Pan-Africanism in Funk

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What is it about The Funk that is Pan-Africanist? The Funk, as it is commonly understood by the urban African American youth of the late 1960s and 1970s, is more than a sound or style; it is a way of looking at the world, an ontological view of reality that is non-Western in many respects.

As I wrote in my 1996 book Funk:

Funk is deeply rooted in African cosmology – the idea that people are created in harmony with the rhythms of nature and that free expression is tantamount to spiritual and mental health. If we were to look into this African philosophy, the African roots of rhythm, spiritual oneness with the cosmos, and a comfort zone with sex and aspects of the body, we would find that funkiness is an ancient and worthy aspect of life. Thus, funk in its modern sense is a deliberate reaction to – and a rejection of – the traditional Western world’s predilection for formality, pretense, and self-repression.¹

While funk certainly is a music style that is identified through driving beats, polyrhythms, and aggressively delivered messages of street savviness and aspirations for social change, there is a spiritual notion to The Funk that transcends Westernization and functions as a means toward the development of an African identity. The Funk nevertheless has maintained an identity of its own through cultural and linguistic adaptations for over five decades and still remains relevant, and still remains enigmatic in the West.

Pan-Africanism

Pan-Africanism as an idea and as a theory of African redemption has had many definitions and uses. By its narrowest definition, Pan-Africanism is identified with political struggles for national liberation against colonial rule in the 20th century, and for national solidarity across continental Africa. Additional formations involve a collective consciousness and a call to action in support of Africa and peoples of African descent.

A broader, more inclusive definition involves the recognition of the centrality of African culture, specifically visual art and music, and reaches beyond the continent to incorporate...
the cultural production of all peoples of African descent. If one takes this liberal accounting of the term, Pan-Africanism refers to the global African, and if one takes a broad accounting of the purpose of the phrase, Pan-Africanism incorporates the lived experience of one’s African-influenced life, an African-influenced self-identity and consciousness, as it is experienced around the globe. Educator Rosemary Onyango defines Pan Africanism defined broadly as “a conscious identification with Africa and mutual responsibility for people of African descent to work solidarity to liberate themselves from varied forms of oppression and exploitation.” In this sense, cultural practices of African Americans contribute to a global creating and re-creating of Pan-Africanism. This can also be understood in terms of literature scholar Tsitsi Jaji’s notion of “stereomodernism,” which provides a contemporary framework for reading “cultural practices that are both political and expressive, activated by black music and operative within the logic of pan-African solidarity.”

The black popular music in the U.S., specifically after 1968, addressed claims of black/African identity, and rhythmic (i.e. cultural) affiliations with Africa. Funk music, in the most popular version, as a form of black popular music from the 1970s, emerged from the black revolution of the 1960s in the U.S., and can be seen as a reflection of Pan-Africanism in this cultural context. This essay will discuss the ways Pan-Africanism can be understood in terms of The Funk, seen through the works of James Brown, Sly & the Family Stone, Earth Wind & Fire, and Parliament/Funkadelic.

In 1950s, U.S. Civil Rights Movement workers inspired “the so-called Negro” to take direct action against segregated Southern institutions. Subsequently a new militancy grew in Northern cities in the second half of the 1960s. The new Nationalism was as a result of the ideas and influence of Nation of Islam ( NOI) leader Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz).

In 1964 Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, and undertook the Hajj, to become an Orthodox Sunni Muslim. As the NOI had imprinted an idea of Islam coming from a far-off Afro-Asian land, Malcolm emerged as an authoritative figure of anti-assimilation to Western values. His many speeches and actions during the final year of his life informed a new militant black consciousness that would be expressed by members of many subsequent black radical groups.

It was Malcolm X who inspired African Americans to: Identify as “Black” vs “Negro;” to turn toward Africa for inspiration and identification, and to claim for themselves “Black Power,” and a right of freedom and self-determination. These ideas often lacked specifics as to what exactly was meant by “freedom,” and “self-determination.” It would become the realm of the artists, to bring into focus what these terms would and could mean on the ground in black communities.

