



Plenty of musicians talk a good game about loving many types of music. Bernie Worrell *lives* it.

“I play it all,” he said in a recent phone interview. “I’ll play a Jewish chant. A Gregorian chant. A chant in the middle of a rock piece. I’ll go to India. I’ll go to Africa. All in one piece.”

A brief sketch of his career should suffice as an illustration. He was a piano prodigy who wrote a concerto at eight and two years later performed with the Washington Symphony Orchestra. He studied at Julliard and the New England Conservatory of Music. He was music director and bandleader for soul singer Maxine Brown before becoming a central figure in Parliament-Funkadelic, with whom he was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. He recorded and toured with the Talking Heads and has worked with experimental artists including Bill Laswell and the super-group Colonel Claypool’s Bucket of Bernie Brains. In 2011, he released an album of jazz standards.

As the *Chicago Tribune*’s Greg Kot wrote in a review of his 1993 album *Blacktronic Science*: “Bernie Worrell explores the possibilities of 21st Century funk with blithe disregard for boundaries. Bach, hip-hop, organ-trio jazz – it’s one big canvas for this virtuoso”

“I get bored quick,” Worrell said. “I’ve got to be free, man. ... I will be free.”

His freedom these days comes in the form the Bernie Worrell Orchestra, which pairs the 68-year-old keyboardist with younger musicians and will be performing at RIBCO on Saturday, April 13. An EP is set to be released later this month, with a full album coming in late fall, Worrell said.

He praised the outfit for “their eagerness, their inventiveness. ... And they can all play different

“I’ve Got to Be Free”: Bernie Worrell Orchestra, April 13 at RIBCO

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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types of music. ... Which is what I do, because I don’t stick to one thing. They fit right in. They have good ears, and they listen.”

“Listening” is essential for any musician Worrell works with. He was born with perfect pitch, and that’s a crucial element of his seemingly boundless musical appetite. “I can play everything that I hear,” he said. “I like mixing musics. So in the middle of a classical piece, segue right into a cartoon. Just for the fun of it. Take away that strictness.”

Those confines were one reason he didn’t pursue a career as a classical pianist, which his mother wanted for him. Another factor was his modesty. “I didn’t like the way classical music was put on a pedestal,” he said.

He has often described himself as a team player, and that made him a good fit for Parliament-Funkadelic, in which Worrell was just one creative force alongside such luminaries as George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, and Eddie Hazel. Worrell arranged many of P-Funk’s hits, and the distinctive and influential sounds he created were partly a function of his preferred synthesizer. “I’m a Moog person,” he said. “I like the different nuances you can get. You can play with the sound waves and create new tonalities, textures.”

Discussing Parliament’s 1978 hit “Flash Light,” he noted that many people say the bass line – which Worrell performed on three Minimoogs – revolutionized bass-playing. “I don’t know about all that,” he said. “I don’t talk about myself. ... Everybody else does.”

The Bernie Worrell Orchestra will perform on Saturday, April 13, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island, RIBCO.com). The show starts at 9:30 p.m. and also features Jaik Willis. Tickets are \$15 the day of the show and \$12 in advance.

For more information on Bernie Worrell, visit BernieWorrell.com.