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In Maryland, George Clinton, Parliament-Funkadelic and a missing Mothership

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This is a story about a UFO.

Not just any UFO. The Mothership.

It might be the most awe-inspiring stage prop in the history of American music and it belonged to funk legends Parliament-Funkadelic. Since the Mothership vanished in Prince George's County in 1982, rumors of its whereabouts have mutated into local lore: It burned in a fire. It was disassembled. It was stolen. Scrapped. Kidnapped. Thrown in the woods. Chained to a truck by a drug dealer and dragged to funk-knows-where. The band's most devoted followers say it flew off into space.

This is a story about trying to find it.

In concert, the Mothership was last spotted in Detroit in 1981, belching dry ice fumes and flashing kaleidoscopic light. An aluminum flying saucer, it was about 20 feet in diameter and decked out with dazzling lights. Below it stood a band of otherworldly eccentrics celebrating the hard-won freedoms of the civil rights movement in a freaky, fantastical display.

Darryll Brooks remembers the last time he saw the Mothership. It wasn't in Detroit. It was in a junkyard in Seat Pleasant. Brooks last saw it there because Brooks is the guy who threw the Mothership away.

It was the spring of 1982 and Parliament-Funkadelic frontman George Clinton and his bandmates were battling debt, drug addiction and each other. Brooks, who ran the group's Washington-based tour production company, says the only way he could pay the band's debts was to pawn its gear. With no place to store a spacecraft, he dumped the Mothership in a junkyard behind a Shell station on Martin Luther King Jr. Highway. But 28 years later, its final resting place remains a mystery.

Here's where it isn't: In that Seat Pleasant junkyard.

Here's where it *might* be: Sleeping peacefully beneath a quilt of P.G. County kudzu.

Ask Seat Pleasant residents about a missing UFO and you'll get puzzled looks and a few laughs. Tromp through the neighboring woods and you'll cut your hands on the thorny bramble. You'll also find abandoned tires, mattresses, vacuum cleaners -- but no spaceships.

Parliament-Funkadelic guitarist Garry Shider resides in Upper Marlboro, not too far from where the ship disappeared. Maybe he knows where to find it.

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"Aw man," Shider says. "You ain't gonna find the Mothership."

Endlessly imitated

Throughout the '70s, Clinton and his bandmates blurred the line between escapism and empowerment with a glut of albums that have been endlessly sampled, imitated and analyzed. Look at the decades of funk, rock, techno, go-go, Prince hits and jam bands that came in P-Funk's imaginative wake -- "influential" doesn't quite cut it. Without Parliament-Funkadelic, Lady Gaga would not wear ridiculous outfits and hip-hop might not exist.

Onstage, the band was a living, breathing, panting comic book -- Clinton in his stringy blond wigs, bassist Bootsy Collins in his star-shaped shades, Shider in nothing but angel wings, combat boots and Pampers. It was expressive, subversive, brilliant.

"They were celebrating the intellectual breadth of the black experience and giving people a grand space to celebrate all that they had become," says California author and funk historian Rickey Vincent. "Sly Stone said, 'I Want to Take You Higher.' George Clinton said, 'Yeah, and I got the Mothership to take you there.' In a sense, he was doing what black folks had wanted to do for generations: Take themselves up."

Clinton, his 68-year-old voice rasping over the phone from Los Angeles, agrees: "We were higher than anyone else!" (He and the current iteration of the band are scheduled to play the 9:30 club on Monday.)

Before the Mothership was built, it was a concept. Parliament released "Mothership Connection" in 1975, an album with a title track about hitchhiking to cosmic transcendence: "Swing down, sweet chariot. Stop and let me ride." Clinton started dreaming up a tour to match. After watching the Who's 1969 rock opera "Tommy," he asked himself: "How do you do a *funk* opera? What about [black people] in space?"

He called upon David Bowie's tour producer, Jules Fisher, to help bring the Mothership to life. "This was theater. This was drama," says Fisher, a renowned Broadway lighting designer. "Current shows like U2 and the Stones -- they don't provide this narrative arc."

The Mothership was assembled in Manhattan and made its first descent in New Orleans from the rafters of Municipal Auditorium on Oct. 27, 1976.

Minds were blown.

"That first night was really huge for us," Clinton says. "But we made one mistake." The band unveiled the Mothership at the beginning of the show -- an impossible stunt to follow. The next night, in Baton Rouge, the ship didn't land until much later in the set.

Keyboardist Bernie Worrell remembers being unable to look away. "It was phenomenal, man. You couldn't describe it," he says. "I can play and not look at the keys. I watched it every time it would come down."

'Whole different love'

Washingtonians greeted the Mothership with unparalleled fervor. The nation's capital had long been a stronghold for the band and in 1975, Parliament released the "Chocolate City" album, a supremely funky mash note that popularized the nickname Washington had earned for its majority-black population.

When radio personality Donnie Simpson first moved to the area, he saw P-Funk stoking a unique dialogue with the community. "As hot as I thought they were in Detroit, when I came here, it was a whole different love," he says. "A whole different appreciation for the funk."

Washington is also where Clinton first hired promoters Brooks and Carol Kirkendall for a 1977 gig at Landover's Capital Centre. "Once we started playing there, it was all over," Clinton says.

Brooks had never seen anything like it. "Here's a guy coming out of a Mothership with a mink coat and platform shoes," he says. "And a cane? And a fur hat? C'mon, man. Black folks been down so long. . . . It was jubilation."

