

# Performing Funk: A Study of Texture, Counterpoint, and Agency

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## Project Description, Musical Examples, and Bibliography

This project builds on work presented in two chapters from my book, [\*Embodied Expression in Popular Music: A Theory of Musical Gesture and Agency\*](#) (Oxford University Press, 2024).

What specific attributes in a musical texture “Make It Funky”? This study examines funk music from the 1960s and 1970s as dynamically developing texture. A methodology integrating Christopher Hasty’s projective model of meter shows how funk performers collaborate in projecting metrical levels, as metrical dissonances arising in one part are stabilized and supported in another answering part. Through close readings of representative funk songs, the analysis shows how vocalists and instrumentalists mobilize pentatonic figurative schemas to form a web of collaborative counterpoint, building from a pentatonic-referential base to form expansive and rhythmically complex blues-inflected, diatonic, and chromatic textures.

Exploring funk as a broadly influential musical practice, the inquiry extends beyond “classic” funk works of the early 1970s, including earlier and later works that have been described under various labels including soul, funk, R&B, and disco. (See Examples 1–4.)

### Key Terms

**Figure** A virtual structure of reference perceived at a level of preunderstanding by performers and listeners (Danielsen 2006). *Figure* maps onto *gesture* to form larger expressive units.

**Metrical projection shift** Drawing from Hasty’s theory of metrical projection (1997), Attas explains projection shifts as “defining moments where listeners are likely to shift their focus from one projective duration to another because of changes in the musical texture” (2016).

**Refractive counterpoint** Adapted from Hatten (2018). Used here to refer to similar melodic content combined in different parts at displaced time intervals. Refractive counterpoint based on pentatonic figures is often encountered in soul, funk, blues, and rock music.

### Conclusions for Further Research

A unique idiom of 16th note figuration shapes metrical qualities in funk music. Syncopated patterning in 16ths indexes to binary human movement (as in down/up guitar strumming), resulting in energized embodied motion that enlivens patterning at broader metrical levels.

There is an embodied correlation between the fast rhythms of funky playing and the deployment of pentatonic figuration: the idiomatic ease of pentatonic moves facilitates the agile and percussive playing that characterizes funk. Pentatonic-referential figures appearing simultaneously at multiple metrical levels are a distinctive feature of the improvisatory counterpoint that permeates funk textures.

The multilinear textures of funk contribute to implications of virtual social agency, musically modeling an ideal collaborative space. In this way, the funky groove carries ideological weight, engaging the political and musical imagination as it provides for embodied pleasure in movement. Studies of musical texture may further illuminate rhetorical processes in Afrofuturistic funk songs that offer the promise of transcendent experience in a creatively imagined virtual space.

## Poster Musical Examples

Example 1. Sly and the Family Stone, “Thank You (Falletinme Be Mice Elf Agin),” *Stand!* (1969)

Vocal *Refractive counterpoint*

Look-ing at the dev - il grin-ning at his gun,

Guitar *Em7 E7(#9) Em7 E7(#9)*

Bass

(pop)

G |-----9-----7-----9-----9-----7-----|  
D |-----5-----7-----5-----7-----|  
A |-----7-----|  
E |-----|  
(thumb)

Final verse *Metrical projection shift*

Flam-ing eyes of peo-ple fear burn-ing in-to you. Man-y men are miss-ing much, hat-ing what they do.

Chorus *B-D-E E-G-A (completion) B-D-E*

Thank you fa - lettin - me be mice elf a - gin

Metric qualities (Hasty 1997)

- | *Beginning*
- \ *Continuation*
- / *Anacrusis*
- /→ | *Anacrusis-Becoming-Beginning*

Minor pentatonic scale steps

E G A B D E  
*Scale degree* 1 2 3 4 5 1

Trichordal scale segments

E-G-A  
G-A-B  
A-B-D  
B-D-E  
D-E-G

Example 2. Tower of Power, “Soul Vaccination,” *Tower of Power* (1973)

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the voice and guitar parts for the first two lines of the song. The voice part is in 4/4 time and features a syncopated pentatonic melody. Annotations include a dashed box labeled 'pentatonic trichord (C-D-F)' covering the first two bars, and another dashed box labeled 'expansion (D-F-G)' covering the last two bars. A 'gap and fill' annotation is placed over the final two notes of the second line. The guitar part is in 4/4 time and features up-strumming and lateral moves to stabilize a 16-note projection. A guitar diagram below the staff shows the fretboard with fingerings for each string (e, B, G, D, A, E) across the first 12 frets. The second system shows the voice part for the next two lines. Annotations include 'completion (F-G-A)' pointing to the final note of the second line, and 'P' and 'P'' marking the downbeats of the first and second lines respectively. A dashed line connects these two downbeats, indicating pentatonic completion coinciding with downbeat stability.

