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Friday, July 7, 2006



An edition of The Record



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Mostly sunny with highs around 80. Tonight and Saturday: Mostly clear with lows in the 60s. Turning partly cloudy on Saturday with highs in the lower 80s. C10

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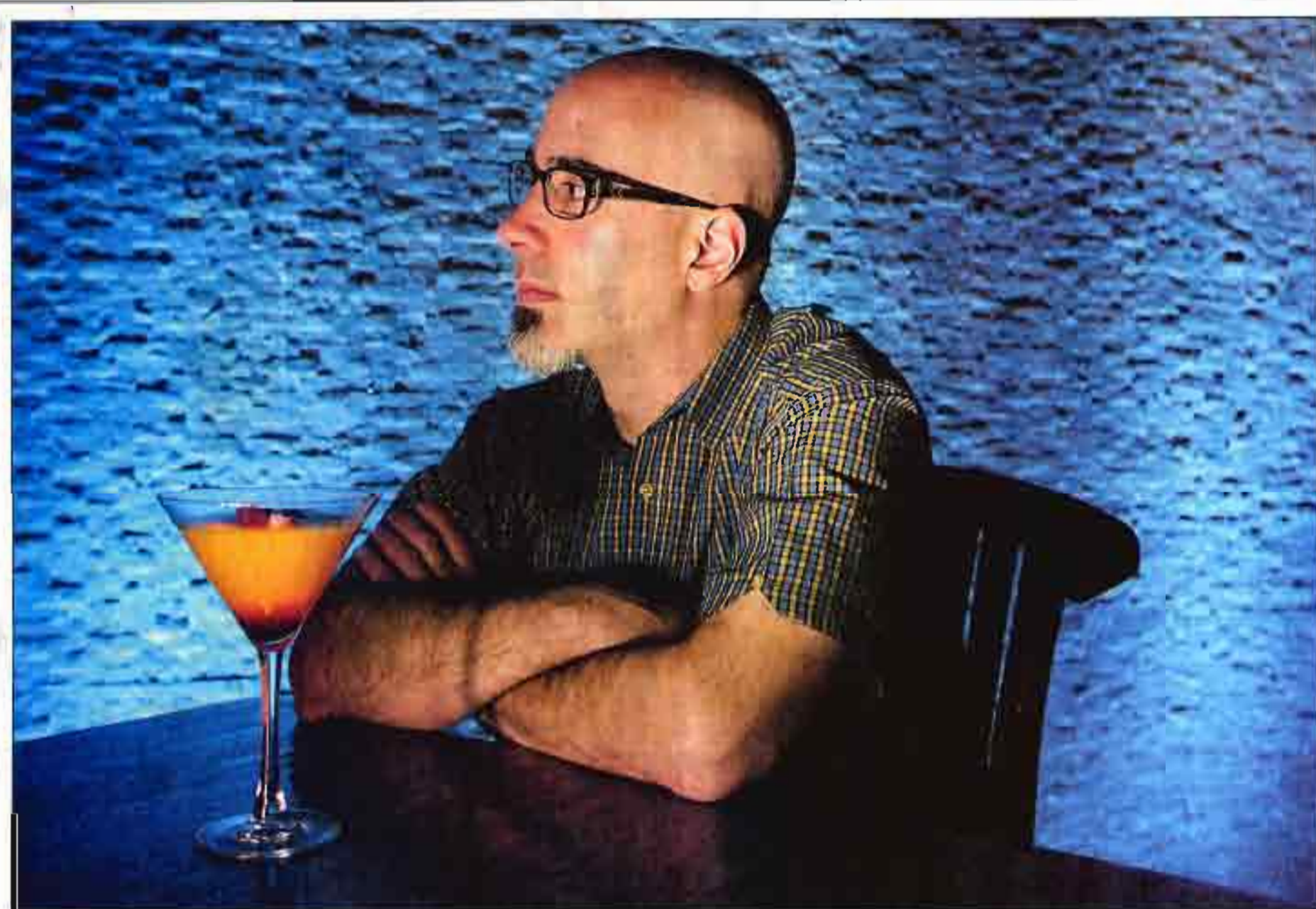
Friday



Something's brewing

More and more Americans are treating coffee a lot like wine.

bringit, D7



Photos by MICHAEL KARAS/Herald News

Rafe Gomez, host of the popular Saturday night radio show The Groove Boutique, spins Thursday nights at Chakra restaurant and lounge in Paramus.

