Qwest TV by Quincy Jones

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As the user experience trends increasingly toward streaming media, Qwest TV by Quincy Jones provides unique content on a user-friendly platform. Advertising itself as “the world’s first subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) service dedicated to jazz and beyond,” it is co-founded by jazz impresario Quincy Jones and producer Reza Ackbaraly. Managed out of Paris, France, Qwest TV is something of a rebellious sibling to Medici.tv (a database with which readers may already be familiar). Whereas Medici.tv focuses on the classical performing arts, the inhabitants of Qwest TV are jazz, funk, soul and blues. Quality of content is equal, however, with both services providing professionally curated collections of High-Definition and 4 K videos. Both Medici.tv and Qwest TV benefit from the support of the Creative Europe MEDIA Programme of the European Union. The Qwest TV platform is bilingual, currently available in English and French.

The Qwest TV collection contains 500+ videos including concerts, documentaries, interviews, and an archive. The excellent archival footage is made possible through cooperation with the Belgian Radio-Television of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (RTBF). These archived videos are the highlight of the content. Here, viewers can witness live performances of greats like Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Thelonious Monk, and B.B. King. While the collection focuses primarily on the evolution of jazz, content also covers funk, soul, blues, and other eclectic music from around the world. Additional artists range from John Coltrane and Louis Armstrong to Ibrahim Maalouf and Ravi Shankar to Jacob Collier and Snarky Puppy’s Michael League. Several of the playlists are curated by legends like Quincy Jones, Chick Corea, and Ed Motta – living musicians gathering music under unique umbrellas for a varied audience.

Subscriptions are available for individuals and for institutions. The University of Central Oklahoma Max Chambers Library ran a month-long trial starting April 2019 and became fully subscribed by the end of May. The quick decision was based upon enthusiastic student and faculty feedback. One example, shared with permission, was received from Associate Professor of Double Bass, Dr. Michael Geib:

I just wanted to reach out and tell you that the Qwest Jazz Video Archive is amazing! Unlike many kinds of art music, almost the entire history of Jazz has been recorded, and this library database would be an amazing resource for both faculty and students. Thanks so much for setting up the free trial!

With a layout comparable to Netflix or Hulu, the platform is easy to access and navigate. Similar genres of music are listed together or cross-populated in the playlists. Top page content features a guest artist, who usually has performance videos, an interview, and participates in the growth of the database by creating a playlist of their own. There is no indication of how these artists are chosen, but there is a new one at the beginning of each month. Previous guests include Quincy Jones, Lee Fields, and Youssou Ndour among others. In addition to guest artists, Qwest hosts in-depth interviews with professional musicians like Questlove and Erykah Badu, and producers such as Terrace Martin.

In regard to usability, browsing is the ideal method of locating content. There is a search function, but it can be difficult to make sense of the results. For example, a search for John
Coltrane brings up a number of videos, only one of which has a performance by the artist. Other results may be linked due to composer credits (John Hendricks Live at Estival Jazz), shared instrumentalists (saxophonist Eric Dolphy with Charles Mingus), or other less apparent criteria (part of an answer to a question in Kamasi Washington’s interview). Additionally, since many setlists are not part of the metadata, the outcome of searching for a particular song title is likely zero results. Browsing, on the other hand, allows users to explore the lists created by guest curators, as well as categories highlighting instruments, time periods, countries, styles, and so on. “Piano Fever” and “Sax Machines” are two examples of these rotating groupings and curated playlists include “The Sound of NYC” and “Dig Into the Italian Television Archives.” Tributes to particular artists are also a common theme among the selections, and Qwest has recently added the Marsalis on Music video series as the first media in a new “masterclass” category.

Any music enthusiast would enjoy the specialized collection of content located on Qwest TV. In academic settings, likely users will be faculty and students in Jazz Studies, Contemporary Music Performance, or Ethnomusicology. Subscribing institutions are given access through IP authentication and a proxy server for off-campus patrons. Institutional rates for universities, colleges, conservatories, and private schools are based upon whole student body full-time enrollment equivalent. There are two additional options – one for music schools alone and one for public libraries. Rates for these entities would be similarly based upon numbers of users. The platform is compatible with most web browsers outside of MS Internet Explorer and all devices except dedicated ebook readers (Amazon’s Kindle, for example). The customer service representatives are easy to work with, despite the distance and time zone differences that may impact communication with US institutions [note: while there is an operating branch in Los Angeles, CA, all institutional correspondence appears to take place with the Paris office.]

It is worth mentioning that individual subscribers will have more options for personalization than those who gain access through an academic institution. There are also levels of personal subscriptions – silver, gold, and platinum – each with its added bonuses. The playlists also become more easily portable with a single-user package. Individual subscribers can use a Qwest TV app that allows for better on-the-go access. Whether thinking about Qwest TV as an individual, or for a library database list, there is always the option to try before you buy. Individuals are allowed a 7-day free trial and institutions typically get one month to encourage student and faculty feedback.

For those hesitant to initiate a trial, the website (qwest.tv/media) allows for free previews of some content. This site also provides open access to certain written content – long-form articles, news briefs, album reviews, and a section called Quincy Speaks. There is also a page of quizzes which can be taken for a chance to win merchandise, including LPs, concert tickets, and free subscriptions to Qwest TV Premium Gold. Last, but not least, the site includes an online shop for users wishing to show off their jazz pride. This reviewer’s personal favorite is the YOLO SO KOKO shirt, which is an acronymic abbreviation of Quincy Jones’s quote, “You only live once, so keep on keepin’ on.”

After a successful Kickstarter campaign (all co-founding donors are listed on the website), Qwest TV was launched only a couple years ago in December 2017. It is a young database with great potential for growth moving forward. As the content increases each month, the playlists become more diversified and bring awareness to new evolutions of jazz-influenced music around the world. Early users have been able to witness their steady progression and are excited to see where the platform goes from here.

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