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Finally, a show with standards

'Radio Deluxe' puts pop classics back into regular rotation and balances that with talk.

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NEW YORK — We're in a spacious penthouse high atop Lexington Avenue, and our guests will be arriving any minute. The gin martinis are chilled and pasta is bubbling in the kitchen. Amid some last-minute confusion, jazz musician John Pizzarelli and his wife, singer Jessica Molaskey, are getting ready to buzz in their visitors downstairs.

If it's Wednesday, it must be Tony Bennett coming up the elevator. Or maybe it's Liza Minnelli. Either way, the evening is about to begin — and before it's over there will be live music, *shocking* banter and a regal night overlooking the lights of New York.

Actually, you can scratch the bright lights. Pizzarelli and Molaskey are huddled before microphones in a small studio near Carnegie Hall in Manhattan, ready to tape the latest edition of "Radio Deluxe," a syndicated radio show that combines the retro feel of a 1940s living room broadcast with a boomer's passion for the Great American Songbook. The lush penthouse setting is entirely fictitious, but don't tell that to our genial hosts.

"We're going to have a m-a-r-v-e-l-o-u-s evening," says Pizzarelli, slipping into a William F. Buckley imitation. "And I hope our friends enjoy the stunning view."

"Don't get carried away, darling," Molaskey answers. "And fix your tie."

Recent guests have included Peter Cincotti, Steve Tyrell, Barbara Cook, Annie Ross, Margaret Whiting, Stacey Kent, Keely Smith, Tony Danza and Kenny Rankin. The hosts conduct freewheeling interviews, riff on the state of pop music and play a potpourri of standards by legendary and modern-day performers, ranging from "All of Me" to "Zing Went the Strings of My Heart."

There's also live music: Molaskey sings ballads with Pizzarelli accompanying her on guitar; sometimes a group of jazz musicians sits in. Guests can break into song, as when Tyrell performed "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head."

"It's a very respectful but also a crazily humorous show that honors our musical heritage," said Jonathan Schwartz, an author, longtime radio host and expert on jazz and pop standards. "These hosts are brilliant performers, and the genius of the show is that they communicate a love for music that can reach a contemporary audience."

The question is: How much of an audience will they reach? "Radio Deluxe" currently is heard on 11 stations across the nation, including KKGO-AM (1260) in Los Angeles and XSURF-AM (540)



in San Diego/Tijuana from 9 to 11 p.m. Saturdays. Although there is a revival of interest in pop standards — a boom Pizzarelli and others have fueled — not many stations play the music full time.

Building the market for a syndicated show like "Radio Deluxe" can be difficult, but negotiations are underway for a possible deal with New York's WOR-AM, which would put the production on a national hookup, Molaskey said. There is also talk of placing the show on either satellite radio or on a public broadcast network.

Don McCulloch, a veteran radio producer and editor, has donated his efforts free of charge to the project, as have other technicians. Although the show does not have a major sponsor, McCulloch believes it's just a matter of time.

"There's a lot of hard work in radio when you're starting out," Molaskey said. "But since we've got nothing to lose, we can do whatever we want — and we're having fun."

Pizzarelli — one of America's most respected jazz singers and guitarists, who will be appearing with his quartet at the Hollywood Bowl on Wednesday — began toying with the notion of a TV or radio show shortly after his career took off in the early 1990s. He had originally thought of creating an "after hours" extension of his stage act, which blends cool jazz vocals and hot guitar riffs reminiscent of his father, Bucky, a guitarist who recorded with Frank Sinatra and others. At one point, Pizzarelli the younger thought of doing a cooking show ("Something like 'Molto Mario' meets 'Playboy After Dark,'" he cracked. "We'd prepare food and play songs, and if we burned the meal in the kitchen, we could always order in Chinese.")

The idea for the radio show came into focus several years ago, however, when Molaskey, a Broadway actress and accomplished singer, began joining her husband on the bandstand, either as a guest or in her own act. In person, Pizzarelli and Molaskey are forever trading affectionate wisecracks — it's the gasoline that fuels their marriage — and their onstage patter reflected this. They exchanged one-liners in between songs by George Gershwin and Cole Porter, and the couple took on a new persona: They were the Hepburn and Tracy of jazz, the Burns and Allen of bop.

"We're not the Bickersons," said Molaskey, trying to explain the impetus for their onstage routine. "Marriage can be an unbelievably wonderful thing, and if you can be yourself on stage, sharing your gifts and humor and having a good time, it's really something. We began interacting on stage, and suddenly people wanted to bottle it."

It seemed a natural for radio. Pizzarelli and Molaskey set out to interview some of America's greatest performers, pushing for candor and intimacy instead of glitz. They believed guests would be more likely to open up in a studio than before TV cameras.

Sometimes the intimacy can be stunning. On a recent show, Pizzarelli and Molaskey were interviewing Keely Smith, the jazz singer and former wife of bandleader Louis Prima. Smith was taking listeners down musical memory lane, recalling the years she and her husband had to perform five lounge acts a night in a Las Vegas hotel. She also casually mentioned the little-known fact that, at one point in her life, she was on the verge of marrying Frank Sinatra — a ceremony that never took place.

"So, was he a good kisser?" Pizzarelli asked, not expecting a bombshell.

"He wasn't even a good lover!" Smith shot back. Minutes earlier, she had said the singer could "sometimes be a real putz" for his behavior toward other performers. The two usually glib hosts were tongue-tied.

"Well, now we're stumped! A blush has fallen over the living room!" Pizzarelli exclaimed. "Maybe

we can play something by Sinatra now," his wife urged.

On another occasion, as they interviewed Kurt Elling, a droll, low-key jazz vocalist, the high-octane wordplay between Pizzarelli and Molaskey became a blur.

"What are you guys running — a cartoon show?" Elling wondered.

Other interviews have been calmer. When Molaskey complimented Minnelli on her singing ability, she answered candidly that vocalizing never came easily to her. Unlike her renowned mother, Judy Garland, Minnelli conceded she had to work "damn hard" to become a singer.

In a moving tribute to the late Rosemary Clooney, her longtime musical director, John Oddo, spoke of her ability to connect emotionally with an audience, long after age and debilitating illness had begun taking a toll.

The atmosphere is loose. On occasion, Maddie, the couple's 8-year-old daughter, wanders into the studio during a taping and participates in the show, calling out her favorite songs to be played. (She's partial to "Ain't That a Kick in the Head.")

As "Radio Deluxe" slowly builds an audience, the illusion of Pizzarelli and Molaskey speaking from a lavish penthouse also continues to grow. During a recent appearance, New York Times critic Frank Rich complimented his hosts on their "marvelous futons." Singer Margaret Whiting praised the "elegant flocked wallpaper."

Other guests can't help but wonder what's taking the chef.

"Oh, honey!" said Minnelli, as her taping ended. "Let's get some of that pasta!"