

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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When saxophonist, flutist, composer, and singer Karl Denson discusses *Brother's Keeper*, the new record from Karl Denson's Tiny Universe, you could be forgiven for thinking he's talking about essays instead of songs.

After he finished the first drafts of the songs, he sent them to Tiny Universe keyboardist David Veith, who did what Denson called "revisions." Switchfoot's Jon Foreman also helped out with vocals and some melodies. "I wanted to get some depth as far as not having it just be my ideas," Denson said last week in a phone interview.

Three months of "revisions" resulted in the record being extraordinarily exact, particularly for the funk/soul genre, yet *Brother's Keeper* never sounds insular or overworked; the grooves not only survive but often sing.

"You think of writing songs as just sitting around the campfire, and everybody has an idea, or you have a great story you tell with a guitar," said Denson, whose six-piece band will perform at RIBCO on Saturday, September 19. But certain types of music -- to be done well -- require time and sweat. "The idea of more pop records or even a great classical piece -- there's always revision going on," he said. "The best way to do a record is to do it at least once and possibly twice before you actually record. That was the process with this record."

What makes this album -- due out September 15 -- unusual for Denson is that he had the time to do it right. "In the rush of making music, there's not time to do revisions," he said. "That was kind of the idea with this record, to take the time to really finish it as best I could."

Denson, who co-founded the Greyboy Allstars and also leads the jazz outfit the Karl Denson

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Trio, wrote much of the record last year while on the road with Lenny Kravitz, with whom he's played on and off since 1989. ("They don't work nearly as hard as we do," he said, not really joking.)

By the time he went into the studio, Denson said, he had enough distance from the writing process to see the songs clearly. "You can get very stuck to your ideas when you first create them," he said. "I was able to listen to my demos long enough to fall out of love with them."

The work that went into *Brother's Keeper* is evident in its careful sculpting of sound. "Drums of War" is lyrically blunt, but the tune has an emotional urgency, and the arrangement is surprisingly nimble -- with a joy in the music that never undermines the message.

"Monica" has trip-hop details, and the bass gently carries the melody. The song -- which Denson said is about his high-school sweetheart -- invigorates the cliché of its sentiment and subject matter with earnest, only slightly wistful singing and a well-placed metaphor: "So we set a date and we booked a train / We bought a set of tickets in the summer rain / So excited but we didn't know / The train was in the station but it wouldn't go."

Opening track "Shake It Out" is similarly accessible but has no emotional baggage whatsoever, reveling with its warm, easy keyboards in what sounds like a perfect summer afternoon. It and the record's other bookend are more typical of Denson good-time aims. Closer "Just Got Paid" is aggressive, hip-hoppy party funk, a look at hand-to-mouth living ("What came first / The money or the bills? / Staring them down / It's a battle of wills") that's nearly celebratory.

"It's kind of a pop tune," Denson said of the album's final cut. "It's kind of in the mold of what my kids listen to. I was trying to do that and still stay close to where I am musically and where my fans are. That was kind of a balancing act."

*Karl Denson's Tiny Universe will perform on Saturday, September 19, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The outdoor show starts at 8 p.m., and tickets are \$20. The bill also includes the Uniphonics. A portion of gross merchandise sales will be donated to Photocharity ([Photocharity.com](http://Photocharity.com)), a fundraising organization benefiting homeless young people in San Diego.*

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For more information on Karl Denson's Tiny Universe, visit [KarlDenson.com](http://KarlDenson.com) or [MySpace.com /karldensonstinyuniverse](http://MySpace.com/karldensonstinyuniverse)

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