and Anglo-American "progressive" rock). Yet on close inspection the divide between the two positions is illusory. Bootsy Collins' bass guitar is patched through numerous effects pedals which alter the sound so radically that it effectively becomes a new instrument (the credits of Collins' solo albums referred to it as "Space Bass"). Bernie Worrell's synth tones seem almost an affront to the organic "soul" ideal, but the syncopations, ornaments and stylistic flourishes of his playing evoke jazz and gospel as much as classical and film music. Every instrument, every new piece of technology, every musical genre and every borrowed musical or literary text carries with it a set of historical and cultural associations, and it is through the interplay of these associations that P-Funk produces new, frequently ambiguous meanings. By way of musical and lyrical quotation, technological mediation, revision and recontextualization, Clinton and his cohorts create a music of "unashamedly hybrid character…[that] confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal."[18] It is the group's use of musical quotation that I wish to address presently.

Musical quotation is hardly novel to P-Funk or to the musical traditions of the African diaspora. The practices of quotation and revision-as-commentary have an established history in Western art music: Agawu writes in *Music as Discourse* that "In the nineteenth century, the common practice of paraphrasing existing works suggested transformative rendition (saying something differently), such as is evident in Liszt's or Paganini's paraphrases of music by Beethoven and Schubert.[19] Quotation-and-revision is simply one rhetorical tool in a Western canon that prizes individual compositional genius above all else, however; quotation-*repetition*-and-revision (hyphenated because it constitutes a single discursive act), by contrast, is the formative gesture of African-American expressive culture. For P-Funk's Bernie Worrell, who has a foot in both Western classical and African-American vernacular musical traditions, quotation is a spontaneous gesture that is often driven by a desire to decenter the canon:

> Being trained classically and with the strict – I can't take too much of that, I gotta lighten it up, and that's why I like to interject something serious, and then all of a sudden left-turn… because I was turned off back in the days when I was training and whatnot, the

> way they would put classical music on a pedestal, like "this is the highest form." That's bullshit. Everything is equal… so I did it on purpose just to say, "Yeah, right, now check this out."[20]

Musicologist Christopher Ballantine writes that musical quotation works on three different levels of identification and signification for the critical listener. The first is chiefly concerned with formal musical relationships in a work and does not encompass extramusical or socially understood meanings; the second level includes musical gestures that listeners may understand to convey a specific meaning. The third level is described by Kevin Holm-Hudson as "a knowledge…that the meaning [of the piece] is constructed not only by its individual melodic or stylistic references, but by a new, cumulative meaning constructed from the interaction of those references."[21] While Ballantine was writing specifically about Charles Ives, his analytical schema might be applied to any instance of musical quotation.

On Parliament's "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk," individual musical and lyrical references are explicit (i.e., they are meant to be recognized by the listener) and often pointedly disjunct, providing a level of narrative commentary but remaining as textual fragments. In fact, the relatively unharmonious juxtaposition of borrowed texts – the nursery rhymes "Three Blind Mice" and "Baa Baa Black Sheep" and the composition "Merrily We Roll Along" – serves first to emphasize the received social and cultural meanings of each. Only upon repeated listens do the group's textual alterations become fully apparent. With each alteration – each "repetition with a difference" – Clinton Signifies, producing new meanings from old texts. The lyrics of "Three Blind Mice" are quoted almost verbatim, though they are sung to a different melody and a markedly syncopated rhythm. "Baa Baa Black Sheep," chanted rather than sung, is perverted through a drug reference ("Baa baa black sheep have you any wool?/Yes sir, yes sir, a nickel bag full"[22]. The group's usage of "Merrily We Roll Along," the theme of the Warner Brothers cartoon series *Merrie Melodies*, is perhaps subtler.

Clinton doesn't so much upend the "Looney Tunes" theme as adapt it to his own uses; the meaning of the original theme is not subverted but is instead compounded and expanded upon through its employment in a new context. The opening melody line of "Merrily We Roll Along" (Fig. 5-1) is as follows:

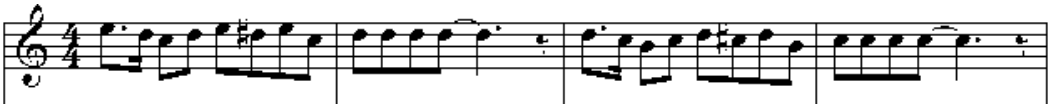

Figure 5-1: "Merrily We Roll Along" (C. Tobias/M. Mencher/E. Cantor). Personal transcription.

The above melody is redeployed throughout "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk" in snippets, entering at unexpected times and often clashing tonally with the rest of the track. The rhythm of the theme itself is unchanged, but through each iteration it is subtly reharmonized, at times pointedly discordant and at other times relatively harmonious both internally and in relation to the other instruments. The theme is never fully assimilated to the surrounding tonal and rhythmic material; it is always somehow at odds with the basic groove. The theme first appears immediately after the unaccompanied Sir Nose first mentions Star Child, thereby operating as an aural sign for the latter character; it is also the first tonal material introduced in the song. Consisting of a trumpet , a saxophone and a trombone, the horn section enters and exits with the first few notes of the theme in under two seconds (from approximately 0:18 to 0:20), following with a three-note fillip. All three instruments play variations of the melody at dissonant intervals from each other (Fig. 5-2):

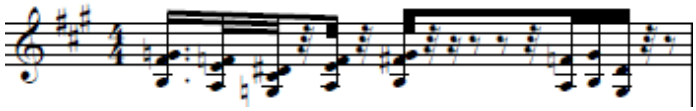

Figure 5-2: Horn section entrance from "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention – B3M)" (G. Clinton/W. Collins/B. Worrell). Personal transcription.

Taken alone or together, none of the three horn lines implies the song's eventual key of F# minor. The second iteration of the theme would imply a C# Major key but for the fact that the trombone plays a half-step too sharp to complete the inverted chords formed by the trumpet and saxophone lines. The drums, which enter immediately before the second iteration of the theme (at approximately 0:31), establish a beat at half the tempo of the horn theme, which in this context is revealed as a flurry of sixteenth and thirty-second notes spanning a single bar. The near-simultaneous entry of drums and the horn theme acts as a sharp, wicked retort to Sir Nose's preceding declaration: "I will never dance!" Together, the steady, "on-the-one" drum pulse and the frantic horn figure encapsulate the song's meld of groove and cacophony; the irritatingly sharp trombone provides an unruly edge to Star Child's already impolitic interruption. With the eighth-note pulse of the high hat in place Sir Nose's cries spiral upward in pitch (more studio trickery) and downward in volume (ditto) while Bernie Worrell teases atonal squelches from a Moog synthesizer.

Sir Nose continues to protest that he will never dance, but his cries grow weaker as bass and guitar enter with the main groove at 0:55:

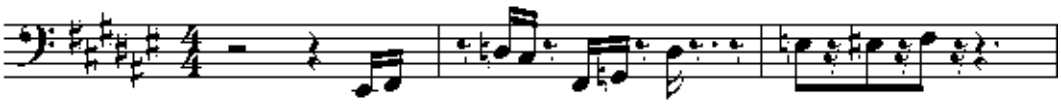

Figure 5-3: Groove 1 from "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk." Personal transcription.

Above this groove, which will underlie every subsequent iteration of the "Looney Tunes" theme, a choir chants: "Syndrome, twiddly dee dum. Humdrum, don't succumb." Music and words serve as another firm rebuke to the weakening Sir Nose, whose unfunky placebo is no match for the insistent rhythmic force of Star Child and the clones of Dr. Funkenstein. The groove which is established at 0:55 (and fleshed out with the entrance of piano and the full backbeat at 1:17) – what I will call Groove 1 (Fig. 5-3) – is characterized by the "more or less swung sixteenth notes" which funk scholar Anne Danielsen writes "are almost always present in a funk groove."[23] The "One" – the heavy downbeat – which Clinton invests with near-mythic significance (cf. such song titles as "Everything is On the One") is conspicuously absent from the bass-and-guitar riff itself. Here, the "One" is instead provided by a cymbal crash of the drums – otherwise playing a slowed-down variation of the standard disco rhythm (bass drum on beats 1 and 3; snare on beats 2 and 4; high hat on straight eighths, dropping the "on" beats on some measures) – on every other downbeat. As on many other P-Funk songs, time almost seems to stop just before each iteration of the One; here, however, the first two notes of Groove 1 fill in the space just before the One, threatening the absolute dominance of the downbeat.

