

ALAN “GRIP” SMITH:

THE BEST OF

Both Schools

PRODUCER, SONGWRITER AND KEYBOARDIST ALAN “GRIP” SMITH describes his style as “old school/new school.” “Old school R&B was really musical, in the sense that it was very chordal and song-oriented,” he says. “I try to combine that with the more groove-based, rhythmically syncopated new school style.”

Grip, who has worked with such R&B heavyweights as Keith Sweat, Xscape, TLC, Silk, and Dru Hill, pursues a similar old/new path in choosing keyboards. His two workhorses are the retro-flavored, button-and-knob-heavy Yamaha CS6X and the sleek, modernistic Yamaha EX5.

“The CS6X is a monster,” says Grip. “It’s great for dance music and sequencing. I love the acoustic patches and the lead sounds. I also edit a lot of the patches to make them my own. I love using the CS6X live, too. The EX5, on the other hand, is more of a foundation keyboard for me. It’s my controller, and I often use its Rhodes, grand piano, and string sounds. The bass patches are cool, and so are the pads. Basically, I just love the whole keyboard. Yamaha gear really is the best, and I appreciate the way Yamaha supports urban music.”

Grip says the EX5 is also his main songwriting tool: “I write with it because it’s easier for me to compose when I can get sounds that are just like what I’m hearing in my head, without having to do much tweaking. I usually don’t like to do much editing beyond basic stuff like adjusting the reverb cutoff time. Usually the sounds I start with are the ones I end up using on records. For example, right now I’m working on a project for Dreamworks by a talented new artist named Sera, and the EX5 sounds I used when I wrote for the album are the ones I intend to use on the final versions.”

Grip, who studied classical piano from the age of eight, says he always knew he’d become a musician. He sharpened

his skills performing in church, community choirs, concert jazz bands, and on the road with R&B groups. Along the way he became a fan of great jazz keyboardists like Herbie Hancock and Oscar Peterson, though he’s quick to point out that a jazz musician’s skills aren’t necessarily the ones needed to make R&B hits: “It’s hard to bring a jazzman’s touch to a pop record without losing all that a jazz player is capable of doing, because pop records are really mostly about the song.”

Grip erupted onto the R&B scene as a writer and producer after overseeing Immature’s “Xtra, Xtra” and Xscape’s “Who Can I Run To?” “Those records charted fairly well and got a lot of radio airplay,” he says. “Working with Dru Hill also opened a lot of doors for me. It really helped put me on the scene as a record maker and a session player.”

Grip currently divides his time between studio work and touring. Which is closest to his heart? “Both,” he insists. “I’m the musical director for Jagged Edge, Keith Sweat, Silk, and Xscape, so I’m really comfortable onstage. But the studio is like home to me, because it’s the place where I can really do my own thing.”

Does Grip have any advice for aspiring songwriters trying to pitch their songs? “Yes,” he says. “I always hear record label A&R people saying things like, ‘Don’t worry how the song is recorded, just put down your idea.’ But the problem with that advice is that most A&R people can’t hear the song from just a rough idea. They can only compare it to the sound of whatever is hot right now. So even if you’re just working in a small home studio, make sure that whatever you send represents the very best recording and performance you can create. You may just get the chance to have your stuff heard, and you want to make the most of it.”

Grip tours with the P200, S80, EX5, and CS6X.