**Malcolm X and black music**

In June 1964 Malcolm X made a declaration about the power of black music, that has implications for the present day. A jazz aficionado in his youth, Malcolm X delivered a cultural argument for black liberation. During a speech at the Audubon Ballroom, as part of the announcement for the Organization of Afro-American Unity, Malcolm articulated the social possibilities inherent in improvisational black music – jazz:

I’ve seen it happen. I’ve seen black musicians when they’d be jamming at a jam session with white musicians – a whole lot of difference. The white musician can jam if he’s got some sheet music in front of him. He can jam on something that he’s heard jammed before. If he’s heard it, then he can duplicate it or he can imitate it or he can
But that black musician, he picks up his horn and starts blowing some sounds that he never thought of before. He improvises, he creates, it comes from within. It’s his soul, it’s that soul music. It’s the only area on the American scene where the black man has been free to create. And he has mastered it. He has shown that he can come up with something that nobody ever thought of on his horn.

Well, likewise he can do the same thing if given intellectual independence. He can come up with a new philosophy. He can come up with a philosophy that nobody has heard of yet. He can invent a society, a social system, an economic system, a political system, that is different from anything that exists or has ever existed anywhere on this earth. He will improvise; he’ll bring it from within himself. And this is what you and I want.5

This would be the crucible by which African American artists could forge the creative energy necessary to “create a new social system” through their arts. From this point of view, black music and musicians were direct descendants of Africa and an African world view. As Archie Shepp announced at the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers in 1969: “Jazz is a black power, jazz is a black power, jazz is an African power, jazz is an African music jazz is an African music, and we have come back!!”6

Jazz and funk

Jazz in the 1960s reflected the “awakening” of the Negro, and much of the music grew militant and evolved into what was often called “Hard Bop,” led by a front-line Afrocentric avant-garde of dissonant, sonic daredevils such as Archie Shepp, Art Blakey Donald Byrd, Charles Mingus, Lee Morgan, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis. These “free jazz” practitioners were demonstrably pro-African or pseudo-African in their approaches. Songs like “Message From Kenya,” “Dahomey Dance,” “Ghana,” and “Mwandishi” were part of the language of the new avant-garde. Through their music they sought to present themselves as “uncolonized.” Much of hard bop music teased out the rhythm structures that would follow (and be heard later in funk). They also were the first to use the terms “soul,” “soul brother,” “funk” and “funky.” According to historian Anthony Bolden, “funky” is a term that has roots in the “Funky Butt,” a song (and dance) attributed to jazz performer Buddy Bolden as far back as the late 1800s.7

While jazz, as Dizzy Gillespie has stated “was created for people to dance,” many jazz artists of the 1960s were ambivalent about the dancefloor. Jazz was still beholden to the “be-bop” masters of the 1950s, who had set out to deliberately make music with an intellectual approach, rather than catering to the dance beats of over-commercialized swing of the WWII years. But the musical revolution continued. Miles Davis explained his new direction at the end of the 1960s: I was listening to a lot of James Brown, and I liked the way he used his guitar in his music. I always loved the blues and wanted to play it … you know, the sound of the $1.50 drums and the harmonicas and two-chord blues. I had to get back to that now because what we had been doing was just getting really abstracted.8

Miles Davis, under the influence of his then wife Betty Davis (Betty Mabry), would turn his back on the free-form, acoustic combo jazz he was doing, and began to explore electronic sounds and electric guitars, fusing blues riffs with African drums, further abandoning the traditional song structure, and, creating a sound all his own. Later, his former pianist Herbie Hancock, and followers such as George Duke, Stanley Clarke, Lonnie Liston Smith
and Grover Washington, Jr would bring about a true fusion of improvisational sensibility over soulful dance grooves, establishing *jazz-funk*.

