Funkentelechy in the Panhandle

Hey kids. Only 5 months since the last post. Mea culpa.

I been busy with many things, not the least of them being a novel that is currently at around 50,000 words and may in fact be an unprecedented work of confounding genius. Or maybe a load of shite. YMMV

Also, too, I got to spend a long afternoon with the one true Dr. Funkenstein, George Clinton, for a feature article in ‘s Arts and Culture issue.<fn>On newsstands now!</fn> Don’t believe me? Ha! I got evidence.

Funk Feast (Photo: Mark Wallheiser)

That steak was big as your face.

As you might imagine, several hours in the Mothership orbit is pretty heady business. The man can tell stories.

I submitted my first draft, full of piss and vinegar and with dreams of Pulitzer dancing in my head. Three days later, an email arrived from the Editor to the effect that my article was “wildly creative” and “very conceptual.”

This is the editorial equivalent of “Bless your heart.”

So I rewrote. And in the end, I think the turned out great, especially after the editor asked for more detail about George’s kind of fiercely incredible wife, Carlon. All’s well &c.

Tonight, I was part of a Flamingo Magazine panel at our most excellent local bookstore, Midtown Reader. I was asked to read something. So I went back and re-read my first draft and found some things I still really like about it. So for my reading, I read the parts that were “wildly creative” and so forth. And I promised the crowd (SRO, packed to the rafters, riots on par with Sacre du Printemps) that I would post the full first draft here.

Compare and contrast the warty version with the published piece (which, I must say, looks better in print, due in large part to the fine photography of Mark Wallheiser). Bonus points for your exegesis of the transformative effects of the writer/editor grapplings.

Funkentelechy & the Trickster

Principle

By Rob Rushin

Every culture across (inter)planetary time and space recognizes The Trickster. This mischievous demigod roams the world in many guises, joking, provoking – maybe even smoking – mere mortals into confusion and creative discord. Dynamos of misdirection and sleight of hand trickeration, they may appear as different entities simultaneously, your perception/reaction crosswise with your neighbor. Did you find a glide in your step and a dip in your hip, or do you remain utterly devoid of funk? Do you see the Star Child or Sir Nose, or do you only have eyes for Dr. Funkenstein?

Costumes, personae, masks, altered voices: The Trickster's repertoire of contrivance is deep and wide, wielded to disrupt habitual thinking and lead you to synthesis, amalgamation, and integration. To freedom. To the Mothership.

When the disruptive paradigm shakers of the trans-Atlantic slave trade chained their cargo in the bowels of their Middle Passage transports, they shipped more than saleable human capital. The myths of Africa – especially from the Slave Coast – came with them. In the 20th Century, the Trickster lineage from Eshu through Br'er Rabbit and Signifyin(g) Monkey found outlet in the bodies of such characters as Little Richard, Sun Ra, Richard Pryor, and, of course, our illuminatorial visitating interlocutor of the moment, George Edward Clinton.

Born July 22, 1941, in Kannapolis, North Carolina, Clinton was raised on the doo wop streets of Plainfield, New Jersey. Variously resident of Philadelphia, Detroit, Toronto, and Los Angeles, the one true Doctor Funkenstein – shape shifting Trickster Supreme – has for 20 years worn the mask of Florida Man. A living bridge across seven decades – from Jersey corner singer to staff writer for the pop music machines of the Brill

Building to Godfather of funk and hip hop – he remains among the most influential figures in American popular music. In 1997, the Parliament Funkadelic gang was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. In 2014, a replica of the Mothership, central to funkentelechal performance and cosmology, went on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, bearing the label "A Gift of Love to the Planet."

Clinton, age 77, remains a vital force, his imprint on rock, funk, soul, hip hop, and certain gauzy corners of jazz as extensive as any musician of his time. Aside from being the most sampled musician on the planet – hip hop and its variants are literally unimaginable without Clinton's influence – the P Funk mélange spawned a cosmology that more or less established the recognizable tenets of Afrofuturism and a philosophical ethos that boils down to a bold declaration of psycho-physical liberation: "Free your mind, and your ass will follow."

Last Spring, Clinton announced a global farewell tour ahead of a 2019 retirement. Then he set the internet on fire with the surprise release of *Medicaid Fraud Dogg*, the first Parliament album in 38 years. He might be retiring, but the old Atomic Dog can still bark. And bite.

