

## **Continuity and Break: James Brown's 'Funky Drummer'**

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### **Abstract:**

In groove-oriented music, the basic unit of the song is repeated so many times that our inclination as listeners to organize the musical material into an overall form gradually fades away. Instead of waiting for events to come, we are submerged in what is before us. Dancing, playing, and listening in such a state of being are not characterized by consideration or reflection but rather by a presence in the here and now of the event. It is likely to believe that there is a connection between such an experience and the ways in which a groove is designed. This article investigates how a groove-based tune, more precisely Funky Drummer by James Brown and his band, is given form in time and, moreover, how this form is experienced while being in such a 'participatory mode' (Keil). Of importance is also to discuss how the rhythmic design of the groove at a microlevel contributes to this experience.

In groove-oriented music, the basic unit of the song is repeated so many times that our inclination as listeners to organize the musical material into an overall form gradually fades away. Instead of waiting for events to come, we are submerged in what is before us. Our focus turns inward, as if our sensibility for details, for timing inflections and tiny timbral nuances, is inversely proportional to musical variation on a larger scale. When a groove is experienced in this way, music ceases to be an object that exists apart from us. The relation of subject and object is almost suspended. We operate within a continuous field where the limit between music and listener is not yet established or has

vanished. Dancing, playing, and listening in such a state of being are not characterized by consideration or reflection but rather by a presence in the here and now of the event.<sup>1</sup> Charles Keil has referred to this way of being in music as the *participatory mode*, and it may engender an intense, almost euphoric feeling; in the words of Keil, “you are ‘at one’ with the entire universe or at least with very large chunks of it.” (Keil 1994: 98)

It is likely to believe that there is a connection between such an experience and the ways in which a groove is designed. More precisely, the groove experience can be linked to both the overall repetitive form so common in groove-based music and the subtle rhythmic design of the basic one or two bar pattern that is repeated. In the following, I will undertake some reflections on how a groove-based tune, more precisely Funky Drummer by James Brown and his band, is given form in time and, moreover, how this form is experienced while being in the participatory mode. I will also discuss how the rhythmic design of the groove at a microlevel contributes to this experience.

### **Groove as musical form**

Even though Funky Drummer is divided in two parts, part 1 and part 2, it is characterized by an absence of an overarching form in the sense that it lacks the aspects that commonly create the feeling of large-scale time-spans in music. Accordingly, the transition from part 1 to part 2 does not occur as a consequence of an overall harmonic course or a thematic development. Rather, it follows a cue from James Brown, a cue that he probably gives exactly at that point in the recording session where he finds it necessary to change the musical course by introducing something new. Typically, the fabric of rhythm does not change gradually. Rather, and much similar to how John Miller Chernoff describes the music of West-African drum ensembles (Chernoff 1979), the change is sudden, with all layers of rhythm changing their pattern at the same time.

In addition to the shift from part 1 to part 2, ‘Funky Drummer’ also contains a few

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough philosophical and musical-analytical underpinning of this argument, see Danielsen 2006, in particular chapters 8, 9 and 10.

other features typical of groove aesthetics and groove as a musical form. First, the division of labor is clear. Each musician sticks to his or her pattern, which is repeated throughout each part. Moreover, each pattern is clearly distinguishable from the others while being at the same time closely related; often two patterns have a complementary design. In 'Funky Drummer' there are also longer stretches where one of the instrumentalists is assigned to taking a free, improvisatory role. One of them is a sax solo by Maceo Parker. However, his improvisation does not follow the dramatic curve of a more traditional jazz improvisation. Rather, it unfolds in dialogue with the groove; it is driven by the energy of the interlocking patterns of the "support drums" and adds to the groove, emphasizing the excellent qualities that were already there and making the underlying groove even more interesting.