It would be the Rhythm and Blues artists that would drive the masses onto the dance-floor. Their works often implicitly reflected the celebrations of Africa that the jazz masters were pronouncing. Soul music became the name for the popular sounds of black pride that developed in the 1960s. Soul reflected the growing moral authority of the Civil Rights Movement, fused with the excitement of the new sounds on the streets. Often people would dance to soul music, but “listen” to jazz. It was members of the James Brown band that would effectively bridge the two worlds of music. These musicians were typically jazz players, who reluctantly took on roles in the traveling Brown band for the money. Along the way a new style of music emerged: funk. As JB’s trombonist Fred Wesley stated:

I’ve always held the belief that funk and jazz are basically the same thing, with emphasis on different elements and playing with different attitudes. Jazz is cool and slick and subtle, emphasizing the melodic and harmonic side of the music, and appeals to the more cerebral listener. Funk is bold, arrogant and aggressive, emphasizing the hard downbeats and tricky rhythms of the music, and tends to appeal more to the booty-shaking listener.9

**James Brown and the funk**

The spark of this musical transformation is “The Godfather of Soul,” James Brown. Raised in a Georgia brothel, the young performer made a name for himself with his intensely expressive screams and moves onstage, earning the moniker “Soul Brother Number One” by the mid 1960s. A singular visionary, Brown rearranged the structure of the music popular in black America, by building on the expressive modes of Little Richard and Ray Charles, and directing his band to do away with the traditional chord structures and rhythms of the day. Brown directed his band to “get in a groove” and “hit it on the one” and essentially to de-emphasize the melodic aspects of the instruments and foreground the rhythmic elements. With a different feel percolating beneath the songs, Brown could surf along the rhythms with extemporaneous ad-libs, freestyle rhymes about street life, about self-pride, about social awareness, about relationships, and about the dance itself.

I discovered that my strength was not in the horns, it was in the rhythm. I was hearing everything, even the guitars, like they were drums.10

Brown wrote of his emergent new sounds in 1965. Later he would comment: “I also took gospel and jazz and defied all the laws. If I played eight bars and felt like I should play nine or ten, I would play nine or ten, as long as I felt the people groovin. That’s where the extended play come from.”11 Brown’s “extended play” of his hit songs, further reconnected U.S. black music with Afro-diasporic rhythm-driven musics across the *Black Atlantic*.

James Brown’s “rhythm revolution” took place as a *Third World Revolution* was taking place, and West African nations were “hearing” black American music in a new way. Since the dawn of U.S. Slavery, part of the process of disenfranchising and disorienting the African was not only to remove physical artifacts from his/her body, but to remove all remnants of cultural identity. Thus, in early America, use of the *drum* was outlawed by slave owners. An argument can be made that with each stage of “freedom” the Negro attained, s/he was...
developing musical adaptations that involved a return of the drum into their lives. James Brown played a major role in this. In 1968 LeRoi Jones wrote the following passage that describes the way James Brown’s music could “re-Africanize” the space.

If you play James Brown (say, “Money Won’t Change You/but time will take you out”) in a bank, the total environment is changed. Not only the sardonic comment of the lyrics, but the total emotional placement of the rhythm, instrumentation and sound. An energy is released in the bank, a summoning of images that take the bank, and everybody in it, on a trip. That is, they visit another place. A place where Black People live. … But dig, not only is it a place where Black People live, it is a place, in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling, where Black People move in almost absolute openness and strength.12

Brown’s extended rhythmic grooves, his highly rhythmic and percussive style of improvising his vocals, and his passionate screams became essential elements of West African popular music from the mid 1960s onward. As biographer Michael Veal writes, The “Scream Contest” became a staple of West African musical entertainment in the 1960s, in which artists sought to out-James Brown one another.13 Anthropologist John Miller Chernoff wrote that his African subjects often queried him about James Brown’s music. “Many of my friends who were most eager to help me understand their Highlife songs were just as eager for my help in translating James Brown’s slang, which they interpreted with no end of enjoyment and delight.”14

The renowned leader of popular African music, was Fela Anikulapo Kuti. Kuti started his career a mainstream entertainer in 1960s Nigeria, who had traveled to the U.S.A. in 1969 to study jazz. His politicization under the guidance of U.S. activist Sandra Izadore led to Kuti devoting his entire career to making songs that served to challenge colonial state power and to inspire his followers worldwide. He developed a brand of music that fused the modal jazz stylings he was studying, with the relentless rhythms of his native African “Highlife” dance music, and James Brown funk, and dubbed the term Afrobeat. Claiming “Music is the Weapon,” Kuti would become a worldwide leader in resistance music until his death in 1997. Kuti, who was frequently marketed as “The African James Brown,” was reluctant to make overt proclamations of his allegiance to Brown’s work, but did acknowledge that Brown’s work felt “African.” “I didn’t see James Brown as a leader, I saw him as a beautiful musician.” Kuti told Barney Hoskins in 1983. “At the time, it was like, this guy is an African. That’s how I saw his music.”15

