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Smooth jazz: a case study in the relationships between commercial radio formats, audience research and music production

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationships between three areas of activity within the music and media industries: the construction of music formats for commercial radio programming, audience research and music production. With specific reference to two companies located in the United States, this research explores some of the ways in which these practices impact upon one another and help to develop the organization of music genres into discrete, strictly controlled, radio formats. In order to illustrate the relationship between music formatting and audience research, this work makes a case study of Broadcast Architecture, a Los Angeles-based research and consultancy firm. Prominent in the radio industry since 1988, Broadcast Architecture is the primary exponent of the 'smooth jazz' format and a leader in audience research technologies. To examine the relationships between Broadcast Architecture and the production of music used in smooth jazz radio programming, the case study considers the work of GRP Records, a popular jazz label established in 1982. The findings of this research are used as a basis for asking questions about the relationships between musical creativity, radio programming and audience tastes. The case of GRP Records, which has existed as both an independent jazz label and a subsidiary of major labels, illustrates

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how record companies can cater to the needs of radio formats and therefore the ways in which radio formats can exert influence upon the music available in the record market. The primary research presented herein draws upon a series of interviews with the founders and senior executives of Broadcast Architecture plus the founders, staff and artists affiliated with GRP Records.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE 'SMOOTH JAZZ' FORMAT AND ITS KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Since the late 1980s, the radio industry and its research consultants have parlayed the appeal of pop-influenced jazz into a music format carefully tailored to a specific target audience. This format, known as 'smooth jazz', provides adult-orientated music aimed primarily at the 25–34-year-old 'upscale' adult professional (Watrous 1997). Smooth jazz typically offers a mix of jazz-influenced instrumental pop music and rhythm and blues (R&B). Nicholson (1998: 222) defines smooth jazz as 'airplay-friendly instrumental pop-jazz' featuring 'slick production values and musical hooks from contemporary popular music'. Washburne has acknowledged that the sound of smooth jazz 'stems from a long tradition of pop and jazz mixings' (Washburne 2004: 132). Essentially, this is instrumental music, led by saxophones or guitars, that combines some jazz improvisation with the harmonic and rhythmic conventions of pop, rock and R&B.

The roots of the smooth jazz format can be traced to so-called 'beautiful music' stations in the United States. Barnes (1988: 29) records that this easy listening format largely featured 'musak-style' instrumental renditions of pop hits, supported by an ageing demographic. Indeed, this sort of music is often dismissed as 'elevator music' (Barnes 1988: 29). During the 1970s and 1980s, the radio format most closely associated with jazz-pop was known as 'Quiet Storm'. The Quiet Storm format began in 1976 in Washington, DC, at WHUR 96.3, an 'adult contemporary' (AC) station owned by Howard University. Taking its title from Smokey Robinson's 1975 record, *A Quiet Storm*, station intern Melvin Lindsey developed the format as part of the station's late-night programming. Championed by WHUR station manager Cathy Hughes, the show featured mellow R&B, soul and R&B-influenced jazz offerings aimed at the urban, African-American adult. The format provided an intimate, relaxing experience designed for late-night listening, a key to its appeal among adult audiences.

The coherence of the smooth jazz sound stems primarily from criteria established through audience research activity. Washburne (2004: 132) has argued that the label 'smooth jazz' is a construct that originated in consumer research studies conducted by radio consulting firm Broadcast Architecture, whose executives 'construct playlists based off listener surveys and detailed market analysis of mass reception patterns' (Washburne 2004: 133). By developing data-gathering methods and tools for audience research, companies like Broadcast Architecture take advantage of radio's reciprocal relationship with its listeners. The construction of music playlists based on audience feedback typically means that the average smooth jazz station's song catalogue numbers between 30 and 40 songs and that these selections are played in six- to eight-hour rotations, with minimal variation from week to week (Washburne 2004: 133). Like earlier easy listening formats, smooth jazz has been described pejoratively as "'jazz-lite" "happy jazz" "hot tub jazz" and "fuzak"'

(Washburne 2004: 124). Bayles (1996: 369) also uses the term 'fusak', a portmanteau of 'fusion' and 'musak', to denote a category of music that she has called a 'sedative for yuppies [and] weary commuters'. In the case of jazz audiences, such views carry a special resonance because they are bound up in discourses around jazz that posit the music as a highly autonomous form of art music, a position shared by a large proportion of jazz histories (Gioia 1997; Gridley 1988; Sales 1992; Taylor 1986; Tirro 1993; Williams 1970) and challenged by an increasing number of scholars (DeVeaux 1991; Frith 2007; Gabbard 1995; Stanbridge 2004; Tomlinson 1992; Washburne 2004).