Over Groove 1 (with bass, guitar, drums, piano and Worrell's synthesizer ornamentations) Star Child and a choir begin to sketch out a context for the *Looney Tunes* quote. Between 1:46 and 2:10, the choir sings the familiar children's song "Three Blind Mice" to a new tune while Star Child offers playful commentary (with Star Child's comments in parentheses):

> *Three blind mice (let me put on my sunglasses)*
> *See how they run (so I can see what they ain't lookin' at)*
> *They all ran after the farmer's wife*
> *Turned on the fun with the water pipe*
> *Have you ever seen such a sight in your life? (ho!)*
> *Those three blind mice (yeah)*
> *Those blind three mice*[24]

"I love those meeces to pieces," Star Child/Clinton finally says of the titular mice, repeating and revising a catchphrase from the Hanna-Barbera cartoon *Pixie and Dixie and Mr. Jinks*. Unlike cartoon cat Mr. Jinks, who would say, "I *hate* those meeces to pieces," inveterate mischief-maker Star Child identifies with the mice of the cartoon (and those of the song). Like the Signifying Monkey, both Star Child and the mice delight in stirring up trouble and outwitting their oppressors. Explicitly referencing and implicitly identifying with cartoon characters that would likely have been familiar to P-Funk's late-1970's audiences, Clinton makes plain the purpose of the *Merrie Melodies* lift: Bugs Bunny (himself an update of 19th century trickster Bre'r Rabbit), Tweety Bird, Pixie and Dixie and other cartoon characters all thwart their antagonists through wit rather than brute force, making fools of their oppressors in the process. The cartoon theme, then, is a symbol of modern-day tricksterism, the aural signature of a hero who sows creative chaos behind the backs of his joyless oppressors.

With a few small interpretive leaps and the appropriate store of pop-culture knowledge, anyone parsing the lyrics of "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk" might find the same parallels I have suggested. While the signification of each musical and lyrical quotation depends on an awareness of its original context, Star Child/George Clinton offers interpretive clues – and additional layers of allusion – through his own spoken asides. Agawu writes in *Music as Discourse* that "music cannot interpret itself;" only through an external verbal supplement can its meaning or "truth content" be divined[25]. On Parliament and Funkadelic's recordings, narrator Clinton provides that supplement. Like the sacred texts of the Yoruba, P-Funk songs contain their own "discursive metalanguage." Star Child's interpretations (like Esu-Elegbara's) are presented as riddles, leaving additional interpretive work to the listener.

The significance of the *Merrie Melodies* lift on "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk" emerges only through layers of textual signification and allusion. In my next example, both the received and revised meanings of the quoted musical material (the military bugle call "Reveille") are apparent even on first listen. The title, lyrics and music of Funkadelic's 1979 song "Uncle Jam" comprise an extended riff on U.S. military iconography and rhetoric. "Uncle Jam" is the centerpiece of the album *Uncle Jam Wants You* (a subversion of U.S. army icon Uncle Sam, under whose picture it reads "I Want You for the U.S. Army"). The cover photograph, which depicts Clinton seated in a wicker chair, flashing a peace sign with a smiley-faced nuclear warhead next to him and

the P-Funk "One Nation Under a Groove" flag draped behind him, parodies a famous portrait (Fig. 5-4) of Black Panther party founder Huey P. Newton.[26] Clinton signifies here by reclaiming items of military recruitment and Black Power propaganda and remaking them in his own hybridized image. On the *Uncle Jam* cover (Fig. 5-5), Newton's spear and rifle, both weapons of war and/or violent resistance, are replaced by the peaceful tools of dance-floor revolution: on one side, "the Bomb" of uncut funk and on the other, the Bop Gun.

Figure 5-4: "Huey P. Newton, Minister of Defense" (unknown artist, 1968).

Figure 5-5: Cover photograph, *Uncle Jam Wants You* (Warner Bros., 1979).

"Uncle Jam," the song, refigures the same act of reclamation and revision in musical terms, opening with a four-note quotation from the military bugle call "Reveille." Instead of a bugle, the instrument playing "Reveille" here is a synthesizer, its pitch quavering rather than steady. As with the *Merrie Melodies* theme in "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk," the "Reveille" quote in "Uncle Jam" is framed by an unlikely musical context and is seemingly at odds with the underlying rhythm. "Reveille" is written in 2/4 march time, with emphasis on the first beat of each bar; while "Uncle Jam" begins with the drummer playing an apparent march beat, the rhythmic pulse is thrown off by a gliding bass line which alternately emphasizes the downbeat and the upbeat. The

synthesizer subsides and when the theme is reintroduced by a guitar at 0:22, the drums clearly emphasize beats two and four of a 4/4 bar – the "backbeat" of most rock and soul music. To further complicate matters, the bass line returns at 0:32 with a strong emphasis on the downbeat of each bar.

Figure 5-6: From "Reveille" (traditional). Note: only first four notes are quoted on "Uncle Jam". Source: Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reveille), accessed June 30, 2010.

Having different instruments emphasize different parts of the beat is quite common in funk and other African-American derived forms of popular music, with each instrumental line defined by its relationship to the underlying pulse. The melody line and implied rhythmic pulse of "Reveille" is familiar to most us before we even hear "Uncle Jam," however, so its juxtaposition with a shifting and ultimately opposing pulse is vaguely disorienting. Through rhythmic displacement and timbral alteration (in the substitution of an electronic synthesizer for the usual bugle), the military bugle call which symbolizes order and obedience is made to represent its funked-up flipside – just as Uncle Jam is the pointedly black-identified obverse of Uncle Sam.

Like Star Child and the Signifying Monkey, Uncle Jam is a merry prankster who frequently and intentionally flirts with chaos. He resists the oppressive order of belligerent American patriotism just as surely as he evades the grip of militant Afrocentricism. His only mission is to "Rescue dance music from the blahs."[27] Troping on popular associations of dancing with "work" and "funk" with the foul body odor that hard work produces, Clinton disarms the drill sergeant archetype by turning him into a dance instructor: "All right you mugs, this is Uncle Jam's Army, see? And we're on groove maneuvers, see? And I don't wanna see nobody sweatin' 'til I tell ya!"[28]

One might argue that, in both the Signifyin(g) tradition and the Afrofuturist paradigm of the P-Funk universe, meaning is in fact fixed; listeners and audiences know what Esu-Elegbara and Uncle Jam stand for, and their discursive practices depend upon the ability of the audience to connect the signifier with specific signifieds. Yet in neither discourse is meaning fixed in a way that is commensurate with European reason. Both the Signifying Monkey and the Afrofuturists are explicitly opposed to the rigid binarism that characterizes the essentialist and deconstructionist perspectives alike. For Derrida, each

signifier is defined in relation to its opposite; in the semantic universe of Esu-Elegbara, each signifier contains both a signified *and* its opposite simultaneously. According to Tony Bolden, a signal characteristic of black American expressive culture is its aversion to binary oppositions: "An essential characteristic of [African-American] stylization is the capacity to resolve antinomies and resist simplistic either/or logic."[29] This tendency – basically an expression of the same ethos Gilroy labels "anti-anti-essentialism" – Bolden finds particularly prominent in funk music:

> [The] proclivity for fusing oppositions seems to be a fundamental quality of the funk, enhancing its capacity to refract as it reshapes and reformulates, transposing ideas so that blacks can effectively utilize them for their "own use." Thus Clinton riffs on "psychedelic" to create "funkadelic," and fuses "funk" with "intellect" and "technology" to create "funkintelechy." (*sic*)[30]

While Clinton's lexical inventions have a contorted but fluid rhythm of their own, P-Funk's music is generally messier and harder to parse: overstuffed, pointedly eccentric and often radically poly-textual, it foregrounds verbal and musical oppositions rather than subsuming them. Joyfully evading full comprehension, it is a disruption of reified musical and cultural notions of "soul" just as surely as it is a confirmation of the playfully oppositional tropes embedded within the black vernacular. Chief among these tropes, of course, is Signifyin(g), a form of rhetorical play which serves as the sustaining principle of the P-Funk universe. By playing with meaning, P-Funk produces an endless supplying of new meanings. Clinton laid out the P-Funk program of reproduction through play on the opening track on Funkadelic's 1970 debut album, previously quoted at the outset of this thesis:

Loan me your funky mind, and I shall play with it
For nothing is good, unless you play with it
And all that is good is nasty!
Fly on, baby.[31]

- George Clinton, from "Mommy, What's a Funkadelic?"

