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THE RISE OF THE SMOOTH JAZZ FORMAT: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF KENNY G  
AND HIS GANG OF SMOOTH OPERATORS

by

WILLIAM ARDEN MADER III  
M.A. University of Central Florida, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the College of Sciences  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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2012

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to explore the development and rise of the smooth jazz radio format. It is an exploratory study which aims to illustrate the confluence of forces that contributed to the immense success of the smooth jazz genre through the 1980s and well into the 1990s. Artists, such as the saxophonist Kenny G, popularized this style of music that is often described as instrumental-pop music, happy-jazz, or easy listening. Others might draw comparisons to the music we often hear inside of elevators and shopping centers. This is a process that is not unique to the genre of jazz nor to the time period I will be focusing on but is a niche in the music world in which I am intimately involved. This study delves into how the smooth jazz genre developed, the key player(s) involved with its proliferation, and most importantly, this study demonstrates that in spite of the meteoric rise and immense commercial success of smooth jazz, it was not a trend that could withstand the continuously changing tastes of the public.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Catherine Bush. Her support and encouragement throughout this process has been unflappable. I do not know what I would have done without her help. Thank you so much Grandma. This is for you.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

There are a number of individuals who have contributed in one way or another to my completion of this project. Within the UCF family, I would like to thank my advisor, Liz Grauerholz, committee members John Lynxwiler and David Gay, as well as my first advisor when I entered the program in 2006, Warren Goldstein.

I also want to thank my family for their encouragement through my journey through academia. Last and most certainly not least, I wish to thank my friends and acquaintances who have added fuel to the fire of my passion for music over the years. You know who you are.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Kenny G and His Gang Of Smooth Operators

What is a jazz record? Any record that sells under 20,000 copies, once it sells over that, it is no longer a jazz record.

-- Quincy Jones

If an individual were to scan the radio dial from top to bottom, they may not find a single radio station devoted to jazz or instrumental music (no vocalist(s) on the track) for that matter. But if you did, it would very likely have elements that remind the listener of R&B or pop music. It would probably be at a medium-paced tempo (not too slow, not too fast), with very little deviation (if any) from that tempo, and would probably conjure up descriptions of "relaxing," "easy listening" or even "smooth." Others might draw comparisons to the Muzak-style music we often hear inside of elevators and shopping centers. This is a process that is not unique to the genre of jazz nor to the time period I will be focusing on (1980s/90s) but is a niche in the music world in which I am intimately involved. I would like to delve into how the smooth jazz genre developed, the key player(s) involved with its proliferation and, most importantly, this study demonstrates that in spite of the meteoric rise and immense commercial success of smooth jazz, it was not a trend that could withstand the continuously changing tastes of the public.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Rationalization -- Max Weber and the Iron Cage

"One of the most important aspects of the process of rationalization of actions is the substitution for the unthinking acceptance of ancient customs, of deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest."

Max Weber

(Economy and Society, 1969: 30)

Indisputably a key figure within the discipline of sociology, Max Weber is well known for his extensive research on the development of bureaucracy in the Occident, and related to this concept, a theory of rationalization. He defines bureaucracy as a large-scaled organization composed of a hierarchy of offices. He saw it as being wholly a creation of the modern world. Pre-industrial, traditional societies were characterized by leadership roles being assumed within the society because of loyalty and personal ties with their local group/society. With the move to modern societies, we see the development of formal structures, with institutionalized rules and regulations. Tasks that are needed to be completed within the modern society are compartmentalized, with the purpose of achieving the optimum means to the desired end. Weber saw the modern, Western world as becoming increasingly rational, "...dominated by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and nonhuman technologies that control people. Weber saw the bureaucracy as the model/example of rationalization.

Weber saw that Western society was producing a particular kind of rationalization, which is called *formal rationality*. It is defined as follows (Ritzer 2010: 28):

"...that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures (people are therefore not left to their own devices)."

Weber saw this as a major development in the history of the world. With the presence of this kind of rationalization at the societal level, governments could now use institutionalized rules to guide/direct actions and behaviors. Weber also makes the point that this kind of system allows little (if any) choice of means to ends.

Weber did praise formal rationalization as it was used within certain bureaucratic organizations, such as the IRS or Postal Service. The well-entrenched rules and regulations within these bureaucratic organizations provide assurance that they will operate in highly predictable manners. In either one of these organizations, a non-formal system could hardly keep up with the work. But, Weber also states that this quantitative approach shows little or no concern for the actual quality of the work. An emphasis on control over humans through these rules, regulations, and structures is demonstrated by an increased division of labor, prescribed method(s) for task-completion, and leaders considering, if not already implementing, the replacement of human workers with machines.

Weber paid close attention to what he called the "irrationality of rationality." These were the "unintended" consequences of the rapid and thorough rationalization occurring throughout the Western world. These include the following:

- dehumanizing effect of working in bureaucracies
- "red tape" related issues can actually lead to increased inefficiencies within these organizations.

- emphasis on the quantitative aspects leads to large amounts of poor quality work
- anger at nonhuman technologies which replace human workers

It is with these and other elements in mind that Weber discussed the "iron cage" of rationality. Bureaucracies can act as cages in which people feel trapped and their basic humanity denied. Weber anticipated a society where the sectors of life (work, educational, recreational, etc.) are rationalized structures with no escape. He eloquently wrote about this cage (Weber 1958: 182):

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might be well be truly said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.

This excerpt is one of Weber's most well known quotes and paints a fairly dystopic picture of the future of modern Western society. But at the heart of it, Weber is speaking of potentialities. He is not theorizing that the world is heading down a one-way street leading each of us to our own, personal iron cages. Instead, Weber was attempting to demonstrate that the march towards a modern, industrialized world is going to have its positive and negative consequences. And these consequences are both intended and unintended. The unintended consequences are the focus of this study.

### Rationalization of Music Industry

Weber wrote an essay devoted to this topic in particular in 1911, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*. The following is an excerpt from the introduction of his essay, which describes what Weber saw as the key concepts of the rationalization of music:

The drive toward rationality, that is, the submission of an area of experience to calculable rules, is present here (in Western culture) ...This drive to reduce artistic creativity to the form of a calculable procedure based on comprehensible principles appears above all else in music. Western tone intervals were known and calculated elsewhere. However, rational harmonic music, both counterpoint and harmony and the formation of tone materials on the basis of three triads with the harmonic third, are peculiar to the West. So too is a chromatics and enharmonics interpreted in terms of harmony. Particular also to the West is the orchestra with its nucleus in the string quartet and organization of ensembles of wind instruments. In the West there appeared a system of notation making possible the composition of modern musical works in a manner impossible otherwise (Weber 1958 [1911]: Introduction, pp. xxii).

Throughout this essay Weber displays his immense knowledge of music and explains how the development of the Western harmonic system led to a codification and systemization of music composition and performance that did not exist prior to the sixteenth century. Weber views Western music as something which had been completely rationalized since J.S. Bach and his peers reached the zenith of polyvocality (the three forms of which are: modern chordal harmony, contrapuntal polyphony, and harmonic homophonic music). He discusses modern attempts (i.e. the Romantics) to search for something new and interesting but to no avail. In the

end, "the most modern developments of music, which are practically moving toward a destruction of tonality ...cannot get rid of some residual relations to these fundamentals, even if in the form of developing contrasts to them" (Weber 1958 [1911]: pp. 102). Weber's analysis of modern music has many similarities with the features that characterize Western modernity in his larger narrative. Specifically, it is a fully rationalized system, the culmination of purposively rational acts. It is derived from pre-modern and inchoately rationalized worlds, yet it sweeps them away to create its own and "new" foundation. Also the non-rationalizable elements still in the system (aka "rebels") will create tension with those already rationalized elements, yet Weber is stern in his belief that the rationality of the modern Western music world cannot be transcended.

