



Rafe Gomez: Groove Boutique

By Brian Soergel



A few years ago, Rafe Gomez and his wife found themselves in a perplexing situation: Their young son would only go to sleep if one of his parents snuggled next to him. So Gomez, who had a radio show in college and spun tunes as a club DJ, turned on the soothing smooth jazz sounds of CD101.9 in New York.

"The music was relaxing, beautiful and lush," says Gomez. "I got to know the songs really well and it got me to thinking. There is so much cool music the station could play that would complement their play list if they'd just wiggle their elbows a bit and give themselves room for something new."

A couple of years later, that "something new"—that nation's first smooth jazz mix show featuring chill music, nu-jazz and an uptempo blend of smooth jazz and acid-jazz—is gradually making inroads in

the smooth jazz format. And CD101.9, the first and now one of several stations nationwide that broadcasts Gomez's syndicated The Groove Boutique show, recently morphed into New York Chill and devotes more than 30 percent of its playlist to chill music.

So what is chill music? Regular smooth jazz listeners may have heard songs by various artists in the ever-expanding genre, such as Praful, Adani & Wolf and Zero 7. Chill music is actually an umbrella term describing a type of music that, as legend has it, originated on the island of Ibiza near Spain. It's practiced mostly by European DJs and musicians who blend a soothing mix of music culled from smooth jazz, world music, jazz, pop and vocals.

As with any genre, of course, sticking the "chill" label on an artist can be limiting. In fact, the kind of music trumpeter Chris Botti programs on his Chill With Chris Botti radio show is vastly different than the music Gomez plays. Botti spins purer chill music, with its European artists and downtempo style. What The Groove Boutique does is much more encompassing: On Gomez's show, you'll hear Rick Braun and Kim Waters mixed in with older-era legends such as Grant Green and the Headhunters and newer, hip jazz groups such as Twinset, which hails from New Zealand.

Let's rewind a bit, though, back to the days when Gomez's son was having trouble sleeping. After successfully putting the lad to sleep with soothing smooth jazz, Gomez concocted a wild idea and just went for it. "I had a wide range of exposure to contemporary jazz music, from the Breckers and Tower of Power and David Sanborn to the acid-jazz groups from the UK in the early 1990s," Gomez says. He contacted CD101.9 program director Charlie Connelly with an idea of creating a "jazz mix" program with smooth jazz artists and with artists mentioned above. He handed Connelly a demo featuring songs and minimal voiceovers.

Recalls Gomez: "Charlie said, 'Rafe, I took a listen, I love it, great songs, I love your voice. But it'll never work.' He said it just didn't suit the audience and suggested I take it over to satellite radio."

That sounded good to him. Since he's a New Jersey native who now lives in the town of Montclair, Gomez took the show to New York City-based Sirius satellite radio, which competes with XM Radio to provide listeners commercial-free music for a monthly subscription fee. Gomez's precursor to

The Groove Boutique—a six-hour show called In the Mix—was born and played on Sirius' Planet Jazz channel.

Six short months later, the show's popularity caught the attention of CD101.9's Connelly, who invited Gomez back to the station to re-audition the show to himself and then-operations manager John Mullen. "They said they were having a problem with their format," Gomez recalls. "Their listeners were getting older and the station couldn't attract new ones. Listeners who tuned in during the 1980s when the music was hip, new and fresh stayed with the format, but those in their late 20s and early 30s felt no connection to the music. They said The Groove Boutique was exactly what they needed. If I could work marquee smooth jazz artists into the show, they'd go for it."

Today, The Groove Boutique can be heard on CD101.9 and smooth jazz stations in Albany, N.Y.; Flint, Mich.; Bend, Ore.; Palm Springs, Calif.; and Gainesville and Fort Walton, Fla., among others. The show is now tied for being the No. 1 ranked Saturday night mix program in New York City, competing against rap, dance, pop and other genres. The show isn't streamed on the Internet, but you can hear songs on playlists that Gomez specially programs for his website at www.thegrooveboutique.com.

Gomez puts the show together with the help of his PC from his modest basement, where, as you might imagine, he has loads of albums, CDs and digital downloads. He burns the show onto a CD and ships it to the stations. There are no gaps between songs, and Gomez provides voiceover at the beginning and end of the show.

Music has always been Gomez's passion. Growing up in Passaic, N.J., Gomez played the French horn in his high school band and drums in a 12-piece cover band called The Funk Machine. While earning a bachelor's degree in business administration at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Penn. (he later did a stint as an ad copywriter), Gomez scored a gig at the university's radio station after turning on to the UK's jazz and funk scene. Then he'd spin tunes as a DJ in the Hamptons in New York while on break from his studies. The focus of his jazzy mixes sharpened through immediate listener feedback.