---

[1] Parliament, "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention – B3M)," *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*, 1977, Casablanca Records 824 501-2.
[2] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 55-56.
[3] Ayanna Smith, "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," *Popular Music* 24, No. 2 (2005), 179-191.
[4] Parliament, "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention – B3M)."

[5] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 82.
[6] Mark Willhardt and Joel Stein, "Dr. Funkenstein's Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication: George Clinton Signifies," in *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, ed. Kevin J. Dettmar and William Richey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 145-172.
[7] Bootsy's Rubber Band, "The Pinocchio Theory," *Ahh…The Name Is Bootsy, Baby*, 1977, Warner Bros. BS 2972.
[8] J. Phillip Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, No. 1 (Spring 2008), 83-109.
[9] Parliament, "Chocolate City," *Chocolate City*, 1975, Casablanca Records 836-700-2.
[10] Kathryn McKittrick and Clyde Woods, "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean," in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, McKittrick and Woods, eds. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007).
[11] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), ii.
[12] Willhardt and Stein, "Dr. Funkenstein's Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication," 147.
[13] Willhardt and Stein, "Dr. Funkenstein's Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication," 150.
[14] Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis," 98.
[15] Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis," 97.
[16] Willhardt and Stein, "Dr. Funkenstein's Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication," 152.
[17] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1994), 92.
[18] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 99.
[19] Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17.
[20] Bernie Worrell (P-Funk keyboardist), telephone interview with author, July 23, 2010.
[21] Kevin Holm Hudson, "Quotation and Context: Sampling and John Oswald's Plunderphonics," *Leonardo Music Journal* 7 (1997), 17-25.
[22] Parliament, "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention – B3M)."
[23] Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 134.
[24] Parliament, "Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk (Pay Attention – B3M)."
[25] Agawu, *Music as Discourse*, 28-29.
[26] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 100.
[27] Album cover text from Funkadelic, *Uncle Jam Wants You*, 1979, Warner Bros. BSK 3371.
[28] Funkadelic, "Uncle Jam," from *Uncle Jam Wants You*.
[29] Tony Bolden, "Theorizing the Funk: An Introduction," in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, ed. Bolden (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 13-29.
[30] Bolden, "Theorizing the Funk," 18.
[31] Funkadelic, "What is Soul?" *Funkadelic*, 1970, Westbound W-2000.

Chapter 6: Concluding Thoughts

In the preceding chapters I have addressed two basic questions: What does P-Funk mean? And how does P-Funk *make* meaning? The former question has no single, definitive answer, and I'm sure Clinton wouldn't have it any other way. Part of the point of the group's radically intertextual, lexically overstuffed music and performances is to celebrate the irreducible multiplicity of meanings that can be produced from any one signifier.

I have argued that P-Funk makes meaning, espouses an ethos of joyful indeterminacy, and encourages the collective celebration of difference through the rhetorical act of Signifyin(g). I draw this conclusion through analysis of the group's recordings and performances along with a series of discussions with band members and associates. While I was relatively sure of my basic argument before entering the field, my conversations with group members and with leader George Clinton in particular confirmed that I was on the right track. If at any point I had felt I was projecting intentions and motivations onto P-Funk's work that weren't there, I would have rethought my argument considerably. Nevertheless, I regret that I didn't speak to Clinton and other band members at greater length; my field work with P-Funk is far from complete, and this thesis should be regarded as a blueprint for what is still very much a work-in-progress. With more firsthand experience in the P-Funk universe, and a wealth of perspectives from the music's creators, its purveyors and its changing audience, my future work on P-Funk should be somewhat less dependent on historical surveys, theoretical texts and other secondary sources.

While more extensive fieldwork will be vital to my own future research on P-Funk, I hope also to explore some of the relevant theoretical and historical literature which I was unable to incorporate into the present work. Victor Turner's theory of "communitas," as outlined in the books x and y offers an effective anthropological model for the type of temporary utopia – in which the everyday strictures of class, gender, property ownership and the law are abandoned[1] – that P-Funk and its audience seek to create in performance. Works on rhythm, live performance and trance, including Kai Fikentscher's *You Better Work! Underground Dance Music in New York City* (2000) and Judith Becker's *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (2004) offer additional insight into the type of atmosphere both group and fans foster in concert through music and dance. Major texts on Afrofuturism, a growing field which I only touched upon

lightly herein, include John Corbett's *Sun Ra: Traveling the Spaceways – The Astro Black and Other Solar Myths* (2010) and *Extended Play: Sounding Off From John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (1994), John Szwed's *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, the *Journal of the Society for American Music*'s "Special Issue on Technology and Black Music in the Americas" (2008), and "Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of *Social Text*" (2002). Finally, historical surveys and foundational texts of black nationalism, including *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Huey Newton's *Essays from the Minister of Defense* (1968), Elijah Muhammad's *The Supreme Wisdom: The Solution to the So-Called Negroes Problem* Vols. 1 and 2 (1957) and *Message to the Blackman in America* (1965), Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar's *Black Power: Radical Politics and African-American Identity* (2005), and James Lance Taylor's *Black Nationalism in the United States: From Malcolm X to Barack Obama* (2011) offer a useful portrait of the cultural context and political climate in which P-Funk first emerged, along with a reference point for some of the sources Clinton drew upon in formulating the P-Funk mythology.

As a devoted fan of P-Funk, I hope that I haven't succumbed to seeing the band and their world through rose-colored glasses. The band and its fans may be united by their embrace of Clinton's utopian vision, but differences, disputes and everyday socieoeconomic inequities can't be resolved by music alone; the same old struggles tend to resurface once the show is over. When a shooting broke out and left a 16-year-old dead after a Cleveland, Ohio concert in July of 2011, it served as a tragic reminder of just how quickly the utopian energy of a P-Funk concert can dissipate in the outside world. Band members face the same hardships as any other touring musicians. When guitarist Garry Shider fell ill and eventually died of cancer in 2010, his family struggled to pay his medical bills as he had no health insurance. At least two other band members are facing similar troubles as I write. Yet Clinton and P-Funk have always been remarkably resilient when faced with hardship, and they have reached out to fans and colleagues in aiding their own and supporting their communities in recent years. A medical fund was set up in 2010 to help Shider and his family, and similar efforts have been initiated since then. Clinton donated a number of archival materials from throughout P-Funk history to the Barack Obama Green Charter School in the band's hometown of Plainfield, New Jersey, with the eventual aim of opening a historical museum in the near future. Most remarkably, Clinton has started a regularly-updated blog, www.funkprobosci.org, in order to document his ongoing legal battle to regain control of his song publishing and highlight new initiatives to protect artists from copyright theft. I regret not having

devoted more time to following and supporting Clinton and P-Funk's efforts in these areas – especially as members of the group have been so generous with their time and their input while I've been completing this thesis – but I hope to get more involved in this sort of advocacy in the near future.

P-Funk Politics in "Real Life"

New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin inadvertently caused a media uproar in 2005 when, in a speech he made in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, he referred to the besieged community as a "Chocolate City." Campaigning for reelection after a disaster that displaced thousands of poor black residents, Nagin countered white politicians seeking to capitalize on the shift in the city's racial makeup by promising that New Orleans "will be chocolate at the end of the day." Some in the media castigated Nagin's racially-charged remarks, particularly as he followed with an appeal to the divine order: "This city will be a majority African-American city. It's the way God wants it to be."[2]

While many commentators took offense at Nagin's race branding and linking of ethnic with divine order, few noted that the entire speech was built around a canny pop-culture reference. Though it originated as a nickname for Washington D.C., the black-majority capital of the United States, the term "Chocolate City" first entered popular parlance on Parliament's 1975 song and album of the same title. Nagin might reasonably have assumed that his middle-aged constituents would catch the reference even if the (mostly white) media commentators didn't. Though their ulterior motives and cultural contexts differed, both Clinton and Nagin invoked the phrase in order to flip the historical script and triumph over adversity: Clinton's vision of the African-American city as a monument to black political and cultural achievements countered the prevailing narrative of racial ghettoization through white flight, economic decline and social neglect, while Nagin's speech was both an appeal to the resilience of black New Orleanians, who had been hit hardest by the hurricane, and an invitation for displaced blacks to return.

