

An Interview with Nick Colionne  
February 16, 2006  
Interviewed by Mary Bentley

**SmoothViews (SV):** *You are about to release your 5<sup>th</sup> CD, Keepin' It Cool.*

**Nick Colionne (NC):** It was released to radio about a month ago. The 16<sup>th</sup> was my release date. It's in the stores on the [February] 21<sup>st</sup>.

**SV:** *Your 4<sup>th</sup> CD, Just Come On In, was the one that really put you on everybody's radar. Why do you think it was the 4<sup>th</sup> release that did it? Besides the quality of the music, because it's a great CD – what do you think are some of the other factors that came into play for that to happen when it did?*

**NC:** Well, the best I can say is God smiled on it and said "This is your turn." That's about all I can see. I did some different things with the music, but not a lot different from what I had been doing. I didn't just step out and go off in another direction. I think the timing was [right], the music was good, and as I said, God stepped in and said, "Okay, it's time for you to get a break."

**SV:** *Speaking of that, about the music – your sound is very identifiable and recognizable. When we hear one of your songs, we know it's you without having to be told. We can hear your style. How would you describe your style?*

**NC:** I would say my style is a mixture of all the things that I've ever learned [and] all the different styles of music that I've played. I started off playing guitar, basically emulating Wes Montgomery and Kenny Burrell mostly. After that, I got into Jimmy Hendrix and a lot of R&B guys who were playing. It's a combination of all the things that I've learned and all the things that I've played. Inside of all of those things, in the middle of it, Nick Colionne came out of it.

**SV:** *Since Just Come On In was so successful, did it make it that much harder to come up with material for Keepin' It Cool?*

**NC:** It made it a little harder because of the success of *Just Come on In*. It put pressure there to be as good or better. I strive to be better, to make each record progressively better than the last, but it was scary. It was a case of, how do I follow this? I went through a lot of songs; this one is not going to make it, this is not going to make it, this one may make it, no, this might not make it.

**SV:** *Is it a collaborative effort, or is it something you do on your own?*

**NC:** I collaborate. If I have an idea, and if I get caught in the same place and feel like I'm not moving it anywhere, then I'll collaborate. Sometimes, I'll just collaborate with guys like John Blasucci, who I co-wrote "High Flyin'" with. He and I like writing together, so we hang out together. We just sit down. Or my bass player, Dave Hildebrand. Dave comes over. We hang out a lot. We'll go down and say, "Let's just come up with a song." We did

"Always Thinking of You," which happened to be the first single off the new CD. We didn't even think it would be a single. It was just some things we were playing with, and when it came out, it was a song.

**SV: *So you can get your muse from anywhere then?***

**NC:** Inspiration comes from a lot of different things. Sometimes it can be the fact that you got another piece of equipment. You keep messing with the equipment, trying to figure it out. Next thing you know, you're coming up with some songs because you like the sounds...which is basically what Dave and I were doing. We were checking out sounds.

**SV: *In your last interview with SmoothViews, you discussed the mentoring programs that you're a part of. Are you still involved with those?***

**NC:** Yes, very much. I don't think I could stop doing that. It's something that's very close to my heart. I love being around the kids. Kids keep me young. I go around them to steal their energy.

**SV: *You don't seem to have a problem with energy when you perform.***

**NC:** Well, a lot of that's probably nervous energy.

**SV: *I don't believe that! Not you!***

**NC:** Everybody thinks that Nick Colionne is so confident and bold. Nick Colionne is nervous too. I just try to channel it. I'm just a person. I'm always on the edge. I have to come out blastin'. That's how I work off some of that [nervous] energy. I'm a pretty "up" kind of person. I'm always running and jumping around.

**SV: *I remember seeing you in 2004 at Jazz on the Vine. You came off the stage and into the audience. That was amazing.***

**NC:** It was a fun show. I like to take it to the people. I like to get out there with them because I feed off the energy the audience gives. The closer I get to them...I can make it personal. That's what I like to do because the music is personal to me. I want to share it.

**SV: *And you were singing that night. You were singing "Purple Rain."***

**NC:** Oh yeah. I like to clown around. That wasn't the first time I did it, but the first time I actually sang that particular song. It started off as a joke on my show. I was at a gig and I started saying that I was going to play an old jazz song. The band was behind me thinking, "What is he talking about? Where is he going?" It wasn't part of the show. I went into "Purple Rain" and they were back there laughing. They almost didn't come in because they couldn't stop laughing. I came off and Dave and John said, "Man! You are one crazy dude." I like to keep it interesting...

**SV: *Keep them on their toes.***

**NC:** I was doing it to see if they were paying attention. They liked it, and I said I'd do it some more. People seem to like it.

**SV:** *It was unexpected for us too, but it was fun to watch you play and listen to you sing. And you're singing on Keepin' It Cool – "Rainy Night in Georgia."*

**NC:** Right. I've been singing "Rainy Night in Georgia" in my live shows for awhile. My manager said "I think you should record this. People respond to it very well. They seem to really like the way you do it." So I went and did it.