In a smooth groove

DJ Rafe Gomez wants to bring cool jazz to the masses

By ED BEESON
Herald News

A short drive from the tangled aneurysm that is the Route 4 and Route 17 interchange in Paramus is Chakra, a stylish Asian fusion restaurant and lounge that attracts a well-heeled, thirty- and fortysomething crowd. It is the ideal setting for Rafe Gomez, a Passaic native turned New York radio DJ, to sow the seeds for the music he is trying to bring into the mainstream. Gomez, who has stylishly thick glasses, a shaved head and a black goatee with a tuft of gray hair sprouting from the center, is the host of The Groove Boutique, a Saturday night jazz mix show on CD101.9, New York's smooth jazz radio station.

The Groove Boutique, however, is a slightly different animal. Gomez has engineered the show to be a seamless blend of jazz-funk and fusion, the chic, tasteful and up-tempo cousin of smooth jazz. The music of The Groove Boutique typically hails from genres with funky names like cool jazz, club jazz, acid jazz and nu-jazz, which meld jazz instrumentation to electronic dance beats. They are popular mostly in Europe and, predictably, the music sounds a bit



The stylish Asian fusion restaurant and lounge Chakra is a well-suited venue for the jazz-funk and fusion selections of DJ Rafe Gomez.

hipper than the typical smooth jazz song. And it mixes well with Chakra's dimly lit interior, which is a few shades shy of opulence. There is a waterfall in the dining room and many walls are covered in antique

bricks that were mined from an abandoned kiln in the Midwest. Booths are squared in by nearly transparent curtains, which imbue a sense of both privacy and voyeurism. A Thai bas-relief stares over a lounge area full of plush

couches and dominated by a majestic mahogany bar. Chakra is the type of place that serves fresh raspberries with its cocktails.

"The best compliment I get," said Phil Chiarante, Chakra's co-owner who was holding a stein

GET IN THE GROOVE

The Groove Boutique airs from 8 p.m. to midnight every Saturday on CD101.9 FM.

Rafe Gomez spins Thursdays 10 p.m. to closing at Chakra restaurant and lounge, 144 Route 4 West, Paramus. www.thegrooveboutique.com www.chakrarestaurant.com

of a microbrew that the restaurant serves, "is, 'I don't feel like I'm in Paramus anymore.'"

"To me it's transportative," said Gomez, 45, who stood next to him. "I don't want to go so far as to say sensual..." Chiarante said, searching for a word.

"Sophisticated. Indulgent," Gomez chimed in. "Luxurious. I'm a synonym finder."

The conversation continued down a hallway past the bar, up a wooden ladder in front of the walk-in cooler and into the liquor storeroom, an attic-like space with low ceilings and two CD turntables.

"This was made for 5-foot-9 DJs and under," said Gomez, the top of his head nearly touching the ply-

Please see GROOVE, D6

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Groove

Continued from D1

wood beams.

Here, in front of a small window that looks out onto Chakra's lounge area, Gomez spins every Thursday night from 10 p.m. to closing. Gomez was hired here, as he was at the top-tier New York restaurant Daniel, to curate a night's worth of casual but cool music that grooves with the overall vibe of the restaurant.

In one sense, this is a mere DJ gig. But Gomez sees it as the testing ground for the music market he is trying to pioneer.

He dreams of turning The Groove Boutique into a lifestyle brand for young professionals, much as "TRL," MTV's after-school video countdown, is a lifestyle brand for the teen and tween set. He imagines it as "an irresistible, addictive experience," with a late-night TV show, exclusive iPod mixes and, of course, product placements.