The controversy over Nagin's speech, and his subsequent reelection despite widespread media criticism, demonstrated – probably not for the first time – that George Clinton's highly stylized rhetoric could have both real-world applications and real-world consequences. To proclaim Washington D.C. or New Orleans a "chocolate city" is a politically meaningful discursive act. To imagine Richard Pryor, "First Lady of Soul" Aretha Franklin, and other black pop-culture icons taking over the White House – as

Clinton does on the song "Chocolate City" – is another. Clinton's music and lyrics are full of such discursive acts, revising, subverting, juxtaposing and inverting the terms, signs and symbols of already existing discourses in order to explode conventional ways of meaning and propose a radically hybrid alternative order.

A black White House, of course, is now a (partial) reality, yet many of the problems that cities like Newark, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Gary, and Cleveland faced in 1975 still persist today. The Hurricane Katrina crisis of 2005 only highlighted the fact that resources, wealth, and political power in America are still largely divided along lines of race and class. When I spoke to P-Funk singer and roadie Michael "Clip" Payne about the idea of the Chocolate City, however, he suggested that Clinton's message was more conciliatory and less clear-cut, racially speaking, than I had imagined. "Chocolate," he said, was a state of mind – an immaterial principle, like "soul" and "funk," that knew no boundaries of race or class. Payne, a Detroit native who lived through the riots as a child, mentioned that young blacks and whites were equally frightened and suggested that a lack of cross-racial understanding was to blame for the violence in Detroit. Blacks and whites, he said, could be united through "soul" and sincerity in thought and action – the same "chocolate state of mind" that enables the spread of the Funk as unifying life force and positive essence.

One Nation: Antiphony, Cacophony and Provisional Utopia

P-Funk thrives at the intersection of apparently competing (and frequently conflicting) discourses; overlapping and jostling for space with one another in P-Funk's lyrics, music and iconography, this multitude of discursive strains represents the messy plurality of humanity. The act of Signifyin(g) is the unharmonious means by which P-Funk brings these discourses together under the "One Nation" of Clinton's dreams, a heteroglossic utopia that finds cosmic order within chaos and continually flirts unabashedly with degradation, death and terror as necessary correlatives of the life principle. Through Signifyin(g), P-Funk propagates the Funk (a.k.a. the One), the elusive essence that enables the existence of Clinton's utopia.

Where antiphony, the classic back-and-forth of black musical tradition, suggests an in-group dialogue among individuals already unified in social station and purpose, P-Funk's untidy musical exchanges hint at the tension between group solidarity and free of

individual expression. Yet both approaches serve the same affirmative end. Paul Gilroy suggests in *The Black Atlantic* that call-and-response style singing might constitute one of the building blocks for a more egalitarian society. With a few crucial substitutions, Gilroy might be describing P-Funk's heteroglossic utopia:

> There is a democratic, communitarian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony which symbolizes and anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relationships. Lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are established between one fractured, incomplete, and unfinished racial self and others.[3]

Where the call-and-response style is defined by preacher and choir speaking *to* one another, George Clinton's music finds voices and texts speaking both *over* and *against* one another. Through repetition, revision and (sometimes contentious) dialogue between texts a multiplicity of hybrid utterances emerges, melding "self and other," essence and anti-essence. Where others hear cacophony, divine mediator George Clinton hears a complex cosmic unity: the glorious noise of "One Nation Under a Groove."

---

[1] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series (1969; Ithaca, NY: Cornell Paperbacks, 1977), 96-97 and 112-114.
[2] Ray Nagin, quoted in Ned Sublette, "P-Funk Politics," *The Nation* (June 5, 2006).
[3] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 79.

Bibliography

"The Appeal of Primitive Jazz." In *Jazz in Print: An Anthology of Selected Early Readings*, edited by Karl Koenig, 119-120. Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002. Originally published in *Literary Digest* (August 25, 1917).

Abbey, John. "George Clinton." *Blues and Soul* (December 1978). Reproduced in *Rock's Backpages*. http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=15269. Accessed February 2, 2011.

Agawu, Kofi. *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Anderson, Maureen. "The White Reception of Jazz in America." *African American Review* 38, No. 1 (Spring 2004): 135-145.

Avila, Eric. *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*. Ewing, NJ: University of California Press, 2004.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryn Emerson and Holquist, 259-422. Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 1981.

———. *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1968).

Baraka, Amiri. *Black Music*. 1968; New York: Akashic Books, 2010.

Bennett, Lerone, Jr. "The Soul of Soul." *Ebony* 17, No. 2 (December 1, 1961): 111-120.

Bolden, Tony. "Theorizing the Funk: An Introduction," in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, edited by Bolden, 13-29. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.

Bowman, Rob. "On the One: Parliament, Funkadelic, the Mothership, and Transformation." In *Music Traditions, Cultures and Contexts*, edited by Robin Elliott and Gordon E. Smith, 271-280. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2010.

Carew, Derek. "The Consumption of Music." In *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, edited by Jim Samson, 237-258. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Chris Richards, "In Maryland, George Clinton, Parliament-Funkadelic, and a missing Mothership," The *Washington Post* (April 12, 2010). http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2010/04/11/AR2010041103996.html. Accessed February 13, 2011.

Danielsen, Anne. *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

David Mills, Larry Alexander, Thomas Stanley and Aris Wilson. *George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History*. New York: Avon Books, 1998.

Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books, 1998.

"Far-Out Words for Cats." *Time* 54, No. 19 (November 8, 1954).

"Funk." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*, edited by Glynnis Chantrell, 222. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

Hershey, Burnett. "Jazz Latitude." *The New York Times Book Review & Magazine* (June 25, 1922).

Hudson, Kevin Holm. "Quotation and Context: Sampling and John Oswald's Plunderphonics." *Leonardo Music Journal* 7 (1997): 17-25.

Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*. 1972; New York: Atheneum, 1988.

Iton, Richard. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Joe McEwen. "Funk." *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, edited by Jim Miller, 375. New York: Random House, 1980.

Johnson, James Weldon. "James Weldon Johnson's 1922 Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*." *Modern American Poetry*. http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_l/johnson/preface1.htm. Accessed June 11, 2011.

Jones, Leroi (Amiri Baraka). *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*. 1963; New York: Harper Perennial, 2002.

Kofsky, Frank. *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970.

Luis Jacob, Pan Wendt and Adrian Piper. *Funkaesthetics*. Toronto: The Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, 2009.

Malcolm X. "The Bullet or the Ballot." Speech given in Cleveland, OH, April 3, 1964.

Marquis, Donald. *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz*. Revised edition. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State Press, 2005.

McKittrick, Kathryn and Clyde Woods. "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean." In *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place,* edited by McKittrick and Woods, 1-13. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007.

Mendelsohn, John. "Procul Harum: *A Salty Dog*." *Rolling Stone* (May 31, 1969). Reproduced in *Rock's Backpages.* http://www.rocksbackpages.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/article.html?ArticleID=14164. Accessed September 17, 2011.

Morthland, John. "Big Mama Thornton: *Stronger Than Dirt*," *Rolling Stone* (November 1969). Reproduced in *Rock's Backpages*. http://www.rocksbackpages.com.login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/article.html?ArticleID=12348. Accessed September 17, 2011.

Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness.* New York: Verso, 1994.

Robert Palmer. "James Brown." In *The James Brown Reader*, edited by Nelson George and Alan Leeds (New York: Plume, 2008), 145-147. Originally published in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, edited by Jim Miller (New York: Random House, 1980).

Rollefson, J. Griffith. "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith." *Black Music Research Journal* 28, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 83-109.