**SV:** *It worked out well. It sounds great. It sounds like you've been singing for a long time. You're a native of the Chicago area?*

**NC:** Thank you. Yes, from the west side of Chicago.

**SV:** *Chicago is a great city for music. You mentioned some of your influences earlier. Is there anybody else that influenced you?*

**NC:** George Benson – without a doubt. George Benson and Wes Montgomery are two people that I could listen to every day. I still get amazed every time. I could listen to the same song every day and find things that George does and say, "Wow! How did he do that?" Sometimes I just sit here. If somebody were to see me, they'd think I was crazy. I was listening to a solo today by George Benson.

**SV:** *I saw him a couple of years ago at America's Jazz Fest in Maryland. He was playing. The way our seats were, we could see backstage. Steve Oliver was off to the side watching Benson play. He was watching him the same way we were watching him. He was just as much a fan as we were.*

**NC:** I was there. I was sitting on the left side, stage right. The whole time I was leaning on the seat in front of me with my head in my hands, sitting there. My roadie asked me if I was in a daze.

**SV:** *So you were with the rest of us – amazed.*

**NC:** I was just amazed.

**SV:** *Yeah. He's great. He's influenced a lot of people. You grew up in a home where a lot of music was played and appreciated.*

**NC:** Oh yeah, everybody... my parents, my stepfather played guitar. He's the one that started me. My grandparents were crazy jazz people. They listened to Ella, Charlie Parker, Coltrane, and Coleman Hawkins, all those. That's basically what we listened to all the time. As a kid, I used to run around scat singing all the solos from the songs – horn solos and stuff. We got into that. My dad was big into jazz too. When my brother and I first started our band, my biological dad was my manager. It was great at times.

**SV:** *Your brother's a musician too?*

**NC:** My brothers' a drummer – an ex-drummer. He doesn't play anywhere but in the house. When he's not beating on the drums, he's beating on everything else in the house – the table, the stereo system. We have to tell him, "Hey man! Can you cool it? We're trying to have dinner!"

**SV:** *Do you think if you hadn't been exposed to all that music the way you did that things would have been a lot different for you today?*

**NC:** I think that I wouldn't have had a lot of insight that I have into music now. I wouldn't be able to appreciate it as much. By being exposed to it at an early age, it made me appreciate it, the complexities of some of the things that people play, the intricacies of the different guys like George Benson and Wes Montgomery. It just made me want to do it more so that I could expand my knowledge of the instrument and be able to say what I want to say with the music.

**SV:** *That kind of ties in with the mentoring for the kids. I think some of the kids are missing that foundation in their lives, in the schools, and in the homes.*

**NC:** I have nothing against hip hop music or rap music or anything, but when you see somebody that can make millions of dollars just talking you stray away from really getting into music itself and learning about music. They start talking instead of learning about the music or where the music comes from. One of the greater things about being a mentor is that when I go into the schools that I mentor in, these kids, these elementary school children, they're learning about jazz and they're becoming very interested in it. Now the ones who are playing instruments, they want to play jazz. I keep telling them, look, I didn't invent jazz. You don't just listen to Nick Colionne; you go back and get some old stuff. You learn where it came from, who started it. Watch how it developed over the years, how it transformed from one form into another. That's what I did.

**SV:** *Right. I think it's important. The last time you talked with SmoothViews, you mentioned one of the kids you're mentoring. You said he showed some potential.*

**NC:** The kid's name is Chris. I call him CJ. When I first came to the school, he was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Now he's a freshman in college, and he's in the jazz band playing the guitar. He was calling me and emailing me. I told him, you have to change your approach and go this way. The first time he did it, he didn't do well. I told him, "No wonder you're not doing well. Where'd you get those silly chords? They want to hear that you know some theory, that you can play some intricate stuff." He went back and did it really well. I saw him when he was on break for Christmas. He'd come over here and tell me, "Yeah, I had to take this test. I made it. Thanks." He makes me very proud. He worked with me last summer as my roadie. Most of the kids that I mentor, 75% of them, are still in touch with me all the time. That makes me feel good. Even though they're not in school, they're in high school and college, they keep calling me. They find out when I'm at the school and they try to make it their business to be there. It makes me feel good.

**SV: It should. That's great, because there's so much negative awaiting them out there. Okay. You have a new label home with Narada. There's a lot of talent there and it's pretty diverse, too. They have a wide range of performers. How do you think that move is going to impact on your career?**

**NC:** A lot of great cats on that label. They seem to know the music business. You can kind of leave a lot of things up to them because they look out for you as an artist and make sure everything is right. I've never had that luxury before. I've always had to try to do everything. Between me and my manager, we've had to do everything, but now we have people. They've got all these big named guys on the label, so they've already shown that they're here to stay. They know what they're doing, and I'm glad to be a part of it.

**SV: I want to talk about the cruise for a little bit. I've heard from several sources that you were the hit of the cruise. One of my friends went and she said they would replay the jam sessions on the cruise TV. She said they called it Nick @ Night.**

**NC:** It was really funny because the next to last night of the cruise, Peter White was performing. In his performance, he said, "The only thing I'm going to miss about this cruise is watching Nick on TV every night."