There's nothing that the proper attitude won't render…funkable

Do you promise the funk, the whole funk,
and nothin' but the funk?

How the founding father of *One Nation Under a Groove* came to live under the oak trees in a remote and superficially unfunky outpost in the Florida Panhandle is a rags-to-riches-to-rags-to-redemption tale. Clinton tells all in his 2014 memoir, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard On You?*, a raucous fable of grittier detail than we can manage in

a family-style magazine. Suffice to say that customary depredations of devious management, drug use, and a somewhat devil-may-care lifestyle had left George with limited options when he arrived for a 1996 date at The Moon in Tallahassee.

“It was a mess, but I’m not gonna boo hoo about it because nobody wants to hear that shit.”

Clinton set up shop in Tallahassee in 1997, finally settling five years ago on an 8-acre countryside spread a few miles from his private recording studio.

“I used to think I had to be up and out, all the time,” Clinton mused beneath his personal oak tree canopy. “But when I got here, I realized I could just sit down and be. I used to stay up til dawn. Now I like to go to bed at 8 o’clock and get up at dawn to listen to the birds singing.”

Clinton has countless children and grandchildren, many of them hard at work in the P-Funk empire – some playing and singing, some running media relations and office functions, some keeping a steady stream of treats coming off the grill. The situation clearly suits him.

In 2014, he dropped the first Funkadelic album in 33 years, the 33-song *first ya gotta SHAKE THE GATE.* This year brought *Medicaid Fraud Dogg*, a 23-song epic about the disastrous state of health care in an over-prescribed society. This fall, Clinton promises another couple dozen tracks under the P Funk All-Stars banner, tentatively titled *One Nation Under Sedation*. All this while taking a planetary victory lap. The well has not run dry.

Tallahassee also gives Clinton access to talent from the local universities. Florida State University ethnomusicology Professor Michael Bakan got to know Clinton after featuring him as guest artist at FSU’s annual Rainbow Concert showcasing the school’s world music program. That collaboration – peaking with a wild version of “Atomic Dog” arranged for Gamelan

ensemble – led to Bakan cutting tracks for *Fraud Dogg*. It was a session to remember.

"It seemed like he wasn't really paying attention, so I figured I'll just try some things out. It was like he's looking off in space, or doesn't seem like he knows I'm doing anything, and suddenly he says, '*That*.' So I started again and he says, 'No, no, no. Wait. Now. Now stop. Now keep going. Stop.' As the day unfolded, I realized that essentially when you're in the studio with George, you're his hands. He's not a percussionist so he doesn't have the chops, but he knows exactly what he wants. Once he hears the sound, it's like he immediately has an entire roadmap of where that sound is going to be."

Bakan laughs and says, "I've worked with John Cage, and the strange thing is that you would think there couldn't be two more different kinds of musical artists than John Cage and George Clinton. But that's the closest I've ever experienced."

Along with the local talent, Clinton holds long-term P Funk family close, guys like bassist Lige Curry and Dewayne "Blackbyrd" McKnight – a genuine guitar hero in the mold of predecessor legends Eddie Hazel and Michael Hampton – who keep the original Mothership Connection alive and vital. Drummer Benzel Cowan, son of original and current P Funk trumpeter Bennie Cowan, was dandled on the knee of Bootsy Collins as an infant; the man was born to funk. People who come into George's orbit tend to stay there.

Case in point: As we wandered the property surveying the garden and dozens of birdhouses, George pointed at the house.

"See that apartment there? Overton lives there. He's still living with us."

Overton Loyd created the comic book insert for the *Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome* album. It depicts the epic battle between Sir Nose D'Voidoffunk and Starchild. (If

you find an original copy for sale, you can't afford it.) He also designed the cover for the *Motor Booty Affair* album, the *Atomic Dog* video, and the artwork for *Fraud Dogg*.

"P Funk is a family thing," Clinton says, not for the first or last time during our afternoon together.

Clinton's recent collaborations with Sly Stone and his ongoing association with ex-James Brown horn players Maceo Parker, Fred Wesley, and Pee Wee Ellis connect current P Funk to its deeper historic roots. Common wisdom holds that James Brown, Sly Stone, and George Clinton deserve credit as the creators of modern funk. Too simple to be the whole story, sure. But also: inarguably true.