Silver, Horace. *Let's Get to the Nitty Gritty: The Autobiography of Horace Silver*. Edited by Phil Pastras. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006.

Smith, Ayanna. "Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster," *Popular Music* 24, No. 2 (2005): 179-191.

Sublette, Ned. "P-Funk Politics." *The Nation* (June 5, 2006). http://www.thenation.com/article/p-funk-politics. Accessed September 18, 2011.

———. *The Year Before the Flood: A Story of New Orleans*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009.

Tackley, Katherine. "Jazz Recordings as Social Texts." In *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture and Technology*, edited by Amanda Bayley, 167-186. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Tamony, Peter. "Funky." *American Speech* 55, No. 3 (Autumn 1980): 210-213.

Tate, Greg. *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays On Contemporary America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit*. New York: Random House, 1983.

Tomlinson, Gary. "The Historian, the Performer, and Authentic Meaning in Music." In *Authenticity and Early Music: A Symposium*, edited by Nicholas Kenyon, 115-136. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Symbol, Myth and Ritual Series. 1969; Ithaca, NY: Cornell Paperbacks, 1977.

Vincent, Rickey. *Funk: The Music. The People, and the Rhythm of The One.* Foreword by George Clinton. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996.

Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998.

White, Cliff. "Funkadelic: The Noble Art of Rhythm 'n Biz." *NME* (November 18, 1978). Reproduced in *Rock's Backpages*. http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=2275. Accessed September 17, 2011.

Willhardt, Mark and Joel Stein. "Dr. Funkenstein's Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication: George Clinton Signifies." In *Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, edited by Kevin J. Dettmar and William Richey, 145-172. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Audio and Video Recordings

Bechet, Sidney. *Sidney Bechet: Masters of Jazz Vol. 9*, 2006, Storyville Records 101 8509. Compact disc.

Bootsy's Rubber Band, *Ahh…The Name Is Bootsy, Baby*, 1977, Warner Bros. BS 2972.

———. *Bootsy? Player of the Year*. 1978, Warner Bros. BSK-3093. LP record.

The Brides of Funkenstein. *Never Buy Texas from a Cowboy*. Atlantic SD 19261, 1979. LP record.

Clinton, George and Parliament-Funkadelic. *The Mothership Connection: Live 1976*. 1976; Los Angeles: Shout! Factory, 1998. DVD.

Funkadelic. *Funkadelic*, 1970, Westbound W-2000. LP record.

———. *One Nation Under a Groove*. 1978; Priority P2 53872, 1993. Compact disc.

———. *Uncle Jam Wants You*. 1979; Priority 72435-39379-2-8, 2002. Compact disc.

Morton, Jelly Roll. *Jelly Roll Morton: The Complete Library of Congress Recordings by Alan Lomax*, 2005, Rounder 11661-1890-2. Compact disc.

———. *Last Sessions: The Complete General Recordings*. Rec. 1939; Verve 403, 1997. Compact disc.

Parliament. *Chocolate City*. 1975; Island Def Jam/Universal Music 440 077 027-2, 2003. Compact disc.

———. *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*. 1976, Casablanca 842-620-2.

———. *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome*. 1977; Casablanca Records 824 501-2, 1990. Compact disc.

———. *Gloryhallastoopid*. 1979; Casablanca Records 842-622-2, 1990. Compact disc.

———. *Mothership Connection*. 1975, Casablanca NBLP 7022. LP record.

Interviews

Clinton, George. Interview with author. Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE. July 15, 2010.

Gray, Carl (P-Funk videographer). Interview with author. Dell Music Center, Philadelphia, PA. July 17, 2010.

Gray, Carl. Phone conversation with author. March 25, 2011.

Murray, Carlos (P-Funk dancer and George Clinton's personal assistant). Interview with author. Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE. July 14, 2010.

Thomas, Greg (P-Funk trumpeter). Telephone interview with author. July 23, 2010.

idx1274 (P-Funk merchandise vendor). Conversation with author. Showcase Live, Mansfield, MA. July 3, 2010.

Manning, Kim (P-Funk vocalist). Interview with author. Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE, July 14, 2010.

Curry, Lige (P-Funk bassist). Interview with author. Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE. July 14, 2010.

Payne, Michael "Clip" (P-Funk emcee). Interview with author. Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE. July 14, 2010.

Hampton, Michael (P-Funk guitarist). Interview with author. Northern Lights, Clifton Park, NY. July 8, 2010.

Ford, Ron (P-Funk vocalist). Interview with author. Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE. July 14, 2010.

Boyd, Steve (P-Funk vocalist). Interview with author. Cork & Bottle, Dewey Beach, DE. July 14, 2010.

Worrell, Bernie (P-Funk keyboardist). Telephone interview with author. July 23, 2010.

Internet Sources

Brackett, David. "Funk." *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46626. Accessed December 7, 2010.

Muhammad, Elijah. "The Mother Plane." The Nation of Islam. http://www.nationofislam.org/themotherplane.html. Accessed September 17, 2011.

"Profiles of James Brown and Aretha Franklin." U.S. Department of State. http://www.america.gov/st/arts-english/2008/July/20080813200637eaifas0.2157053.html. Accessed September 16, 2011.

"The P-FAQ!" The Motherpage: Makin' Your Funk the P-Funk. http://www.duke.edu/~tmc/motherpage/pfaq.html. Accessed July 14, 2011.

Appendix A:
A Selective Discography

The following discography includes relevant albums by many of the acts under the P-Funk umbrella, along with related works in funk and other genres. P-Funk releases are organized by artist and by date. Other releases are organized principally by topic. Every original studio album by Parliament, Funkadelic, and George Clinton is included; with other P-Funk offshoots and works of other artists I have chosen more selectively. "The Funk Genre" includes compilations that provide an overview of the style, along with major works by seminal funk artists whose histories and/or personnel overlap with P-Funk's. The "Children of Productions" section consists primarily of albums by newer (1980s-1990s) acts that explicitly reference P-Funk, either through sampling or collaboration. Countless other artists draw on elements of P-Funk's music, iconography and philosophy; the collective work of hip-hop groups Outkast (and their "Dungeon Family" collective) and the Wu-Tang Clan are notable examples. Needless to say, attempting to cover any and all recordings that exhibit traces of P-Funk's influence is a task best left for another time. All releases are available on CD unless marked with an asterisk (*).

P-FUNK RELEASES

The Parliaments

Testify! The Best of the Early Years. Recorded c. 1965-1968. Connoisseur, 2000.

Funkadelic

Funkadelic. Westbound, 1970.
Free Your Mind…and Your Ass Will Follow. Westbound, 1970.
Maggot Brain. Westbound, 1971.
America Eats Its Young. Westbound, 1972.
Cosmic Slop. Westbound, 1973.

Standing on the Verge of Getting It On. Westbound, 1974.

Let's Take It to the Stage. Westbound, 1975.

Tales of Kidd Funkadelic. Westbound, 1976.

Hardcore Jollies. Warner Brothers, 1976.

One Nation Under a Groove. Warner Brothers, 1978.

Uncle Jam Wants You. Warner Brothers, 1979.

The Electric Spanking of War Babies. Warner Brothers, 1981.

Music for Your Mother: Funkadelic 45s. Westbound, 1993. (Compilation of singles released 1969-1976.)

Live: Meadowbrook, Rochester, Michigan – 12th September 1971. Rec. 1971. Westbound, 1996.

Motor City Madness: The Ultimate Funkadelic Compilation. Westbound, 2003.

By Way of the Drum. Hip-O Select, 2007. (Previously unissued album, recorded c. 1988.)

Toys. Westbound, 2008. (Previously unissued recordings from 1970-1974.)

Parliament

Osmium. Invictus, 1970.

Up for the Down Stroke. Casablanca, 1974.

Chocolate City. Casablanca, 1975.

Mothership Connection. Casablanca, 1975.

The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein. Casablanca, 1976.

Live: P-Funk Earth Tour. Casablanca, 1977.

Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome. Casablanca, 1977.

Motor-Booty Affair. Casablanca, 1978.

Gloryhallastoopid (or Pin the Tail on the Funky). Casablanca, 1979.

