

SHITTY IS PRETTY



There are many beautiful animals in the forest, but none is quite as ferocious as the mighty Heavy Funk 45'. In the interest of preserving this rare and endangered species, I have written this step by step guide of how to produce your own. This by no means a foolproof formula for success (if you are an utter fool you will unfortunately still be an utter fool after reading this). However, when used in combination with good taste and a little giblet gravy, this guide will give you the basic tools to produce a highly potent Funk 45'.

The first thing to understand is that if you are trying to make a Heavy Funk 45', you are NOT trying to make a "professional" record by today's standards. Funk 45's are rough because they were made rough. They were made in basements or garages or lo-fi studios by bands that played barbecues on Saturday afternoons. Many people come at Funk with this bullshit acid-jazz, smooth R&B method. Everything comes out all clean and happy and nice. They call it professionalism. I call it bullshit. If your going to try to record Funk, you got to have enough balls to make it rough. Fuck what the radio station says. Fuck how smart you are and how fancy your ideas are. If you're gonna come rough, COME ROUGH!

ANATOMY OF A HEAVY FUNK 45

With that said you are ready for the basic principal of making a rough and heavy Funk 45': SHITTY IS PRETTY. By this I mean that in whatever you're doing, whether writing a horn line, getting some drum sounds, or designing a label, you got to be shitty. The shittier the better. The more you let go of the professional musician/engineer/producer bullshit that creeps into your head while holed up in a studio, the more you will be able to let yourself record the kind of rough-ass shit that you want to hear when you're out on the dance floor tryin' to get into your karate boogaloo. Why do people use sampled drums when they have \$300,000 recording budgets? Because they don't have the balls to spend only

\$300 and one afternoon making an entire album of bare-back break beats their damn self! They think if they throw one radio shack mic up in the living room and let their cousin play that beat he learned in high school then they won't be a legitimate professional music celebrity. Fuck em! You don't need any of that money or big label bullshit to make the greatest record nobody will ever hear! Keep it rough, entry-level, stupid, and above all SHITTY!

I have divided this guide into three basic parts: *Music, Recording, and Presentation*. Due to lack of space the latter two steps will be printed in the next issue. For now we will concentrate on the first step, composing a Funk 45'.

BY GABRIEL ROTH

PART ONE: THE MUSIC



As in all aspects of funk, you must remember that it must be simple. Get over the whole genius/composer/innovator idea. You don't need to compose a masterpiece. If you were a Mozart, you probably wouldn't be reading this article anyway. The point is that funk is necessarily raw and straight from the soul. It doesn't come from thinking real hard about counterpoint, odd-time signatures, or new theories of harmony. It must be simple so that when folks hear it they want to get down, not ponder its significance in music class. So if you don't know a lot of music theory, don't worry. You're a step ahead of those who do. If you do, don't take yourself too seriously because there is no room here for creative egos.

In addition to being simple, all parts (and they are all exactly that: parts) of an arrangement must be brutally repetitive. Repetition of patterns is the meat and potatoes of every bad-ass groove.

Chord changes in the main section of the song are not common. If you want to be adventurous you might get away with a groove that alternates between the I chord and the IV chord (e.g. B⁷ and E⁷), but your best bet is probably just to lock in some mean parts on one chord and stay there. If you can't get into the idea of playing one chord for a whole song, put down this magazine immediately and go find yourself a nice Beatles songbook.

MUSICIANS

Your first step will be finding some musicians. Not everybody with a good sense of rhythm can play funk. Though it is very basic music, very few musicians have the experience or good taste to respect its subtleties. It is best to get time-machine players. That is: genuine old-school players that think they are still in 1971 (e.g. Cliff Driver, Lee Fields). If this isn't possible, your second choice is to get musicians who are so into rough old shit that they can willfully deny the influence of the last 30 years of music on their own playing (e.g. the Poets of Rhythm, Neal Sugarman, me). Your third and most probable option is to find musicians who are patient, disciplined, confident, and will do exactly what the fuck you tell them to do. If they are not patient and disciplined they will have a hard time playing the same shit over and over (and over) again. If they are not confident their insecurities will possess them to prove how talented they actually are by fucking up their part with some old educated bullshit. Lastly, they must do exactly what the fuck you say. There are two good reasons why they will: A. They respect you and what you are trying to accomplish and understand that they are a part of a whole. B. You had to pay them. As far as option B. is concerned, beware of studio musicians! They tend to be the least capable of playing anything tasteful. Funk is not "professional" music and studio musicians and jazzers usually find it beneath them to play anything that goes well with barbecued food.