Despite such criticism, smooth jazz remains a commercially successful format. In recent years, singers with adult appeal, such as Norah Jones, have crossed over from easy listening formats like smooth jazz to the mainstream pop charts. Jones spent 97 weeks on the charts with her record *Come Away with Me* (2002), selling over 25 million copies worldwide and receiving five Grammy awards (Keightley 2004: 387). Smooth jazz has also become something of an outlet for R&B-influenced popular music, with artists like Amy Winehouse, Kool and the Gang, Stevie Wonder and Randy Crawford featuring on compilation sets. The majority of smooth jazz radio stations bookend instrumental jazz-pop tracks with soft R&B vocal music from artists like Luther Vandross, Sade, Anita Baker and Marvin Gaye, or crossover AC hits from pop artists like Celine Dion and Mariah Carey. McGee (2008: 6) notes that major labels, such as Warner Brothers, market their smooth jazz through involvement with various international jazz festivals and promotions via credit card reward programmes, as well as popular television commercials and soap operas. In addition, smooth jazz music samplers are available at popular coffee chains and upscale food outlets. Smooth jazz is frequently tied in with commercial sponsors: from smooth jazz cruises and festivals to wine tasting, golf and luxury living magazines. There is also a smooth jazz television channel and there are numerous Internet radio stations (McGee 2008: 7). This broadening of the traditional sound and function of jazz across the music and media industries has developed in large part through the commercial aims of format radio across the United States and its relationships with audiences and record labels.

Since its inception in the late 1980s, the success of the smooth jazz format in commercial radio markets across the United States has helped to reinvigorate jazz as popular music. According to DeVeaux (1995: 2), in 1992, 28 per cent of adult Americans (approximately 60 million) listened to jazz radio. DeVeaux (1995: 2) notes that this is 'attributable in part to the spread of new pop-jazz formats'. Indeed, in the United States, smooth jazz stations are typically market leaders in the 35–64 age demographic (Watrous 1997). By the end of the 1990s, there were more than 200 such stations across the United States (Nicholson 2002: 232). By 2004, smooth jazz had achieved some of the highest Arbitron ratings, with 'combined advertising revenues of over \$190 million each year' (Washburne 2004: 133).

Music for a New Age

Frank Cody, co-founder of Broadcast Architecture, began his career as a programme director for NBC's 'The Source' and also instigated the successful 'Jazz Show with David Sanborn' that ran between 1980 and 1985. In 1986, John Kluge, owner of the Metromedia broadcasting company, sold his television stations to 20th Century Fox and rewarded his general managers by permitting

them to engineer a leveraged buy-out of Metromedia's radio division. KMET had been a successful rock radio station in Los Angeles during the 1960s, but was now floundering under formidable competition. Carl Brazell, part of Kluge's management team, came to Cody with a request for a new radio format. Brazell wanted to know if KMET could regain its former position, and, specifically, 'whether there was a format not being exploited in the market with a large enough audience to garner significant share' (Archer 2007). Cody recalls: 'Carl said: "I want something that is big, fast and safe."'

Brazell commissioned a study of the Los Angeles radio market with Owen Leach of Leach Research. Cody relates: 'Owen set about staging a "think tank" at his offices in Princeton, New Jersey.' For three days, a team consisting of Cody, Leach and a young executive named Paul Goldstein collaborated on finding an untapped radio market niche. Among suggestions of a specialist 'sex talk' radio station, a mobile rock station called 'The Rock n' Roll Adventure' and a full-time Spanish language station, the research team soon arrived at a possible format they called 'The Malibu Suite'. The moniker was the working title for what would later become known as 'Smooth Jazz'. With the addition of programme director Christine Brodie, now the Vice President of Affiliate Relations at Broadcast Architecture, Cody and Goldstein 'holed up in an off-site corporate apartment – "the bunker" – to establish the musical criteria for the new station' (Archer 2007). For six weeks, the team worked to establish the parameters of the format. Brodie attributes their reasoning to three key trends: 'firstly, Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1986) sold millions and had no radio support; Windham Hill, the New Age label, sold millions of records without radio; then melodic jazz became huge.'

Archer (2007) points out that by the mid-1980s there was a considerable body of jazz-pop music made by popular artists like George Benson, David Sanborn, Pat Metheny, Dave Grusin, Earl Klugh, Jeff Lorber and Al Jarreau. Nevertheless, despite the popularity of easy listening formats such as Quiet Storm, commercial radio had yet to address jazz-pop in an organized fashion: 'the genesis of smooth jazz, similar to the birth of free-form progressive FM radio in the '60s and modern rock in the late '70s, was music for which there was an audience, but no radio airplay' (Archer 2007). Cody describes the problem as follows: 'the commercial jazz stations that existed back then played traditional jazz and they really didn't want to touch a lot of this "happy jazz" as they called it.' The research team believed that one radio format addressing these trends would satisfy a gap in the radio market: '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.' Cody recalls that all of their potential formats were tested on the public, with one clear winner:

We tested our ideas with storyboards, mock-up advertising and also some prototypical tapes that we played for people by doing intercept research at malls throughout southern California. Doggone, it if wasn't the 'Malibu Suite' idea that most people were excited about.

Carl Brazell and KMET's General Manager, Howard Bloom, decided to relaunch the station, rebranding KMET as 'The Wave' KTWV-FM 94.7.

The Wave debuted in Los Angeles on 14 February 1987. Cody notes that great care was taken with the marketing of what they now called 'Wave Music':

We were a little leery of calling it 'New Age' music because that has a lot of baggage with alternative spirituality and crystals and mumbo jumbo associated with it. So our slogan for the station was 'Music for a New Age'.

As stations such as KTWV (Los Angeles), KIFM (San Diego) and KKSF (San Francisco) began to achieve strong ratings with this style of programming, a legion of other stations began the transition to the 'Wave' format. They included WNUA (Chicago), for whom Frank Cody was a consultant, Breezin' 100.7 (Milwaukee), KHIH (Denver) and WQCD (CD101.9 in New York). Today, The Wave is among the most profitable radio stations in the United States, with gross revenue of over \$50 million (Archer 2007).

