

Kirk Whalum

November 10, 2005 on the Holland America Oosterdam cruising in the Pacific

Interviewed by Susan Johnson

Smooth Views (SV): *Is this your first cruise? How has the experience been for you?*

Kirk Whalum (KW): It isn't my first cruise. Ruby and I have been on several... I went on one without her, but we've done about 10 cruises. About six of them have been smooth jazz cruises. In fact, the first one was a smooth jazz cruise where there wasn't a particular host, and the other cruises, I guess, developed out of that. This whole season of people cruising these themed cruises having to do with smooth jazz might have developed out of that. It's interesting. I don't know if it's cyclical, but this whole thing of venues for this music that we call jazz... starting back in the early teens and 20s of this century where people categorically went to big dance halls or big theatres to hear their favorite music. At that time it was the pop music of the day... Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Tommy Dorsey. Then became the sort of, recording industry out of that where it was an anomaly to those musicians. They were like, "Hey, wait a minute. What do you mean record? If you do that, then people won't come out to hear us play!" So there was a big paradigm shift. And then some people... some opportunistic people realized... hmm, we could make a lot of money from this recording business. Then the live aspect of it begins to kind of take a back seat. But I think it's getting back that way now with the technology being what it is and the challenges in that, people are looking for venues to provide music, and I think these cruises are good.

There's a magic about this cruise that's palpable. We really see this cruise as being special. They've all been special, but this one in particular. There's something about Dave Koz and the way he approaches this and the way he books the bands and his concept of all of this that we all kind of resonate with in one way or another. So I think maybe it starts at the top. [Dave said on the cruise that Kirk was the best saxophone player alive and Kirk responds to that comment] I don't agree with him but I'm humbled by him saying that. That's the kind of thing you aspire to. If, on a bad day, I need a reason to practice, that's a big shot in the arm.

SV: *What prompted you to record the Babyface Songbook?*

KW: There were a few things. Initially, it was sort of identifying a strong suit, a forte, in my own giftings, and that is to interpret melodies and to sing the melody with an instrument, the saxophone. That came at the expense, in a way, of some other things, because I'm also a frustrated writer and arranger and producer and all of those things... and a frustrated preacher! So, there's many aspects of my life that I have to juggle. When I came to this realization, it was because I was signed to Warner Bros. at the time by a

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SmoothViews

December 2005

guy named Matt Pierson, who comes up later in this story. The first project he wanted to do with me was one called **For You**. **For You** was a CD of covers, songs of other writers, songs that were already popular. People loved these songs, and so I came along and did my versions of these songs, and the CD was extremely successful, especially in context with my other records. So right away, in appreciation really for Matt who was able to help me... you know, it's nice to have somebody outside... I always call it the haberdasher, who takes a look at you and says, "You'd look great in this!"... he really helped me in that way. So, I also had to grapple with the fact that these other areas of my life are very important to me. I feel that these are areas that should not be abandoned. So, I came up with kind of an alternate scheme, to do a CD like **For You** and **The Babyface Songbook** and alternate it with CDs like **The Gospel According to Jazz** or **Unconditional** or **Into My Soul**... CDs that are literally into my soul. You know, "Who are you? What are you about?" Tell your story, kind of thing. So that was the main thing and the other thing was that I'm a big fan of Babyface.

SV: *How did you decide which songs to include? Do any of them have special meaning to you?*

KW: Matt Pierson... neither one of us are on Warner Bros. anymore. I'm on Rendezvous and he's an independent. I asked him to produce this record for me, and he's a great song guy. You know, there are folks in this industry called song guys or gals who actually have just an immense repertoire of songs and styles, and they can kind of be a librarian for you and narrow things down. So Matt did that for me. Together we went through a ton of songs. You know, Babyface is a prolific guy so it was a daunting challenge, but it was nice because at the end of it I realized that we have a whole lot in common. It was nice to sort of go spelunking into his repertoire, and the things he writes about, and the way that he impacts people with his gift. There were a few where I felt that I could vicariously relate to, like "Not Gon' Cry" recorded by Mary Jane Blige. Just the angst of that scenario of being abandoned by this guy that you committed your life to. You cast your lot with this person, and you give it all, and you're helping them through college, and all the sudden he decides he's going to leave you. I thought it was very poignant. Songs like "I Said I Love You" I can relate to on a very personal level. I always talk about "I Said I Love You" is a powerful message both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, if a person says, "When I promise I love you it means I'll always be there." It's the idea of love that's backed up by commitment and it's the "I'll never leave you" part. I think that's the most romantic thing you could ever say to a person. Then, vertically, it's God's love. It's the One who actually, really can say that qualitatively, because on a human level we get weak or we get distracted or whatever. But God's love is like a rock. It's like, "I will actually never leave you." I can't imagine not experiencing first-hand that love. There were songs like that that have a very personal meaning to me. I'm glad the guys included that on the cruise. [There was a Gospel Hour that Kirk hosted on the first Sunday of the cruise.] You know, the first time we did that was on a Warren

Hill cruise, so I have to give props to him and his people for suggesting that. It wasn't something that I asked to do, but I was certainly glad to have the opportunity.

