

The Sounds of Black America: Funk and Dayton, Ohio

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Abstract

This essay proposes a framework called the “sounds of black America” to argue that the social and cultural interactions unique to a specific locality results in a particular approach to funk as sound organization. Drawing on George Lipsitz’s concept of the “Black Spatial Imaginary” and using the music of the Ohio Players as a case study, I demonstrate how the music programs in Dayton-area schools can help us understand the particular approach to funk that came out of Dayton in the late 1960s through the 1970s.

Introduction

In his wide-ranging and, often amusing, 2013 autobiography, George Clinton recounts the development of his sound and subsequent musical journey, including Parliament’s early doo-wop days and the extraterrestrial highs of the mothership’s success. In recalling the early days of traveling back and forth between Detroit, where he worked as a songwriter, and his barbershop, the Silk Palace in Plainfield, New Jersey, a telling section of Clinton’s book focuses on the Silk Palace’s jukebox. Noting that he owned the jukebox and could change the records whenever he wanted, Clinton states that this gave him access to all the regional R&B and soul scenes from across the country. He writes, “There was the Philly sound, with the Orlons and Lee Andrews and the Hearts. Chicago had the Orioles, the Dells, and the Dukays. If you listened closely enough and read the labels for writer and producer credits, you could start to sort them by subtle differences and figure out which groups were from St. Louis and which ones were from Cleveland.”¹

I start my presentation today with Clinton’s quote because it highlights various important aspects about black popular music in general, and particularly black music in the second half of

the twentieth century. Clinton notes the subtle sonic differences between multiple groups encompassed under the genre label “R&B,” and also how these differences help to determine and define what we might consider various sonic localities. In his documentary, *Finding the Funk*, Nelson George and his commentators argue persuasively that here, in Dayton, was, in the 1970s, perhaps the epicenter of funk music. As historian Scot Brown explains in his work, during the 1970s and into the early 1980s, Dayton produced many regionally and nationally successful bands like the Ohio Players, Slave, Lakeside, Zapp, Faze-O, Platypus, Dayton, Shadow, Heatwave, and Roger Troutman, to name but a few.² Situated in a city along the Miami River about 50 miles from Cincinnati, funk musicians from Dayton built on the rhythmic foundation popularized by James Brown in the mid- to late-1960s and put their own unique spin on the genre, creating what Portia Maulsby calls “Dayton Street Funk.”³

Maulsby’s term points out an important but relatively under-emphasized aspect in musicological studies of funk history: many American urban centers had their own particular approach to funk as sound organization, and these approaches were closely connected to a variety of social institutions and cultural interactions that had specific iterations in different urban centers. Coming to prominence after the Civil Rights legislation and at the beginnings of deindustrialization, funk as both a sonic and sociocultural practice provides myriad opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary examinations, particularly, at least for my purposes today, in the realms of musicology and cultural geography. Indeed, cultural geography and music engage in an intimate relationship where place and space play a fundamental role in shaping music, while music plays an integral role in articulating, and in some cases, manipulating, place and space.

Today, I offer the beginnings of a framework that I call the “sounds of black America.” I use “sounds” in the plural because I am interested in examining the intellectual labor of musical

performance, and putting these various manifestations of funk in dialogue with the various social institutions and cultural interactions specific to different geographic locations in America. In this presentation, I primarily examine one particular social institution: the school music programs in Dayton, and how these music programs might help us think about the music of the Ohio Players.

The Black Spatial Imaginary and Community Theaters of Dayton

In key ways, Dayton was similar to many other early twentieth-century industrial towns in America. As members of the black community left the South to escape Jim Crow laws, they moved west and north to industrial cities like Dayton to find better paying jobs working in factories and for government contracts. While the economic opportunities were greater than what was available in the South, Portia Maulsby notes that these higher wages were coupled with discriminatory practices in the workplace, poor working conditions, and segregated housing policies and practices. In particular, Maulsby notes that the discrimination in housing created a high concentration of the black community – regardless of an individual’s education, employment, or socioeconomic status – living on the Westside of Dayton.⁴

The concentration of the black community on the Westside and the segregated education structures that resulted can be understood through a framework that George Lipsitz outlines in his text, entitled *How Racism Takes Place*. In it, Lipsitz examines the two meanings of the word “place”: first, as in the way that racism occurs, and second, in the sense that cultural geographers do, “to describe how social relations take on their full force and meaning when they are enacted physically in actual places.”⁵ For Lipsitz, the relationship between race and place results in a distinction between what he calls the “white spatial imaginary” and the “Black spatial imaginary.” The former emphasizes what he terms “hostile privatism and defensive localism,” while the latter counters the white spatial imaginary with “democratic and inclusive ideals.”⁶