BROADCAST ARCHITECTURE

In 1988, as a result of the success of The Wave, Frank Cody was invited by Owen Leach to form a consulting business, Cody/Leach Broadcast Architecture. The company, now simply known as Broadcast Architecture, works in 25 different countries conducting audience research for the radio industry. It was during a Broadcast Architecture research study for WNUA (Chicago) that the term 'smooth jazz' was first used by a listener giving feedback on the station. Allen Kepler is the President of Broadcast Architecture and was the Marketing Director for WNUA at that time:

The term 'smooth jazz' did not exist on a radio station until late 1989. We had gone through a bunch of names: 'Music for a New Age', 'Music that Makes You Feel Good'. Broadcast Architecture came in and did research managed by Frank Cody. The term 'smooth jazz' came from a listener in one of the focus groups. I actually sat there and saw it come out of a listener's mouth.

Kepler's comment reveals something of the democratic nature of the relationship between radio and its audience. Not only can the construction of music formats rely heavily on the opinions of listeners, but also the smooth jazz format received its name from a suggestion made by a research candidate. Kepler recalls that the audience, who were attracted to WNUA's accessible blend of jazz and pop, were having trouble classifying the music on the station:

People would say 'well, it's jazz, but it's not like a nightclub with smoke and a bunch of old guys playing upright basses'. They would try to put a feeling on it like 'light' or 'relaxing' because it's easy-going; it's not quite as complicated.

Frank Cody's recollection of the pivotal session is as follows:

As though it was yesterday, I can remember this African-American woman in Chicago and she was a big fan of WNUA. She was asked: 'what do you call this music? Is it jazz?' She said: 'with this music, the musicians are trying to make you feel good. It doesn't have any hard edges. You know what it is? It's smooth jazz.' Light bulbs went off over our heads.

We all stood up in the room behind the one-way mirror and said: 'oh my God, that's it, that's what it is.'

The station was now able to communicate its programming philosophy with two simple words. Despite Kepler's and Cody's enthusiasm for the phrase, WNUA's programme director was concerned that 'Smooth Jazz' targeted too narrow an audience and so the station temporarily adopted the slogan 'Smooth Rock, Smooth Jazz'. Under the direction of General Manager John Gehron, 'Smooth Rock' was dropped. Allen Kepler recalls: 'I remember we had some painted wall sides in Chicago. We had people go out and paint over "Smooth Rock."'

Audience research

Broadcast Architecture's work is focused on the use of interactive research technologies. These technologies allow the company to test music on a station's audience and to draw conclusions from their responses. Typically, the process is intended to inform programmers of the songs that listeners prefer. This kind of research is also sometimes called 'auditorium research' because it is frequently carried out in a hotel conference room or theatre. Prior to the use of electronic systems, audience research data had to be manually recorded on paper and analysed by hand. Allen Kepler recalls that 'up until 1988, all music testing was done with listeners being recruited to listen to a tape where a song plays and they fill in a bubble, like they're taking a university exam'. Christine Brodie was the Director of Programming for The Wave for fourteen years prior to joining Broadcast Architecture. She confirms that Broadcast Architecture tests all of its repertoire:

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.

In Brodie's view, the process of testing music in this way empowers the consumer by allowing them to determine, through their emotional responses, the sounds that will become available over the airwaves. Ahlqvist (2001: 349) notes: 'audience research is valued because it maximises the likelihood that only the most "viable" records are integrated into the station's music programming.' If 'viability' is a measurement of the audience's desire to hear a particular track, in favour of others presented in a given listening session, then music formatting is a reaction to audience consensus. Evidently, this research activity takes place in a controlled environment, rather than being integrated into the consumer's daily routine, and some pre-selection of the music included in the test must already have taken place at the hands of programmers in order to make the process feasible. Moreover, the cross section of audience members that volunteer to attend research exercises may not be representative of the audience as a whole. Despite these potential problems, the research methodology and the agency of the listener have become important components in programming format radio.

It can be understood, then, that research data allow heavily invested companies such as radio stations and movie studios to gauge the success of

a product prior to costly broadcast or distribution. Radio programmers and research consultants target the demographic complexities of each city, tailoring what they play according to these taxonomies. It is for this reason that the 25–55 age group has been described as the ‘money demographic’ (Zimmerman 1991). Berland (1990: 189) notes: ‘the format narrative proposes that communities are defined and dispersed as taste communities framed within boundaries of age and contemporaneity, and secondarily around patterns of record or other commodity consumption.’ In order for commercial radio to successfully target these ‘taste communities’, the interests and consumption patterns of listeners must be examined in detail. Frank Cody states that the digitization of audience response data allows for a minute level of analysis:

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.

Clearly, it is important to consider the discursive field in which music programmers construct their knowledge about how to programme music and connect with listeners. Berland (1990: 183) argues that there is a ‘growing inseparability of the two functions: market research and programme direction’. As a result, ‘industry and research orientations converge to produce subformats that target very narrow audience niches with highly standardized and repetitive music programming’ (Ahlkvist 2001: 352–53). In this scenario, an increasing number of listeners are exposed to fewer and fewer songs and thus programming becomes increasingly deterministic. Such potentially homogenizing practices raise questions about music as a commodity and the conservative nature of audience tastes. Frank Cody is aware that audience testing can encourage lowest common denominator programming. He notes: ‘when utilised properly, it’s very powerful, but research is only as good as the people who observe, analyse and respond to the data. In the wrong hands, it can be very destructive to creativity.’ Allen Kepler also concedes that ‘anything that is mass-marketed is not going to be outrageously, wildly unique’.