SV: You came from a musical family. Your brother, Kevin, has been great in the shows on the cruise! Have your children caught the musical bug?

KW: It's overdue for Kevin to have his own show. I only get an hour and I'm grateful for that hour but I need an hour and a half at least for myself so I can get to all the songs the people want to hear and say what I want to convey. And then I've got my brother there, so I need another hour to get into all the stuff that he does which is fun for me. You have to have balance. My family is fun to go back and do some research. I'm not by any means the first musician in my family line on both sides. My grandmother sang beautifully on my mother's side, sang at church in the choir. And then on my father's side, my grandfather was an amazing singer and his wife, my dad's mother, who was blind most of her life, was a big hero of mine. She was a musician who taught voice and piano. Even some of my heroes, Nate Crawford, who's an incredible saxophonist, tells the story about how he studied piano with my grandmother. My father and my uncles all played instruments. My uncle, Peanuts, is a musician in St. Louis and, in fact, is one of the folks you're going to be hearing from. We did a CD on him that now will be distributed through Rendezvous. He's an incredible musician, and somebody who I will always look up to, and he's now 75. So, growing up at home you could say that in my nuclear family there was my mom who loved Al Green and Aretha Franklin and Marvin Gaye. So fortunately we were exposed to that at an early age. My father was straight up gospel, James Cleveland and the hard-core traditional gospel things. And growing up in Memphis, there were a lot of amazing influences in the blues and country. We have four kids, and so far we have one musician in the family. He's 22, and his name is Kyle. He's plays on a few of the things I do. He's a wonderful bass player, and right now he's out with a country band. We're really proud of him. Our other kids are all into their own things.

SV: Your faith seems to fill every corner of your life. You have recorded several religious CDs. How do you decide whether your next CD will be smooth jazz or gospel?

KW: They kind of actually are simultaneous in the sense that we've thought all along that there was no need to wait while one is out. We've found that if you've got them both out at the same time that people will buy them both. Fortunately, I don't have to decide that. What's hard, I guess, is getting to it logistically. Time is just... I guess part of it is constantly being on the road. At this period in my life, I have lots of tuitions and stuff to pay so the practical part of it is that I need to be out working. What would be nice if I weren't out working so much would be to be writing more and recording more.

SV: You played the "Texas Tenor" sound when you lived in Houston. How did you end up in smooth jazz?

KW: That's a very good question. This ring, that unfortunately your readers won't be able to see... if they look on my album cover, they can see it... was given to me by the daughter of my mentor who's name was Arnett Cobb.. I had a couple of mentors, but he's the one who was hands-on. He was the iconoclastic Texas Tenor. He, along with James Clay and Fathead Newman and "Jazzcat" Illinois Jacquet, these were the guys who sort of embodied that sound. For me, it was having gone to college in Houston. I was right away exposed to that and, more directly, to him [Arnett]. So, I think that I kind of got that by default by just being around. And literally just five blocks from Arnett Cobb's house were where the dormitories were... where the music department was at Texas Southern in Houston. Now, you could say that the way I got into the profession of playing jazz was by sitting in with different bands and playing bebop and then subsequently playing with a band called Bubba Thomas and the Light Men. I was in Paul English's band. All of this was in Houston while I was in college.

So the sort of era that I came up in musically, there was a lot of bebop and a lot of funk and a lot of rhythm and blues, so those things naturally melded together and I was hearing Wilton Felder and the Crusaders and I was hearing Ronnie Laws, both of them are from Houston. And I was hearing Grover Washington and David Sanborn and Spyro Gyra, so it was natural that my particular style would flow out of that. Now, there was no such thing as "smooth jazz." We sort of all were kind of frustrated bebop musicians who grew up on R&B, so we kind of incorporated all those things. Then there came the smooth jazz thing, and that's something that you could really say that, rather than a genre per se, that was more of a radio format. That was something that was born in radio - a format where people could turn on the radio and kind of have this ambience as it were.

To be honest, I don't know how I got categorized into smooth jazz. I'm glad in the sense that it's an avenue; in fact at this point it may be the only valid avenue nationally speaking where you can hear instrumental music that's being recorded now. I heard the other day that in traditional jazz radio, there isn't enough of an audience anymore for there to be one commercial radio station that plays that music. It's interesting to me that I found myself in smooth jazz, and let me tell you it was a shock. At the time I had been on tour with Bob James who was a star from that transitional period, and I was playing with Larry Carlton. These are guys who can play all kinds of music and were virtuosos on their instruments. But then, all of the sudden, I was on tour with Guitars and Saxes, and it was Peter White and Rick Braun, and people came up to me and said, "Where did Rick Braun..." or "Where did Peter White... find you? We never heard of you!" (laughs) At the time, I was like... well, I've got four records out and Peter only has two... (laughs) I've been out here playing for ten years. It was a new audience. It was a new demographic that had sort of come to the party through this radio

format called smooth jazz. So we don't kick a gift horse in the mouth! So you just continue to make music!

