

The rough with the smooth

Forget Kenny G and his sax: Neil Warden is on a mission to add an edge to chill-out jazz and get the world listening, finds Rob Adams.

Listeners tuning in to Groove Boutique on the New York radio station WQCD/CD101.9 on a Saturday night might be forgiven for assuming that one of the show's most popular bands, Blue Soul Groove, are native New Yorkers with major record-company backing. The truth couldn't be more different. Blue Soul Groove is largely the work of one Scot, guitarist Neil Warden, with the help of a few guest musicians he's invited round to his home studio in Edinburgh. Warden, best known for his work over many years with Scottish blues singer Tam White, had simply been laying down tracks with no real purpose in mind. Then, however, the power of the internet intervened and catapulted him on to a radio playlist alongside personal heroes including George Benson, David Sanborn and Hubert Laws.

"It started with a minor success I'd had on the music download website mp3.com, with a track I'd recorded three years ago with John Burgess playing sax," says Warden. "That produced something like 30,000 downloads in two months, and the track ended up on their jazz playlist. Norah Jones was at number one – and at number 14, there was me. So I thought I must be doing something right. Then mp3.com folded and I didn't really do any more about it until I eventually got a MySpace site towards the end of the summer."

Warden was slightly wary of MySpace – an internet community that had sprung up as if from nowhere to become a shop

window on the web for musicians and bands around the world – and assumed his songs would get lost amid the constant traffic it was attracting. But he posted a few rough mixes of tracks he'd been working on – and within a week he was contacted by one Rafe Gomez in New York.

"He sent an e-mail in DJ-speak, saying 'Love whatchya doin', hit me with a CD,' and I thought, 'Who is this guy?' I asked around a few musicians I know in the States and everyone vouched for him, and it turned out that his show, Groove Boutique, has this massive listenership. And not only is it on the biggest radio station in New York from eight till midnight on a Saturday – it's syndicated coast to coast through another 20 stations. When I checked his playlist, it had almost the same on it as my iPod. So I got back in touch and we've been e-mailing each other regularly since then."

The biggest problem was that Warden didn't have a CD with which to "hit" his new admirer. So there followed a week of all-night sessions as he and saxophonist Burgess finished an EP's worth of tunes, with Ronnie Rae Jnr on keyboards and Gavin Dickie adding bass. "There didn't seem much point in sending tracks for someone in New York to play if they weren't available for people to buy," says Warden. "So, although it was a bit of a rush job, I tailored the music to suit the style of

music he [Gomez] plays, and he playlisted it. On his next show, he started off with a George Benson track and continued with one of mine – and he's still playing my stuff."

The style of jazz Gomez plays – smooth jazz, or chill-out – does tend to get a bad press. This, says Warden, has much to do with the bland saxophone noodling of artists such as Kenny G. "If you listen to someone like Grover Washington Jnr, he was a serious, serious player. He could really play jazz, although he was much better known for his smooth style. I wanted to find a way of appealing to that smooth audience, but to play with a bit of grit, a bit of blues feeling. That's why I called the project Blue Soul Groove – to try to convey the idea that this wasn't just background music, that there was some passion in it."

As a teenager living at home in Dunfermline, Warden would travel into Edinburgh to see bands such as Focus and King Crimson. He then got into jazz-rock – and, during the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as working with Tam White, he played in fusion bands. "I used to go to the States a lot on holiday and I remember trying to punt a demo tape of my stuff in Palm Springs, and there was no chance," he says. "They would just have laughed at the idea of a bloke from Scotland trying to sell them his version of their sun-and-surf music, as they call it. They'd be like, 'Who are you kiddin'? We've got all we need of that



right here.' Actually, looking back, maybe that coals-to-Newcastle thing was the angle I should have taken. But just researching the actual music and what they played on the radio was very interesting. They don't necessarily want something that's in-your-face because their lives are busy. They want to tune in and relax."

Still, radio stations across Europe have expressed an interest, and the Japanese are huge fans of Warden's style of jazz. And if he comes up with something that's too smooth for his own tastes, he can pass it on through an agent to shopping malls. "If you stand in Macy's department store in New York long enough, you'll hear one of my tracks," he says.

"I suppose what I'd really like to do is take the music out live – but there's not

the demand here, which is a shame because people like Morrissey Mullen were making really accessible, funky jazz into the 1980s, getting big audiences. "I'll just keep working and exploring different avenues. But seeing Blue Soul Groove playlisted alongside George Benson and all these guys is quite a buzz for now."

ROB ADAMS - The Herald December 14 2006

The Herald
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