It should also be noted that Weber has been described as viewing rationalization as an historical force which has come about at the expense of artistic expression (Malhorta 1979). One discussion (Malhorta 1979) of Weber's analysis of rationalization in music makes the point that throughout Weber's seminal work, *Economy and Society* (1969), he sets the "rational" in opposition to such things as emotion, custom, honor and individuality. Additionally, Weber states the following as incongruent with "rational social action": emotional values, tradition, beliefs, the idea of honor, art and the affinity to art, heroic asceticism, charisma, the forces of nature, the mystery of creation, ecstatic frenzy, sex as a free expression of affect, and any expressive activity. As congruent with the rational, Weber mentions the following: self-interest, calculated attainment of ends, ethical religion, eroticism, the market, impersonality, capitalistic economy, bureaucracy, and standardized charity (Malhorta 1979). Among a number of issues (e.g. Weber's insistence on the autonomous nature of the world of music production), critics of

Weber's theory of rationalized music point to his omission of any discussion of the role that individual "actors" play in shaping these transitions between pre-rationalized music and the culmination of the process in Western rationalized music.

The literature revolving around commercial radio and rationalization processes are typically focused on one of the following: a particular genre (Pop, Classical, Rock, Country, Jazz, etc.), issues surrounding radio stations' programming philosophies, or the effect(s) of deregulation of the radio industry (small/local radio stations vs. corporate-owned radio conglomerates). Sociologist Richard A. Peterson (1978) is one of the preeminent scholars on the subject who has written a number of pieces surrounding the production and/or distribution of music. One of Peterson's seminal articles was an examination of contemporary country music and the forces that brought about change within this genre. Peterson states that the conventional theories explaining cultural change generally blend the following ideas:

1) cultural change is a product of the innovative interaction of creators, and 2) change is the result of evolving consumer demand which is the result of the natural ebb and flow of fads and fashions or by changing social-structural imperatives. (Peterson 1978: 293-4)

Both of these theories support the position that elements of culture reflect the particular culture in which they are consumed. Peterson states that these typical explanations of cultural change tend to ignore the influence of the apparatus that is positioned directly in between culture creators and consumers. Peterson saw the influence of this intervening apparatus as the focus of the then emerging "production of culture" perspective. Through a detailed analysis, Peterson discussed the interdependence between the commercial-music industry and the radio-broadcasting industry, the changes which have taken place within country-music radio, and how

these changes have had an impact on record making, artists' careers, and eventually the genre of country music (Peterson 1978).

The close relationship between the record and radio industries is rooted in the dramatic commercial success of television in the 1950s. At this time, radio stations began programming for specific demographic niches of the population. Radio was the means by which the record industry could spread the word about new releases, therefore becoming the de facto advertising wing of the music industry. The consequences of this "convenient union" are described by Peterson as the following: 1) only records which are played on the air have a chance to become commercially successful, 2) record makers consciously tailor their productions so that they are likely to be aired, and 3) the careers of artists and eventually whole genres of music are facilitated or frozen out in the process (Peterson 1978). Furthermore, Peterson makes the point that the public is not the prime concern of radio programmers. Commercial radio's dependence on attracting advertisers results in programming that will attract the audience most inclined to buy the products being pitched to them in between the songs being aired.

In 1959, the CMA (Country Music Association) was created by music industry executives with the purpose of competing with the emerging Rock n Roll genre which was threatening to take away the country music audience. The CMA aggressively led campaigns to increase country music on the radio and did so successfully. Country radio soon evolved into a "hit-maker" orientation with the clear aim of convincing national advertisers that country radio was now respectable and could attract an audience at least as affluent and consumption-oriented as radio listeners in general. Peterson says the general strategy was now to create records that would be played on country stations and would also cross over to be played on radio stations

with a format other than country music. This "search for crossovers" strategy was also adopted in much of the commercial-music industry beyond country music as well, so that in the mid-1970s the various distinct industry-defined genres of music came to sound more and more alike (Peterson 1978). Peterson concludes his analysis of contemporary country music (contemporary being 1978) with the prescient comment that country music is similar to all of the arts in that it is dependent on commercial media and that the questions of which creative efforts will be fostered and whose tastes will be catered to depend increasingly on the intervening technological and organizational elements in the production of culture.

When looking for discussions surrounding pop music and processes of rationalization, Alex Seago's (2000) discussion provides evidence of the hegemony of the American music industry. It also demonstrates that there are key aspects of pop music production and composition which are resistant to the processes of rationalization. Seago examines the discourse surrounding globalization and what many refer to as the influence of cultural imperialism of the West (in particular, American values, goods, and lifestyles) and attempts to shed light on how accurate/inaccurate these perceptions are. He creates a distinction between economic developments in the music business itself and cultural trends in pop music styles and aesthetics. Focusing on the economic trends, Seago discusses the total restructuring of media industries throughout the world and how this has led to a rapid concentration of ownership and control (including a significant shift from the public to the private sector). The 1980s and 1990s in particular witnessed the emergence of new mega-corporations (i.e., Time-Warner and News International) that began to diversify across an entire range of previously distinct media products, leading to an increasing number of mergers between cultural producers, telecommunications



companies, and firms specializing in computer hardware and software (Seago 2000). This concentration of corporate power within a handful of multinationals gives credence to elements of Ritzer's thesis, in particular, "...the capitalist-inspired drive toward ever greater instrumental rationality and the subsequent creation of ever larger bureaucratic structures (Seago 2000: 122).

The roots of market research within radio are discussed in Stephen Lippmann's (2008) examination of the rise of the national radio networks in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1935, CBS's new audience research department, under the direction of the psychologist Frank Stanton and with the assistance of the survey research and public opinion research pioneer Paul Lazarsfeld, conducted a series of studies whose goals were to determine the radio audience's listening habits, tastes, and patterns. This developing market research industry helped broadcasters to better gauge audience preferences and also pushed the commercialization of the airwaves as the sale of advertising time became standard practice (Lippmann 2008). In turn, radio programming became much more predictable with programs occurring at prescheduled times and in an effort to reach the widest possible audience, programming steered away from regionalism, specific market segments, or controversy (Lippmann 2008). Interestingly, Lippmann demonstrates through his analysis that the introduction of standardized programming practices not only helped stabilize broadcasting markets but also increased the viability of locally and independently owned stations. Lippmann concludes that although his analysis may paint a picture of a profusion of diversity on the airwaves, in reality, many alternative voices have been squeezed off the air and the potential for noncommercial entities to be heard on the radio has been greatly diminished through regulatory legislation that has been passed over the years.