It is said that James Brown's guitar auditions consisted of: "Can you play a E9 chord?" (Yeah.) "For how long?" We had a similar experience the first time we brought Binky Griptite into the Desco studios. I told him "Give it Up Turnit Loose in D", and we got right down in to it. Phillip and I wanted to see how long he could play the part before he started fucking around. Five minutes . . . Ten minutes . . . Nobody said shit. We just kept playing like we had no intention of ever going to the bridge, much less stopping.

After watching Binky sit there with his eyes closed for thirty minutes without wandering one note from the 3-note line, I stopped myself. He's been steppin' with the Soul Providers ever since.

MELODY

The melody should generally be restricted to the horns or maybe the organ. Vocals can be the only melody, but it's good to have some kind of horn/organ line that can easily get stuck in some fool's head. Again simplicity is key, and shitty is pretty. If you have some music theory, don't use it too much. Extensions are a no-no. No 9^{ths} or 13^{ths} (a 6th is okay in a real happy groove, but the context must imply that it is indeed a 6th and not a 13th.) It is best to stick with the pentatonic scale (1, 3, 4, 5, and 7) for any melody. If you have no idea of what I'm talking about, don't fret - you have an excellent shot at writing a nice simple line. Never add notes to try to make something more cute and clever. In fact, it's a good idea to take out as many notes as possible and leave only the really important ones. Too many notes will really kill a line. Just try to keep the shit nice and RAW. Don't forget our secret little key to success: SHITTY, SIMPLE, SIMPLE, SHITTY, SHITTY: PRETTY!

HARMONY

When you write horn lines you not only get to come up with shitty melodies, but you get to come up with shitty harmonies as well! Though 3rd's and 6th's (and 10th's) are common and reliable, if you want to get extra shitty you can try one of the following three harmonies, each of which breaks basic rules of any respectable music theorist:

1. Medieval Style- Parallel 4th's and 5th's can be just the thing to bring that rough-ass Gregorian shit to a simple line. (E.g. In the key of A minor: a G with a D, an A with an E, a C with a G, etc...)
2. Good Ol' Mr. Unison- Having all the horns play exactly the same notes is the perfect way to piss off jazzers and revel in your own shittiness. How could something so stupid be so clever? (This is also great for those of you who don't have a lot of formal music education.)
3. The Point- My personal favorite right now, it is a mixture of Medieval and traditional harmonies that captures the subtle but shitty major/minor ambiguity that is such a rudimentary part of Soul music. Use a major 3rd (minor 6th) interval for every note of the line (parallel 3rd's). (E.g. In the key of E minor: a D with an F#, an E with a G#, a G with a B, etc...)



RHYTHM

Rhythm has got to be 99% of the arrangement. Other than the horns and sometimes the organ, all the parts are patterns that should fit together into the arrangement like so many gears in a clock. With that in mind (as well as our basic shitty-is-pretty principle), let's break down a rhythm arrangement instrument by instrument.

The drums can be the simplest part but is often the most easily fucked-up part. If they are too straight it can sound like Disco. This is often the problem with these Funkadelic-head drummers that believe in that four-on-the-floor, backbeat-heavy, disco-but-they-call-it-funk bullshit. However, it can be worse if you got one of these Tower O' Power, Drummer's Magazine, chop's guys who plays so much syncopated 32nd note bullshit that you have to go and stick his size 5A David Garibaldi signature model drumsticks straight up his educated ass.

There are a few nevers: 1. Two hands on the hi-hat, unless you are actually in Ghana and it's still 1970, is a never. 2. Swinging. Beau Dollar swings on *Who Knows?* by the Dapps, James Black does it on Eddie Bo's records, but now that the eighties happened, it is nearly impossible to find any drummer that will be able to successfully carry out a tasteful swinging funk beat and not fall into that uptown jazz-funk cheesy shit. 3. Complicated fills. Just say no.

