



P E R F O R M E R S

(((PARLIAMENT-FUNKADELIC)))



“HEY, MISTER, GUESS WHAT?” I feel a small hand pulling my coat sleeve and look down to see a young black kid about seven staring up at me. It’s October 28, 1976, and I’m in the New Orleans Civic Auditorium, a hall packed with riggers, gaffers, soundmen and musicians. An incredible event

B Y T O M V I C K E R S

Parliament-Funkadelic,
circa 1974: Calvin
Simon, Bernie Worrell,
Grady Thomas,
"Boogie" Mosson,
"Fuzzy" Haskins,
George Clinton, "Tiki"
Fulwood, Garry Shider,
Michael Hampton,
guitarist Ron
Bykowski, Ray Davis
(from left)

is about to unfold. "Mister, you know what's going to happen here tomorrow night? The Mothership is going to land right on that stage, and Dr. Funkenstein himself is going to be here," he continues, unaware that Dr. Funkenstein himself, George Clinton, is standing less than six feet away. The kid continues rapping to me as the silver Mothership is hoisted to a perch above the stage. George walks by, looking very incognito. "Hey, I want you to meet somebody, this is Dr. Funkenstein." "Yeah, right," the kid says in a voice full of doubt. "That ain't no Dr. Funkenstein. Where's his white coat and wig?" George assures him that he is indeed Dr. Funkenstein. "Well, if you're who you say you are, ya got any tickets for the show?" George whips out a pair. "Thanks! I'm gonna bring my dad, he's a big fan... see ya tomorrow!"

The kid disappears into the crowded hall, and George smiles at me. "See, man, all the geepies want to see the Mothership land. That kid will be a clone for life." Little did George know then that the upcoming Earth Tour would not only become one of the top-grossing tours of the Seventies but would catapult Parliament-Funkadelic into the theatrical realm until then known only to white acts like Kiss and David Bowie.

The next night, when the first date of the tour kicked off, the hall was packed. Concealed beneath a giant denim prop hat, with strobe lights flashing and smoke billowing, the Mothership lowered to the stage to a collective gasp. A stairway was carted up, and as more smoke shot from the platform, Dr. Funkenstein appeared. The crowd lost its mind.

The band kicked into the deadly groove of "Dr. Funkenstein." As George strutted down the stairway, the audience was grooving so hard that the whole arena was shaking. Joints were lit, and the sweet smell of reefer filled the hall as the crowd screamed, clapped and celebrated as if it had just witnessed the Second Coming. It was a moment that I will remember as long as I live, and anyone who saw the Mothership land back in the day had their lives permanently changed.

And those geepies, like the New Orleans kid, made George one of the most sampled producers in hip-hop. Rappers from Dr. Dre to Ice-T have given George props for his influence. And for all of those black and white funkateers surfing the Internet, there's a myriad of P-Funk sites celebrating every aspect of the music George and Parliament-Funkadelic helped create. There's even a site for the artists who designed the album covers: Pedro Bell, Overton Loyd and Ron "Stozo" Edwards.

But let's go back to see how this musical-cultural revolution happened. George Clinton, the man who may not have started it all but certainly fathered a musical sound, was born in Kannapolis, North Carolina, on July 22, 1941, the oldest of nine children. The family moved to Newark, New Jersey, in 1952.

In 1955, George started his first doo-wop group, naming them after a popular cigarette. Though they only played school dances and YMCA sock hops, the Parliaments quickly acquired a reputation. The practice hall for the young Parliaments was Newark's Uptown Tonsorial Parlor, a barbershop where George burned a mean process along with his trademark "finger wave." While processing hair in the front, George would

P-Funk dressed down for 1978's Anti-Tour, with rollerskates reserved for photo sessions: Walter "Junie" Morrison waves Old Glory; Ray Davis is to his left; Worrell, Shider and Hampton are among those kickin' out front





Above: Artist's rendering of 1977-78 Earth Tour stage set, featuring the Mothership
 Right: George Clinton in one of his many guises

also deal lids of grass out of the back and run with his teenage gang, the Outlaws. It was there he met Grady Thomas (the genie in purple to P-Funk fans), who eventually introduced him to other young doo-woppers, including Calvin Simon and Calvin "Fuzzy" Haskins. Calvin, Grady and Fuzzy soon became members of the Parliaments, and a couple of sides they recorded for Hull Records later got picked up by ABC. But without any do-re-mi, the records failed and George and the group were back at the barbershop harmonizing.