Contemporary studies examining the process of rationalization of programming in commercial radio have reached a number of conclusions. As recently as 2000, it has been noted that despite the attention devoted to issues of deregulation and competition in the commercial radio industry, there is a limited number of studies showing empirically how programming practices affect the standardization of commercial radio programming (Ahlkvist and Fisher 2000). One study, which attempted to rectify this gap in the research, analyzed playlists from various radio stations and found that the major driving force behind music programming standardization is large markets (Ahlkvist and Fisher 2000). Additionally, low programmer autonomy and the use of audience research and consultants encourage standardization (Ahlkvist and Fisher 2000). In large markets (e.g. New York, Los Angeles, Chicago), it is the policies within the commercial radio organization which contribute to the rationalization of music radio. These policies' purpose is to more efficiently and effectively deliver audience segments to advertisers (Ahlkvist and Fisher 2000). The result of this is that it drives stations to reduce the autonomy of programming and on-air staff, to shy away from programming new music, and to use research and consultants to guide programming decision making. In place of autonomous programmers, consultants from marketing research firms are increasingly relied upon to rationalize programming in the aim of delivering large audiences to advertisers. One researcher has this to say about the dependence on audience research conducted by consultants:

The organization of audiences by music format does rationalize the radio market, but this is not the same as diversifying or enriching radio programming. This would entail diversifying musical production itself, and diversifying the exposure of music to specific audiences - the opposite of what has actually occurred in the evolution of music formats. (Berland 1993: 109)

This move towards programming being influenced (controlled) by market research is discussed throughout the literature (Barber 2010; Ahlkvist 2001, 2000; Fairchild 1999; Barnard 1989; Peterson 1978; etc.). The adoption of audience research is described as a move towards a "scientific" or "objective" collection of data on targeted listeners' response to music programming either through phone surveys ('callout research') or 'auditorium tests' where a demographically specified sample of potential listeners are brought together to rate elements of the station's programming (Ahlkvist and Fischer, 2000). The result of this market research is precision-researched formula radio in the shape of similarly programmed stations aimed at increasingly narrow, demographically defined yet highly profitable markets (Barnard 1989).

One consultant firm at the center of marketing research for radio is the Chicago-based company, Broadcast Architecture. It was founded in 1988 by Frank Cody and Owen Leach (originally the consulting firm was called Cody/Leach Broadcast Architecture). Currently, it operates in 25 different countries with the sole purpose of conducting audience research for the radio industry. Broadcast Architecture is the first firm to develop and implement interactive research technologies to conduct their market research. Prior to their existence, audience research was performed by recruiting listeners to listen to a tape where a song plays and then they fill in a bubble, like they're taking a university exam. Broadcast Architecture's process involving the 'mix master' is explained as follows:

We use a process called the 'mix master'. It's a dial that you give to an audience and let them give their ratings on a piece of music. Music is an emotional thing, so we don't want them to qualify it in numbers. They just react as they would with the dial on their radio. We play the music that scores highly and mix that up as playlists. (Barber 2010: 56)

Broadcast Architecture's belief is that this kind of testing of music with an audience empowers the consumer by allowing them to determine what music will be on the airwaves based on their emotional response to the music. It has been noted in other research that "...audience research is valued because it maximizes the likelihood that only the most 'viable' records are integrated into the station's music programming (Ahlkvist 2001: 349)." Yet it is also necessary to take into account that these music-testing sessions are performed in a controlled environment and to some degree music has already been preselected prior to the audience testing. Additionally it has been noted that the cross section of audience members that volunteer to attend research exercises may not be representative of the audience as a whole (Barber 2010). Despite these issues, this kind of audience research has become more commonplace, especially in the large metropolitan markets. Broadcast Architecture's use of the Mix Master within audience testing is welcomed mainly due to the level of detailed information that can be gleaned from these tests. B.A.'s co-founder, Frank Cody, states the following:

We can look at every individual respondent and because it is gathered digitally, we can slice and dice it any way we want to. We can look at it by comparing men to women, younger demographics to older demographics; divide it up geographically, economically, racially. We learned a lot about what people wanted to hear. (Barber 2010: 57)

This highly detailed level of analysis can provide radio stations with further insight into the tastes and distastes of the listening public. In many commercial radio stations, programming has become inextricably linked with market research. The result of this is that industry and research orientations converge to produce subformats that target very narrow audience niches with highly standardized and repetitive music programming (Ahlkvist 2001). This leads to

listeners being exposed to fewer and fewer songs and lead to increasingly deterministic programming (Barber 2010). A "lowest common denominator" programming style is encouraged under this system and is noted by Cody himself: "when utilized properly, it's very powerful, but research is only as good as the people who observe, analyze and respond to the data. In the wrong hands it can be very destructive to creativity." Furthermore, B.A.'s Allen Kepler concedes that "anything that is mass-marketed is not going to be wildly unique" (Barber 2010: 57).

Research has drawn attention to a significant point that the music business and radio are distinct and separate entities (Berland 1990; Hennion and Meadel 1986; Peterson 1978). On the surface, it would appear that radio acts as a promotional device for new music as well as educating listeners about older music. However tensions exist between the two industries and Frank Cody succinctly states: "The music business and radio are two very different businesses. They happen to help each other and have some sort of synergy, but radio's job is to have people listen to the radio, tune in to a station and leave it on" (Barber 2010). The relationship between radio and the music business has also been called a "mismatch of the two principal music media" (Hennion and Meadel 1986: 286). The distinction can also be made that record companies use radio to promote their records and stations use music to target listeners that are attractive to advertisers (Ahlkvist 2001).

Finally, Richard Peterson's discussion of popular music and cycles in symbolic production provides further evidence of the ways in which the various actors within the music industry influence what will and will not be on the top of the music charts (Peterson & Berger 1975). His analysis focuses on the degree of competition within the music industry and the ways in which this affects diversity in the music produced during various time periods. His analysis

demonstrates that the degree of market concentration correlates to periods of homogeneity, while the degree of relative competition, corresponds to periods of diversity (Peterson & Berger 1975). In addition to his own analysis, Peterson states that the majority of evidence suggests that a concentration of power contained within a handful of oligopolies results in reduced innovation as well as a more homogenous product. One of the examples of this is the Hollywood movie production during the 1930s and 1940s, network radio during the same era, and more recently, network television (Peterson & Berger 1975). During these instances, actors within the various industries are provided little if any reason to market products which are innovative. Instead, these oligopolists aim to sell products which will please the most, without offending any major group of consumers. In the marketing world, this is commonly referred to as "L.O.P." (Least Objectionable Programming/Product). This approach to selling music to the masses continues to be utilized in the industry as well as in many other industries. Since the early 1970s, the major record labels have utilized possessing as diverse an artist roster as possible, with the purpose of being easily adaptable to upcoming and unexpected trends in popular taste. A direct quote from a former president of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) illustrates this point:

We think Columbia Records is particularly well suited to maintain its leadership of the recorded music industry. Because of the versatility of our catalog--which covers literally every point of the music spectrum--we can and do capitalize on the rapidly changing public tastes. As I speak, black music and country music appear to be two primary growth areas in the coming year. If that perspective changes by the time you leave this room, I can still assure you Columbia Records will have a major entry into whatever new area is broached by the vagaries of public tastes. (Peterson 1975: 169)

Other strategies are continually being developed by the music industry, all in the hopes of gaining the largest share of the market. Peterson concludes that at times even though the music industry has developed highly sophisticated methods to attract the public to purchasing music, the public at large can quite often act in unpredictable ways. The "omnipotent" marketing firms may not always have the upper hand when it comes to pegging what the music consumer is going to like next.