Trombipulation. Casablanca, 1980.

Parliament's Greatest Hits: Uncut Funk…The Bomb. Casablanca, 1984.

Tear the Roof Off 1974-1980. Casablanca, 1993.

First Thangs. HDH, 1992. (Expanded reissue of *Osmium* with early singles and outtakes from 1970-1972.)

Bootsy Collins

Bootsy's Rubber Band. *Stretchin' Out in Bootsy's Rubber Band*. Warner Brothers, 1976.

Bootsy's Rubber Band. *Ahh…The Name is Bootsy, Baby!* Warner Brothers, 1977.

Bootsy's Rubber Band. *Bootsy? Player of the Year*. Warner Brothers, 1978.

Bootsy's Rubber Band. *This Boot is Made for Fonk-N*. Warner Brothers, 1979.

Bootsy. *Ultra Wave*. Warner Brothers, 1980.

William "Bootsy" Collins. *The One Giveth, the Count Taketh Away*. Warner Brothers, 1982.

What's Bootsy Doin'? Columbia, 1988.

Back in the Day: The Best of Bootsy. Warner Archives, 1994.

The Bootsy Collins Anthology: Glory B Da Funk's On Me. Rhino, 2001.

George Clinton/P-Funk All Stars

George Clinton. *Computer Games*. Capitol, 1982.

P-Funk All Stars. *Urban Dancefloor Guerillas*. Uncle Jam/CBS Associated, 1983.

George Clinton. *You Shouldn't-Nuf Bit Fish*. Capitol, 1983.

George Clinton. *Some of My Best Jokes Are Friends*. Capitol, 1985.

George Clinton. *R&B Skeletons in the Closet*. Capitol, 1986.

George Clinton. *The Cinderella Theory*. Paisley Park, 1989.

P-Funk All Stars. *Live at the Beverly Theater in Hollywood*. Rec. 1983. Westbound, 1990.

Funkadelic/Parliament/George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars. *Greatest Hits Live 1972-1993*. AEM, 1993. (4-CD collection of live recordings.)

George Clinton. *Hey Man…Smell My Finger*. Paisley Park, 1993.

George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars. *Dope Dogs*. 1994; Dogone, 1998.

P-Funk All Stars. *Hydraulic Funk*. Westbound, 1995. (Expanded reissue of *Urban Dancefloor Guerillas* with 12" single versions of "Hydraulic Pump" and "Generator Pop.")

George Clinton. *Greatest Funkin' Hits*. Capitol, 1996. (Remix compilation of various P-Funk tracks; features collaborations with several contemporary rappers.)

George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars. *T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M.: The Awesome Power of a Fully Operational Mothership*. Epic/550 Music, 1996.

George Clinton and the P-Funk All Stars. *How Late Do U Have 2BB4UR Absent?* The C Kunspyruhzy, 2005.

George Clinton. *George Clinton and His Gangsters of Love*. Shanachie, 2008.

Other P-Funk Releases

Axiom Funk. *Funkcronomicon*. Axiom, 1995. (Compilation of Bill Laswell-produced recordings with various P-Funk members from 1989-1995.)

Brides of Funkenstein. *Funk or Walk*. Atlantic, 1978.

*Brides of Funkenstein. *Never Buy Texas From a Cowboy*. Atlantic, 1979.

Eddie Hazel. *Game, Dames and Guitar Thangs*. Warner Brothers, 1977.

Eddie Hazel. *Rest In P*. P-Vine, 1994. (Previously unreleased recordings from 1975-1977.)

Incorporated Thang Band. *Lifestyles of the Roach and Famous*. Warner Brothers, 1988.

Jimmy G and the Tackheads. *Federation of Tackheads*. Capitol, 1985.

*Parlet. *Pleasure Principle*. Casablanca, 1978.

Parlet. *Invasion of the Booty Snatchers*. Casablanca, 1979.

*Parlet. *Play Me or Trade Me*. Casablanca, 1980.

Parlet. *The Best of Parlet featuring Parliament*. Mercury, 1994.

*Sweat Band. *Sweat Band*. Uncle Jam/CBS, 1980.

Various Artists. *George Clinton's Family Series, Volume 1: Go Fer Yer Funk*. Rec. 1972-1981. AEM, 1993. (First release in a five-volume compilation of previously unreleased P-Funk tracks.)

Various Artists. *George Clinton's Family Series, Vol. 2: "P" is the Funk*. Rec. 1976-1981. AEM, 1993.

Various Artists. *George Clinton's Family Series, Vol. 3: Plush Funk*. Rec. 1972-1982. AEM, 1993.

Various Artists. *George Clinton's Family Series, Vol. 4: Testing Positive 4 the Funk*. Rec. 1975-1981. AEM, 1994.

Various Artists. *George Clinton's Family Series, Vol. 5: A Fifth of Funk*. Rec. 1972-1981. AEM, 1994.

Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns. *A Blow for Me, a Toot for You*. Atlantic, 1977.

Fred Wesley and the Horny Horns. *Say Blow By Blow Backwards*. Atlantic, 1979.

*Bernie Worrell. *All the Woo in the World*. Arista, 1978.

RELATED WORKS

Funky Forefathers

The Beatles. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Capitol, 1967.

The Jimi Hendrix Experience. *Are You Experienced*. Reprise, 1967.

The Jimi Hendrix Experience. *Axis: Bold As Love*. Reprise, 1967.

The Jimi Hendrix Experience. *Electric Ladyland*. Reprise, 1968.

Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Research Arkestra. *It's After the End of the World*. MPS Records, 1970.

Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Solar Arkestra. *Soundtrack to the film Space is the Place*. Rec. 1972. Evidence, 1993.

The Temptations. *Anthology*. Rec. 1964-1986. Motown, 1995.

The Funk Genre

James Brown. *Sex Machine*. King, 1970.

James Brown. *Star Time*. Recorded 1956-1984. Polydor, 1991. (4-CD boxed set.)

Earth, Wind & Fire. *Greatest Hits*. Rec. 1973-1981. Columbia/Legacy, 1998.

Sly and the Family Stone. *Stand!* Epic, 1969.

Sly and the Family Stone. *Greatest Hits*. Epic, 1970.

Sly and the Family Stone. *There's a Riot Goin' On*. Epic, 1971.

Various Artists. *The Funk Box*. Rec. 1970-1982. Hip-O, 2000. (4-CD box set of popular funk tracks.)

Various Artists. *In Yo Face! The History of Funk* Vols. 1-5. Rhino, 1993.

Zapp & Roger. *All the Greatest Hits*. Rec. 1980-1993. Warner Brothers, 1993.

Children of Productions (Recordings inspired by P-Funk)

De La Soul. *3 Feet High and Rising*. Tommy Boy, 1989.

Digital Underground. *Sex Packets*. Tommy Boy, 1990.

Digital Underground. *Sons of the P*. Tommy Boy, 1991.

Digital Underground. *The Body-Hat Syndrome*. Tommy Boy, 1993.

Dr. Dre. *The Chronic*. Death Row, 1992.

Prince. *The Black Album*. Rec. 1988. Paisley Park, 1994.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers. *Freaky Styley*. EMI, 1985. (Produced by George Clinton; features contributions from several members of P-Funk.)

Snoop Doggy Dogg. *Doggystyle*. Death Row, 1993.

Appendix B:
A P-Funk Timeline

Note: All chart positions are for U.S. charts (courtesy of Billboard).