The idea came to Gomez, who worked in marketing before he jumped into radio, after he saw some success from The Groove Boutique. When the show premiered on CD101.9 in 2003, it proved to be a ratings draw, outperforming the rest of the station's weekend programs, according to the station's programming director, Blake Lawrence.

The show is syndicated in 20 other markets across the country, including unlikely places like Flint, Mich. In 2004, Gomez released a Groove Boutique compilation CD through Tommy Boy Records, the once-preeminent hip-hop label. He even twice went on QVC, the home shopping network, and sold thousands of copies of the Groove Boutique CD, he says. "Who's watching at 4 a.m.? I don't know. But somebody's watching, and somebody's buying. That's all that counts."

Which is remarkable considering that this show is Gomez's mid-life career change.

Long story short, he saw his fortunes rise and fall during the dot.com boom of the mid-1990s. He was a freelance marketer for countless start-up Internet businesses. "It was great, great man," Gomez said, the nostalgia seeping from his voice.

But it didn't last. In 2000, he watched as the world of e-commerce shriveled up and his once-secure job was shed like dead skin. Out of work and living on his savings and his wife's salary, he stayed up late listening to CD101.9. Though he used the station to help his young son fall asleep, Gomez discovered what he thought was a hole in its programming: No show played an uninterrupted mix of smooth jazz. Gomez figured he had nothing to lose, so he put together a package and pitched The Groove Boutique.

The first station to bite was Sirius, the then-nascent satellite radio station. Then after two years, Gomez jumped to CD101.9, also known as WQCD-FM.

Like perhaps every music aficionado, Gomez believes there is a world of awe-inspiring music that should be heard by a larger audience but isn't because it doesn't fit within the neat boundaries of a four-minute pop song, the format that seems to drive the mainstream

music industry. Unlike many aficionados, Gomez has a plan to get that music out into the mainstream. Chiefly, it relies on a marketing plan (which may explain his self-proclaimed talent as a "synonym finder").

The music of The Groove Boutique takes the positive elements of both jazz and electronic dance music (cool sophistication and upbeat energy), while leaving behind their negative connotations (stuffy elitism and drunken encounters, respectively). Even if it is not entirely danceable, The Groove Boutique provides a soundtrack that is at least worthy of a good head-bobbing. It lets you relax, fall into deep conversation or thought — and perhaps think of life in European cafes and cocktail bars.

These are two of Gomez's biggest selling points: The music is easy to listen to, and it feels very chic.

Which leads him to his target audience. Gomez has a theory about what happens to young professionals when they graduate from college, get married, settle down and think about kids: They stop thinking about what is cool and hip.

Their attention instead shifts to adult responsibilities, like carting the kids off to Little League games, paying the mortgage, and worrying about 401ks, health benefits and their next promotion.

When that happens, the definition of cool and hip gradually changes. It becomes something that newfound adults no longer recognize. It becomes something weird and unappealing.

In terms of music, this process causes tastes simply to stagnate. Less likely to seek out new music, many settled-down adults will simply listen to what they knew when they were growing up, Gomez says.

"No one wants to think of themselves as beyond what's hip, as being old fogies," Gomez said. But that's what many people inevitably become.

But it doesn't need to be this way, Gomez says. While adults in their mid-30s and older will probably not jive to the typically bombastic music that is cool in local high schools, there is music that could speak to an adult's needs. And that is probably just a moment of tranquility.

What can provide a sense of both tranquility and coolness better than underground jazz?

"I'm glad that I have stuff that can blow purists away, and also thrill the folks who want to feel good," Gomez said.

The problem is access. Jazz is hardly the most commercial music, and because the genres Gomez spins are more popular abroad, it is difficult to discover much in a local music store. (Ever heard of Grupo X, the Latin jazz band formed by Londoners? Or One Million Dollars, a New Zealand soul jazz collective out of Auckland?) "To find this music," Gomez said, "it would take a lot of work."

This is where he comes in. Gomez is the compiler and the mixer. He is the tastemaker.

Or so he sees himself. "This would allow others to experience hip on a platter, on an iPod," Gomez said.

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