

Gregg Karukas

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Interview by Susan Johnson

Gregg grew up listening to the jukebox at his dad's roadside tavern in the DC/Maryland area. He had an ear for music and the natural ability to put down the tunes on the keyboard and organ. After playing in rock, soul and jazz bands around the area, he moved across country to L.A. in 1983 for the opportunity to play with some of the great musicians out there. His timing was perfect because the contemporary jazz scene was just beginning. After playing around the city, he started his own band which included an "undiscovered" sax player named Dave Koz for awhile. Gregg was also an original member of the Rippingtons and has continued to play solo and with many of the current popular smooth jazz artists. **Looking Up** is his tenth solo CD.

SmoothViews (SV): *Hi Gregg! Your new CD, **Looking Up**, has hit the stores and sounds great! What is the reaction of radio and the fans?*

Gregg Karukas (GK): So far so good. I've gotten a lot of nice emails from people. It's tough these days to get an immediate reaction from radio. You have to wait weeks before radio stations really add the record en masse. The whole science of radio promotion is something that I just try to stay detached from. I'll take the news, but I'm not going to be getting too involved in it because it is really such a different situation every year. Things change. It's kind of a crap shoot. There's so many great artists putting out great new music and the bottom line is that the radio stations are playing a lot of other older music. So everybody kind of gets in line and waits. As far as CD sales and the response, it's fantastic. I've definitely had to separate the radio situation from everything else that I do. It's great when I hear from people saying they've heard my stuff on the radio, but I guess these days with the internet we can only hope that there are new listeners who are sampling tracks on either iTunes or whatever website they happen to be on, or they get a recommendation. That really has been a great way to expose a new CD. This is the first year that we're really seeing, especially with sites like yours, the community really being more of a unified thing where everybody talks about the new releases as they come out. And then as soon as it comes out, there's usually two or three reviews on Amazon.com and that really helps.

(SV): *This CD focuses on the acoustic piano. What led you to that decision?*

(GK): You would think, being a piano player, why is that such a big thing? Not many people know this, but on my first record there wasn't a lot of acoustic piano... there were only a couple songs with acoustic because I didn't have a good piano in my studio. In the early days, I really considered myself a composer first, and the songs I was writing... I just heard saxophone on a lot of them. So over the years, the percentage of piano to sax has gotten a little more piano on every record. Then just by coincidence,

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this new record seems to have all piano or 98% piano. There is saxophone on one song only, and it's just a background part. So when I noticed that, as I was writing songs and recording them, I said, "Yeah. This is kind of cool now. Let's stay on this theme. It's nice that the way I'm hearing these melodies is the way I'm playing them." It wasn't like, "this melody would be much better on sax. Why don't I call up Dave Koz or whoever to come in and play this part?" It just started to develop as all piano.

No vocal songs this time either. I love collaborating and writing vocal songs with either Ron Boustead or Shelby Flint. It's just that we haven't done much of that this last year or so. It's not really a prerequisite to me to have vocals. Most people in the past may have added a vocal track for promotional reasons to try to get radio airplay or something. That used to be a school of thought and I have never done that. Some people do a vocal track that's a cover. I'm a "... no covers," never on my CDs. My Holiday CD is, of course, an exception, but then again there are four original songs on there too. I'm very proud of the vocals I've had on my CDs over the years. The one cover I was planning on doing years ago... it was probably in '95... was "People Make the World Go Round" or "You've Got it Bad Girl." I forget which one. Those are two of my favorite songs. Then I heard on the radio Ramsey Lewis doing the same song and I said, "Oops! Well, can't do that." And then here we have today Richard Elliott has a big, big radio hit with "People Make the World Go Round." That's cool.

(SV): Besides writing and mixing your own music, you also produce CDs for others and work in TV and movies.

(GK): Yes. Over the years, that is the kind of work that allowed me to afford to do my own solo records because I am certainly, at this point, not making any money on my own CDs. But just being able to be versatile is good. I also do a lot of engineering for people. Sometimes people call me to just mix their records. When I work on films and TV stuff, a lot of it is either as a programmer or a recording engineer or mixing engineer. I will inevitably end up playing some keyboards on each project.

The main TV/Film composer that I work with, his name is Craig Safan, has been getting more involved in Broadway-type musicals, so we've done a lot of music for that. We always do one or two made-for-TV movies a year. It has slowed down a bit. For his musicals, we make a whole record of all the songs first and treat it as if it's a whole soundtrack record. Then as the musical gets developed before it actually hits the stage, he takes that record around and presents it to the various promoters and backers and agents to try to get the backing to mount the production. It really does take a lot of money to get any play or musical produced. So that's a whole new field.

Some of my most favorite sessions were doing stuff like the music for ***Cheers***. Every couple of weeks we would go in and record a new set of cues. And it was such a relaxed thing; to do those sessions was fun. And then we

did some movie scores with a full orchestra. (*Mr. Wrong, Major Payne*) So there would be an 80-piece orchestra playing along with either my bank of computers and synthesizers, or I'd be running the computers, playing grand piano as well and watching the conductor. So those were definitely some interesting sessions.

