



December 7, 2007

Music: The Grey '90s

Nothing neutral about these funk Allstars

by Matt Kramer

Before I could even start to slip down into my customary pre-Christmas funk, my spirits were buoyed by the announcement that the Greyboy Allstars were bringing their revitalized jazz-funk jams to Petaluma's Mystic Theatre on Thursday, December 13. I had barely begun grumbling (Grinch-like, of course) that I'd have to go see them in the city again, when—ho ho ho!—the electric quintet tacked the Petaluma date onto the front of this leg of their current tour, giving the North Bay opening-night honors.

I don't know if there was a happier music writer in the universe when the Greyboys, or GBA, or whatever you want to call them, released *What Happened to Television?* (2007) earlier this year. It's their third studio recording, and it arrived a full decade after the previous one, *A Town Called Earth*. Admittedly, it took the new disc a little while to grow on me, as *WHTT* represents a shift from the band's previous musical output. Yet that progress is part of what had had me anticipating the long-awaited release.

I moved to California during the GBA's heyday; I remember seeing their shows listed in the *Chronicle's* pink section in the mid-1990s, but didn't know anything about them. I got into them way too late for prime time. Now I've just about worn their CDs out, and I've followed two GBA solo projects—Robert Walter's *20th Congress* and Karl Denson's *Tiny Universe*—everywhere from Santa Cruz to Quincy. Yet I've seen the GBA perform live only twice. During the latter of those concerts, they tried out "How Glad I Am," with guitarist Elgin Park (a.k.a. Michael Andrews) singing his heart out. It was the closest to a pop song I've heard from GBA, who in the past preferred mostly longer tunes that let Walter, Denson and Park solo over the solid but slinky drum and bass backbone laid down by Zak Najor and Chris Stillwell. It wasn't just pop; it carried a big hook, the forte of Park/Andrews, whose own projects and compositions have included TV and film work, most notably the score for *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005).

After Park's heartfelt live rendition, "How Glad I Am" received strikingly different treatment on the studio recording. Lead vocals were provided by the L.A.-based trio The Living Sisters, who establish the perfect ethereal setting for the subject matter. It netted Song of the Day honors on NPR

Blake Zidell & Associates
Public Relations for the Recorded and Performing Arts



December 7, 2007

in late May. One of the singers, Inara George, also provided sassy background vocals behind Denson's squawked vocal lead on the James Brown-ish "Still Waiting."

Female vocals are a welcome new aspect of the GBA, and the Brown school of funk is a thankfully continuing influence. With saxophone, Hammond B-3, Park's versatile guitar skills, and Najor and Stillwell's irresistible grooves, GBA boogaloo is second to none. They've treated crowds to a James Brown cover or two at the shows I've attended; with the first anniversary of Brown's death approaching on Christmas Day, it seems a safe bet that at this tour-opening treat, we'll also receive a gift from the Godfather.

The Mystic performance is "an evening with," which means no opener and all GBA. Be forewarned: These guys took a lengthy set break when last I saw them. But, as with the 10-year hiatus between their last two studio recordings, the Greyboy Allstars are worth every minute of the wait.