Indeed, in a poignant turn of phrase, Lipsitz argues that the Black spatial imaginary “turns segregation into congregation,” and seeks to change the focus from the *exchange value* of place – seen in the acquisition and accumulation of wealth through property – to place’s *use value*. Lipsitz notes that this use value manifests itself in multiple ways: in some cases, members of black communities would pool their resources and exchange services that were otherwise denied them; in other cases, it meant joining in solidarity as a way to safely move within multiple spaces.

Throughout his text, Lipsitz continually points out the importance of expressive culture in creating and understanding the interconnections of race, place, and space. Visual installations, community art programs, and music help to define the Black spatial imaginary. We can see and hear Dayton manifesting the Black spatial imaginary in multiple ways. As Maulsby and Scot Brown note, the concentration of the black community on the Westside, coupled with the wages provided by factory and government jobs, created a vibrant black business and entertainment district located on West 5th Street in West Dayton. Numerous businesses, theaters, clubs and taverns provided ample opportunity to hear musical styles from the South, particularly blues and jazz, side by side with the latest developments in black popular music.⁷ Thus, in Dayton and other racialized spaces across the country, black communities established the kinds and varieties of performance venues for black musicians that helped shape and define their respective cultural geographies.

But if the entertainment district in Dayton provided opportunities for musicians to interact with each other and be exposed to a variety of musical practices, then the school system provided younger musicians with the kind of training that would help them develop their musical talents and provide them with myriad performance outlets. Brown, in his work on Dayton-area

funk, argues that because Dayton and its surrounding municipalities adopted a “separate but equal doctrine” for the school system, blacks in the city organized and lobbied for all-black schools with black teachers.⁸ If the segregated housing policies created segregated school systems, then the black community of Dayton turned this segregation into congregation, resulting in widely respected music programs with inspiring music teachers in four high schools: Roosevelt, Dunbar, Roth, and Jefferson. Brown specifically mentions Charles Spencer, music teacher at Roosevelt High who not only insisted that his students learn music theory as a requirement to participate in activities like intramural choirs and marching bands,⁹ but also enabled students to take on added responsibilities, such as directing music ensembles like choir and conducting the orchestra. Indeed, the impact of the public-school system had such a profound effect that musicians who had participated in these school programs remembered them, even decades later. In a 2015 interview with Jeff Mao for the Red Bull Music Academy, former leader of the Ohio Players, Walter “Junie” Morrison, corroborated the importance of the Dayton school system. Morrison states, “I think one of the most important influences for me though, was the school system. We had very inspirational teachers, like Charles Spencer at Roosevelt High. Teachers like Mr. Spencer had a way of helping us to want to learn and be impeccable with our music studies.”¹⁰

The kind of discipline and professionalism that Spencer and other educators encouraged was supplemented by the kinds of musical interactions and experimentation that occurred before band rehearsals, during talent shows, “battle of the band” competitions, and “show wagons” where mobile stages enabled local bands to play and compete. Brown, in extensive interviews with multiple Dayton-based funk musicians, notes that the music rehearsal rooms in the local schools offered a preview of what was to come, as the young musicians jammed together,

experimenting and developing their sound. The bands were able to practice and hone these experimentations at talent shows and dances because, as Brown states, “During the 1960s to the late 1970s school talent show and dances were among the most popular social gatherings for black young people in Dayton.”¹¹ Indeed, we can think of these social gatherings as examples of what musicologist Guthrie Ramsey calls “community theaters.”

Ramsey describes community theaters as spaces where interpretation and the construction of musical meaning can occur. From the house party to the skating rink, from the church pews to the band rehearsals and talent shows, community theaters provide scholarship with pools of experience and cultural poetics that can be used for theoretical and analytical principles.¹² One of the key elements of Ramsey’s framework is the performative nature of community theaters; that is, the everyday experiences of the black community impact the processes, procedures, and interpretations of pieces of expressive culture. In my analyses today, I would like to focus on how the experiences in the community theater of the Dayton school system might inflect the decisions that went into some of the Ohio Players’ earliest records. Returning to the kinds of musical interactions that must have occurred in the talent shows and dances, we can see – and more importantly, members of the Ohio Players explicitly state – how these musical interactions were integrated into their live shows and recorded performances. Such was the case, for instance, when the Ohio Players released the album *Pain*.