Upon James Brown’s death on December 25th, 2006, one consistent theme about his legacy was that while he was an American icon, he did not dilute or soften the tone of his work to gain popularity within white America. As lifelong friend Reverend Al Sharpton has stated “he didn’t crossover to white, he made white crossover to black.”16 Brown’s work was essentially the template for the “Africanizing” of the U.S. black population, of taking people to a place of their own. This process would be identified through “The Funk” through the 1970s and beyond.

Sly & the Family Stone and universal funk

The multi-racial band from the San Francisco Bay Area in 1968 redefined The Funk and its use. The group was led by Sylvester Stewart, the eldest son of parents that migrated from Denton, Texas in the 1940s. Raised in the Pentecostal church, the multi-
instrumentalist Stewart performed in jazz groups, rock groups and a harmonizing vocal quintet while in high school. Steward wrote, arranged, produced and recorded music at Autumn Records in San Francisco, and by 1966 was a radio deejay, veteran producer and bandleader during heyday of the “Hippie” movement in San Francisco. Renaming himself Sly Stone, the firebrand constructed a band of diverse players (two white men, two black women among the seven core members), and developed a sound that fused the power and energy of rebellious rock music, was driven rhythmically with the James Brown inspired grooves, and soared soulfully above the innovative arrangements with gospel church intensity. Important message songs such as “Everyday People,” “Stand!,” “You Can Make It If You Try,” and “Don’t Call Me NIGGER, Whitey” were crucial breakthroughs in tone and tenor for the younger generation (of all races) that were transformed and often deeply affected by the group.

In early 1970 the group released a song driven almost entirely by the bass guitar, titled “Thank You Falletin’ Me Be Micelf Agin,” which became a #1 pop song. The syncopated thumb slapping and string popping by bassist Larry Graham set in motion a decade of funk bass playing that followed. In addition, the celebration of “being myself again,” was reflected by the individualized outfits worn by each band member. Gone were the crisp, coordinated uniforms worn by disciplined background performers that was typical of R&B stars to that point. In the Family Stone, “Everybody is a Star,” and everyone was stage front, implying that everyone enjoyed “equality” and had an equal value within the act. Applied to society at large, this image offered an inspiring social breakthrough, which was followed up by a generation of funk bands.

The hooks, basslines, lyrics, chants, and the assertive, outlandish celebration of diversity and difference – all while at the top of the charts on black and white radio – set the Family Stone apart from any other act at the time. Griel Marcus explained their impact in terms of freedom.

There was an enormous freedom to the band’s sound. It was complex, because freedom is complex; wild and anarchic, like the wish for freedom; sympathetic, affectionate, and coherent, like the reality of freedom. And it was all celebration, all affirmation, a music of endless humor and delight, like a fantasy of freedom.17

As a result of this “fantasy of freedom,” multi-member funk bands emerged in the 1970s that celebrated musicality, celebrated black rhythms and black identity, celebrated individuality within a group structure, and sought a higher purpose while performing as entertainers in a capitalist enterprise. The idea of art for a higher purpose can be drawn from African aesthetics.18

Yet the Family Stone often defied serious analysis. Their “free-form” appearance could be dismissed as “bohemian,” as originating simply from proximity to the white counterculture of the Bay Area, instead of as a progression in black liberation. The very notion of a “black bohemian” – as someone comfortable with their blackness yet serious about their own eclectic pursuits, rather than white acceptance – was not framed with approval within the black radical milieu at the time. Sly Stone – and perhaps to a greater extent black guitarist Jimi Hendrix – not only maintained their “identities” within a white dominated music industry, they transformed the nature of that industry for a brief period of time. Sly Stone’s music stood defiantly at the crossroads of racial love and racial hate, of group identification and group diffusion, of future community and past traditions. This was becoming the truer nature of “diasporic” Africans in the 1970s. As Stuart Hall writes:
The diaspora experience … is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.19

Funk bands were created essentially to “harmonize differences” through the rhythms, their looks and their energized performances. By the early 1970s, “bohemian” bands such as Funkadelic, Mandrill, War, the Bar-Kays and Earth Wind & Fire emerged in the wake of the Family Stone. Soul stars such as The Temptations, Isaac Hayes, Curtis Mayfield, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye all developed a more street-oriented, funky “bohemian” look and sound. Aretha Franklin had a “black power” moment of her own, in 1971 when she first took control of her own production, penned her funkiest song “Rock Steady,” and self-produced her award-winning album *Young, Gifted and Black*.

