

What the Funk you Talkin' About?

By Kevin Brooker

Webster's Dictionary defines "funky" as... Wait a second. Webster's don't know shit about no funk. As a matter of fact, if we leave it to the Websters of the world, we'll just keep on getting stuff that is allegedly funky but ain't. You know what's not: Winkerbean. Chicken. Monkey. Cold Medina. Marky Mark's Bunch, which is nothing but Grand Railroad with a sequencer. Any list of the anti-funk has to include electric dishwashers, Pringles™, (for that matter, anything with the ™ symbol), air fresheners, gum, and any pet with more than three legs. Try as they might, Afro wigs will never be funky. Neither could any hair product that is not human feces. Speaking of which, a Trustafarian can't be funky, unless he is so committed that he forgets to go pick up his cheques.

Obviously there is a fine line between what is not and what is. Your pimped Acura can't be funky, while a spray painted Gremlin can't not be funky. Homemade wine is funky; homemade retsina, funkier still. A car with an eight-track player qualifies, but the tapes that work in it will not, unless Donna Fargo's Greatest Hits album can be considered smooove, which it can't.

Funk resides in a permanent state of impermanence. It refuses to last forever. George Clinton, dean of the august musical institution known as Parliament-Funkadelic, used to be the planet's purest embodiment of the genre. Yet as he staggered through his Western Canadian tour last year, he revealed himself to be criminally unfunky. Oh, sure, some defended him by saying his unlistenable act was actually "crunk." Screw that. To me it just looked and sounded like plain old drunk.

Which is fine because there are plenty more of you out there willing to pick up the slack with regard to puttin' some stank on it. You, me, the dentist: funk is definitely loose upon the land. Everyone wants to be it, including *The Simpsons* creator, whose favourite "Treehouse of Horror" moniker is Matt "Funk Lord of USA" Groening.

Once used to describe body odour or the smell of sexual intercourse, funk now largely refers to crazy, idiosyncratic, beautiful things that shouldn't, by rights, be there. What these elements of

funk have in common is that they are invariably hand-crafted, or in some other way ad hoc, jury-rigged, punk-rocked, slapped-together, or just messed up due to acts of nature. In our world these include but are not limited to: composting toilets, finger hash, micro-hydro, tree houses, houses with trees growing inside, ugly clothes that don't fit well, and tastefully furnished snow caves. Funky indeed are those people I knew who started an illegal restaurant in their home called *Under the Table*. Or the people I saw only in a buddy's snapshot, who camped at the toe of a glacier, skied all day, and came home to a hot tub made with a plastic tarp, lining a dug-out hole, and heated by a coil of copper tubing placed over a campfire, with two lengths of radiator hose to keep the water re-circulating. Funk *and* science!

If nothing else, funk serves as a kind of bat guano in the lifelong process of human growth. It is the polar opposite of the soullessness and sterility that many of our parents broke their backs to provide for us. Ergo, a "thing" cannot become a "thang" unless it pisses off your mom.

To a large extent, funky has come to serve as an all-purpose equivalent of the word "cool." And this is okay, inasmuch as it reaffirms that truly cool stuff requires a significant component of ghetto. Around these parts, we're pretty good at that, so we must guard against becoming funk snobs. Sure, we've got the entire discography of Bootsy Collins' Rubber Band *and* we live in a yurt, but this should never lead to a posture of funkier-than-thou, which is negafunk in and of itself. We tend, for example, to think that Europeans don't know funk, that somehow people who have been making cheese in basements since the Bronze Age can't get down. But they can. Anybody can, who wants. Badassedness is transnational, trans-phat and probably transgendered. (That said, Denmark is funky, Sweden not so much).

Meanwhile, don't knock yourself out looking for funk. You won't find it in boutiques. You can't order it online. Funk's got to find you. All you have to do is live well and stop caring what the cool kids think, and you're two-thirds of the way there.

photo: Doug LePage