Another feature typical of a groove form is the use of a break. The break in 'Funky Drummer' is often referred to as the most frequently sampled break in the history of popular music. Whether true or not, the break no doubt has some outstanding qualities, and these come effectively into focus when they are suddenly allowed to rule the whole sound for eight measures (approx 5:50), while Brown appreciates them through repeating the outburst "Ain't it funky!". The break is introduced by a so-called cut, which traditionally refers to the point in the musical course where one or more tracks or layers are taken out of the groove so that the remaining voices receive more attention. However, in line with the dialogical logic described above our attention goes in the opposite direction as well. Not only does a certain voice achieve renewed attention when other voices are cut around it, but a voice may also acquire attention as it is itself cut. The immediate effect of the cut is clearly that one becomes aware of the layers of bass, Hammond organ, guitar, and horns that had previously accompanied the "funky drummer"; we hear the dimensions that are gone; gaps are exposed. At the same time, our attention shifts to the extraordinarily tickling drumming by Clyde Stubblefield, and a groove that, when running alone, seems to be both less and more complicated than when it was played together with the rest of the band. The structure of the figure is more straightforward and open than we might expect from how it sounds in the preceding parts.

As a sounding rhythmic gesture, however, the drum playing is more intricate than may be perceived when it is only part of the sound of a full band. Both the strokes belonging to the basic pattern and the more ornamental strokes are extremely well placed and most often marginally ahead of themselves.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1**



The drum pattern of “Funky Drummer.”

One of the effects of the break is that we become aware of these intricacies. The return to the groove after the break is thus extremely satisfying. The "new" beginning underlines the qualities of that which was: Suddenly there is a difference, an intensified feeling, as if we suddenly sense the quality and the qualities of the groove in a new way.

### **Repetition and depth**

The most striking compositional ‘tool’ of Funky Drummer, however, is the use of endless

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<sup>2</sup> It is an open question whether the drum break was planned in advance. One possibility is that James Brown at some point became aware of the qualities of this groove and then gives his instructions to the band. The song is apparently also named on the spot, when James Brown toward the end of the song states, “The name of this tune is the Funky Drummer.”

repetition. The question as to whether repetition in a groove is repetition of the same thing depends upon the resolution of the “processing”: if the resolution is good—if the listener is sufficiently attuned to details and other events on a microlevel—there is almost always something different in a given repetition. Conversely, a non-confident listener will probably tend to hear the same thing in spite of considerable differences from one repetition to the other. It also depends upon the extent to which listening is directed toward difference rather than similarity. When an important aesthetic orientation in African American culture is summed up as *to repeat with a difference*,<sup>3</sup> this means that every repetition is different, and that the focus is on difference—not difference in itself but difference stepping forward in relation to the same, to a figure, a formality or convention, perhaps even tradition. (In practice, tradition will also contain the expectation of difference.) In other words, repetition in a groove is a sort of microlevel signifyin(g): it is repetition and revision in one and the same maneuver.<sup>4</sup> The aim is twofold. On the one hand, it is important that the same is repeated every time: the same should be recognized or categorized as such. On the other hand, it is equally important that this same is different. However, this difference must not exhaust the category but instead occur in the form of what could be named “intracategorical variation”: the difference is a difference within the repeated.

Even a strictly repetitive tune like “Funky Drummer” is, on the level of structure (meaning that which can be pinned down some way or another, by notation or other forms of representation) an example of a changing same. The change is rather discreet and happens over a long time, but it is there. Subtle changes are, for example, introduced to the drum groove. However, we never think of this as a change, probably due to the fact that it is rather the act of producing the same. For this reason, it is probably also a mistake to speak of variation in this case. It is perhaps more accurate to speak about optimization or subtle perfection, about shaping the groove so that it can

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3 See Gates 1988: xxii–xxiii.

4 See Gates 1988. For investigations and discussions of signifyin’ in grooves, see Brackett 1995; Walser 1995; Danielsen 2005; Danielsen 2006.

make itself even more comfortable within the whole.

