

JazzNEO to premiere February 26: a conversation with host Dee Perry

by Kevin McLaughlin



Good news for jazz lovers, or even the jazz-curious: the launch on February 26 of Ideastream Public Media’s full-time jazz channel. Featuring hosts Dee Perry, Dan Polletta, and John Simna, JazzNEO will broadcast on 90.3 HD2 and be livestreamed on JazzNEO.org.

Perry, who gladly came out of retirement to be one of the inaugural hosts, is excited about the venture. “Northeast Ohio has a vibrant culture of players, presenters, and students of jazz, and what really excites me is how JazzNEO can shine a spotlight on all that talent and connect it to listeners who are looking to nourish

their ears, brains, and hearts,” she has said.

I sat down with Perry in Ideastream’s facility on Euclid Avenue to talk about JazzNEO and her love of jazz. I began by asking her about her first experiences with the genre.

Dee Perry: My dad built his own stereo set, and he had three albums: Miles Davis’s *Flamenco Sketches*, a Gloria Lynn album — I think it was Great American Songbook tunes done in a jazzy kind of way — and a third album of train sounds.

I didn’t realize that I was being exposed to jazz all along, like in cartoons and in old movies — you know, the things that would set the mood in the background. There was all sorts of early jazz in Disney cartoons, and on the radio they played music all mixed up

together when I was growing up. So there was a lot of jazz in my life before I realized what it was called and just how complex it was.

I took a course at Cleveland State with jazz host Chris Columbi, who was one of the first broadcasters here at WCLV. He did a long-running jazz show and then he became my professor — a jazz history survey — and he taught me how to listen to the music. I thought I didn't like it. But he showed me what the elements are, wrote down how solos work, and how to listen for threads of music or quotes from a song — it's just like unlocking one layer of a complex puzzle, and I'm still unlocking layers decades later.

Kevin McLaughlin: What were your first experiences as a jazz host?

DP: My first job in radio was in jazz at WABQ in Cleveland. I went to other stations — R&B, pop, and light rock stations — and then I wanted to do something different. I went to the Urban League and said, I've done this kind of radio, is there something else? They sent me to Cleveland Public Radio, and once I was part of this, I thought, yes, this is what I was looking for.



KM: You retired in 2016, and now you're coming back to be a part of JazzNEO. And your attraction was that you wanted to give symmetry to your career?

DP: Also because I just love the music itself and I really had taken the time to explore it in the past several years, and it was a challenge. Can I get up to speed? I'm still working on that with who's new and mixing that with who's been around.

KM: Will there be local artists represented on JazzNEO?

DP: There are so many great players living in the city, in this region, and in the state, so part of our mission at JazzNEO is to put as much focus as possible on Northeast Ohio: the players, the clubs, the festivals, students — any facet of jazz that is growing in this area to turn the spotlight on.

KM: Will you have live performances on the air?

DP: Eventually. We don't have all the technical pieces connected right now to do an in-studio broadcast, but we can present recorded local performances. One of the programs is going to be "Live at the Bop Stop," the club on Detroit Avenue that sends recordings of live shows to radio stations. Right in our backyard we've got a great source for live jazz. We'll also be playing student performances, like those at Oberlin Conservatory and other places that are teaching the next generations.

KM: What is the focus of your show going to be?

DP: If I had to pick a word, it would be "eclectic." I like everything from the 1920s to the 2020s. I'm a huge Fats Waller fan, and I also love Art Tatum and all the old stride pianists. And I'm a huge fusion fan — Weather Report, Return to Forever, Pat Metheny... and then the younger players, like James Carter and Gregory Porter. I just heard of a female baritone saxophonist who is wonderful, Claire Daly. I want to bridge the classic jazz lover and the person who says, like me once upon a time, "I don't know if I like jazz," and then bring them something to make them say, "I do like that." So yeah, eclectic and revelation.

KM: How much listener input will there be?

DP: We're providing a space for people who will tell us what they want to hear, or to send us their own playlist. There's always some pocket or some genre that we may have overlooked, or that someone will get great pleasure out of hearing. But also for musicians to say, "I have a recording and here's a link to what I've done," because we can't know all of the local players, and they won't know us until the word gets around.

KM: I want to ask you about the event on February 26 at the Bop Stop.

DP: All three jazz hosts will be there, sitting and talking with Mike McIntyre, who is always so fun to share a stage with. It's something the news site has done for a while — invite the community in to interact — and so being the newsman that Mike is, he invited us to share the community tour to talk about how our first day went.

KM: It sounds like a great evening. Thank you so much for sitting down with me, and best of luck to JazzNEO!

DP: It was a pleasure!

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