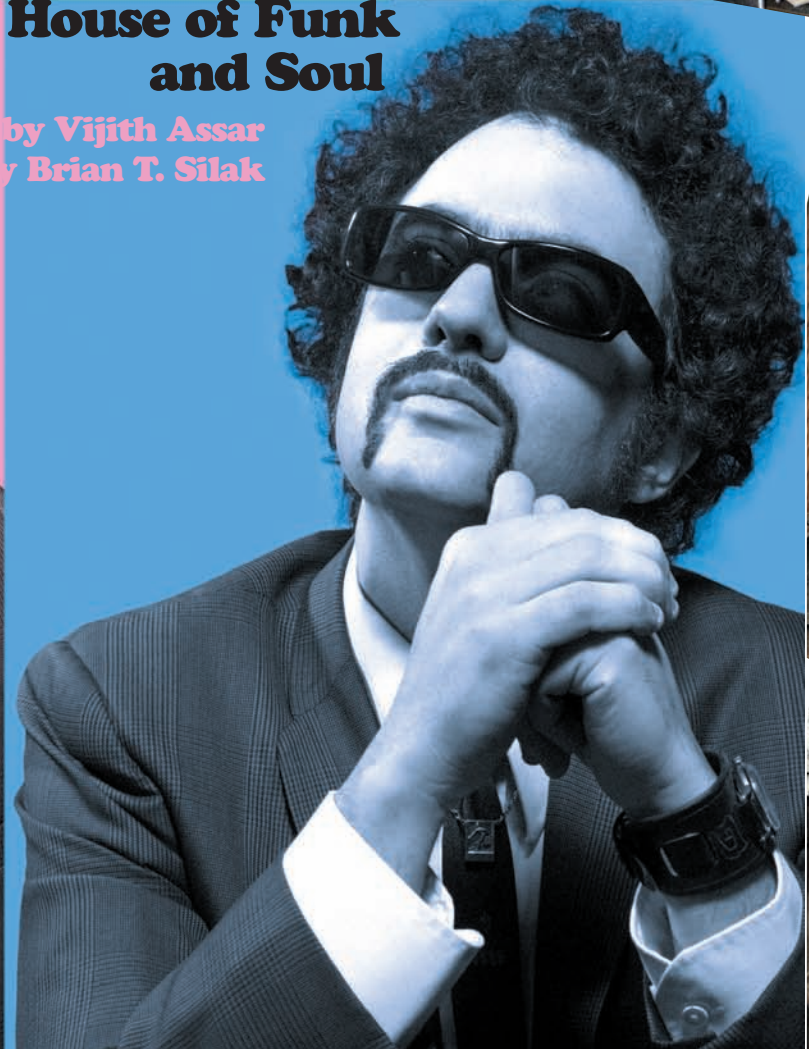


Gabriel Roth

Bosco Mann

**Daptone's House of Funk
and Soul**

by Vijith Assar
Photos by Brian T. Silak



Sharon Jones may be the reigning matriarch of revivalist funk, but when I first interviewed her a year and a half ago, she was very clear about her role: she's the face and voice of the operation but not the brains. "You gotta ask Bosco that," she'd shrug whenever I tiptoed up to questions of composition, production or arrangement. As it turns out, Bosco Mann is the alter ego of New York musician Gabriel Roth, who is almost single-handedly responsible for the rebirth of funk and soul taking place in the back alleys of Brooklyn. As the leader of Daptone Records, with partner Neal Sugarman, Roth plays more roles than any one Mann should ever be able to - from bringing the funk on bass guitar to selling the funk as label executive, he does it all - and with the recent passing of James Brown, he may soon find himself one of the old school's most important surviving torch-bearers and "hardest working man in soul."

You have a pretty focused stylistic niche. Why?

When I started making records it wasn't because I turned on the radio and liked what I heard. I started making records because I was listening to old records and they sounded great. It's not really an agenda or an angle as much as it is just kind of being honest with ourselves. In articles, people say, "Aren't you just doing something that's been done before?" or "Isn't this some kind of retro fad?" First, we're not making enough money for it to be called a fad, that's for sure. We're just trying to be tasteful and try to make the kind of records that sound good and feel good. If they sound old, that's great - I dig old records. It's just hard not to read into it more than that and try to put some kind of politics behind it. But the truth is we dig old records, so we're going to try to make old records.

Can you tell me about your studio?

