

Funk

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An African-American popular music style. It features syncopated interlocking rhythm patterns based on straight quaver and semiquaver subdivisions, a vocal style drawn from soul music, extended vamps based on a single and often complex harmony, strong emphasis on the bass line, and lyrics with frequent spiritual themes and social commentary. The use of the term for a musical style inverts the negative colloquial meaning of strong aromas, particularly of a bodily and sexual nature.

1. Origins.

While the adjective ‘funky’ was applied to gospel-influenced jazz in the 1950s, and appeared in song titles as early as 1967, for example *Funky Broadway* by Dyke and the Blazers, it did not become widespread as a term for a specific genre until the mid-1970s. The increased use of the term in the late 1960s coincided with a shift in African-American politics from the integrationist stance of the Civil Rights movement, associated with the rise of soul music, to the more radical stance of the Black Power Movement, a shift heralded by James Brown’s funk recording *Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud* (1968). In the 1960s Brown did the most to develop what came to be known as funk but elements of it can be found in recordings of the 50s: Professor Longhair’s *Tipitina* (1953) and the Hawkettes’ *Mardi Gras Mambo* (1954), both from New Orleans, blended Latin rhythms with the texture and harmonic patterns of rhythm and blues, while Ray Charles’s *What’d I say* (1959) presented an innovative synthesis of Latin rhythms, blues-based harmonic progressions and gospel vocal techniques. Brown’s 1962 recording of *Think* from *Live at the Apollo*, with its rapid tempo and aggressive cross rhythms, intensified the polyrhythmic implications of the earlier proto-funk recordings, while *Out of Sight* (1964) and *Papa’s got a brand new bag* (1965) brought these innovations into the recording studio. He refined his approach in *Cold Sweat* (1967) by substituting open-ended vamps based on a single harmony for harmonic progressions, and by accenting strongly the first beat of every or every other 4/4 bar, freeing the instruments to play any number of syncopated patterns in which the beats are implied rather than stated.

Other bands created their own forms of funky soul music, including Booker T. and the MGs, the Bar-Kays, the Meters, and Charles Wright and the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band. The first band to absorb Brown’s rhythmic approach and extend it was Sly and the Family Stone, who joined his rhythmic and textural innovations with a fragmented doo-wop vocal style featuring rapidly alternating voices, and with aspects of psychedelic rock, a fusion evident in their first successful single, *Dance to the Music* (1967). The psychedelic influence, particularly that of Jimi Hendrix, was felt by other funk bands, most notably Funkadelic (*Maggot Brain*, 1971) and the Isley Brothers (*That lady*, 1973).

The early 1970s witnessed a further spread, refinement and diversification of the funk style. The role of the bass expanded with Brown’s new bass player, William ‘Bootsy’ Collins, in songs recorded during 1970 such as *Sex Machine* and *Superbad*. Also, Larry Graham of Sly and the Family Stone created an innovative thumb-

popping bass guitar technique particularly evident in an early 1970 release, *Thank you falettinme be mice elf agin*. The band War added a prominent Latin element to the funk sound (the songs *Slippin' into Darkness*, 1971, and *Cisco Kid*, 1972), while Tower of Power brought syncopated horn lines to a new level of complexity (the album *Bump City*, 1972).

2. 1973 onwards.

The sudden popularity during the period 1973–5 of Kool and the Gang, the Ohio Players, Earth, Wind, and Fire and Parliament, in conjunction with the enormous success of Stevie Wonder, marked the beginning of funk as a distinct genre. Kool and the Gang's trio of hit songs *Funky Stuff*, *Jungle Boogie* and *Hollywood Swinging*, brought the funk sound to the pop audience with jagged, syncopated horn lines, party whistles and chanted group vocals. The Ohio Players scored a number one hit with *Fire* in 1974, a song that featured a hypnotic bass line, salacious group vocals, horn riffs, Latin-flavoured percussion and fuzz-toned guitar lines. Earth, Wind, and Fire fused jazz, soul, Afro-Caribbean rhythms, and Pan-African themes (signified musically by a trademark use of the kalimba), making their album *That's the Way of the World* one of the most popular of 1975. Stevie Wonder embarked on a new phase with the song *Superstition* (1972), a funk classic which marked his status as the most popular black recording artist of the period. By 1974 funk had influenced a number of jazz artists in the development of jazz fusion as evidenced in recording by Miles Davis (*Bitches Brew*, 1969), Herbie Hancock, (*Headhunters*, 1973), the Crusaders (*Southern Comfort*, 1974) and Weather Report (*Black Market*, 1976).

Parliament, with mastermind George Clinton began a string of recordings with *Up for the Down Stroke* (1974) that succeeded on the rhythm and blues charts through the 1970s, including *Tear the roof off the sucker (Give up the Funk)* (1976), *Flash Light* (1977), *One Nation Under a Groove – Part 1* (by Funkadelic) and *Aqua Boogie (a Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop)* (both 1978). Clinton created a particularly striking form of funk, emphasizing a clear backbeat, often reinforced with electronic hand claps. He thickened the texture with a wealth of contrasting, overlapping parts, featuring 'Bootsy' Collins' extroverted bass lines, Bernie Worrell's innovative synthesizer work that included the use of the synthesizer bass on *Flashlight*, horn players from Brown's band and gospel-rooted group vocals. Clinton expanded the Parliament stage show into a spectacle that set new standards for grandiosity in black popular music. Beginning with the album *Mothership Connection* (1975), he developed a cosmological narrative that proselytized the redemptive power of funk, and has continued to influence numerous hip hop musicians.

While groups such as the Commodores, the Gap Band, Rick James, Cameo and Slave achieved success in the late 1970s and early 80s, they were largely overshadowed on rhythm and blues radio by the overwhelming popularity of disco music, itself a simplified form of funk. Funk's influence, however, was felt in its psychedelic rock–funk form through artists such as Prince and Living Colour, and in Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1982), which blended aspects of funk with disco, pop and heavy metal. The legacy of funk cuts across a wide range of popular forms, and is most obvious in hip hop, which has adopted funk's rhythmic approach and recycled many of its rhythmic patterns via sampling.

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See also

Brown, James

Chambers, Dennis

Clinton, George

Funkadelic

Jazz-funk

Soul jazz

Hayes, Isaac

Isley Brothers

JBs

Kool and the Gang

Mayfield, Curtis

Parliament

Richie, Lionel

Sly and the Family Stone

Tower of Power

Turner, Tina

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