Soon, Brooks and Kirkendall's company, Tiger Flower, was producing and promoting nearly all of the band's domestic tour dates. Some of the wildest shows transpired close to home. At a Capital Centre gig on April 25, 1981, Clinton stepped out of the Mothership, tossed his gold-lamé cape over his shoulder and strutted across the stage. Naked. (You won't find it on YouTube, but there's a VHS tape out there to prove it.)

"The audience went *crazy*," Brooks says. "Carol and I looked at each other like, 'We're in so much trouble. Our career is over.' But nobody said a word. I guess the officials didn't see it. The unions didn't see it. But the audience saw it."

It was also the last time a Chocolate City audience would see the Mothership in all its glory.

'Ran out of juice'

Going down with the ship? In the case of Parliament-Funkadelic, the ship went down with the band.

"The volatility of the record industry at that time -- the disco crash, they called it -- made it really hard to subsidize that big touring group," says funk historian Vincent of the band's early-'80s collapse. "They ran out of juice and they ran out of money."

The band would later reform as the P-Funk All-Stars, and a second, less impressive Mothership would be built in the '90s, but the group never eclipsed the highs of the late '70s. Worrell rattles off the factors that dragged Parliament-Funkadelic down: "Discontent. Tired of all the unfairness. Being owed money. Lack of respect within the group. The management. Learning that money was stolen."

After the Detroit show in '81, Brooks and Kirkendall had the band's equipment trucked back to Washington for storage. Months passed. The group remained dormant and cash evaporated. Unable to pay the rent on his storage spaces, Brooks began peddling the unused gear to local go-go bands. Some of Worrell's keyboards were sold to a young Trouble Funk, cementing P-Funk's role in go-go's creation myth.

Worrell, meantime, had no idea that his fantastic machines were being snatched up by Washington's then-fledgling go-go players. "But I know that a lot of stuff I was looking for, I didn't have," he says.

Too bad go-go didn't need a spaceship.

"We had to find places to put stuff, including the Mothership," Brooks says. So he stashed it in his mom's two-car garage in Clinton, Md., for about six months -- "long enough to make my mother [ticked off]."

On a cold, clear spring afternoon in 1982, she finally demanded that her son remove this piece of junk. Brooks

and Bernie Walden, a young Tiger Flower employee, dragged the Mothership out of the garage, crammed it into a U-Haul truck and drove it to a tree-lined junkyard in Seat Pleasant. "We backed the truck as far as we could out into the woods and kicked it off the truck," Brooks says. "We had a bottle of something and gave it a toast."

"It was heavy," Walden says. "And I didn't want to do it."

Brooks says he regrets the decision, too, but was unable to reach Clinton or the band at that time. "Nobody was keeping phone numbers," Brooks says. "Some of them were living with *their* mamas."

Today, the group's feelings are mixed. "I thought that was pretty stupid," Clinton says of the decision to dump it. Shider disagrees, citing the massive expenses that racked up from touring with an extensive entourage, elaborate costumes and a gigantic metal spacecraft.

"I was glad it was gone," he says. "With the Mothership came no money."

Hunting a UFO

Today, the Shell in Seat Pleasant is a Lowest Price gas station. On a sunny weekday afternoon, the junkyard out back is busy with middle-age men poking around for old engine parts. Three guys are trying to revive a Ford sedan that wants to stay dead. Two others are searching for scrap metal they can sell in Baltimore. No one has seen any UFOs.

But they do recommend speaking with Charlie Walker, the gas station's former owner. Walker practically shouts into his telephone when he says he's never heard of Parliament-Funkadelic. But he vaguely remembers "something big and aluminum" catching on fire in the junkyard in the mid-'80s.

So the Mothership went up in flames?

"No, no, no, no, no," says Thomas Stanley, an assistant professor at George Mason University. "It didn't burn. It exists. It exists to this day. "

Stanley is a true funk scholar. Along with his friends Larry Alexander and the late television writer and former Washington Post reporter David Mills, he wrote the book "George Clinton and P-Funk: An Oral History." He also penned articles for Uncut Funk, Mills's Parliament-Funkadelic fanzine.

Stanley claims that he's recently seen the wreckage of the Mothership -- *touched* it. But he doesn't want to give up the location. His reverence for this music borders on religion, but he has no interest in sending a salvaged Mothership to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame -- or even the Air and Space Museum.

After a cryptic conversation about how the Mothership escaped its fate in the junkyard, Stanley e-mails some clues about its alleged location. He also includes a plea to let it rest.

"I find it much more satisfying to imagine this sacred artifact bound firmly in the bosom of the strong black communities that straddle the D.C. line between Suitland and Seat Pleasant. This was always the heart of P-Funk's base of support in Chocolate City," he writes. "It is very important, I think, that we not seek truth at the expense of myth. Music and Myth are, after all, P-Funk's most enduring legacy."

So is it really out there? Does it really matter? Perhaps there's no grand cosmic truth to be found in the wilds of

Prince George's County. Just myth.

On a chilly Friday at dawn, the only thing that seems real in these woods are the vines that strangle your ankles with every step. Swiffer broomstick in hand, you can thwack away at the bushes for hours without hearing a . . .

CLANG!!

The Mothership?

No. Chrome toilet bowl. Another false alarm. Definitely the funkier. Culverts, rusted air-conditioning units and forsaken grocery carts make similar sounds.

But Stanley swears the Mothership is still out here with the trees and the trash. Beneath an impenetrable blanket of weeds and dirt it sleeps, undisturbed for nearly three decades and miraculously undestroyed -- rusted, rotted out and funkier than ever.

To read excerpts of interviews with George Clinton and others in this story, visit <http://washingtonpost.com/clicktrack>.

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