

BigWheel Electrosoul keeps on rolling at Appaloosa Grill

By **Ru Johnson** *Tuesday, Mar 13 2012*

We're BigWheel Electrosoul," DJ Check One announces after the band's first song before adding, "and we're here every Tuesday at Appaloosa."

BigWheel Electrosoul, Tuesdays at Appaloosa Grill, 535 16th Street, free, 720-932-1700.

Before the percussionist can take his next breath, a highly inebriated gentleman begins to chant with slurred thunder, "One more song! One more song!" which inspires sardonic shrugs and a laugh from Check One and the rest of the crew before they launch into the next song in their set. Seemingly satisfied, the drunken man screams and claps. "Thank you! Thank you!"

The legend of BigWheel Electrosoul's Tuesday-night gathering begins about eight years ago. From its earlier incarnation as DragonFly (featuring Dominique Lolly of Big Gigantic and Jared Sayers of the Motet), the trio now comprises Damieon "Check One" Hines, Charles Parker "Murder" Mertens and Jerod "Qknox" Sarlo.

To the untrained eye, it appears as though the three are merely meshing sounds, Check One on drums and making beats with the MPC, Qknox on the keys and synthesizer ("and the occasional shaker," he notes) and Mertens with his monstrous bass. What's actually happening is that the three beatmakers are playing live over beats — their beats. It looks easy, but the guys say they've played together for so long, the chemistry is almost natural.

"There's a lot of screaming, a lot of hand signals," Mertens explains.

"I always feel like if I stare intently at them, they'll look up at me," says Qknox. "I'll intend to stop a tune, and I won't be able to get Charlie's attention, so I'll just stop, and he'll stop it anyway. That's just years of working together. I've been playing with Charlie for 30,000 years, it feels like."

The inspiration to perfect live beatmaking came when Check One witnessed Mark De Clive Lowe's signature live production on stage at the Jazz Cafe in London, a sight that so moved him, he began honing his own skills in that regard. "I saw him making beats with the MPC and said, 'Man, I gotta try this,'" he recalls. "It's been a growth and sticking with it; it kind of bled into everything." Hines, who is also a producer, DJ, drummer and T-shirt designer, is a classically trained percussionist. Live, he employs electronic drum sequences with live drumming and his trusty MPC 2500.

"When I moved back here," Qknox remembers, "Check One was the only one doing this. I didn't have the MPC, so I didn't have the capability to do that live stuff, but when I saw how he was using samples and live music, it was like, 'Duh!' This was before Ableton and all of those programs."

The tremendous talent that exists in each of these musicians is what drives BigWheel forward and has kept the trio at the forefront of the live-music scene. All three make beats, and each of them is involved in a smattering of individual projects.

"Each of us has 200 beats that we go through," Check One points out. "I have pages of beats. We've done a bunch of projects when people die, like Michael Jackson and Teddy Pendergrass. We'll drop these beats and then bring them back. Halloween beats, compost beats, where we chop up radio hits. We've done shows dedicated to Too \$hort — there are just a gross of beats that we have to work with."

In addition to these three pieces of the puzzle — Mertens, Qknox and Check One — there's an interchangeable fourth element, which might be an a cappella vocal or a horn solo. "If I play an a cappella and no one is on stage," Qknox explains, "the fourth person is whatever element we use. If we use a sample of 85 people singing, the fourth element is 85 people."

Qknox is the melodic spoke in the turning wheel. Trained on the keys and experienced in artist development, he studied at the New School University's Jazz and Contemporary Music Program in New York City. A traditional foundation of jazz informs his playing, even in progressive projects like BigWheel. "To make beats for BigWheel was different than making

beats that were not intended to be made live," he points out. "There's a certain sound that fits well with all the instruments together and fits in a live setting. You could make these amazing beats and wonder what it sounds like live, but it's always completely different when a band plays live behind it."

Originally the trio was trying to create loops on the fly with the bass, hi-hat and snare drum, and make up lines along the way. But then they started bringing down the productions that each of them had been working on, and that's when the magic happened. "Everyone was trying different things," Check One recalls, "and so many different parts came together to make the sound more musical."

There's a mathematical formula to making the music work, however. "Just like a jazz musician will compose a song and bring his chart to the music session, it's the same with us," Mertens reveals. "We compose the beats and we bring a beat down to the session, but we listen to it, pick it up by ear, find the notes and the keys and react to it. We make up our parts that work against the beat to rock along with it."

Also classically trained, Mertens is a beast with the bass. When he straps up, it's with the intensity of an entire cavalry preparing for war. He holds his instrument with authority and brings the underlying element of rhythm that gives all within earshot the inevitable scrunch face. His beatmaking skills (Ableton is his weapon of choice) have earned him the nickname "Murder Mertens," because "the beats were a bit murderous," he says with a laugh.

Back at Appaloosa, each instrument colors the sound in the steadily filling tavern. Folks are making their way to the bar, where the trio's trusty bartender, who answers to "Double Dutch" — and who is also known to get down on the microphone with the guys on the late-night tip — is serving up the drinks tall and strong. Qknox is getting intimate with the keyboard, Check One is tap-tap-tapping on the drums, and Mertens is preparing to unleash a monster groove, going through the routine before the beat opens, silky and funky.

The players make smooth transitions from song to song. There's a sample from Lost Boyz that leads into the second song, inspiring cheers from the group's already tipsy fans. This joint

flows smoothly into the third track, which is a remix of a song from MC Bianca Mikahn. Her vocals come in without warning, drawing "Where did that come from?" glances from several people in the crowd, who clearly enjoy the change-up.

