

Oct. 22, 1989—

BROOKLYN, Mich.---- Trick or tweakin'.

"Tweakin' " is a contagious funk-rap number off George Clinton's brilliant new record, "The Cinderella Theory." And the trick is to find Clinton, lost in the auburn fall foliage of south-central Michigan.

For the last nine years Clinton, also known as Maggot Overlord and Dr. Funkenstein, has retreated to a farm in this quiet resort town 65 miles outside Detroit. He leaves only for business and mini-tours such as Saturday gig at Chicago's Riviera Night Club.

Downtown Brooklyn features a lime-green gazebo that looks cool for an ice cream social, while the outskirts of town are dotted with hot joints like the Blarney Barrell. They boast house bands such as Frog & the Beeftones, and a name like that gives you the confidence to blast Clinton's "Do Fries Go With That Shake?" as you navigate the bumpy dirt road to his house.

Clinton has no phone, and he really doesn't have an address, since he bought an old farm and built his new digs way deep in the backland. If this were any other time of the year, the Happy Halloween skeletons on the front door might offer a clue. Every day is Halloween for the Great Funkpin.

So you're daydreaming about the total concept - trick or treating at George Clinton's house - when after repeated knocks, he finally appears. The Godfather of Funk is without a shirt, is wearing baggy fatigues, and his rainbow-colored dreadlocks are lined with orange, red and yellow feathers. As you walk in, the first thing you see is a living room full of 300 plush toy animals, a couple of them hanging from the ceiling. You smell weed. There is no furniture. It looks like a carnival company that has cruised Noah's ark.

This must be the place.

For all his flamboyance, Clinton is the most underappreciated figure in rhythm and blues. Since he formed the first Parliaments in 1955 in Plainfield, N.J. (a five-piece group reminiscent of the harmonic doo-wop of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers), Clinton has connected African polyrhythms, psychedelic guitar, sonic rock that's so dear to Michigan (Ted Nugent, the MC5 and the Stooges) and splendid street wisdom: "*Free your ass and your mind will follow,*" or "*Funkin' is like making love, if you only got one stroke, you might as well phone it in.*" He's just finished producing "Yank My Doodle (It's a Dandy)," the debut record from Trey Lewd, featuring Clinton's son, Tracy.

In the late 1960s, Clinton was vocalist with two groups. Parliament (he dropped the "s") was his outlet for commercial and polished music, while Funkadelic was more experimental and rough. Musicians crossed over between the bands. By the 1970s, Parliament had recruited players such as James Brown sidemen Bootsy Collins on bass and Maceo Parker on reeds, former Ohio Players keyboardist Junie Morrison and rock-influenced guitarist Eddie Hazel.

Parliament's breakthrough was the hit 1974 single "Tear the Roof Off the Sucker," from the album "Mothership Connection." For the next five years, Parliament would end live shows with a giant spaceship



emerging from a blue denim cap hanging above the stage. These days he's chilled on the heavy keyboard sound in deference to manifold vocals and the harmony, which most of the P-Funk material lacked.

At age 49, is this a kinder and gentler George Clinton?

"We're about order and chaos at the same time," he said as he settled down at the kitchen table. The previous night, Clinton, his wife and his grandson Pookie had been working on a colorful "Fantasy Kingdom" mural that was still thumb-tacked onto the table. The mural seemed to have a mirror effect on Clinton.

"We represent the ongoing desire for order and the reality of chaos and change," he said. "Everything goes through that. Logic has run its course. The ultimate proof of reality and logic was what goes up must come down. Well, they shot that spaceship (Voyager), and the mother just kept going. It won't come down, hell, it may never come back. Once you break gravity, the concept of down is gone. So what goes up used to come down."

I told you the house smelled like weed.

That new law of gravity is applicable to George Clinton's career. He's not taking his 17-piece band through big arenas anymore. Instead, he's drawing fresh listeners from alternative music halls such as Chicago's Cabaret Metro, where, in late August, he put on a funktastic three-hour show.

Clinton explained, "We saw alternative radio and alternative music was more receptive to us. It was better than going back to the world we know, and that's black radio. Forget straight-out pop radio. So under the alternative thing, we've been playing the right-size places. We're not competing with anybody. We're playing according to the vibe."

With that, Clinton has had to reacquaint himself with his extensive catalog. While new crowds are clamoring for well-known Funkadelic hits such as 1978's "One Nation Under a Groove" and Parliament material such as "Flash Light" (which set the stage for synthesized bass lines), they also want to know about the push behind the funk.

