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THE KANSAS CITY STAR

[Jazz Town](#)

[Saxophonist Najee smooths the jazz grooves](#)

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By JOE KLOPUS

The Kansas City Star



In 1986, when so-called smooth jazz was in the making, one of the big hits came from a sax player who went by one name.

Against a backdrop of synthesizers, drums and a chorus, his sax played soulful lines that people could relate to — but if you listened carefully, you could also hear some seriously jazzy elements straight out of the Charlie Parker playbook.

The player was Najee, the record was “Najee’s Theme,” and it was the beginning of a very successful run that hasn’t ended. That long run brings him back to the Gem Theater on Saturday.

Najee plays his music, straddling the line between jazz and R&B, because he’s a product of his time and place.

“I have a strong R&B influence from the neighborhood I grew up in,” he says.

He’s talking about Jamaica in Queens, N.Y. — and he mentions that Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Fats Waller and Count Basie had lived there, too.

As a teenager, he honed his skills in New York’s Jazzmobile program.

“Each weekend I could study with Frank Foster, Frank Wess, Billy Taylor, Ernie Wilkins. ... It was through those gentlemen that I learned about bebop and how to navigate through changes.”

Then he headed for the New England Conservatory, where he learned from jazz innovators Jaki Byard and George Russell. But he reached a point in 1983 where personal finances didn't allow him to continue at the conservatory. He headed home for New York.

And here's where the luck comes in. "Within two weeks, I was in a club band, playing straight-ahead jazz. And in walks Chaka Khan's musical director, who asks me to try out for her band."

This is 1983, remember, and Khan was at the peak of her career. Najee toured with her for a year and a half.

After a while, he joined the band of another singer, Meli'sa Morgan. He mainly played keyboards with her. Then, "Someone in the management company she was signed to heard me play sax. They said, 'Why don't you bring us some demos?'"

It wasn't too long before those demos led to Najee's first record deal.

"The record company wasn't sure what to do with me," he said. But a very popular soul singer of the time knew what to do. "Freddie Jackson invited me to go on the road and open shows for him. Then I had my first gold album in three months."

That was the record with "Najee's Theme." A good string of hits followed, notably "Tokyo Blue."

Don't get the idea that Najee has become an '80s nostalgia act. His current album, "The Morning After: A Musical Love Journey," is seated at No. 1 on at least one smooth-jazz chart as this is written.

And maybe part of that success comes from his knowledge of the jazz heritage — something that some others in the smooth-jazz idiom don't care to demonstrate.

His Kansas City show will have one outward sign of his respect for jazz tradition. He promises a tribute to his friend Ahmad Alaadeen, the KC local legend whose reputation Najee knew from "inside circles," he says.

They met after a previous Najee show in Kansas City, and there was much mutual respect — so much that during Alaadeen's last illness, Najee flew into Kansas City to visit Alaadeen's bedside.

Najee will take time during his Saturday show to perform some of Alaadeen's tunes, with Kansas City guests joining the band.

The Najee show is part of the American Jazz Museum's Jammin' at the Gem series. But there's also a smooth jazz concert series getting underway in our town, and the first show is upon us.

Guitarist and composer Peter White, a Brit who made his first splash working with singer/songwriter Al Stewart in 1978 but has since branched out nicely, headlines a show at the Gem tonight.

White has some serious credentials — Junior Walker and Grover Washington had hits with songs he wrote — so this week is a serious feast for fans of smooth jazz. White's show is at 8 tonight; tickets are \$47 at ticketmaster.com.

The Smooth Grooves at the Gem series also offers Keiko Matsui on March 28, the Jeff Lorber Fusion on May 22 and Alex Bugnon on Sept. 27.

Saturday

Najee performs at 8 p.m. at the Gem Theater, 1615 E. 18th St. Tickets are \$35-\$55. For more information, call [816-474-6262](tel:816-474-6262) or go to AmericanJazzMuseum.org.

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