Combine all this history with grandchildren keeping George attuned to a new generation's eyes and ears and you have a recipe for authentic multigenerational *funkentelechy*, a concept derivative of Aristotle's *entelechy* that means, roughly, the ongoing actualization of the true funk.

Then there is Camp Clinton's secret weapon, George's wife Carlon, a savvy administrator, promoter, and self-taught legal eagle who hovers above the overall organization. She also manages the endless requests for interviews and favors that stalk Clinton like Atomic Dog chasing the cat.

Today, that dog was me. All for you, dear reader. All for you.

"…I'm still hard as steel."

Friends, inquisitive friends
Are asking what's come over me

The opening lines from The Parliaments first hit, 1968's "(I Wanna) Testify", about a man transformed by love, resonate in George Clinton, c. 2018. For all the wild stage antics and ferocious mountains of sound he has delivered, the man we visited is at peace with himself and his legacy, surrounded by

family and proudly unburdened by any medication beyond doctor-prescribed marijuana. Even as Clinton prepares to leave touring to the younger P Funk generation – "I am setting it up for the kids to take it over." – he still plans to work the studio "hard as steel. Started hard as steel and I'm still hard as steel."

And still sharp as a razor. He is a mesmerizing storyteller with an astonishing recall of detail, though with the Trickster one never knows where the line between factoration and trickeration falls. For example: shortly after "Testify" hit the charts, it became clear that the music world – hell, the whole damned world – was changing. George knew he needed to change with it. But how?

"I'm just thinking about this today. I went and saw *Fantasia* and *2001* on the same show. 1968. You know, you're talking about Disney's animated visual concepts showing primordial ooze with classical music, and then you got *2001*, Arthur C Clarke you know, past the primordial and out the other end into that star baby."

So that's where Star Child comes from?

"I got a whole bunch of stuff too, you know, I must have just got loaded with all the information to whatever was going on through that period of time."

Clinton has always been a cultural omnivore. Our conversation covered Smokey Robinson, Hendrix, Iron Butterfly, *Blade Runner* and *Chariot of the Gods*, King Crimson, Zappa, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who he calls "the P Funk of jazz."

Even Kanye West. Asked whether Kanye might be turning into Sir Nose, Clinton laughs, a beautiful deep chortle up from the belly.

"That's the best way to say it. Sir Nose, yeah. His nose is definitely kind of growing. He gonna have to watch his nose,

gonna have to check his nose out."

We talked about Clinton's fellow astral traveler Sun Ra, legendary leader of the Solar Myth Arkestra. When they met in the 80s, Clinton realized they were basically up to the same thing.

"They were doing what we do – the costumes, the space travel – just doing it in jazz. It's beautiful."

Reminded of their shared background in doo wop, Clinton demonstrates the encyclopedic mind that informs his musical imagination.

"Yeah, he was in Chicago then. Those harmonies he was after were deep, that five-part shit. Nobody was doing that kind of thing except maybe Smokey. We were all singing unisons and octaves, nothing like that."

Younger Clintons keep him hip to new trends and talent, leading him to collaborations with the likes of Scarface, Thundercat, and recently-minted Pulitzer winner Kendrick Lamar.

"I was telling Kendrick jazz was going to be the next thing in hip hop, not knowing that his record was all in that. I don't know if he already had it like that, but there's lots of jazz in his ammo. I use a lot of that flavor on this *Medicaid Fraud Dogg*."

"You know that kind of music gives it an elevation. It's still hip hop, still storytelling, but he actually had some arrangement. You can't just call it making beats, you know, just making a beat on the computer. That shit had to be written. Somebody went to school for a lot of that stuff he's putting down. You didn't get that from no Casio."

Other talent on his radar includes Cardi B, Flying Lotus, and Childish Gambino.

“Gambino, he’s really got it. Lots of information, and clever. That video? Man, that’s some shit!”

It was time for a photo shoot. Carlon live-streamed the proceedings on Periscope, so you can verify: Clinton styling a stunning, gold sequin ensemble while singing along with Sinatra.

That’s the beginning, just one of the clues
You’ve had your first lesson, in learnin’ the blues.