By 1960, George and the group had moved to nearby Plainfield, New Jersey, where he owned part interest in a barbershop. Though the basic group was formed, it lacked a bass singer, who soon appeared in the form of Ray Davis. With the group complete, George and company made a pilgrimage to Detroit to audition for Motown.

It was Martha Reeves, then a secretary, who saw them parked in front of Motown's headquarters and invited them in. They auditioned but were turned down because they sounded too much like the Temptations. George's songwriting abilities were noticed, however, and he was signed as a staff songwriter, which served to put the group on ice while George honed his songwriting skills.

Nothing happened until '67, when the Parliaments hit with "(I Wanna) Testify" (#3 R&B, #20 pop). Though they gained a national profile, their small label Revilot went out of business, and the group's name became tied up in a legal battle.

But in the world of George Clinton, necessity was the mother of invention. While touring the Boston-Cambridge area, he started hanging with some white college students experimenting with LSD. And when he returned to Detroit, he noticed the psychedelic revolution had hit the Motor City, with several local bands swept up in an acid daze. Then and there, George and his group decided to change their musical direction and style.

George recruited backup band bassist Billy Nelson, keyboardist Bernie Worrell, lead guitarist Eddie Hazel and drummer Raymond "Tiki" Fulwood. All were accomplished players, but Bernie was the most experienced. A child prodigy, he had given his first classical recital at age four and had attended Juilliard and the New England Conservatory of Music. His mom had dreamed of a classical career for him, but the lure of George and his hip talkin', dope smokin' cronies was too strong.

Clinton christened the band Funkadelic. Soon the singers were given supporting roles, and Funkadelic became a totally crazed bunch of acid-taking black lunatics playing rock festi-

vals around Detroit with top local and national acts. The biggest problem was they didn't rock loud enough, and though they had a gang of attitude, they lacked the amplifiers to make it work. At one outdoor rock gig Vanilla Fudge lent Funkadelic their equipment. "That was it," George recalls. "We roared like a motherfucker, and it was no looking back after that. Our next investment was in Marshalls for all the guitars and proper amps for the keyboards. From then on, we scared people."

The sight of George roaming the stage, high on acid, wearing a sheet with nothing on underneath, also scared people. But the band started drawing attention, George signed Funkadelic to Westbound, and they began making freaky rock records that attracted a small but loyal following of black and white heads.

Funkadelic recorded a number of LPs in the early 1970s. Most were a bit ragged with spacey instrumental jams (Eddie



Hazel's magnum opus "Maggot Brain") or funky vocal jams ("I Got a Thing"). Members came and went, but three key players joined: Garry Shider, Glen Goins and Cordell "Boogie" Mosson. Shider (the guy in the diaper) and Goins were solid rhythm guitarists with gospel-trained voices that added a freshness to the band's overall sound. Mosson (the black leprechaun) took over as bassist.

The turning point for Funkadelic was 1973's *Cosmic Slop*. The album looked different, with Pedro Bell's colorful ghetto art gracing the cover. Inside, the music wasn't slicker, just a bit more thought-out. Ironically, when "Cosmic Slop" was released as a single, it failed to chart, but it has since become recognized as one of Funkadelic's greatest tunes, played at virtually every P-Funk show. The next album, *Standing on the Verge of Getting It On*, became another live staple along with the fiery "Red Hot Mama." Funkadelic was becoming more polished and, by constant touring, a force to be reckoned with.