We built the studio in an old house in Bushwick, Brooklyn. We're not really open to the public. We do some recordings for people, either because they offer us a bunch of money to do it or because they're friends of friends. Luckily we're able to get by that way, because it's still a rough time for recording studios. We've done some stuff for Mark Ronson, who's a kind of a DJ/producer. He just did this record with Amy Winehouse as the singer, and we did a lot of tracks for him for that. We did a couple commercials. But for the most part we do our own thing. We finally got to the point where we're doing enough business to where if somebody calls and says,

"I want to record my rock band, and it's a shitty band but I can give you \$200," I can say, "No." My partner Neal Sugarman and I wear a lot of hats. One day we're dealing with layout of artwork and dealing with paying rent and collecting from a distributor, arranging a string section and booking shows and going on tour. We're doing everything and there are only two of us. And playing - I kind of started playing bass guitar because the bass guitar player that I was using before was too busy and I just wanted someone to be in the background. It's definitely kind of hard to produce yourself sometimes, but with the bass it's not as hard as being a singer or something like that.

The liner notes for *Dap Dippin'* with... say that was recorded "in Duke's basement." Is that the same place, before it found a name?

"Duke" was Duke Amayo, who is lead singer from Antibalas. In Williamsburg, he used to have a place called Afrospot, named after

a Nigerian club. Upstairs, we'd have shows and concerts, and he would have kung fu classes and everything else you could imagine, and then in the basement they built a recording studio. It was a real low-ceiling, concrete, fucked up basement. So we recorded *Dap Dippin'*... in there, and I'm not real happy with how that record sounds. I don't mind the roughness, but there's a certain narrowness and midranginess to the sound just because of that basement, you know? I mean, you have 6 1/2 foot ceilings and concrete floors and stone walls - there's only so much you can do to try to open up the sound.

Especially considering that drums are a big part of your sound.

The basement definitely was not the best place to record drums. I think one of the things I learned was to kind of let instruments blend themselves as much as possible. If I have a horn section, I'm going to use one mic. If the trumpet player is too loud, I'm going to tell him to back up. That's just how we do it, and it just comes out to be a more natural blend. And I find the same thing with drums, too. I use very few mics on drums, usually one or two mics, sometimes three, very rarely four, but I never close mic the set. The thing about mic'ing it a little further away from it is you can get a much more natural sound, but it's also much more challenging in a room that doesn't sound good. If you're recording drums, I would say that 90% of the sound is the drummer, first of all. If you have a great drummer, they're going to sound great. That's a huge part of the sound, and then after that, you gotta have a good sounding drum set - not necessarily an expensive drum set or a vintage drum set - it can be a \$20 drum set from the pawnshop - but if you tune it right and muffle it right and whoever is playing it has the right touch... The point is to get all that stuff happening before you put up a mic. And then once you put up a mic you can try fifty different mics, and once you find the best sounding mic, you can try a thousand different positions. Lately I've been really into getting a mic and putting it on the ground two to three feet back, between the hi-hat and the bass drum - about two feet away and to the side of the bass drum, pointed up at the snare from underneath. That's most of the sound that we have on this record. The best bass drum sound I get is when I don't put a mic on it, you know? It sounds more natural. I used a lot of real trashy microphones. I had this Akai mic - just a Dictaphone mic with a quarter-inch end on it, and I used that for most of the bass drum stuff for the last few years. And I had a lot of Radio Shack microphones, too.

Are you still using them?

On this record [Sharon Jones and The Dap-Kings, *Naturally*], not so much. I got a couple of nice mics that are sounding really good right now. I definitely have much better gear now than I did five or six years ago, and I think that helps a lot. More than anything I think it's just kind of like a learning curve. Every recording session we do, I learn something - of my approach to recording, one is just not to trust anything but your ears and not be biased by what usually works, what's supposed to work, what



somebody told you or what the magazine said works. Sometimes you spend a long time doing something really clever and you really want it to work - that's not just recording, that's musically too. Sometimes I'll do some real complicated horn arrangement or something, I'll really think I've masterminded something out, and I'll be up three nights in a row working on it and have this huge chart, and somebody will say, "Hey, wouldn't it be better if the horns just went, 'BLAP! HARUMPH! WAP!'" I think a real big part of being able to wear those different hats and being able to make records that I want to listen to is to have a little perspective to stop and say, "You're right. You know what? Your idea is better. It's simpler, you didn't spend all night on it, you didn't invest what I invested into it, but it's going to sound better."

It sounds like you have the same philosophy for both composition and engineering.

It's definitely the same stuff.

So what's the second part of your technique?

