

David Benoit

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Interview by Bonnie Schendell

When you think of pioneers of the smooth jazz genre, the name of David Benoit has to be on your list. With his broad spectrum of musical endeavors including smooth and traditional jazz, orchestral music, arranging and conducting, David has been a mainstay in an industry that has been full of changes. It was an honor to get to chat with someone who has been around for so long; someone who has been such an influence and guiding force for the genre and young musicians.

SmoothViews (SV): *Let's talk about the new CD, **Orchestral Stories**. Did you envision any airplay or was this something done just for your enjoyment?*

David Benoit (DB): Well, that was mainly the real reason. It was truly a gift from Peak Records. It was probably the only way to get a record like this done because they were so motivated to have me on the label, they were willing to do something really cool for me. I got turned down by everybody on this project. Nobody wanted it. It was a tough sell. I was really happy when Andi Howard said they were really into it. But the other part of it is that it will probably not get any direct smooth jazz airplay, but it has some interesting avenues. One of the real supporters of the project is Cameron Smith [of Smooth Jazz TV]. Cameron actually went to Prague with us and filmed the whole thing of the orchestra, and it will be on Smooth Jazz TV. He got so into it and he did a documentary about it. So, we're starting there and there are some other avenues, like some classical stations. I will be talking to some light classical stations to see if they'll play a movement or two, like "Kobe" or "Centaur and the Sphinx." Some of the stations like XM or cable will play "9/11." We don't expect a typical avenue because it's not beat oriented music, and we think it'll be a long process of getting people turned onto it, and hoping that we'll get some symphony dates to perform. Like maybe with the National Symphony Orchestra. Their musical director is wonderful. Leonard Slatkin. He is very innovative. I did one performance with them. So we know that things aren't going to happen right away with this record, but it was a real labor of love.

SV: *How did it all come about?*

DB: Well, when you listen to it. Especially "Kobe"... check the story out and follow it along. It's pretty intense. Most people have not read the story. And that's why the CD is titled **Orchestral Stories**. You've really got to read about Keiko's life and what she went through after the earthquake and the Hiroshima bombings. There were a lot of parallels with the life of my own mother-in-law. It's a very interesting story. When you read it and then listen to the music, the music follows the story line. It's very deep. I think if I can be really honest, the biggest issue I see with this record is that people are going to misinterpret the intentions. It's okay to listen to it and think this is relaxing. That's fine, but it really is a lot more than that. It is supposed to be a very powerful and intense story about this woman who almost lost her life. The music is almost like watching a movie, so I am hoping that people like yourself, who have followed my career and really know me, will

really get into that side of the record. It's a very different way to listen to it when you think of it as a movie or a story. It takes you to a different place. The main thing is that people don't just write it off as "Oh, that's pretty." I hope they get something a little more than that.

SV: *Do you think that your fan base will appreciate it and support it?*

DB: Some will. Some will get really into it. Some just won't get it. It's a real risk when you do a record like this. This is my gripe about smooth jazz right now. It just gets more dumbed-down and safe and I'm thinking, what is going on? What happened? You wrote about ***Freedom at Midnight*** and I am very proud of that record and what I put into it. There's a lot going on. There's a lot going on with other records, like with Pat Metheny, Joe Sample, Earl Klugh. There's a lot of artists...my concern is, all of the artists in the genre are great, and a lot of them are friends of mine, but I am concerned that the genre as a whole has gotten so mellow. Let's write the most unobtrusive, inoffensive music we can, so we dare not ever offend anyone.

SV: *Let me ask your opinion. What do you think of the abundance of CDs coming out that are exclusively cover songs? Is it to get airplay? Is it safe music?*

DB: That's very interesting. I think it's the flavor of the month right now. But, let me say this. Chris Botti's CD – brilliant! We need more records like that in this format. It's like when people were putting down Kenny G. I know Kenny. He's a good friend. He has opened up the format. He has done more good for this format than anybody. I played on his last cover record, in fact. I like the idea of cover tunes. Diana Krall has been doing covers and like I said, I love the Chris Botti record. It's a masterpiece. But, kind of like with my ***Orchestral Stories***, the first time I heard it I thought it was pretty. And then as I got into it, I thought this is really, really great. But getting back to covers, I know that Rick Braun has a CD of covers coming out, but it's different, like from the 70's. And Dave Koz has a cover of movie songs, which I haven't heard, but I'm sure is very good. Peter White, too. I'm not against it at all. I think people are doing it, not so much for airplay, but, well...how many ways can you continue to jam on two chords?! They need more musical content. I think that is the problem with smooth jazz. It is lacking in musical content, so I think a lot of artists are thinking let's cover some tunes like the ones we listened to as we were growing up. Ones with chord changes and dynamics. I think it's a good thing to do covers and I don't think it's for airplay. At least when I talk to my friends, like Dave Koz and Rick or Peter, they seem to be doing it for the right reasons. They just want to really make some music and if it gets some airplay, great. I'll probably come out with a pretty straight-ahead contemporary jazz album after this and put on a couple of covers myself. You know... the boat can only leave the dock for so long! (laughs)