In 1974, George reclaimed the Parliaments' name. By shortening it to Parliament, he signed the vocal-oriented group to Casablanca and released an S&M-flavored album, *Up for the Down Stroke*. The title track garnered some R&B play, and, with two bands signed to different labels, George was poised to launch



Circa 1976:
Clinton, Shider,
Simon,
Worrell, Thomas,
Mosson,
Hampton, Davis,
Haskins, Glen
Goins, Jerome
Brailey, Debra
Wright, Jeanette
Washington

the Parliafunkadelicment Thang. His increasingly workaholic studio outings yielded two killer albums in 1975: Parliament's *Chocolate City* and Funkadelic's *Let's Take It to the Stage*.

Aside from a more focused yet distinctive sound for both groups, a new creative force in the form of Bootsy Collins powered both albums. Bootsy had been a bit of a prodigy himself, playing with James Brown at age sixteen and then leaving to form his own band, the House Guests. Bootsy had been hearing about Funkadelic for some time, but when he saw it he knew that this was the group for him. Though he did very little live work with either group, his influence on these and subsequent albums gave P-Funk an elastic bottom, further refining the group's sound and giving it a definable blackness.

For Bootsy had learned by playing with James Brown about the power of the One. As Bootsy explains it, "Before I met James, I would just get up and play, but he taught me about the One – the first beat of the measure, and how if you accent it, it gives you the most powerful, primal rhythm. That's what 90 percent of his music is based on, that's what funk is: the One."

Bootsy dropped the magic of the One on George, and before you knew it, everything was on the One. With Parliament it was a more arranged One, while Funkadelic opted for a loopier groove. Both bands were now powered by drummer Jerome Brailey's amazing foot and hand speed. Jerome can be heard on Parliament's breakthrough single "Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker)" and the entire *Mothership Connection* album as well as Funkadelic's *Tales of Kidd Funkadelic*. Lead guitar on the recordings was supplied by Cleveland native Michael Hampton, who, at sixteen, joined in the mid-Seventies.

Mothership Connection was the Parliament album that broke wide open. With George taking on the character of Star Child, a self-described "chocolate-coated freak," the album took off into a sci-fi fantasy land where hip-talking brothers from another planet rule the universe. Two back-to-back singles – "Mothership Connection (Star Child)" and "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)" were smashes on urban radio, but it was the crossover hit "Give Up the Funk" that turned on a wider pop crowd. Suddenly, George's otherworldly vision captured the imagination of a whole generation, and the album went double platinum.

Aside from the science fiction backdrop George had created for Parliament, another important event occurred in the Funkadelic universe. The band was wooed from Westbound by Warner Bros., and George had what was basically the same group signed to two different major labels. Though Parliament and Funkadelic coexisted with the same lineup, each group had a distinctive sound. As George explained to me for *Rolling Stone*, "The Parliament stuff is energy, but it's energy like rhythms, melodies and horn lines, where Funkadelic is more raucous with guitars."

The Warners Funkadelic signing, coupled with Parliament's success on radio, gave the band the opportunity to stage the lavish P-Funk Earth Tour, launched in conjunction with Funkadelic's Warner Bros. debut, *Hardcore Jollies*, and Parliament's followup, *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*. Though the Parliament album was the more successful, the national press started to pick up on Funkadelic, and a number of white rock critics helped spread the word that Funkadelic wasn't some acid-damaged brothers, but indeed one of the hottest guitar bands in America.

Through constant touring and a bad-boy image, their fame grew with each sold-out show and Number One single. And in 1977 Parliament released the landmark *Funkentelechy vs. The Placebo Syndrome*, which contained "Flash Light" (#1 R&B, #16

pop). Musically, Bernie's bass keyboard riff fueled "Flash Light," but on a whole 'nother unspoken level, funkateers started bringing flashlights to P-Funk shows, creating a cosmic effect and feedback between the stage and the fans.

But Funkadelic was not going to take Parliament's success lying down and scored a monster hit with "One Nation Under a Groove." The song was inspired by a gig outside the U.N. at 6:00 a.m. for an unreleased documentary. As the sun rose, illuminating the flags lining U.N. Plaza, one of George's lady friends commented that it was like "one nation under a groove." That was enough for George: The song was cut within weeks, becoming Funkadelic's biggest-charting single.