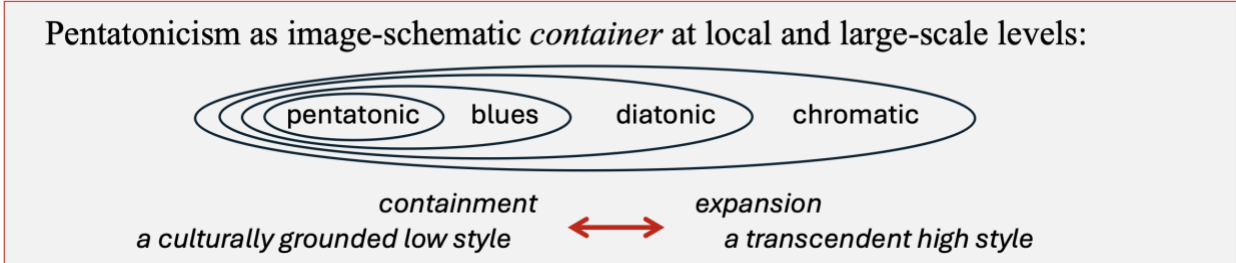
Parallel barre chords: -1 +1 -1 +1 -1 +1 -1 +1

*Syncopated pentatonic melody*


*Up-strumming and lateral guitar moves stabilize 16-note projection*

*Pentatonic completion coincides with downbeat stability*

Texture and metrical layers	
Intro	Ensemble brass: pentatonic melody. 4-bar phrase rhythm. Guitar, bass, drums: 16 <sup>th</sup> -note projection, autotelic groove.
Verse / Chorus	Blues-inflected pentatonic melody with backing vocals in call-and-response. Chromatically ascending brass hits in syncopation emphasize 8 <sup>th</sup> -note layer.
Bridge / Solo	Harmonic/metric projection shift: Cm9 sustained 4 bars. Intro brass melody on Dm7 serves as 4-bar consequent phrase. (Beginning becomes continuation.) Sax solo. Autotelic groove reasserts 16 <sup>th</sup> -note layer. Brass build contrapuntally.
Verse / Ending	Blues-inflected pentatonic melody with backing vocals in call-and-response. Chromatically ascending brass hits in syncopation emphasize 8 <sup>th</sup> -note layer. Textural drop and build: 16 <sup>th</sup> -note layer emphasized. Ascending and descending chromatic brass lines in 8 <sup>th</sup> -note triplets punctuate outro.




Example 3. Earth, Wind & Fire, "Shining Star" (1975)

Swing 16ths  (0:10) E7#9

*Predictive texture: announces pentatonic referentiality* "Straight" 16ths

Intro E-F#-G#-B-C# (embellished)

Guitar 

Verse E7#9 E-G-A-B-D (embellished) *Autotelic groove: gradually fills out and embellishes pentatonic space*


When you wish up-on a star, your dreams will take you ve - ry far, yeah.

Chorus *Swing 16ths* A7 D9 G13 C9

You're a shin - ing star, no mat-ter who you are; shin-ing


bright to see, what you could tru - ly be.

*Retrodictive texture: consolidates pentatonic referentiality. "Straight" 16ths.*

Electric piano 

*Chromatic turnaround with guitar solo. Phrase expansion.*

Bass E7 G#13 A13 Bb13 B13 C13 C#13 D13 D#13 E7#9



Example 4. Chic, "Le Freak" (1978)


Guitar riff Am7 (3+3+2) D C


*Pentatonic chord roots A-D-C [025]*

*3+3+2 cross rhythm enlivens 16th-note binary strumming.*

*Pentatonic fretboard hand position: chord changes articulated with one finger.*

*Gestural variation: all parts interrelated in figural and metrical treatment.*

Bass 


Bass 

Verse Am7 D C Am7 D C

Have you heard a - bout the new dance craze? Lis-ten to us. I'm sure you'll be a-mazed.

