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

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2025 TSMT Poster Session

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

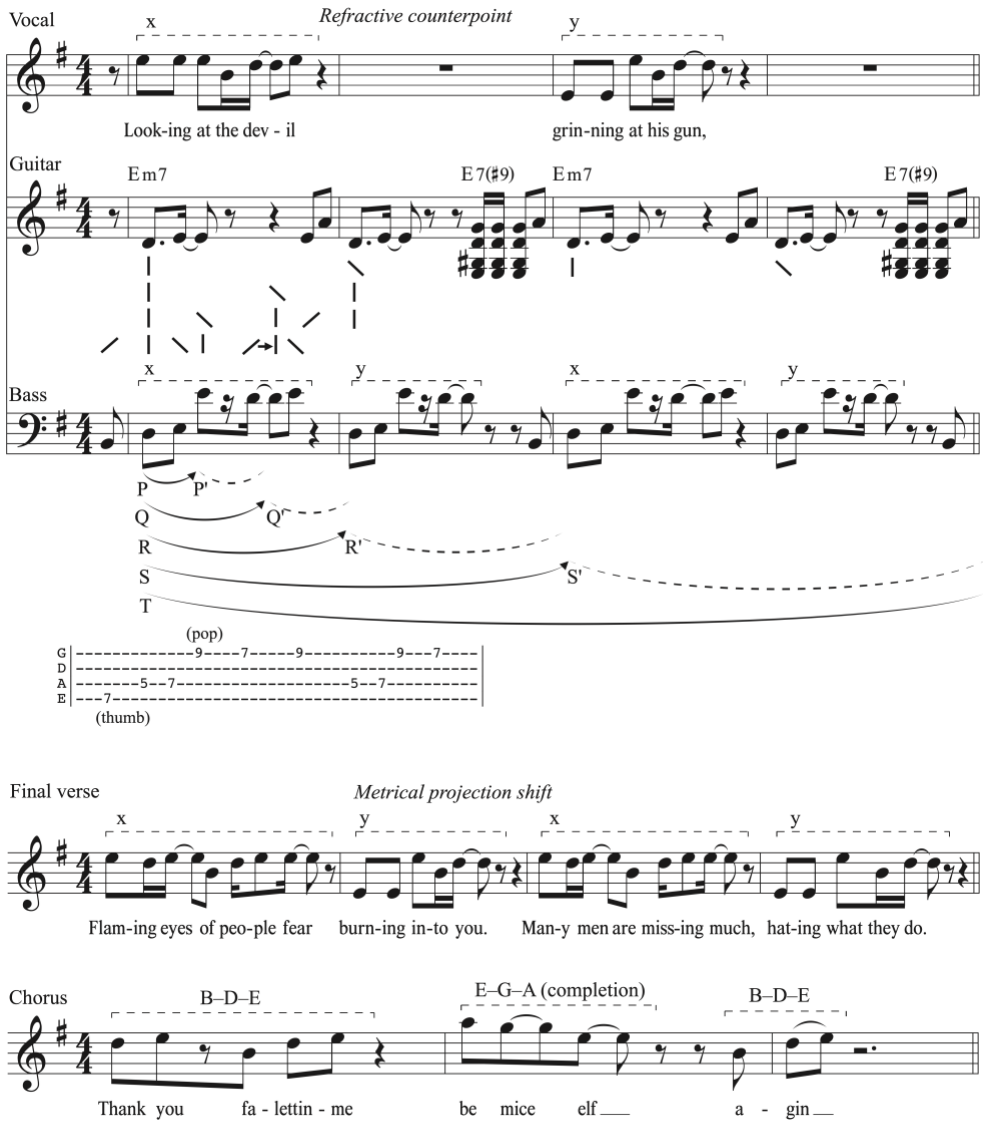
A unique idiom of 16th note figuration shapes metrical qualities in funk music. Syncopated patterning in 16ths indexes to binary human movement (as in down/up guitar strumming), resulting in energized embodied motion that enlivens patterning at broader metrical levels.

