

**History of Rock**  
**Chapter 15**  
**Funk and Disco**

Funk was a distinctive style that included syncopated bass lines and polyrhythms along with short vocal phrases with a considerable amount of repetition. Early examples of funk were recorded by James Brown, Godfather of Soul. His funk style was deeply rooted by music from Africa.

Brown's backup musicians used polyrhythms between the bass, drums, and horns, while having a strong accent on the downbeat. Horns were used to punctuate the rhythms, but not to play the melodies. Chord changes were generally minimal. A clear example of this style is heard in *Papa's Got a Brand New Bag*.

***Listen to James Brown---Papa's Got a Brand New Bag (1:1)***

This piece uses a standard blues chord progression but other songs in funk style by Brown maintained a single chord for a very long time. This drew attention to the rhythm rather than the chord changes.

The style begun by Brown was so appealing that it was copied by other groups. One such group was Sly and the Family Stone. Sly Stone (Sylvester Stewart) and his brother, Freddie Stewart, grew up singing gospel in church. Sylvester took music theory classes at Vallejo Junior College and learned to play a number of instruments in addition to working as a singer and songwriter. He also produced a number of recordings for San Francisco bands, including Great Society with Grace Slick.

The Stewart brothers started a group called the Stoners, but it lasted for only one year. They added more musicians and called it Sly and the Family Stone. It was called *family* because Sly had siblings in the group and because it included both white and black members. Bigotry was a concern to Sly Stone and the group's recording, *Everyday People* (1969) made fun of hangups about skin color as well as other forms of bigotry. An even stronger statement was made by the recording, *Don't Call me Nigger Whitey* (1969).

***Listen to Sly and the Family Stone---Don't Call Me Nigger White Boy (1:5)***

By the time the group recorded *Dance to the Music* (1968), they had taken Brown's polyrhythmic vamps, used minimal chord changes, added fuzztone, and imitated Motown's stress on all four beats, avoiding the backbeat that was common in most other rock styles.

***Listen to Sly and the Family Stone---Dance to the Music (1:3)***

The recording that had the greatest impact on the development of funk was *Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)* (1970). This song reminds of Booker T and the MGs and added an updated fuzztone guitar along with polyrhythms set over minimal chord changes.

**Listen to Sly and the Family Stone--- *Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)* (1:4)**

During the 70's, a funk style called street funk developed. This style was dominated by strong bass guitar lines, harmonies filled in by guitars and/or keyboards, complex rhythms played by a variety of drums, a *flat-four beat*, and often included a party atmosphere complete with whistles and tambourines. The *flat four beat* is one in which all four beats are played evenly. Popular street funk groups included Kool and the Gang, the Ohio Players, and George Clinton and his groups, Parliament and Funkadelic.

Kool and the Gang actually began in 1964 as a group influenced by Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis, and John Coltraine, using the name Jazziacs. They commercialized their sound and called themselves the Soul Town Review. Soon, their leader, Robert Bell gave himself the nickname *Kool* and renamed the group *Kool and the Gang* in 1968. Their style of street funk was lighthearted and danceable. After early recordings in funk style, Kool and the Gang left that style behind and played disco-influenced dance music during the late 70's. In the 80's they focused on a smoother, ballad-style. They continued to place hits at the top of the charts in the 80's, but had less success in the 90's.

**Listen to Kool and the Gang---*Celebrate Good Times* (1:12)**

Funk had been an African-American style from its beginning but its infectious style caused it to spread past American soil to Scotland where the Average White Band (AWB) formed in 1972. This group was anything but average. Their music was based on a steady flow of even beat subdivisions and stress on the backbeat (note how that is different from funk's beginnings). Their saxophone section played repeating melody patterns that used less punch than horn sections in other funk bands. Their most successful album was produced in 1974, *AWB*. They won a Grammy for the single from that album, *Pick up the Pieces*.

