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## The Basement Tapes? Well, Not Quite

**With His Groove Boutique Radio Show, Rafe Gomez May Be About to Break Out**

By GEORGE JAMES

"Good evening. My name is Rafe Gomez, and you have officially entered The Groove Boutique, America's first and only smooth jazz mix show," says the voice on New York City's WQCD-FM – known as CD-101.9 – late on a Saturday night.

"For the next two hours, I'll bring you the world's best soul jazz, acid jazz, jazz funk and nu jazz, all blended, vibed and funkified to tasty perfection," Mr. Gomez says, promising a taste of the world's "jazziest funk and funkier jazz" every Saturday from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m.

But talk about funky. The Groove Boutique is perfected on an ordinary-looking personal computer in the cramped basement of Mr. Gomez's garden apartment in Montclair, NJ. He then burns a two-hour compact disc that is delivered to the radio station, which specializes in smooth jazz.

Mr. Gomez calls the basement his studio. But it is so small that a Roy Lichtenstein poster and a James Bond movie poster take up most of one wall, and shelf after shelf of compact discs fight for space. A playpen takes up much of the floor. "It's all being done in my basement," Mr. Gomez said one recent morning, as he sat shoeless and in jeans next to the computer, "with my son playing with Hot Wheels on the floor and my daughter throwing balls in the air."

It might be a basement mix, but The Groove Boutique, which began its run on CD-101.9 last September, is hot. Mr. Gomez creates an uninterrupted musical mood by mixing smooth jazz – often with a more upbeat tempo than usual – seamlessly blending the songs, one into another. The listener is suddenly whisked along a groove of unpredictable sounds, eventually realizing – when the silky-voiced Mr. Gomez gives their titles – that he has been listening not to one long song, but four or five.

The mix format is not new. Some pop and rap stations, and club D.J.'s, have been doing it for years. But those who follow the jazz industry believe Mr. Gomez is the first to do it with this music.

According to Arbitron statistics for the last quarter of 2003, The Groove Boutique attracted 6.8 percent of those aged 25 to 54 in the New York listening area, placing it fifth in its time slot. CD-101.9's previous programming in that slot drew 3.5 percent of listeners and ranked eighth.

Mr. Gomez, 42, has a shaved head and gray goatee, and believes he has finally arrived after years of trying to find a niche in music. He combines his knowledge as a club D.J., record producer and advertising copywriter to create his jazz-funk confection.

"Rafe to me is this supercool kind of musicologist," said John Mullen, the operations manager of CD-101.9 who hired him. "He's very passionate about music, he's very knowledgeable, and he brings a flavor to the station we wouldn't get from a normal disc jockey."

Mr. Gomez is not your average D.J. First, he has a degree in business administration from Bucknell University, reflecting the pragmatic side that has helped him market his creative side. As a teenager, he alternated between playing French horn in the Passaic High School Concert Band - he was born and raised in Passaic - and drums in a 12-piece jazz band made up of his buddies called The Funk Machine. As an intern at WBLS-FM in New York City, Mr. Gomez got his first glimpse of mixing from a D.J. named Ted Currier, who, he says, "was able to create a clublike vibe on the radio." It was also at WBLS that he learned the music business by routinely calling hundreds of record-store owners and club D.J.'s to find the latest hot sellers to play on the station.

On a recent Saturday night, Mr. Gomez's eclectic mix began with the upbeat jazz of Jeff Lorber, playing "Gigabyte." Then one song eased into another: the 90's acid jazz of Garaj Majal doing "Be Dope," followed by the 80's jazz funk of The JB Horns playing "I Like It Like That," the nu jazz coming out of Europe represented by Norway's Bobby Hughes Experience in "Theme From Ski-doo" and the 70's soul jazz of The Blackbyrds in "Happy Music."

Carol Archer, an editor for Radio & Records, a trade publication, wrote that not only is Mr. Gomez's format new for smooth jazz but that The Groove Boutique is also providing an outlet for music that rarely gets air time. "This is the first mix show that's been for smooth jazz, or any adult format, that I'm aware of," Ms. Archer said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles. "The way it's put together is very unique and very creative: songs that people know, but blended in such a way that it makes it sound new."

And, she said, the format appeals to the younger listeners that smooth jazz stations, with their aging listeners, crave.

A smooth jazz mix show was such an obvious idea that Mr. Gomez was surprised no one had done it before. He began thinking about it one night a few years ago as he put his son to bed. The boy likes to doze off to CD-101.9, and, Mr. Gomez sitting with him, thought, "There's a lot I know that would work on this station."

Although impressed with his idea, the station referred him to Sirius Satellite Radio, a subscriber-only service. For about a year, Mr. Gomez aired a six-hour jazz-mix program, "In The Mix." It soon drew a lot of attention through jazz Web sites and word of mouth, which prompted CD-101.9 to call him back and for the United Stations Radio Networks to syndicate the show nationally. The Groove Boutique is currently syndicated to five other markets, ranging from Oregon to Texas to Florida to update New York.

Mr. Mullen, CD-101.9's operations manager, said the response has been so overwhelming, ratings so good and e-mail so plentiful and positive, that the station is moving The Groove Boutique back an hour to a 10 p.m. to midnight slot and showcasing the program with 10- or 15-minute segments during drive time Monday through Friday.

"Sometimes, radio personalities become bigger than life," Mr. Mullen said. "That's what I see happening to Rafe. He's in the initial stage."

Mr. Gomez is ecstatic. Mainly because of the show, his site on the World Wide Web, [www.thegrooveboutique.com](http://www.thegrooveboutique.com), has been getting 40,000 hits a month, he says, an advertising agency has hired him as a music consultant and a booking agent wants him to take The Groove Boutique live.

Hey, he might even get out of the basement.