"Smooth jazz" must be a legitimate genre of jazz after all. Why? Because so many people are declaring it dead.

by David R. Adler

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DOMINICK GUILLEMOT

▲ **Good Mourning?:** Kenny G

IN STRAIGHT-AHEAD JAZZ AND MORE EXPERIMENTAL realms, it's a given that times are tough: Album sales are negligible, musicians are underpaid and underexposed, and careers are increasingly punishing, do-it-yourself affairs. It's sometimes assumed that "smooth jazz," the lighter and glossier pop-jazz that came into heavy rotation in the '80s and '90s, must be where the money is. Surely this palatable groove-based music, often scorned by the jazz community as not jazz at all, is an easier route to commercial success, with broader support from the music industry and the masses.

Or is it? Reports indicate that smooth jazz, or "contemporary jazz" as it's known on the *Billboard* charts, is in fact seeing a dramatic downturn. And the genre's crisis points to larger historical questions about jazz, nomenclature and mass appeal. "Every month I hear we lost a radio station somewhere," says veteran keyboardist and producer Philippe Saisse. New York's CD101.9 switched to classic rock in early 2008 and then to all-news. KIFM 98.1 in San Diego—arguably smooth jazz's world headquarters—went adult contemporary in early 2011. Stations in Chicago, Sacramento, Philadelphia and many other markets have dropped smooth jazz and switched formats as well. "It's a lot smaller than it used to be," says Allen Kepler, president of Broadcast Architecture, the consulting firm that launched the Smooth Jazz Network in 2007. "The big change for us is that it's no longer such a popular format among the big broadcasters like Clear Channel and CBS and those large PPM markets." (More about the ratings measuring device PPM, or Portable People Meter, to follow.)

The ripple effect is profound, given that entire careers in smooth jazz were built and maintained via terrestrial radio. "It's becoming harder and harder to put together tours and concerts in cities that don't have radio stations," Saisse adds. "The problem for a lot of us," says famed saxophonist Dave Koz, "is that we know the way it was. We have one foot on one piece of land that was in the past … and we're using our other foot to find some semblance of solid ground. For people just coming up, new artists, it's a different story."

Artists like Jeff Lorber, seen here in May 1982, crafted an accessible style of fusion that can now be heard as a forerunner of smooth jazz

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Former Yellowjackets bassist Jimmy Haslip, an in-demand sideman and producer, also speaks of declining album sales. "Now I see appalling figures," he says. "I see a No. 3 record on the [Contemporary Jazz] chart and I find out that they have only 3,000 sales." Even top-name artists? "Yeah, it could easily be," Haslip adds, recalling a time when Yellowjackets "would easily sell 100,000." (The band's 1987 top seller, *Four Corners*, moved 350,000 units.) "Those numbers just don't exist anymore."

Keyboardist Jeff Lorber, who co-produced his latest release with Haslip, has some fun with the suggestion that people involved in smooth jazz might be heading for the exits: "No, they've already gone through the exits, they've taken the freeway home and they've gone to bed."

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FEW WOULD ARGUE THAT SMOOTH JAZZ IS UNIQUELY bad off. Record label dominance is over, digital music and media are ascendant, the business is being entirely remade, and opinion on the brave new online world is sharply divided. "On my desk right here I've got a check for zero dollars and 78 cents from YouTube licensing offers," Saisse deadpans. "I've got some Spotify checks here for zero dollars nine cents. So it's not quite making up for the royalties that we used to get from radio [*laughs*]. But I'm working on it. I'm collecting my zero-point-78-cent checks and we'll see what happens."

When people think of smooth jazz they often think of Kenny G. But G, who got his start in Lorber's band, is an anomaly. His total album sales, reportedly topping 75 million, give an illusory picture of the kind of money that was ever available in the genre. According to John Ernesto, manager of the Berks Jazz Fest in Reading, Penn., "The way things are today, there could never be another Kenny G, because he relied on radio and record sales."

The more typical smooth-jazz artist was far from a household name, and probably facing some familiar uphill battles. Guitarist Gil Parris, who debuted on RCA as a smooth jazzer in 1998 (sales: 23,000), reflects on the genre's troubles: "It's not only the demise of smooth jazz, I think it's the demise of the middle class, the middle ground of music, period. Either you're in that top five with John Mayer and Rihanna and Taylor Swift, or you're an icon in your 60s or older like George Benson or Herbie Hancock—they're kind of unaffected. But the middle-ground people … now you start to see artists package themselves together, so instead of Kim Waters being able to sell out a venue, he'll go as the Sax Pack, or Boney James will go with Richard Elliot and Norman Brown and Jeff Golub and they'll use one rhythm section, because the whole middle ground is sort of disappearing. Smooth jazz is definitely the first to go because it's part of that middle ground."

