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A Return to Psychedelic Funk: An Inquiry into Childish Gambino's "Redbone"

Madeline Haddad



Abstract: Childish Gambino's "Redbone" has incited many waves of impact across today's pop culture media. His song uses features of the 1970s psychedelic funk movement, such as slap bass space feels and paranoia, to recall the Black Power Movement and illustrate the fear of Blackness in modern society while asking listeners to "stay woke" in political activism. This paper examines the origins of the Funkadelic movement along with its social implications within the Black Power Movement. It is then followed by a musical analysis of "Redbone" with a focus on the harmonic, melodic, and instrumental aspects of the piece and its direct relations to the 1970s movement while providing a novel variation. Cries to "stay woke" in the lyrics reemphasize the call to action, bringing wide reception and success to both the subsequent album and Glover as an artist.

Keywords: Psychedelic funk, Childish Gambino, Black Power Movement, Afrofuturism, Funkadelic

1. Introduction

Donald Glover, more commonly known by his stage name Childish Gambino, released his third studio album “Awaken, My Love!” in 2016, which peaked at number five on the Billboard Hot 100 and was nominated for Album of the Year at the 2018 Grammy Awards (Staff 2018). This album was considered to be a shift from his previous hip-hop style to psychedelic funk and rhythm and blues (R&B), which came into popularity during the 1970s. The seventies were also the height of the Black Power Movement, which entailed a significant change in political understandings.

Along with this development came a huge divergence of music genres that utilized certain attitudes to further append ideas that manifested during the era. The introduction of the Funkadelic genre came about originally from Motown, a record label company situated in Detroit (Motor City). This new genre provided an alternative R&B style that focused on experimental instruments and techniques that invited listeners into a musically provocative experience.

“Awaken, My Love!” calls back to this era, with the entire album featuring a psychedelic journey through the otherworldly mechanized sounds of synthesizers and other electronic effects. This medium could also explain the exploration of freedom from stereotyping to construct a cosmology that tells a narrative of alienation from mainstream society.

“Redbone” was the promoted single which subsequently debuted at #75 on the Billboard Hot 100 in December 2016. Although the lyrics seem to suggest an affair with a significant other, Glover’s disguised intentions may also be interpreted.

In this paper, I will suggest that, as a throwback to the 1970s psychedelic funk development, “Redbone” utilizes common psychedelic features of slap bass, space feels, and paranoia to recall the Black Power Movement and illustrate the fear of Blackness in modern society while asking listeners to “stay woke” in political activism. After an overview of the history of the Black Power Movement and the birth of the Funka-

delic and psychedelic funk genres, I will then proceed with an in-depth musical and lyrical analysis of the piece. Focusing on the instrumental, melodic, and harmonic aspects of “Redbone,” I will relate them back to the musical characteristics of the psychedelic funk genre and how Glover replicates the same feel that the seventies brought with its New Age ideology. Finally, I will look at the social and political impact that the piece had specifically and broadly with regard to the mass media as well as Glover’s career as an artist.

2. Black Power Movement

Shifts in African American political factions, which encouraged a questioning of the effectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, resulted in the ascension of the Black Power Movement in the early 1970s. Supporters of the new movement realized that the systemic changes that should have come with the Civil Rights Act were not implemented and thus rejected integration as a short term goal until equality was established (Joseph 2008). Self-determination and empowerment would be the push for reform in social, political, and cultural institutions. As a result, the music of the time also evolved with the new divergences of opinions and ideas, allowing for avenues of varying expression.

The artist James Brown innovated funk songs to collaborate and perform with the Black Panther Party at certain political events and rallies, which mirrored the shifts in the Civil Rights Movements that later identified with this new genre (Harris 2001). In his works, there is a clear highlight on syncopation, which drove the groove-like feel that later influenced funk acts such as Stevie Wonder, Sly, and the Family Stone. These artists developed it further with muted guitars, thick slap basses, and horns now commonly recognizable of the genre. Brown’s most successful piece, “Say it Loud I’m Black and Proud,” was a pivotal moment in forwarding the notion of Black expression, freedom, and empowerment, while challenging social norms (Morant 2011).

However, the economic and social successes of certain Black in-

dividuals were not distributed evenly in the United States, furthering a divided stance between the middle- and lower-class Black communities. The development of funk rose from this divide as a way to give a voice to lower-class African Americans (Morant).

