

Music legend and Fisher Island resident **Larry Rosen** is turning Miami into a jazz town

# Cat's Got Rhythm

By Fernando Gonzalez  
Photos by Daniel Azoulay



Rosen began his musical career as a drummer.

**T**here was a time, not that long ago, when Larry Rosen (and much of the music industry) believed Miami was not a jazz town. Now Rosen, who moved to Fisher Island from New York in 2000, has helped to change that perception with *Jazz Roots*, the annual series he has been producing at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts since 2008.

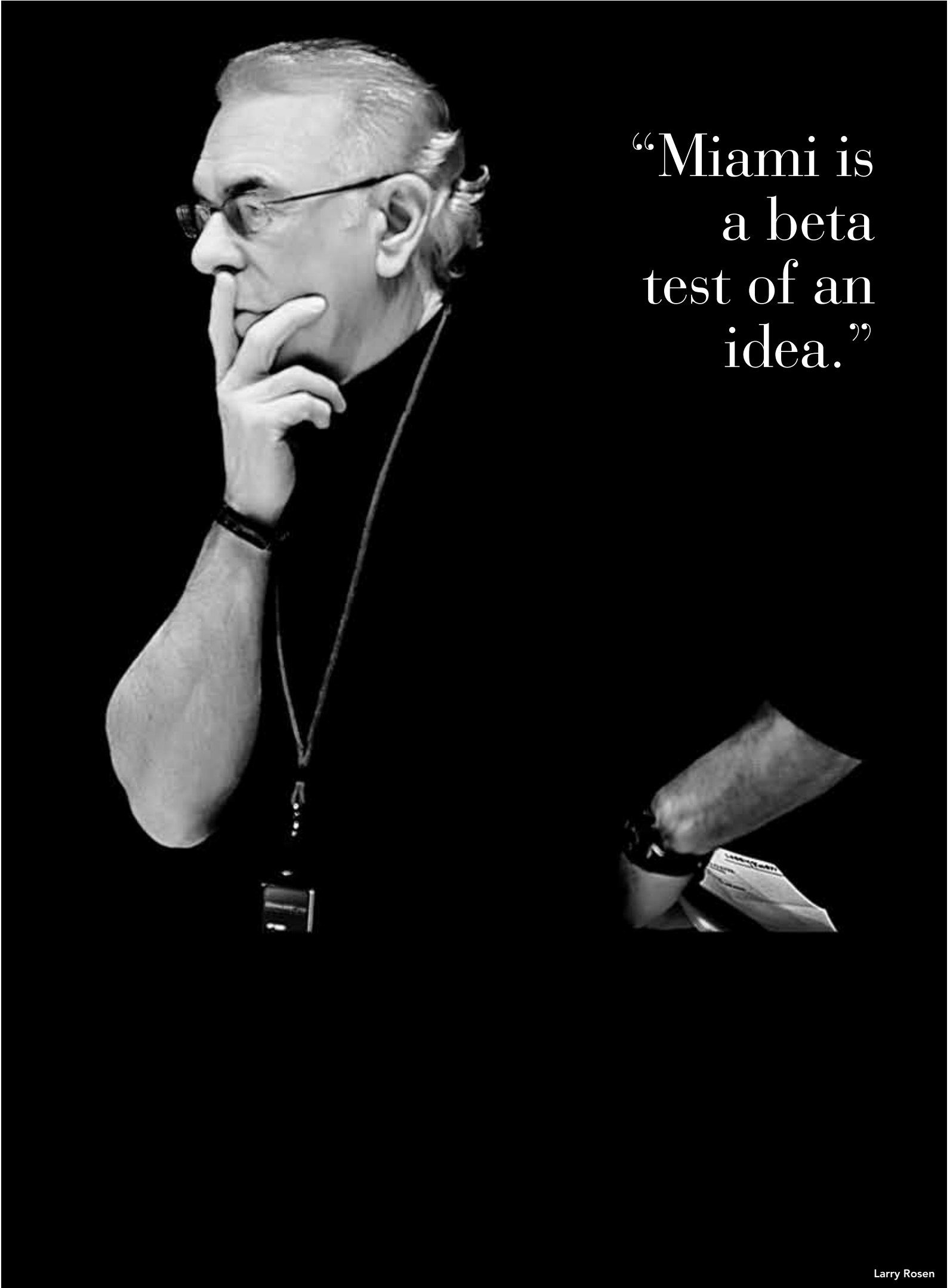
Only a few years ago he mused about how “anyone who’s in the jazz business knew that Miami was not a jazz market. So when I came here, I certainly knew what to expect. But you don’t really understand Miami unless you live here. I soon got a much better understanding of the city’s ethnic mixture, what audiences go to see, what’s happening, where is it happening, and what the general vibe is, and I understood why this was not a jazz market.”

The first *Jazz Roots* season had “about 650 subscriptions, of which 200 were from our neighbors in Fisher Island,” notes Rosen. “And in most cases it was not because they were great jazz fans. They just thought, these are our neighbors and we want to support them.” Remarkably, the series not only survived but also thrived.

Rosen used a strategy that incorporated promotion (“It’s very hard to establish a brand, but if you establish Coca-Cola, it doesn’t matter what’s on that can,” he says), thematic ideas for programming, and an educational approach that includes interviews with the featured artists on local radio. So far, *Jazz Roots* has presented a broad variety of artists and styles, from masters such as saxophonist Sonny Rollins and pianist Keith Jarrett to a retrospective of bossa nova with singer and songwriter Ivan Lins, pianist and singer Eliane Elias and guitarist, composer and arranger Oscar Castro-Neves. Audiences have also enjoyed electric jazz fusion with pianist Chick Corea and guitarist John McLaughlin, celebrations of Frank Sinatra, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald and Count Basie, nods to the Latin jazz tradition with tributes to Machito and Tito Puente, and a rare presentation of Larry Harlow’s suite, *La Raza Latina*. (The shows have been strikingly documented by noted photographer—and Fisher Island resident—Daniel Azoulay. He is now collecting them for a *Jazz Roots Backstage* book series.)