It's that fourth element that makes BigWheel Electrosoul seem like an interactive band. The truth is, the guys are happy being a trio — but there's always a steady parade of MCs, poets, singers and other vocalists who want to join the rat pack on stage on Tuesday nights.

"We don't have an open mike," Check One clarifies. "We like to call it a 'guided microphone.' We enjoy being a trio, yet there are plenty of MCs who come down and jam with us. Singers, poets, even drummers and bassists will be invited to play."

It gets a bit complicated, though, when artists become overzealous with the mike. "They just rap because they have the microphone, and they will rap until you take it away from them," says Qknox. "We let people on the microphone, but we're honest with them when they don't pull it off. Damieon, especially, talks to them afterward. We've recently been giving little talks beforehand, like, 'After you do your verse, give us a second. We might have a drum solo or something.'"

Some folks, of course, just can't help themselves, as is the case with the enthusiastic fan who wanted an encore after the first song. Without warning, he makes his way onto the stage, where he then rambles off a freestyle that makes Qknox shake his head with laughter. The bandmembers never skip a beat during his slurred rap, and when the song finishes, Check One gives the rhymer a "Thanks for playing" pat on the back and directs him from the stage. The party-goer yells, "You only live once!" before Jay-Z's "Girls, Girls, Girls, Pt. 2" blares through the speakers and the boys are at it again, doing what they do.

<http://www.westword.com/2012-03-15/music/bigwheel-electrosoul-appaloosa-grill/2/>

Bigwheel Electrosoul

The Guac Vol. 1

Sound Collage

By **Ru Johnson** Monday, Jan 10 2011

Bigwheel Electrosoul's *The Guac Vol 1*. features the intricate live instrumentation you expect from Bigwheel, boosted by the turntable skills of DJ Vajra, who chops things up and keeps them fresh and full. The ambience of the set, recorded live at Lola, is perfect for a progressive brunch crowd. Not only does DJ Check One completely throw down on the drums, but the collaboration of QKnox on keys and laptop and LikeMind on bass completely filters out any need for vocals at times. On "Bigwheel Goes to Tom's Diner," the band is at its height, while the rendition of "Stakes Is High" is concise and brilliant with its dips and musical turns. Bigwheel is known for putting on an energetic live show, and *The Guac* presents the band at its soulful and sophisticated best. It's also a perfect appetizer for a full album from Bigwheel.

<http://www.westword.com/2011-01-13/music/bigwheel-electrosoul/full/>

Best Live Hip-Hop Band - 2011

BigWheel Electrosoul

If live instrumentation were a living organism, you would find it alive and well at Appaloosa Grill on Tuesday nights. That's when the trio of DJ Check One, Charlie Parker Mertens and Qknox join as BigWheel Electrosoul and set the place ablaze with their progressive and confident brand of hip-hop. With Check One on drums, Qknox on keys and Mertens on bass, the threecome serves up classy and innovative music that makes you want to dance — or at least enjoy a drink at the bar. Big Wheel isn't just a bar-residency band, however; these musicians have a full-length album in the works, not to mention a "brunch" collaboration with DJ Vajra titled *The Guac Vol. 1*.

<http://www.westword.com/bestof/2011/award/best-live-hip-hop-band-1770203/>

Bigwheel Electrosoul: A Greater Groove

• **ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT** JANUARY 5, 2010 BY: BRIAN COLEMAN [Subscribe](#)

One complaint some have about electronic music in general is its occasional lapse into

tediousness, a quantized 4/4 beat drilled into your head like a factory automaton. Against this trend some shining lights have fought back, most notably producer J Dilla, whose intentionally slightly out-of-time rhythms can catch one off guard, but wonderfully so.

We in Denver are fortunate enough to have an exceptional example of this fight-back in our very own Bigwheel Electrosoul, who has performed all around Colorado and whose members (Dameion Hines aka DJCheckone - Drums/Beatmaker, Jerod Sarlo - Keys/Beatmaker & Charlie "Parker" Mertens - Bass/Beatmaker) have played and studied in such musically diverse spots as Europe, India and Japan.

Bigwheel brings this deep musical knowledge and experience to bear on their live performances, which consist of sampling familiar yet indistinct beats and sliding in and out of the regimented meter into jazz, hip-hop, soul rhythms and more, which allow them to riff over this tonal background and elevate the ordinary into anything but. Bigwheel is often joined by some of Colorado's top musicians, singers and MCs. This incomparable vibe as a unit has also seen them act as the house band for national acts such as Bahamadia, Camp Lo, Eric Roberson and Phat Kat.

Using this element of musical surprise to its advantage, Bigwheel excels in live performances, coaxing rhythms and grooves out of some primordial vacuum which, in so doing, informs its audience that they are indeed witnessing something truly unique to the moment, but ultimately timeless. As they explain, "Bigwheel stems from improvisation and becomes what it is. A song typically starts off with guidelines that come from the MPC or Ableton Live and, depending on the instrumentation, artists put their own unique stamp on the moment. The future of Bigwheel is going to be filled with celebrating the past, present and future of the art form and the love of the beat. Guided ambiguous live music."

Don't be the last in town to bear witness to this celebration yourself... get in the Bigwheel groove!

Bigwheel Electrosoul performs every Tuesday night at 10pm at the Appaloosa Grill (16th & Welton), and once a month at Lola (1575 Boulder Street, Denver). They also regularly gig at other venues around town.

Bigwheel is part of the Sound College umbrella of artists, musicians and fashion. For

more info: www.myspace.com/bigwheelcamp and www.soundcollege.net.

<http://www.examiner.com/article/bigwheel-electrosoul-a-greater-groove>