3. Birth of Psychedelic Funk

The Funkadelic style came out of a musical group from Detroit originally called the Parliaments, under Revilot Records, led by George Clinton who began as an R&B songwriter in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They began as a Motown focused endeavor, with their first hit single “(I Wanna) Testify” (1967) hitting #3 on the *Billboard* R&B Chart (Wright 2013). However, Clinton eventually lost the rights to the name “The Parliaments” when their label declared bankruptcy, and thus managed the group under the name “Funkadelic” in 1968 with his backing musicians under the label, Westbound Records. He later gained rights to “Parliament” in 1974 under Casablanca Records, and was able to combine the names as Parliament-Funkadelic or “P-Funk.” During his time with Parliament, he promoted a more commercial, mainstream effort supported by “soulful vocals and horn arrangements,” while Funkadelic became an experimental approach designated by its “footloose guitar” (Wright). Eventually, the two merged into one style known as Psychedelic Funk (Borthwick 2004).

With P-Funk, a genre of music evolved that created a new medium for exploring freedom from racial stereotyping within a marginalized group, pushing equal opportunity, and positing a voice into an otherwise unchallenged idealism. During this time, a heightened affinity for spaced-themed music and ideas of alienation emerged, leading to the development of “Afrofuturism” (Gipson 2019). The term was coined in the 1990s to revisit the cultural expression of Black empowerment, and to break free from oppression through metaphors of mythologies and apocalyptic settings as the utopian and technological ideas that the Black community possessed. It presented an opportunity for listeners to ride

the Mothership, a gospel drive and turn around that allowed for an escape from any issues that were being faced (Morant). Highlights of the sound include analogue synthesizers with a space feel, strong bass lines, horn section arrangements, funk guitar styles, and prominent live recordings rather than a mechanized sound production (Borthwick).

4. Musical Analysis of “Redbone”

It is apparent that Glover drew upon this psychedelic funk movement and Bootsy Collins’s “I’d Rather Be With You” as inspiration for “Redbone.” During an interview with Billboard, he claimed that he often listened to this genre of music as a child, and was unsure as to what feeling he was experiencing but wanted to replicate it for this album [Awaken, My Love!] (Weiner 2016). The work starts with an eerie mellotron and a syncopated kick line before the prominent slap bass, keyboard, and guitar entrances at five seconds. To create the main keyboard lick, a Fender Rhodes piano was used to authenticate the vintage seventies funk sound, also observed in Stevie Wonder’s “Isn’t She Lovely.” This mechanical keyboard that functions as a synthesizer allowed for a mellow timbre and “bell-like” sound heard throughout the piece (Gibson 1999). A vintage telecaster guitar run through of a Maestro G2 Rhythm & Sound pedal, seen commonly in Jimi Hendrix’s “Voodoo Child,” was used to give the “wah” guitar effects that reflected the funk-rock style of the time (Genius 2017). A glockenspiel doubles the guitar line to add an idea of floating and psychedelia behavior. This melody line is seen as a tribute to Bootsy Collins’ record, which also utilized both as part of its arrangement. Most notably, the slap bass defines the piece as part of the psychedelic funk genre and dominates the entire provoking sentiment. Glover’s producer for the album, Ludwig Göransson, explained in a breakdown video that he added a delay effect onto this guitar track that is not noticeable on the first observation but can be identified with close listening (Genius). In “I’d Rather Be With You”, a memorable drum fill transitions the intro into the first verse, which Glover replicates in “Redbone” for the same

purpose (Collins 2018). Later in the piece, a clavinet, frequently utilized by Stevie Wonder, appears to resemble the brass arrangements typical of the Funkadelic; however, it is thinner and more synth-like in sound than the brass. Additionally, occasional vocal effects such as long breaths, whispers, and “ohs” add to the sense of uneasiness and paranoia.

