



(top) Don Blackman as "Doctor M.O.F. (Minister of Funk)" (below) Lenny White. Photos courtesy of Don Blackman.



Wright: I didn't want to do anything but hang with the older musicians and play. Some people say I didn't have a childhood. It was just a really unique one. I got a musician's work ethic together very early in life. When I was eight or nine, I joined a band called the Junior Firebolts. The actual Firebolts were a local band that won all these [citywide] battles of the bands in the '70s. We'd open for them at dances and wedding receptions.

Miller: During those first Tom Browne sessions, Dave and Larry were looking at this thirteen-year-old kid [and] saying, "We gotta sign him." Until they met the Jamaica Kats, GRP was putting out light Angie Bofill records. Suddenly, they were putting out some funky stuff. It really changed the direction of their label.

Wright: When they first asked me to make a record, I didn't think I was ready. [*Nard*] is just as much Don Blackman's or Marcus Miller's as it was mine. It was really an opportunity to present my history. I wanted to display not only my music but some of the best music I'd ever heard, by guys from my neighborhood. It really wasn't about who was on the cover, but the posse assembled... I thought the Firebolts were the greatest band in the world, and they broke up before my album came out. I wanted to bring the Firebolts back so the world could hear what I heard. Donald being my teacher, I hung out at all his rehearsals and knew his music. He was the funkier cat I knew. Everything Donald writes was inspired, so I asked him to write something for me, and that was "Haboglabotribin'." Funk and R&B used to have a sense of humor to it at one point. I'm glad I contributed to the humorous part of Black music. I think that's something missing now.

Blackman: I'm from a musical family. I had an uncle who played drums for Nat King Cole and Dinah Shore. My grandparents were very strict, so when they were home, all you heard was gospel. In the basement, my uncle was into classical. On the first floor, you heard James Brown and R&B. On the second floor, you'd hear jazz. I had the best of all worlds in my house. It was deep.

Johnson: Donald has perfect pitch. He literally can hear anything and not only imitate it in the same key, [but] you could fart and he could tell you what key it's in. That's why he's a little nuts too, because it's painful if stuff isn't perfect when you have that kind of hearing.

Blackman: In the mid-'70s, I had a band called the Family Tradition with a drummer named John Palmer and an Italian cat named Bill Naccari. After that, it was Omar Hakim, Marcus, and my sister, Carol Woods. Carol had beads in her hair first. I said, "Damn, that looks kinda slick; let me try that." A lot of people said I was imitating Stevie Wonder, but I had beads before Stevie, in '74... [On the LP], I added Barry, [Parliament

drummer] Dennis Chambers, and Eddie Martinez, who plays those solos [on the album]. He was one of the raunchiest rock-and-roll guitar players I ever heard. Eddie's like Jesus. Dennis and I became like brothers, and whenever Parliament came to town, I'd jam with them.

Johnson: We were laughing so hard recording that album; I almost couldn't play. What the hell? But that's Don Blackman. And then these beautiful ballads.

Blackman: A lot of people said, "Man, you sound like Parliament." It wasn't so much that they influenced me; it's that we all came from the same school—the Pentecostal Church of God and Christ. We hear the same things. When you mention church, people think, "Amen." But those Pentecostal churches? They rock. You can't get no funkier than church, trust me.

Wright: Of all the albums that came out of the Jamaica Kats, Don's was the most complete and the best representation of what was going on in Jamaica at the time.

Blackman: Clive Davis got offended by "You Ain't Hip." He told me, "Change the lyrics," or he wasn't going to release the [single]. I said, "I'm not changing the lyrics," so he didn't release the record. And I'm glad he didn't, because the ["You Ain't Hip" promo] became a collector's item.

...AND YOU DON'T STOP

By the mid-'80s, Browne's, Blackman's, and Wright's runs as solo artists were already winding down, just as fast as they had started. Electronic production and hip-hop had brought an end to the era of jazz-funk ensembles; GRP Records was absorbed into its more pop-minded parent label, Arista. It was a golden era for Marcus Miller and Omar Hakim, though. Miller became one of the decade's most influential bassists, hooking up with Luther Vandross, Miles Davis, and David Sanborn—for each of whom he also wrote and produced. (The occasional solo artist would go on to even greater success as a scorer of film and TV—his credits include Spike Lee's *School Daze*, for which he penned E.U.'s "Da Butt," and, more recently, *Everybody Hates Chris*). Hakim joined Weather Report and brought the funk to David Bowie's "Let's Dance" and Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms* album.

Meanwhile, it was one of the Jamaica Kats' own who was steering music in the opposite direction. Tapped by burgeoning Hollis impresario Russell Simmons to produce tracks for his growing stable of artists, Larry Smith—a former bassist with the Firebolts and the leader of another local band, Orange Krush—ushered in the drum-machine era with his stripped down Oberheim DMX beat for Run-DMC's "Sucker M.C.'s." Smith changed the game yet again the following