Even if smooth jazz as a radio format is in decline, it doesn't mean that pleasant, poppy quasi-jazz will cease being made. And yet artists are beginning to reinvent themselves and weigh other options. Trumpeter Rick Braun is crooning standards (on 2011's *Sings With Strings*, co-produced by Saisse). Parris is wearing many hats and gravitating toward rock and blues (he recently backed Joe Cocker). Others like Boney James and Brian Culbertson are "reaching out to the R&B audience," according to Ernesto, and guest vocals are becoming more and more common.

Lorber has revived his original band name, the Jeff Lorber Fusion, and is making music with a bit of a rougher edge. Whether all this music continues to be called smooth jazz—a name embraced by virtually no one in smooth-jazz circles—is anyone's guess.

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IT'S OFTEN SAID THAT JAZZ LOST its commercial viability after bebop, but that isn't quite true. Hard bop's turn toward blues and gospel had a clearly populist intent. Pianist Horace Silver created a funky strain of jazz that deeply influenced Lorber, as the song "Horace" on his latest effort, *Galaxy*, makes clear. Jimmy Smith's organ jazz, Stanley Turrentine's husky soul-jazz tenor, Lee Morgan's "The Sidewinder": These were jukebox-ready sounds with an authentic connection to soul and R&B, and they kept jazz strong in black communities at the very time the avant-garde was rising up. "You don't have to be a jazz snob at all to enjoy what Horace is doing, or the early Ramsey Lewis stuff, or Eddie Harris," Lorber says. "You see plenty of examples of jazz that crossed over back in the day, great instrumental tunes. It was a pretty regular feature of the Top 10."

"The first artist I embraced who represented that intersection between heady jazz and head-bobbing music was Cannonball Adderley," says Philadelphia bassist Gerald Veasley, whose work as a leader since 1992 is often associated with smooth jazz. Haslip mentions Adderley as well, in reference to Lorber's *Galaxy* sessions: "Groups like the Bar-Kays, Junior Walker, even early Cannonball records like 'Mercy Mercy Mercy,' 'Jive Samba,' 'Country Preacher'—that's what I had in my head when I walked in the studio with Jeff."

It can be argued that Adderley, with Joe Zawinul on Fender Rhodes, was playing fusion before Miles Davis. But Davis is rightly considered the main instigator of electric jazz, the musical father of heavily amplified fusion bands such as the Mahavishnu Orchestra, Weather Report and Return to Forever. By the mid to late '70s

GOOD HUMOR MAN

Kenny G on his audience, the demise of smooth, and his burgeoning comedy career

Has Kenny G found a way to maintain his mega-selling streak despite music industry upheavals? "No, I have not found a way," says the famous—perhaps infamous—saxophonist, 56. "No one has. But I love what I do, so I'm going to keep doing it. The fact that I don't get paid what I used to, or have the success that I used to, it doesn't deter me." In late June, Concord released *Namaste*, a collaboration between G and Indian classical musician Rahul Sharma.

The downturn in smooth jazz, G maintains, has to do with the airwaves becoming overloaded with very bland music, made in some cases by second- or third-tier emulators of Kenny G—"people who didn't deserve to be on the radio," he charges. It's ironic given that G himself has been denounced, most famously by Pat Metheny, for personifying blandness or worse. But zillions of listeners for three decades have had a different view.

Asked to pinpoint his audience, G begins in Asia. "In Korea, families come: grandmothers and 6-year-olds and everyone in between. It's the same in China and maybe a little more adult in Japan. I've been to Asia 60 or 70 times in my life. In the States, the audience is older. In the major cities like L.A., Detroit, D.C. or New York, a lot of African-Americans come. I think that's because my music used to be played on the quiet-storm format in the wee hours of the morning. They played Grover Washington, George Howard, Ronnie Laws and they played me, and I became part of that sound."

Jeff Lorber, one of G's first employers, is blunt about whether he had any inkling of the man's future stardom. "Absolutely none," he admits. "But a lot of other players just weren't all that interested in working hard and doing what had to be done to make it in the music business. When I met Kenny it was very different. He immediately understood that things could go somewhere. He had a fantastic attitude about wanting to jump in and get with the program."