The beat should be a one or maybe two bar pattern that repeats over and over. Think of a breakbeat you like and rip it off. There are very few beats that haven't already been played a thousand times so don't get bent out of shape trying to lay down an absolutely original one. Just try to make it rough and it will probably work.

It is common in funk to shift the backbeats around (that is: move the snare accents off of the 2 and/or 4 to a neighboring eighth note). This is one of JB's biggest innovations which he started with *Cold Sweat* and continued to develop through *I Got the Feelin'*, *Give it up Turn it Loose*, and ultimately culminated in *The Popcorn*. This is very common on heavy funk 45's and you can put it to good use. However, if it is too contrived it will come out like bad Tower of Power. Sometimes it works better just to play a really straight beat.

When you're trying to come up with a bass part remember that the bass is usually felt more than heard. It's got to be the same thing over and over and the simpler the line the better. Check out Jodi Gales *Push*, or Lyn Collins *Think*, or even the JB's *Hot Pants Road*. These are all examples of seriously heavy bass lines that consist of no more than two notes. Like horn melodies, bass lines should be basically within the pentatonic minor scale, though chromatic walks from the major 3rd to the 5 are very common as well as from the 7 to the root. One more thing to remember before I move on: NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES "SLAP" OR "POP" THE STRINGS OF A BASS. THIS IS NOT FUNKY AND COOL. IT IS TASTELESS AND EMBARRASSINGLY STUPID.

The guitar on a funk 45 should be played like a tambourine. It's all about repetition. The JB school is usually two guitars: one playing strictly rhythm (chucking muted 16th's while squeezing out a pattern of 9th chords,) and the other playing a linear (one note at a time) picking pattern. Both parts usually repeat in one or two bar patterns and NEVER change. Other than the JB's, who always had an extra guitar player and plenty of discipline, bands usually just play the rhythm parts. Often linear parts and rhythm parts are mixed together like in Prophet Soul's *Kick the Habit* (Sticks of Dynamite), or Hook and Sling.

The organ is either playing the melody (like the horns), playing rhythm (like the guitar), or just fucking around. This is probably the only instrument that can fuck around once in a while. Of course, like all instruments, the organ must be played by someone who has enough taste to know when not to play anything at all. You'll find that certain chords (minor 7th's for example) don't work for the organ because they sound too smooth. Chord wise, the organ should stick to dominant 7th's and an occasional 9th. I have been very lucky to find Earl Maxton, who knows exactly when he should be in the rhythm

section, when to play a melody, when to fuck around, and when to just lay out. Before we found Earl, I spent a lot of time trying to get organists to play the right shit. If you don't need anything fancy, it might be easier to just play it yourself (this goes for all instruments if you have some basic idea how it should be played and can't find someone to do it better than you.)

Congas and other percussion can be really nasty if they are recorded rough enough. Make sure that they are not too Latin for the track you're doing though. For straight funk stuff, they sound heavier when they are on the downbeat.

Probably the most underestimated instrument is the tambourine. The tambourine dictates the groove. It should be loud and played by someone who can really play it. Don't let somebody's little sister shake it just to shake it. It's gotta be solid from top to bottom. Pay Bobby Byrd a thousand dollars to do it right for three minutes and you will have a killer record. (Secret tambourine hints: 1. The angle you hold it at can determine the amount that the beat swings: 90 degrees to the floor will give you the straightest sixteenths. 2. Periodically switching from over-hand to back-hand techniques helps to relieve tambourine fatigue, but be conscious not to change the feel.)

Now that you have all the parts, you got to put them together right. Don't get too excited about some complicated syncopation. Listen to Mary Jane Hooper *I've Got Reason's* or some Dyke and the Blazers. Straight and simple but nasty as fuck. On the other hand, you should be aware of exactly how the parts fit in with each other. To that end there are three basic types of syncopation: with (together), against (call-and-response), and independent.

The intros to Lee "Shot" Williams *Get Some Order* or General Crook *Gimme Some* are good examples of "with" syncopations. The guitar and bass are playing exactly the same part, the same rhythm, on the same section of the bar. This can be cool in short parts, but too much of it will make it sound like either riff rock or jazz fusion, especially if the part is too complicated. The only band who could really get away with a lot of this is the Meters. *Cissy Strut* is an enigma.

