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SEARCH

[HOME](#) | [NEWS](#) | [PERFORMANCE](#) | [RECORDINGS](#) | [THE MAGAZINE](#) | [GALLERY](#) | [VIDEO](#) | [RADIO](#) | [BOARDS / CHAT](#) | [CDNOW](#)

» Concert Reviews

[John Mayall](#)
[Everclear](#)
[Blonde Redhead](#)
[Rage Against the Machine](#)

» Columns

[Rocking My Life Away](#)
 Anthony DeCurtis on the true meaning of music in commercials

[Where It's At](#)
 New releases today include Collective Soul, The Other Ones, the Neville Brothers, and Linda, Dolly & Emmylou

[Well Hung at Dawn](#)
 The column that prefers Banana Republic over The Gap


30 Years

Can You Handle It?

Thunder-thumbed Larry Graham lays down the millennial funk

He is widely heralded as the Master of Bass, a founding father of funk, Mr. Thunderlicks. His thumb, quips the Artist Formerly Known as Prince, should be insured. His voice, gut-low and as smooth as his snaky bass lines, is like Barry White's on a fitness plan, promising danger and excitement. He is Larry Graham: veteran of Sly & the Family Stone, Woodstock survivor, chief engineer of Graham Central Station, devout Jehovah's Witness and the hipster Obi-Wan of the Artist's New Power Generation. He's also the proud father of a new album, *GCS2000*, which marries his time-tested, "thumb-slapping" bass-up-front funk with the eclectic, unmistakable space-soul production stylings of the Purple One. We caught up with Mr. Graham to find out if the riot's still goin' on in 1999.



Thank you, Whatsyourname, falettinme be mi-funky-celf agin.

In the liner notes to *GCS2000*, the Artist says that you are funk itself. What guys did you look up to when you started playing bass?

When I started playing bass, I wasn't listening to bass players, because I didn't want to be a bass player. I wanted to be a guitar player, and that's who I listened to. If I wanted to be a bass player, I probably would have learned the so-called proper technique and how to play like everybody else. But because I was thinking, "I'm going back to guitar eventually," the style that I did develop on bass was out of necessity -- you know, to make up for not having drums when it was just my mother and I playing. So criticism like "That's not the correct way to play" didn't phase me one bit because I was like, "This is not my instrument anyway -- it's temporary." And I still think like a guitar player in that I don't look at the bass as necessarily a background instrument, and when it comes to using effects and pedals and stuff like that, I'm just like a guitar player. That's why on songs like "Dance to the Music," folks are a little surprised to hear a bass coming through a fuzz tone. But to me it makes sense.



Before Sly Stone asked you to join his band, you were playing clubs with your mother. What else was on your resume at that point?

I started out tap dancing really young. Then I started taking piano lessons and I did that for a number of years and then I started playing drums. And I played in the school band. I played clarinet and saxophone for awhile and just went through the various instruments because I just liked all of them. Then my father gave me his guitar when I was about eleven. In the meantime I was also really into singing, so I had a singing group too. I used to sing stuff like Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, because my voice was high. Then one day I woke up and it was like, [/ow voice] "Hello, Mom." (Laughs) So much for Frankie Lymon.

Later, when I was fourteen, I was in a group called Al Lewis and the Modernistics. I was playing lead guitar and this guy used to make me stand back behind the amplifier, and he would act like he was doing the playing -- he'd be out in front with the guitar behind his head, scootin' on the floor, putting on a show and going crazy, but it was me playing. (Laughs). Then my mother and I started working together as a duo, and because we didn't have any drums I developed my thumb-slapping style to compensate. And this lady who used to come in all the time, she was a big fan of ours but she was also a big fan of Sly Stone because he was a DJ, and she found out that he was gonna be starting a band and she just took it upon herself to constantly call him and say, "You gotta come hear this bass player!" And he finally came over to the club, which was right on the corner of Haight and Ashbury, heard me playing my stuff and asked me to join his band.

You played Woodstock with the Family Stone. Has anything since compared to that?

No, not the same. Woodstock was a turning point in our lives. You go up there and you play and everybody loves you and you hear this roar of approval coming from half a million people. That's a sound that you never forget. Imagine that happening, and now you go back to play the encore. We were so pumped up, we took everything up another notch. We went into another zone we had never been in, rising above any performance that we had ever given. But once you go to a place you've never been, you know how to do that again, so every show that we did after that was affected by that one performance.

When was the first time you played with the Artist?

Summer of '97. I was in Tennessee playing the amphitheater, and the Artist was playing the big venue. He called me and said, "Do you wanna come to the after show and jam with us?" We'd met each other briefly in the late Seventies, but we never had a chance to hang out or play together. So I go over to this club,

and there's some serious music going down up there and he sees me, gives me the nod to come up on stage and pick up my bass. And all the words that could have been spoken between us over the years, all those life experiences were experienced at that moment on stage.

You recorded *GCS2000* at the Artist's Paisley Park. Is that like being in Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory, or is it just another studio?

Oh no. No. I mean, first of all, the studios are state of the art. There's nothing that he might want that he doesn't have. Everything that you need is there. And there was no concern about budget -- I didn't have to watch the clock, because it's like as long as the electricity is on, as long as he pays the electric bills, tapes will be rolling. And there's nobody that you have to answer to, saying you can't do this and you can't do that. That's almost unheard of. Then, on top of that, to have one of the best producers in the world to work with you -- how much would I have to pay him to co-produce my album, and play guitar and play keyboards? You couldn't put a dollar figure on that. I mean, you can't ask for a better situation, and you can actually hear that love and freedom in the music. It's heart music.

Does he make you call him the Artist?

No. I call him Baby Brother, because he feels like I'm his big brother. He doesn't call himself the Artist -- that's what other people started calling him.

What does he call himself then?

Well, he's got the Symbol, which is unpronounceable, so he doesn't call himself anything. He dropped the name.

So if he were to call you up and you ask who it is, does he just keep saying, "It's me!"?

If he calls you on the phone, you *know* it's him.

Does his answering machine say, "You've reached ... "?

(Laughs) He doesn't have an answering machine.

RICHARD SKANSE
(February 11, 1999)

{ [LARRY GRAHAM](#) | [BACK TO NEWS](#) }



Your Turn

Is Larry Graham THE funk?

cyrillia@msn.com

my name is alpha kamara am always listening to your small brother since i been in usa . i love he has done . and let god bless you and every body at paisely park ,and the world. i love you all brothersand sister.

ptsdyo@rtcol.com

Mr. Graham, I remember listening to Dance to the Music and played it so much I think I wore out the record. When that keyboard came in it sent chills up and down my spine. Keep up the good work. Warm Philia, Don Miller

bcfreeman@worldnet.att.net

Mr. Graham, Your vocals inspired me when I was a kid so that Now Im singing bass too. I loved your harmonies with Sly and with GCS. I hope chocolate gets a chance to sing with GCS again. Thanks for all the music.

npgprince@yahoo.com

This relationship between The Artist, Larry, Chaka, Doug E, and so on...is no fluke. Wake up record industry (AND ALL YOU SLAVES WITHIN THE SYSTEM!)...This is a REVOLUTION!! Music made with love..Music made with heart..Music made with FREEDOM! Thanks Much

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