G has a thick skin, a funny streak and a way of undermining his detractors by joining them. In a 2011 Super Bowl ad for Audi, he's cast as a prison official who uses his horn to put rioting inmates to sleep. "At first they just wanted to use my song for something they'd already filmed, but I said, 'Look, why don't you just have me in the commercial as well?' So I was having laughs with the director and he put the scenario out there. I said, 'Sure.' It was just a bunch of ad-libbing—there were a million things that got said that didn't make it."

In another video called "Kenny G Loves the Internet," G lampoons viral online trends and can be seen planking, owling, watching the Honey Badger and so forth. "That was a couple of young directors who approached me to do a story about me. In the process of doing that, they said, 'Hey, do you want to make a funny video today? It would be really funny if you Tebowed.' I said, 'Really, would that be funny?' 'Yeah.' So we filmed it and came up with that thing."

About being satirized on *Saturday Night Live* and *South Park*, G is far from bothered. "That's where I was blowing the note that makes everybody crap their pants, right?" he says of the *South Park* bit. "I loved it. I thought it was hilarious." The recurring *SNL* skit 'What Up With That?' features Fred Armisen in the role of Giuseppe, a saxophonist with distinctly curly, G-like hair. "I said to them, 'Just have me in the thing! I don't even have to say anything, just have me be the guy, because he's playing me anyway. I haven't gotten them to OK that yet, but I'm trying really hard."

DAVID R. ADLER

came what Lorber calls fusion's second wave, typified by acts like the Crusaders and, well, the Jeff Lorber Fusion. "It was a little bit closer to instrumental R&B," Lorber notes, "with more melody and forms closer to pop songs."

A key figure in this second wave was the late Grover Washington Jr., who could play funk-jazz with strings on the classic *Mister Magic* but also hold his own next to Kenny Burrell, Ron Carter and Jack DeJohnette on *Togethering*. In a 2011 Before & After discussion with Larry Appelbaum, tenor legend Jimmy Heath knocked players with flashy technique and instead hailed Washington, who "had a singing saxophone sound that people could understand."

Gerald Veasley understood, and eventually he'd go on to join Washington's group: "Working with him was the fulfillment of a dream, because I heard his *Live at the Bijou* and used to just stare at the album cover. What a cool band, what a cool concept. It wasn't music that you had to analyze, per se. But from my point of view, you did not hear any compromise. You heard something that was fully fresh and felt like it was nimble, that it could go in different directions, yet was rooted in groove. That's what also drew me to folks like Roy Ayers, George Benson, people like that who predated the whole smooth-jazz idea."

Arriving in Boston from France in 1975, Philippe Saisse was blown away by what he heard from Pat Metheny, the Brecker Brothers and others, and he'd soon cut his teeth in bands led by Narada Michael Walden and Al Di Meola. "At the same time," Saisse remembers, "Hubert Laws and others were making records on the CTI label, really commercial records. … They were doing 'contemporary' jazz but it had substance; it was just dialed down. And it worked. Bob James, Joe Sample, Don Sebesky as an arranger—it was intriguing because I knew they were really deep musicians but they were able to cross over. George Duke had some massive hits. They had the support of radio, so you could have those hits if you were smart and if you knew how to dial down the genius level."

Creed Taylor, founding visionary of CTI, had already experimented with "dialing it down" during his tenure at Verve and A&M in the '60s, when he created what could plausibly be called the first smooth-jazz star: Wes Montgomery. A hard-bop guitarist of breathtaking originality, Montgomery took a dramatic late-career commercial turn and began recording pop hits like "Windy" and "California Dreaming." His slickly produced, frequently lamented large-ensemble records contained some real pearls, however. And they set the stage for the transformation of another guitar monster and Wes disciple, George Benson, into a proto-smooth jazzer (and R&B singer) as well. The title track from Benson's 1976 Atlantic release, *Breezin'*, is a definitive example of an early "contemporary" radio smash.

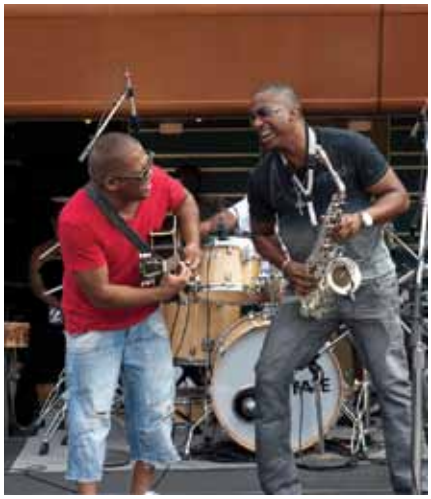
The genre began to take off. As guitarist Larry Carlton and other supremely gifted session players embarked on solo careers, they established a level of musicianship and individuality that's proven hard to match. Part of it, in Saisse's view, had to do with the new pop-savvy jazz growing steadily more commercial. "Everybody was learning the basics and then dialing it down," he says. "But a lot of the new generation, they only learned the dialed-down basics. That was their basics. And then it was dialed down from there."

