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AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
November 20, 2003

SMOOTH JAZZ HAS A NEW 'GROOVE'

Smooth jazz radio: It's not just for waiting rooms anymore.

New York-based DJ Rafe Gomez recently launched "The Groove Boutique," a two-hour syndicated program he's marketing as "America's First Jazz Mix Show."

The show, which syndicator United Stations Radio Networks is offering to smooth jazz stations, eschews the format's usual mellow content in favor of everything from uptempo cuts by smooth jazz artists (David Sanborn), to acid jazz (Corduroy), jazz-funk (Soulive) and "that soul-jazz Verve and Blue Note were putting out in the '70s" (Jimmy McGriff). Gomez presents it all in a club format, loosely sequencing songs according to similar keys and beats per minute, and letting tracks bleed into one another.

"The songs all rely on jazz chord changes, but the show's foundation has a very clubby sound," he says. "It's jazz you can dance to."

Gomez honed his funky jazz formula on "In the Mix," his show on Sirius Satellite Radio's Planet Jazz channel. New York's WQCD "CD 101.9" soon approached him about bringing his concept to terrestrial radio, and "The Groove Boutique" debuted in late September.

"There's this myth that the smooth jazz audience is conservative and unwilling to listen to up-tempo stuff," he adds. "But given the right presentation, they'll go for it."

KQJZ 92.1/106.3 owner Buddy McGregor is betting Gomez is right. The Austin smooth jazz outlet is one of the first stations in the nation to pick up "The Groove Boutique." Starting in early December, McGregor plans to air the show from 8 to 10 a.m. Sundays, admittedly an odd time to groove, but he plans to pit it against Majic 95.5's Sunday morning smooth jazz programming. (He says "Groove Boutique" may ultimately move to Saturday nights.)

Smooth jazz, with its highly polished layers of synthesizers and agreeable horns, has long been seen by purists as "real" jazz's soulless, commercial second cousin. However, the genre's older, generally affluent fan base has made the smooth jazz format, which emerged in the late '80s, a lucrative one.

"We're very happy with the audience," says McGregor. "It's a distinguished, moneyed audience."

He bristles at "waiting room" jabs, calling smooth jazz a "status symbol."

While Gomez calls "Groove Boutique" a "mix show for grown-ups," he sees its more youthful appeal -- its inclusion of hip-hop infused acid jazz, for example -- as an asset.

"When the format launched almost 20 years ago, the listeners were in their 30s," he says. "The idea is to

bring in the young listeners."

If it increases the ratings, McGregor is all for it. Some observers are confident that it will.

"The smooth jazz audience is getting more sophisticated all the time," says Carol Archer, smooth jazz editor for trade publication Radio and Records. "From what I understand, early audience reaction (to 'Groove Boutique') has been very strong."

"Smooth jazz fans definitely dig a funky groove." Gomez says. "Even if you go to a Kenny G concert, he's not going to be playing mellow music for two hours."

So does that mean that the G-man is welcome to chill in the Groove Boutique?

"Not with his sleepy stuff. But if Kenny comes out with a track that's banging, I'll definitely play it," Gomez says. "I saw him in concert in the early '90s and believe it or not, he kicked butt; the guy gets loose. Really!"

"OK, you'll just have to take my word for it..."

Visit www.thegrooveboutique.com for playlists, mix streams and more information.