

UpFront

JAZZ BY DAN OUELLETTE

Jazz Returns To Weekly TV Via 'Legends' Show

Jazz, once a staple of early black-and-white TV programming, is returning to the tube with what is described as the first weekly national network series in 40 years.

"Legends of Jazz," which debuts April 2 on PBS, will feature conversations with and studio performances by a range of jazz stars. The initial 13 installments, already shot, include Clark Terry, Roy Hargrove, Chris Botti, Benny Golson, Pat Metheny, Lee Ritenour, Marcus Miller, George Duke, Phil Woods, David Sanborn, Kurt Elling, Al Jarreau, Ivan Lins, Oscar Castro-Neves, Robert Cray, Keb' Mo', Tony Bennett, Chick Corea and the late Ray Barretto.

Hosted by pianist Ramsey

tionwide. "Five million people tune in each week," says Lewis, best-known for his 1965 jazz-pop instrumental hits "The 'In' Crowd" and "Hang On Sloopy." "Not all are diehard jazz fans. Some people are just curious about quality music. We researched broadening the radio idea to television, and we think interest will explode."

Rosen, the founder of the GRP and N2K labels, agrees, citing the success of Ken Burns' televised 2001 jazz documentary and the sales of its related CD compilations—as well as the success of "American Idol"—as proof that "people are interested in seeing music on TV."

Each "Legends of Jazz" show is theme-based and features a

line between being true to the music and not dumbing it down."

Rosen reports that more than 80% of PBS affiliates plan to air the series. "That's huge and represents a lot of potential eyeballs," he says, and hastens to add, "one challenge is when the stations will program the show." But, he says, so far, so good. For example, WETA in Washington, D.C., and WTTW will give the show top billing in its kickoff week.

"Legends of Jazz" DVDs and companion CDs of the show's performances will be distributed by WEA. The first volume (shows one through five) will be available in May, the second (shows six through nine) in June and the third (shows 10-13) in July. A three-volume



The program's first episode—with a trumpet theme—will feature, from left, CLARK TERRY, ROY HARGROVE and CHRIS BOTTI.

Lewis and produced by LRS-media and WTTW in Chicago, the half-hour shows are shot in high definition with 5.1 surround sound. An additional 13 episodes are greenlighted for next year, and a deal is already in place with WEA to distribute DVDs and CDs from the performances.

"This show will succeed in bringing jazz back to the public's attention," says Lewis, who co-founded LRSmedia with music entrepreneur Larry Rosen and investor Lee Rosenberg, who also serves as president/CEO of the venture.

Lewis' confidence stems from hosting his two-hour weekly radio program "Legends of Jazz," which is syndicated to nearly 70 stations na-

montage of historical footage and in-studio guests who share anecdotes and perform. The first show focuses on the trumpet's role in jazz, with featured performers Terry, Hargrove and Botti, who play solo and then as a group.

Rosen understands that music on TV today is highly produced and often augmented by dancers and electronics. He admits that jazz does not conform to those production values, but nonetheless can be presented to audiences in a creative way.

"The music will speak for itself," Rosen says. "Each tune played is four minutes in length without long choruses and is something that an audience can relate to. We're trying to find a

boxed set will be available for the holiday season.

"This will be a body of work that sells," WEA president John Esposito says. "Anything that Larry Rosen has done is class. When I heard about the TV launch, I said sign me up. We do a healthy business in jazz. The occasional jazz record may go through the roof, but it's like Nonesuch's heritage artists that continually sell over the years."

Esposito says TV exposure will help the genre. "I have a 20-year-old daughter who tells me that a lot of kids on college campuses are getting into jazz," he says. "So I'm feeling pretty good about this deal. My job is to sell records, and I believe we're going to sell a lot." ■■■