The next "big thing" in music is difficult (if not impossible) to predict, with numerous, unforeseeable and influential elements yet to present themselves. The Zeitgeist is an elusive thing and quite often by the time it is widely recognized, there is something else in its place. In spite of this, numerous individuals and groups within the music industry whose sole purpose is to find that elusive hit song or the next Beatles, strive to pinpoint what it is that the public is craving and, if possible, predict what will be next. The synergy that took place between marketing research groups, radio and music industry insiders, and smooth jazz musicians in the 1980s and 1990s provides a poignant example of when a popular trend was utilized to lucrative ends for all parties involved

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### The Creation of Smooth Jazz

Advertisers and commercial radio found a perfect accomplice in the creation of the format which became known as "smooth jazz." Broadcast Architecture (which coincidentally coined the term "smooth jazz" in focus group research) resolutely stand behind the drive to program music to attract advertisers: "...more listeners means more adverts, means more revenue. There's no reason for a smooth jazz station to exist in the commercial market otherwise" (Barber 2010: 58). The name of the "smooth jazz" format is traced back to market research conducted by Broadcast Architecture. However, the origins of the music itself are not so clear-cut. The writer Stanley Crouch, who was involved with Ken Burns 10-part documentary, *Jazz*, is one of many jazz historians who make a connection between the smooth jazz of the 1980s and 1990s and the jazz-fusion movement of the 1960s (although Crouch's view is far from objective):

The problem emerged with fusion music in the 1960s which made it difficult for people to tell the difference between jazz and instrumental pop music. Now, because of the title ["smooth jazz"], some people are led to believe that jazz is anything with a pop rhythm section and an instrumental improvisation. Smooth jazz makes it more difficult to know what jazz is for the average person, and when people finally hear real jazz, they always say, "Why did I spend so much time listening to garbage?" (Watrous 1997: C13)

The rise of jazz-fusion (aka jazz-rock or fusion) came out of artistic as well as economic needs. Artistically, jazz musicians were curious about the new electronic instruments becoming popular since the meteoric rise of rock music. Electronic guitars and keyboards offered sounds



and timbres (and increasing decibel levels as well) that had never been possible before. Economically, it was the immense success of the Beatles who permanently altered the business side of music production. The writer Stuart Nicholson (1998) states that the recording industry drastically changed the way business was done in the aftermath of the phenomenal success of the Beatles in the 1960s. Rock acts which sold over 100,000 units became the norm (Nicholson 1998). Record sales by jazz artists paled by comparison. It started to become an imperative for jazz artists to cross over into the new demographic purchasing rock records if they wanted to remain competitive on the major record labels. One artist at the center of this was the trumpeter Miles Davis. As a recording artist with Columbia records, Davis was aware of the trends in the music industry and coupled with his desire to remain "current," Davis recorded the seminal album, *Bitches Brew* in 1969. This record featured Davis alongside young rock musicians and in spite of receiving criticism from jazz purists and traditionalists, went on to become extremely successful and introduced Davis to rock listeners who may have previously thought of jazz as chiefly the province of their parent's generation. Out of Davis' successful commercial crossover, his bandmates went on to achieve success in a similar manner, combining elements of jazz with rock (John McLaughlin and Mahavishnu Orchestra, Chick Corea and Return to Forever, Joe Zawinul / Wayne Shorter and Weather Report, and Herbie Hancock's Headhunters). These artists continued in the same vein as Davis, blurring the lines between rock and jazz, turning many people onto jazz as well as irritating purists who saw this fusion as sacrilege.

If Miles Davis' album *Bitches Brew* paved the way for the eventual creation of a jazz-rock fusion genre, it was the unprecedented success of the saxophonist Kenny G in the 1980s that signaled that this new format in jazz was here for the long run. Kenny G (Kenny Gorelick)

began his professional career with The Jeff Lorber Fusion in 1980 and two years after this he released his first solo album on the major label Arista Records. He enjoyed success early on, with both his second and third albums (*G Force* and *Gravity*) achieving platinum status. His fourth album (*Duo Tones*) sold over 12 million copies and stayed on the Billboard charts for well over a year. Each of his subsequent releases have been multi-million sellers. He even has the top selling Christmas album of all time. All of this incredible success points to the unavoidable conclusion that the music this artist produces has found an audience, an audience which dwarfs the audience for practically any other jazz musician, living or dead. His success is often credited to his heavy use of elements commonly associated with rock and R&B music. This includes instrumentation (electric guitars/keyboard/bass instead of acoustic), the inclusion of vocalists on tracks, incorporating simple melodies in common time meters, and limited amounts of improvisation. Some listeners often describe the music as "easy listening" or "relaxing." Kenny G's success has made him a lightning rod for critics and musicians alike. There are numerous examples of this including a tirade written by the jazz guitarist Pat Metheny to Harper's magazine. This letter was written after Kenny G released a record in which he dubbed himself playing alongside a recording of the deceased jazz legend, Louis Armstrong. *Jazziz* magazine ran a cover article on this topic ("Oh my God, they killed Kenny") delving into the reasons why Kenny G receives so much critical attention from the jazz community. Many argue that what Kenny G plays is not really jazz, or that it is simply music appealing to the lowest common denominator with the sole purpose of selling as many albums as possible. Either way, Kenny G and the smooth jazz genre are continuing to outsell other types of jazz records and the number of

radio stations playing smooth jazz versus those playing traditional/straight-ahead jazz shows is tremendous.

### The Current Study

The purpose of this research project is to explore the development of the Smooth Jazz format by examining its historical development, discussing the various actors involved in its creation (record labels, artists, and marketing firms), and the relative success of the genre. I am particularly interested in the time period centered on creation of the market research firm Broadcast Architecture and their subsequent work with radio stations operating with the smooth jazz format.

### Methods

This study provides a qualitative examination of the popularity of the smooth jazz format in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This is the timeframe when Kenny G was selling unprecedented numbers of albums for a jazz artist and was simultaneously receiving airplay on practically every radio station operating with the smooth jazz format. One example of the successful union between the marketing firms and record labels is found with the relationship between Broadcast Architecture and the record label GRP. After the creation of Broadcast Architecture, the record label GRP gravitated towards signing and recording artists who could reap the rewards from the smooth jazz boom (Barber 2010). Broadcast Architecture used highly sophisticated methods (discussed earlier) to construct playlists which GRP would subsequently use to decide how to produce records as well as what type of artists they would sign to the label. The commercial potential for jazz on the radio took hold in the 1980s, "the GRP label signed a

whole stable of artists to function in this musical environment" (Nicholson 1998: 220). From 1990 to 1995, GRP was rated the "Top Contemporary Jazz Label" in Billboard, demonstrating their immense success within the smooth jazz genre (Barber 2010).

Qualitative analysis was employed to uncover the timeline of pivotal events that brought about the immense success of smooth jazz. These events include the decades prior to the "branding" of a genre of music became widely known and sold as smooth jazz. My analysis will follow a number of events that have occurred, going back to the 1960s with the advent of a genre called "jazz-fusion", through the 1970s when numerous jazz artists were covering pop tunes more frequently, up to the 1980s when Kenny G and others found success more than any jazz musician in any time before, and finally through the 1990s when the format had a solid presence on the FM radio dial. There will also be a brief epilogue discussing the recent decline in smooth jazz radio.

My own training as a jazz musician provides me with an insight into the stylistic variations and developments within the genre of jazz as well as the changes the music has undergone in its roughly 100 year existence. I have been playing the saxophone for 22 years and for the past 5 years I have been seriously studying theory, harmony, improvisation, and jazz history. My passion for this subject is unbounded.