Right now I'm producing an artist I worked with... this is my 2nd production with him. His name is Omar, and he's a piano player in the kind of world music, new-age field. We're co-writing songs and recording here, and it's another extension of what he did before where we featured a lot of the musicians who had played with Yanni over the years, Charlie Bisharat and Pedro Eustache and Ramon Stagnaro, a great guitarist. So this project we'll probably have the same guys come in and add violin and guitar. It's a very interesting kind of cross-over world/classical/new-age. It'll be out next year. We don't have a title yet.

(SV): You've said that you "think we all need music to be the soundtrack to our soul." In what ways do you hope to connect to the people listening to your music?

(GK): For me, I relate to my own experience growing up listening to music... listening to songwriting, in particular... starting from the Beatles, Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell, James Taylor... people like that. When you are listening not for notes but just for the overall feeling of a song, that is a whole new experience compared to when you're listening to see how hot this particular player is or how great a jazz player this guy is. You're taking more of a technical approach to listening. Being a musician, I have to do both things, but I'm very glad that growing up I had an appreciation for the more intangible, if you will, emotional aspects of music. That is the kind of feedback I love getting from people because people... smooth jazz fans, whatever... are not generally musicians or music types. They're people who have come across this music, however they have been exposed to it, something about it touched them. Whatever it is, I can't define it specifically, but I can certainly define the way I approach how I write music and what I like. And that is, I try to be as lyrical as possible with the melodies. It's really all about the melodies for me... and the grooves. I really concentrate a lot on working on different kinds of grooves. I don't use too many stock grooves. I try to put a little twist on things always. And then when you do that and have a great melody, that's something that I consider a great accomplishment and then if everybody else likes it, that's even better!

(SV): Your label is located in the England. Are there advantages to having a label outside of the U.S.? And why does the address on your CD show Illinois as the address?

(GK): Good question. The label is owned and run by Les Cutmore in England. He started in the business working with Paul Hardcastle and Jazzmasters. That's how things started originally. None of the physical business of my CD gets done in England. He uses a U.S. distributor, and he uses U.S.

promotional people, and that's why it has the U.S. address. He has people that work on the day-to-day operations here.

(SV): When you write your music, do you know which guest musicians you want to have and you write for them or do you write a song and then decide who might fit the music?

(GK): It usually happens right during when I'm writing the song. There's something about the melody or the style or groove that I'll say, "This is a perfect song for Ricardo Silveira", for instance, or Michael O'Neill who's been my main guy for so many years with such great pocket-groove ideas and solos, too. In fact, I'm really happy to give him a chance to stretch out a lot more on this CD, **Looking Up**, because he really has a great solo voice. For instance, on the last CD... "Remember When" the song that's just me and Dave Koz. I knew right away that I wanted to do a duet with just piano and Dave on sax. So I actually wrote three songs and sent them to him and said pick your favorite and come on over and we'll play it together. That's what happened. He picked the one he liked the best.

(SV): Let's talk a little about the Brazilian influence in your music. That track "Lost in Negril" is hypnotic and such a "feel good" song! And who is that on vocals and trills?

(GK): I would call that more of a Caribbean island influence. There are a couple of others, "Corner Club" and "CrossRhodes" that are more of a Brazilian groove. The vocals actually are... no one I know. It comes from a CD of all sorts of vocal effects from all over the world.

(SV): If people who purchase your CD read the liner notes, they'll find a "secret" website to visit for a surprise. What a great idea! Do you have a lot of response to that?

(GK): I've had a great response. In fact, I'm hoping to do something like that at some of the concerts that I have coming up... something special for the people who were just at that concert. For instance, Catalina JazzTrax Festival... I'll just say something from the stage and there will be a secret word they'll have to find on www.karukas.com. We get a few emails every day from people, and part of that is if they go to the secret page we offer to send them an autographed photo or sheet music score or something.

(SV): You're headed out to sea on Rick Braun's All Star Smooth Jazz Cruise. Will you play solo sets along with playing with the other musicians? Will you go on any excursions?

(GK): It looks like I will be playing every single night at least for two hours! We haven't figured exactly what shows there are going to be. We'll have to figure that out pretty soon. I can't say for sure. I was not originally asked to do my own show. Rick asked me to be involved as his musical director and also be musical director for five other artists for five other shows. Somewhere between that and all the jam sessions I'm sure I'll play some of my own stuff, but I don't think they have me on the schedule to do my own

show. I'm hopeful that we're all going to be playing different stuff too. Stretch out more. That's one of those things about the cruise. Once everyone gets to know everybody they want to hear something different. They like to hear the musicians stretch out a little bit beyond what would be a normal show. Because we're bringing the family, we're looking forward to doing anything and everything we can. But because I've got a big responsibility doing a show every night I don't know whether I'll be that free to go out and do a full-day excursion. But if they're early in the morning and it works out, yeah!