**SV: They've asked you to host the jam sessions for the 2007 cruise, so you must be doing something right.**

**NC:** They asked me to come back and perform and also host the jam sessions again. Cool! I'll be there!

**SV: Was this your first jazz cruise?**

**NC:** Yes, it was my first one and I really enjoyed it.

**SV: What was it like playing with all of those musicians every night?**

**NC:** That was great. To be able to come in and not play anybody's song, per se, just saying, "Okay, let's play a song." Somebody would come up with a tune and we'd get off on that song. Or when Brian Culbertson came, we played some song and Brian asked, "What do you want to play next Nick?" I said, "Let's make up a song." So, we made up a tune. We probably would never remember it again. It was a great groove. That was happening! To play with Rick Braun, Peter White, Mindi, Eric Darius, Euge Groove, Pamela Williams, and all of them. Everybody came. It was about having fun. We're kickin' it all on the stage, throwing licks back and forth. That was the highlight of the cruise for me. Then they had Jaared and Michael Paolo walking across the furniture playing. I told them, the next saxophone player that walks across a piece of furniture I'm throwing off the ship!" (laughs)

**SV: It must have been the highlight for the audience too, I'll bet.**

**NC:** Oh yeah. We had a great time. We even had some people from the audience playing. There were people who brought instruments on the cruise with them.

**SV: The audience was playing? Oh really!**

**NC:** Yes. I called them the Passenger All Star Band. (Laughs)

**SV: Were any of them any good?**

**NC:** A couple of them were pretty good. We got them up there for a couple of nights and then I had to cool them out because they were coming every night wanting to play.

**SV: It must have been incredible for the featured musicians as well.**

**NC:** Oh yes! The musicians were getting off more than the audience. They were just happy to be playing with other guys that they hadn't played with before, so it was a kick. I knew Peter White. I've known Peter for awhile, and I knew Rick. I've known Brian forever. I knew Michael Lington. We were on the same label. It was my first time meeting a lot of the other guys. They didn't know who I was. Who is this guy, Nick Colionne? What is a Nick Colionne? (Laughs)

**SV: You showed them what a Nick Colionne was.**

**NC:** Here I am. This is Nick Colionne, and this is what I do. So now, I've made a lot of new friends from that. As a matter of fact, I went to see Rick Braun last week. He and Steve Cole were in Chicago doing a show for WNUA. Karukas was playing with them. I got to go down and hang out with them. I hadn't seen them since the cruise. Plus, I think if one guy comes to another guy's town, if he's not working he should come out and support him. By supporting them, you show the people in your town that you support the artist and the music.

**SV: Absolutely. It sends a good sign. Usually at festivals everything is so scripted. I know they have time constraints, but I'd like to see more improvisation. Have more musicians play impromptu songs together from time to time. I mean, they're all in the same venue. I'd like to see more of that. It sounds like that's exactly the way it was during the jam sessions on the cruise.**

**NC:** Everything was impromptu. Nobody knew what anybody was playing when they came to the jam session. You come to the jam session and you go to the Green Room. "Okay, what do you guys want to play?" Somebody would say, "Let's play this." "No man, not enough people know that one. Let's do this one." "Okay, what key do you want to do it in?" "Let's do it in this key." "No, that's not a good key for saxophone. Let's do it in this key." "Okay. Let's do it in that key."

One night it got so crazy. I looked up and Brian was playing the trombone. Michael Paolo, Jared, and all those guys were on stage. We started clowning around. I said, "Bring it down! Bring it down!" They started squatting down playing. I said, "Get farther down!" They lay down on the floor and they were all crawling on the floor. They were all lying on their backs. All you could see were the horns up in the air. They were all crawling

around. They looked like a bunch of little worms. I was cracking up. I saw pictures of it and I was reaching down pulling Brian up off the floor.

**SV: (laughs) Oh man! That must have been hysterical.**

**NC:** People said, "Nick, how are you going to top that tomorrow? I said, "I don't know. We'll come up with something."

**SV: Playing on the ceiling.**

**NC:** Or walking on the water.

**SV: So, you'll be at Berks next month. This is your first time playing the Berks Jazz Festival?**

**NC:** Yes. I'm playing on Jason Miles' new CD. Jason wanted me to come up for his thing. Then, we – the musicians who were on the cruise – are going to have a jam session that Saturday night after Brian's show. It's for all the people who are on the cruise like Gerald Veasley, Candy Dulfer, and a lot of people. It's going to be a showing of what the jam session will be like on the cruise. It should be pretty hot. It will be a late night thing; just a bunch of people clowning around.

**SV: And we get to see you in April. You're coming to the Birchmere with Ronny Jordan in April.**

**NC:** Yes, April 5<sup>th</sup>. Then on April 6<sup>th</sup> I'm doing a live taping on XM radio.

**SV: You have the new CD and that usually means a new tour. Are you ready to hit the road?**

**NC:** I'm ready to hit it. I'm reaching out to all promoters telling them that Nick Colionne is ready to come to your town. Call me.

**SV: Well thank you Nick. It was a pleasure talking with you. We'll see you on the road.**

**NC:** And thank you.

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