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The Evolution of Smooth



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One blustery late-fall evening at the Rochester Institute of Technology, my friends and I were wrapping up an Anime-club meeting with sesame chicken, garbage plates (an original Rochester, NY dish), and a fusillade of spirited debate at the roundtable, that turned (thanks to one guy who just bought some expensive headphones) to music, and musical tastes. Otaku generally have bad taste (I say this knowing I am one of these people—but I'm an anomaly. One garbage plate-loving anomaly.) A close friend, one who I had known since my sophomore year, turned to me and said, "You know something? I hate Jazz."

He could've said his parents were mer-people from the deep oceans of the Jovian satellite Europa, it didn't matter to me; He was a Deadman. (At least that night. As I said before, otaku have bad taste.) Of course instead of asking, "Oh, you hate Jazz? What part?", I cursed him for a fool and stormed off into the night. He didn't say it to be hurtful, he was just expressing an opinion—one which many have expressed in ignorance; he had no idea the incalculable acres of wonderland he annexed for slaughter with that blanket statement. I didn't think it was possible before that point, but there were/are people who can actually hate Jazz. Really, all of it?

There has been the smooth/traditional divide for years—(some part of me feels Smooth Jazz has been adopted by and marketed for people who don't get traditional, straight-ahead Jazz, much in the same way Toyota/Lexus makes cars for people who don't like driving...)—nevertheless,

Smooth is an evolution of Traditional. Born of the late-20th Century and a beneficiary of modern production technology, it finds itself that much closer to R&B, Soul, and Hip-Hop. And some artists (Lin Rountree and Nicholas Cole for example) have now successfully melded the styles together in a happy marriage of all that we've learned in the past. That all started in the late seventies/early eighties, when Smooth slowly began to lure staunch R&B people into the Jazz fold—and one of the most successful genre bridges has been Billboard chart-topper Najee. It has been nearly thirty years since the release of Najee's first solo album, *Najee's Theme* (Capitol/EMI, 1986—itsself topping Billboard's Top Contemporary Jazz chart for 1987), but in the intervening years, the three-time Grammy nominee has shown no indication of slowing down. Since then, he has been from tenor saxophone, to soprano, to alto, to flute, and back to tenor again; his own musical journey creating a sound that did not change with the times, so much as help define them. We're now counting down the days until the release of Najee's new album *The Morning After: A Musical Love Journey*, on October 22, 2013, and to be preceded on Tuesday 8th by the first single "Champs Élysées".

DIJM: Who've you got working with you on *The Morning After*?

NR: I actually brought in some of George Duke's people on this record; Bill Sharpe on bass (who played with Dave Koz and many others), Ray Fuller, who played with Duke for many years, and engineer Eric Zabler, who has worked with Duke since 1976.

DIJM: And what place do you think this album occupies in your musical evolution?

NR: Well, I'm not afraid to put some traditional jazz on there anymore. In the early part of my career I took a lot of criticism because they knew I was from the traditional jazz world—I was actually an R&B player too. I played R&B, traditional jazz, big-band stuff, all of that. And I'll never forget that when my first few albums came out, a lot of critics back then weren't receptive to the changes that were happening in Jazz in terms of contemporary sound design. So I was one of those guys that kinda got hit hard on that.

DIJM: Why would they get on you for Traditional Jazz? Those are the roots, the bones of everything that matters.

NR: I remember one famous writer, Leonard Feather [1914-1994] who used to do all the liner notes for many traditional jazz people; Miles Davis, John Coltrane and others. And he did mine—which was an honor—but he hit me hard... He let it be known that he knew there was more to me as a musician. Over time I was able to develop an audience that I'd like to say began as an R&B audience, and weren't Jazz listeners and in time became Jazz listeners. In that time, I've been able to share a bit more of my traditional jazz roots.

On *The Morning After*, I did just that; there's a track called "West 72nd Broadway" which was an area of New York City that I spent some time in growing up as a child. We have the bassist Brian Bromberg, and also Joel Taylor, the drummer (he plays with everybody; Barbara Streisand, Joe Sample, etc.) and Nick Smith, who's played with Stanley Clarke, George Duke, all those folks... So we've got two traditional songs on there.