This continuous work on getting at the optimal solution is often described as “locking the rhythm” or “nailing the rhythm.” It is not a thought process, and it is never finished; it goes on automatically and continuously, manifested in the form of better or worse periods. In the better periods the technical skills of musicians (and dancers) appear to be completely absent (such things as precision and timing tend to be audible or visible only when they are lacking; ideally they attract no attention to themselves).<sup>5</sup> In most of the tunes by James Brown and his bands, this is exactly the case. All of the parts are completely reliable, and in a normal or “absorbed” mode, one need not consider the manner in which the groove is played; an alternative is never introduced. The groove simply has a good feel to it.

The trustworthiness of a groove, one in which the technical skills or competence-related aspects of the performance are transparent, is very important so that the groove’s partakers can get into the groove and remain there, in the participatory mode, for a long time. However, when this happens, not only the groove’s “craftsmanship” disappears; even the fact that the same basic musical unit is repeated throughout remains hazy. In a song like ‘Funky Drummer’ its repetition leads us deeper down into the groove. At the same time repetition is in a sense absolutely without interest for those of us who are being moved. Repetition is almost transparent.

### **Real time subtleties**

As stated earlier, the groove is, in one sense, only a groove to the extent that we are moving together with it, only to the extent that we are absorbed in the movement of the groove and have entered the participatory mode. A groove works when it is allowed to and/or manages to conquer us for the state of being in the groove. If one takes such a

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<sup>5</sup> This relation seems analogous to how Heidegger, and in line with him, Hubert Dreyfus, describes the “skilled use of equipment,” pointing out how both the equipment and the skills become transparent. This way of interacting with the world is referred to by Dreyfus as “absorbed coping”; see Dreyfus 1994: 61–69 and Heidegger 1962: 98–99.

participatory mode as a point of departure, repetition does not exist apart from its supplementary difference; as an experiential aspect of the groove, repetition is probably absent. In other words, when we are in the music, we hear only difference, but not in the sense of a deviation from what has come before. Rather, the synthesis in time that has to take place to make repetition into repetition never takes place, at least not on a level that brings it into focus. The fact that what is, is the same as what was, is pleasurable but never considered.

Getting into the groove requires a listening focus on performance in real time, that is, the attention of the listener has to be directed towards what is actually going on in the here and now of the groove. Conversely a groove seems to be designed to keep the participant within the time-span of the groove's basic unit.<sup>6</sup> The repetitive structure of the groove is important in this respect, but repetition is only a necessary, not a satisfactory, condition when it comes to explaining how the groove is able to "lock" the participants' attention within this smaller time unit. Equally important is to take into consideration the many subtleties going on at the micro level of the groove. In 'Funky Drummer' the early attack of the gesture that I have elsewhere named 'the One' (inspired by James Brown's own focus on 'the rhythm of the One') is crucial for the circular feel of the groove. It starts with an early attack at the upbeat to the metrical one, i.e. on 'four and', and ends just before beat two. Such an ellipsis of an upbeat and a succeeding downbeat, to borrow from David Brackett (Brackett 1995), is an example of the particular timing pattern called "a downbeat in anticipation".<sup>7</sup> It glues, so to speak,

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<sup>6</sup> For analyses and discussions of the structure and microrhythmic design of basic rhythmic patterns in funk, as well as of the relationship between the microlevel of rhythm and the state of being-in-a groove, see Danielsen 2006. For a discussion of how such patterns changed with the arrival of digital audio workstations in the 1990s, see Danielsen 2010.

<sup>7</sup> See Danielsen 2006, chapter 5.

the end of one basic unit to the beginning of the next.<sup>8</sup> Stewart, in his discussion of the drum groove in 'Funky Drummer' (Stewart 2000), claims that the accent on the 'four and' was a reminiscence of New Orleans' second line drumming, which according to Stewart was introduced to drummer Clyde Stubblefield by Clayton Fillyau, a drummer also employed by James Brown who had been taught second line drumming from a drummer from New Orleans.<sup>9</sup> Anyhow, such a rhythmic pattern seems to fuel the motion forward and keep the listener busy with partaking in the process.