One of the things about tracking a lot of instruments live and never having more than one track of drums is the sounds that you get - if the trumpet is too loud, there's nothing you can do about it later. You can't really "fix it in the mix," as they say. I record to tape as opposed to Pro Tools or whatever, and we actually do a lot of splicing and flying things in and stuff with the tape machine. But the general approach is that I'm not going to be smarter when we mix this record than I am the day we cut it, you know? Instead of having an attitude like, "Well, let's open that up and put it on another track." I'm not really about that. I'm like, "Look, if it sounds better, let's record over the other thing. If it doesn't sound better, let's not record it." For the most part, we try to come into the studio with a musical idea. The idea of "Let's do 64 tracks and put each note on a different track and record the solo five times and we'll put it together later - and we'll paste it and fly it around and if it's not good, I'll copy it from the other verse" - instead of that approach I go in there with musicians that are going to play a great fucking solo when I hit record. You hit record, they bring the goods and that's the record. All the greatest drum tracks I've recorded have been because I had great drummers playing great things. I've definitely learned a lot about mic'ing and getting things to sound better, but I really gotta give the credit where the credit is due.

But it's not simply a matter of the parts that were played. There's definitely a sound there that makes me think I'm listening to an old soul record.

Well, yeah that's true. I get a lot of that. We definitely try to make recordings as rough and raw as we acceptably can.

How do you do that?

You can get a 20-watt guitar amp as opposed to a Fender Twin or something - you can get a little more dirt out of it without blasting your ears off. Going to tape is a big part of it. One thing I do is with drums and bass

- a lot of times I'll roll bass frequencies out of the instrument to hit the tape, and the reason is because the way that bass frequencies distort tape and the way that high frequencies distort tape is very different. High frequencies get crunchy, and the bass frequencies kind of compress and swell up. But the problem is, if you have something like drums or bass that have a lot of bass frequencies in it, the bass frequencies will swell up and blow up the tape before the high frequencies can get crunchy. So what happens is, the bass will go "BOOM!" and kind of fart on the tape, but you won't have that crunchiness on the top that makes it sound real nice. So what I'll do is I'll roll a lot of low frequencies out, hit the tape with them - and it takes a lot of experimentation to figure out how much bass to take out and how hard to hit the tape. I'm always listening off repro when we hit record, because I feel like the tape is definitely a really big part of the sound. It always sounds really different coming back off the tape than it does going there. You roll those roll frequencies off when you hit the tape really hard, the hi-hat and the snare drum or just the attack of something, the top end of something will get crunchy and start sounding nice on the tape, and then right at the same point the bottom swells back up where it's supposed to. I used to do that with springs, too. I would use two channels on the console, one as a preamp and one as a post-amp. I would do the same thing I was talking about with the tape: roll the bass down and turn the high end up and then hit the springs hard, and on the way back I'd do it the other way, because it's the bass frequencies that knock the springs around and make them all 'Doing' and there's a lot of hiss that comes out of it. So it's almost like a homemade Dolby, you know? And when you hit the return, the post-amp for the springs, you can turn the bass back up and bring the high end down, and thus you'd have a real warm reverb that's not boinging around, and when you bring the high end back down you're pulling the hiss back down.

You deal with a lot of interlocking riffs - there will be a guitar thing going on and a horn section, and half the time the bass is also melodic. Is there some strategic way in which you go about dividing up frequency ranges?

Depending on what kind of board you're using, sometimes you have a lot of control over it, sometimes you have less. I definitely get into that a lot, try to figure out who's living where. The midrange is obviously always the biggest problem. You know, if you have a band that has two guitars and three or four horns and then vocals and overdubs that could be percussion, you've got snare drum - all that stuff is living in the midrange, and I definitely will pull frequencies out of different things or push them into different things. Sometimes you get a guitar and just find one midrange frequency - 800 Hz or 2 k or something ugly - and then crank the shit out of it on the EQ and then turn it real low in the mix, so it's nasty and it's present, but it's just in one spot. The arrangement is a huge part. I've had tracks where I was going nuts trying to get things to sit in the right

place, and in the end, it was because everyone was playing too goddamned much. I've had other tracks that practically mix themselves, and it's usually because the arrangement is open. Everyone's kind of sitting in the right space and leaving space for each other and listening to each other. That's why I think it's important to have a holistic approach to music, you know, because you really can't mix something if you've got the wrong ingredients to start with.

Like, invert the chord rather than pull out the 250 Hz.

