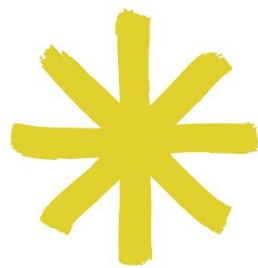


ONE NATION UNDER A GROOVE: BEAUTY AND DEMOCRACY RECONSIDERED



**PARTNERSHIP
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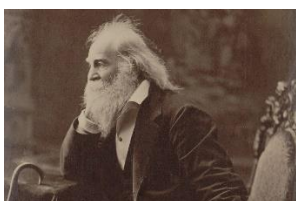
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TENTH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION ON OCTOBER 5, 2017 AT THE ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY.*

ONE NATION UNDER A GROOVE: BEAUTY AND DEMOCRACY RECONSIDERED

BY: SAM MAGAVERN

On May 31, 1905, the Albright Art Gallery had the dedication ceremony for its beautiful new building. After the singing of a chorus by Beethoven, led by the Orpheus, Sangerbund, Teutonia, Liederkrantz, and Guido societies, the audience heard an address titled "Beauty and Democracy" from Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard University. President Eliot was apparently a strong proponent of utilitarian philosophy, because he opined that the ultimate goal of democracy was to provide the greatest number of people with "cheerful feelings," while reducing to the lowest terms the preventable evils that make life miserable. Beauty, for President Eliot, was chiefly a way to "increase innocent pleasurable sensations and emotions" – for example, by observing the starry sky, lovely landscapes, flowering shrubs, or fine paintings. The Art Gallery's notes tell us that President Eliot's address was "delivered in a clear, ringing voice and was listened to most attentively," and that at its conclusion the Chorus sang an ode titled "Spirit of Beauty" by Mrs. Arthur Detmers of Buffalo.

I read President Eliot's address with high hopes, but then increasing disappointment at the narrowness of his range. When I think about beauty and democracy, I think about the Gettysburg Address and the I Have a Dream Speech; I think about *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston and *Do the Right Thing* by Spike Lee – works that plumb the inspiring promise and tragic flaws of our fitful strivings toward democracy. I think about the devastating ugliness of prejudice, greed and fear. I think about the many beautiful scenes I've observed here in Buffalo over the last ten years of people coming together to work for the common good. I think about the Freedom Wall on the corner of East Ferry and Michigan. In short, I think about more than "innocent pleasurable sensations and emotions." And so, one hundred and twelve years after President Eliot's address, I would like to share with you some different reflections on beauty and democracy



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The first thought I would like to offer is that democracy has an urgent need for beauty. In a true democracy, there is no single authority to impose its view of the world on all its citizens. There is no one dogma to which everyone must subscribe; no one conductor who can force all voices to sing in harmony. Dissonance and disagreement are not just tolerated; they are welcomed. As a result, many people have an aesthetic aversion to democracy; they find it messy, chaotic, and ugly; and they yearn for someone to make everyone sing the same simple tune. People yearn for form and meaning; and if they do not perceive enough form and meaning in democracy, they turn elsewhere. If they don't recognize themselves in the story being told about our country, they look for a different story.

Artists play two critical roles in overcoming this shrinking away from the messiness of pluralism. First, they create public goods. Every true work of art is a public good; every work of art is intended for a public, however small. These public goods are like oases around which people gather, like beacons that illuminate our paths and common places. Through them, citizens who have opposing values are able to find shared meanings and emotions that link them together and prevent democracy from degenerating into chaos.

Certain artists play an additional role: they make democracy itself beautiful. They find patterns and cohesions in its sprawling complexity. They weave together great songs in which even dissonance can play a part. Think about poems like “Song of Myself,” by Walt Whitman, in which he identifies himself – even his physical body – with the whole country and its dazzling range of voices. To take American democracy as your subject does not require you to write patriotic hymns. Read “America” by Allen Ginsberg and savor the many different voices in which he berates, chides, laments, pleads with his country and – after describing himself as a nearsighted pot-smoking communist Jewish homosexual – equates himself with American and promises to “put his queer shoulder to the wheel.”

The second thought I would like to share is that every democratic movement needs beauty on its side. Who can imagine the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s without songs, poems, paintings, plays, and dances? Who can imagine the prophetic voice of Martin Luther King, Jr., without the profound beauty of his prose and oratory? Art and beauty play many roles in the struggle for equality and justice, ranging from the practical to the spiritual. The arts communicate information in engaging ways; document movements and preserve their history; attract attention from the press and decision-makers; bring diverse people together as equals; inspire collective action by connecting people emotionally; offer moments of joy and healing in the midst of arduous struggle; and foster deeper, more creative thinking about complex problems.

