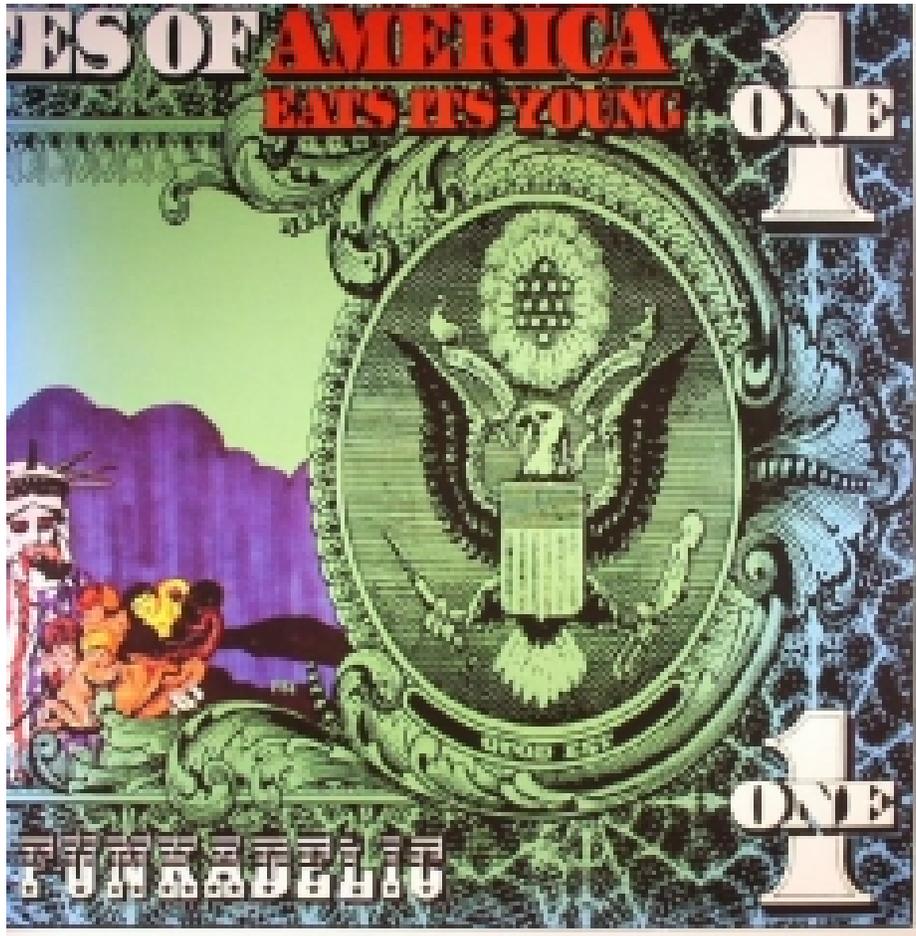


Discography: Parliament-Funkadelic: America Eats Its Young

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What's most immediately striking about *America Eats Its Young* is how much sense it makes. While the first three Funkadelic albums traded in thick, fetid, burbling psychedelia played at fuck-you volume, opener "You Hit the Nail on the Head" is almost rustic. Bernie Worrell's organ is droll and stately. Eddie Hazel's guitar is reduced to hasty snatches of wah that function more like a boatman's oar than a tsunami. The drums dance briskly rather than plodding like the last steps of a dying brontosaurus. And George Clinton's words are simple, precise and devoid of bullshit. This isn't a political album that makes sweeping statements on the problems and morale of the time but puts us on the spot with measured words that a child can understand and an adult can comprehend. "Just because you win the fight don't make it right." "If you don't like the effects, don't produce the cause." "We've got to see what we are doing in the name of comfort." Comfort – not hatred, not stupidity, something subtler and far more dangerous. Clinton is one of the smartest men in pop and knows better than to recite platitudes about the brotherhood of man; in that post-hippie winter of discontent, strangled by cults and murders, Clinton knew precisely what peace-and-love bullshit gets us. In its precisely worded sloganeering, content-packed but light-footed sprawl and purifying minimalism, *America Eats Its Young* is sort of the Season of the Witch's answer to Solange's *A Seat at the Table*. "You wanna be the teacher, don't wanna go to school/ Don't want to do the dishes, just wanna eat the food", from Solange's "Junie," could easily be a lyric from this album.

