

The fashion of funk: Maceo Parker brings a well-dressed, all-star band to Ardmore Music Hall

By Jack Firneno

Maceo Parker's played with the best — and best-dressed — of them. He's the sax player James Brown was talking to when he first yelled "Blow, Maceo!" in 1965 on the song "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag." It was a call was later heard on dozens of other tracks as Parker became Brown's right-hand man.

When he left that group in 1974, Parker jumped on the Mothership to lend his punchy, percussive playing to a handful of seminal Parliament-Funkadelic albums over the next decade. Later, his signature sax could be heard on albums by everyone from the Red Hot Chili Peppers to Prince.

For the past quarter-century, Parker's been his own bandleader, in charge of what's often dubbed "The Greatest Little Funk Orchestra on Earth." He delivers infectious grooves and sweaty solos on records and in person, still playing around 100 shows a year worldwide, even at 72 years old. His formula, as he's explained it for years, is as simple as it is effective: "2 percent jazz, 98 percent funky stuff."

Parker's own compositions are regulars in concert, as are plenty of James Brown and P-Funk numbers. There's also some Sly Stone and Marvin Gaye, among others, and, especially over the last few years, a handful of songs by his idol, Ray Charles. He usually sticks to a set group of songs, but the directions those pieces take vary from gig to gig, and from lineup to lineup as Parker brings out different players on each tour.

"I get encouraged from what we're doing, and 98 percent of the time I won't discard that feeling. I'm governed by my gut feeling, I've been doing this for such a long time," he explained. Parker performs with a smile, and seems to talk with one, too. You can almost feel it beaming over the phone line from North Carolina to the suburbs of Philadelphia.

"If I feel there's a lift to me, then I also feel it's gonna be a lift to the band and also a lift to the people. It's almost as if I'm in front of the control board and I'm alone in the studio just listening to what I feel like I want to hear. That's the liberty of having your own group."

When Parker comes to Ardmore Music Hall in January, his group will include some good, old company: the backline features P-Funk alum Dennis Chambers on drums and bassist Rodney "Skeet" Curtis.

"It's almost like a relative, but in a good way — sometimes you have relatives not in a good way," laughed Parker. "There's a history, too, and that gives a closeness, same as somebody in your family. And you know these people and you feel good about them, especially when they can really play. It's just a great feeling."

Family's how Parker got his start, playing with his brother first in their own band and later together with Brown. And if clothes really make the man, that also explains where Parker came from and how he does what he does today.

Wardrobe was an important part of the James Brown band when Parker arrived in the early '60s. It was all about uniformity, he recalled, "Down to our ties having to be almost the exact same size."

He'd gotten the gig through his brother, Melvin, to whom Brown had originally extended an offer. The Parkers were well known around A&T University in North Carolina, where they attended and played regularly. Brown had seen Melvin play drums and told him that, whenever he was ready, there'd be a spot for him in the James Brown band.

It was also at A&T that Parker realized he should pursue the burgeoning funk sound over jazz, when singer Marvin Gaye came to town looking for a pickup band and was told to look up the Parker brothers. Parker was already “hearing” the funky licks anyway, he said, but that instance sealed the deal.

“If somebody came on the campus and stuck their head in each room and I’m in the room with maybe 30, 40 jazz people, maybe it’s hard for him to recognize me,” he explained. “But if I’m in the funk five, maybe they’ll recognize me easier.”

And, it was a year or two later that Maceo and Melvin approached Brown when he came back to town. Brown expanded the offer to include Maceo, but on baritone instead of tenor sax, which he played primarily at the time.

So Parker picked up a baritone, but soon began alternating on tenor with other players. He got back on his main ax when the band was recording Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag.” Parker and the other tenor were unsure who’d take the solo until Brown, in a creative moment, rhymed “Maceo” and “blow.” The rest was history.

Eventually, Parker became one of maybe only two people in the band allowed to dress differently from the rest of the group. He also was responsible for helping Brown pick out the outfits for each show.

One day the band was running late to a venue. Brown told Parker to meet in his dressing room, which had two entrances. Parker left the soundcheck early and went to the room through one entrance, but his boss left through the other looking for him and they kept missing each other. It sounds like the premise for a sitcom, but in this band it ended up costing him a few dollars.

“I forgot what the fine was, but he gave me a fine. I just laughed,” Parker recalled. “It was one of those things.”