SV: *I understand you always have a project in your head. Can you tell us what's in your head at this time?*

KW: Right now, really you're right. It's definitely just in my head. It's not on paper yet, music paper or any other paper. I guess that's not true. We've kind of started putting down ideas. But it's ***Gospel According to Jazz, Chapter Three***. There's a couple of other things that I've been wanting to do. One of them is a project with Jeff Golub. It's something that he and I have been messing around with. He's a hero of mine because he's a blues musician... rock and blues... just a raw energy. Again, these are things that I think are important to have in the mix, because if it's all processed and kind of slick smooth jazz, I don't think I could do it. I think I would fail. I'm grateful for people like Praful, who bring in the other influences... especially the Brazilian influences... and Jeff Golub. But to answer your question, those are some of the things that I'm working on. And my brother, Kevin - I would love to be involved somehow. I've written some stuff for him and would love to see him now come into his own. I think that time is upon us.

SV: *Are you touring a lot in 2006 to promote the **Babyface Songbook**? Is there a venue or city where you haven't played that you would like to see on your schedule?*

KW: Lots of cities I haven't played that I would like to see on my schedule, especially international... Israel, Australia, West Africa. But I'll put it to you like this... the life of a musician is the life of faith. My faith just happens to be in the Lord Jesus as Provider, as Protector of all of that, but it's a life of faith anyway, because honestly, if I pull up my calendar right now there isn't anything in January. There's a couple of things that are spread out in that quarter. But there was nothing in November if we had been talking in August and here we sit. So I think it's not for the faint of heart, especially from the point of view of the wife. I'm glad to be married to a woman who really doesn't wig out about that. We've seen in the past that God fills that calendar up based on the calling of my life to do what I do. I try to remain faithful to work on my craft, to not sit on my thumbs and worry about why the phone isn't ringing. So to say, what are we doing in 2006, honestly I don't know. I think it's fair to say that the major markets for music are covered a lot of the time. I think there are a lot of fans who would like to see us in their city... and when I say "us" I mean many of the artists in our format, but we've got to sell tickets and have enough steam built up. One of the things I love doing is workshops. We have a workshop called The Gospel According to Jazz and that's something that we can do in a church, for instance. And we do play concerts and work with musicians, especially young musicians. I hope to see more of that this year.

SV: *Can you share with us how Dave Koz, Hyman Katz, Earl Cole and Matt*

Pierson helped you pimp your Honda? Will we be seeing you on MTV?

KW: (laughs) Pimp My Ride. (laughs) I haven't pimped it yet. I did get the wheels. My daughter's been driving it. Our daughter has been in Nashville, because her school in New Orleans is temporarily not open so she's been driving my car. But the Honda... it's a car that I've been holding onto it for dear life because I personally taught all four of our kids to drive in that car, a stick. It's a '94. I love my little Honda. The joke about this is that Rendezvous is a company with big dreams and big aspirations and a lot of cool plans. So we always tease around about what am I going to do with my first million and I said, "Well, I'm going to pimp my ride!" Rather than wasting it on some overpriced German car! (laughs)

SV: *What do you enjoy doing when you have some time off?*

KW: I like being with my wife. That's easy for me to say with her sitting here, but I tell her that all the time. My favorite thing to do is spend time with her. We're getting to do more of that. We're about to have an empty nest! I like being outside. Used to jog but my back won't let me anymore so I walk. I love spending time with the kids. We'll jump in the car, for instance, for the holidays. Last year we just drove to D.C. and hung out. We're talking about going to Atlanta this year. We just love doing things as a family. I'm not very good at keeping up with sports. I'd like to do better. Actually, I promised myself last year that I would be a baseball fan this year in 2005, and it didn't quite pan out. I made it to one game. I enjoy baseball. I just haven't followed it, but I want to get something that I can follow! I don't like golf. In fact, I have this problem with golf. It's a personal sort of vendetta that I'm working through. (laughs) As an outdoor kind of ex-jogger and now a walker, I feel like, man, that prime real estate that those guys use for their game is just not right! Look at all those kids who need parks and look at us who are always trying to find a place to walk. Here they are with all these beautiful areas and they've got carts driving through it! Whatever. (laughs)

SV: *Thanks so much, Kirk, for taking your cruise time with us!*

KW: Thanks to you!

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