



Shopping At The Groove Boutique

This eclectic mix show is so cool it attracts a younger demo

Sometimes necessity is the mother of invention, but other times the solution comes before you recognize the problem. The second scenario unfolded when DJ and mixer Rafe Gomez brought his mix-show concepts to the United Stations Radio Networks. *The Groove Boutique* and its accompanying short-form spinoff, *The Groove Boutique Blends*, are the latest offerings to the Smooth Jazz community from United Stations, the same network that distributes *Legends of Jazz* with Ramsey Lewis and Art Good's *JazzTrax*.

According to USRN Exec. VP/Programming Andy Denemark, who has been involved with smooth jazz since before it was a radio format, the first meeting between Gomez and the network came about under unusual circumstances. "Rafe had a sponsor in his back pocket, and that was an interesting way to begin," he says.

"With Ramsey's show and Art's show, we weren't looking to produce more programming for the Smooth Jazz format, but we thought *The Groove Boutique* had underwriting from the start, so we set up a meeting."

Unfortunately, the sponsor fell through, but discussions continued. "Rafe's concept seemed really fresh, and his personal energy and commitment to the music were infectious," Denemark says. "Then the R&R Convention in June really brought it home that we should do this show."

As many in the format family will recall, much of the discussion among Smooth Jazz programmers at the convention was about the format's aging demographics — as it always is, and rightly so — and what to do about it.

It was during the "Rate-a-Record, Rate-a-Wine" session that Denemark experienced an awakening: KIFM/San Diego Asst. PD/MD Kelly Cole spoke about her interest in a show called *The Big Sonic Chill* that aired on Jefferson-Pilot's Alternative station in her market. "It's very cool and kind of scary to me too," Cole explained. "We need something like that in Smooth Jazz."

That's when the light bulb went on for the network programmer about what Gomez's show could accomplish. Denemark closed the deal for *The Groove Boutique* not long after that.



Rafe Gomez

Street Cred

So what, exactly, is the show? That depends, as it's adaptable to a variety of uses. *Groove Boutique* programming comes to affiliates as a two-part package, which consists of a two-hour weekend show featuring an eclectic mix of music encompassing soul jazz, acid jazz, funky jazz and beyond. The same music also comes in a Monday-through-Friday mini-mix.

Gomez explains that the weekend show is longer and that its music breathes a bit more, while the daily features are intended to both cross-promote the weekend and give stations a "morning blend" or "drive home" feature that's different from regular programming.

Gomez creates the show's segments beat by beat. As an experienced club mixer and producer who got his start in radio researching underground tracks for their hit potential for the legendary Frankie Crocker at WBLS/New York, Gomez has plenty of street cred, which backs up his ears and his vision for the show. *The Groove Boutique* provides an outlet for a deep library of music that previously hasn't had much, or possibly any, airtime.

"There are so many rich and diverse niches in music and so many exciting genres within the broad definition of jazz that were relevant in clubs, lounges and home record collections but weren't getting radio play," Gomez says. "It seemed obvious that other radio formats were staking a claim to an active late-night audience and that Smooth Jazz was missing out."

Impressively, Emmis' WQCD (CD101.9)/New York was the first Smooth Jazz station on board, airing *The Groove Boutique* on Saturday nights and *The Blends* in early morning drive. "We program to the most exciting city in America, and we were looking for something exactly like this at the time that the program came along," says WQCD PD Charley Connolly. "Rafe has great knowledge and a unique skill. Response from listeners and advertisers has been great."

Invaluable Linkage

Gomez has livened up more than the airwaves at WQCD, where the phones regularly light up with listeners wanting the titles and artists of the songs they are hearing; he's also energized folks in the sales department there, and they are finding sponsors that want to be in *The Groove Boutique* environment late on Saturday night. Previously, that off-peak time slot was less appealing to sponsors.

Connolly has also added music that he discovered on the show, such as Chris Standring's "Miss Downtown Sugar Girl," to the station's playlist. "Rafe has a good feel for the music, and we are going to take advantage of his know-how in a variety of ways," Connolly says.

Another way the New York affiliate is taking advantage of the relationship is by having Gomez spin music at the station's year-end holiday event at New York's Beacon Theater (12/12).

The Groove Boutique has become a darling of the press as well, and CD-101.9 was the happy recipient of an unusually large listing last week in *Time Out New York*, a leading source of Big Apple entertainment listings. Now that's buzz.

On the record-company side, shows like *The Groove Boutique* are

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Rafe Gomez

always welcome, because they are outlets to expose music that was not getting commercial radio play before. Some labels even have product that goes along with the concept. Verve, for example, recently released the imaginative project *Verve Remixed Volume 2*.

Higher Octave, in particular, is watching the progress of the show. That label has just released a compilation, *Smooth Grooves 4*, which is being touted as the first true jazz mix release, where the tracks are blended, as opposed to standing alone. The disc was assembled by none other than Gomez. Clearly, the *Boutique* is a product and concept given to linkages of all sorts.

generalizing, but there are two types of syndicated music shows — shows that repackage the tracks that are already getting airplay and shows that provide a very special block that's different from the format but still sensible within the context of the station," he says.

"*The Groove Boutique* is closer to the latter of those two types, but that's what makes it exciting."

Listeners are picking up on the excitement as well. Whenever the show airs, e-mail begins to fly in the direction of Gomez and his website at www.thegrooveboutique.com. "Fans are stumbling on to the show, and they get hooked right away," he says. "They recognize that the music is close to what they are used to, but it's different enough that they can also say, 'Wow, this is cool!'"

Groove Jazz

And it's more than just the music that's a bit unfamiliar. Gomez, an experienced voice actor who has done commercial work, also does the vocal imaging on the show. Some programmers find his sound to be rougher around the edges than most regular Smooth Jazz jocks, but Gomez maintains that his sound is more "groove jazz" than Smooth Jazz, which adds to the nighttime energy of the show.

For *The Groove Boutique's* producers, Gomez's unique delivery has meant two things: It's added to the challenge of marketing something that's different, but it has also led them to "plain wrap" the shows. Additionally, the short-form *Groove Boutique Blends* are being provided to affiliates in a form where the local jock can do the back-announce and get credit for being the mixer.

"Our philosophy at United Stations is that it's always about the network being the behind-the-scenes entity when it comes to the programming," Denemark says. "We're a business-to-business company, and we're not looking for the on-air credit. We're really happy when something that we provide gives the affiliate an opportunity to attract attention."

The network is obviously happy: Gomez and *The Groove Boutique* have only been on the air a matter of weeks, and the show's affiliates have already gained a lot of attention. As they say, stay tuned.

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Andy Denemark

A New Concept

As with any new concept in radio, there are some people who will take a while to convince, especially because a good deal of the music in the show is unfamiliar. Gomez says that he is consciously mixing in a number of familiar titles and melodies and that he's tapping into local station research in order to gather a list of hits that work within *The Groove Boutique* concept and sound.

According to Denemark, the blend of familiar and unfamiliar is exactly what the show is about. "I'm