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)



Metric qualities (Hasty 1997)

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

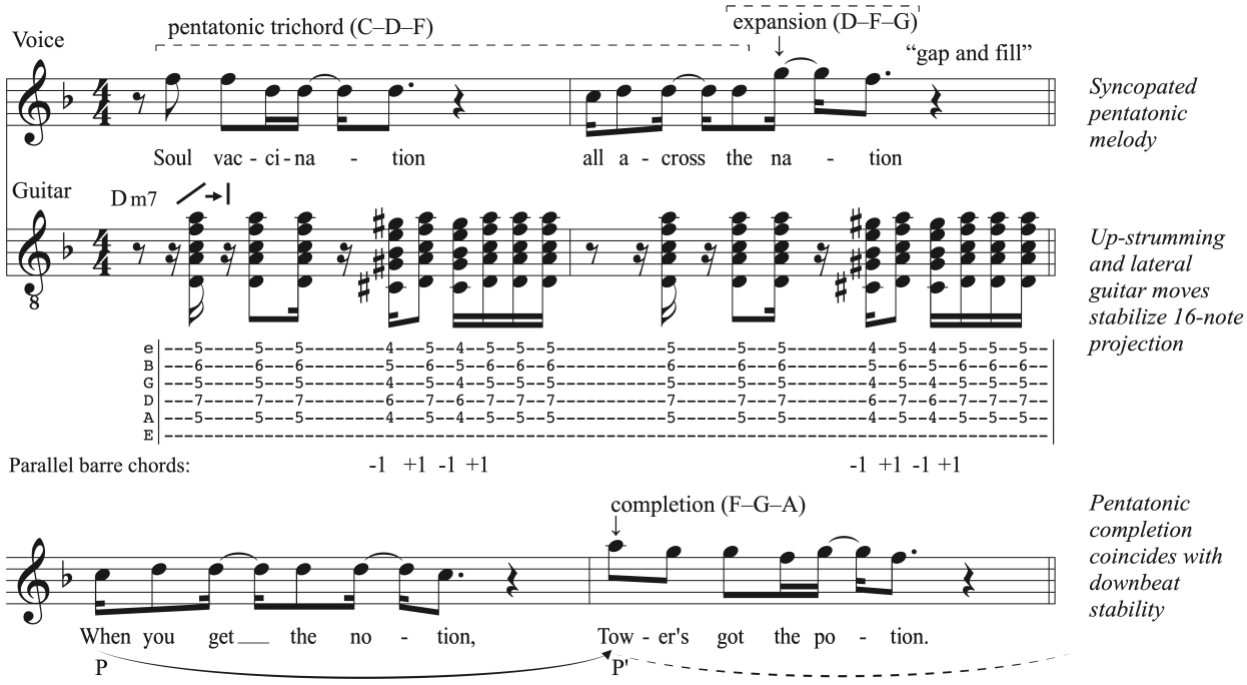
Minor pentatonic scale steps