Funky Ba Da Bing, sweetheart.

Dropping Beats, Dropping Knowledge

Music is designed to free your funky mind
We have come to help you cope

Clinton agrees he fits the Trickster mold, but insists he does not really think about it all that much.

“See, I got so much history, so many things I know, that I just go ahead and do it. I’m responding to things around me, things that are happening. That’s why *Medicaid Fraud Dogg* gets to what it’s about. It’s the thing happening now.”

Thus does Florida Man concoct *Medicaid Fraud Dogg* with no consideration of the fact that our sitting governor was CEO of a company dinged for the largest Medicare fraud penalty in history. Informed that Spotify was running ads for the governor’s U.S. Senate campaign during the *Fraud Dogg* stream, he rumbled that deep laugh while denying any funkentelechal trickeration.

“Ain’t that some shit? Somebody having some fun.”

A happy accident? Maybe so, but hearing “I’m Rick Scott, and I approve this message” hard on the heels of “Medicated Creep” or “I’m Gon Make U Sick O’me” will never be anything but

comedy gold.

I’m gon make u sick
I’m gon make u sick o’me
Then I’m gonna give you the antidote
Somethin’ to make ya feel better

For all the humor, Clinton is dead serious about the themes behind the new album. Looking at addiction through the lens of someone who has been there, he compares Big Pharma to street dealers.

“Drugs are really more dangerous now. I quit, but I can still see all the people my age walking around, you know, that same dazed look like it was street drugs. And most of them got prescriptions. Now it’s legal. So the pharmaceutical companies, same as though it was still street drugs, they get people hooked on stuff, but now they got a legal way of doing it with prescriptions and stuff, people don’t have a chance. If you stop taking them, you’re in trouble. So they get a captive audience and they can advertise that shit on the radio and TV and internet. They give you the cure for the pill they gave you for something else and that happens three or four times before you realize you taking meds for other meds.”

No need to read the label warning
Just take two of me

“I’m glad when I got out of it I still had enough energy and inspiration to write all this. That was my energy for fighting harder again, along with my life, you know, family and everything. It was fun just building up the energy to get going again.”

It’s George doing what he has done for 60 years: absorbing the culture around him and refracting it through his unique sensibility.

Is There Life After Funk?

Once upon a time called Now
Somebody say, "Is there funk after death?"

The indisputable creative peak for Parliament Funkadelic remains their string of 70s masterpieces, but the new music coming out of Camp Clinton is lighting up a new, international generation of listeners. Just as important, the organization is healthier than ever. With extended family handling both creative and administrative duties, this framework can keep funking after George is gone, much like the Ellington, Basie, and Sun Ra organizations have kept those torches burning. If we – and they – are lucky, our kid's grandkids will be shouting "Make my funk the P Funk" while fourth- and fifth-generation Clintons navigate the Mothership.

Then again: King Lear had only three daughters, and we know how that turned out. Over 60 years, George Clinton emerged as Keeper of the Funk and one of the most recognizable front men in pop music. So what about succession? Who will fill the Dr. Funkenstein shoes?

"They all know they're doing it as a group and the group has been set up to function as a *group*. They'll find the focal point. They can figure out how they want to keep it going forward because the group is the group. Long as they don't get it twisted and think it is them individually, don't let those trivial things that usually get in the way of groups…some of those excuses be good as hell, but you ain't really thinking about the big picture."

Clinton passes the baton with a clear mandate to keep eyes on the prize: Maintain the funk, the whole funk, and nothing but the funk. It's an awesome task with and immense payoff.

"Ain't nothing better than when that music is coming together on stage. There is comradery you developed, whether you know

it or not. Despite the bullshit, that tightness you got supersedes everything."

But what will George do when he hangs up his road shoes?

"Man, I'ma go fishing, like every day. And I'm gonna write another book. I'm thinking about calling it *Stupid Shit I Did On Drugs*. I'll get all my friends to tell me about all the stupid stuff we did and collect it all in a book."

He laughs again, that same up-from-the-roots-of-his-soul laugh we have been digging all afternoon. He might be serious. Maybe. With this Trickster, you never know until the funk comes down.

Fantasy is reality in the world today
I'll keep hanging in there
That's the only way