*G-A-C-D-E]*

Bridge Am7 D

Bass 

*A-C-D [025]*

*Metrical projection shift: Half-time harmonic rhythm with gradually ascending strings focuses attention on broader hypermeter.*

## Additional Musical Examples

### Example 1. Stevie Wonder. "Superstition," *Talking Book* (1972)

#### a. Verse (0:30)

Swing 16ths 

vocal



Ver - y su - per-sti - tious, writ-ing's on the wall.

clavinet 1

clavinet 2

bass synth

hi-hat

snare  
bass drum

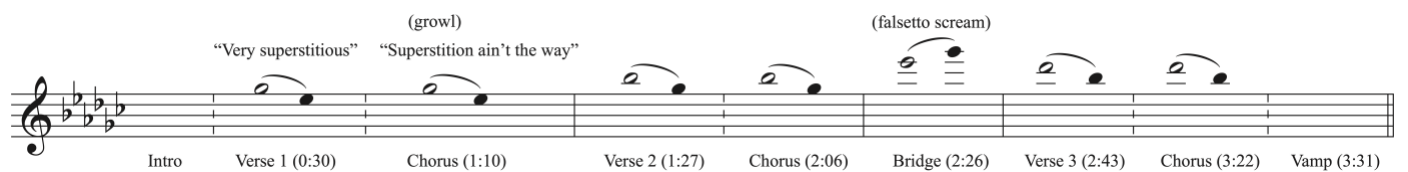
#### b. Brass (0:50)

Swing 16ths 

brass



#### c. Sectional form and vocal highpoints



(growl) (falsetto scream)

"Very superstitious" "Superstition ain't the way"

Intro Verse 1 (0:30) Chorus (1:10) Verse 2 (1:27) Chorus (2:06) Bridge (2:26) Verse 3 (2:43) Chorus (3:22) Vamp (3:31)

Example 2. James Brown. “Get Up Offa That Thing,” *Get Up Offa That Thing* (1976)

Verse

vocal (shout)

Get up of - fa that thing and dance 'till you feel bet - ter. Get up of - fa that thing and dance 'till you... Sing it now!

brass enter after 16 measures

clavinet 3+3+3+3+4 enter after 8 measures

guitars G7(#9)

bass

hi-hat

snare

bass drum

Table 1. James Brown. “Get Up Offa That Thing.” Dialogue and metrical layers in the first verse

Dialogue and metrical layers	
Solo vocal / bass	Two versions of the same line, with Brown alternately shouting and singing at approximately one-measure intervals.
Trumpets / saxes	Alternating at one-measure intervals between: Hits together with backbeat accent. Differentiated parts. Quarter-note pulse on dividing eighth aligns with hi-hat.
Guitars	Alternating at one-measure intervals between: Strumming sixteenths with syncopated pattern (5+5+2+4). Muted single notes emphasizing dividing eighth aligns with hi-hat.
Drums / clavinet	Dedicated support to metrical layers: Bass drum: Accents on strong beats project half-note pulse on 1 & 3 Snare drum: Backbeats project opposing half-note pulse on 2 & 4. Hi-hat: Eighths project opposing quarter-note pulse on dividing eighth. Clavinet: Sixteenths (density referent) in 3+3+3+3+4 cross-rhythm.

*Everything was stacked but separate because it would move out of the way of each other just in time.  
We stacked it on top of each other and made points and counterpoints.*

George Clinton (quoted in Eshun 1998)

Table 2. Parliament. *Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (1977). Overall album design

Song	Key center	Narrative
Bop Gun	E	Rock guitar-powered defense of Funk against the Placebo Syndrome.
Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk	F#	The cosmic villain opposes the Star Child in a comical psychedelic pastiche.
Wizard of Finance	F#	Parody of the soul ballad depicts the banality of unfunky commercial music.
Funkentelechy	G	Radio-like delivery of “deprogram and reprogram” self-actualization.
Placebo Syndrome	Eb	Lampoons light pop to represent the mind-numbing Placebo Syndrome.
Flash Light	C	The triumph of Funk. Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk dances.

Table 3. Parliament. *Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome*. Binary oppositions

Good	Evil
Star Child	Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk
Funkentelechy (life)	The Placebo Syndrome (death)
Multilinear rhythm, swing division	Evenly divided meter
Natural, gospel-style vocal	Unnatural, technologically filtered vocal
Call-and-response collectivity	Isolation
Embodied expression	Disembodied, expressionless
Individualized sounds in dialogue	Homogenous textures of commercial music

Example 3. Parliament. “Bop Gun,” *Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome*. Main guitar and bass riffs

The musical notation shows three staves for the main riffs of "Bop Gun":

- guitar (clean, left):** Treble clef, 4/4 time. Features a melodic line with a C#-D-E motif, indicated by a dashed box and label above the notes.
- guitar (wah filter, right):** Treble clef, 4/4 time. Features a similar melodic line with a C#-D-E motif, indicated by a dashed box and label above the notes.
- bass:** Bass clef, 4/4 time. Features a rhythmic accompaniment with a similar melodic contour.

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