

Mary Mardirosian signs off

Her last show on WICN is Oct. 8

By Chet Williamson

Mary Mardirosian, Worcester's First Lady of Jazz, announced last week during her popular Saturday-afternoon radio program *Jazztime*, on WICN, 90.5 FM, that she had decided to leave the airwaves.

The announcement stunned her faithful audience, and immediately a flood of phone calls poured into the station.

"Oh well, before we go any further," she said after announcing "Blue Star," the opening music played by saxophonist Benny Carter, "I would like to make official what some of you may already know. After 15 years of public radio, I have decided to bring down the curtain. My final program for WICN will be Saturday, Oct. 8. That's next week, folks.

"The opportunity to share this music

the music she calls mainstream jazz. From the beginning, her fans have recognized her and adored her for that.

"The Three Tenors" Mardirosian said, introducing the next piece of music after collecting herself. "You know? When I have the *IV Guide* in front of me and I look at the program listing and I see 'Three Tenors,' I say, 'Oh wow! Three tenors. Scott Hamilton, Ken Poplowski and Spike Robinson.'"

A jazz fan since childhood, she took to the airwaves in 1979 when she was invited to talk about Count Basie with Tom Reney, then a programmer at WCUW, 91.3 FM. Reney had heard that she knew the count personally. Mardirosian and her late husband Marty were serious fans of the Count Basie Orchestra.

What began as a way to get back into the workplace became a journey. Radio kept drawing Mardirosian in. Although shy and retiring, she possessed a healthy sense of curiosity, a necessary ingredient for radio hosts, especially for interviews.

"Originally, I planned on doing office work for the radio station," Mardirosian said, sitting in a conference room at WICN after her show on Saturday. "Basically to volunteer, to work in the office and brush up on office skills so I could go out and prepare myself for an outside job - which I wanted to do after my husband passed away."

Radio station WCUW was known nationally in the late 70s as a kind of jazz harbinger. As well as programming the most avant-garde music, the station produced live concerts by such cutting-edge artists as Anthony Braxton, Archie Shepp and Marion Brown. Mardirosian brought a sense of tradition and history. She simply played the music she loved: A ballad sung by Carmen

McRae. A tone poem played by Duke Ellington. A soft-shoe by Lester Young. Zoot Sims whispering. Ben Webster moaning, Scott Hamilton wailing.

"If you are volunteering," she said, "No. I, you have to love it yourself to make the audience feel something. If you're playing it and being phony about it, how is the audience going to respond to that? This is what I loved. I found the people responding to that.

"Like Ron has said to me," Mardirosian said referring to DeSourdis, her engineer for the last seven years, "Boy, the audience knows when you like someone, and I think the audience knows when you don't like someone.' I guess I'm very open about that. I would like to say when I was at WCUW I developed my own program. I didn't step into anyone else's program. I developed the Saturday-afternoon program that was totally mine. And the same

continued on page 10

continued from page 9

thing over here. My program, when I came over here, it was a brand new show with my ideas, I created my own. I'm kind of proud of that."

Creating a four-hour jazz show and keeping it fresh for the past 15 years is something that Mardirosian has worked hard at. Walking us through a typical show's preparation, she said, she generally plays 40 pieces of music. She factors in current events like birthdays, obituaries, anniversaries and up-and-coming concerts. With an extensive record collection of her own, she makes a list of items she plans to play on Saturday.

"What has happened - doing the program for so many years - listening now is just a job, I listen just to get the program ready. I never listen, anymore, for my own listening pleasure. It's always: Let me find time. If it is records from my collections, I say, 'Now Mary, stop and listen to some of the cuts.' And if something hits me right

Chris and Richard Holiday and Makoto Ozone. Her live radio interviews are filled with engaging conversation, hilarity and

sometimes even silence.

"I was to do a telephone interview with Arthur PIYsock," she said with a chuckle, "and we were set for me to call him at a certain time. And we called and somebody answered the phone and said that he'd gone out to get a haircut. 'Why don't you call back?' That was kind of hairy.

"I've interviewed Woody Herman. I've interviewed Scott Hamilton many times. Houston Person, You name it: Bud Shank and Shorty Rodgers. Another funny one was Anita O'Day. Again, the same thing. She was appearing at the Regattabar in Cambridge. The interview was all set up. No show. So I had to interview the drummer. He said she had a hairdressing appointment. I've done Chris Connor many times. She's such a doll. And I love to interview Herb Pomeroy. He is just a joy. Gee, who else? Dakota Staton. And

away, grabs me, then I'll say, 'That's what I am going to play.' But it's not for pleasure. It was a job. And it was tedious. I minded that part of it."

Something she is also quite proud of is her series of four-hour-long specials in which she focuses on the career of one artist. She has presented overviews of composers such as Jimmy Van Heusen, Cole Porter and countless musicians: Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, Nat Cole and Duke Ellington, among others. There is an annual special on Stan Kenton and, **of course, Basie.**

As omnipresent as her male counterpart Emil Haddad on the local jazz scene, Mardirosian could be seen virtually every Monday night when the El Morocco was presenting the greatest jazz on the planet. Often she would introduce the artist that she had played on record a couple of days before. She has introduced and championed to Worcester audiences such young lions as Rebecca Parris, Donna Byrne,

Etta Jones. She was the most humble woman that I have met. Ernestine Anderson. She is a darling."

The Seattle-based singer, Anderson, also gave Mardirosian one of her most memorable moments on radio.

"Apparently one of my listeners had gone to see Ernestine and said to her, 'There is a woman disc jockey in Worcester, and she plays your record all the time.' Would you believe while we were fund raising, one Saturday, I got a call and they said, 'Mary, it's for you.' I picked it up and she said, 'Hi, I'm Ernestine Anderson.' I says, 'Do you mean, the Ernestine Anderson?' And she says, 'Yes.' And I recognized her voice. I was just floored. Before I could say another thing, she says, 'I would like to make a pledge to your program. I understand you're fund raising.' I says, 'You're kidding?' She says, 'No, I'm not.' And she did. She made a pledge to my program. I couldn't get over it."

When it comes to fund raising, *Jazztime with Mary Mardirosian* has no local peers. Her fans have generously supported her shows, from the beginning and through the years, in record-breaking figures. All the while, she has volunteered her services.

"One thing I would like to say," Mardirosian said. "This music would have died a long time ago, had it not been for public radio all over the country. You know the Charlie Parkers and Dizzy Gillespies. And the Ellingtons, people like that should never die. And I think, thanks to public radio, we've been able to keep this music alive. I myself appreciate that. I appreciate the fact that there is a public radio to present this music to the public."



Mary Mardirosian

that I love so much has been a source of great joy to me," she said in a heartfelt voice, choking back the wavering before continuing. "The decision to leave has been a very difficult one. I thank you all so very much for your great support over the years.

"Your support has made it possible for WICN to expand its jazz program to over 50 hours per week, and with your continued support, WICN will continue to provide you with great jazz seven days a week. Special thanks to Ron DeSourdis for engineering my show, and so much more."

Across her 15 years in radio, Mardirosian has personified what community and public radio are all about - people. As you can guess by her announcement, Mardirosian is a people person. She is the first to tell you she is no slick and polished professional. What she is, is passionate. She has a genuine love for