Again, it is clear that a tension exists between record companies and radio stations, both of whom need music, but use it for different purposes. Frank Cody agrees when he asserts that

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.

Hennion and Meadel (1986: 286) also concur with this statement when they note that ‘the radio audience and record buyers do not coincide and the one is not included within the other’. Indeed, with advertising-supported radio formats such as smooth jazz, there is little incentive for radio to share in the music industry’s desire to ‘break’ records or sell through to retail. Hennion and Meadel (1986: 286) call this dichotomy a ‘mismatch of the two principal musical media’. Ahlkvist (2001: 343) makes the distinction clear: ‘record companies use radio to promote their records and stations use music to target listeners that are attractive to advertisers.’ Christine Brodie confirms that this is absolutely

the position of Broadcast Architecture: 'more listeners means more adverts, means more revenue. There's no reason for a smooth jazz station to exist in the commercial market otherwise.'

How, then, do these kinds of formatting practices impact upon musicians and record labels who seek exposure through radio? If an audience has been 'sliced and diced into dozens of minute demographically, psychographically and sociologically fine-tuned targets' (Barnes 1988: 10), are musicians and record labels obliged to construct music to appeal to these groups? And should they? Frank Cody notes that with the smooth jazz format, the typical jazz tenet of improvisation is not a desirable attribute:

The trick with success in commercial radio is to have people listen for long periods of time. We found that extended, intense solos drove people away from the radio experience. The downside of that is that you could blame this technique on making things safe.

Cody summarizes the parameters of jazz on commercial radio when he says:

What really works for commercial music is for a melody to get stuck in people's heads. We're almost like drug dealers, selling melodies to people. Once testing was introduced, then we were able to fine-tune our instincts; we were able to make our bets safer in terms of content and reduce the risk factor.

Cody's 'drug dealer' analogy provides a clear example of how commercial radio views its relationships with its audiences and the tools employed to nurture these bonds. However, commercial radio's ongoing fear of short attention spans continues to be problematic for purveyors of less mainstream styles of music. Jazz-rock guitarist Al Di Meola argues that smooth jazz programming significantly underestimates the audience's facility to appreciate a challenging listening experience: 'great playing has been sacrificed for simple melodies' (Di Meola 1992: 42). He continues: 'the overriding fear is that exciting music turns potential listeners *off*, and that's what's happened with pop-jazz' (Di Meola 1992: 33; original emphasis). Clearly, Di Meola's enthusiasm for improvisation and creative exploration cannot be reconciled with the demands of smooth jazz radio audiences and would be unlikely to fit a format in the present system where programme decision-making is tuned to commercial needs – which is to say, amassing listeners for advertising messages. He states: 'there is absolute, documented policy on those formats prohibiting records that exhibit too much emotion' (Di Meola 1992: 33).

Another problematic area of audience testing is the time allotted for listeners to render decisions on individual pieces of music. Frank Cody has refined the testing formula over years of experience:

At one point we were testing 30 to 40 seconds, but what we found was that if they don't like what they're hearing, they turn to another station very quickly. So what we landed on was somewhere between eight, ten, fifteen seconds being enough to establish what a song was all about.

This practice has given way to an entire philosophy of brevity on smooth jazz radio. As Allen Kepler notes:

In the early and mid-'70s, FM radio was playing twelve-minute songs and album sides. It was crazy. Nowadays, commercial radio formats typically play songs that are between three and four minutes long. They will play edits of songs. I equate it to reading a magazine rather than a book. You're really more in a *Reader's Digest* mode where you just need to get the gist of it.

While this approach is problematic for the jazz purist, it generates mass appeal among the general public. Washburne (2004: 142) suggests that 'smooth jazz provides an opportunity for the public to be sophisticatedly "jazzy" without having to delve deep into the jazz tradition' or, indeed, to explore the myriad of new jazz music presently being recorded. The situation satisfies a dictionary definition of 'kitsch' inasmuch as criticisms of smooth jazz have tended to describe the music as a tasteless imitation of an art form with recognized value. From this perspective, by making deliberate use of harmonic and thematic elements common to jazz music, smooth jazz is able to provide a sort of superficial cultural experience to its listeners through repeated conventions and formulae. Theorists like Theodor Adorno, who sought to define the avant-garde and kitsch as opposites, perceived this in terms of what he called the 'culture industry' (Adorno 1991), where art is controlled and formulated by the needs of the market, thus resulting in art that is unchallenging and that merely serves to give the audience something to hear or otherwise consume. Adorno (1990: 306) makes a prescient point when he writes 'popular music is "pre-digested" in a way strongly resembling the fad of "digests" of printed material'.

In terms of audience research activity, Broadcast Architecture's audience testing is largely devoted to older, pre-established music:

The music testing that we do, our audience research, is primarily based on 'gold library', which is the older music to play in between the newer music. We really don't believe in heavily testing new music because new music is very hard to judge as to where it's going to go. Nobody can really render a great decision on a song they've never heard before.