1940

- March 29 – Ray Davis (bass vocalist) born in Sumter, SC

1941

- January 5 – Grady Thomas (baritone vocalist) born in Newark, NJ
- June 8 – Clarence "Fuzzy" Haskins (tenor vocalist) born in Elkins, WV
- July 22– George Clinton born in Kannapolis, NC

1942

- May 22 – Calvin Simon (tenor vocalist) born in Beckley, WV

1944

- April 19 – Bernie Worrell (keyboardist) born in Long Branch, NJ
- May 23 – Ramon "Tiki" Fulwood (drummer) born in Philadelphia, PA

1950

- April 10 – Eddie Hazel (guitarist and vocalist) born in Brooklyn, NY

1951

- Billy "Bass" Nelson (bassist and vocalist) born in Plainfield, NJ

1952

- After spending part of his childhood in Washington, DC and Virginia, George Clinton moves with his family to Newark, NJ.
- October 16 – Cordell Mosson (bassist) born

1953

- July 24 – Garry Shider (vocalist and guitarist) born in Plainfield, NJ

1956

- Clinton forms the Parliaments, a vocal quintet named after a popular cigarette brand, at his high school in Newark. They record and release a single, "A Sunday Kind of Love" b/w "The Wind." Two more singles follow in 1958 and 1959, neither of which attract more than mild regional notice.
- November 15 – Michael Hampton (guitarist) born in Cleveland, OH

1962

- Clinton signs on as a staff songwriter with the New York division of Jobete Music, the publishing arm of Berry Gordy's Detroit-based Motown music empire. Due to a dispute between Gordy and his ex-wife, Raynoma, few of Clinton's songs will be recorded by Motown artists.

1963

- Clinton and the Parliaments (now featuring the long-lasting final lineup of Clinton, Haskins, Davis, Simon and Thomas) move to Detroit and audition for Motown. The label sees promise in the group but no deal is reached, and the Parliaments record demos and plays local clubs while waiting for the opportunity to join the company's roster (which unfortunately never comes).

1964

- Clinton forms a production company, Geo-Si-Mik, with fellow Jobete songwriter Sidney Barnes and saxophonist Mike Terry. Geo-Si-Mik signs a deal with Golden World, a local Detroit label, writing and producing singles for singers Pat Lewis, Roy Handy, J.J. Barnes, Ron Banks and the Fantastic Four between 1964 and 1966.

1965

- The Parliaments record and release a single, "Heart Trouble," for Golden World. Like all of their previous releases, the single fails to chart.

1967

- Summer – The Parliaments release "(I Wanna) Testify" for Revilot. The single becomes their first hit, climbing as high as #3 on Billboard's R&B chart and #20 on the Pop chart. Two follow-up singles also chart nationally over the next 18 months, and Clinton recruits 15-year-old Plainfield guitarist Billy Nelson for the group's first major tour.
- Billy Nelson switches to bass and recruits 17-year-old prodigy Eddie Hazel as the Parliaments' lead guitarist.

1968

- Embroiled in a business dispute with Revilot Records owner LeBaron Taylor, Clinton is legally enjoined from recording under the "Parliaments" name.
- Organist Mickey Atkins and drummer Ramon "Tiki" Fulwood join the Parliaments' backing band, which is now moving in a heavy rock direction under the leadership of Hazel and Nelson.

1969

- To circumvent the recording ban, Clinton signs the Parliaments' backing band to Westbound Records as Funkadelic; the five Parliaments will appear, uncredited, as "guests" on Funkadelic's albums.

1969 (cont'd)

- Funkadelic releases its first single, "Music For Your Mother." The song features a monologue by saxophonist Herb Sparkman, who will leave the band before the next single is released.
- Funkadelic's second single, "I Bet You," reaches U.S. #22 R&B and #63 Pop. A year later, rising Motown stars the Jackson 5 will cover the song on their *ABC* album.
- Mickey Atkins leaves Funkadelic; keyboardist Bernie Worrell and rhythm guitarist Lucius "Tawl" Ross join during the recording of the group's first album.

1970

- January – Funkadelic releases its self-titled debut album (Pop #126, R&B #8).
- Clinton signs a one-off deal with Invictus Records under the name Parliament (which is effectively the same band as Funkadelic), releasing the *Osmium* LP in July. The album fails to chart.
- October – Funkadelic releases *Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow* (Pop #92, R&B #11)

1971

- July – Funkadelic releases *Maggot Brain* (Pop #108, R&B #14).
- Fall – Tawl Ross suffers a drug-induced breakdown and is forced to leave the band. Shortly thereafter, Tiki Fulwood, Billy Nelson and Eddie Hazel all leave the group due to drug problems and/or money disputes with Clinton.
- Clinton recruits new guitarist Harold Beane and drummer Tyrone Lampkin.

1972

- For a brief spell, Cincinnati, OH-based band the Houseguests – featuring brothers and former James Brown sidemen William "Bootsy" and Phelps "Catfish" Collins – serves as the new instrumental lineup of Funkadelic. Though the Houseguests will part company with Clinton after recording two songs for the group's upcoming album, *America Eats Its Young*, the Collins brothers will return to the fold in 1974.
- Clinton recruits guitarist and vocalist Garry Shider and bassist Cordell "Boogie" Mosson from Plainfield band U.S. (United Soul).
- April – Funkadelic releases the double LP *America Eats Its Young* (#123 Pop, #22 R&B). Purportedly recorded over nearly two years, it is the first of many P-Funk albums to feature a rotating cast of players in place of a single stable lineup.

1973

- June – Funkadelic releases *Cosmic Slop* (#112 Pop, #21 R&B) featuring new guitarist Ron Bykowski and cover art by Pedro Bell (a.k.a. "Sir Lleb of Funkadelia"), who will go on to illustrate numerous P-Funk album covers over the next 25 years.

1974

- July – With Bootsy and Catfish Collins back in the P-Funk fold, Clinton relaunches Parliament as a soul-styled ensemble on Neil Bogart's upstart Casablanca Records with *Up for the Down Stroke* (#17 R&B).
- September – Funkadelic releases *Standing On the Verge of Getting It On* (#163 Pop, #13 R&B). The album marks the return of Eddie Hazel, who co-writes and plays on every track. Later in the year, however, Hazel is forced to leave again when he winds up in prison after attacking an airline stewardess while under the influence of PCP. Hazel will return for sporadic stints with P-Funk several times over the next decade and a half, but his career is frequently hampered by the drug and alcohol addictions that ultimately lead to his death in 1992.

1975

- March – Parliament releases *Chocolate City* (#91 Pop, #18 R&B).
- April – Funkadelic releases *Let's Take It to the Stage* (#102 Pop, #14 R&B).
- Clinton hires horn players Fred Wesley, Maceo Parker, and Richard "Kush" Griffith, formerly of James Brown's backing band, the JB's. Together with Rick Garder, they are dubbed the "Horny Horns," and become Parliament's first regular horn section.
- December – Parliament releases *Mothership Connection* (#13 Pop, #4 R&B). Spawning three successful singles, it becomes the first in a string of Gold and Platinum albums for the group.

1976

- April – "Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker)," featuring newly recruited drummer Jerome Brailey, becomes the first P-Funk single to reach the Pop Top 40 (peaking at #15). It peaks at #5 on the R&B chart.
- With financial backing from Casablanca Records founder Neil Bogart, Clinton launches the P-Funk Earth Tour, the group's first arena tour, replete with lavish costumes and enormous stage props. Though barely profitable due to the great expense of transporting the band and its extravagant set across the country, the tour helps to cement the group's growing success. Typically, the band appears in concert under the name Parliament-Funkadelic.
- Clinton signs Funkadelic to Warner Bros. Records, securing a deal for P-Funk's first spinoff project, the Bootsy Collins-led Bootsy's Rubber Band, with the label at the same time. The P-Funk ensemble continues to expand as Clinton recruits numerous singers and players for both the core band and its offshoots, effectively becoming a revolving-door collective by the end of the decade.
- July – Parliament releases *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (#20 Pop, #3 R&B).
- September – Funkadelic releases *Tales of Kidd Funkadelic* (#103 Pop, #14 R&B), its final LP for the Westbound label.
- September 20 – *Mothership Connection* is certified Platinum (for sales of 1 million copies).

1976 (cont'd)

- October – Funkadelic releases *Hardcore Jollies* (#96 Pop, #12 R&B).
- October 19 – *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* is certified Gold (for sales of 500,000 copies).

1977

- May – Parliament releases the double LP *Live: P-Funk Earth Tour*, documenting two concerts from the tour of the same name that took place in January.
- June 8 – *Live: P-Funk Earth Tour* is certified Gold.
- Increasingly neglected on P-Funk's recent albums in favor of younger vocalists Garry Shider, Glenn Goins and Gary "Mudbone" Cooper, three of the original Parliaments – Fuzzy Haskins, Calvin Simon and Grady Thomas – leave P-Funk, fracturing a vocal lineup that had been together for more than 15 years.
- November – Parliament's *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (#13 Pop, #2 R&B) is released.
- Multi-instrumentalist Walter "Junie" Morrison (b. 1954), formerly of the Ohio Players, joins P-Funk, contributing substantially as a songwriter and player to Parliament and Funkadelic's albums and hit singles over the next two years.

