

Drummer Max Roach dies: Last of the bebop pioneers

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On August 16, jazz lost one of its most admired and significant figures when drummer Max Roach died in New York City following a long illness. He was 83.

Roach played a major role in the transformation of jazz drumming from the intense and sometimes bombastic style that powered the big bands of the swing era into the sizzling polyrhythms associated with modern jazz. A virtuoso and educated musician, Roach's playing throughout his 60-year career was characterized by boundless technique tempered with impeccable taste, a solid sense of time underlying a melodic feel unusual for his instrument, and a lithe touch that both blended with and buoyed his fellow musicians.

Kenny "Klook" Clarke is generally credited with developing the modern drumming style, moving the steady beat from the bass drum to the high-hat cymbals. However, Roach's virtuoso playing appears on most of the classic mid-1940s small combo recordings that helped give birth to modern jazz in the form of bebop, most notably with alto saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker, trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Fats Navarro and pianist Bud Powell.

Roach anchored the first of trumpeter Miles Davis's 1949 nonet sessions, subsequently dubbed "The Birth of the Cool," and five years later formed an historic "hard bop" quintet with the brilliant trumpeter Clifford Brown. He continued performing in a variety of contexts and, in 1972, began teaching. Declining health finally sidelined him about five years ago.

Born January 10, 1924, in Newland, North Carolina, Roach lived with his family in Brooklyn from the age of four. He was proficient enough to perform professionally by age 16, and soon worked his way into the coterie of musicians, including Parker, Gillespie, Powell and pianist Thelonious Monk, then working out a new musical vocabulary at Harlem jam sessions. Roach's skills developed so early that by the time he graduated from Boys' High in Brooklyn, he had already substituted for an ailing Sonny Greer during an engagement of the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

During the next few years, with World War II raging and

recording activity halted by a musicians' strike, Roach was active on Manhattan's Fifty-Second Street, then brimming with nightclubs playing mixtures of the older jazz and the new. As the war wound down, however, recording activity started up again through small, independent labels, capturing Roach with Gillespie, Parker, Powell and Davis, as well as singer Sarah Vaughan, and tenor saxophonists Dexter Gordon, Stan Getz, Don Byas and Allen Eager. These classic 1944-1946 bebop recordings, full of rhythmic intricacies, advanced harmonies and, on occasion, unbelievably fast tempos, forever changed the basic vocabulary and sound of jazz music. (For a further discussion on this important musical development, see "What bebop meant to jazz history".)

For the next several years, Roach performed and recorded prodigiously, notably as a member of the classic Charlie Parker Quintet of 1947 and 1948, and on a series of astounding piano trio sides by the great Bud Powell, including "Tempus Fugue-it" and "Un Poco Loco."

By 1953, however, the bebop musical revolution had lost much of its early momentum. Drug addiction and mental illness afflicted many of its leading proponents, including Parker and Powell, and the younger audiences were beginning to be drawn to more accessible musical forms such as rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll.

After performing a final time with Parker, Gillespie and Powell at a remarkable May 15, 1953, all-star concert in Toronto's Massey Hall—recorded and released by the group's bassist, Charles Mingus—Roach relocated to Los Angeles, California, and played post-bop "cool" jazz as a member of the Lighthouse All Stars. During this interlude Roach appeared in a film cameo, playing behind Pearl Bailey in Otto Preminger's *Carmen Jones*.

The next year, with the encouragement of local impresario Gene Norman and the backing of Al Glaser, Louis Armstrong's manager, Roach for the first time became a bandleader, teaming up with 23-year-old Clifford Brown in a quintet that featured Bud Powell's younger brother Richie on piano. It was a perfect fit. The Clifford Brown-Max

Roach Quintet, which would eventually include star tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins, was among the most influential and aesthetically pleasing of its time, playing a propulsive, sophisticated, hard-swinging form of straight-ahead jazz that would become the font of the “hard bop” school.