Given that programmers of the smooth jazz format supplement the so-called gold library with new works that share similar characteristics to the pretested catalogue, it is arguably a difficult task for new musicians playing any sort of experimental music in this genre to emerge and become established in radio. Wayte (2007: 289) agrees, noting that the emphasis is normally 'comfort and predictability rather than exploration'. Jazz producer Jeff Weber is also not in favour of these programming trends:

You can buy radio airplay; the only thing you can't buy is smooth jazz airplay because one programmer, Broadcast Architecture, controls almost all of what people listen to in the 'Smooth' or 'Wave' format. Broadcast Architecture, in its wisdom, only endorses music that sounds like all the other music.

This comment raises another question: if music programmers are reliant on audience research, then to what extent do they express their own preferences? The 'musicologist programming philosophy' is a term that Ahlqvist (2001: 346)

uses to describe the concept of music programmers as ‘arbiters of good taste’, whose goal is to ‘enlighten their listeners by exposing them to music they think has integrity; music they feel passionate about; music they think is good’. In practice, this is often the exception. The reality of commercial radio broadcasting is that ‘programmers must compromise their personal preferences in order to satisfy the less sophisticated taste of the majority of the station’s listeners’ (Ahlkvist 2001: 347) and it is widely accepted among programmers that they ‘should not try to educate listeners’ (Ahlkvist 2001: 348–49). The generic programming of material based on test scores from audience research has become so reliable for stations that new formats can be adopted with little knowledge of the music itself. Indeed, many ailing rock and New Age stations made the transition to the smooth jazz format in this way. This, of course, impacts negatively upon the programmer’s ability to demonstrate expertise through his/her work. Allen Kepler agrees that connecting with a commercial radio audience involves a delicate balance of new and established content:

If it was really challenging, we wouldn’t have any ratings, because people don’t tune in to be challenged or necessarily even to learn; they tune in to the radio to be entertained. We try to achieve this balance. Our analogy is, we want to lead the audience, but we don’t want to run too far ahead. If we push too hard with too much new music or too much eclectic stuff, we’ll lose them. They’ll just lose interest in it because they just don’t have enough time to think about it.

This is a difficult position for the radio programmer, whose personal tastes may well clash with a format’s strict programming guidelines. It is further complicated by the fact that when programmers act as conduits rather than taste-makers, audiences continue to demand familiar, unchallenging repertoire: ‘playing only the “best-testing” records . . . produces music programming that rarely strays from the format mainstream’ (Ahlkvist 2001: 352). Notionally, this further dilutes the programmer’s willingness to experiment. In this way, the conservative tastes of the audience majority tend to dominate the airwaves, influencing not only the decisions made by programmers and the work of those companies and artists achieving airplay but also those musicians for whom such commercial validation remains elusive.

GRP RECORDS AND THE ‘SMOOTH JAZZ’ FORMAT

New York-based jazz label GRP Records, founded by composer Dave Grusin and producer Larry Rosen, was one of the most successful producers of pop-influenced jazz during the 1980s. Although perhaps distinctive in that GRP was a jazz label managed by two highly motivated entrepreneur-musicians, the company has, during its existence, operated as an independent label and as a subsidiary of both MCA and Universal. In this regard, many of GRP’s music marketing strategies are not dissimilar to the sorts of promotional routines adopted by mainstream commercial record labels both large and small.

Immediately from its incorporation as an independent label in 1982, GRP adopted an aggressive strategy towards radio promotion. The potential for jazz-pop to cross over to other markets had been evident as early as 1976 with the breakout success of George Benson’s *Breezin’* for Warner Brothers. Guitarist Earl Klugh, a jazz-pop artist who has worked with Grusin, Rosen and George Benson, recalls the feeling of commercial viability during this era:

Breezin' was a huge, huge hit. It was mainly an instrumental record, but the thing that really took it over the top was George's vocals. That success really took the contemporary sound of jazz through the roof at that time. Between 1975 and 1982, record sales for jazz artists went from 40–50,000 to 400–500,000.

In 1982, New York-based radio station WPIX-FM began its transition to the AC format. The station proved to be an early supporter of GRP Records. GRP's Senior Vice President of Marketing, Mark Wexler, notes:

I went to the warehouse and I got every piece of product we had ever made and sent it over. All they played was GRP music because we were the first ones to service them and because we were so specialised in that format.

As a result, by the mid-1980s, GRP's sound was well established with broadcasters of adult music formats. This activity pre-dated the arrival of radio stations like The Wave KTWV-FM 94.7. Guitarist Lee Ritenour notes: 'as soon as The Wave started in Los Angeles, the GRP sound was immediately the sound that they went for.' Erica Linderholm was GRP's Director of National Radio Promotion in Special Markets from 1987 until 1996. She shares this view: 'I felt like the stations embraced our music because it fit their format.' Without overstating the specialness of this case, as an example of the relationship between radio formats and record company decision-making processes, this was fortuitous timing for GRP, and a notable incidence of creative and commercial synergy in the radio and music industries.

In addition to the launch of The Wave in Los Angeles, the year 1987 also saw GRP form a partnership with a major label distributor. With the support of MCA Records, GRP had greater leverage in reaching consumers with its products. Frank Cody of Broadcast Architecture recalls his first encounter with Larry Rosen of GRP Records:

Larry couldn't believe that there was a station, a commercial station called The Wave, run by a major broadcasting corporation, that was playing this music on one of the strongest signals in the United States. He contacted us and said: 'my God, how can we help?'