DIJM: What is a saxophonist's most important asset? (both mental and physiological)

NR: Interesting question... They go hand in hand; one cannot work without the other, and it's what separates most players in terms of the character of their sound. I'll give you an example: I stopped playing alto saxophone about two years ago, and the reason was that when I heard a great alto player I was like, "That's how the instrument is supposed to sound..."

Traditionally I'm a tenor sax player. I played some soprano as my career began to take off when I got a recording contract, because it was a popular instrument. Though I didn't fall in love with it until years later, it was the instrument that made me famous. It was the voice of the times. But I'm traditionally a tenor saxophone and flute player. I think I do okay on alto, but when you hear David Sanborn (who's a real alto player), for me that was the realization that no matter what I did, I couldn't sound like him—because physiologically, I'm just not set up like that. I can do all the licks, I can understand what he's saying, I can go through the motions, but I can't sound like that.

DIJM: Now I've heard trumpet players tell me that the sax is a relatively easy instrument to master, and that the trumpet is harder.

NR: What?! *laughs*

DIJM: And I've been told by renowned flutists that the flute is harder than that, even. And yet when you had your horns stolen from you, it led you to learn the flute. How did you set about your mastery of that deceptively simple, yet incomparably stubborn device? Are they telling the truth?

NR: I don't agree with trumpet players when they say that, obviously. There's nothing easy about the saxophone at all. Now, flute on the other hand, is extremely unforgiving. I find that if I put it down for even a few days, then it takes a few days for me to get comfortable with it again. There is some truth to that.

DIJM: Improvisation is the foundation of Jazz, though not usually of the production of the jazz record—smooth or otherwise. It doesn't get any better than real, it doesn't get any better than live, and I think that applies to jazz more than any other genre. How often do you jam?

NR: Quite often, honestly. I have to do it to stay fresh. When people come to my shows, we do a show. And that can go many places, depending on the environment, the venue, the amount of time we have. But it's really important just to be able to play with musicians and bounce off of one another, aurally speaking. I definitely spend a lot of time doing that.

DIJM: You ever done that on a record? Or recorded all the artists at once in the same booth?

NR: It's funny that you say that, because for *The Morning After* we did a little of that. There's a song called "Mafalala", which has kind of a reggae bent to it, but more of the Miles Davis-type approach where we just had this groove and we took the changes in different places. It wasn't a planned thing—we just happened to have the musicians all there, we started going into this thing, and it worked. The other one I mentioned previously, "West 72nd Broadway", with Brian Bromberg and Nick Smith and Joel Taylor. That was just an idea that we came up with in the

studio, and it's traditional blues progression; me playing tenor saxophone, Brian on acoustic bass (he's an incredible acoustic bass player) and Joel Taylor on small tap drums and Nick Smith on acoustic piano. And that was really a result of us just jamming.

DIJM: It's easier than ever now to produce a record (album, rather), with computers and the peripherals of production getting increasingly more powerful and less expensive. While this has put the tools of expression in more hands than ever before—and I laud the democratization of artistic expression—it certainly has had an effect on industry standards, some would say for the worse, as the lowest common denominator has somehow gotten even lower.

NR: No doubt about that...

DIJM: And when I listen to older, more practiced people play, there's a level of polish to their performances, and to the creativity of orchestration and depth of the layers of production that is hard to find on the indie scene among younger players, even those who've been well-educated. I'm not saying education doesn't mean anything, but you can tell when a creation has that 'X-factor', that reason for being, that thing that makes you want to listen to it again.

NR: Well, I agree with you. I think technology is a double-edged sword. It's a great tool that allows many artists to record cheaply, because unfortunately not very many of us out there have the budget to utilize high-end studios. I just recently used a studio in L.A. with Eric Zabler for the upcoming album, and I tell you, there's nothing that can replace an experienced and well-traveled engineer that knows (what we call) outboard gear; being able to correctly use those \$10,000 microphones, those compressors—all of those things that make those old recordings we cherish sound the way they do. I know of some people who can afford to put those instruments in their home studios, but there is a difference, you can tell.

DIJM: Would you call yourself an audiophile?