The call-and-response syncopation is usually the best. Check out *Humpty Dump* (The Vibrettes). The bass picks up the bar and the guitar answers on the 2. Or a very clean example is Marva Whitney *What Do I Have to Do to Prove My Love to You* in which the horns hit the one and the guitar answers by accenting the two. This type of arranging between the horns and the rhythm section is one of the greatest things that made JB's arrangements so distinctive. A more extreme example would be Oscar Harris and the Twinkle Stars *Relax Before Sex* in which the saxes and brass have an elaborate two bar arrangement in which the baritone honks and the brass answers and then the bass trombone honks and the saxes answer in turn. Meanwhile there are two guitars chatting back and forth and the whole thing is in stereo and it makes you paranoid if you smoke a joint and listen to it in headphones. This is why playing nothing is such an important part of a funk arrangement. It allows space into which you can fit other things. Like the space between the cogs of a gear, or the whole in the center of a wheel.

Lastly, independent syncopation is when the parts neither follow nor answer one another. Check out *Hot Pants*. The bass is playing a two-note line, one guitar is playing a mean linear part and the whole time the other guitar is chugging along like a tambourine completely independent of the whole thing. Another good example of a different type of independent syncopation is the Dyke and the Blazers' arrangements, which were too rough to slow down for calculated JB type call-and-response arrangements. The bass is pounding along with the drums, the guitar is doing his thing, and the horns are barking at will. The parts are independent but it is important to remember that they are always related. One part is never stepping on another. Independent syncopation also describes the way the rhythm section might be doing a one or two bar pattern and the horns have a long four or eight bar melody. Check out Ernie and the Top Notes *Dap Walk*. The bass and guitar are doing this two bar vamp and the horns are

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RHYTHM CONTINUED

playing an eight bar (notably simple) melody.

The greatest funk tracks usually use all of these syncopations together. *Hook and Sling* is a two bar pattern where the bass and guitar play simple, independent parts for the first bar and a half, and then play in unison (a "with" type syncopation) for the last two beats when they run that little line together. In *Lickin' Stick*, the guitar and organ are perfect call-and response parts. The bass line is independent except for it goes "with" the guitar accents on the second bar. The horn line is a four bar pattern, consisting of long notes that go against the cut-up two bar pattern of the rhythm section.

This all may seem to be a bit complicated, but when you begin trying to figure out what the fuck to tell the musicians to do, keeping these principles of



l-r: the Desco studio / Mr. Lee Fields / a dapper keys man! / sweaty sticks...

CHANGES

Almost all of the time the purpose of a change is to take the band out of the groove just for a minute so when it comes back it's twice as bad. Not all funk tracks need changes. They can just be three minutes of one really good part. However if you're going to do a change, there are four basic kinds: the turnaround, the bridge, the B-section, and the break.

The most distinguishing thing about a turnaround is that, unlike other changes it is NOT a repeating pattern. The expression "turnaround" originally referred to the V chord section that turns around the end of a blues pattern. (In a traditional 12 bar blues, the turnaround is actually the 9th and 10th bars.) It is not uncommon for a funk 45 to use a 12 bar type blues arrangement (E.g. *Pass the Peas*, *The Percolator Got a Thing for You Baby*, *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag*, *Frank Williams You Got to Be a Man*, etc.) When this is the case, a turnaround is necessary, but there are lots of songs that have turnarounds that are not in a blues form. A turnaround is a short part (never more than one or two bars) that usually signifies the end of the melody or the entrance of another one. It usually only occurs once each time it appears, as opposed to a bridge or B-section which can be a pattern that repeats. It often has a chord change that hits the V or vii chord which begs resolution back to the groove. Robert Moore *Everything's Gonna Be Alright*, uses a iii vi turnaround that goes to a IV chord. Sometimes it is simply a melodic turnaround like in Naomi Davis *Forty First Street Breakdown*, in which there is a chromatic descending turnaround every time Naomi calls the band to "break it down". *Tighten Up* has a horn break that is actually more of a turnaround than it is a break. The turnaround for *Hook and Sling* has three chords (VI, VII, I) and leads into a drum break before returning to the groove.