SV: *What drew you to the Czech Symphony Orchestra for this CD?*

DB: Well, there were a few reasons. I think, initially, we didn't have a large budget, even though Peak was quite generous considering the kind of record this was. But we still had to record an 80-piece orchestra, and we couldn't afford to do it in any of the major cities in the U.S. It is so cost prohibitive. We started looking

at Europe and I had read some really neat things about the Czech Symphony and I had a lot of musicians who had been going over to the Czech Republic with great results. We also felt that we didn't just want a group of pick-up musicians; we wanted a real orchestra because we were going to record classical music. And what better place to record it than in Central Europe where it all began? We were so happy with the results.

SV: *How did the members of the symphony react to being part of your music and compositions, and the CD? Were they familiar with you prior to that?*

DB: A few were. My assumption was that no one would know anything about me, but there were members of the orchestra who had some of my CDs. That really helped. The nicest moment came when we did "Centaur and the Sphinx" and I was on the podium conducting, and it was going pretty good. Then I said "Listen to me play it on the piano." So I played it on the piano and the orchestra gave me quite an ovation after that. So, I figured they were really nice! The other thing I was impressed by was the discipline when I was up on the podium. No one was clowning around.

SV: *Is that different from in the U.S.?*

DB: Yes! (both laughing) There's a wonderful story about John Williams when he took over the Boston Pops. Things got so bad that he said to the management that "if the orchestra doesn't start treating me with respect, I'm going to walk off." They were doing such great numbers, box office-wise, but the musicians had this thing about the pop guy and the jazz guys. I have had that issue in America where they don't take me seriously. Or they have their opinions. I felt that even if the musicians personally didn't like my music, they paid me enough courtesy and respect and played it as nice as they could. When I was on the podium they were very respectful. It was really neat.

SV: *You've been conducting other symphonies for some time now. Is there anything you have learned from these experiences?*

DB: There is so much I have learned that I don't even know where to begin. I've learned how much I don't know! (laughs) And how green I am. What's nice about having my little orchestra in L.A., the Asia America Symphony, is that it's my little workshop. They guys have all known me for a long time. I've really studied pretty hard at score reading and conducting, and have gotten better at it, but I am still such a complete freshman when it comes to conducting orchestras.

SV: *A lot of people are thrilled that the "After 9/11" song is on this CD, since it stirred so many souls at the Wave of Peace. How does that tune make you feel?*

DB: Well, I am really enjoying playing it live and for the first time in my last concert a week ago, I mentioned this is 9/11 and it might be a good time to reflect a little bit about what happened in New Orleans and Mississippi. And the audience gave me a really nice response. The danger is that you don't want to feel like you are exploiting the situation, but because it is so timely, and it is a patriotic song, it is my way of being a little patriotic. It's uplifting. People can feel better about things and apply that to the Katrina situation, as well. I mean, look at what our

country has done, look at what people have done. People have come together and worked together. That's what 9/11 is all about. How people have come together in the face of tragedy and tried to do the right thing.

SV: *Do you feel that radio has always been receptive to your music?*

DB: Well, by and large, I have been pretty lucky with radio. But not always. I've strayed from the pack before. There were a few years where I kind of got away from radio. It was probably when I was doing ***American Landscape***. That was kind of the prelude to ***Orchestral Stories***. It was like the introduction to what I wanted to do, and had the London Symphony. But I couldn't get that on the radio. We didn't expect it with ***Orchestral Stories***, but back then it was almost like anything that David Benoit does will get on the radio. It seemed like no matter what I did, I would get on the radio. Then I found out that wasn't true. I learned a lesson that the format had changed and evolved quite a bit from ***Freedom at Midnight*** and ***Every Step of the Way***. That's when I teamed up with Rick Braun and we did "ReJoyce" because I thought I need to get back into this format.

SV: *When did you realize that music was going to be your lifelong passion?*

DB: When I was about 16 or 17. I just couldn't do anything else, you know! (laughs) I can't change a light bulb. I can't put gas in my car. I am the absolute worst. My poor wife. I am worthless around the house. But I can make a really good martini! And I have a real propensity toward anything creative. I have a love of architecture and I designed the house we live in. But basically music is about all I can really do with any proficiency!

SV: *I have also learned that you don't play any other instruments.*

DB: No, I don't.

SV: *Is that where technology comes in and is it a challenge to embrace the technology?*

DB: Yes, that's where the technology comes in. The technology allows me to play all of the instruments. You've never noticed an album of me playing all of the instruments, because it has never existed, but I've got tons of demos where it's me playing the drums, guitars, strings, bass, brass. It's fun. That's the great thing about a computer is that you can do all that. Although, I have a set of real drums in the living room and sit down and bang on them once in a while! It's always fun. It is amazing that you can send files over the internet and drop them in where you need them. It's been this way for a little while now. In the old days you had a master tape that you had to ship to somebody, but now doing it all over the internet is amazing.

