

Cold Front Smooth Jazz's Evolution Into 'Chill'

An underground electronica sound, which burbled out of the Spanish island of Ibiza's night-club scene, has become, as some argue, "the next evolution of smooth jazz."

About a decade ago, at Spain's Café Del Mar after-hours bar, DJ Jose Padilla spun a hypnotic, Balearic mix of laidback grooves with tinges of melancholy r&b and impressionistic jazz. The set was still dance music but instead of having a propulsive four-on-the-floor kick, it floated to a softer pulse. The sensual soundscapes were designed for the "come down," something to quell racing heart beats after eight hours of continuous manic dancing. As the sun came up on the beach, Padilla delivered the perfect ambient soundtrack.

These romantic evocations soon became all the rage with many Café Del Mar patrons badgering Padilla for mix CDs. Somehow the word "chill" became the moniker for this hybrid of electronica, pop and jazz.

Eventually, Padilla's innovative "chill-out" mixes spread across Western Europe. Paris' posh Hotel Costes began pumping similar music in its lobby, which led to Stéphane Pompougnac to produce a successful compilation series under the hotel's name. Then came Claude Challe's *Buddha Bar* series, another mix of downtempo grooves, sleek house music and multikulti pop.

Now, chill is seeping through America. It's as ubiquitous as it is innocuous, played in coffee shops, fashion boutiques and chic furniture outlets. And many smooth jazz artists and radio programmers are taking note. Musicians such as saxophonists Boney James and Euge Groove and guitarists Norman Brown and Ronny Jordan are underscoring their music with faint shades of silhouette electronica, subtly updating smooth jazz, an idiom in need of some stylistic makeover.

Although Santa Fe, N.M.'s KLBU (102.9) is often cited as the first full-time chill radio station, the biggest endorsement of chill from the smooth jazz camp came last November, when New York City's WQCD, CD101.9, changed its branding from "Smooth Jazz" to "New York Chill." After years of being one of the country's leading stations of the smooth jazz/adult contemporary format, CD101.9 noticed its Arbitron ratings slipping, something that program director Blake Lawrence attributed to as a "graying of its audience." To boost ratings and attract a younger audience, CD101.9 found a brand new bag: chill. Without completely jettisoning smooth jazz favorites, such as Sade and Brown,



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the station began rotating electronica acts such as Zero 7, Air and Thievery Corporation.

Sirius Satellite Radio soon took CD101.9's lead in blending smooth jazz and electronica with its "Velvet Couch," a three-hour Saturday night program on Sirius' Jazz Café channel as a more jazz-laden complement to Sirius' Chill channel, which focuses more on electronica.

But what is chill: a radio format, music genre or both? Like jazz, chill means many things to many people—relaxing, hypnotic, sexy and cool, but no definitive answer.

"The naming of different genres sometimes gets in the way of the music itself," said saxophonist Mindi Abair, whose GRP albums, *It Just Happens That Way* and *Come As You Are*, have become staples of the chill sound. "Chill is music that you sit back and relax to and still enjoy. The connotation doesn't mean just background music. It means it's cool, viable and sexy—something that you want to relax to."

In a video on CD101.9's web site, trumpeter Chris Botti goes even further, claiming that "chill is the evolution of smooth jazz." He first caught wind of chill back in 1999 when he was on a European tour with Sting. "I became a fan of it and when I got back to the United States, I started talking about it," he said.

Botti became so entranced by chill that he began hosting a syndicated radio program, "Chill With Chris Botti," produced by Washington, D.C.-based Crystal Media. Now, he's the de facto poster boy for chill music, at least from a jazz perspective. And although he waxed poetically about it, he's careful to distance his own music from chill. "I've become a spokesperson for someone trying to introduce people to chill music," Botti said. "But what I

do as an artist on the trumpet has nothing to do with chill music.

"Chill music is 80 percent function," Botti continued. "There's no real artistry like Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane or Miles Davis. Chill music is the total sum of itself; there's nothing that moves you to notice an identifiable artist. That doesn't mean that chill music isn't cool; it just means that you're not likely to go buy a ticket to go see a chill artist."

Keyboardist, composer and producer George Duke offers a similar argument regarding chill in its association with jazz. "I'm not a big fan of where this stuff is going and still using the word 'jazz,'" he said. "First, the whole smooth jazz thing didn't have much to do with jazz. I'm more inclusive than exclusive. But when the [improvisational] spontaneity goes out of it, it loses its jazz essence.

"I subscribe to the David Sanborn school," Duke continued. "He said radio took a little piece of what Miles and Stanley Turrentine did and made a format out of it. But you could hear the depth in the playing. Now they got all these guys who generally come in that have little to do with jazz. They haven't experienced playing with Miles and Dizzy Gillespie like we have, so the music becomes more lollipop."

Guitarist Chuck Loeb counters with a more level-headed argument: "Like in any genre, chill contains elements that can be cool, and when it's done well, it incorporates a high level of musicianship. On the other hand, just like any other genre, some of it can fall into the category of fluff, where someone is taking advantage of the simplicity of the music and not putting enough content in there."

Like Abair and Botti, Loeb is part of the new