By the early seventies, funk bands had turned away from traditional (Western) constructs of presentation and abandoned the formal R&B uniforms entirely. The earthy, or “tribal” look was an integral part of black bands’ attire, and their often outrageous look resembled in many ways the masks and adornments worn by traditional African performers. The 1970s group that took this to heart was Earth Wind & Fire.

**The elements: Earth, Wind & Fire (EWF)**

Emerging from the Chicago Black Power Movement, a band of jazz musicians led by percussionist and arranger Maurice White, who had finished a stint as music director at Chess Records, and three years in the successful soul-jazz group The Ramsey Lewis Trio, would develop an act that would become the best-selling of the 1970s, of any genre, worldwide.

EWF began at a time when Chicago-based free-jazz practitioners such as Phil Cohran’s Heritage Ensemble, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, and Sun Ra’s Arkestra were exploring African aesthetics in their works. These artists frequented the Afro-Arts Theater – a regional hub of Black Nationalist ideas, art, and culture – and were no doubt influenced by the Nation of Islam, which was headquartered in Chicago in the 1960s, and the Black Panther Party, with their leader Fred Hampton seeking to organize people of all races into their “Rainbow Coalition.” Playing on the popularity of Astrology in the Black Community, and the prominence of pseudo-African slang, styles, and rituals such as Kwanzaa, Maurice White was able to create a musical imaginary that celebrated blackness, while maintaining a universal appeal. In his autobiography, White stated:

I wanted EW&F to use the symbols of Egypt in our presentation, to remind black folks of our rich and glorious heritage … Our rich culture didn’t start on slave ships or in cotton fields … It started in Egypt. Knowing where you came from gives you confidence and pride that can’t be easily taken away. Egypt gave the planet mathematics, astronomy, science, medicine, the written word, religion, symbolism and spirituality. Despite what centuries of distortion have told us, the civilized world did not start in Europe: it started in Egypt. This is the core reason I turned to Egyptology: it encourages self-respect.20

After two years of toiling as a free-jazz oriented outfit, White recruited new musicians, and stepped forward as co-lead singer (along with Philip Bailey) and began producing accessible,
popular music that was nevertheless driven by Afro-Cuban rhythms, and showcased visual art that spoke to Africa in dramatic ways. White developed a signature sound with a “thumb piano” that he called a Kalimba, that permeated the music of EWF through the decade of the 1970s. The album art, and live concerts also showcased an affection for Egyptology and pyramids, with philosophies that appeared to be consistent with African cosmology and a belief in humanity’s oneness.

Their first hit funk song in 1974, “Mighty Mighty” explained, after verses on morals and courage in the face of difficulties: “we are people of the mighty/mighty people of the sun/in our hearts lie/all the answers/to the truth you can’t run from.”

The goal of EWF was to be epic in scope. “We have a message to give but we don’t think we have to preach to air it. White told Jet magazine in 1978. “We want to change traditional concepts, negative thoughts about life. God and cosmic forces within the universe. We can’t reach everyone but those we do reach can be seeds to plant flowers that bloom for others to pick.”

With hit songs like “Shining Star,” “Serpentine Fire,” and “In The Stone,” EWF sought to, and largely succeeded in imbuing an African aesthetic into Black popular music in America, at a time when accommodation to the status quo was becoming the norm, and most black bands were having trouble remaining in the public view regardless of their look or orientation. Researcher Trenton Bailey writes:

White encouraged audiences to transcend time by using pyramids as space ships in concerts. He encouraged fans to elevate their minds by employing ancient Egyptian imagery in the visual art. And he encouraged listeners to transcend space by fantasizing (‘Fantasy’) and meditating (‘Getaway’).