**Listen to AWB---*Pick Up the Pieces* (1:8)**

Singer, songwriter, and producer, George Clinton formed Parliament as a vocal group patterned after the Temptations. The group recorded using Hendrix-like distorted guitar and the funky polyrhythms of Sly and the Family Stone along with vocals similar to those used by the Temptations with *Cloud Nine*.

In 1968 Clinton formed Funkadelic. Both had flexible membership and some members played in both groups. To keep their identities separate, Clinton had each group record on different labels.

Clinton worked with so many different musicians over the years that his style also changed. One significant change that became important in later funk was the

replacement of the electric bass lines with synthesized bass lines. That sound was introduced with Parliament's hit recording, *Flashlight* (1978).

***Listen to Parliament---Flashlight* (1:9)**

Earth, Wind, and Fire was another group with a great amount of commercial appeal. Formed in Chicago in 1969, they recorded their most successful albums in the mid-70's. They sometimes varied their funk style by adding Latin rhythms, but it was their more genteel pop sound that set them apart. At times they sounded much like one of Motown's groups. Their soundtrack for the movie *That's the Way of the World* won them a Grammy for the single, *Shining Star* (1975). The group was still active in the 90's.

***Listen to Earth, Wind, and Fire---Shining Star* (1:10)**

The Ohio Players developed out of an R&B group known as the Ohio Untouchables, formed in Dayton, Ohio in 1959. They switched to a funk style in the early 70's and placed several songs on the pop and R&B charts. One of their biggest hits was *Love Rollercoaster* (1975).

***Listen to The Ohio Players---Love Rollercoaster* (1:11)**

**Disco**

The term *disco* was first used in post-World War II France when clubs began playing recorded dance music rather than using live bands. During the 60's those clubs were called *discothèques*. Disco music of the 70's became popular with the soul styles of Detroit (Motown) and Philadelphia (Philadelphia International Records) that became popular in homosexual and African-American clubs in New York before the dance craze spread to the rest of the country. These musicians and singers did concertize, but the essence of disco lay in the clubs themselves, where the dancers were the performers.

The music was to be played from records and had *beat per minute* (bpm) indications on the labels so recordings could be chosen to easily *segue* from one to another without changing the speed of the beat. Many disco recordings began with a rhythmically free introduction to allow the tempo to change from one song to the next and to give the dancers the opportunity to get out on the floor. Other songs were longer than many singles were in order to allow dancers a continuous flow of music.

In disco, each beat was strongly accented. Many recordings featured group backup vocals that created a party-like atmosphere or they used other sounds to invite the listeners to join in the party and dance.

One of the earliest important disco singers was Barry White whose disco recordings were made with a 40 member orchestra he called the Love Unlimited Orchestra. In the 70's White made one disco hit after another.

***Listen to Barry White---Practice What You Preach* (1:13)**

The movie, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), helped spread the popularity of disco dancing to a large mainstream audience. The Bee Gees had already enjoyed considerable success on the pop charts, but, with the soundtrack of *Saturday Night Fever*, their popularity continued and they produced several top hits. One of their three number one hits from that soundtrack was *How Deep Is Your Love* (1977). Others were *Stayin' Alive* and *Night Fever*.

***Listen to the Bee Gees---How Deep Is Your Love (2:1)***

Donna Summer was generally considered to be the *Queen of Disco*. Her hit, *Love to Love You Baby* (1975) provided 17 minutes of dreamy music for dancing.

***Listen to Donna Summer---Love to Love You Baby (1:15)***

She won several Grammy's for her works.

Among the important disco groups was the Village People who capitalized on stereotypical homosexual images and themes with their disco hits.

***Listen to the Village People---YMCA (1:19)***

One of the most successful and influential disco groups of the late 70's and early 80's was Chic. Their style included the regular pounding beat, interesting and very active bass lines and Cuban-influenced rhythms.

***Listen to Chic---Good Times (1:17)***

Queen's, *Another One Bites the Dust* (1980) bears the influence of Chic's style.

***Listen to Queen---Another One Bites the Dust (1:18)***