

# “Mothership Connection”—Parliament (1975)

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Essay by Ben Greenman (guest post)\*



*Album cover*



*Original label*



*George Clinton*

When “Mothership Connection” first appeared in record stores in December of 1975, America’s eyes were trained on more earthbound matters. The beginning of the country’s year-long Bicentennial celebration was only two weeks away. The observation deck at the World Trade Center in New York City had just opened.

“Mothership Connection” charted a course for the stars, and made stars of the band in the process. For starters, it marked the arrival of Parliament as a fully successful musical and cultural unit. Led by the singer and songwriter George Clinton, Parliament was a reconstitution of a doo-wop-into-soul band that had been active in one form or another since the late 1950s. Parliament, in its seventies incarnation—which started with “Up For the Down Stroke” in 1974 and continued with “Chocolate City”—was a funk band with its eye on the pop charts, a sleekly designed commercial proposition that absorbed elements of radio soul, outré funk, and even bubblegum pop. Clinton and his P-Funk officers, chief among them bassist Bootsy Collins and keyboardist Bernie Worrell, wrote tight songs with punchy horn charts—a far cry from the improvisatory epics of Clinton’s other main band, Funkadelic, the acid-funk-rock band he had overseen since the late sixties.

“Mothership Connection” was both a refinement of Parliament’s sound and an excursion into uncharted territory. Clinton had long wrapped his albums in ideas. Funkadelic had trafficked in a satirical, sometimes sorrowful look at American society with such records as “Maggot Brain,” “America Eats Its Young,” and “Cosmic Slop.” And Parliament’s previous album, “Chocolate City,” which had been released in April of 1975, had looked at the growth of African-American populations in major cities and played out a speculative scenario where major African-American celebrities populated the White House and the cabinet. “Mothership Connection” took African-American culture even higher than the nation’s highest office: it took it into space. The first sketch of the idea had something to do with aliens landing in America’s poorest neighborhoods and liberating the residents. (“Landing in the Ghetto” was an early rejected title.) Clinton liked aspects of that sketch, but it seemed limited, and so he kept building the idea. He had an image of black cool as Black Hole Cool, a black alien sitting in a spaceship that was as tricked out as a pimp’s Cadillac. For him, space was not just a place, but a state of mind. It was a metaphor for the boundlessness of art, and also for the ways that art found its way to people; the Mothership Connection had something to do with an extraterrestrial DJ beaming booty-shaking, soul-quaking, mind-liberating music down to the earth’s benighted inhabitants.

That was the first message listeners heard when they put the record on their turntable and the needle found its way into the opening track, “P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)”: “Good

Evening. Do not attempt to adjust your radio. There is nothing wrong. We have taken control so as to bring you this special show. We will return it to you as soon as you are grooving.” The spoken monologue, which went on to take potshots at other artists of the time who were dabbling in funk (Blue Magic, David Bowie, the Doobie Brothers), bore some similarity to the title track of “Chocolate City,” informed by proto-rappers like the Last Poets as well as famous DJs like Frankie Crocker and Wolfman Jack. But here it was delivered, not by Clinton himself, but by Clinton in disguise as the Lollipop Man (also known as the Long-Haired Sucker). Slipping into character would become commonplace for Clinton and other P-Funk stars. Characters, as he had learned from Walt Disney, had powers that mortal men did not. They were immortal, capable of going anywhere, instantly recognizable. The Lollipop Man was soon joined by Star Child (on the album’s second song, its title track), and then, on succeeding records, characters like Dr. Funkenstein, Sir Nose, Wiggles the Worm, and more. Clinton used the characters to build an ever-expanding mythology of the P-Funk universe, emphasizing individualism and the liberating force of funk.

“P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)” was not all spoken-word performance. It had a massive sing-along chorus, like many of the album’s songs. And it had horns. More and more, Parliament was becoming a brass powerhouse. Rock bands at the time like Chicago and Blood Sweat & Tears were incorporating brass sections more and more, and on “Mothership Connection,” they were fully and profitably embraced; the Brecker Brothers, Michael and Randy, joined Fred Wesley and Maceo Parker. The band’s formula worked and then some. The first single, “P. Funk (Wants To Get Funked Up),” was an instant sensation at R&B stations, but the record didn’t truly catch fire until pop programmers got onto “Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker).” Powered by an irresistible beat and an indelible chant, “Give Up The Funk” crossed the band over into mainstream radio and established them as a commercial force. Fans who bought the record got the hits along with equally challenging album tracks that ranged from sprightly (“Unfunky UFO”) to slinky (“Supergroovalisticprofunkstication”) to gleefully sleazy (“Handcuffs”).

The final piece of the puzzle was the first thing most record-buyers saw—the spaceship itself. As the concept album developed, Clinton realized that he needed a spaceship for the cover photo. Manager Charlie Bassoline went straight to a Los Angeles prop house, where he found the original ship from the 1951 sci-fi classic “The Day The Earth Stood Still.” (A few months later, Clinton would begin the process of commissioning and building his own mothership, an iconic stage prop that would eventually make its way to the Smithsonian.)

“Mothership Connection” was an artistic triumph, a commercial hit, and proof of concept for Clinton and Parliament. In the three years following “Mothership Connection,” the group stayed in the same cartoonish, philosophical groove and delivered such albums as “The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein” (1976), “Funkentelechy Vs. The Placebo Syndrome” (1977), and “Motor Booty Affair” (1978). “Mothership Connection,” the album that made that glory period possible, enjoyed a resurgence when Dr. Dre sampled it extensively on “The Chronic,” creating a bridge between the West Coast G-Funk of the nineties and the slippery P-Funk grooves of the seventies.

*Ben Greenman is a bestselling author whose work spans fiction and nonfiction. He has written novels such as “The Slippage” and “Please Step Back,” collections of short fiction such as “Superbad” and “Don Quixotic,” and has co-written memoirs with everyone from Questlove (“Mo Meta Blues”) to Brian Wilson (“I Am Brian Wilson”). For the purposes of this essay, it is best to think of him as a lifelong P-Funk adherent and as the co-writer of George Clinton’s memoir, “Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain’t That Funkn’ Kinda Hard On You.”*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.