

CHARLES WRIGHT PUCKEY PUCKEY, JAMS & OUTTAKES 1970-1971
& THE WATTS 103rd STREET RHYTHM BAND



(excerpted from the liner notes for *Charles Wright and the Watts 103rd Street Rhythm Band: Puckey Puckey: Jams and Outtakes, 1970-71*. Available on Rhino Handmade, 2008.)

Any aficionado of vintage soul and funk know that even some of the biggest acts of the era didn't have much unreleased material still available to mine but with the Watts 103rd, they were a rare exception. Warner Brothers, unlike many of their competing labels, pursued diligent archiving practices with their recordings. The Warner's "vault" has remained one of the best maintained - and accessible - in pop music unlike the scores of other labels that would literally throw out master reels and other artifacts simply because they lacked the foresight to preserve them.

However, this would mean relatively little if not for the extraordinary recording output of the Watts 103rd itself. For cost reasons, most bands tried to get into the studio, nail a song in a take or two, and get out. But armed with the deeper pockets of the Warner Brothers, Wright used their resources to full advantage by booking studio time for hours - sometimes an entire day - and having the band come in and rehearse, sometimes trying out the same song take after take after take.

For example, for the included track, "Watts Tower," Zax had noted how it featured, "a riff that the band had been playing off and on in the studio for several years...the vocal riff where they're singing 'I gotta feeling tonight, everything is going to be alright.' It was something they messed around with but never quite committed to in an album or single release."

Wright explained: "I'd be in the studio all day, every day. I was constantly trying to make something happen... What we did, many times, we'd start the groove and do it over and over and over again and cut out the best part of it. I did that a lot of times. We were trying to sell that four minutes of happiness and however it came about and whenever it came about, we'd deal with it."

It was a laborious process but it also produced some of the group's best known songs, especially "Express Yourself," which evolved out of those constant rehearsals. *Puckey Puckey* includes a never-heard-before alternative cut of that hit, one that's a little more sparse than the eventual, final copy but you can get a clear sense of the musical and rhythmic ideas Wright and the Band experimented with.

Again, the title cut, "Puckey Puckey," is an exemplary example. It was originally intended to be an album cut but never made it there. This compilation ends with the "four minutes of happiness" version of the song - the take that Wright felt held up the strongest - but an original, nearly 30 minute, rehearsal taping of "Puckey Puckey" also shows how the band would try to stay in the groove and find that elusive magic. Bassist Melvin Dunlap, who played on all these songs, explained that he and the rest of the group were, "just trying to perfect the sound, perfect the groove, perfect the pocket."

Read the rest of the liner notes to learn about the Watts 103rd studio grind and the beginning of the group's end. www.rhinohandmade.com

--Oliver Wang
soul-sides.com