

Raising Atlantis: Parliament's 'Motor-Booty Affair' at 40

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In one of the great ridiculous pop records, Parliament is still trying to raise Atlantis after 40 years of funk

Motor-Booty Affair (1978) is a self-contained pocket of the Parliament-Funkadelic mythology that exists entirely underwater; it's one of the great ridiculous pop records. Forty years after its release it's not one of the better-known P-Funk albums, owing perhaps to its release two months after Funkadelic's masterpiece *One Nation Under A Groove*— and the simple fact that more people are going to check out a band called Funkadelic than one called Parliament. But it's arguably Parliament's strongest full-length. It's funky but often gorgeous thanks to the lavish sensibilities of new musical director J.S. Theracon, a.k.a. the late Junie Morrison of the Ohio Players. Its long, meandering compositions, a boon as pop transitioned into a more club-friendly format in the disco age, gave mastermind George Clinton free range to pull the most demented shit out of the sinkholes of his mind. And though it presents itself on the surface as the freakiest backstage feather-boa party in the galaxy, it blindsides us with beauty when we least expect it.

Motor-Booty Affair comes from the peak of Parliament's commercial success; it would be their fourth of five consecutive gold records. During this period, Parliament had completed its transition from psych-rock orgy to tight funk juggernaut and was busy laying the foundation for the P-Funk mythology. Their first mythopoeic work was 1975's *Mothership Connection*, which was elaborated on by 1977's definitive *Funkentelechy* vs. *the Placebo Syndrome* and 1979's *Gloryhallastoopid* (a very good record in spite of much of the core crew jumping ship prior to its

recording). *Motor-Booty Affair* can be seen as a spinoff. Some of the same characters as on previous records appear, but all the new faces it introduces are infinitely more interesting. Mr. Wiggles the Worm and his “bionic idiots” Giggle and Squirm. A mermaid named Rita. A mouth named Jaws. Rumpofsteelskin with dynamite sticks by the megaton up his butt. Queen Freak-a-Lene and Charlie Tuna. There are a boatload of fish jokes on this thing, which makes sense as it takes place mostly in Atlantis, a place where you can “dance underwater and not get wet.”

https://open.spotify.com/album/4nJxMt76H3NtmGfklL035z?si=DWG_XSlxT82_G830EttXhw

Of Clinton’s countless fascinations with body parts, none is more central to P-Funk mythology than the Nose. Bassist Bootsy Collins’ “Pinocchio Theory” suggests that “if you fake the funk, your nose will grow,” which Clinton logically connected to cocaine (which he disdained, at least then) and used to create the character of Sir Nose D’Voidoffunk, who can’t dance, won’t dance and never will dance. One has little use for a nose underwater, which naturally makes Atlantis the funkier place on earth. (“You might want to rent a blowhole,” Clinton suggests.) Sir Nose, unsurprisingly, is afraid of the ocean. “Put me down,” he squeals. “I hate water!” But once he’s had his baptism he has a change of heart. “It feels good, it feels good!” he exclaims, splashing around with everyone else. All he needed to get funky was a little push. It’s sorta heartwarming.

Among other things, *Motor-Booty Affair* is a tribute to the radio shows Clinton grew up on. There are far more spoken than sung vocals throughout the record, and on “Mr. Wiggles” Clinton busts out the same impression of legendary Philly DJ Jocko Henderson he used to open *Chocolate City* three years prior — except this time he’s a talking worm, his vocals echoed by pitch-shifted dolphin noises. (That Henderson made some of the earliest rap records makes for a nice chicken-and-egg symmetry alongside P-Funk’s ubiquity as sample fodder for early hip-hop producers.) Brassy sportscaster Howard Cosell gets two shout-outs: the “Wide World of Wiggles” on “Rumpofsteelskin” is probably a nod to Cosell’s *Wide World of Sports* and on the title track Clinton assumes the persona of “Howard Cod-sell.” These faux announcers drive the narrative and make passive commentary on events that’d be the focus of lesser comic songs. “There’s Moby Dick,” cries Cod-sell; “he’s running after Octopussy.” It’s hard to even make out that joke given the multitude of voices and ad-libs butting in from all sides of the mix.

Voices are the dominant feature of *Motor-Booty Affair*’s musical landscape, many hard to even notice as they swarm across the stereo field. When there’s a discernible lead vocal, it’s usually sung en masse by Clinton’s “Snorkel-Singing Air Tank Harmonics” (the credits on any P-Funk release are a riot to read). Though Clinton’s vocal histrionics are key to the success of earlier Parliament records like *Up for the Down Stroke* and *Chocolate City*, here the focus isn’t on one individual but all the guests at the party. The music itself of *Motor-Booty* might seem a little dainty compared to other P-Funk albums, especially if you’re familiar with the viscous Hendrix-sludge of *Maggot Brain* or the eerie keyboard-funk of *Mothership Connection*. The tempos are faster than usual, there’s less syncopation, there are a lot of pianos and the record doesn’t even snap into a proper funk groove for nearly six minutes. There are moments where we want to hear the fertile sproing of Bootsy Collins’ bass or those supernaturally high co-ed choirs. But the eerie hollowness of the mix creates tension, suggesting the party wasn’t meant to last.

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A sadness tugs at much of Parliament’s music. Their shows seem like the peak of brainless funk excess until you understand what “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” means and why it’s poignant that Glenn Goins uses it to call the Mothership. Similarly, there’s the suggestion on *Motor-Booty Affair*’s closing track, “Deep,” that Atlantis is an imagined place free from racism. As it rolls on for nine minutes, its subject matter becomes less about water and more about the real world. Someone talks about a “honky with a nerve,” adding they always keep a gun on them. A nasal voice complains of the presence of black people (my phrasing, not theirs) in their neighborhood and how they “had to hire a spy.” Clinton advises listeners to vote and unionize, insisting: “We’ve got to raise Atlantis from the bottom of the sea / We’re going to raise Atlantis to the top.” The last thing we hear is Clinton calling for security as he disappears backstage. Few writers are better at creating superficially absurd scenarios that are, slyly, about so much more.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDcBp004Nu0>

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