My research for this study and subsequent analysis led me through a number of sources. I read numerous articles (academic journals magazines, and newspapers) discussing the smooth jazz phenomenon. Prior to my official research, I was given a copy of Pat Metheny's critical letter to *Harper's Magazine* about his distaste for Kenny G. It was a piece that stayed in the back of my mind for a number of years, and when I decided to conduct this study, I knew that this

particular piece of writing would be included. It led me to a number of pieces, some fully embracing Pat Metheny's position that this is "bad" music, while other pieces strove to look at it in an objective light. Through a synthesis of the various articles and books I obtained, I was able to create a timeline of events, leading up to the establishing of the smooth jazz format and Kenny G's status as the top-selling instrumentalist, on through the backlash that swirled around smooth jazz's (contended) place in the jazz history narrative and finally the recent dissipation of smooth jazz on the FM dial.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Smooth Jazz: Setting the Stage

Smooth jazz as we know it today with Kenny G and his cohorts, did not form out of midair. The term “smooth jazz” itself may have been coined by a focus group in the 1980s, but the particular sound and formula for the genre has a history within the jazz art world going back decades. There is one particular musician who, through the music he created and the influence he had on the musicians he recruited (many of whom went on to form their own influential groups), paved the way for much of the jazz that followed in the years since. This individual is the trumpeter Miles Davis.

Miles Davis figures prominently into practically any discussion surrounding jazz history. His career as a professional jazz musician began in the 1940s in New York City with the saxophonist Charlie Parker (who ushered in a stylistic development in jazz that is commonly referred to as “Bebop”). From this point forward, Davis was known as a musician who would continue to explore different styles and approaches to playing jazz, always searching for new ways to reach an audience and explore his art form. In the late 1960s, Davis was at a crossroad in his career. Around 1968, according to Davis himself, he was listening heavily to non-jazz artists, in particular the funk music of James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone, as well as the Rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix. Davis hung out with Hendrix on a number of occasions, talking about music, discussing their individual approaches to their art, etc. In Davis’s autobiography, he says this about their relationship, “It was great. He influenced me, and I influenced him, and that’s the way great music is always made. Everybody showing everybody else something and then moving on from there” (Davis 1989: 293).

In 1969, the seminal music event Woodstock took place, with Jimi Hendrix closing out the festival with his now infamous deconstruction of “The Star Spangled Banner”. The day after this landmark performance, Davis was in the recording studio to begin working on his album *Bitches Brew*. Going into this recording, there were already a number of musicians mixing elements of jazz with rock, to varying degrees of success. Davis was intrigued by what a number of these musicians were doing (for example, the saxophonist Charles Lloyd and his quartet featuring a future member of Davis's group, the keyboardist, Keith Jarrett), and on a practical level, was keen on attracting younger fans to his concerts:

Nineteen sixty-nine was the year rock and funk were selling like hotcakes, and all this was on display at Woodstock. There were over 400,000 people at the concert. That many people at a concert makes everybody go crazy, and especially people who make records. The only thing on their minds is, How can we sell records to that many people all the time? That was the atmosphere all around the record companies. And jazz seemed to be withering on the vine, in record sales and live performances. Compared to what my records used to sell, when you put them beside what Bob Dylan or Sly Stone sold, it was no contest. They (Columbia Records) thought that since I sold around 60,000 albums every time I put out a record--which was enough for them before the new thing came around--that that wasn't enough to keep on giving me money. So this was the climate with Columbia and me just before I went into the studio to record *Bitches Brew*. What they didn't understand was that I wasn't prepared to be a memory yet, wasn't prepared to be listed only on Columbia's so-called classical list. I had seen the way to the future with my music, and I was going for it like I had always done. (Davis 1989: 298)

With the release of *Bitches Brew* in the spring of 1970, Davis cemented the establishment of a new era in jazz that was to be called jazz-rock fusion, or fusion for short. In the words of Stuart Nicholson, "Just as Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman had come to personify specific eras in jazz history, so Miles Davis would come to signify the era of jazz-rock fusion" (Nicholson 1998: 112) With the full support of Columbia's president, Clive Davis, the album was heavily marketed and cleverly packaged as a "new direction in music." *Bitches Brew* reached thirty-five on the *Billboard* chart, sold over 400,000 units by the end of 1970, and won the Grammy for Best Jazz Record. After the release of the album, Davis was persuaded to play a venue (The Fillmore West in San Francisco) that was typically featuring the major Rock artists of the day, such as Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead. Davis was reluctant going into it, but after receiving overwhelming support and interest from the mostly young audiences, he was convinced that this was the right move. And it was; soon, thereafter, Davis's records sold in increasing numbers due to his drastically increased (mostly younger) fan base. He began playing concerts where he would open for acts such as Blood, Sweat & Tears, Carlos Santana, The Band, and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. It was an artistic move that would keep Miles Davis in the public spotlight for the rest of his life.

The influence this album had on numerous jazz musicians (and non musicians for that matter) is beyond the scope of this thesis. That said, the development of the rock-jazz fusion genre was largely created by musicians who appeared on *Bitches Brew*. To illustrate this point, here is a list of some of musicians who appeared on the album and the names of the groups they went on to create and/or be a part of the jazz-fusion movement:

Wayne Shorter, soprano saxophone (Weather Report)



Bennie Maupin, bass clarinet (Herbie Hancock's Headhunters)

Joe Zawinul, keyboards (Weather Report)

Chick Corea, keyboards (Return To Forever)

John McLaughlin, guitar (Mahavishnu Orchestra)

Dave Holland, bass (Circle w/ Chick Corea)

Lenny White, drums (Return To Forever)

Jack DeJohnette, drums (Charles Lloyd Quartet)

In addition to becoming known as a stylistic trailblazer, Davis continuously hired young musicians. This gave him insight into the latest trends in the music world as well as providing an apprenticeship for the numerous musicians who passed through his bands. Contemporary musicians who have played with Davis consistently speak with reverence about the time they spent with him, demonstrating his lasting influence, through today.

One musician who worked with Davis for a number of years, striking out on his own a few years before the *Bitches Brew* session, is the keyboardist Herbie Hancock. Hancock played acoustic piano throughout his time with Miles Davis's group, most notably with the sextet featuring (in addition to Davis on trumpet and Hancock on piano) Wayne Shorter (tenor saxophone), Ron Carter (bass), and Tony Williams (drums). In the mid to late 1960s, Hancock released a number of critically acclaimed albums for the Blue Note label, including *Maiden Voyage* and *Speak Like A Child*. By the time the 1970s rolled around, Hancock (just like Miles Davis before him) recognized that the funk of James Brown, Stevie Wonder, and Sly and The Family Stone was the style of music that was captivating the public and Hancock was keen on finding a way to be a part of the burgeoning rock-funk scene. Hancock had this to say in an

interview in 1975, "I always had a secret desire to... to play on some of Sly Stone's records. I really wanted to do that for two years. I was always amazed at every record he came up with. Then it came to me, why not do that kind of music? Not with him but with my own kind of group. It was music I believed in. It was honest music" (Nicholson 1998: 191). With this frame of mind, Hancock assembled a group of musicians in the fall of 1973 and proceeded to record the album *Headhunters*, an entirely unique recording and yet simultaneously an obvious nod to the funk music that was omnipresent around this time period. Hancock even titled one of the tunes "Sly," as a nod to Sly Stone. The breakaway hit from the album was the song, "Chameleon." It peaked at 13 on the *Billboard* pop chart and by the end of 1973, it had sold 750,000 units. These staggering numbers for a jazz album make it one of the best selling jazz albums of all time as well as the first to be certified gold. This success placed Hancock firmly in the eye of the public at large, both jazz and rock audiences were coming out in droves to hear him perform in concert. Hancock recalled playing a show shortly after *Headhunters* was released:

I walked in there, and one of the opening acts was on and I looked at the audience. I said, 'Wow, that's a lot of people in here tonight, who's the headliner?' And David Rubinson says, "Don't you know what's happening here. You're heading the show! (Nicholson 1998: 192)

From this point forward, Hancock, and a slew of other jazz artists, would work within this medium of jazz-rock fusion, or more specifically with Hancock, jazz-funk. Hancock in particular, would develop two parallel and mutually beneficial careers as both a jazz pianist (playing acoustic piano in settings such as a Miles Davis tribute group with Wayne Shorter, Ron Carter, and Tony Williams) and as a fusion artist operating primarily in the pop world. Another

artist with a solid jazz pedigree, the guitarist George Benson, would go one step further than Hancock and his peers, paving the way for a union (holy or unholy depending on your perspective) between the pop world and the jazz world.