Parliament followed *Funkentelechy* with *The Motor-Booty Affair*. This changed the stage show to an underwater set filled with props and elaborately costumed singers. George became Mr. Wiggles the Worm, and "Aqua Boogie" continued Parliament's string of Number One R&B hits. Another important P-Funk member, Walter "Junie" Morrison, a former member of the Ohio Players, joined. His bizarre lyrical gifts gave George a new songwriter to riff with.

Things were getting a bit out of control around this time, and George decided to put together the Anti-Tour. Instead of elaborate costumes and big arenas, the band dressed in army fatigues and played small venues.

With all this success, George became an in-demand producer, working first with his singers and musicians, including solo albums by Hazel, Worrell, the Horny Horns (James Brown's legendary hornmen Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley), and female backup singers Parlet and the Brides of Funkenstein. George was so busy he briefly considered retiring from the stage, but the fans wouldn't have it. He quickly realized that he had to keep performing live, even though this was leading to exhaustion and physical burnout.

As the Seventies ended, Funkadelic hit again with "(Not Just) Knee Deep" and a subsequent tour of England and Europe that fried brains on the other side of the Atlantic. P-Funk was now a global phenomenon that looked unstoppable. But as the 1980s dawned, the tide turned and the creative spark that had powered the band started to fizzle. Parliament's *Gloryballastoopid* yielded a Number Eight R&B hit with "Theme From the Black Hole," but the loosely constructed concept didn't translate to the stage.

Worse, Funkadelic became embroiled in disputes with Warners, resulting in the compromised *Electric Spanking of War Babies*. The group was then dropped from the label, with *Electric Spanking* remaining Funkadelic's last studio album.

On the Parliament side, the band released its final studio album, *Trombipulation*, which featured some spectacular songs, though only "Agony of Defeat" was released as a single. It became Parliament's last charting single (#7 R&B). With the death of Casablanca founder Neil Bogart, George lost one of his great champions, and from there it was pretty much the end of Parliament. The band didn't break up as much as collapse from the combined forces of lost record deals, death, drugs and creative exhaustion. As the Eighties began, George signed a solo deal with Capitol, which led to his last big – and some say greatest – hit, "Atomic Dog." And

even though a band of P-Funk refugees toured behind the single's success, it didn't pack the same punch. The great era of Parliament-Funkadelic came to a close.

Today George continues to tour with the P-Funk All-Stars and to reach a whole new generation of funkateers. But for those who lived through the groundbreaking years when Parliament-Funkadelic was a vital musical entity, they will never be forgotten. There have been many revolutionaries inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Some, like Little Richard or James Brown, virtually invented whole musical genres. Others, like Sly and the Family Stone, took the earlier musical forms and furthered them in new directions. Not only did Parliament-Funkadelic accomplish both, but they did something more: They took a musical form and added a sociocultural twist that lives on in greater popular culture. George and his crew of merry funksters created a space-age ghetto culture that captured the essence of black street culture (rhythm, attitude and language) by melding it with the conceits of white rock culture (elaborate stage shows, loud guitars and psychoactive drugs). No one had ever come close to pulling off this amazing amalgamation, and no one has since.

As George told Ed Ward in a *Village*

One Nation
Under a Groove:
Master of P-Funk
Ceremonies
George Clinton, in
ermine and foxtail
attire, testifies to
the audience dur-
ing the Earth
Tour, 1977



Voice article, "What we're doin' is so funk'n' untapped. People thought rock & roll would go away if they ignored it. And funk is the saaaame thaaaaaang, if not deeper."

Funk never did go away, and it never will. Parliament-Funkadelic was allowed to grow organically and mutate from doo-wop to acid rock to P-Funk over a period of twenty years. It was a very special time with no AIDS, no innercity gangs packing AK-47's, no crack. It was a time when sex, drugs and funk ruled a musical universe that fans still hold in high regard. As special a musical force as George Clinton is, the many talented musicians that flowed through the ranks of Parliament-Funkadelic made music that changed the world. True, George was the ringleader and philosophical force, but the creativity of these musicians helped him to realize his dream. The whole truly was the sum of the different parts that made P-Funk so unique. And it is this musical sound and vision that we honor tonight and forever. ◀