America Eats Its Young is one of the great post-'60s comedown albums, and it's striking in how much it sounds like a real comedown: there's clarity, but with that clarity comes immense sadness. The vocal takes on "Everybody Is Going to Make It This Time" and "We Hurt Too" are wounding. Clinton seems to be impersonating a boy soprano. The key word is neoteny: the quality that's at the core of what we call "cuteness," the primal urge to care for those we see as weak and vulnerable. It's what makes Brian Wilson's wounded missives on *Pet Sounds* so powerful: the idea that this grown-man singer seems to be experiencing the loss of innocence for the first time through a profound daze of disappointment. It's a quality Sly Stone would subvert on *There's a Riot Goin' On*, the best album ever recorded about the death of the hippie dream: in portraying precisely the kind of inactive, indifferent escapist Clinton castigates

throughout his album, he channels the qualities of the baby in a disturbing way that emphasizes lethargy rather than innocence. Clinton's great enemy here is complacency, and his message on "If You Don't Like the Effects, Don't Produce the Cause" is a pertinent one, but a hard one to swallow: you can't really practice social justice if you're hoarding money.

If that sounds Christlike, that might be because Clinton was flirting at the time with the theology of the Process Church of the Final Judgment, a British-American cult which worshiped both Jesus and Satan. The band was excoriated by critics like Robert Christgau due to the Process Church's tenuous connections to Charles Manson, though from what I've read about them the church seems more harmless than most religious movements of its ilk. There's no woo-woo bullshit on here either way, and "Miss Lucifer's Love" would be hard to read as a tribute to the Church's worship of that incarnation of Satan. Alas, what it sounds like is another entry in the disreputable canon of the devil-woman blues ballad. *America Eats Its Young's* attitude towards women is its least endearing aspect. "We Hurt Too" is ostensibly about the way men are driven to bury their emotions, but the use of "they" throughout suggests to be directed aggressively at women who don't understand that. And though "America Eats Its Young" is one of the pithiest album titles ever, it also makes America a maternal figure, and the gendered language used to attack it on the title track ("Who is this bitch?") is unnecessary, born out of the same conflation of feminine sexuality with evil that gave rise to the woman-as-Satan trope in the first place. It's far less effective than the exaggerated moans and sobs that comprise the bulk of the track, which might have been inspired by the famous street-of-dying-men shot in *Gone with the Wind*, and if you know how that shot ends, you understand what a delicious subversion that would be.

Though acid was the chemical fact of Funkadelic's music early on, Clinton was beginning to distrust drugs by the time he made this album. Original drummer Tawl Ross suffered permanent brain damage from using drugs during his time in the band, and heroin, decried both here and on predecessor *Maggot Brain*, was ravaging black neighborhoods in the early 1970s. (His next nemesis would be coke, at least until he started using it.) So Clinton produced this one mostly straight. The difference is dramatic. *America Eats Its Young* is solid rather than liquid, and its best ideas make themselves known individually rather than as part of an overbearing whole: little bird-scratches of guitar, a Jew's harp bouncing puckishly beneath "Loose Booty," a sighing string section that splits the difference between poignant and maudlin. When *America Eats Its Young* is slow, it's ballad-slow, not heavy-slow. The thing about acid is it helps everything make sense – or at least a parody of sense – within the larger context of the universe. Here, Clinton and band pull back and see everything individually. We'll never know how a record that takes everything on *Maggot Brain* to the extreme would sound (the answer might lie in Miles Davis's mid-'70s work like *Agharta* or *Dark Magus*), but *America Eats Its Young* points the way to the spit-shined clarity of the Parliament project that would be Clinton's primary investment in the latter half of the '70s.

Because of this, it's tempting to think of *America Eats Its Young* as a transitional record. A lot of the band left between *Maggot Brain* and *America Eats Its Young*, and *Maggot Brain* is generally regarded as the band's peak, so it's easy to see this one as the beginning of Funkadelic's decline. Indeed, the project entered an odd limbo for a few records prior to the Junie Morrison era and the blockbuster *One Nation Under a Groove*, as Parliament began to consume Clinton's field of vision. But for my money it's one of the strongest P-Funk records, and it's certainly the smartest. If it was greeted with suspicion in the early '70s, well, a left-wing, devil-worshipping psychedelic funk album about the evils of complacency might be exactly what we need in these no-less-hideous times.