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

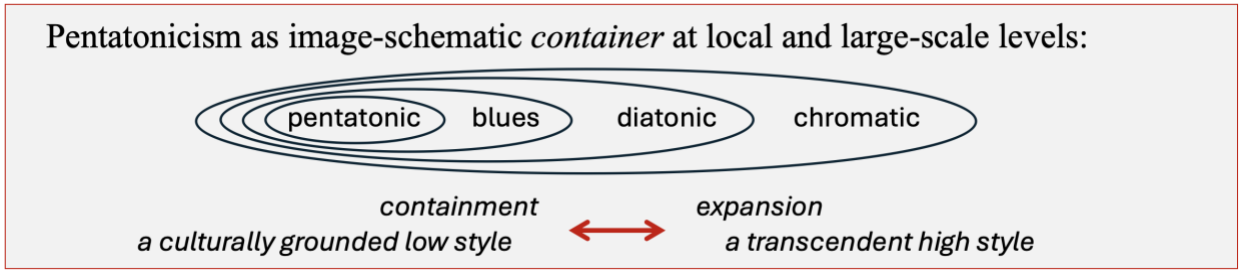
Trichordal scale segments

E–G–A
G–A–B
A–B–D
B–D–E
D–E–G

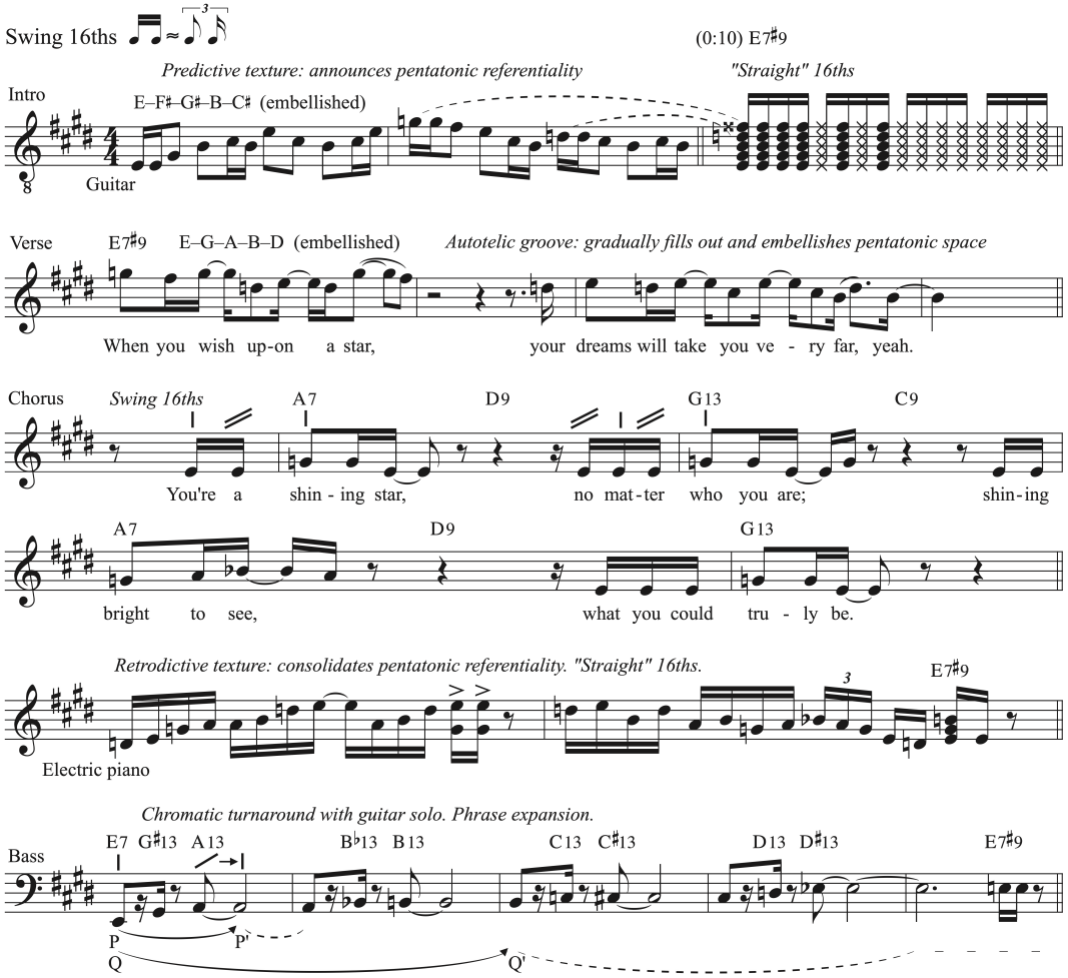
Example 2. Tower of Power, “Soul Vaccination,” *Tower of Power* (1973)