Deborah Lewow became the Director of National Radio Promotion for GRP in 1985. Lewow recognized that the launch of a radio format so closely related to its target market presented GRP with a powerful opportunity: 'this was LA, the second biggest market in the country and the majority of people they want to play are GRP artists. So a GRP artist would do a record every eleven months and tour behind it to capitalise on that.'

The consolidation of jazz-pop as a successful radio format had a profound impact upon the working practices of jazz producers and artists. Nicholson (2005: 11) notes that 'the smooth jazz stations demanded music with a catchy melodic hook, a bright and breezy theme, a contagious backbeat, and tunes that lasted no more than four minutes'. As a result of the renewed commercial potential of jazz on the radio, musicians began 'framing their product to compete in a marketplace of playlists, formatting, and the *Billboard* charts' (Nicholson 1998: 220). He continues: 'the GRP label signed a whole stable of

artists to function in this musical environment' (Nicholson 1998: 220). Pianist David Benoit's first GRP release, *Freedom at Midnight* (1987), coincided with the launch of The Wave. Michael Bloom, who became GRP's Director of Publicity in 1986, notes that radio had a powerful effect on Benoit's live career as a performing artist:

One thing that made GRP very big was the radio operation. The first time David Benoit played New York, he could only get into a small room in a not well-travelled part of the island of Manhattan. Then this station CD101.9 started playing his GRP records. The next thing you know, he was playing the Blue Note for a week. The next year it was Carnegie Hall. His arrival happened to coincide with the expansion of this radio format.

Clearly, GRP was fully engaged with achieving recognition in radio. As Negus (1993: 61) has said: 'the ultimate aim of radio promotion in North America is to achieve a "crossover" hit – to move out from Urban, New Age or Adult Contemporary and gain nationwide exposure on Top 40 Radio.' In order to do this, the label must determine the most suitable format for the artist and find related formats in which the artist might attract new audiences. Erica Linderholm describes the methods and challenges of targeting a number of different formats with the same record:

It was hard to go to AC (Adult Contemporary) with a GRP record because GRP was so branded as a jazz label. With some of these programmers, if it wasn't Phil Collins or Anita Baker, they really had a hard time being open to it. So going to a vocal format with an instrumental was a struggle.

In order to address these issues, GRP began to produce recordings that were tailored for adult radio formats. GRP's co-founder Dave Grusin notes:

You couldn't get arrested if it was instrumental music. If it was aimed at the pop marketplace it had to have vocals. So there was a time when we did a lot of that. Even on an instrumental record, we would have a guest singer or back-up vocal group and cover some pop material.

Carl Griffin was hired by Larry Rosen in 1990 in order to help GRP to cross over to radio formats popular in black communities: 'we had a phrase' notes Griffin, '“vanilla jazz,” which means “white-sounding jazz.” We needed to add an urban flavour to it in order to be competitive. That's what I brought to the table.' Doug Wilkins started at GRP in 1992 and became GRP's Vice President of Jazz Promotion. He notes that GRP adopted a policy of signing artists that had the potential to achieve crossover success in other genres: 'we started to sign artists that musically fit the R&B format like George Howard, Phil Perry, Maysa and then eventually George Benson.' He notes: 'my job was to promote the R&B acts that Larry signed and try to cross over some of the smooth jazz artists from smooth jazz radio to urban radio and R&B radio.' Producer Jeff Weber acknowledges that these activities were commonplace: 'Lee Ritenour did a song with a vocal on and it became a hit. So, quite naturally, everybody else did the same thing.'

Doug Wilkins feels that the addition of vocal material to the GRP catalogue was a workable compromise with mainstream radio formats: 'to me, smooth

jazz represents instrumental artists with a groove and a tempo. When you add a vocal element, it enables it to be crossed over to other formats.' Wilkins assembled a staff of regional promotion people situated in various markets across the United States. He describes some of the techniques that were adopted to try and reach larger audiences:

Phil Perry was a vocalist singing adult music that could be played on R&B radio and also cross over to smooth jazz. Someone like George Howard was an instrumental artist, but we would sit down in our meetings and try to add vocals to his tracks either in the forefront or the background. He also started to do cover songs that were familiar with listeners and that had success at R&B radio. We knew that to get different artists played at R&B radio, we needed to have a vocal element whether or not it was the artist doing the vocal or bringing on someone who had success at that format to do one or two songs as a guest artist.

These reflections help to clarify the ways in which GRP shaped its products in response to the requirements of format radio. Record producer Michael Abene, a producer of several GRP recordings, understood the commercial imperative for the label to adopt such policies. He states: 'to me, that CD101 or "Wave" sound had a lot to do with gathering finances for the label.' Producer Dennis Bell concurs: 'without radio, I don't think GRP would have floated. They had stuff on the R&B stations that crossed over, which is why they were successful.' For record labels then, there is a clear commercial imperative to accommodate the needs of radio. Barnard stresses the importance of this point:

Radio's demand for and use of music has a profound effect on the repertoire and promotional strategies of record companies: prior exposure on radio can influence a company to sign an artist; and how a songwriter, record producer or band approaches the process of creating a single or album may be influenced not only by what is currently selling but what is likely to be chosen for airplay. (2000: 133)

Access to promotional opportunities through radio broadcasting can therefore be a key consideration in a record label's acquisition of a new artist. As Negus (1993: 63) states: 'the system of radio format categories permeates the entire record company operation and influences the type of artists acquired and how these artists are presented.' This was especially true of GRP as an independent jazz label producing niche music designed to appeal to pop audiences.