NR: Can you define what that means?

DIJM: It's a person who, when they listen to music, they devote 100% of their attention to the listening of that song. They put down their books, turn off their television, close the laptop, and just sit and bask in the wonderment of the music—which I think is paying the artist his or her due respect.

NR: You know what, I am definitely that person.

DIJM: How have you engineered *The Morning After*? Have you thought about optimizing digital copies for portable mp3 players, or full-bodied recordings for those of us with home hi-fi's?

NR: We recorded digitally at 24-bit/96kHz, but in order to meet requirements for the market, we downsample to 16-bit/44.1kHz, for iTunes, Amazon, and CD. But with Eric Zabler, because of his proficiency and experience in the industry for almost forty years, we were able to make the highest-quality product possible.

DIJM: What do you listen to at home?

NR: Oh, I listen to a bunch of things, man—My ear is very diverse. Lately I've been listening to some of Wayne Shorter's and Herbie Hancock's older stuff. I've got George Duke's last album [Dreamweaver, Heads Up Records, 2003], before his untimely death. Just purchased Johnny Hartman and John Coltrane and their recording together, and Sonny Rollins. And then on the R&B side, Jill Scott, and even the jazz pianist Robert Glasper (of Jazz and R&B fame).

DIJM: When you said "Jazz Pianist" I actually thought of Jeff Lorber...

NR: Oh, well you know Jeff Lorber and I worked together for years, so he's no stranger to me, music-wise. He actually produced on the last two albums.

DIJM: When are you going to play with Stanley Clarke again?

NR: We haven't played together since the George Duke Memorial. It has been years since we've done any kind of touring or recording together, but it's always good to play with Stanley, I love playing with him.

DIJM: Artists like Bob James, Alexander Zonjic and Kenny G have since become masters of the market they created and don't feel the need to tour worldwide that often anymore—do you think you'll ever reach that point?

NR: No, I think it's wonderful that an artist can find a niche that they're able to have an audience, but as far as I'm concerned the bigger the world the better, y'know? *laughs*

DIJM: Are you like some comedians; the type that really love the job and won't give up touring just because they have a television series and some movie deals—they HAVE to get on a stage. Are you like that?

NR: Yes. Absolutely. For me there's nothing that replaces the feeling of performing live. As much as I enjoy the recording process, there's nothing for me like live.

DIJM: You mean the feeling of being showered with the tidal waves of love from an audience?

NR: *laughs* Even more than that, it's the interaction I enjoy. It's fun, you know? It's just fun. It has been my outlet my whole life.

DIJM: And you're an artist. For me, (as an artist myself) a work of art isn't really done until someone else has seen it or heard it or experienced it. The circuit of interaction is complete when it has gone into their mind and become theirs.

NR: You're absolutely right about that. I mean what's the purpose of doing all this? Art is a means of communication; a means of sharing your heart and mind with people.

DIJM: Winding down now, a little birdie told me you flew planes in a past life...

NR: *laughs* It is very much a past life. I used to do a little flying, now I'm a huge flight-simmer; I do flight simulations at home for fun. But I did go to August Martin high school in NYC, which at that time was an aviation school. My very first goal was to become a pilot, but in high school I decided (because of my extracurricular activities in music) that I was headed for a career change. And then I'd occasionally go on a recreational flight with an instructor, back in the early 2000s. (But when 9/11 happened, I cut all that out.) So now I buy programs where I can stay at home and fly from one place to another just to have something mindless to do.

DIJM: And finally, your FAQ states that it's a good idea to balance business and artistic integrity, and of course this matters when first starting out and trying to build a customer base. But for someone like yourself, who've already built up a loyal following, is that really something you still have to live/create by?

NR: Yes. I've been very fortunate... to be honest, when I first started I didn't have a clue as to what I was doing. It was just as a musician growing up in New York City, I played with a lot of R&B bands, and I could see the market at that time was open for that. Even though we had in the previous generation, guys like Grover Washington Jr., George Benson, Bob James, David Sanborn, all these great names; the next generation in the late eighties was almost like a rebirth, and I was a part of that movement.

Find out more about Najee's event schedule and discography at <http://najeemusic.com>