The extended 36 bar outro, a common feature of psychedelic funk pieces, showcases accretion in texture and finishes the piece on the psychedelia note. The first 6 bars present the Rhodes and Mellotron synthesizers, a slap bass, and a walking synth bass previously heard throughout the song. A fuzz effect on the electric guitar appears in the next 6 bars which is then doubled in the following 6 bars for a groovy sound. In the succeeding 6 bars, an Oddity synth element is added to give a futuristic and spacey feel (Genius). Following that, a doubled acoustic guitar line with a chorus effect appears as a counterpoint to the electric guitar melody, thereby creating a thicker and unusual tone. In the final 6 bars, a grand piano creeps in and plays a forceful i-i64 cadence (the minor tonic root chord, followed by the same chord in the second inversion) in D# minor for a grand, classical conclusion as an attempt to draw the listener’s attention one last time before the piece concludes. These elements mirror the same techniques that the Funkadelic genre consisted of in the 1970s, considering that the same synthesizers were used to resemble the style.

Harmonically, “Redbone” centers around a recurring 2 bar syn-copated VI-VII-i (major six, major seven, minor one) progression in D# minor in the verses and choruses. As the VI (major six) takes a half note, the VII (major seven) is a dotted quarter, and the i (minor one) is an eighth that extends into the second measure; the slightly off-beat feel allows for a groovy tension throughout the song. The pre-chorus and extended outro contain a 3 bar i-iv-iio (minor one, minor four, diminished second) chord progression with a passing III between the iv-iio (minor four, diminished second) played by the slap bass. A V (major five) chord is used as a transition into a deceptive cadence at the chorus after both pre-choruses.

In the outro, there is a dance between a minor third and major

third interval on the Rhodes that inspires the guitar melody to accentuate this oscillation. “Blue” notes are understood as “flattened” thirds that are in between a minor and major third interval (Evans 2008). It may be that Glover desired to utilize that figure to honor the origins of funk, jazz, and R&B, which often contained these blue notes.

It is interesting to note that the piece is not set in a normal frequency of A=440 Hz, as most music is, but it is in A=432 Hz. Commonly believed, 432 Hz presumes healing and relaxation properties, and a scientific study suggested that it can decrease heart rate more than 440 Hz tuned music (Calamassi, Diletta, and Pomponi 2019). Glover and his producer used this alternate tuning to help accentuate the functions of psychedelic funk, which in turn created a free imagination and realm of exploration. This is similar to the idea of Afrofuturism, which theoretically anchors the cultures, experiences, and practices of the Black diaspora to the future by creating utopian homelands in a space oddity setting. This different frequency temperament transports the listener through an imaginary utopia, and mirrors the oppression that the Black community faces.

The structure of the song would not usually take precedence when discussing the piece and upon closer inspection. Although it follows a usual AABA[BBC] form, slight discrepancies in bar length and unconventional vocals contribute to a continual paranoia. The first pre-chorus contains six 4/4 bars, while the second pre-chorus has seven due to a suspension on the cry “ah” just before entering the frightening refrain. Glover’s voice in the song has been a source of speculation as many listeners originally thought that his vocals had been pitched up due to their seemingly unbelievable high falsetto nature. However, he has stated in an interview with Triple J that he actually sang with his natural voice and no pitch effects were used on the entire album (Prasad 2016). He later performed the piece on *The Jimmy Fallon Show*, affirming that he indeed was using his own voice (Glover 2017). By singing in his falsetto voice for the entirety of the song, Glover contributes his own expression of anxiety and fear that reflect the ideas of oppression and rebellion of the Black

communities in America in a psychedelic mood.

5. Lyrical Analysis of “Redbone”

While the musical content strongly suggests ties to the 1970s psychedelic movement, the lyrical content more so focuses on political awareness, both during the Black Power Movement and in today’s society. On the surface, it can be understood that Glover describes an adulterous relationship combined with paranoia. However, upon deeper inspection, we can see the double entendre of the lyrics as a call for listeners to be aware of their political surroundings and take action accordingly. When the first verse opens with “Daylight / I wake up feeling like you won’t play right / I used to know, but now that shit don’t feel right,” it seems that Glover is suspicious of his lover and detects their unusual behaviors. The title “Redbone” itself is slang for a light-skinned Black woman (Pitts 2019), a picture that Glover attempts to paint for the listener before even hearing the song. In the second verse, “You wanna make it right, but now it’s too late / My peanut butter chocolate cake with Kool-Aid” also reinforces the picture of “Redbone” with the colors of the words he uses. The items “peanut butter chocolate cake” and “Kool-Aid” seemingly do not mix well together despite the fact they are both sweets or desserts. Utilizing this metaphor, Glover believes that he and his lover, although on the outside seem to work together, do not see eye to eye on everything.