"I never had the chance to actually listen to the records," he said. "Especially the ones from the '60s. There's one or two that you know. You live up to the reputation of the rest just to keep the concept going. But now, we have to do 'Funky Dollar Bill' or 'Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow.' We always went through the grooves, but now, man, people quote lines from the songs. It's a lot of fun now, because it's like the old days where everybody's part of the group. Everybody used to dress up like Funkadelic. They'd get on the stage with us all the time. Then they'd tell their friends they were in the group. That was the thing for young kids. People don't do that so much anymore, but they still relate to it." (Clinton said the near future promises miniature dolls of some of the better known intergalactic P-Funk characters - Bootsy, Maggot Overlord, Dr. Funkenstein and the Brides of Funkenstein.)

If you must compare Clinton, the closest cousin is James Brown. But where Brown stayed true to the gritty anguish of soul music, Clinton went off the deep end with the magical ability to balance 20 or 30 mostly electric musical ideas simultaneously. In a 1978 interview in Rolling Stone magazine, longtime Clinton compatriot and keyboardist Bernie Worrell called Clinton "a genius, the creative center" for his layered thinking.

"I just go in and ad-lib," Clinton said, acknowledging the tribute with a satisfied smile. "There's so many ways to turn stuff around semantically. If you don't say it literally, you can suggest it. You can suggest it from slang or logic, or a heavy innuendo or 'innuotdo.' The rhythm keeps the people locked into it. Bernie would amaze me at making what I do make sense. He understands music as a color or a mood, and he creates a carousel song that goes round and round. After a while, you can see something spinning around."

"I never have to find a spot in music. I tell my players to give me everything every other producer tells them not to put on tape. I can always take it out. I go for the essence of a person's ego. Ego is what makes

you think you can play music in the first place. You just know you have to put it to sleep when you leave the studio. Pretend the studio is the bathroom.

"Ego trip out, flush the toilet, and leave."

Clinton excused himself. That gave me time to admire the stuffed toy rooster propped up against the pantry, the stuffed toy duck on the kitchen cabinet and the stuffed toy goose in a nearby basket. Clinton returned with a framed black-and-white photo of four of the original Parliaments wearing crisp suits and ties. The picture is proof that slick precedes funk.

"We were in eighth grade then," Clinton said, admiring the picture. "You can see how I liked Frankie Lymon (they actually looked alike). We were a doo-wop group. I started straightening hair with lye at 14. We all had our little dos. I did all the other guys' hair. One of the other guys in the group who didn't show up for this picture did mine."

The Parliaments continued to sing doo-wop through 1959, the year they got day gigs at the Wham-O Hula-Hoop factory in Newark, N.J. "When the hoops came to the 'hood, it was like, we're going to run this factory," Clinton laughed. "We turned out so many hula hoops. We were punching the clock for two or three people." Nights were spent singing doo-wop or listening to Palladium-era Tito Puente mambos.

Clinton is preparing to record Puente's "Dry Coconut." A rhythm-laced cover of "The Banana Boat Song" pops up on "The Cinderella Theory."

"That was one of the first songs the Parliaments ever did," Clinton said of the Harry Belafonte hit. "We loved those atonal harmonies. I always try to see what song I can sing against a track it don't belong to."

In 1964 Clinton was hired as a Motown staff writer in New York and later that year he moved to Detroit. He brought along the Parliaments and by 1967, they had their first hit with Clinton's ballad "(I Wanna) Testify" on Revilot Records.

"By then I realized the Motown thing was sewn up," Clinton said. "I couldn't do nothing there. They had all the cool-looking groups. There wasn't nothing to do but change up. Then one night the Parliaments were playing with Vanilla Fudge in New York. I already knew Jimi Hendrix - he was James then. We didn't have any equipment, so we had to use Vanilla Fudge's equipment and that stuff was as powerful as all hell. We heard what that sounded like, so we went out and got all the amps in the world. I also remember playing 'Free John Sinclair' gigs out in the park in Detroit. We did a lot of those shows with Ted Nugent and the Amboy Dukes. They had the hit 'Journey to the Center of Your Mind' and we had 'Testify.' So when we got around the next time we had the stuff that was needed."

Clinton and company called it Acid Doo-Wop.

On a subsequent trip into Boston, Clinton began wearing the wacky costumes to break the monotony of an unusually long three-week stint in Beantown clubs. "We sealed it in late '69, when we played this amusement park outside of Detroit," Clinton said. "I was wearing a goalie mask. I had my head shaved with a cross on one side and a moon and Christmas star on the other side. Then, all I was wearing was a bedsheet with a funky Peter Max cartoon of the Road Runner and Wile E. Coyote on it. That got us our ticket to ride.

"We're accepted as being crazy, anyway," he said. "At worst, we were an avant-garde thing that would sell 100,000, anyway. Now, if you can find (out-of-print) Parliament/Funkadelic records, they sell for \$150. We knew about Frank Zappa. We knew about Sun Ra.

"You do that cult thing, and man, it will last forever."