Years later, a uniform mix-up occurred with the band Parliament with different results, when bandleader George Clinton’s wardrobe trunk didn’t make it to an upcoming show.

Clothes were just as important with this group, but in a completely different way. “George’s thing was, ‘Life ain’t nothing but a party,’ especially on stage,” said Parker. “You had guys say, ‘I’m really into trains, can I wear this conductor’s outfit?’ ‘Yeah, man.’ ‘I’m really into cowboys and the two guns and ten-gallon hats.’ ‘Yeah, man.’ And then another guy, ‘My feet hurt, I don’t feel like wearing shoes tonight.’ ‘That’s cool.’ ”

So when the band was set to go on and Clinton didn’t have his clothes, he improvised. Parker watched in amazement as the leader borrowed a wig off one of the women in the group, then wrapped himself in a tablecloth and headed out on stage.

“That was the first thing that threw me about my little stay with George,” laughed Parker. “Coming from all those years with James Brown and uniformity.”

Today, a Maceo Parker show shares plenty of similarities to a Brown engagement: sharp dressers, tight performances, orderly rounds of solos, and lightly choreographed entrances and exits. But he doesn’t whip suddenly from song to song like his former boss. Solos can stretch comfortably over solid, steady grooves for 6 or 10 minutes and the band appears much more relaxed.

Of course, they’re also nowhere near as sprawling or theatrical as Parliament, where 25 or 30 costumed people were dancing, singing and playing on stage, and landing a spacecraft — The Mothership — at the beginning of a show. That was something Parker said he modified when he assumed some leadership roles in Parliament, reigning in all that organized chaos just a little. He adopted the same mentality for his own group years later.

“I lean toward James Brown. We don’t have to necessarily have someone come in and fit us in the same suit like the Temptations, but we do wear suits and ties,” said Parker. “My concept is, you can get a roomful of musicians and handpick, without even playing, six or seven people to get on stage. And you can ask if they know Knock on Wood and if they do you can play it and it’s cool. But if you dress like you just came off the basketball court and grabbed an instrument, subliminally people can see that, and they can feel that you just got together. I like people to feel we’ve gotten ready and prepared for them. I think people appreciate that a little more.”

Audiences have been appreciating it for decades, with Parker leading his lineups through extended funk workouts to soul ballads. He opened his solo career with fans already in tow, and made plenty of new ones as he struck out on his own in the ‘90s, with guest appearances on stage and recordings with a younger generation of admirers like Ani DiFranco, De La Soul and Dave Matthews Band.

And, he got to be that admirer himself when he finally played with Ray Charles. Before James Brown or Marvin Gaye, there was teenage Parker at a Charles concert. He had found his way near the dressing rooms and, when, Charles passed by Parker pointed and mouthed the words, “One of these days, Mr. Ray Charles, you are going to know Maceo Parker.”

He never knew if Charles saw him that day, but the prediction came true in 1993: Parker was opening for the pianist on a string of dates, and was invited to join the headliner for a song onstage one night.

Even with decades of experience, Parker was still nervous about the spot: Charles had a sharp ear and a reputation for calling out players if they were even a little out of tune. And, after the show he stopped by his idol’s dressing room.

“Ray laughed. He laughed at everything all the time,” said Parker. Even so, the now-veteran sax player was surprised by the reaction he got when he mentioned how long he’d wanted to join Charles onstage, and that he was nervous about being in tune.

“He interrupted and said, ‘I bet you talked to your horn and said, ‘Mother ____, you better play good tonight!’ and then he put his hand on his hip and bent over laughing,” Parker recalled, chuckling himself. “I almost got scared, his head was almost way down to the floor.”

Mission accomplished, and Parker still cherishes the moments they had together. Years later, he honored the pianist with a concert of Ray Charles songs featuring the WRD big band in Germany. That yielded the 2008 album “Roots & Grooves,” a collection of Ray Charles tunes, and later “Soul Classics” with the same big band in 2012, featuring songs by the likes of Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin.

Adding more classic soul to his repertoire makes the Greatest Little Funk Orchestra on Earth an even more well-rounded revue. But for Parker, there’s much more to it than a sense of legacy. It’s alive to him; it’s the music he’s always wanted to make, the sounds he believes that he was born to play.

“I just do what I do. I may say something like, ‘Since I started such a long time ago,’ or, ‘There may not be many left.’ But I always heard the funky side of stuff, and that’s what I went with,” he said. “It seems to work out for me.”