

With the release of their sixth album, *From the Corner to the Block*, the five-man group GALACTIC - drummer Stanton Moore, bassist Robert Mercurio, saxophonist/harmonica player Ben Ellman, keyboardist Richard Vogel, and guitarist Jeff Raines - reaffirms their standing as one of the funkier outfits in the known universe. Featuring a cherry-picked guest list of some of hip-hop's most dynamic lyricists - including Juvenile, Gift of Gab (Blackalicious), Lyrics Born, Ladybug Mecca (Digable Planets), Mr. Lif, Chali 2na (Jurassic 5), Vursatyl (Lifesavas), and Boots Riley (The Coup), *From the Corner to the Block* exposes GALACTIC's organic grooves to an urban ear while still maintaining their essential funk aesthetic.

The band started out over a decade ago as an instrumental act in the tradition of the Meters, the JB's, and Booker T. & the MG's - bands equally comfortable recording their own material or working with vocalists. *From the Corner to the Block* grew out of GALACTIC's experiences touring with artists like the Roots, Jurassic 5, Triple Threat DJ's and Gift of Gab. Though it features cameos from a "wish list" of fan-favorite MCs, this isn't a typical hip-hop album per se, but a contemporary funk record that just happens to feature hip-hop vocalists. "We never set out to make a rap record," explains Ellman, who produced the record with assistance from engineer extraordinaire Count (Halou, Quannum, DJ Shadow). "We wanted to kinda modernize the New Orleans sound," adds Mercurio.

The New Orleans legacy echoes throughout the album, indeed. The brassy "Bounce Baby" (featuring DJ Z-Trip) stirs up wah-wah guitar, a horn-driven melody, syncopated beats, and turntable wizardry into a potent rhythmic instrumental. "Tuff Love" (featuring Trombone Shorty) offers a taste of some of New Orleans' hottest young talent. "Second and Dryades," (featuring Big Chief Monk Boudreau), evokes the spirit of the Wild Magnolias - it's a percussion-laced Mardi Gras anthem for the digi generation, on which Boudreau relates the story of being an Indian on Mardi Gras day. The song sure to raise eyebrows though is the title track and first single, featuring the Soul Rebels Brass Band and platinum rapper Juvenile (who tapped GALACTIC to back him on the "Jimmy Kimmel Show"). Mercurio, for one, is happy with the outcome. "It sounds like it was all supposed to be there, this track was meant to happen" he says.

The rest of the album features a diverse array of funky arrangements, vocal deliveries, and musical expressions, from sexy downtempo jams like "Squarebiz," featuring the ever-delectable Ladybug Mecca and singer Nino Moschella; to uptempo party-starters like "What You Need" with Lyrics Born, and "Hustle Up" with Boots Riley (which Mercurio calls "a total rock tune" dressed in funky threads); to semi-autobiographical tales of urban street life by Mr. Lif ("And I'm Out"), Vursatyl & Ohmega Watts ("Find My Home"), Lateef the Truth Seeker ("No Way"), Gift of Gab ("The Corner"), and Chali 2na ("Think Back").

Even with all the different vocalists, the songs maintain a sense of thematic consistency. As Ellman explains, this was by design: the rappers were each asked to write about a corner. "It could have been any corner," he says. "Everyone had a different perspective." Many contemporary all-star collaborations are purely commercial exercises, yet *From the Corner to the Block* stands as a labor of love, connecting GALACTIC's hip-hop jones and their guests' fervor for funk aesthetics. The result isn't just the grooviest, funkier record of 2007, but perhaps the finest post-Katrina album to come out of New Orleans.