1978

- March 4 – Parliament's "Flash Light" becomes the first P-Funk single to reach #1 on the R&B charts, remaining there for three weeks. The song also enters the Pop Top 20, peaking at #16.
- May 4 – *Funkentelechy Vs. the Placebo Syndrome* is certified Platinum.
- September – Funkadelic releases *One Nation Under A Groove* (#16 Pop, #1 R&B). On the 30th, the title track becomes the first Funkadelic single to reach the top of the R&B charts, where it remains for six weeks. "One Nation Under a Groove" also becomes the only Funkadelic single to reach the Pop Top 40, peaking at #28.
- November – Parliament's *Motor-Booty Affair* is released.
- December 13 – *Motor-Booty Affair* is certified Gold.
- December 19 – *One Nation Under Under a Groove* is certified Platinum.

1979

- September – Funkadelic releases *Uncle Jam Wants You* (#18 Pop, #2 R&B).
- October 13 – Funkadelic's "(Not Just) Knee Deep" reaches #1 on the R&B chart for two weeks, though it only hits #79 Pop.
- November – Parliament's *Gloryhallastoopid* (#44 Pop, #3 R&B) is released. Aside from *Parliament's Greatest Hits* (1984), it is the final Gold-certified P-Funk album.

1979 (cont'd)

- Former Parliaments Fuzzy Haskins, Calvin Simon and Grady Thomas take Clinton to court for the right to release an album they had produced, *Connections and Disconnections*, under the Funkadelic name. The court ultimately decides in the plaintiffs' favor.
- December 19 – *Uncle Jam Wants You* is certified Gold.

1980

- March 11 – *Gloryhallastoopid* is certified Gold.
- After years of negotiation with distributor CBS Records, George Clinton's Uncle Jam Records is launched with the release of the Bootsy Collins-produced *Sweat Band* LP. Other acts signed to the label include former Spinners singer Philippé Wynne, Clinton's son Tracy Lewis, and Sterling Silver Starship.
- Clinton begins working on a projected LP with funk legend Sly Stone. Though the album never materializes, several tracks will eventually appear on Funkadelic's upcoming *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* and the P-Funk All-Stars' *Urban Dancefloor Guerillas*.
- December – Parliament releases *Trombipulation* (Pop #61, R&B #6), its final LP to date.

1981

- *Connections and Disconnections*, the Haskins, Simon and Thomas album under the Funkadelic name, is released on LAX Records. Despite a handful of negative reviews, it manages to chart at #151 Pop and #45 R&B.
- April – Funkadelic releases *The Electric Spanking of War Babies* (Pop #105, R&B #41). Originally intended as a double LP, Warner Bros. forces Clinton to edit it down to a single.
- Cincinatti-based funk musician and Bootsy Collins protégé Roger Troutman, fresh off the hit self-titled debut of his band Zapp, blindsides Clinton and company when he signs a solo deal with Warner Bros., reneging on a promised deal with Uncle Jam Records. Clinton had put a significant amount of money and time into securing the Troutman deal, and its collapse will put a halt to Uncle Jam Records, lead Clinton to terminate his relationship with Warner Bros., and ultimately precipitate the unraveling of the entire P-Funk organization.
- Beset by mounting financial and legal problems, along with an ensemble of musicians and singers that has now ballooned to an unmanageable size, Clinton brings Parliament-Funkadelic off the road and disbands the group after a concert in Detroit.

1982

- Having temporarily retired the names "Parliament" and "Funkadelic," Clinton signs to Capitol Records under his own name.

1982 (cont'd)

- November – *Computer Games*, Clinton's first LP for Capitol, is released. Though nominally a solo album, it includes extensive contributions from many P-Funk veterans.

1983

- April – "Atomic Dog," the second single from *Computer Games*, reaches #1 on the R&B chart, remaining there for three weeks. Although it only reaches #101 on the Pop chart, "Atomic Dog," later becomes one of Clinton and P-Funk's most-recognized songs due to its use as a sample in countless hip-hop songs. It is P-Funk's last #1 single to date.
- Now dubbed "George Clinton and the P-Funk All-Stars," a reunited P-Funk takes to the road in a slimmed-down configuration for the successful Atomic Dog tour.
- The P-Funk All-Stars release "Urban Dancefloor Guerillas," which collects tracks recorded over the previous two years with a wide variety of lineups.
- December – Clinton releases *You Shouldn't-Nuf Bit Fish* (#102 Pop, #18 R&B).

1984-1985

- Clinton revives the Funkadelic name for an album entitled *By Way of the Drum*. Though he eventually secures a contract with MCA Records to release the album, it is rejected after the title track is released as an unsuccessful single in 1989. Supposedly, the label loses the master tapes, and the album is only available on poor-quality bootlegs until the tapes are recovered in 2007.

1985

- Clinton produces *Freaky Styley* for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, featuring backing vocalists and horn players from P-Funk on several tracks. Though the album is not a success, Clinton and P-Funk's association with the band will help to ignite a revival of interest in both when the Red Hot Chili Peppers become stars in the late '80s and early '90s.
- July – Clinton releases *Some of My Best Jokes Are Friends* (#163 Pop, #17 R&B).

1986

- April – Clinton releases *R&B Skeletons in the Closet* (#81 Pop, #17 R&B) to lackluster sales and poor reviews. After the album's disappointing reception, Capitol Records drops Clinton from its roster. With little public interest and fewer financial resources, P-Funk has no incentive to tour, and the next three years are relatively quiet for the group.

1989

- With the Red Hot Chili Peppers touting P-Funk as inspirations and the group's 1970s recordings showing up in sampled form on an increasing number of hip-hop records, Clinton and P-Funk receive renewed popular attention and acclaim. Clinton signs a new contract with Prince's Paisley Park Records and reforms the group in order to tour. George Clinton and the P-Funk All-Stars will continue to tour regularly up to the present day.
- August – Clinton releases *The Cinderella Theory* (#192 Pop, #75 R&B), his Paisley Park debut.

1992

- December 23 – Eddie Hazel passes away at age 42.

1993

- October – Clinton releases *Hey Man, Smell My Finger* (#145 Pop, #31 R&B), his second and final album for Paisley Park. Though sales are disappointing and the album quickly slips out of print due to the closure of the Paisley Park label, Clinton and P-Funk will enjoy greater mainstream visibility throughout the '90s than at any time since their late 1970s peak, appearing in films, television, music videos, guesting on countless rap records, and touring incessantly.

1995

- Clinton releases *Dope Dogs* on Dogone Records.

1996

- June – George Clinton and the P-Funk All-Stars release *T.A.P.O.A.F.O.M. (The Awesome Power of a Fully Operational Mothership* (#121 Pop, #27 R&B).

1997

- Parliament-Funkadelic is inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. The inducted members are George Clinton, Bernie Worrell, Bootsy Collins, Fuzzy Haskins, Ray Davis, Calvin Simon, Grady Thomas, Billy "Bass" Nelson, Eddie Hazel, Ramon "Tiki" Fulwood, Garry Shider, Cordell Mosson, Michael Hampton, Glenn Goins, Jerome Brailey, and Walter "Junie" Morrison.

2005

- July 5 – Ray Davis passes away at age 65 in Brunswick, NJ.
- September – George Clinton and the P-Funk All-Stars release the double album *How Late Do U Have 2BB4UR Absent?* on Clinton's own The C Kunspyruzhy Records.

2008

- Clinton releases *George Clinton and His Gangsters of Love*. The album is a set of cover songs featuring members the P-Funk All-Stars and several guests, including the long-dormant Sly Stone.

2010

- June 16 – After a battle with brain and lung cancer, Garry Shider passes away at his home in Greater Upper Marlboro, MD.

2011

- Clinton donates a replica of the Mothership, the centerpiece of P-Funk's mid-1970s Earth Tour concerts, to the Smithsonian Institution.