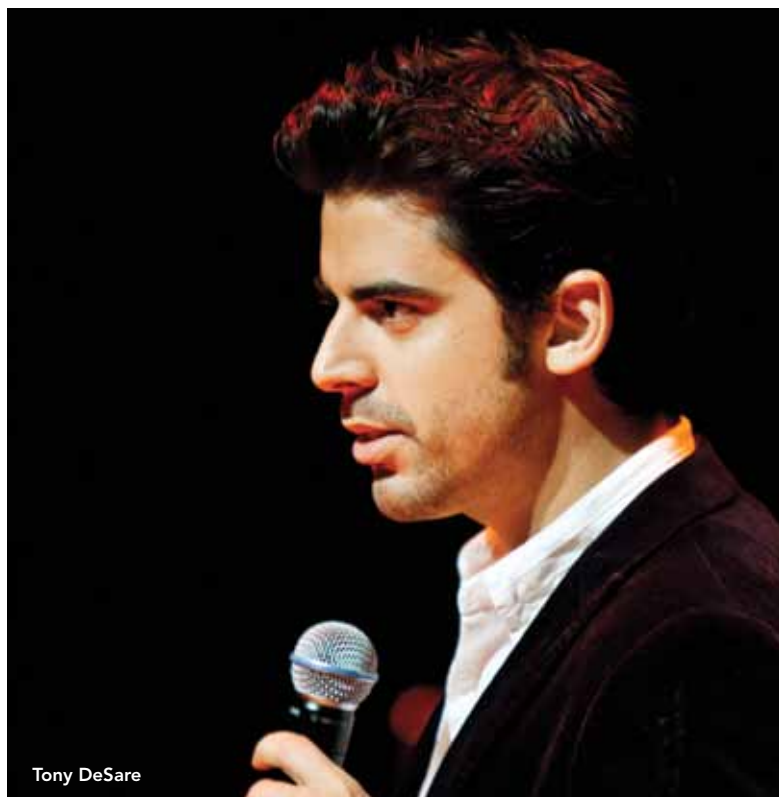
Meanwhile, Rosen’s educational-outreach program goes beyond merely attending the shows to include true behind-the-scenes experiences, such as master classes and opportunities to interact and play with the artists. Averaging “about 150 students per show,” the program has already served thousands of students in the Miami-Dade County Public School system.

“Miami is something of a beta test of an idea,” said Rosen in an earlier interview. Now, speaking backstage at the Arsht Center, he marvels: “Everything has worked *better* than expected.”

A black and white photograph of Larry Rosen, an older man with glasses, resting his chin on his hand in a thoughtful pose. He is wearing a dark shirt and a lanyard with a badge. The background is dark.

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Considering Rosen's track record, that should not come as a surprise. A drummer who became a successful producer, record-label owner and music entrepreneur, Rosen, 71, has shown an uncanny sense for anticipating the changes in the business. In 1982, while many of his peers were debating the merits of CDs, Rosen and composer, arranger and pianist Dave Grusin founded GRP, a record company that defined itself by an all-digital recording philosophy and releasing its music only on CD. In the 1990s, when the tremors of another upcoming change were only beginning to be felt, he moved on and founded the online music retailer N2K. "For me it was about my two loves at the time: music and technology," he says. He later, through his own production company, developed the one-hour prime-time TV special *Legends of Jazz* and the 13-part

series of the same name. He is currently working with Quincy Jones and Phil Ramone on a seven-part television and multimedia project entitled *Recording: The History of Recorded Music*. Still, for all his business acumen, Rosen attributes much of the success of *Jazz Roots* to the growth of Miami—social, cultural, economic and even architectural.

"The city keeps on growing," he says. "I remember when I moved here half of those buildings around Bayfront weren't even there. And now we have the Arsht Center, the American Airlines Arena, the new MAM, and over on Miami Beach the new building of the New World Symphony. There is so much happening, and it all revolves around art and culture. We are creating a cultural environment here. Maybe the schools don't have the money, but the community is





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taking over in many ways. The whole thing about *Jazz Roots* was not just the idea of putting on concerts.”

In fact, retired attorney Carl Randolph, chairman of the *Jazz Roots* advisory committee and fellow Fisher Island resident, makes the point that the series “was not just about hearing great music. We thought, and still believe, that we could use music as a vehicle for bringing the community together. We felt that if we got to know each other a little better, we would understand each other more and it would make living together that much nicer.”

But for any of this to succeed, you need a few things to coalesce, says Rosen. “The city’s financial situation is reflected in the new venues and opportunities to bring people together. In Detroit, the height of Motown happened when the Ford Motor

Company was at its peak. The Cleveland Symphony benefited from manufacturing. A lot of funding went into the arts, and you need the economic base for it. And that’s happening here very, very strongly. You have other pieces, like the fact that Miami has the wealthiest Hispanic community in the United States. You bring all those pieces to the puzzle and that’s why Miami is the new city of America in the arts.”

As for Miami’s taste for jazz? “It’s changing rapidly. Who ever expected we would be able to sell 2,000 tickets for a jazz show? It’s unbelievable. I don’t care where it is in the United States, you are not selling that many tickets consistently. But we are helping change the perception. Jazz is successful in Miami now.” **f**