Earth, Wind and Fire provided a grounding for a generation of artists, and in many ways an escape – and were creating a universally popular Wakanda – a space of black brilliance and freedom of expression – for their followers at the time.

The Mothership Connection

George Clinton and his band Parliament/Funkadelic was the premier black act in the late 1970s, the decade of funk. Raised in North Carolina as the eldest of nine children, as a teen Clinton moved up North, and became a leader of a singing group operating out of a barbershop in Plainfield, New Jersey. As a ringleader of sorts, Clinton was able to incorporate the sounds and styles of the street characters that frequented the barbershop; the drug dealers, pimps, and hustlers of the underground economies on the outskirts of the New York metropolis.

As the “street narratives” and psychedelic influences became stylish and trendy, Clinton incorporated these themes into his vocal group The Parliaments, and his backing band Funkadelic. George Clinton was able to build on the emerging popularity of the urban street narratives, as well as his comic takes on the absurdities in black American life, and build a musical and cultural movement based on “Funk” as a music and lifestyle.

To the Clinton ensemble, “funk” would become something larger than the sum of the parts, a vision of redemption, of communion with higher forces, of “oneness with the universe.” Larger themes of transcendence, of “rising above it all” continued throughout the works of P-Funk, despite the vulgar and often jarring subject matter, on songs like “Cosmic Slop,” “Maggot Brain,” and “Good Thoughts, Bad Thoughts.” As Clinton told Lenny
Henry in 1993, “‘One Nation Under A Groove’ went beyond uniting everybody under one roof, it meant: ‘Everybody on the one. The whole universe on the same pulse, All things is on the one with the universe.’”

In 1975 Clinton’s band Parliament broke through with hit record sales with “Give Up The Funk (Tear The Roof Off The Sucker),” “Chocolate City,” “Mothership Connection (Star Child),” and “P-Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up).” The songs built upon the rhythmic effects of James Brown funk, as many musicians from Brown’s operation (Fred Wesley, Maceo Parker, Bootsy Collins) had joined Clinton by then. These funk grooves were augmented by Clinton’s Afro-futuristic ideas, and keyboard player Bernie Worrell’s adroit use of electronic synthesizers to give funk listeners an other-worldly yet streetwise experience.

Clinton’s music spoke of (black) visitors from “The Chocolate Milky Way,” that revealed “the concept of specially designed afro-nauts capable of funkatizing galaxies.” Clinton claimed that these beings placed special information about The Funk, hidden among “the secrets of the pyramids,” but would be waiting “until a more positive attitude toward this most sacred phenomenon – cloned funk – could be acquired.” While these fanciful notions of blacks in space had been heard before (Sun Ra’s “Space is the Place”) in the case of Clinton, he was fusing these ideas of lofty travel with a grounding in grooves from the James Brown alumni in his band, and reaching mass black audiences through radio airplay.

With the help of record executive Neil Bogart, Clinton parlayed the success of the 1975 album Mothership Connection and its follow up The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein into a major national tour with state-of-the-art visual props and stage effects. The P-Funk Earth Tour was the crowning achievement of the band, and was a fundamental element of hip hop’s Pan-Africanist ideas later on. During the shows, a massive spaceship would descend on stage, with Clinton (as Dr. Funkenstein) emerging from the ship to “Give Up The Funk” to the masses in the audience. Clinton’s band would be driving a funk groove, while the multiple vocalists would be chanting “Swing Down, Let Me Ride,” a line which tied into tropes of slavery era spirituals. It was as if Sly Stone’s desire to “take you higher” was realized by Clinton’s Mothership that could engineer the lifting by itself.

Clinton followed up this major experience with a synthesizer driven sound, led by Bernie Worrell and later Walter “Junie” Morrison’s brilliance on the keyboards. These were sounds to bring their audience to the future and back. This was an important feature of The Funk, that is at once primal, and futuristic. Later songs that drew on the ironies of the futuristic age (and fears of a loss of the soul inside a machine) included: “Flash Light,” “Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk,” “Aqua-Boogie,” “One Nation Under A Groove,” and “Atomic Dog.” In his 1983 essay “On African American Music, From Bebop to Rap,” Cornel West discusses the late 1970s P-Funk recordings, referring to them as technofunk.