Exactly. Or sometimes there's a part, a guitar part or something that I love and it's real nasty and it's great, but for some reason there's no room for it in the mix. And we'll just mute it or do it again simpler. Sometimes there's a part that's really great, but there's no room for it, or it's not helping - it doesn't make the whole song better. And that's kind of the final answer. You do a track and you mute the vocals and the track sounds better, you've got yourself an instrumental, you know what I mean? The second thing that I was going to say I learned recently about mixing is to make unbalanced mixes. I'm sure you're familiar with this, but when you put a record on, it could be a record you've been listening to your whole life, but when you put it on in the control room on studio speakers and you're listening to it in that environment that you're used to mixing in, you have a completely different take on it and you hear things that you never heard before, you know? You realize that on some Otis Redding records, that his vocals are buried. You can barely hear them, they're all the way on the right, the entire band is on the left and the loudest things are these two piano notes that come by every sixteen bars. And that's true whether you're talking about Otis Redding, Motown or The Beatles. A lot of the records that you love have really freaked out shit on them, mix-wise. Tambourine is a classic example: up until the '70s, if you had a tambourine on a record, there was a good chance it was louder than everything. And that's one thing that I've been kind of getting into, instead of making everything sit in its comfortable little spot and panning everything all the way across the board and the drums and bass are in the middle and you can hear everything and nothing's louder than anything else. These real equal mixes, there's nothing exciting about that. A lot of times, what really hooks up a mix is the freaky stuff, letting something happen naturally and not trying to make it sound like it's supposed to sound. Just letting something unfold and be its natural, flawed self can sometimes bring a lot more personality to a song than trying to fix everything.

A lot of the Daptone material is in the vein of the one-chord jam, on the simple side harmonically. Does that give you a lot of room to explore things, like sympathetic resonances?

Definitely we're coming from a minimalist approach with that kind of stuff. Not that we're not going to change chords, but we're not going to change chords without a good reason - I'm not going to change chords just to show you that we know some new chords. But as

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far as sympathetic resonances, I never really got into that. We definitely tuned some stuff and tried to make it sound good, you know, once in a while getting a conga in the right spot. On the session we're doing now I've got a mic on the piano. I use it a lot of times, and there's nobody playing the piano. So, yes, in that way there's definitely some sympathetic resonance going on, but we've never, like, tuned a tom to a track.

There's a very distinct sound to a lot of funk guitars, and I think a lot of people would be interested in learning what your go-to moves are for getting that high, jangly thing happening.

I don't know whether I have any notably good guitar sounds on a record, but of everything I record, the guitars are the things I do the least with. I kind of just try to stay out of the way. Usually I just grab a 57 like everybody else and throw it on the amp. I definitely hit the tape hard with guitars, which puts a little crunch on them. Once in a while I'll compress them a little bit, but that's usually just if there's some part that's really all over the place. Sometimes I'll EQ them crazy. Guitars are one of the few things where you can just kind of grab some midrange frequency and crank it, or take all the high end out of it, or all the low end. You can do really extreme EQ things with guitars and they still sit nicely and don't sound distracting. Tracking the reverb out of a guitar amp when it's playing is something we always do - we rarely put reverb on afterwards.

The liner notes for *Naturally* include a

long discussion of the idea that "somewhere between banging on logs and the invention of MIDI technology we have made a terrible wrong turn." Can you expand on that?

I don't want to go on the crazy diatribe, but if you go back through music history, you see technology, both in the way that we were able to record things and preserve things and the way that we're able to build instruments - also the way we're able to distribute music and advertise music and package music. All those things were progressing in ways that made it easier for people to express themselves with music, to relate to each other, made it easier for people to band and feel joy and feel sadness and anger or whatever. If you listen to an Otis Redding record and you hear the way he's singing and the way the band's playing and the way it comes off - it's like he's just singing every note like it's his last. When the horns play, you feel what they mean. The ability to get that stuff on records and the mics they were using and the amps they were recording on and all that stuff made that possible. I think that as that progressed, coming to the '70s and the '80s, it seems like the technology somehow kept going but did not continue to enhance the ability of people to express themselves. If you listen to hip-hop, if you listen to the drums that they're sampling, they don't sample Phil Collins' drum set. They don't sample drum sets from the last twenty years. It's just a misdirected energy trying to make things faster and cleaner and quicker with more options. There's so much in the recording industry about options, about, "Hey, let's do it this way so that later you can undo it, you can change it, you can change speeds, so you can change keys, so you can take one verse and move it to another with the click of a button." I don't understand how that could really help the world make a better record. It doesn't really help somebody express themselves. Obviously there are examples of people that can use technology and do things, whether its beats or remixes or whatever these kids are doing these days with their newfangled devices - there are things they can do that are very creative and things that they couldn't do without the technology. I think a lot more often there are people going in to make records, and the advances in technology have not been something that helps them. ☺

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