

Ellen Exner for Bach Symposium 2017

Certifying J. S. Bach's Interplanetary Funksmanship: George Clinton, Bernie Worrell, and P-Funk's Baroque Aesthetic

In his 2014 memoir, *Brothas be, Yo Like George, Ain't that Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?* (New York: Atria), George Clinton, leader of a constellation of bands referred to collectively as Parliament-Funkadelic, specifically identified the contrapuntal style of J. S. Bach as an important musical influence while discussing composition of the track "Nappy Dugout" (Funkadelic, *Cosmic Slop*, 1973). Even though "Nappy Dugout" itself does not betray any clear debt to Bach or to the compositional procedures of his era, a survey of P-Funk's works reveals that there are indeed other tracks that do overtly reference the style of the Leipzig Thomaskantor. One such is "Atmosphere" (*Let's Take it to the Stage*, 1975), the music of which is entirely an homage to Bach.

The infusion of Bachian and other "classical" textures into P-Funk's eclectic blend was among the essential contributions of Clinton's brilliant keyboardist, Bernard Worrell. The "Wizard of Woo," as Worrell was sometimes known, brought an extraordinarily sophisticated level of musicianship to the band, having trained as a concert pianist at the Juilliard School and then the New England Conservatory. His virtuosic instrumental commentary, encyclopedic command of musical styles, contagious bass lines, and the signature extra-terrestrial soundscape he created with his Moog synthesizer were indispensable to the group's unique sonic identity. This paper is a scholarly exploration of P-Funk's debt to Bach and by extension joins an ever-evolving discussion of how his music transcends generic boundaries.