In addition to being a product of the genius of George Clinton, technofunk constitutes a second grand break of Afro-American musicians from American mainstream music … Like Charlie Parker’s bebop, George Clinton’s technofunk both Africanizes and technologizes Afro-American popular music – with polyrhythms on polyrhythms, less melody and freaky electronically distorted vocals. Similar to bebop, technofunk unabashedly exacerbates and accentuates the “blackness” of black music, the “Afro-Americanness” of Afro-American music – its irreducibility, inimitability and uniqueness. Funkadelic and Parliament defy nonblack emulation; they assert their distinctiveness-and the distinctiveness of “Funk” in Afro-America.
With the specter of assimilation an ever-present force in the 1970s and the colorblind multiculturalism of disco music dominating the crossover radio at the time, Clinton’s work (and to a lesser extent the pop Egyptology of Earth Wind & Fire) served to keep a light focused toward an African worldview even as the race neutral (white identified) technological world was overtaking mainstream American life.

P-Funk engaged with intellectual ideas during a time when pop music had less and less to say to the masses. P-Funk displayed intellectualism and mocked it at the same time. Clinton, with the audacity of a funk-master, dared to play with ideas once considered sacrosanct in western discourse: science, philosophy, politics, and history. Clinton made fun of much of these ideas and rendered them to the realm of the physical & natural.

Microbiologically speaking,
When I start churnin’, burnin’ and turnin’
It’ll make your atoms move so fast
Expandin’ your molecules
Causing a friction fire
Burnin’ you on your neutrons
Causing you to scream
“Hit me in the proton, BABY”
Parliament – Dr. Funkenstein (1976)

Through comic parody and irreverence, Clinton’s works helped to explain and define the presence of African Americans in U.S. post-Civil Rights Movement modernity. In the 1970s there was a need to construct an understanding of an historically marginalized people inhabiting newly “integrated” social spaces. P-Funk addressed this on the song “Chocolate City,” referring to predominantly black urban spaces such as Washington, D.C. Their chant “God bless Chocolate City and its vanilla suburbs” described a new understanding of de-segregation perhaps better than any demographic data produced at the time.

The specter of integration and social isolation in the 1970s was a key theme in the music of P-Funk. In 1978, during a time when commercial entertainers were being urged to simplify their lyrics and song titles, Parliament released Funkentelechy vs the Placebo Syndrome, an album of sonic experimentation and soul-rendering concepts that invites deconstruction to this day. Clinton created a character – Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk – that had become so isolated and self-absorbed that he suffered from a syndrome of superficial material values – “The Placebo Syndrome” – and refused to dance. In this way, P-Funk could address the social ills facing society – with a primary solution being the dance – and of finding one’s own natural rhythms, or flow, represented by “entelechy,” which is defined as a natural regulating force within the body.27

“Funkentelechy vs the Placebo Syndrome” served as a parable on the scope of The Force (of one’s natural life) vs The Empire (Westernization) in the popular Star Wars film saga, which began in 1977. These and many other examples showed the way George Clinton was able to help people free themselves from Westernization, even as technology was furthering its grip on the daily life of the modern population. It was not difficult for some people to see the timeless (ancient) values in the futuristic tales. Journalist David Jackson wrote in 1979:

Clinton demonstrated a sensitive, mature and intelligent understanding of the cultural traditions of black Americans … Clinton has paid serious attention to Black music, dance
and folklore, and is now along with James Brown, a fine artist expressing the hopes and joys and fears of his race. His music is for all dispossessed people of the world; for perpetuation of communion with the ancestral spirits in the fight for universal freedom. Clinton’s music is part of a force that will unite the dead, the living, and the unborn to rebuild the destroyed shrines of the root race.²⁸

“Bring that beat back:” hip hop and afro-futurism

As a result of the works of Clinton, White, and others, one element of hip hop has built on the Afro-Futuristic themes within the music and sought to continue and expand on these ideas. One of the “founders” of hip hop, Afrika Bambaataa developed an organization he termed “The Zulu Nation,” which involved youth development with a structure similar to the Nation of Islam. The organization taught “infinity lessons” that emphasized moral thinking, and re-centered Africa as the source of honorable values that would become central to the messages within early hip hop.

