

Smooth jazz finds its "groove"

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Mix shows are as common on the radio these days as traffic reports and car ads, but there's at least one in New York that still catches some folks by surprise: Rafe Gomez's "Groove Boutique" on Saturdays, 11 p.m.-1 a.m., on WQCD (101.9 FM).

As a "smooth jazz" station, CD-101.9 is better known for a relaxing ambiance than for a mix that would get you up and moving. So Gomez says that one of his missions is to show how "smooth jazz" goes far beyond its traditional Kenny G image, tying into a wide range of jazz, soul, funk, R&B and even hip hop.

That's a point WQCD strives to make on some level all the time – that it's not just wallpaper - and it's been successful enough to be the eight-most-popular station in town among its target audience of 25- to 54-year-olds.

Gomez goes a step further.

"I go back to '70s soul jazz," he says. "Then mix soundtrack jazz, instrumental funk, '80s jazz-funk and '90s acid jazz with today's electrojazz, house jazz and up-tempo smooth jazz."

He does three 16-minute sets an hour, and recent mixes have included the likes of Earth Wind and Fire's "Africano," Chuck Brown's "Mr. Magic," Voodoo Village's "Bounce Wit It" and Funk Inc.'s "Urban Renewal."

"You'll hear tracks you won't hear on the station in the day," says Gomez. "But it fits with CD-101. If you see Kenny G live, he doesn't do three hours of elevator music. At some point he'll get funky. That's what we do. It's just an extension."

"Rafe brings another element to the station," says John Mullen, operations manager. "We've been very pleased with the response." Best of all from WQCD's perspective, "Groove Boutique" brings in the hardest catch of all: younger listeners.

"I hear from a lot of young people who might not have listened before," says Gomez, who grew up in Passaic, N.J., and played drums in soul and funk bands.

He got his first radio gig with the late Frankie Crocker on WBLS. He became fascinated with the early 'BLS mix shows by Ted Currier and Jonathon Fearing, and eventually became a club deejay. He ran a record label, then returned to deejaying. In 2002, he started a jazz mix show on Sirius satellite radio.

That's what he took to WQCD, where Mullen and program director Charlie Connolly liked what they heard.

"John and Charlie made it happen," says Gomez. "Before 'Groove Boutique,' there wasn't a show like this anywhere on commercial jazz radio in America."