

Codename: Carter Makes High-Definition Retro-Futurist Spy Rock

TOM MURPHY | JUNE 8, 2016 | 7:19AM

Codename: Carter grew out of a recording project that guitarist and vocalist Steve Gray undertook in 2008. Though better known as a guitarist, Gray discovered sounds that inspired him on keyboard, and he shared demos with old friend and longtime musical collaborator drummer Michael Behrenhausen. The two filled out the demo recordings a bit before other life demands took over and they put the project on hiatus.

Gray and Behrenhausen were members of surf-rock band **Maraca 5-0** from the late '90s through the early 2000s. Rather than the sunny quality associated with the current wave of that sort of music, Maraca 5-0 had an often darkly powerful edge.

"Sometimes we described it as the 'angry surf band,'" says Gray. "[With Codename: Carter], we wanted to keep a lot of the energy that band had and not be confined to surf so much. It has a lot of the same guitar stylings, but lacks the confines of a specific genre."

Initially inspired by '60s and '70s spy-movie soundtracks, surf rock, Stereolab and Barry Adamson, Gray and Behrenhausen returned to the project in 2012 and realized an even grander musical vision with a five-piece band. The duo brought bassist Sean Boyd, keyboardist/bassist Marc Hobelman and keyboardist/saxophone player Wouter Reyniers on board, thus incorporating a wide spectrum of influences. Beyond the so-called spy rock, there was a bit of prog and rock and roll.

"The new instruments brought new ideas, and having brass in the band, we got into more heist/spy sounding stuff," says Gray. "Stuff like Roy Budd, John Barry, Henry Mancini and Goldfrapp's first album influenced it. Later on, we started to sound more like Lalo Schiffrin with those *Dirty Harry* horns, and it had a more energetic sound."

Codename: Carter captured some of that energy on its new self-titled full-length debut. A handful of years in the making between development and production, the record itself is split between the songs that Gray and Behrenhausen composed in the early days of the band and those written with the current outfit. Offered on twelve-inch vinyl, the album was the final recording done with the legendary Bob Ferbrache at Absinthe Studios before Ferbrache moved out of Denver in 2015. The new set of songs also marks the first time Gray has recorded vocals with any of his bands. But given the confidence and strength of the singing, you can't tell that Gray is a bit of a novice. Rather, his vocals are reminiscent of those of Peter Murphy and David Bowie.

"It's new, and it's taken me a while to build up the confidence to project, but I'm improving with each gig and feeling more confident about it these days," comments Gray.

For the album-release show at the hi-dive, Codename: Carter is bringing in projections of films befitting a band inspired by the music of old spy movies, as well as a music video made for the song "We'll Make a New You." Expect dancers to round out the visual side of the show alongside the bandmembers, who dress up to have a unified look.

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"It's sort of a 1960s government-agency worker [look]," says Gray. "John Wenzel [of the *Denver Post*] described it as NASA: short-sleeved white shirts, skinny black ties and black pants, and an access badge."

Although the look is very composed and the songs tight and polished, the key to why the band never sounds overly premeditated is its roots in an intuitively collective approach to the entire endeavor.

"We've tried doing things consciously on a project level before, and we forget about it a week later," says Gray. "It's better to be conscious about the little things, and the bigger stuff should happen organically. We let inspiration make the bigger decisions about where we're going to go. When you're fleshing things out, you have to be deliberate and conscious and plan how the song is going to start and stop, and is there going to be a bridge so that it's not just one minute long.... But our schtick and sound and course for the future in songwriting is planned [more] by the muse than it is by any particular bandmember."

Codename: Carter, with the Savage Blush and Best Creeps, Saturday, June 11, 9:30 p.m. at the hi-dive, 303-733-0230, \$10, 21+.



Tom Murphy is a writer, visual artist and musician from Aurora, Colorado. He was a prolific music writer for Westword and a documenter of the Denver music scene.

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