SV: *So, last year you celebrated the 10th anniversary of Benoit/Freeman. How did you begin working with Russ Freeman? And in doing the follow-up CD, were you concerned about it living up to the original?*

DB: Well, we were worried about that and that is why we made such a different CD this time. It is a different time now. Russ and I had done some Benoit/Rippingtons dates and Russ approached me. I had just finished my obligation with GRP and he

began initiating some conversation about coming to the label. I thought this would be a good opportunity to see how they operate. I was very impressed and I was surprised at how open they were and forward-thinking. In terms of the record, I flew to Florida, stayed at Russ's house and we sat down and wrote together. It was a lot of fun. Then he came out to my place and did some writing out here. Then it all came together.

SV: *You've had some great collaborations, a lot with David Pack and with Stuart Wade for **Fuzzy Logic**. How do you select collaborators?*

DB: David Pack actually selected me. We've known each other since college. I remember when he came back into my life after a ten year absence. I had moved back to Manhattan Beach and he was coming down to the area a lot, so we hooked up. We decided to do some work together, and have done a lot since. With Stuart Wade, I was just knocked out with Down to the Bone and the way it sounded and the way it felt, so I contacted him out of the blue. And I said I wanted to come to England, which really surprised him. He thought he would get a tape or MP3, but instead I went over to England to his studio and wrote together. It was a great experience.

SV: *I'd like to switch gears and talk to you about your involvement with kids and music, which is an important part of your career. What more can you tell us about the Asia America Symphony and the mentoring you do?*

DB: Well, we have two orchestras. The adult orchestra is the Asia America Symphony and the kids' orchestra is the Asia America Youth Orchestra. I founded that orchestra about four years ago as a way to develop young talent. Right now I am going through some changes with it. It takes up so much time and I have been looking for someone to run it for me a little. The problem is that as soon as I get someone in there, then they're not running it the way I envisioned it, then I've got to kind of come back. So now I am in this process of trying to find somebody who can really help me run it. It's a labor of love and is also a way for me to get a lot of podium experience, conducting the classical music. But the main focus is discovering new talent. The age range is pretty young. Anywhere from nine to seventeen. Once they go to college, it turns into a new level, so this really is a youth orchestra. Kids just developing and barely knowing their instrument, but ending the season really well-developed. It's been a really neat project. This year we are calling it The Stars of Tomorrow. We have a violinist that won a *Star Search* for kids. It's something that I really enjoy doing...helping kids and seeing their musical talent develop. I mentored a young man named Taylor, who I worked with since he was eight. He is now focused on traditional, straight-ahead jazz and is quite brilliant. Amazing, amazing talent. Now there is another jazz pianist I am working with and the funny thing is that the Japanese want him to be a straight-ahead, traditionalist, but in his heart he wants to be in smooth jazz. He likes the funkier stuff. So, I told him to go for it and do what he feels is right. Nowadays, everybody wants to market, and I understand that. You gotta have a market. But in Japan, straight-ahead is in vogue!

SV: *You definitely appeal to even younger kids with your salutes to Charlie Brown and the music of Vince Guaraldi.*

DB: Yeah, that's the other thing. I tend to attract kids anyway, in the right way. But with "Linus and Lucy" and the Peanuts things, a lot of my fans are bringing their kids now and the kids are coming of age, so I am getting a new generation of fans! But I applaud parents who are exposing their children to music at an early age. Right now, most kids are doing the SpongeBob Squarepants thing, and that's okay, but...like in our house at 6 o'clock, the TV goes off and we put in a CD. Our daughter can now pick out songs because she is listening all the time.

SV: *We each have our favorite or most moving CDs. Which of your own touches you the most?*

DB: You'll be happy with this answer. One of the best CDs I have ever made is ***Freedom at Midnight***. There is something about some CDs in your career where everything just comes together. It was the first CD for GRP and I worked very hard and long on it, not on the recording, but on the writing. And that's what I am doing on this new one I am working on, is putting a lot of time into the writing. ***Waiting for Spring*** or ***Letter to Evan***. But ***Freedom at Midnight*** is just one of those. Everything hit the mark! I don't know how! (Laughs) Definitely CDs like that and ***Moonlighting*** have become the cornerstone of the format.

SV: *A final question for you. When the concert is over and the audience is getting up to leave, or the CD has ended, what do you want people to get from your music?*

DB: I want them to get something. What I don't want [is for] them to walk away saying it didn't do much; didn't knock me out. That would be the worst. If they said it gave me chills, made me happy, upset me a little bit, relaxed me...as long as they got something from it or maybe it really irritated them! I have never heard that yet! As long as they have gotten something and don't feel like they want their money back – which I have never heard either! That's the main thing. Feel something.

SV: *Thank you for taking the time to talk with SmoothViews. I am looking forward to seeing you next month at Blues Alley in Washington, DC.*

DB: You're very welcome. It's always a pleasure.

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