

Newkirk

Funk City

OBR/COLUMBIA, 1989



If Prince Paul was the mad scientist who invented the hip-hop skit, then Don Newkirk was something akin to the lab technician who helped bring the monster to life. Known to astute credit-readers as the “prize announcer” on De La Soul’s “The D.A.I.S.Y. Age,” and the “Mood for Love” crooner on Paul’s own *Prince Among Thieves*, Newkirk and his pitch-perfect radio-announcer voice have been an integral part of the Dew Doo Man’s stew since the pair first linked as part of an early ’80s Amityville, Long Island, rap crew called the Soul Brothers.

In 1989—the same year he appeared as the “labelmate” on 3rd Bass’s “The Gas Face” (“Thanks, Serch!”)—Newkirk was also a budding new-jack-swing star with a video for “Sweat You” in rotation on *The Box* and the backing of Def Jam R&B sub-label OBR. *Funk City*, the album that followed, crossed Teddy Riley’s bounce-y, R&B/hip-hop hybrid with a cosmic peace-and-love aesthetic that was equal parts De La and Paisley Park.

Although Newkirk, a talented multi-instrumentalist (he interpolated Lonnie Liston Smith’s “Expansions” bass line on Stetsasonic’s “Talking All That Jazz”), would produce

the entire album himself, Prince Paul’s touch was present in the form of *3 Feet High*-style interludes that offered comic relief from sincere love jamz like “Judy, Judy” and the social commentary of “Double Dutch on the Sidewalk.” In fact, Paul’s voice, disguised as a clueless publicist who refers to Don as “Dan,” is the very first thing you hear on *Funk City*. In a nod to his Amityville homies and an early example of R&B borrowing from hip-hop, “I Desire” not only sampled De La’s “Jenifa Taught Me (Derwin’s Revenge)” but also co-opted the Jenifa-Oh-Jenny character.

Label brass didn’t see what skits talking about putting frog legs in people’s hands had to do with selling up-tempo dance music, though, and the album went largely unpromoted. While *Funk City*’s lack of commercial success (or perhaps its cover artwork, which featured Newkirk in Hammer pants and puffy shirt, flanking a peace sign on the moon) put a premature end to Newkirk’s R&B career, his partnership with Prince Paul soldiers on, most recently taking the form of Baby Elephant with Bernie Worrell. ●

—Jesse Serwer