This last point bears particular importance for democracy. Every movement faces the temptation to become simplistic and insular because that so often seems like the path to success. Every group can succumb to groupthink and lose its creativity, its openness to critique. Great art depends on ambiguity: the ability of words, images, and gestures to carry multiple meanings at the same time. Art teaches us to find truth in things that we cannot fully

understand or explain. Art appreciation, therefore, can be a training ground for democracy and its refusal to accept any one interpretation as the last word.

The last thesis I would like to share with you is that beauty needs democracy. Now, no one would claim that beauty can only be produced in a democracy. Many beautiful works of art have been created under conditions of monarchy, aristocracy, and plutocracy. Even the most totalitarian regimes have not entirely snuffed out art, although some have come remarkably close – viewing even the most inward-facing art as a threat, simply because it represents an independent source of value and meaning. Art does not require democracy to exist, and, moreover, artists have sometimes depended on highly unequal social arrangements – on the patronage of rulers or aristocratic classes – for their sustenance.

But democracy almost inevitably improves culture by expanding the number of people with access to the tools needed to make and appreciate beauty. Simply put, democracy increases the talent pool and the audience for art. In undemocratic societies, the few will attempt to monopolize the sources of beauty, restrict the number of authorized meaning-makers, limit the allowable interpretations of art, and hoard art for themselves. They may not fully succeed – some of the world's greatest art has been created by its most oppressed peoples – but, in general, their economic, political, and social power will choke off many sources of beauty.

In the United States today, art is not threatened by a totalitarian government so much as it is threatened by other undemocratic forces, especially corporate commodification, by which art is turned from a public good into a private thing or an advertisement for other private things. Too often, what is marketed as art is really a site for product placements. Many songs are not so much songs as advertisements for the singer, who is himself not really an artist but simply a brand. That is why beauty needs not just a democratic government that keeps it free from censorship, but also a democratic economy that puts more of the means of artistic production in the hands of artists instead of corporate executives.

To see how democracy can aid beauty, consider the history of black music in America – which is, in significant measure, the history of popular music in America. Even under slavery, African Americans created some of America's most beautiful and enduring songs. But something truly remarkable happened when enslaved African Americans emerged into freedom – however partial that freedom remained. As more black artists gained the ability to perform publicly, build careers as artists, and then – with the invention of the phonograph – record their music, the United States entered a golden era of popular song, which has lasted to this day. The art of song is particularly democratic because it requires less material resources, formal education, and socio-economic power than perhaps any other major art form. Nearly every person in the country enjoys some version of it. While many popular songs are entirely undemocratic, and the corporate music machine is repellently plutocratic, even so popular music retains an organic connection to what Sly Stone calls “everyday people.”

And so, to experience democratic beauty at work, let's turn to Parliament Funkadelic, the musical ensemble founded by George Clinton in 1970. Clinton was a teenager working in a barber shop in Plainfield, New Jersey in the late 1950s when he started a doo-wop group called the Parliaments to entertain the customers. The Parliaments were named after a brand of cigarette, but, surely, Clinton was also attracted to the political meaning of the word Parliament and to the artist's role, in Percy Bysshe Shelley's words, as the “unacknowledged legislator of the world.” Characteristically, the Parliaments' hit single was called “(I Wanna) Testify,” and it was a popular love song that invoked both the religious and the political-legal resonances of the word “testify.”

By 1970, Clinton had renamed the Parliaments "Parliament" and started a second band with overlapping members but a different sound, Funkadelic. Having two bands served the very practical purpose of avoiding the record label's exclusivity requirements, but it also said something about Clinton's inherently pluralistic approach to music and his refusal to be confined by the corporate marketplace.

Parliament and Funkadelic released an astonishing 23 albums in the eleven years between 1970 and 1981, joining James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone as the world's greatest purveyors of funk music. From the beginning, Parliament Funkadelic, or P Funk, was devoted to making art more democratic, making democracy more beautiful, and using its art to make America more democratic.

The band's approach to making music was democratic in many innovative ways. P Funk never depended on one or even two lead singers or lead performers. Even within a single song, different band members might sing lead parts, and, in concerts, no one, even George Clinton, dominated the spotlight. Had there ever been a band where it was not obvious who was in charge? In the song "The Doo Doo Chasers" the band plays with this concept, having a voice ask in mid-song, "Which one is George Clinton?" Many band members shared in the song-writing, and the band's loose, improvisatory style empowered highly distinctive voices, such as Bootsy Collins on bass and Bernie Worrell on keyboards. Even visually, the band presented an astonishing variety of looks, ranging from Gary Shider's diaper to George Clinton's rainbow colored extensions.