The Ohio Players, Improvisation, and Sonic Interaction

Pain was the second album that the Ohio Players released, but the first on the Westbound Records label after Junie Morrison joined the band. The title track contains many of the sonic characteristics that came to be associated with the Ohio Players. In fact, it might be more fruitful to think about “Pain” as an extended jam, as the song itself contains very little lyrical material,

and instead shifts the emphasis first to the improvisatory capabilities of the trumpet, guitar, and flute players, before it engages in a brief call-and-response section between guitar, piano, and bass towards the end. In his interview with Morrison, Mao specifically asked about this track, noting that it had a loose and improvisational feel. Morrison responded, stating, “‘Pain’ was indeed an improvisational work. We were on our way to a gig in Memphis when suddenly, the bus pulled over and it was announced that we were going to test out a studio we had heard about.” He continues a few moments later, noting that as the musical director of an ensemble of talented musicians, “All I had to do was immediately create a hook and call on each of the individuals to solo from time to time. The track was done in one take, vocals and all. No problem. Done deal.”¹³

While the track was recorded in one take, it set the framework for what would become typical of the Ohio Players sound. As Rickey Vincent observes in his text *Funk*, a key element of the band’s sound is that their “quirky, ever-changing layers of rhythms slid together in a fantastically fluid sound[.]”¹⁴ While Vincent was referring to the more commercially successful recordings from the Mercury label, *Skin Tight*, *Fire*, and *Honey*, we can hear the kind of fluidity that he highlights from some of their earliest recordings. In “Pain,” for instance, we can hear the changes in the accompanying groove that mark different solo sections. For instance, the track starts off sparse, with just a brief piano introduction before the vocal line and horns enter. Supporting this opening riff is an equally sparse groove, articulating beats 2 and 4 in the snare drum while the bass provides harmonic and rhythmic support. However, as the track moves through its different solo sections, the drum parts of the sections change. When the trumpet solo enters in measure 13, for example, the drummer adds additional sixteenth note articulations in the hi-hat and cymbal, which continue throughout the duration of the solo. After the trumpet

solo, a four-measure transition follows, after which the piece moves to a more blues-oriented guitar solo, which is supported by an eighth note pulse and more active piano accompaniment. As “Pain” progresses, the accompaniment becomes more active, until halfway through the song the individual solos give way to a pronounced moment of call and response between the guitar, piano, and bass as the song is propelled toward its conclusion.

While extended improvisations and call and response are key elements of many different styles of black popular music, the particular combination of styles in this track, as well as the musicians’ ability to create different grooves and to weave in and out of them effectively can be understood as a reflection of the musical community from which they came. The jazz and blues-like presence on the album can be heard as a reflection of the kinds of sonic interactions that were taking place in the entertainment district, while the jam-based arrangement of “Pain” can be understood both as a sonic manifestation of the jam-like activities of the Dayton-area school music rehearsal rooms, as well as Morrison’s own musical director responsibilities in both his local church and in multiple school ensembles.

The Ohio Players would go on to record two more albums for Westbound Records, 1972’s *Pleasure*, and *Ecstasy* the following year. While *Pleasure* continued to feature extended jams highlighting the band’s improvisational and interactive abilities, it also scored them a major hit with the track entitled “Funky Worm.” The track is recognized by two of its most notable characteristics, the “Granny” character, which opens the track, and the ARP synthesizer solo. Morrison developed the Granny character – or, more accurately, a character on which the “Granny” character is based – through interactions with the audience during their live shows around their hometown. In the interview with Mao he noted, “Early in my career with the Ohio Players, we played a lot of nightclubs and had a closer interaction with the audience. As a result,

we would do skits to bring ourselves even closer to the people in that setting. One of these so-called ‘skits’ involved the character I created of a young boy with a very ‘dirty mouth.’ That ‘boy’ character was using what later became the ‘Granny’ voice on ‘Funky Worm.’”¹⁵