"Supply and demand has gotten out of control," Gil Parris adds. "Now everybody thinks they're a recording artist. There's an overabundance and a lot of it is really subpar. You can tell: How many people are playing as well as George Benson or David Sanborn? It has a very canned, personality-less sound. How many times can we take a hip-hop groove and put a few flat-five blues licks over it? It's pretty lame when you hear it next to 'Mountain Dance' by Dave Grusin, that beautiful writing, or the *Taxi* theme by Bob James, or anything on *Breezin'*. Or when Eric Gale takes the [guitar] solo on 'Mister Magic.' It's so personal. Nothing is coming out of that quality. But in defense of the new artists—I sound like an old curmudgeon—there's just no budget for that."

Corporate radio, smooth jazz's lifeline, also did the music no favors by imposing narrow playlists and less-than-inspired programming. According to Veasley, who hosted a show on Philadelphia's WJJZ for three years, "The radio format became more and more restrictive. I don't know that it ever necessarily represented people's tastes. … It was more like a funnel that was hard for artists to get through without altering their music, or without a real heavy push from major labels. … It was also complicated by radio consultants who drove a lot of the decision making: questions about how long the solo should be, what instrument it should be, what ratio of saxophonists to guitarists—all this crazy over-analysis of the music before the audience got a chance to hear it."

Veasley continues, "I think some smooth jazz was made for the moment and sort of through painting by numbers. That's not to denigrate my peers who have made it. Part of it has to do with the recording process that came along right at the same time. You had producers who could basically sit in a room with some loops and create performances. Unless you're very creative, the music you

Scenes from the Smooth Jazz Cruise, an enduring bastion for smooth and contemporary jazz



"[TO] SAY, 'WOW, WE HAVE THIS AUDIENCE THAT IS 50-50 WHITE AND BLACK, MALE AND FEMALE, WITH A WIDE AGE DEMOGRAPHIC'—THAT DOESN'T APPEAL TO PEOPLE WHO PAY FOR RADIO."
– GERALD VEASLEY

RHONDA LANE

make is going to sound more inside the box. Couple that with the constraints of radio and it was kind of a recipe for disaster. Now, contrast all of that with going to see smooth-jazz artists live: There you hear musicians who are really expressive and dynamic and trying things, not confined to the eight-bar solo. Certainly they're not stretching like Ornette Coleman or Joe Lovano, but they're still going beyond what was represented on radio."

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"SMOOTH JAZZ" TOOK HOLD IN THE MID TO LATE '80S as a format name for WNUA 95.5 in Chicago, KTWV 94.7 ("The Wave") in Los Angeles and CD101.9 in New York. Even Michael Lazaroff, director of the Smooth Jazz Cruise, professes to hate the term, because, as he says, "It conjures up an image and a sound that is not exciting, and nothing could be further from the truth." Lorber points out that "'smooth jazz' was code—'Hey, it's jazz but it's not Cecil Taylor!' That's basically what it was saying. As a radio format it was sort of a godsend, because it caught on around the country and gave instrumental musicians a platform to be exposed, which was amazing." But Saisse provides a caveat: "The biggest stars in smooth jazz are only stars in the U.S. Even Kenny G doesn't really have a career in Europe."

So who are the core American fans? In radio parlance they're "P1" listeners, the ones who truly care about what they hear. Lorber describes them as "orphans from R&B radio that used to play stuff like L.T.D., Kool & the Gang and Earth, Wind & Fire. Now the stations are playing more hardcore rap stuff, so those adult listeners looked for a place to go and they found it at smooth-jazz radio. Especially because the smooth-jazz formats included Sade, Anita Baker, Luther Vandross, so-called urban adult contemporary stars in a big way." As recently as March 2012, Earth, Wind & Fire was No. 36 on the smooth-jazz chart at *JazzWeek*.