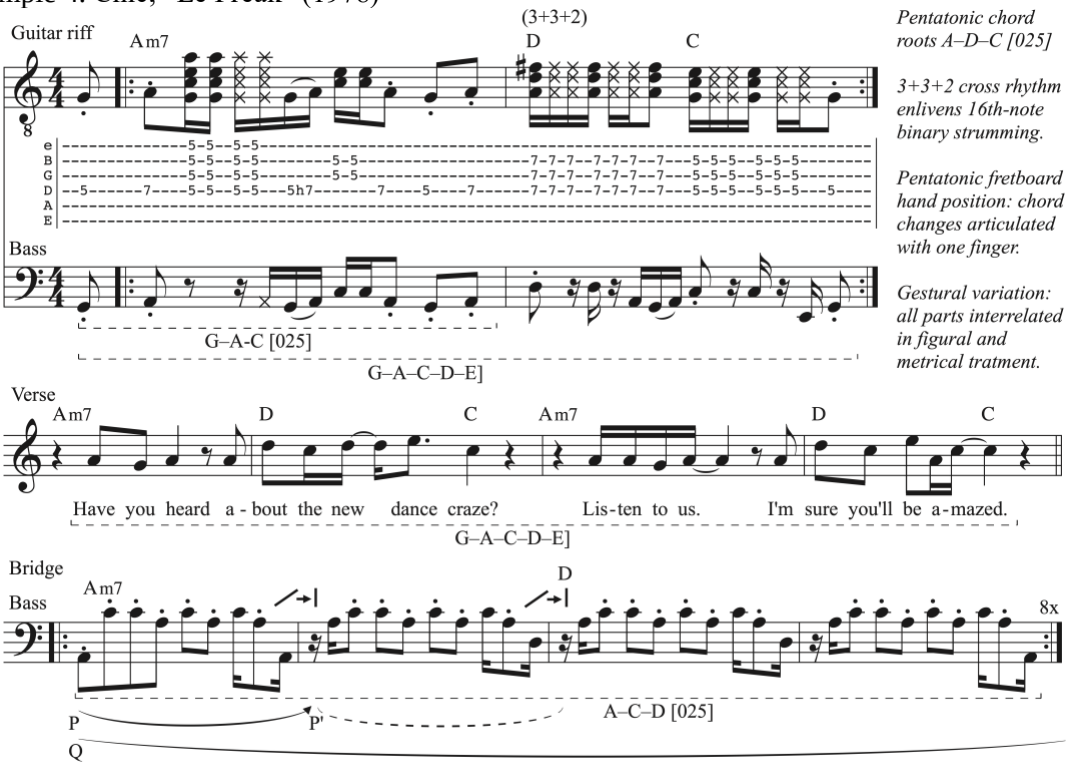
Texture and metrical layers	
Intro	Ensemble brass: pentatonic melody. 4-bar phrase rhythm. Guitar, bass, drums: 16th-note projection, autotelic groove.
Verse / Chorus	Blues-inflected pentatonic melody with backing vocals in call-and-response. Chromatically ascending brass hits in syncopation emphasize 8th-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 16th-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 8th-note layer. Textural drop and build: 16th-note layer emphasized. Ascending and descending chromatic brass lines in 8th-note triplets punctuate outro.



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



Example 4. Chic, “Le Freak” (1978)

