

## Local jazz programs make the connection with Ken Burns series

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**By Steve Behrens**

A handful of public TV stations jumped on Ken Burns' coattails — rummaging around in local attics for jazz history and even demonstrating that jazz performers are still swinging in their communities.



Images from *Jazz in Five Points* on Rocky Mountain PBS.

The opportunity was notable enough for PBS program veep John Wilson to mention it to station programmers this month in remarks about local-national interdependence.

Connecticut PTV and Rocky Mountain PBS aired what amounted to half-hour miniatures of the Burns series, profiling the great days of jazz in New Haven and Denver, respectively. And WFUM in Flint, Mich., launched a five-episode series, *Jazzland*, that mixes a little local jazz history with lots of performance tape shot in the studio and at jazz clubs around the upper Midwest. More about those projects in a minute.

A few other stations repeated old specials on jazz. San Antonio's KLRN brought back the independently produced *San Antonio Jazz: The Golden Age*, a half-hour doc that debuted on the station in 1999, says Jeannette Sigard, program director. Featured were local performers such as Golden Age star Jack Teagarden and present-day bandleader Jim Cullum.

And the whole country saw a repeat of an hour-long performance special produced by Phil Byrd for WYES in New Orleans: *Preservation Hall Jazz Band: A Night in New Orleans*, which PBS paired with Burns' first episode Jan. 8. The special first aired on PBS last November.

Other stations "localized" the Burns series with short-form promos and intros. In Cincinnati, WCET brought in famed local broadcaster Nick Clooney (brother of Rosemary, father of George) to host half-minute intros for each episode of the Burns series. In a barter underwriting deal, Clooney also gave the documentary series some cross-promotion on his morning drive

program on swing-format WSAI, says Phil Meyer, WCET's new director of marketing and membership.

And in Norfolk, WHRO crafted a series of one-minute promos for the Burns series and began running them in September, says pledge producer Martha Edwards. The spots featured local personalities with jazz cred, notably including Jae Sinnett, a professional drummer and host on sister station WHRV-FM.

■ **Denver:** The Rocky Mountain PBS (KRMA) documentary came naturally as an installment in the *Rocky Mountain Legacy* local history series produced by Lisa Olken. *Jazz in Five Points*, which aired on the final night of the Burns marathon, Jan. 24, profiles the heyday of Five Points, a black neighborhood with three blocks of night spots that, for touring bands, were the only place to perform between Missouri and California.

Olken burns through a lot of old still photos, especially as she keeps up with the racing tempo of the jazz. The overall tone is reminiscence: visits by big stars, with young musicians lined up in the front row, listening to learn. "Oh, Lord, we had some days down there," says one Five Points regular.

Like Burns, Olken puts the musicmaking in the context of a lively ethnic community that had more than its share of woes. African-Americans in Colorado had to co-exist with a strong Ku Klux Klan underworld that was active until the 1950s. "The topic was the Jazz Age in the neighborhood," she says. "In doing the neighborhood, I had to address Denver's racism."

■ **New Haven:** Rebecca Abbott's *Unsung Heroes: Jazz Music in New Haven*, aired the same night by Connecticut PTV, employed the familiar mix of stills, musical recordings and present-day interviews used by Olken and, for that matter, Ken Burns.

What Abbott and Olken lacked most conspicuously were talking heads like the eloquent Gary Giddins, Stanley Crouch and Wynton Marsalis, who gave the Burns series much of its verbal eloquence. The Denver and New Haven documentaries did offer lots of one-sentence and two-sentence interview clips, however, and Abbott cut them together into a complex conversation, with old-timers frequently finishing each others' sentences.

Abbott — an independent producer, Quinnipiac University video production professor and active member of a community group called Jazz Haven — packs in a lot of local historical detail. She was already hoping to do a local jazz history documentary, she says, when Larry Rifkin, executive v.p. at Connecticut PTV, told her that Burns' series had been scheduled by PBS. That was last July. "He said, 'Can you get it done by January?'"

Within weeks, Abbott pulled together a three-camera shoot of a live concert

honoring two well-loved New Haven jazz organists, the brothers Eddie and Bobby Buster. The concert provides an additional element to liven the documentary.

Abbott focuses on Dixville Avenue — like Five Points, a black neighborhood where jazz performers stopped on tour and where many less-known musicians rose to regional fame. Like most whites in the metro area, Abbott didn't know about Dixville Avenue and its storied night clubs, and began to learn more about it after reading a magazine article.

■ **Flint:** A five-person crew spent many nights shooting *Jazzland*, an ambitious five-part performance series aired during the Burns series by WFUM, the public TV station of the University of Michigan-Flint. "It's a labor of love, believe me," says Rodney Brown, the producer at WFUM.

Each *Jazzland* episode showcases several strong second-tier jazz professionals playing traditional jazz in the styles of the 1950s and 1960s. Host and saxophonist Allan Barnes often performs with the guests. Brown shoots some sets with four cameras in a well-lit studio, much in the style of performances on the BET cable network. Others are shot in murkier upper-Midwest clubs, where patrons add excitement but also sometimes wander in front of the band.

A minor element are interviews with old-timers such as the owners of two clubs where Brown taped performances — Baker's Keyboard Lounge on the outskirts of Detroit, billed as the oldest jazz club still in business, and Rusty's Jazz Cafe in Toledo, the third oldest.

Brown says he immediately saw the effect of *Jazzland* and the Ken Burns series when he returned to Baker's. "People were lined up out the door."

"Jazz is going to be a real hot topic for the rest of the year, and we're going to be on the cutting edge of that."

WFUM's interest in performance programming is usual for a public TV station. It extends to producing two episodes a week for its late-night music show *Home Page Magazine Afterhours*, aired on nine stations in the region, according to Brown.



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