In the early 1980s, he interned at radio station WBLS in New York, where he says he learned how to mix music from legendary East Coast DJ Frankie Crocker. "I learned what worked in clubs and what worked on radio," Gomez says. "Frankie had me calling around New York City to see what was selling, going to clubs to see what the crowd was going crazy for. I saw how the connection between clubs and radio works."

Gomez now says The Groove Boutique proves that the smooth jazz audience is ready to sample different grooves without giving up their regular fare of Boney, Kenny and Mindi. "Smooth jazz provides a background for what's going on in a person's life and serves listeners well," he says. "When you start to get to 9 o'clock on a Saturday night, however, a listener's needs change, and smooth jazz's lush sounds don't necessarily address them. So listeners will turn off the radio, put on their own CDs or turn on cable radio because they need something livelier. The Groove Boutique offers the energy that listeners want and keeps them tuned in to smooth jazz stations for two hours longer than they otherwise would have been."

Gomez realizes, however, that not all smooth jazz markets are the same. For all smooth jazz stations, the music he plays can be added to core artists without chasing listeners away, he says. It's melodic and listener-friendly. There's no improvisational jazz. "But when you start getting out of New York and San Francisco," he says, "toward the middle of the country, program directors have to be aware of which artists and which songs are appropriate for their listeners. My listeners are busy with families and jobs. They don't have time to seek out new, cool, melodic, music and their ears are way beyond pop and rap—it just doesn't appeal to them anymore. The Groove Boutique is invigorating and melodic and makes them feel connected to something hip, fresh and exciting."

Artists played on Gomez's show can reap the benefits of exposure. The New Zealand jazz band Twinset saw a spike in sales after The Groove Boutique played a song of theirs called "Sunny." And Pete Belasco, a vocalist and saxophonist, has seen sales of his *Deeper* increase after being featured on the show. "Rafe Gomez and his Groove Boutique have been a wonderful asset to Compendia Records, especially in regards to Pete Belasco," says Beth Lewis, director of national promotions for Compendia Records. "From day one Rafe has been singing Pete's praises and has helped others out there to take notice as well. It's great to have an outlet to break new music that is perhaps a bit edgier or more experimental than would fit the average smooth jazz mold."

"It's been a pleasant surprise," adds Belasco. "Rafe thinks outside the box and plays songs that you don't normally hear on smooth jazz radio. But the songs fit."

The success of *The Groove Boutique*— it's been written about glowingly in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and other high-profile publications—has led to other opportunities for the 42-year-old Gomez. In 2003, the Higher Octave record label released *Smooth Grooves 4*, billed as the "world's first continuous mix smooth jazz compilation album." Gomez mixed it. And last year, Tommy Boy Records offered *The Groove Boutique: Volume One*, which featured 15 songs Gomez mixed and compiled featuring such artists as Chris Botti, Ramsey Lewis, Praful, Jimjam and Alfonzo Blackwell. It also included a song called "Icy," which Gomez co-wrote and co-produced. The song has vocals from an artist called Machan and trumpet by Glenn Kaye. Gomez describes the song like this: "If Herb Alpert and Bob James got together in Brazil and Praful was mixing the drinks, what would it sound like?"

"Icy" is being played now on smooth jazz radio stations, and Gomez isn't afraid to admit that he was a bit calculating while composing the tune. Researching what made a song successful on smooth jazz radio, he spent six months charting the tempo and beats from every song that made it onto *Radio & Records*' smooth jazz chart. The vast majority of songs had between 90 and 106 beats per minute, he found. "For 'Icy,' I went to the upper end of things, at 106 beats per minute. I also found the most popular key, which is 'E.' I wanted to follow the rules for smooth jazz radio but take a different approach production-wise. Some people may be put off by smooth jazz because some of it sounds like it's cut and pasted. But it's not too hard to change it within the format."

Gomez's own music will get more attention this month with the release of a Smokey Robinson anthology. His chill jazz remix of Robinson's classic "The Quiet Storm" is added as a bonus track. In addition, Gomez created a longer version of the song for a CD called *Motown Remixed*, to be released in March.

Meanwhile, Gomez hangs on to his love of club DJing. He spent last summer spinning tunes at the hip World Bar located inside Manhattan's Trump Tower. He's even looking to expand his base outside New York by booking gigs based on his radio show. "It's easy to replicate what I do live," he says. "And there's definitely a huge audience for this type of smooth jazz mix."

Gomez would also gladly consider creating a full CD of all-original music if a label is interested. "It wouldn't all be between 90 and 106 beats per minute," he says. "I'd go a little crazy, maybe take it up to 107."

For more information on Rafe Gomez and his Groove Boutique, including song samples, visit his website at www.thegrooveboutique.com.