On June 22, 1956, while the band was taking a break, Roach backed up Rollins on the album “Saxophone Colossus,” one of the greatest jazz albums ever, and then headed to Chicago to reunite with the quintet for an engagement. It would never happen. On June 26, Clifford Brown, Richie Powell and Powell’s wife died in a one-car accident on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

By all accounts, Brown’s death severely traumatized Roach. Although he attempted to continue performing—replacing Brown with the fine bop-era trumpeter Kenny Dorham—Roach sank into deep depression and severe alcoholism. While he went on making remarkable recordings, including several with yet another brilliant but short-lived trumpeter, Booker Little, Roach’s mental and physical state continued to decline. During the autumn of 1959, Roach checked into New York’s Bellevue Hospital.

Underscoring the extremely hard impact that the jazz lifestyle and the stagnant atmosphere of the 1950s had on its most gifted performers, Roach became the fourth member of the Massey Hall quintet to undergo treatment at Bellevue for substance abuse and mental illness. Parker, Powell and Mingus preceded him. Only Gillespie avoided the institution.

A new political era opened up. After Bellevue, Roach and singer Abbey Lincoln, his wife, became extremely active in the unfolding civil rights struggle. Political confusion was inevitably present, given the official dominance of anticommunism in America, on the one hand, and the identification of socialism with international Stalinism, on the other. Roach and Lincoln denounced imperialism and its crimes, such as the CIA-backed murder of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in February 1961, while embracing forms of black nationalism like that espoused by Marcus Garvey, the 1920s’ political charlatan who urged a return to Africa.

He was prepared to earn the wrath of the American media and even the disfavor of his fellow musicians in pursuit of his beliefs. In May 1961, he disrupted a performance by Miles Davis at Carnegie Hall, walking to the edge of the stage with a placard stating, “AFRICA FOR THE AFRICANS, FREEDOM NOW.”

Roach’s anger at racism and colonialism was real and entirely legitimate. However, the generally unfavorable climate and lack of political alternatives took their toll.

During the early 1960s, Roach proclaimed he would never again play pieces “without social significance.” The result

was 10 years of highly skilled jazz music that to some, including this writer, frequently sounds overly harsh, pedantic and angry, lacking the grace and beauty that characterized Roach’s earlier works. For a YouTube example of a performance from “We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite,” featuring Abbey Lincoln, click here.

In 1972, Roach changed course again, divorcing Lincoln and joining the faculty of the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, where he eventually became tenured. The next 30 years were spent teaching, exploring different musical forms and performing. Some of his later ventures included adding a string quartet to a jazz quartet, an all-percussion ensemble called “M’Boom” and performances with rappers, scratchers and breakdancers. He toured regularly with his regular quartet, however, usually featuring saxophonist Odean Pope and trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater. These performances were reminiscent of the grace and style that characterized his great bebop recordings of the 1940s, and the Clifford Brown-Max Roach recordings of the mid-fifties.

I was fortunate to hear the Max Roach Quartet during one of its later performances. The lack of a piano opened up the sound, allowing fuller appreciation of the drumming texture. The harshness of the 1960s was long gone. Roach played both softly but firmly, exciting the listeners with his lyricism, rather than the footstomping and bombast used by lesser drummers to generate an audience reaction. The “social significance” of the music was not rammed down the listener’s throat, but arose from the aesthetics of the music itself. Throughout, Roach displayed a graciousness to the audience that is hard to forget.

Hardcore bebop fans got a special treat in 2005 when Uptown Records released newly discovered recordings featuring Roach with Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie at the height of their early powers. Preserved on professionally recorded 78 rpm acetates during a June 1945 performance in New York City’s Town Hall, the tracks consist of unusually extended solos with excellent fidelity. The jewel in the crown is Roach’s potent drumming throughout Gillespie’s barn-burner “Salt Peanuts,” in which he plays the introduction, drives the other performers through the ensembles and solos, takes an amazing solo of his own, and then brings the performance to a dramatic coda. (For the amazon.com listing and samples, click here.)

Roach’s death, two years after the release of this stunning recording, brings to a close a chapter in jazz history.



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