

A Funky Blackout Headed to The District

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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The man who goes by the name Fuzz might not realize just how appropriate his moniker is. In talking about his eight-piece funk band Deep Banana Blackout, Fuzz (née James San Giovanni) pretty much apologizes for every decision he and his cohorts have made over the past year. And one gets the feeling that his opinions are as clear as his name.

That's a shame in many ways, because as Quad Citians will find out next week, there's absolutely nothing wrong with Deep Banana Blackout the way it is. The outfit is tight, smart, versatile, and fun, and a relatively strange year hasn't diminished the band's reputation for blistering live shows. RIBCO talent buyer Bill Douglas said he's been trying to get the Connecticut-based band here for two years.

But talking to Fuzz – who sings, plays guitar, and writes most of the band's songs – might give the impression that nothing's gone right for the group since lineup changes last year.

Take, for instance, the choice to start touring again immediately after the addition of two band members, including a new vocalist, a year ago. The re-formulated group performed much of the repertoire developed with Jen Durkin, whose raspy, meaty Janis Joplin-like howl was a far cry from Hope Clayburn's versatile but less-intense pipes. "We didn't start over," Fuzz said. "Maybe in some ways it would have been a good idea."

And it doesn't stop there. Perhaps the group's new record, *Feel the Peel*, should have waited until a new sound for the band had fully emerged. And maybe the band shouldn't have embraced stylistic experimentation and straight songcraft so fully, instead maintaining more of the improvisation-based jamming for which it was known.

And maybe the band should concentrate more on recordings instead of gigs. "We probably tour a little too much," Fuzz said, promising that 2002 will bring a change.

Such is the life of a full-time band that wants to please a large number of fans while still trying to break through to something bigger. Fuzz admits that in writing and recording *Feel the Peel* – which was released in July – Deep Banana Blackout was pandering too much to record labels, hoping to generate some buzz, airtime, and maybe even a deal. It didn't happen, and the result was that some fans were left scratching their heads.

"I don't want people to be disappointed," Fuzz said, succinctly summing up what seems to be his motto.

All the bellyaching and second-guessing, though, is really unnecessary. *Feel the Peel* might not be what longtime fans had come to expect from Deep Banana Blackout, but it's far from a failure. It works as a document of a band in transition, but it's also a strong album without such qualification. The band makes a stylistic tour, moving from the straight-ahead horn-driven funk of "The Hassle" to the sparkling, Latin-flavored "Everybody" to the fun R&B of "Big Thing" (with a sturdy horn progression and cheesy keyboard at no extra cost) to the smooth balladry of "Rocco's Lament," seemingly effortlessly. (On the debit side: The lyrics are a touch too earnest for my taste, and the cover artwork suggests a soundtrack for a porno.)

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Part of the difficulty of *Feel the Peel* is that it comes after the band's two-disc, 13-track, 120-minute live album *Rowdy Duty*, which showcased its fierce side. "It was kind of hard to follow that up," Fuzz said, noting that the live set was "pretty much a ball of fire."

"People get deceived by that," he added. "When we get in the studio, we're not quite as in-your-face."

The intensity level isn't the only change. While many of the band's songs were developed for Durkin's voice, the new record features four singers. Clayburn plays sax and flute in addition to singing, so bandmates Bryan Smith (last year's other new addition, who also plays trombone and tuba), Rob Somerville, and Fuzz often step up to the mic. It's hard – from the evidence on *Feel the Peel* – to really evaluate Clayburn; with the vocal switching and four-part harmonies, her lack of domination is by design, and the record's mix doesn't put the vocals front-and-center.

The horn sound is also "a little more intricate and a little more orchestrated" on the new record, Fuzz said.

But the Deep Banana Blackout on *Feel the Peel* might not last long. Fuzz promises that the band will hone its sound for its next record, focusing on "old-school funk with an edge."

And that should help clear up all those nagging doubts he's having. "The buzz about the band right now is a bit of uncertainty," he said. "We're still developing the new sound of Deep Banana Blackout. ... We're really going to wipe the slate clean."

Deep Banana Blackout will perform at RIBCO at 10:30 p.m. on Tuesday, November 13. Advance tickets are \$8, while admission at the door is \$10.