Musically, P Funk refused to be confined to a single genre. A single song might draw on gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues, and psychedelic rock. As they ask in one of the songs from *One Nation Under a Groove*, "Who says a jazz band can't play dance music? Who says a rock band can't play funk? Who says a funk band can't play rock?" This was not just a statement of artistic freedom; it was also a statement of racial freedom – a refusal to play by the segregated categories imposed by radio stations and record companies; and it was not coincidental that P Funk drew some of the most diverse crowds in music.

In its lyrics, too, P Funk embraced democracy. Their songs had titles like "I've Got a Thing, You've Got a Thing, Everybody's Got a Thing" and "Let's Take it to the People." P Funk offered satires and laments on all the most salient issues facing American democracy, offering their thoughts on consumerism ("Funky Dollar Bill"), inequality ("Biological Speculation") and the Vietnam War ("March to the Witch's Castle"). They presented a tragic view of a cannibalistic political economy in the song "America Eats Its Young." They offered joyful, movement-building optimism ("Everybody is Going to Make It This Time") and a call to action ("Wake Up"). They preached both personal and social liberation in songs like "Free Your Mind, and Your Ass Will Follow."

P Funk were peaceful revolutionaries, laying claim to America on behalf of African Americans and on behalf of funk. They staked this claim on the



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1975 Parliament song and album "Chocolate City." "Chocolate City" was a term that people were starting to use for Washington DC as its population became mostly black. The tragic side of that development was white flight and disinvestment. The joyful side was that black voters and leaders were taking the reins of power in some of the nation's largest cities, including its capital, opening the roads that would one day lead to a black president. The album's cover shows the Capitol Building, the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial on a chocolate medallion. The song opens with these lines: "What's happening CC? They still call it the White House / But that's a temporary condition, too." P Funk's vision of power is explicitly peaceful and democratic: "You don't need the bullet when you got the ballot." And they prophesize not just a black White House, but a funky White House, listing:

Reverend Ike, Secretary of the Treasure
Richard Pryor, Minister of Education
Stevie Wonder, Secretary of Fine Arts
And Miss Aretha Franklin, the First Lady

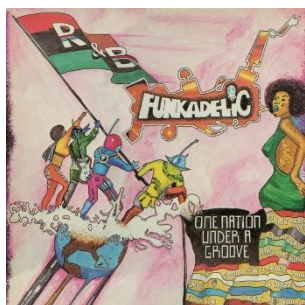
Appropriating language from an old Prudential Insurance commercial but also, perhaps, from the Puritan American icon of Plymouth Rock, Clinton describes D.C. as "my piece of the rock." In the March on Washington and the I Have a Dream Speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. effected a masterful appropriation of national symbols and patriotic rhetoric in the cause of black freedom. What King did in lofty, prophetic oratory, Parliament does in sly, comedic music and visual art.

Parliament-Funkadelic's vision of democratic beauty and beautiful democracy reached its pinnacle in 1978 with the album *One Nation Under a Groove*. The album's cover art appropriates the classic patriotic image of Marines planting the American flag at Iwo Jima; but here the futuristic funk musicians are planting the flag of R & B – not in the soil of a conquered nation but seemingly in the cosmos itself, with the whole globe serving as their stepping off point. Like Walt Whitman, P Funk is never content to identify itself with America; it also persistently announces, "We are the cosmos." Its art is not just national; it is universal.

The first song on the album, "One Nation Under a Groove," became the band's greatest hit, selling over one million copies. It starts with lyrics taken from old gospel songs, referring to heaven and heaven's door: "So wide, you can't get around it / So low, you can't get under it." In the gospel versions, the answer is that "You must come in at the door." But in the gospel according to P Funk, the way to heaven is not a straight and narrow path through a door; instead it is "a chance to dance your way out of your constrictions." Dance – the most embodied, participatory kind of art – is the way to freedom. Liberation does not come from conformity to dogma or social norms; just the opposite: we're "gonna be freakin'." We'll be led not by political or religious authorities but by communally experienced beauty: with "the groove our only guide."

In the spiritual "I Shall Not Be Moved" the singer cannot be moved from the rock of Christian faith. As "We Shall Not Be Moved," the song became an anthem for the labor movement and the civil rights movement. But P Funk's utopian vision is different: it is of a world in which "we shall all be moved" – meaning we shall all be emotionally and spiritually moved by beauty, but also that music will put us all into movement – away from stasis toward progress. We all will join the movement for justice and equality – for true democracy.

