

# GET ON THE BIGFOOT.



Who put the boom in Parliafunkadelicment's One? It was Jerome 'Bigfoot' Brailey, whose drumming launched a thousand grooves. Back with a new album, he tells Kris Needs how he kept his head straight while all around him folks were losing theirs

**O**f the countless musicians who've passed through the teeming portals of George Clinton's Mothership, few made names for themselves in their own right. Obviously, Bootsy was always destined for stardom and keyboardist Bernie Worrell became a respected musician-composer, but otherwise P-Funk's roll-call has been more noted for its casualties than its celebrities, while others simply refused to disembark.

Jerome 'Bigfoot' Brailey was one of the 16 past and present P-Funkers inducted into the US Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 1997, but as one of the few who didn't fall into the pit of drug-induced chaos which all-but wrecked the crew in the 70s, he'd already established himself as the most high-profile and independent of the former members. As the all-time powerhouse funky drummer, he underpinned some of P-Funk's greatest classics, co-writing landmarks such as Give Up The Funk (Tear The Roof Off The Sucker) or providing the bedrock as he sat in studios churning out tracks for days on end with Bootsy, Bernie and the gang, which Clinton then adapted to fit his latest concept or record deal.

In 1977, he broke away to form the aptly-named Mutiny, notching up a jawdropping CV of sessions, collaborations and his own projects, most

recently his band's *Funk Road* set, which successfully replants the genre into the 21st century by mating it with diverse musical strains, in either spanking groove or idiosyncratic song form.

If anyone has travelled the *Funk Road*, it's Bigfoot. Born in Richmond, Virginia, like so many, he wanted to be in a group after seeing The Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, starting on drums at 14. First he played along to Motown and Stax records of the day, widening his palette to include John Bonham and rock, eventually arriving at his trademark style because

**"Eddie Hazel was the closest thing to Jimi Hendrix"**

"I wanted to add my own stuff. I just incorporated it into my style, the way I would have done if I'd played it. That just developed over the years, I guess."

His first band was The Montclairs at school (along with future go-to guitar giant Wah Wah Watson), which led to sessions. By 1967, he was at Washington DC's Howard University, which had spawned The Unifics, who he joined, scoring a hit in 1968 with Court Of Love, arranged by Donny Hathaway, on the Kapp label.

Touring with The Unifics while on summer break (including Harlem's Apollo Theatre), he encountered The Five Stairsteps, Chicago's Jacksons-presaging First Family Of Soul, which comprised the Burke siblings. Signed to Curtis Mayfield's Windy C label, the Stairsteps had built a steady following with R&B hits including Something's Missing and A Million To One. The group shared bills with The Unifics, and Bigfoot hit it off with The Stairsteps until he was playing with both bands on tour.

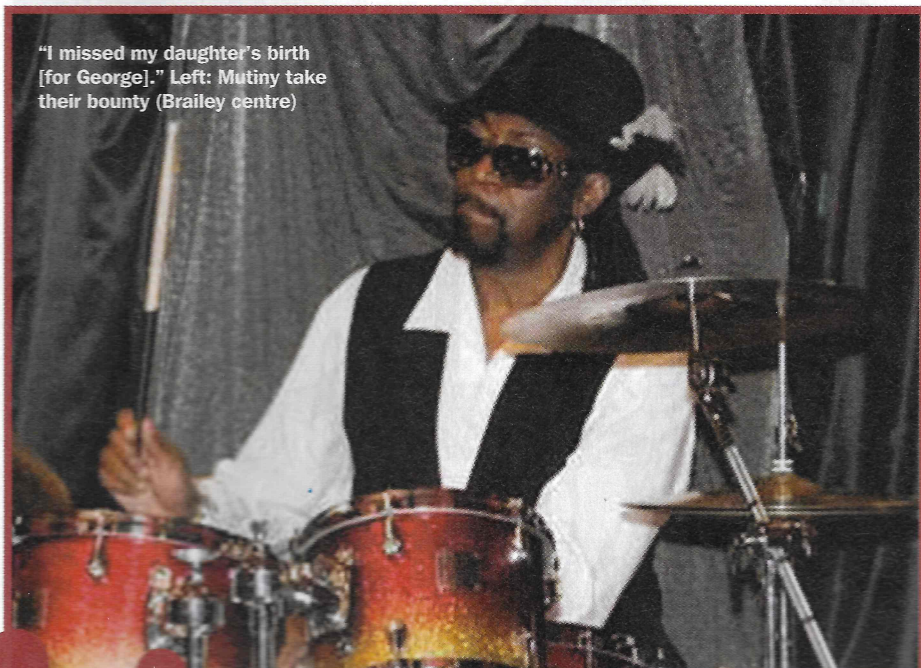
"Finally, it was like, 'I'd rather play with the Stairsteps because we were all about the same age. They had a killer live show, stepping around on stage and catching the licks that I was playing.'"

The Stairsteps' career peaked with 1970's sublimely optimistic Top 10 hit, O-o-h Child, produced by Mayfield, which led to their appearance on the new *Soul Train* TV show. "We did a lot of shows with Curtis, both solo and when he had The Impressions. We were all kids, so it was like we knew these guys was cool but didn't realise how large they actually were."

The Chambers Brothers, who had enjoyed a massive hit in 1968 with psych-funk landmark Time Has Come Today, were also riding that *Soul Train* episode, taking an immediate liking to Bigfoot. "They were interested in me because I was wearing this big, floppy hat. I was six foot two and they were all tall guys. They were like, 'This guy looks like he should be with us!'" He joined a few months later, playing the gig circuit and on the unreleased Oh My God! and 1975's Right Move. "It was crazy because each one of my career moves was like a step going up; Stairsteps were higher than The Unifics, then the Brothers was higher than the Stairsteps."

Brailey was already a fan of Funkadelic's earliest, lysergically-spawned albums when the two groups collided on the chitlin' circuit, getting to know the band, particularly late guitarist Eddie Hazel, whom he tried to get into the Chambers Brothers only to find the guitarist judged "too far out".

"Eddie was the closest thing to Jimi (Hendrix) of all the guitar players. He was just a cool guy, really funny, always laughing. He was real sensitive; he would just break down and start crying for no reason. He wasn't egoed out about playing, he was really soulful."



"I missed my daughter's birth [for George]." Left: Mutiny take their bounty (Brailey centre)