In what other ways, then, can a record label help to determine the suitability of its products for radio? With its in-house recording studio, the GRP label maintained a significant capability to impact upon its releases. Mike Landy worked as GRP's Head Recording Engineer throughout the smooth jazz radio boom of the late 1980s. He recalls: 'from day to day we did a lot of editing. Larry wanted an artist to say something important and then move on and say something else.' Indeed, production elements such as track lengths and the sequencing of recorded material were important parts of GRP's agenda as it conformed elements of its output to the requirements of smooth jazz radio. Washburne (2004: 134) has noted that editing for radio is a common practice among jazz companies: 'to accommodate airplay on commercial radio, record companies, at times, will release two versions of the same song, one in its

original form, and the other with the jazziness – extended soloing or overly dissonant sections – edited out.’ Landy agrees that this was a common practice at GRP and in most cases artists accepted the realities of securing airplay in the smooth jazz field:

Larry would make an edited CD for radio and the artists would be ok with that because it was also in their interest to let people know there was a new CD out there and to get some airplay. It always got less and less. It had to be under five minutes; then it was four minutes. Sometimes artists would compromise, other times they wouldn’t.

Landy’s comments demonstrate that GRP staff and artists were aware of the importance of radio and were conscious of the need to create products that would meet little resistance in terms of media use. Of course, this is not a situation that can apply to all labels, particularly in more avant-garde genres of jazz. Even within GRP, editing for radio purposes was an issue for some artists who were keen to see their creative expressions released with as little compromise as possible.

Guitarist Steve Khan is known for his work with an array of artists including Steely Dan, Billy Joel, Hubert Laws, Buddy Rich, Billy Cobham, James Brown, Maynard Ferguson and Weather Report. Khan recorded his album *Public Access* (1990) independently and licensed the finished master to GRP. Khan was aware that his work would not be broadcast in its existing form. He notes: ‘when you have a recording where the most accessible tunes are ten minutes long, I knew that if Larry took the record, he was going to chop up everything.’ As part of the licensing deal, Khan arranged to personally fund an edited version of the record specifically for radio purposes:

I said ‘if you take the record as is, I will pay out of my own pocket for a special radio edit CD which will cut down the timings, as long as you leave the CD that goes out to the public as it is’.

In this case, Khan felt it necessary to personally subsidize an alternate version of the music in order to protect his original work. The requirements of jazz formats on commercial radio, such as reduced track lengths and a lack of emphasis on improvisation, are an integral part of the negotiation that takes place between radio, record labels and artists. The needs of commercial radio can therefore impact upon which tracks are released and promoted, and the approaches taken by an artist to the arrangement and editing of compositions.

Jazz-rock guitarist Al Di Meola did not record for GRP. However, he strongly objects to the practice of conforming jazz music for radio, a process he claims forces artists to ‘cut the guts out’ of their recordings (Di Meola 1992: 33). He notes: ‘we grew up with varied formats. You could hear R&B and then something from England; that doesn’t exist today’ (Di Meola 1992: 34). Notably, Di Meola has also openly criticized GRP’s radio practices:

I don’t know who’s written the policy up there at GRP Records that prohibits exciting music, but they forgot about hundreds of thousands of fans. Most of the GRP artists sound the same, and radio has adopted that whole concept.

(1992: 33)

Extrapolating from the examples provided by this case study, it is important to note that critiques of the commercial radio system or of the kind of commodified music that smooth jazz represents are not limited solely to jazz. As Peterson (1978) has documented, the development of niche broadcasting in country music meant that its eclectic sub-genres, such as gospel, folk and bluegrass, were 'virtually frozen out of the new country radio' (306).

In contrast with Di Meola, Khan presents a more philosophical approach to the compromise necessary to succeed in this environment:

The formula was that an artist can basically do what they want, but there has to be one or two tunes where they take a popular song, usually a popular R&B song and make a clever 'jazz' version of it. It has to be short, certainly under five minutes, maybe under four-thirty. The timings that American listeners can tolerate keeps going down; we're in the short attention span age. Nobody can listen to anything longer than two minutes.

Khan's comments demonstrate an understanding of the reasoning behind these practices and also the culture of brevity surrounding mass marketing. By accepting the realities of commercial radio programming, Khan was able to collaborate with record labels and radio programmers in order to achieve his goals. Stewart Coxhead is the manager of guitar duo Acoustic Alchemy, a successful GRP act throughout the early 1990s. He too has experienced pressure to force jazz-pop recordings to conform to the smooth jazz radio format:

We lived and died on the radio. When we started in 1987, 'smooth jazz' radio or 'contemporary jazz' radio as it was called, used to play albums. You'd give them the album and they'd go six cuts deep into it. Nowadays when we make a record, we make two records: we make the record we want and we make two tracks for radio. We definitely orientate at least a couple of tracks towards what smooth jazz radio sounds like now. There is pressure now to do that, but there wasn't then.