"As a musician," Veasley confides, "I couldn't always quite get it—the enthusiasm people had for this music that's sort of in between. It doesn't have the spontaneity of straight-ahead jazz, and it doesn't have the sure-headed, shake-ya-thang groove of R&B and pop. It's somewhere in between. But you had that baby-boomer audience that was more than passionate about it." When WJJZ pulled the plug on smooth jazz in September 2008, Veasley was amazed by the listener e-mails. "It was almost like someone died," he remembers. "You know the stages of grief? People were incredulous. You had folks who were angry, folks who were hurt, folks with an overwhelming sadness. The takeaway is that the powers-that-be underestimated the passion that people had for radio and the connection they had to the on-air announcers and the stations themselves."

Lorber offers a dry-eyed counterpoint. "From what I've heard," he says, "the new stations haven't done as well as the smooth-jazz stations, but they don't care. Because they're looking for something else that has to do with the way these big corporations bundle their advertising. For whatever reason the smooth-jazz demographic didn't work into that plan."

One factor might have been that the smooth-jazz crowd is heavily mixed. "That was a revelation to me," Veasley says, "when I started playing concerts and seeing how racially diverse the audience was. I thought, 'Wow, this is exactly what it should be. It can't be anything but good.' When I got involved on the other side of the glass I started to understand that it was exactly the wrong recipe for radio sales. In other words, to go in and say, 'Wow, we have this audience that is 50-50 white and black, male and female, with a wide age demographic'—that doesn't appeal to people who pay for radio."

Another factor was PPM, the ratings system introduced in 2007 by Arbitron, in which participants wear a small high-tech device known as a Portable People Meter to measure audience response over time. "As PPM came in, it's pretty well documented, the [smooth-jazz] format rolled out," says Allen Kepler of Broadcast Architecture. "Some of that was based on corporate agendas … [but] even the Arbitron people were saying it wasn't as user-friendly to the type of people who were carrying the meters. It didn't just hurt us, it hurt other niche formats like triple-A and urban radio."

Indeed, the Spanish Radio Association raised public complaints about PPM in 2008, and several state attorneys general, including Bill McCollum of Florida and Andrew Cuomo (now governor) of New York, filed lawsuits against Arbitron. The Florida suit alleged that PPM undercounts minority listeners and thus "threaten[s] the viability of radio stations [which] air programming targeted at those minorities," according to *Friday Morning Quarterback*, the music industry trade publication.

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DENIS POOLE, ONE OF EUROPE'S RARE DEVOUT SMOOTH-jazz fans, maintains the informative site Smooth Jazz Therapy from his home in the countryside near York, England. He visits the States regularly and knows the genre better than most American jazz critics, and what he says of smooth jazz—in his thick regional accent—is true of a lot of other music today: "It's got a following out there more as a live genre than a recorded one. People come out in number to support concerts and festivals and the various things that the hotels put on. The Newport Beach Hyatt always gets well supported, and the Thornton Winery is legendary for putting on shows right through the summer. So that's bucking the trend; it's almost guaranteeing the survival of it." The cruise business has also proven one of the last solid economic pillars of the scene.

Satellite and Internet radio are still in their relative youth and filling the gap to a degree, though they can't play the seamless promotional role for local events that the terrestrial stations did. Conventional radio is still in the picture: The Smooth Jazz Network maintains a number of broadcasts, including a Top 20 countdown and a newly syndicated show hosted by Kenny G, which goes out to a dozen affiliates. G is spinning the likes of Wes and Cannonball and more current artists.

It's not clear whether this and other SJN ventures can check the downward momentum. "We're getting the product out there in the best way we can, but certainly not to the same number of people we were five or six years ago," Kepler says. "But if you want to see the other side of the coin, take a look at WLOQ in Orlando. We put the Smooth Jazz Network on there last August and we're doing extremely well. I still hold out some hope—it just has to fit into the plan of the local broadcaster, and in many cases that's going to be somebody that owns six or seven stations."

For their part, the artists are determined to see things in a positive light. "It's an opportune moment," Veasley offers, "because now there's really nobody telling you what the formula should be. Artists are being forced out of their musical adolescence, where they have to grow up and make decisions about what they want to do." Saxophonist Mindi Abair, whose recent *American Idol* appearances landed her a gig with Aerosmith, agrees. "This loss is actually starting a revolution," she explains. "It's making musicians say, 'Well, what record do I really want to make?' Are you going to make it for the smooth-jazz radio format? Probably not, because it's not going to make or break you. I think this can be spun into something creative and good for all us, and it's easy to lose sight of that. We're artists—this is what we do. We'll change it. The world will go on and people will still listen to music. Our music." ***JT***