Against the heavy groove of the bass and guitar and the interjecting two-part horns, the band’s vocal lines talk about the “worm” of the song, living six feet underground before coming out of his hole. Shortly thereafter, Morrison interjects the ARP synthesizer line, weaving in and around the funk groove. This track participated in black popular music’s early engagement with emerging music technologies, as Sun Ra had done previously, as Stevie Wonder was doing around the same time, and as P-Funk would do just a few years later. In many ways, Morrison’s solo continued the trend that the Ohio Players had established on their previous record, combining a variety of timbres and instrumental lines to create what Rickey Vincent calls their “gutbucket” funk.¹⁶ In addition, the track serves as an example of how musicians of black popular music, particularly funk musicians, integrated the new sounds of emerging music technologies. Morrison’s solo line also highlights the ways that musicians were able to combine the new sounds with more “traditional” sounds of the horn section, exemplifying what Olly Wilson has called the “heterogeneous sound ideal.”¹⁷ As Brown notes in his essay on fellow Dayton musician Roger Troutman, the incorporation of music technologies played with notions of “linear progress,” rather than an example of the outer space and extraterrestrial themes of Afrofuturism that has come to dominate the scholarly discourse of funk and technology. As Brown writes of Troutman, and by extension, I would suggest, other Dayton-based musicians, they conjoined “futuristic sounds with stories about down-to-earth or time-honored lyrical themes – such as the need for commitment, love, money, and setting aside time to party and enjoy life in the midst of its constant challenges.”¹⁸

Conclusion

It is important to note that while the Ohio Players had benefitted from the social institutions and community theaters of their hometown, they in fact *became* one of those institutions by choosing to stay in the area after they had achieved greater commercial success, and often worked with and trained younger musicians in the Dayton area. Yet, the presence of music technologies outlined above also reflected something more ominous. Schools were closing, including Roosevelt High in the mid-1970s, and the economic downturn that cities such as Dayton were facing in the 1970s had an impact on the musicians of the area. Brown writes, “The downsizing of big bands in black music mirrored the economic calamity of deindustrialization that downsized jobs and wages of workers in cities like Dayton and across the country.”¹⁹ Maultsby highlights something similar, arguing that black popular music of the late 1960s and 1970s was caught in the paradox of the political optimism of the Civil Rights legislation while facing continued discrimination. She writes, “The optimism that once prevailed in the middle class transformed into feelings of ambivalence, and the unemployed expressed their disillusionment at the system that had failed them.”²⁰ The new possibilities of electronic instruments serving as a sonic analogue for the kinds of devastation that America’s urban centers faced would become a hallmark of hip hop music a few years later, and the funk music of Dayton would be heavily sampled by hip-hop artists, particularly those on the West Coast.

And yet, I do not want to end on such a dire note. I would like to suggest that thinking about the specific iteration of funk that the Ohio Players created encourages an examination of the other manifestations of funk in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, including The Meters and their relationship to New Orleans, Sly and the Family Stone and the Bay Area, and Prince’s brand of funk out of Minneapolis. Indeed, while we should not make one-to-one associations between a

particular rhythmic or harmonic figure and a specific band, we *can* think about the intellectual labor of musical performance and how its intersections with a variety of social institutions and cultural interactions can help us understand how sound helps us build, organize, and understand our surroundings.

¹ George Clinton, *Brothas Be, Yo Like George, Ain't That Funkin' Kinda Hard on You?: A Memoir*. (New York: Atria Books, 2014), 44.

² This list appears in Scot Brown, "A Land of Funk: Dayton, Ohio," in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, ed. Tony Bolden. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 73.

³ Portia K. Maultsby, "Dayton Street Funk: The Layering of Multiple Identities," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek K. Scott. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 259-282.

⁴ Maultsby, "Dayton Street Funk," 265.

⁵ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 5.

⁶ Lipsitz, 13.

⁷ Scot Brown, "A Land of Funk: Dayton, Ohio," in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, ed. Tony Bolden. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 75.

⁸ Brown, "A Land of Funk," 78.

⁹ Brown, "A Land of Funk," 78-79.

¹⁰ Jeff "Chairman" Mao, "Interview: Funk Lifer Junie Morrison." *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*, Accessed 7 April 2017, <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/04/junie-morrison-interview>

¹¹ Brown, "A Land of Funk," 80.

¹² Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 4.

¹³ Mao, "Interview: Funk Lifer Junie Morrison."

¹⁴ Rickey Vincent, *Funk: The Music, the People, and the Rhythm of the One*. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996), 196.

¹⁵ Mao, "Interview: Funk Lifer Junie Morrison."

¹⁶ Vincent, *Funk*, 196.

¹⁷ Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music," in *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, ed. Josephine Wright and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park, 1992): 327-338.

¹⁸ Scot Brown, "The Blues/Funk Futurism of Roger Troutman," *American Studies: The Funk Issue*, vol. 52, no. 4, 121.

¹⁹ Brown, "The Blues/Funk Futurism," 122.

²⁰ Maultsby, 270.

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