Again, Coxhead demonstrates that many jazz artists, producers and record labels understand the role of music on commercial radio and are prepared to provide material that is sympathetic to its formatting policies. In order to be successful in the current format radio system, jazz is obliged to address these considerations at the level of production. In this respect, achieving radio air-play and promoting records for sales purposes have become two related yet distinct aspects of marketing practice. The public as listeners and the public as music-buyers are not necessarily the same, but constitute overlapping groups. It is on radio, where smooth jazz can, for example, act as an accompaniment for a dinner party, that this music has found its most commercially successful outlet. Erica Linderholm supports this theory: 'usually, CD sales were driven by a hit record, but in this format there weren't really hit records; it was great listening music to drive to or unwind to or have dinner to.' Clearly, radio programmers give priority to commercial needs – this is not about music, but it is about gathering (and keeping) masses of listeners to sell to advertisers; however, for Linderholm producing 'hit' records is not a necessary model for the successful dissemination of this kind of music. GRP artist Deborah Henson-Conant uses an analogy to describe how GRP made albums that would be

conducive to airplay: 'the album is like a long delicious dinner, but the way GRP was doing it, which was the perfect approach to radio, was more like a delicious dessert tray.' Again, Henson-Conant raises the themes of brevity, compromise and accessibility that have resonated throughout this case study.

Frank Cody views the relationship between jazz and commercial radio as something of a stalemate:

Radio has become a little screwy in some ways; it has become so safe and calculated that the only version of Dave Brubeck you're ever going to hear is the edited version of *Take Five*. I listen to a lot of smooth jazz stations and I hear very little new music percentage-wise, especially in the prime time hours of workplace listening. Some of it dates back more than 20 years old.

Regardless of whether this is the result of impatient audiences or advertiser-friendly programming, the implications of this situation may have serious consequences for creativity in jazz, be it so-called serious jazz or otherwise. First, new and experimental music will have less opportunity to find an audience in radio. Second, these practices damage appreciation of improvisation and free musical expression. Third, it serves to further separate the markets for jazz as art and jazz as pop, which would seem futile, historically at least (Frith 2007). As described previously, the absence of innovation is a common criticism levelled at smooth jazz. Deborah Lewow notes: 'when you research something to find things that appeal to the broadest common denominator, you find that everyone loves the saxophone, so there's fifteen different saxophonists on the air at any given time.' Likewise, Steve Khan feels that catering to the smooth jazz format has contributed to a saturation of artists pursuing the same sound:

They don't have Dave Sanborn, so they get Nelson Rangell. You have this horrible cloning effect, which in the end really kind of hurts Dave Sanborn because it makes a legion of people sick of that sound. Even though that kind of alto playing obviously sells, there must be like 20 mini-Sanborns out there selling something. Nelson, Dave Koz, I can't even name half of them.

This situation was also frustrating for GRP co-founder Dave Grusin. He concedes: 'I think as a company we made all kinds of compromises musically.' This is an interesting comment because it implies that smooth jazz continues to be judged against the prestige of the jazz art form as a whole and yet smooth jazz operates under a different set of criteria. Frank Cody is realistic about the nature of radio formatting in the United States:

Radio is like a franchise business; like owning a McDonalds. You decide to do a particular format and maybe you get a consultant who knows how to do that format and you become the 'Power 106' station or whatever. There hasn't been a lot of creativity in radio for a long time.

According to Nicholson (1998: 222), the revenue of smooth jazz stations rose to 75.7 per cent between January 1993 and December 1995. He notes: 'there was no doubt that the "smooth jazz" format had become a potent commercial force in the 1990s, with musicians writing tunes to coincide with the requirements of

rigid formatting' (Nicholson 1998: 222). Although avant-garde jazz and commercial radio are a profound mismatch, popular forms of jazz can thrive in this climate as long as record labels and artists are willing to compromise. In the UK, the rebranding of radio station Jazz FM as 'Smooth FM' has provided further evidence of these sorts of homogenizing processes at work (Byrnes 2005; Noah 2005). As Simon Frith (1996: 79) suggests, 'it's as if radio programmers can create a territory by mapping it. And record companies can't find their way to market without that map.'

CONCLUSION

By examining the work of Broadcast Architecture, this article has explored how radio programmers use audience research to construct tightly formatted playlists. By engaging with research methodologies, programmers enable listeners to help determine, no matter how conservative their tastes may be, the music repertoire broadcast by commercial radio stations. Broadcasting this material in steady rotation, commercial radio stations across the United States aim to appeal to the widest possible audiences and achieve maximum exposure for advertising messages. Through audience research and the guidelines associated with formatting practices, radio programmers and listeners can impact upon the promotional opportunities available to record labels and recording artists. Record labels use radio as an outlet to expose consumers to new music products. As radio is one of the key promotional tools available for the merchandising of new records, record labels and artists engage with and act upon the information gathered by the radio industry. Audience research is therefore a key determinant in the fortunes of record labels wishing to achieve exposure for their products, which in turn informs record company decision-making for future releases.

The example of GRP Records demonstrates how record labels can operate within the limitations of radio formatting practices and the ways in which the activities of formatting and research can impact upon music-making. For GRP, this included compromises such as the creation of 'radio edits' of longer performances and the addition of backing vocals designed to help tracks to cross over to pop radio. This can, therefore, be considered one route by which radio formats have influence on the music available in the record market. Using GRP Records as a case study, this article has explored some of the ways in which record labels and artists collaborate with radio programmers, shaping music products to meet the needs of their target formats. Clearly, the activities of music formatting, audience research and music production have a significant impact on one another. In these related fields, the potential for artistic compromise is great, but so too are the rewards available to successful purveyors of lifestyle-orientated music formats.

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