George Benson began his musical apprenticeship with the highly regarded jazz organist, Jack McDuff. By the time he was 25, he was recording records under his own name and was even featured on a recording by Miles Davis in 1968, "Paraphernalia." He was aware of the huge potential for album sales outside of playing strictly jazz, and after being signed by the record label CTI, he tested the waters (somewhat successfully) with his reworking of The Beatles album *Abbey Road*, which he called *The Other Side of Abbey Road*. In addition to playing guitar on this album, Benson laid down vocals on the song "Here Comes The Sun." Benson would incorporate his singing chops on a later release for Warner Brothers record label, and to a level of success previously unheard of for any jazz artist. In 1976, Benson's album *Breezin'* was released. It featured the eventual breakaway hit, "This Masquerade." This single propelled Benson to superstardom. It would become the first jazz record ever to go platinum. Additionally, it peaked at number 10 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 and won the Grammy in 1977 for Record of the Year. Since the immense success from this recording, Benson has gone on to have a prolific career as a recording artist and a live performer. He has continuously recorded both as a guitarist and a vocalist, with continued success. Most importantly (for the purpose of this study), with the crossover success Benson had, he paved the way for other jazz artist to tap into the mainstream market, a market much more lucrative than the jazz market.

At the same time that Benson recorded the breakaway album *Breezin'*, a radio station out of Howard University in Washington, D.C. started a new music program which would become

the template for future radio programs devoted to the smooth jazz format. The radio show was called, “Quiet Storm” and its purpose was to provide music, late in the night, with mellow dynamics, easy-going tempos and rhythms, and an overall mood of relaxation and romance. Initially, the show programming utilized R&B artists such as Smokey Robinson (whose song “Quiet Storm” inspired the show title), Al Green, Marvin Gaye, Barry White, and Bill Withers. Additionally, pop-jazz recordings of artists such as Wes Montgomery (guitar), Grover Washington, Jr (saxophone), Chuck Mangione (trumpet), Al Jarreau (vocals), David Sanborn (saxophone), and groups such as Spyro Gyro, the Crusaders, and Jeff Lorber Fusion were to become fixtures on the Quiet Storm program. The popularity of this program and numerous programs that were soon emulating the as-yet-unnamed format “smooth jazz” led many industry insiders to believe that there was a gap in radio programming that was potentially going to be filled by this New Age, easy listening, happy jazz. To fill this gap, certain artists, music recording and radio industry heavyweights, and a new marketing company out of Chicago called Broadcast Architecture would coalesce to create the smooth jazz format and usher in a level of success for instrumental jazz artist that was unprecedented.

### Market Research and The Rise of The G-Man

Jazz-pop music, as previously discussed, did not form out of thin air. An individual could draw a line straight back to the 1930s when jazz artists such as Louis Armstrong and Lester Young were taking the pop songs from the then-current hit shows on Broadway and creating their own versions of them. Jazz musicians are, on the one hand, attempting to create something that is a reflection of their personal artistic voice, and, on the other hand, they also have to eat and pay bills just like the rest of society. The line between artistic integrity and commercial success is a blurry line and all the more so when a format like smooth jazz appears; a format in which a saxophonist (Jay Beckenstein of Spyro Gyro) who has benefited from this genre, provides this comment regarding the economics of smooth jazz: "...smooth jazz isn't a musical style--it is a radio format" (Washburne 2004: 133). Beckenstein's opinion is relatively true, especially when it is viewed in light of the marketing research that has played a highly influential role in the growth of smooth jazz.

In 1986, the Metromedia broadcasting company formed a research group to explore the potential for finding a previously undiscovered radio market to rebrand their Los Angeles based station, KMET. The think tank consisted of Owen Leach (Leach Research, Los Angeles), a young executive at Metromedia, Paul Goldstein, and Frank Cody (former NBC program director and producer of 'Jazz with David Sanborn' which ran from 1980 to 1985). The group came up with a number of ideas for radio formats including a specialist 'sex talk' radio station, a mobile rock station called 'The Rock n' Roll Adventure' and a full-time Spanish language station (Barber 2010). Eventually they settled on a format that featured what would now be called smooth jazz. Cody himself describes the niche to be filled by this new format as follows: "...the

commercial jazz stations that existed back then played traditional jazz and they didn't really want to touch a lot of this 'happy jazz' as they called it. The idea was to put together a radio station that had one third 'New Age,' one third 'contemporary jazz,' and one third of this vocal music that was being ignored (Al Jarreau, George Benson, etc)" (Barber 2010: 54). The research group gave it the working-title 'The Malibu Suite' and on February 14, 1987, KMET was relaunched in Los Angeles as 'The Wave' KTWV-FM 94.7. The Wave went on to become one of the most profitable radio stations in the United States. The success of this venture would lead Frank Cody and Owen Leach to create their own marketing firm which would cement the smooth jazz format.

As it was mentioned earlier, the company formed by Cody and Leach was named Broadcast Architecture (B.A.), based out of Chicago. It was solely responsible for the naming of the smooth jazz format as well as providing the new technology and research to create playlists for any radio station wishing to convert to this new radio format. The media company Clear Channel, which owned and operated hundreds of radio stations throughout the country, was one client of B.A. and as a result of this symbiotic relationship, by the 1990s most major urban area in the United States had a smooth jazz radio station. This format tapped into something that was not only the latest trend, but was reaching a demographic that was willing to shell out money for records and concerts. The success of the recording artist Kenny G is testament to this fact.

### The G-Man Cometh

In 1977, Kenny Gorelick (it wasn't until after he embarked on a solo career that he changed it to Kenny G) joined the jazz rock fusion band, Jeff Lorber Fusion. Within this musical organization, Gorelick honed his musical chops and in particular, cultivated his smooth jazz approach to playing the saxophone. He played the tenor saxophone and flute with the group, and it wasn't until his solo career at Arista Records that he became primarily a soprano saxophonist (the instrument with which he is most commonly identified). In 1982, Gorelick was signed to Arista Records as a solo artist, under his new, shortened name and title for his first release, *Kenny G*. This album was followed by *G Force*, which sold over 200,000 copies. His 1986 album, *Duotones*, was even more successful. The album remained on the *Billboard* charts well into 1987. In tandem with the marketing influence of Broadcast Architecture, Kenny G helped to establish the creation of the smooth jazz format. The assistant music director at KTWV 94.7 FM, Ralph Stewart, describes the role Kenny G's music plays in the business:

We play a lot of instrumentalists, but Kenny G is the only one that is a household name.

In fact, we often use him to explain what we do at the station to someone who has never listened in" (Washburne 2004: 132).

Well into the 1990s, Kenny G continued with a string of hit records. It is worth noting that this was the first time since the Swing era of the 1940s that a form of jazz music received wide exposure on commercial radio. The smooth jazz format was spreading like wild fire throughout the 1990s. The ratings that smooth jazz radio stations received made them one of the most lucrative formats in all of commercial radio. The support for smooth jazz artists through airplay on the radio cannot be understated. It provides advertisement for their recordings and

subsequently increases their ability to attract larger audiences for their live performances.