We will be "getting down on the one which we believe in." This is a brilliant pun. The "one" is "one nation", traditionally conceived of as under "one God," but, "the one" is also the term James Brown made famous – meaning the first beat in a measure, but, more broadly, the beat,



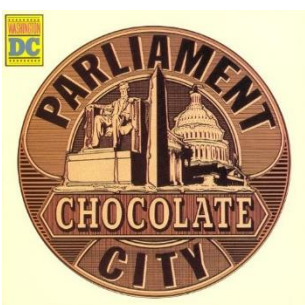
the groove, the distinctive sense of rhythm that made funk music funky. In other words, to say that we believe in the one is to say that we believe in funk – as the singer emphasizes by quoting two of Brown's most famous exclamations: “Can I get it on the good foot” and “Good God!”

The second song on the album, “Groovallegiance,” continues the theme, as P Funk pledges allegiance to the flag – not of the United States, but of the United Funk of Funkadelica. The unacknowledged legislators of the world are claiming acknowledgment. Instead of placing our hand on the bible and swearing that our testimony will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God, P Funk asks us to “promise to funk the whole funk and nothing but the funk” and commands us to “go forth and funk.” As in the first Parliament's hit, “Testify,” religious and legal commandments are replaced by artistic ones, and “the truth” is replaced by beauty, or at least by a more capacious, ambiguous, and rich version of truth – that is, by funk. This is a comic utopia: Funkadelica is not the land we live in, but “you know, the nation that, you know, I would like to live under / (What in the world is this boy talking about?).” Like many utopias, it functions as a critique of existing society, which is unjust and unfunky, and as a joyful escape from it, but also as a vision, a “master plan,” for how we might change it.

Pledging Groovallegiance, the song tells us, involves the kind of loving comradeship that Walt Whitman envisioned: “Let me take you by the hand / And spread the funk across the land.” Like Whitman, P Funk uses overlapping images of romantic, friendly, and national love. Another song on the album, “Into You,” is something of a love song to the people, the demos. In 1976, a southern rock band called the Atlanta Rhythm Section had a pop-soul hit with “So Into You.” In 1978, P Funk gets into a whole people, but it also lays out the things that it cannot get into, which include a neutron bomb and the poisoned land – that is to say, militarism and environmental degradation. What P Funk can get into is “you, my people” and the notion that if it's right for you, it will be right for me – an expression of both equality and communality.

Earlier, I suggested that democracy, with its tolerance for difference and disagreement, needs beauty to help bring and hold us together. And certainly, the groove that P Funk is elaborating represents the power of art. But dancing your way out of your constrictions is not something that you typically do alone. Most often, you dance with others, and, in particular, with a person or people that you love. That is part of the reason that P Funk is not suggesting that we write, paint, or even sing our way out of our constrictions, but that we dance.

The depth of P Funk's vision – and their uncanny ability to weave tragedy, comedy, history, and romance into a single song, albeit a song that lasts 10 minutes and 45 seconds – is revealed in “Promentalshitbackwashpsychosis Enema Squad (The Doo Doo Chasers).” In this song, P Funk presents our present society as dystopian: “the world is a toll-free toilet.”



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Paradoxically, we are afflicted with both “mental diarrhea” and “constipated notions.” We are spouting lies – “talking shit a mile a minute” – because we have not yet freed our minds. Everything is upside down: our mouths have become “neurological assholes.” The future, the past, and the present are all infected, and the cause of all this “social bullshit” is egotism: “a me burger with I sauce on it,” a “myself sandwich,” served with a glass of “constricted cola.”

But all is not lost. The Promentalshitbackwashpsychosis Enema Squad, the doo doo chasers, in short, the P Funk artists, are here to bring us a “musical bowel movement” and “music to get our shit together by.” And while the song’s narrator is explaining this in spoken word, a beautiful falsetto voice is enacting it by singing a love song that is somehow, impossibly, layered directly into the scatological tragicomedy of the main narrative. It is not just art, but art united with love – embodied, earthy love – that can counteract that selfishness that is turning our world to shit and restore the public good.

So ends our brief tour of the United Funk of Funkadelic, our brief residency in one nation under a groove. Here we are in the United States of America in 2017. Richard Pryor is not our Minister of Education, and Stevie Wonder is not our Secretary of Fine Arts. Our society has rarely looked less beautiful and less democratic. We need more doo doo chasers, and we need them fast, to make sure our world does not combust in the heat of global warming or in a nuclear inferno triggered by the hot gas that our leaders are emitting.

And yet it is hard not to feel – despite everything – that the dream of one nation under a groove is still alive and that hope is not lost. In our ten years at the Partnership for the Public Good, we’ve had the good fortune to watch everyday people create countless public goods, countless “Buffalo commons,” countless works of art and justice, countless places where people gather and make something finer and more beautiful than themselves, something greater than their clans or factions, something before which we can all stand, with our hands on our hearts, or, better still, our hands in our neighbor’s hands, and pledge Groovallegiance.