Also the sequence of chords used in this tune might be said to contain a certain built-in circularity since it leads nowhere other than back to its own beginning: in both parts of the tune, the first beat of the basic unit thus works as both the 'closure' of the previous round and the beginning of a new one. In part two this is achieved by a dominant chord occupying the third and fourth beat of the basic unit (which is one measure long). It is resolved to the 'tonic' at beat one, but then it is already too late. The new cycle has begun and we are immediately directed ahead by a "hanging" fifth in the melody riff of the guitar on the second beat. The fifth continues to the fourth on 'four and' before reaching the third on beat one. This third is, however, almost working as an upbeat to a new hanging fifth, and on it goes. Both the rhythm pattern and the chord sequence contribute to an effective "closing" of the groove, not in Leonard B. Meyer's

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8 A similar gesture is discussed in an article by Mark Butterfield as an example of musical anacrusis (Butterfield 2006).

9 There are some differences between my transcription of the groove and Stewart's. These may be due to differences in how we see the role of the many ghost strokes in the drumming of Clyde Stubblefield. I do not regard these more ornamental strokes as part of the basic rhythmic pattern and have thus excluded them from the notated version of the groove, Stewart has, on the other hand, included them.

sense but rather the opposite: the pattern becomes circular.<sup>10</sup> There is always a “last” answer being answered by the beginning, a last question that needs to be answered by the One. The rhythmic dialogue leads back to its own beginning and the groove does not settle down at any point, which makes breaking out of the pattern difficult.

Also the timing inflections and ambiguities at a micro level contribute to keeping the listener within the movement of the groove. Overall, we have no problems getting familiar with the beginning and end of the pattern, as well as with the structural outline of the main rhythm patterns. At the same time, however, it never becomes entirely clear precisely when the transition from one pattern to the next happened or where the rhythmic figures were actually placed in time. While searching for the answers, the groove moves, and we move along. In such a mode every repetition is lived: it is produced and coproduced. Repetition remains an unfocused aspect of an ongoing movement, repeated time and again.

When absorbed in these micro level subtleties, the experience of time in a groove like *Funky Drummer’s*, is —somewhat paradoxically— not really an experience of time. Rather, we are enacting time by way of the groove, doing time with movement. When in this mode, the participatory mode, one does not notice time. Such total presence is often described as being outside time and space, but perhaps it is more correctly described as a presence *in* time, *in* space. Placing oneself in time and space in fact requires distance. It demands having a relation to something else, to *other* events or *other* places. Time stands still, we say, but this is probably because we do not notice a movement that coincides with our own. It is only by stepping out of the stream of time,

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<sup>10</sup> See Meyer 1989. I refer to these grooves as “closed” even though I know that the opposite is often the case. For instance, van der Merwe describes the repetitive groove as “open ended,” due to the fact that it does not end at a certain point predetermined by the musical course (van der Merwe 1989: 107–109). To say that a groove is open ended, however, may actually presuppose a distanced point of view. Only when we can view the musical course as a whole can we say that a repetitive groove is open ended in the sense above. When we are actually in a groove, the musical course is anything but open ended; it is experienced instead as a closed circle.

out of a participatory mode, that we can say "time passes".

As demonstrated above, there is a connection between the repetitive musical form of a groove and what could be named the main challenge of groove-based music from a musical point of view, namely the subtle perfection of the basic one or two bar pattern that is repeated throughout the tune. After just a few bars within a world of "redundant" cyclical harmony and a vocal part that never seems to make any attempt at establishing a larger phrase-structure, the expectation towards change is changed to non-change. Apart from the basic one bar pattern of the groove, there are no event segmentation devices at work in Funky Drummer, and soon this becomes a structural "fact", the normal condition. The participants can engage with the level where details step forward and become significant. There is no need for, and no point in, storing information about what has been in order to understand what might come, in order to grasp a larger formal structure. The entire capacity might be explored within a short period of time. In this way the listening act is directed towards the "core" of the groove, towards the layers where things really happen, where the rhythms are allowed to work with time, in time.

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