Contrast this with what was happening with “traditional” jazz radio. In 1994, the last commercial jazz station (not adopting the smooth jazz format), KJAZ of Alameda, California, went off the air (Washburne 2004). This left only a smattering of public radio stations throughout the country as the only venue for traditional jazz artists to get airplay on the radio. Unfortunately, many of these public radio stations have reduced or entirely cut out jazz from their programming as well. This situation potentially leads jazz artists to reconsider their approach to recording and marketing their art form. This leaves them with a tough decision, go along with the trends and attempt to fit into the smooth jazz mold, or watch as other artists reap the benefits of this lucrative market. For reasons that will not be speculated here, Kenny G was and is obviously comfortable with riding the smooth jazz current, straight downstream.

To a large degree, Kenny G’s success is not even related to the music he plays. The marketing of Kenny G is what really set his career apart from the typical jazz artist. Since the rise of the Beatles and the Rock groups that followed, the way in which major record companies promote and market artists has become highly sophisticated. With regard to Kenny G, the release of his album *Classics In The Key Of G* (1999) demonstrated the power of aggressive marketing strategies to sell an album. Coinciding with the release of the album, Kenny G went on a television campaign on major talk shows such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, was featured in a PBS special, a satellite media tour, sales promotions at Starbucks, and a Barnes & Noble’s Internet sales site with Kenny G as the featured artist. One clever bit of self-promotion and marketing Kenny G did was in 1997, when he earned a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for playing the longest note ever played on the saxophone. Utilizing a technique called



“circular breathing,” he held a note for over 45 minutes. This is a technique that a multitude of musicians learn and incorporate when playing music with long passages where there is no time to breath. Apparently, Kenny G (and possibly with some input from his management) saw the potential for publicity with this performance-stunt. It worked. I can distinctly remember seeing clips of this record-breaking event on news shows the week it happened. To give you an idea of the commercial success Kenny G has achieved, here is a partial list of albums he recorded and the sales-level each album received (platinum = 1,000,000 units sold):

*G Force* (1983) (Platinum)

*Gravity* (1985) (Platinum)

*Duotones* (1986) (5x Platinum)

*Silhouette* (1988) (4x Platinum)

*Breathless* (1992) (12x Platinum)

*Miracles: The Holiday Album* (1994) (8x Platinum)

*The Moment* (1996) (4x Platinum)

*Classics In The Key Of G* (1999) (Platinum)

*Faith: A Holiday Album* (1999) (3x Platinum)

These sale figures are in another world when compared to any other “jazz artist” today or any time in the past as well. His sales totals for his 1994 release *Miracles* gave him the title of having the top selling holiday album of all time. Not even Bing Crosby’s classic holiday recordings can keep up with Kenny G’s commercial success. With this incredible amount of success, it would seem inevitable that there would be a backlash. Even if his music wasn’t a lightning rod for critics of smooth jazz, a saxophonist who outsells any jazz artist who came before him or since is going to have his fair share of detractors.

### The Backlash against the G-Man

Here are a few comments demonstrating the ire for Kenny G that comes from numerous professional jazz musicians and critics:

My gut reaction is that it's like Paul Whiteman trying to make a lady out of jazz...Kenny G is not a jazz musician. He's the only person I've seen who is able to smirk while playing the saxophone. --pianist, Fred Hersch (Washburne 2004: 125)

Scholarly articles discussing Kenny G are an obvious contradiction in terms. Now if you want to consider a treatise on Kenny G humor, I think you might have something... -- Chicago critic, Neil Tesser (Washburne 2004: 125)

The most poignant example comes from Pat Metheny's letter to *Harper's Magazine*, in response to Kenny G's recording of "What A Wonderful World," in which Kenny G overdubbed himself alongside the trumpeter Louis Armstrong's classic recording of the tune:

When Kenny G decided that it was appropriate for him to defile the music of the man who is probably the greatest jazz musician who has ever lived by spewing his lame-ass, jive, pseudo-bluesy, out-of-tune, noodling, wimped-out, fucked-up playing all over one of the great Louis's tracks (even one of his lesser ones), he did something that I would not have imagined to be possible. He, in one move, through his unbelievably pretentious and calloused decision to embark on this most cynical of musical paths, shit all over the graves of all musicians past and present who have risked their lives by going out there on the road for years and years developing their own music inspired by the standards of

grace that Louis Armstrong brought to every single note he played over an amazing lifetime as a musician. By disrespecting Louis, his legacy, and, by default, everyone who has ever tried to do something positive with improvised music and what it can be, Kenny G reached a new low point in modern culture. We let this slide at our peril. (*Harper's Magazine* August 2000: 25)

This kind of vitriolic writing, especially from one musician and directed towards another, demonstrates the degree to which Kenny G and his brand of music elicits strong criticism. The backlash against Kenny G doesn't end here. In 2001, the widely-read jazz magazine, *Jazziz*, featured a cover story regarding the furor surrounding Kenny G, "Oh my God, they killed Kenny: The attacks are relentless, but the G-man endures." The journalist, Michael Roberts wrote the article in an attempt to examine the music behind this figure and explore whether or not Kenny G is the most misunderstood man in music. His article was centered on a listening experiment. Roberts arranged to listen to each of Kenny G's 12 albums (1982's *Kenny G* through 1999's *Classics in the Key of G*), from beginning to end, consecutively. The experiment took him approximately 10 hours to complete. It is a rather humorous piece and the accompanying photographs show the journalist in varying states of disbelief and exhaustion. He concludes his article with this succinct thought:

I'm now able to look at Kenny G's work with what I consider hard-earned objectivity-- and it seems to me that even though listening to almost 10 hours of his work nearly reduced me to tapioca, Kenny still doesn't deserve all the criticism that's come his way. Since the mid-'80s, in my opinion, he hasn't played for fellow artists, or for jazz buffs, or for musical devotees of any kind, really. He's played, it seems to me, for people who

want to switch off their brain for a few minutes or hours or maybe the rest of their lives, and he does it very well. That doesn't appeal to Pat Metheny, and it doesn't appeal to me. But for those of you who are tired of thinking, Kenny G's your man. Just don't listen to all of his albums in a row, I couldn't take the guilt. (Roberts 2001: 44)

I believe that much of the reason that Kenny G is such a lightning rod for this kind of negative attention is tied up with the convoluted history of "jazz." As evidenced by Metheny's words and those of many others, when the smooth jazz format is brought into a discussion of the narrative of jazz history, it is often with derision, if it is included at all. In 2001, the well-known documentarist, Ken Burns, released the ten-part series *Jazz*, first shown on public television stations throughout the country and subsequently made available for purchase. There were also accompanying CD compilations releases as well as a book. It was widely hailed as a step towards bringing more attention to the jazz art form to the masses. However, it was also criticized for its general glossing over of the past thirty years (1970s thru 1990s), including no mention of Kenny G and his smooth jazz cohorts. This omission is not a unique characteristic of the Ken Burns documentary on jazz. In general, the overtly commercial nature of the smooth jazz format seems to have kept smooth jazz from being included in the jazz-history narrative

The generally accepted narrative of jazz history has come under much needed criticism in recent years. In particular, the ethnomusicologist, Scott DeVeaux, has written much about the subject and provided some insightful comments into the construction of the jazz narrative:

I am increasingly aware of this narrative's limitations, especially its tendency to impose a kind of deadening uniformity of cultural meaning on the music, and jazz history's patent inability to explain current trends in any cogent form...The narratives we have inherited

to describe the history of jazz retain the patterns of outmoded forms of thought, especially the assumption that the progress of jazz as an art necessitates increased distance from the popular. If we, as historians, critics, and educators, are to adapt to these new realities, we must be willing to construct new narratives to explain them. (DeVeaux 1991: 553)

Whether one likes smooth jazz or not, the millions of album sales generated by it are difficult if not impossible to ignore. In response to the public's appetite for smooth jazz, there are now collegiate music programs (including Berklee School of Music and University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music) offering courses in smooth jazz to students training to become professional musicians. Smooth jazz is a part of the musical landscape and for better or worse, it is intrinsically tied up with the jazz art world. But, as far as its continuance as a dominant presence on the FM dial, recent signs point to the possibility that smooth jazz has already seen its best days.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

### Epilogue: The Sun is Setting on Smooth Jazz Radio?

Smooth jazz radio stations were omnipresent on the FM dial throughout the 1990s and well into the 2000s. Its dominance was a confluence of forces ,within the music communities, the marketing and economics end of the music business, and the cultural forces which play a hand in everything that takes place in our various social worlds. That said, the radio stations that have been at the helm of the rise of smooth jazz format on the radio are beginning to change course. “The Wave,” based out of Los Angeles, and partially the creation of Broadcast Architecture’s Frank Cody, announced in 2009 that it was going to change its format. Instead of featuring the smooth jazz format, which it had done for the past 22 years, it was now going to convert to the format known as “adult album alternative.” Listeners who once tuned in to “The Wave” for Kenny G and the like, would now have to go to the station’s HD frequency, which they stream on the internet. This move away from smooth jazz is largely the result of a new piece of technology being used to create market research for radio programming. Replacing Broadcast Architecture’s “Mix Master” is the music rating company, Arbitron Inc.’s PPM, a pager-sized device that records the listening activities of the individual. These data are uploaded online on a daily basis and provides a more precise look at the listening habits of the public. More to the point, these data show that the average smooth jazz listener is now out of the age-range of the average radio listener. The audience for smooth jazz is no longer the target demographic for radio advertisers.

## Discussion

### Timeline Charting the Creation of Smooth Jazz

1969

Release of Miles Davis's album *Bitches Brew* (1st "fusion" hit)

1973

Release of *Headhunters* by Herbie Hancock (Miles Davis alumni) solidifies fusion as a format

1976

George Benson (guitarist) has a breakout hit album, *Breezin* (featuring vocals on the track, "Masquerade")

"Quiet Storm" (WHUR radio station) is launched at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

1977

Jeff Lorber "Fusion" is formed (w/ Kenny Goerlick on saxophone; not yet known as Kenny G)

1986

Kenny G releases *Duo Tones*, which stays on the Billboard chart thru 1987

1987

"The Wave" (KTWV radio station) is launched out of Los Angeles, CA

1988

Creation of Broadcast Architecture and "The Mix Master"

1993-4

KTWV & WNUA begin programming "smooth jazz" exclusively

Last commercial "non-smooth" jazz radio station (KJAZ, San Francisco) goes off the air

2001

Release of Ken Burns' documentary, "Jazz"

It is a 10-part series which largely ignores the fusion era and is criticized for the omission.

2008-9

Numerous radio stations drop the smooth jazz format due to poor performance in their respective market(s)

The topic of this study, music, is a subject which I interject into virtually every facet of my life. Within academia and the realm of sociological study, I have explored a variety of aspects of music production, performance, and consumption. While exploring the existing body of literature for this study, I found that there were a number of precedents within the writings of the towering figures of sociological thought. This includes Max Weber and his thorough and illuminating studies regarding the development of our modern world and the accompanying rationalization and bureaucratization of our life worlds. Weber's exhaustive exploration of the modernization of our social worlds demonstrates that as time marches on, there are fewer and fewer aspects of our lives left untouched by the effects of rationalization. Both our professional and personal realms bear the mark of this modern, rationalized society we inhabit. Within the



realm of the creative and performing arts, this rings as true as it does in any other aspect of our social world. It is a double-edged sword, with benefits such as unheralded access to all forms of media and information accompanying the rise of the internet and the digital revolution.

Additionally, potential hazards appear such as how artists will continue to receive financial rewards for the art while simultaneously attempting to put their art out into the digital ether for the whole world to experience. It is worth mentioning that this increased rationalization of the music infrastructure is not solely the province of smooth jazz. Music executives operating in Country, Hip Hop, Rock, World Music, and practically any other genre have gone through similar transitions as record companies attempt to increase their profits at every turn. It is apparent that after the music world recovered from the initial shock of Beatlemania and its unprecedented profits from record sales and concert sales, the leaders in the major music companies have continuously sought to replicate the success of that shaggy-haired quartet from Liverpool, England.

As discussed in Howard Becker's study of the social world surrounding the production of art (*Art Worlds* 1982) there are entire bureaucratic infrastructures created for the sole purpose of supporting the production and distribution of artistic products, such as music albums. Recording engineers, managers, instrument makers, concert promoters, radio DJs, music journalists, and many other individuals all provide important (even if unnoticed and invisible to the public-at-large) services which contribute to the eventual product, in the case of music, the song you and I end up listening to. The music industry is exactly that, an industry.

Even with the immense resources provided by the music industry, there is still no magic formula to uncover who will be the next multi-million selling recording artist. This undeniable

fact gives credence to the contemporary sociologist Richard Peterson's work illustrating the cyclical nature of cultural forms (such as music). His work provides support for the supposition that the smooth jazz format could be yet one more example of the cycles in popular music trends. Furthermore, this cyclical trend in popularity is not unique to smooth jazz. It can be found in other music genres such as Country, Hip-Hop, Rock, Club/House music, and many others. There are parallel cyclical trends in other art forms such as cinema, fashion, and television. In all likelihood, there are a whole bevy of artists operating in yet-unnamed genres in the waiting to become the next big thing.

The sociologist Peter Berger (*An Invitation to Sociology* 1963) impresses upon all of us who conduct sociological research this important message; the sociologist does not look at phenomena that nobody else is aware of, but, that he/she looks at the same phenomena in a different way (Berger 1963). In the words of Berger, we inject a motif of "debunking or "seeing through" into all of the work we do as sociologists. We attempt to go well beyond what is offered to us at face value, to look into underlying motives and relationships between events, people, and places, which are at times difficult if not impossible to recognize with a cursory glance. Furthermore, the critical eye we use in our research and in our discourse with our fellow educators and students, can only lead to a much richer and diverse dialogue across all boundaries, within and without the ivory towers of academia.

It is with this mindset, that I explored the immense popularity of Kenny G and his cohorts. The rise of smooth jazz demonstrates the confluence of societal and cultural forces and the numerous actors who contribute to the patterns and trends that sociologists strive to examine methodically. In spite of various musicians, critics, journalists, and music fans who vilify Kenny

G and essentially make out him out to be the sole responsible party for the success of smooth jazz, this study demonstrates that there is a whole host of individuals and organizations which contribute to the rise and fall of trends such as smooth jazz..

And so it goes, the cyclical nature of the popular trends within the music industry continues. In the next five or ten years, there will in all likelihood be another massively popular music format that gets under the skin of some group of music critics and/or musicians. The discourse will continue, ad nauseam. And most definitely, as long as people keep asking me, I will keep on telling people that ask, “Nothing against him; but, just because I play the saxophone does not mean that I like the music of Kenny G.”

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