The bridge can be almost anything. It is most often eight or sixteen bars of a repeating pattern on the IV chord (E.g. Bobby Williams *Let's Work A While*, everything by JB, almost everything by everybody else), but can be almost any chord or combination of chords. My favorite bridges are the ones that use real cheesy chords (like minor iii's and vi's) before turning around and coming back to the groove. Usually these chords are repeated a few times. Check out Lee Fields *Let's Get a Groove On*, or the Mighty Imperials version of *Never Found a Girl* featuring Joseph Henry. These are the bridges that are so bad that they're good. They can be as cheesy as you like as long as they are SHORT ENOUGH SO THAT THEY DON'T RUIN THE SONG. This envelope has been pushed most notably by Kool and the Gang who often played the worlds ugliest, cheesiest, most terrible, jazz chords for bridges that always seem to be lingering about for four bars too long. Just when you are gonna take the record and smash it, they go back to the original groove which you had forgotten about and now sounds like the heaviest thing you ever heard. I do not condone playing jazz chords, but if you need to express yourself chordally, it is better that you do it in a terrible eight bar bridge than in the important part of a song.

The B-section is a completely independent part of the song, which, unlike a bridge or a turnaround, MUST BE GOOD. It is arranged as a repeating pattern a groove just like the A-section of the song. A perfect example is *Escapism*. The A part goes along for a while . . . and then the snare hits eight times . . . and then BOOM: B-section. In fact, as in this example, the A-section may never return after the B-section. B-sections tend to be long,

which is one of the major things that distinguishes them from bridges. A B-section is different from all other changes in that it is not a temporary suspension from the A-section. It is a comfortable groove in its own right.

Finally, there is the break. A break is a section in which one or more instruments are featured by taking out all the other instruments. Kool and the Gang were masters of not only guitar breaks (e.g. the beginning of *Let the Music Take Your Mind*) but horn breaks as well (e.g. *Who's Gonna Take the Weight*.) Drums usually accompany horn breaks. Check out *It's My Thing* (Marva Whitney) in which the saxes blow a nasty little two bar cuss over a break beat for eight bars leading the band into a screaming 8 bar bridge on the V chord before dropping back into the groove. In Lyn Collins' *Think*, the greatest part of the song is a break in which for a fleeting two bars the only sound you hear is the unyielding chanky-chanky of Bobby Byrd's tambourine. The obvious and most frequently abused break is the drum break. (I will assume here that examples are not necessary.)

I cannot say too much or too little about the drum break.

A mean drum break will make everybody in its presence feel that they are slightly sexier than they were before the beat stepped into the room. A mean drum break will make even white people bite their bottom lips and bob their heads up and down like abandoned monkeys. A mean drum break will make you forget that you haven't paid your rent yet. A mean drum break will make girls like you. You can understand why it takes a great deal of restraint for some folks to use them sparingly. However, part of the beauty of the break is that it is uncommon. If all the tigers in the world were white, nobody would go to Zigfried and Roy's magic show. That is to say: if the breakbeat becomes too common, girls will eventually stop taking their pants off for them. In today's world of tasteless sampling and beat pimping, it is very difficult for most people to overcome the urge to pander to the break hunters and indulge in excessive breaks. So I find I must interject a personal plea to all those who make music: IN THE NAME OF ALL WHICH IS TASTEFUL AND DELICIOUS, RESTRAIN YOURSELF. DON'T BE A BEAT SLUT. To sprinkle breaks all over a record like salt on English food might make it more easily digestible to the masses but will eventually cheapen the face of the once-sacred break in society and undermine the entire cause and effect of its existence. Breaks are like antibiotics. If we prescribe them to everybody, in a few years we will all be immune to them.

In summation, the arrangements and orchestrations of a Funk 45' are illusive in their simplicity. You must understand their tendencies without forcing them. Thinking too hard will leave you with an over-composed record that lacks the basic soul and feeling that the whole thing ought to be built around. If you pour funk in your pocket it will disappear like water. But like water if you stand outside when it is raining, you will come back in wet. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but I do know this: If you are going to write a funk track, you got to make it ROUGH AND NASTY.

If this article helps or encourages anyone out there to record a nice slice of heavy-shitty, then I have accomplished something good (please send me a copy.) If nothing more, I only hope that you have learned to appreciate the basic principal that I have come to know and love: SHITTY IS PRETTY. With this as your mantra, and only one million dollars, you are well on your way to being a successful, Funk 45'-producing millionaire like me.