(SV): *How do you come up with the names for your songs? Let's go through of a couple of them. "Girl In The Red Dress"?*

(GK): That one was easy because we worked on the cover for a long time. I had the cover design before I had the title. I thought that was a good way to open up the CD with that song and that title to establish kind of a vibe.

(SV): *"First Flight Home"?*

(GK): That is dedicated to my wife and kids because that's the one thing that we have to cope with as musicians. We have to leave town from time-to-time. I don't go out of town as much as I did a few years ago, like when I was touring with Boney. It's just one of those things you think about... getting back home. It's great to be out playing music for people and I'm the first to go and play a show anywhere it's offered, but it's also great to get back home, too!

(SV): *"Isabella"?*

(GK): That is another one of those songs that I knew had that romantic vibe and I wanted it to be a girl's name. I wanted it to be Ingrid because Ingrid Bergman is one of my favorite actresses. Yvonne, my wife, said, "Ingrid. I don't like that. That doesn't sound that great as a title." I said, "Okay. What about Isabella?" She said, "That sounds great!" Sold! Now it's not Ingrid Bergman, it's her daughter, Isabella!

(SV): *I like the spelling of the title "CrossRhodes," too.*

(GK): Well, there you go! It's a play on the Fender Rhodes which is featured on the whole song. I came up with that one, too. Normally I'm terrible with titles. Look at this! I've actually come up with a lot of titles on this CD. Normally I'm always asking my fans and friends, and especially Ron Boustead... of course, he did come up with a couple... but I'm always asking people for help. Those songs you've asked me about are all ones I just came up with pretty quickly! I leave them untitled for the longest time. They'll just be titled by the date that I wrote them or by the groove... "Latin- this date" or "R&B- this date." When it really gets down to it and I have to get the copy together for the CD package, that's when I really have to sit down and work on the titles. Now that I look at it, "Relentless" was suggested by Ron Boustead and "Deep Into You" was also suggested by him, so he has two titles on this CD.

(SV): What CDs are your "sound of emotion"? What would you take on a road trip?

(GK): Oh, wow. That's a hard one. There are so many. But I would definitely include a couple Milton Nascimento CDs. Milton is pretty much known as the most famous singer-songwriter in Brazil from the 70s onward. He's kind of like the Paul Simon of Brazil. He's done collaborations with many different people, many different styles and everybody loves his music. He's really a big, big part of the Brazilian music culture. Of course, I have to include Dori Caymmi in this topic because Dori is... if Milton is the Paul Simon of Brazil then Dori is the... let's see if I can think of the best metaphor... Dori is almost like the Arlo Guthrie of Brazil but completely heavy musically. Dori's father is the Woody Guthrie of Brazil. His songs are the folk songs of Brazil. Just like Woody wrote "This Land is Your Land" and "If I Had a Hammer," Dori's father Dorival Caymmi, who is over 80 years old and still going strong... his songs are known by all kids in Brazil. Everybody in Brazil knows his songs because they sing about the land. They sing about their regions and customs. Carmen Miranda recorded Dori's songs about Bahia in the early 1930s. Anyway, I had the great honor to work with Dori for years back in the 90s, both with Sergio Mendes and then in Dori's group. We played on his records and went to Montreux Switzerland and played for Brazil night. So Dori's music for me is the ultimate cross-over of Brazilian, jazz and lyrical melodies. So I would definitely take some of his CDs. Then we get to American music where it would have to be some Miles Davis and I would have to include a Weather Report CD (probably *Heavy Weather*) and a David Sanborn CD (*Voyeur*) and... let's think about somebody modern... Angie Stone, *Stone Love*, and... someone in smooth jazz... that's a hard one. Joe Sample... A lot of guys are my friends, and I don't necessarily listen to their CDs the same way as the ones that I'm talking about where you just listen to the whole CD and let it wash over you. That's really what I try to do, but I don't tend to do that so much with my buddies' CD. I put it on once, and I listen to it. Yeah. Sounds great. Then I put it on the shelf. (laughs) The Yellowjackets CD, for sure. There's a few that are some of my favorites. *Greenhouse* and *The River*. and... I love Richard Smith's CD. That's one that I've listened to multiple times. Oh, and Dave Koz's CD. *Saxophonic*, in particular. It's really a varied, top-notch CD. The production is incredible. The sound is great. And Dave is just always great! Ever since we started together in my band! Back then he definitely had that great sound. That great restrained, but melodic sound.

(SV): In any free time that you have, what do you like to do?

(GK): It's usually outdoors stuff with Yvonne and my two boys Alex (11) and Stevie (8), like hiking, camping, riding bikes. Those kinds of things.

(SV): Any final thoughts, Gregg? Anything you want your fans to know about *Looking Up* or yourself?

(GK): I feel very fortunate to be in this position where I'm writing and recording my own music and able to still get it out there and have people respond to it right away. The place that we're at right now with the internet and all that, really makes it ideal for anyone, even struggling artists, to be able to get their stuff out. And I think that's a pretty cool situation because anybody who takes the time to record their own music and press CDs... however small, however home-grown it is... I definitely give them a lot of credit for making all that effort.

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