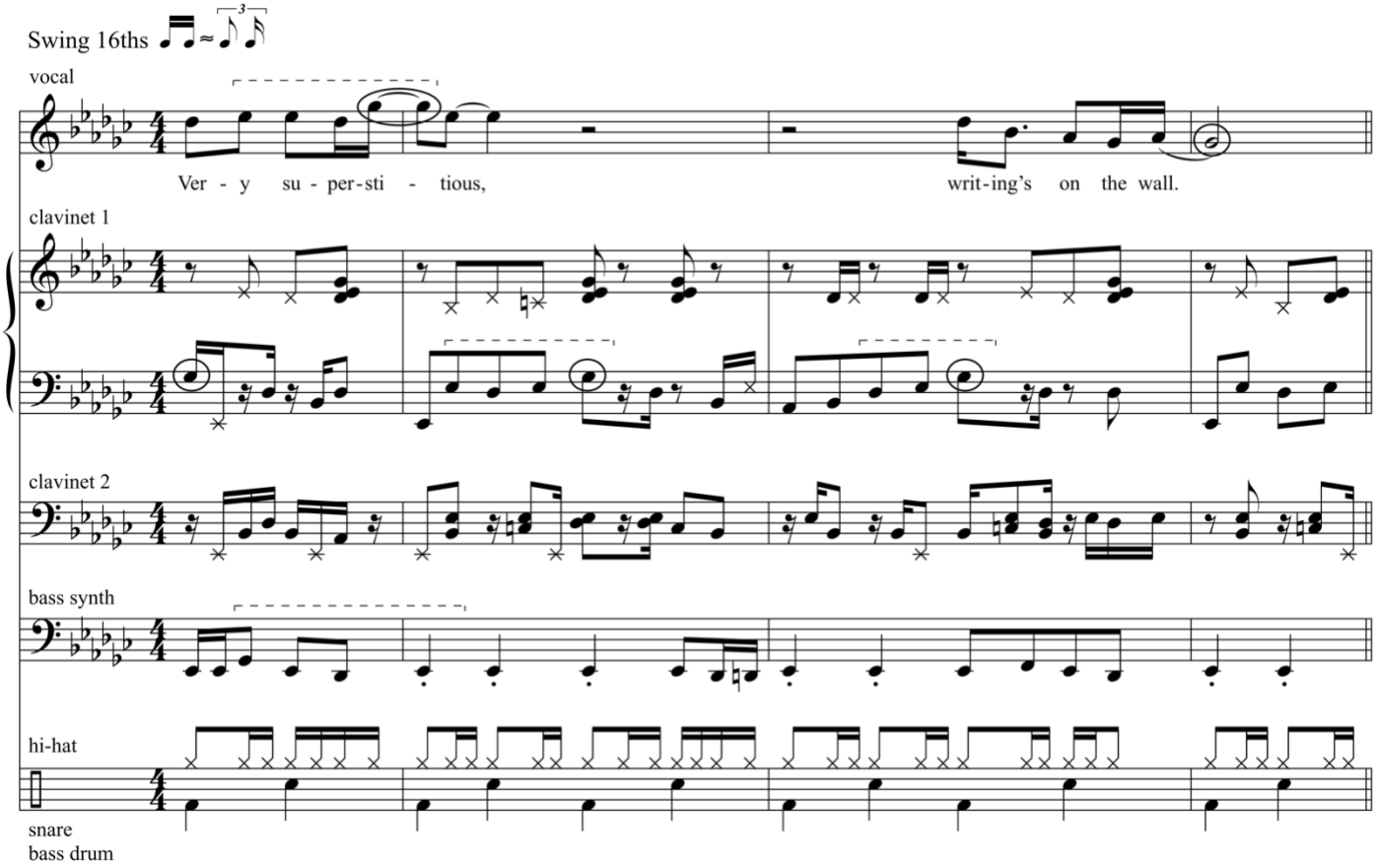


Metrical projection shift: Half-time harmonic rhythm with gradually ascending strings focuses attention on broader hypermeter.

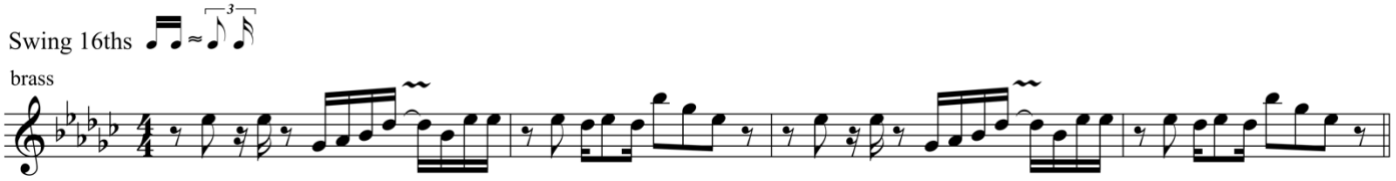
Additional Musical Examples

Example 1. Stevie Wonder. “Superstition,” *Talking Book* (1972)

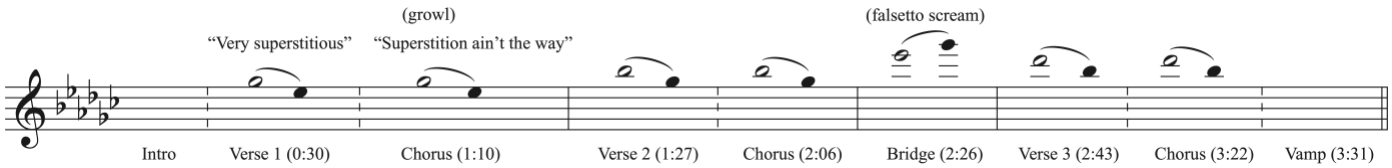
a. Verse (0:30)



b. Brass (0:50)



