

## Press Release

Erie area jazz fans could hardly have asked for a better holiday gift than the announcement that Mercyhurst College radio station WMCE (88.5 and 104.9) is going jazz—all jazz.

When WMCE officially drops its current classical music and mixed genre format in favor of 24/7 jazz, it will become the first fulltime jazz station in Erie radio history. It also will put Erie in the radio big leagues with major cities such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Dallas, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Detroit.

The Mercyhurst station, which will now be called “Jazz FM, Erie’s Jazz Station,” already has a full jazz schedule posted on its website ([www.ErieRadio.com](http://www.ErieRadio.com)), and will begin carrying some of those programs sometime between Christmas and January.

The goal, says station director Michael Leal, is to be broadcasting jazz fulltime in February.

When that happens, Jazz FM will offer 161 hours per week of jazz—nirvana for jazz lovers.

That compares with the 19 hours of jazz—all of it at night, and mostly on weekends—on WQLN-FM, 91.3, Erie’s National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate.

Leal revealed his plans in October to some members of WQLN management. “They were supportive,” he says. “They feel, as do I, that the duplication of jazz for a limited number of hours makes it just that much more exciting for the jazz community.”

Why the change at Mercyhurst?

“We wanted to offer something different for the community,” said Leal. “That’s one of the goals of public radio.”

The decision came after about a year of research and discussion among Leal—a 30-year radio veteran (the past 18 in public radio) who became station director in May 2007--the college’s Communications Department, the administration, and a variety of folks from the community.

“There has been criticism of radio in Erie for having too many dual formats—two country stations, two rock, two sports, and two classical,” said Leal. “Well, there will be only one fulltime jazz station.”

WMCE shared a primary format of classical music with WQLN, and that created a less than favorable situation for WMCE.

“It’s difficult to get support for two classical music stations, and we felt that for many of our current listeners, we were their secondary station,” said Leal. “We are looking for an audience that will make us their first choice, and we hope to get—we will need to get--that kind of support from jazz fans.”

Another reason to leave classical for jazz, Leal said, is that recent research has shown that classical listenership in the past 10 years has remained static, while the audience for jazz nationwide has grown by about six per cent.

Most of Jazz FM’s hours will come from another fulltime jazz outlet—WDUQ-FM at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. “Our partnership with them will be Jazz FM’s foundation,” says Leal.

Also on the schedule are such high profile syndicated programs as “Jazz At Lincoln Center,” with trumpet and jazz education icon Wynton Marsalis; “Jazz Profiles,” hosted by veteran, Grammy-winning vocalist Nancy Wilson, and “Radio Deluxe,” featuring personable vocalist/guitarist John Pizzarelli and his cabaret/pop singing wife Jessica Molaskey.

A common denominator among the syndicated programs aside from great jazz is that, through interviews and discussions chronicling the people, places and events in jazz, they are they are informational and instructive.

“We also plan to provide a significant number of local programs,” said Leal, adding that local hosts will be announced sometime between mid-January and February.

Further, Jazz FM plans to offer special programs highlighting activities and events at Mercyhurst, such as D’Angelo Performing Arts Center performances.

“The other thing we want to emphasize is community jazz events, and we’re looking forward to taping live performances by some of our local jazz musicians,” Leal added. Down the line, he said, tapings could include performances by nationally known artists presented by JazzErie.

Jazz FM will cede radio news dominance to WQLN, running only one-minute national news updates each hour from the Associated Press. “Of course, we’ll carry news bulletins and continuing coverage of big stories,” said Leal.

Two well established non-jazz programs will remain part of the Jazz FM schedule--Despierta Latino (9 a.m.-1 p.m. Sat.) and “Polka Celebration” (10 a.m.-1 p.m. Sun.)

Finally, the station will carry a greatly reduced sports lineup, concentrating on major sports and rivalries, although additional sportscasts—all handled by students—will stream on the web separately from the streaming of jazz.

Leal also promises plenty of student involvement in Jazz FM.

“We have about a half dozen students helping us get ready for the new format, and once underway, as part of the Communications Department, the station will not only be a tool for students, but also we hope to get some students either on air or behind the scenes doing production work,” he said. “We also may try to connect students with our local hosts.”

Leal says word is already getting around on the internet and elsewhere about the fulltime jazz format. “And I’m already hearing back from a number of people who are very excited about it,” he says.

“We hope to make Jazz FM home for people who love jazz.”