

## Preview

### Contemporary Youth Orchestra: Rock the Orchestra— a conversation with guest artist Bootsy Collins

by Mike Telin



Although the word “Funk” may not be used on a daily basis during orchestra rehearsals and concerts, this week is all about “Funk” as the Contemporary Youth Orchestra under the direction of Liza Grossman joins forces with legendary bassist Bootsy Collins.

On Friday, May 17 beginning at 7:30 pm in Cleveland State University's Waetjen Auditorium, CYO under the direction of Liza Grossman and Bootsy Collins perform 14 songs from his own discography in *Psychotic Bump School*. The performance is the 2013 edition of CYO's annual Rock the Orchestra concert.

Beginning tonight (Tuesday, May 14) at 6:00 pm, also in Waetjen Auditorium, CYO in co-operation with the [Bootsy Collins Foundation](#) presents *WIND ME UP!* (an exclusive, behind the scenes view of our collaboration), a benefit for the Bootsy Collins Foundation and Cleveland Metropolitan School District International School. (Check our concert listings for details).

“Tonight and Friday’s concert are all about supporting the kids” says Patti Collins, the Foundation's president who, along with her husband, created the foundation. “It will be four years old this month. We’re still young but rapidly growing.” In addition to raising funds to purchase musical instruments for kids, the Foundation also has created projects aimed at self-esteem. “One of our many projects is “I’m a Bootsy Girl” where girls and women take a pledge promising to lift the self-esteem of a little girl or woman through the arts or whatever they do in the world. We met a little girl a couple of days ago who is about nine years old, and she told us 'I am stopping bullying at my school and I am proud to be a Bootsy Girl.’”

Born in Cincinnati, William Earl (Bootsy) Collins first garnered international attention during his late teens when he began touring with James Brown. He later teamed with George Clinton and Parliament- Funkadelic with whom he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1997. Additionally, Collins has enjoyed his own solo career as a singer and songwriter. We spoke with the engaging Boosty Collins by telephone.

*Mike Telin: It's a pleasure to speak with you. You've got a busy day today and a busy week ahead with the benefit tonight and the concert on Friday.*

Bootsy Collins: Yes, and I have to learn my own songs, because [the orchestra] has learned every song exactly like the record. I thought: *exactly* like the record – OK. So I have some homework to do.

*MT: I understand that they are playing fourteen of your songs?*

BC: Yeah, and I was shocked. I had no idea that they had chosen to do my songs and when they told me I thought, wow. And I understand that they picked the songs as well.

*MT: That's great. Did any they chose come as a surprise to you?*

BC: Well the slow stuff like *Munchies For Your Love*, *Telephone Bill*, *Rather be with You*, I had no idea that they would be into those.

*MT: But your music is so great, why does this come as a surprise?*

BC: I thought the upbeat songs — that makes sense, but I had no idea they would be interested in playing the slow songs. It just surprised me, especially *Munchies For Your Love*, that's a whole different thing. I actually asked why we are doing these and they told me that the kids wanted to do them, so I said cool.

*MT: And you'll be meeting the kids for the first time this evening.*

BC: Yes, we'll all be meeting each other, and everything this evening will be for the first time. I am really looking forward to it. And it is fun because the interaction alone is priceless. It's going to be nice.

*MT: That will be fun, but at this point in your career, why is a concert like this important to you?*

BC: I started playing the clarinet in school, and for me, music drew upon my heart to make me even [go to] school. So [music] is what made all the hard work pay off. Being in music class was like a reward. It wasn't like learning math and your ABC's. That was more like serious homework, but music was a reward and something that I really wanted to do.

I can imagine that these kids feel — if not that way — they still [understand] that music allows you to express yourself. And to see kids getting excited about music and to see the twinkle in their eyes is just a beautiful vibe.

*MT: You started on clarinet?*

BC: Yes. I remember bringing my clarinet home, and I couldn't wait to sit in front of my mama and play what I had learned that day. For me that was better than doing my science, social studies and math homework. I guess it always felt like I was a little more in

control, like I had actually learned something that I could show to my mother. That was a good feeling.

*MT: It was fun to look back and see how your career has expressed itself over time. I love your website and that great video of you playing with James Brown at 18 on some Italian TV show is amazing.*

BC: [Laughing] Oh my! And in fact the first time I saw that myself it was like WOW! But thank God for YouTube because we would never have been able to see any of [those concerts]. Even though we did them, it was so long ago that you can't remember all of that. And we were performing so we weren't watching, and then to see it all years later really puts you in front of the kids today so they can see what was going on back then. So it's a beautiful thing.

*MT: Yes it is. I hope you don't mind, but you were only 18, and well, you look just a little frightened.*

BC: WELL YEAH! Can you imagine being on stage with James Brown? Come on — who wouldn't be, especially at 18. I was trying to hold my composure but there was so much excitement inside. I was thinking, this is the Godfather of Soul. He was someone I never thought I would ever play with.

*MT: You met him in Cincinnati?*

BC: Yes, because he recorded at King Records. But to actually be on stage with him was unheard of as far as I was concerned. And when it happened I had all kinds of stage fright.

*MT: There is the famous story about James Brown talking to you about finding "the groove." Would you mind talking a little about that?*

BC: When I got with James Brown I was coming off of playing guitar so at that time I didn't play bass like the other bass players. I was kind of forced into playing bass because I wanted to play with my brother, Catfish Collins, and he was playing guitar and that's why I wanted to play it. So I talked my mother into getting me a \$29 Silvertone green guitar. I thought it was the greatest thing since bread.

Now, my brother had a gig and the bass player wasn't going to be there so I said, I can do it. He was eight years older than me and like all big brothers, didn't want to hang with little snotty-nosed kids, and that is exactly what I was. But I told him to give me four strings and I can turn this guitar into a bass. Of course I didn't know what I was talking about but I thought, it's not rocket science, just give me four strings. So he did and I put them into the tuning pegs and voila! I had a bass. That's what I call funk. Funk is making something out of nothing. And that's what I did with that guitar, I made something out of nothing. So that was my enrollment into playing bass so once I got a bass nobody was going to tell me how to play it.

So when I got with James Brown I was actually playing too much for him. He told me, "You need to slow it down and give me the 1. I need you to give me the 1." I was like, what is the 1? So he started counting for me and that goes to show how music and num-

bers go together. He would [sing] 1 - - - 1 - - - 1 and by counting the measures like that [I understood] And he said, yeah like that and he told me that if I gave him the 1 I could play everything that I feel because he loved everything else that I was doing, I was just playing all over the 1 and he wanted the 1 to be dominant. So once I learned how to do that, I added it to my whole experience of playing the bass.

*MT: That is a great story. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk, this has been a real pleasure. You have and continue to be an inspiration to so many.*

BC: Thank you for getting the word out because it is all about the kids. To see them keeping the music alive with real instruments is very inspirational for me. As you know when we came up everybody wanted an instrument, and now everybody wants a computer to act like one. So to see kids who are dedicated to playing and practicing and doing all of the things it takes to play music is hard work. So I'll do anything I can do to help a kid who is really trying to keep the music alive.

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To learn more about the life of Bootsy Collins, listen to the recent interview with CBC host of "Q", [Jian Ghomeshi](#) about the new documentary, [Finding the Funk](#).

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