Musically, Bambaataa’s 1982 release of “Planet Rock” was a definitive electro-funk recording, and a showcase of hip hop to the world. “Planet Rock” had a futuristic sound, and felt automated, as if humans were not involved. Early hip hop music – Electro-Funk – involved the making of futuristic beats, hooks, and sounds designed to survive the urban cityscape, the concrete jungle, in which rappers could provide the “soul” inside the machine.

In 1990 the rap group X-Clan introduced their Afrocentric philosophy on their album To The East, Blackwards:

Funk upon a time
In the days of vanglorious
The tribe-dimensional houses of energy
released the original powers
to the translators of the interplanetary funk code
Funkin’ religion, funkin’ lesson
Key bearers, funkin’ to the East
X-Clan, Earth bound 1990²⁹

The album is heavily laden with samples of P-Funk music. Once again a funk-based act engages with the “secrets of the pyramids” trope. The idea that The Funk is ever present yet elusive to define is a hallmark of its longevity.

While the funk faded from the mainstream radio in the 1980s and beyond, it has been reconstituted in hip hop samples that continue to this day. Much of current dance music worldwide is built on the foundations of 1970s funk. The hip hop deejay mix invariably involves the mixing of funk songs, beats, and rhythms; the Afro-futurism found in the 1980s Electro-funk of groups such as Soul Sonic Force, Rammellzee, The Egyptian Lover, and World Class Wrecking Cru (which featured a young Dr. Dre) led to the contemporary industry of “Electronic Dance Music” or EDM which is a worldwide popular music phenomenon.

In some regions, such as New Orleans and Los Angeles, funk continues to thrive. In Washington, D.C. the street funk sounds of the 1970s developed into a live band style known as Go-Go. Large, heavily percussive funk bands dominated the nights in black D.
C. in the 1980s and 1990s, often playing extended songs late into the night – not unlike Afro-diasporic dance music across the centuries. As Natalie Hopkinson explains in her book *Go-Go Live*:

Black music is not just entertainment. It is a conversation across time and space. The same ways of speaking appear and reappear throughout the African diaspora throughout time, geography and context. Through a transatlantic call and response among Africa, the Americas, and Europe, these musical traditions have survived centuries of trauma, holocaust, slavery, and dislocation with remarkable resilience. As old forms die out, new combinations of the same components appear in their place. The riffs, rhythms, and repetition common to music throughout the African diaspora translate into social structures … But the root lies in Africa.  

**Conclusion**

James Brown reinforced “the groove” and re-oriented black popular music toward rhythms, polyrhythms and rhythmic effects – that reminded his followers of Africa. Brown’s explicit assertions of race pride served to redefine black music, as the music from the streets. His music was admired and imitated throughout West Africa. Brown’s work was Pan-African in its appeal and its function. Sly & the Family Stone expanded ideas of “freedom” and developed a “psychedelic” look and feel that spoke to individual identity within a collective, and was held together through a range of rhythmic & sonic innovations. “The Family Stone” forged a non-conformist identity, and opened the doors for bands to represent multiple non-Western and non-conformist imaginings of community. During the middle 1970s Earth Wind & Fire championed black excellence and celebrated Egyptology – imbibed through an African identification – incorporating popular songs, album art, dazzling live shows and catchy, funky grooves. George Clinton’s bands consistently celebrated the infinite liberation potential within the music and the potential of the target audience for the music: urban black youth. Through pseudo-spiritual lyrics and chants, and elaborate rhythmic and melodic innovations, Clinton’s music “re-Africanized” black music amidst the pop clutter of the 1970s. In short, these acts were each creating a *Wakanda* – an imagined space of black freedom and brilliance – decades before the *Black Panther* comic book character and film topped the movie charts.

Clinton’s music, along with Brown and Stone, forms the core of hip hop samples in the 1980s and 1990s, as hip hop continued to produce “authentic” urban tales through rhythm and rhyme. The legacy of *The Funk* may indeed be that from its inception it served to “re-Africanize” the U.S. African American population, then galvanized its links to the global African population, and continues to spread to all of humanity.

**Notes**

11 Vincent, op cit., 74.
18 See Vincent, op cit. Funk.
27 Vincent, op cit, 253–264.