

Discography: Parliament-Funkadelic: Let's Take it to the Stage

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Let's Take It to the Stage from 1975 is the tightest Funkadelic album. But is tight what we want from this band? The best P-Funk releases drag their long tails through miles of funk, and Parliament's marvel of concision from the same year, *Chocolate City*, does a far better job of bottling the band's eccentricities into something that swiftly flies by. It's obvious from albums like this one and the next year's *Tales of Kidd Funkadelic* and *Hardcore Jollies* that George Clinton's most out-there ideas at the time belonged to the increasingly brilliant Parliament project, which would be the source of his best music in the latter half of the decade until Funkadelic's apex at the turn of the eighties. But even if *Let's Take It to the Stage* is a minor album, it's good enough that I'd be willing to hear out a hardcore fan who'd claim it as their best.

The songs on this record tend to hover around four minutes long and sound as much like arena-rock anthems as funk songs, heavy on riffs that punch and shred but lacking in the viscous quality of the earlier records. Its longest and final song, "Atmosphere," is a Bach-interpolating Bernie Worrell keyboard freakout that's both astoundingly beautiful and a bloated chops show-off, much like Funkadelic's most celebrated track "Maggot Brain."

Clinton himself admitted that the record was conceived at least in part due to his frustration at not being played on rock radio. His competitors here aren't just the fellow funksters he light-heartedly ribs on opener "Good to Your Earhole" ("Slick and the Family Brick," "Fool and the Gang") but bands like Led Zeppelin, who had the number one album in America when *Let's Take It to the Stage* came out. In the case of "No Head, No Backstage Pass," it's as much because of the sexual politics as the music, and it's telling that Clinton writes a song celebrating or castigating – it's hard to tell with songs like these – that old rock-star standby, the groupie. Funkadelic wanted to present themselves as rock stars, right down to the title; though nothing here was recorded live, the name immediately gets us thinking of those outrageous costumes and oversized glasses (the Mothership came later).

Let's Take It to the Stage works in that regard. We get a spectacular look at their instrumental showmanship, including a solo on reliable concert-chant "Get Off Your Ass and Jam" that was apparently played by a junkie who wandered into the studio – a bit of guitar mythology almost as delicious as the "Maggot Brain" legend about Clinton telling Eddie Hazel to play like his mom just died. (Rare Earth's Paul Warren claims credit, but it could've as easily been someone in the band.) This is probably the Funkadelic record aside from *Maggot Brain* that would most likely endear Funkadelic to the kind of rock kid you see in *Dazed and Confused*. But it didn't do much for Funkadelic's commercial prospects, charting just outside the top 100 on the rock charts.

One of the most interesting things about it, though, is how many of its ideas would be recycled down the road. For instance, "Good to Your Earhole" debuts a specific kind of chant that'd become synonymous with the P-Funk sound: the male singers in a scary mass, with the female singers delivering piercing high notes. We hear, for the first time, the slinky, seductive patter that'd come to be associated with Bootsy Collins on "Be My Beach," a song whose aqua-theme would be elaborated on on 1978's *Motor Booty Affair*. "No Head, No Backstage Pass" has a cool klezmer thing going, which might've come from the same memories of classmates' bar mitzvahs Clinton tapped into for 1977's explicitly Yiddish "Flashlight." There's a strong argument to be made for the album as encapsulation of everything the P-Funk project did well before and since, and an equally strong argument for it as a testing ground for later, better records.



<https://youtu.be/OXiBCcJSxkU>