

Funky President

IT SEEMS LIKE AGES AGO, doesn't it, that Bill Clinton said his mission was to get the American people "to get out of their funk." In fact it's only been a few months, but that's the equivalent of a million light years in the Clinton fully adjustable presidency. It was only a matter of *days* before he was saying that he hadn't been saying that we were in the funk he'd said we were in before. The president had misspoken—"funk was a poor choice of words." Well certainly it was from the perspective of public relations and spin control. The press pounced on him with ominous reminders of Jimmy Carter's "malaise" speech. Then Clinton—who'd made the remark coming back from a California trip to raise funds for his re-election campaign—panicked. The American people might think he thought something they didn't want their president thinking. So, in the blink of a news cycle, he un-thought it.

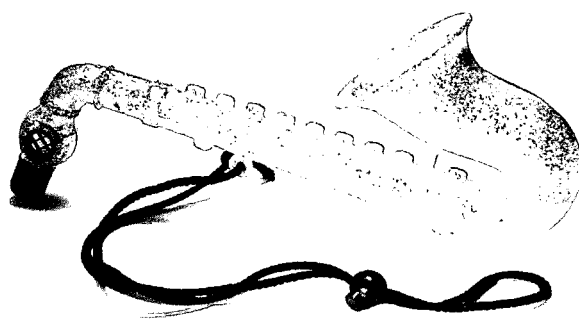
IT NEVER TAKES MUCH to tempt a pedant into showing you what he doesn't know. William Safire used the funk flap as an occasion to treat readers of his "On Language" column to a disquisition on the origins of the word. Rooting about his musty dictionaries, Safire missed one shade of the word's meaning. While he correctly noted that funk can mean "to smoke," it also means "to blow smoke"—an apt enough term for the First Bubba's incessant repositioning. Actually repositioning is a bit mild to describe the phenomenon: In 1984, Orwell described Big Brother's "need for an unwearying, moment-to-moment flexibility in the treatment of the facts." *That's* more like it, but a bit long. For economy and style, let's just say: Bill's the Funky President.

THE MOST PREPOSTEROUS omission in Safire's column was even passing reference to what "funk" means to any sentient American under the age of 40. For TAS's many wonderful readers above the cultural divide, funk is a distinctive style of black music that grew out of the soul music of the 1960's. Pioneered by the likes of James Brown and George Clinton (no relation), funk is characterized by a medium-tempo beat and a groove driven by the bass. Of course, describing music is ultimately a futile endeavor; "if you have to ask," as both Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong are reputed to have said about jazz, "you'll never know." In any case, Safire wouldn't have found out about funk rummaging through Francis Grose's 1698 *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*.

THERE'S NO WAY he could have known, then, that one of the standard reference songs in the funk discography is James Brown's "Funky President." The song was released at Christmastime 1974, in the aftermath of Nixon's resignation, but Brown was actually referring to Jerry Ford—"Taxes keep goin' up / Changed from a glass / Now I drink from a paper cup / ... We got a brand new funky president." (This usage carried yet another of funk's varied meanings, one that Safire did get: smelly.) Taking more and more taxes out of people's pockets? Sounds like JB was presaging the rise of Bill Clinton. There's even a little bit at the end in which James starts talking about "changing things." The only way to do it? He sings, "*Ah need ta be the guv'nah / Ah NEED ta be the GUV'NAH.*" It must have been an early source of political inspiration for Bill.

THE OTHER PRIME PROGENITOR of funk music was George Clinton. You may occasionally see him now hawking Apple Computers on television, his hair an explosion of multi-colored braids and his voice as drawn out and gravelly as Claus von Bülow's driveway. It was George who first gave Washington the nickname Chocolate City, and who standardized the measurement of funk in the late 1970's: if something was very funky, it wasn't high or loud or wide or long, it was deep—"Not just knee deep, she was to-ta-LEE deep," as he put it. It was also Clinton who occasioned my only pleasant moment during a brief stint at the Republican National Committee. My last day there was Halloween, on which the RNC holds an annual party during office hours for underprivileged kids. Corridor lights are turned out, candy is distributed, and staffers are encouraged to make nice with the little shavers. Few felt like doing so; the mood at the RNC then was a sour one, with Bill having knocked George Bush out of the White House the winter before. In a little-used drawer I found a rubber mask of Bush, put it on, and went strolling about the building. I came up to a little boy, extended my hand, and his eyes grew as wide as half-dollars: "Wow," he said with great excitement, "you're George Clinton."

I SUSPECT THE KID'S CONFUSION was more wishful thinking than anything. I'd rather have the composer of "Uncle Jam Wants You" in the White House than the other Clinton. At press time he is very stupidly sending our young men off to Christmas in Bosnia. Those soldiers are about to become immersed in an age-old conflict, stepping into something very deep, indeed. And it's not funk. ❧



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