c. Sectional form and vocal highpoints



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

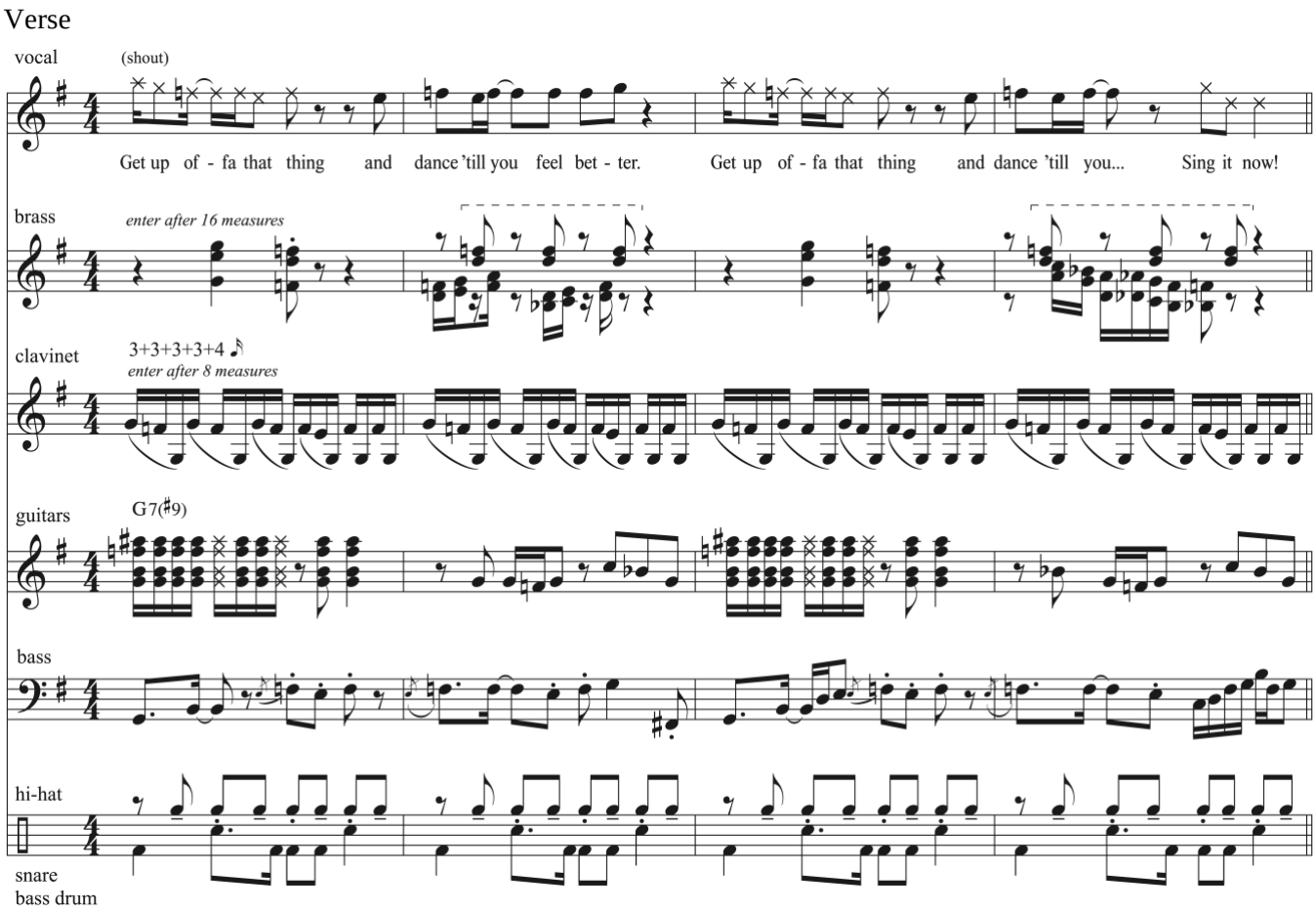


Table 1. James Brown. “Get Up Offa That Thing.” Dialogue and metrical layers in the first verse

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)

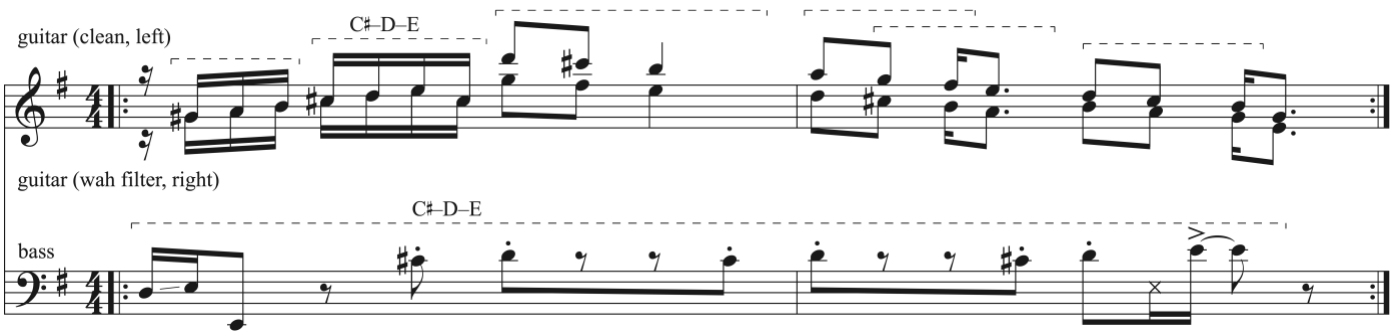
Table 2. Parliament. *Funkentelechy vs. the Placebo Syndrome* (1977). Overall album design

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	E♭	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



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