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Music Preview: Greyboy Allstars play that funky music

By Michael Deeds

When the Greyboy Allstars appeared in 1993 with soul-jazz music sounding like it came from 1973, there was a distinct possibility these young men would be considered ironic or even illegitimate.

But four white boys (and one black one) played that funky music, oblivious to racial stereotypes and whether their rump-winding grooves would be taken seriously.

"We were from San Diego. It wasn't, like, the ghetto or anything, you know what I mean?" remembers Elgin Park, who started learning guitar in grade school. "I think as soon as we started playing, there wasn't really a question of whether it was going to sound real or not."

Nearly 15 years later, the Greyboy Allstars arguably are the slickest instrumental jazz-funk act on the planet -- even if they are, as Park says, "trapped somewhere in '68 to '74."

The Greyboy Allstars

"The band definitely does a specific thing," he explains.

To untrained ears, some Greyboy Allstars songs might sound like a TV-show soundtrack circa the "Sanford and Son" era. Jam-band fans are lured to the band's improvisational dynamic.

But it's an elite command of "the pocket" -- that rhythmic place where molten funk resides -- that makes this quintet so lethal in front of a dance floor.

Former Lenny Kravitz sideman Karl Denson co-founded the Greyboy Allstars with San Diego soul- and jazz-funk aficionado DJ Greyboy. During his popular residence at a local bar, Greyboy

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spun classic music by the likes of Grant Green, Rusty Bryant and Ivan "Boogaloo Joe" Jones. The idea behind the Greyboy Allstars was a live band that would re-create that instrumental vibe.

Greyboy wasn't up to touring, so Park, Denson (sax, flute), Robert Walter (keyboards), Chris Stillwell (bass) and Zak Najor (drums) moved ahead without a DJ as the Greyboy Allstars.

Funk freaks flipped. The Allstars toured internationally and released two albums: 1995's groovy "West Coast Boogaloo" (recorded in a single day with James Brown's trombonist, Fred Wesley), and 1997's snappier, more jazz-influenced "A Town Called Earth."

Appearances in the new millennium became rarer. Denson now leads his own successful soul-jazz group, Karl Denson's Tiny Universe. Walter fronts touring acts and has played with Herbie Hancock's backing band, the Headhunters. Park records a darker, mellower sort of music under his real name, Michael Andrews. He also scored the movie "Donnie Darko" and the acclaimed, now defunct, TV series "Freaks & Geeks."

But the pocket keeps calling. Early last year, the Allstars reunited for 10 days in the studio and recorded "What Happened to Television?," their third studio CD and first in nine years. Vocals are included on a smattering of tracks. Other than that, the new album is not a major departure from the retro licks that launched the band.

"Our goal was to make a fun funk record," Park says. "Our entire recording career has been less than a month. It's not like these things are sculpted for years. That's not what this kind of music is about."

Despite the limitations of the genre, fans are hardcore. And as a performer, Parks admits, there's definitely something gratifying about unleashing three sweaty hours of wah-wah riffs on stage rather than 90 minutes of acoustic guitar.

"It's a physical band, as far as what it demands from me," Park admits. "But that's awesome, that's good."

As the rock band Wild Cherry suggested three decades ago, it can be noble just to lay down that boogie and play that funky music till you die.

"It's just good to keep it alive," Park says of the Allstars. "I mean, we plan on doing it, hopefully, forever."