“Stay woke,” the main phrase in the chorus, becomes the highlighting feature of the song. It urges listeners to be aware of their surroundings and be active in political and social affairs regarding Black lives. The phrase is of African American origin and was used for those who were self-aware, but it did not gain popularity until 2008 when Erykah Badu released “Master Teacher” which featured the phrase “I stay woke” throughout the song (Badu 2008). By incorporating it into “Redbone” as a double entendre, Glover is not only telling his significant other to be aware of her surroundings but also asking his listeners to stay active in

social affairs and recognize their place in society. He then continues the chorus stating “Niggas creepin’ / They gon’ find you / Gon’ catch you sleepin.” Although he may be warning his significant other that other men will come after her, it is also perceivable that he is paranoid about his position in America as a Black individual and wants others to “feel scared, because that’s what it feels like to be black” (Stanhope 2016). Both the lyrics and music itself reflect this paranoia of the psychedelic movement –its groovy and a little eerie–but that’s the point. Glover pleads his audience to pay close attention to his hidden meanings under the surface.

6. Social and Political Impact of “Redbone”

Reception of “Redbone” was widespread and most critics acclaimed the piece. However, it did not peak until almost a year later in August 2017 at #12 on the Billboard Hot 100 and #6 on the Billboard R&B Chart. This is partially due to the incorporation of the song in the beginning of Jordan Peele’s horror satire film *Get Out* (2017). The film was featured for its critical perspective on Black American life and its use of horror to tell the metaphor (Dargis 2017). “Stay woke” fits into this narrative of political awareness that Peele attempted to portray and garnered success for Glover’s telling story. The piece was not only advertised through the film, but also in hip-hop radio and on the music streaming platform Spotify, where it was featured on the curated Rap Caviar playlist (Aswad 2017). Tuma Basa, the curator of the playlist, claimed that although the piece was not in traditional hip-hop style, it was part of the culture and such an interesting work that they had to include it (Aswad). The playlist currently has almost 13 million followers and regularly features popular hip-hop artists such as Drake, Future, and Travis Scott (Spotify). “Redbone” ended up receiving multiple nominations at the 60th Annual Grammy Awards and won the award for Best Traditional R&B Performance (Kreps 2018).

Glover broke through the mainstream with “Awaken, My Love!” paving way for his eventual hit single “This is America” (2018) that de-

buted at #1 on the Billboard Hot 100, which challenged ideas of Black violence under American history (Childish Gambino 2018). Although “Redbone” was one of Glover’s first ventures into social impact through music, his later single “This is America” became the catalyst for an entire evolution of his discography and brought a newfound significance to his works. The additional element of a visual accompaniment along with the musical and lyrical aspects of the piece invited a broader audience to further analyze and understand Glover’s push for social activism. Chock full of references to the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, minstrelsy, and modern day society musically and visually, it seems that “This is America” was the even more progressive approach to political awareness, increasingly more blatant than “Redbone” and much more interested in the grotesque. Glover’s career changed course dramatically from the blend of music with the Black Power Movement, giving him even greater success within the artist world and reaching out to many listeners who had never heard of him before.

7. Conclusion

Donald Glover has reinvented the Black Power Movement’s drive for social and political change through reintroducing the 1970s psychedelic funk. “Redbone” inspires Black activism and awareness of the fear of oppression in America, while inviting listeners on a ride of the seventies music developments. With utilizations of vintage synthesizers from the seventies that recreates the psychedelic feel and the strange harmonic progressions that mimic the original style, Glover draws on the kind of paranoia that is reminiscent of Afro futurism. Surprise changes within the form of the song and the conclusion instrumentally foreshadow Glover’s later success in the music industry while also looking back and paying homage to the music that helped shape him into who he is today as a person and artist. By shining a light on the reality of Black American lives 50 years ago, he notes that these problems are still present in the imagination even in today’s society. Rather than honing in on the

issues themselves, Glover uses his platform as an artist, an actor, and a writer to help empower Black people in various media and promote an idealized country. Just as psychedelic funk became a rebellious form of music for the Black population in the 1970s, “Redbone” established its own rebellion through its unique perception.

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