

Pop Talk: Fuel for a funk firestorm

by *George_Varga*

Musical reunions can be fun for fans and performers alike. So expect to double your pleasure when saxophonist-flutist-singer Karl Denson and keyboardist Robert Walter reunite with their old band, the Greyboy Allstars, to perform their propulsive style of funk-fueled jazz and R&B. Their national tour with the Greyboy Allstars runs through March 7, then resumes May 1 in New Orleans, where Walter resides. But he and Denson are also keeping busy with their own recently reunited bands.

Karl Denson (left) and Robert Walter are reuniting with their old band, the Greyboy Allstars. Their national tour ends March 7, followed by a last performance in New Orleans on May 1. Photo courtesy of John Gastaldo. Tiny Universe, led by Denson, went on hiatus three years ago. 20th Congress, led by Robert Walter, went on hiatus five years ago. The reactivation late last year of both bands, whose leaders met 15 years ago as members of the now also reunited Greyboy Allstars, is a cause for celebration, anticipation and reflection.

"It's time to reacquaint ourselves with our old audience and introduce ourselves to new people," said Denson, who spent the past three years alternating between his fiery jazz-funk trio and the band of rock-funk star Lenny Kravitz, with whom he has worked off and on since 1989.

"I think it will be a bit different now, because the whole jam-band scene has kind of grown up," Denson continued. "There's a new audience out there, which happens every five to six years. But good, quality music can make the transition through time, so I'm hoping we fit that mold."

For Walter, whose pre-Greyboy bands included skewed art-rockers Creedle and alt-rock favorites Daddy Longleggs, the reunion of 20th Congress was inspired by a simple desire to rekindle his and his band members' shared musical passion.

"I moved to New Orleans from San Diego with my wife and son in 2004 and got into all this other stuff, musically speaking," Walter said, speaking from his home in the Big Easy.

"I was hanging out earlier this year with Cochemea (Gastelum), the saxophonist in 20th Congress, who had gone on to play gigs with Amy Winehouse and Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings. And he said: 'I just want to play music with the people I grew up with.' There's something appealing about playing with a garage band, where you're practicing the tunes because you love them, not because you have to get it together for a gig. That's been the draw for all of this, starting with the Greyboy Allstars and moving on from there, so this reunion should be really fun."

Specifically, the kind of fun that invites listeners to gyrate and dance, alone or en masse, to the funk-fueled rhythms that have long been Denson and Walter's specialty.

Groove is in the art for both musicians. Their shared love of jazz, funk and vintage R&B has enabled them to draw a large young audience, which may have little interest in traditional jazz but is happy to shimmy and shake when Denson, 51, and Walter, 38, are in the house with their respective bands.

"The jazz artists I most like were playing dance music at the time, from Louis Armstrong to Weather Report," Denson said from his San Diego home.

"They were very interested in people grooving, so I've always considered that an important factor in my music, too."

Walter, speaking from New Orleans, amplified Denson's comments so accurately he could have been sitting next to him, not 1,600 miles away.

"By playing music that people can dance to, you are trying to straddle the worlds of improvisational music and dance music," Walter noted. "That's been a common denominator in both Karl's career and mine, and in a lot of other musicians'."

"But that's not out of line with jazz at all. When it was popular music, during the big-band era, jazz was dance music. Since then, it's become more of a fine-art pursuit, rather than a populist music. And that's made the music highly irrelevant to the culture and made jazz a museum piece. So, it's important to make the music work on both levels — it's African and European, intricate and direct — and that's what makes it so great, that combination of things."

Early in his career, Denson envisioned becoming an avant-garde jazz musician. His gradual shift to a more accessible style was inspired, in part, by attending a concert at UCLA in the early 1980s by beyond-the-cutting-edge pianist Cecil Taylor.

"That was the kind of music I wanted to play and I was studying composition at the time at Cal State Long Beach," Denson recalled. "At the Cecil Taylor concert, I started thinking that this music is a lot more fun to play than it is to listen to. So, I started focusing more on songs that had strong melodies and harmonies that girls would like."

Did it work?

"It did work," laughed the happily married father of two daughters and one son.

Denson has since enjoyed the best of both worlds.

He's earned a loyal following by making groove-based music with the Greyboy Allstars and with his own bands, as well as through his collaborations with everyone from Kravitz, The Allman Brothers and Steve Winwood to Gov't Mule, String Cheese Incident and DJ Logic. He's also acquitted himself well in the company of such uncompromising jazz greats as bassist Dave Holland, drummer Jack DeJohnette and singer

Andy Bey.

Walter has been less inclined to make inroads in straight-ahead jazz circles. But he has held his own on his solo albums with such veterans as saxophonists Gary Bartz and Red Holloway, guitarist Phil Upchurch and ace drummer Harvey Mason.

Since moving to New Orleans, Walter has carved out a niche for himself in the company of some of the Crescent City's finest musicians, among them drummers Johnny Vidacovich and Stanton Moore, Meters' bassist George Porter and guitarist-singer Walter "Wolfman" Washington.

"I was accepted really quickly, part of which was because Stanton Moore had played on a 20th Congress record and I'd played on one of his," Walter said. "He's a powerful character in this town and he kind of talked me into moving here originally. Of course, there are a million great piano players here and not as many organ players, so that's been my niche."

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