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The mid-1980s, George Clinton was indisputably the King of Funk, the music's most inspired and whacked-out innovator. Clinton first entered the charts in 1967 with the Parliaments and the No. 20 pop hit "I Wanna Testify. A year later, he was in Detroit ring-leading a new creation known as Funkadelic, which put the era's experimental rock into a proto-funk context with hard-rock drumming, heavily distorted guitars and lyrics that laid out the funk cosmology Clinton was developing. And soon after that he added a new group known simply as Parliament. With essentially the same personnel, the two groups performed live together, while on record Funkadelic put an emphasis on instrumentation, improvisation and soloists, and Parliament was oriented more toward songs and singing. Picking up rhythmically where James Brown left off, Clinton created ever more elaborate and outrageous scenarios and songs, as well as a whole new vocabulary to explain them; eventually, his music began crossing over to white audiences.

But Clinton was perpetually involved in contract disputes and lawsuits, and in 1982, having lost the rights to his groups' names, he began recording under his own—though still using many of the same musicians. Clinton notes that he was in an "enhanced" state when he entered the studio to cut vocals for the unnamed track that became Atomic Dog—without realizing that the music was playing backward due to an engineer's miscue, he began ad-libbing lyrics. "This is the story of a famous dog," he announced, and from there the song just got weirder.

More than most of his contemporaries, Rick James fully appreciated just how completely Clinton and company had changed black music.
James's punk-funk, mostly about drugs and freaky sex, took him to the top—but he was starting to slip right about the time producer Quincy Jones boasted that he and Michael Jackson had stolen Rick's groove for Thriller. So on Cold Blooded, written about his then girlfriend, Linda Blair, James created a new groove, playing all the instruments himself while relying on synthesizers rather than guitars and horns.

In the post-disco era, black music took many directions. Rufus featuring Chaka Khan, consisting of a black female singer fronting a black-and-white funk-rock band, had keyboardist David “Hawk” Wolinski's tune Ain't Nobody—which Quincy Jones also wanted for Thriller. Wolinski's bandmates weren't wild about the song but cut it anyway. When their label declined to release it as a single, Wolinski threatened to pull the song from the album and give it to Jones and Jackson. The label relented, and Rufus got the hit. Aretha Franklin was still strongly rooted in soul when she cut Freeway of Love. Writer-producer Narada Michael Walden, who had made a demo of the song in the classic Motown style 18 months earlier, planned to record it himself but wound up giving it to Aretha; her version contains a sax solo by Bruce Springsteen sideman Clarence Clemons. The Pointer Sisters, originally a vocal quartet dressed in thrift-store threads and singing in a '40s harmony style, dabbled in rock and even country before trying a more dance-oriented sound with Jump (For My Love).

The legendary writing-and-producing team of Nickolas Ashford and Valerie Simpson left Motown in 1973 to become performers themselves in a sleek, adult style. But Solid, their only No. 1 single, didn't come until 1984. Walking around New York City one day, Ashford heard some kids saying, “Yo, solid”; he told Simpson
later at home that he thought the phrase applied to their relationship, and they wrote a song with kid appeal to prove it. Another male-female pair, Yarbrough and Peoples, got *Don’t Waste Your Time* from writer-producer Jonah Ellis, who was inspired by an episode from high school in which a pal became his new sweetheart after she informed him that his old girlfriend was cheating on him. Midnight Star was a mixed group in which female singer Belinda Lipscomb was backed by founder Reggie Calloway, his brother Vincent and fellow Kentucky State students; they had to leave for New York to start enjoying hits like *Operator*.

For the movie Footloose, about a small Midwestern town that bans dancing, Tom Snow and Dean Pitchford wrote *Let’s Hear It for the Boy* for the scene in which Kevin Bacon attempts to teach Christopher Penn to dance. The songwriters discarded their original version and rewrote it; next, they accepted and then rejected Deniece Williams’ first recording—so she popped into a Manhattan studio and sang it back on the musical map. Renamed Maze, his group recorded *Back in Stride*, the first of their two No. 1 hits, right after a major personnel shake-up, squelching rumors that they were
disbanding. Soul legend Marvin Gaye helped them get their first record deal and also suggested their name change.

Gaye was also an inspiration to James Mtume, a jazz veteran who turned to writing and producing soul and funk before forming the group he named after himself. He credited Gaye's Sexual Healing with clearing the path for erotic tunes like Juicy Fruit, which was much less orchestrated than Mtume's productions for other artists. The post-Lionel Richie Commodores saluted Gaye and Jackie Wilson on Nightshift. Drummer Walter Orange whipped up the groove while Franne Golde worked the Gaye and Wilson song titles into the lyrics and producer Dennis Lambert gave the single the feel of Rock and Roll Heaven, his earlier smash for the Righteous Brothers.

Ready for the World got a record deal after legendary Detroit DJ Electrifying Mojo (a.k.a. Charles Johnson) made the Flint, Michigan, sextet's indie single a local favorite. Their later hit Oh Sheila sounded so much like a Prince record that fans mistakenly assumed it was about the Purple One's percussionist Sheila E. Despite the fact that both the group DeBarge and songwriter Diane Warren had made ballads their specialty, she penned their up-tempo party anthem Rhythm of the Night for the soundtrack to The Last Dragon; producer Richard Perry made it work for lead singer El DeBarge by overdubbing street noises. Freddie Jackson, who sang background vocals for Melba Moore, cut Rock Me Tonight (For Old Times Sake) at a recording session his boss gave him for his birthday.

But it may have been Rockwell who had the most serendipitous story. Kennedy Gordy was the son of Motown founder and chairman Berry Gordy Jr., and a writer for his dad's publishing wing, Jobete, but he couldn't interest anyone at the label in Somebody's Watching Me except staff producer Curtis Anthony Nolen. Working at his home studio on his own time, Nolen helped Kennedy polish the song and cut it, even persuading Michael Jackson to add his voice. Meanwhile, Kennedy, gazing at a Norman Rockwell painting, decided to go by the more Prince-like name Rockwell. Berry liked the single, which hit so big it surprised everyone—except perhaps Nolen, who had realized something that no one else had noticed: Somebody's Watching Me, with its ultra-paranoid vision, was set for release in the year 1984.

—John Mortland


5 Rhythm of the Night  **DeBarge** • Music and lyrics by Diane Warren. BMG Songs Inc. ASCAP. Gordy 1770 (1985). © 1985 The Universal/Motown Records Group, a Division of UMG Recordings, Inc. No. 1*


8 Don't Waste Your Time  **Yarbrough and Peoples** • Music and lyrics by Jonah Ellis. Taking Care of Business Music. BMI. Total Experience 2400 (1984). © 1985 Mercury Records, a Division of UMG Recordings, Inc. No. 1*


* Indicates highest Billboard R&B chart position
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