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Max Roach, a Founder of Modern Jazz, Dies at 83

By PETER KEEPNEWS

Max Roach, a founder of modern jazz who rewrote the rules of drumming in the 1940's and spent the rest of his career breaking musical barriers and defying listeners' expectations, died early today in Manhattan. He was 83.

His death was announced today by a spokesman for Blue Note records, on which he frequently appeared. No cause was given. Mr. Roach had been known to be ill for several years.

As a young man, Mr. Roach, a percussion virtuoso capable of playing at the most brutal tempos with subtlety as well as power, was among a small circle of adventurous musicians who brought about wholesale changes in jazz. He remained adventurous to the end.

Over the years he challenged both his audiences and himself by working not just with standard jazz instrumentation, and not just in traditional jazz venues, but in a wide variety of contexts, some of them well beyond the confines of jazz as that word is generally understood.

He led a "double quartet" consisting of his working group of trumpet, saxophone, bass and drums plus a string quartet. He led an ensemble consisting entirely of percussionists. He dueted with uncompromising avant-gardists like the pianist Cecil Taylor and the saxophonist Anthony Braxton. He performed unaccompanied. He wrote music for plays by [Sam Shepard](#) and dance pieces by Alvin Ailey. He collaborated with video artists, gospel choirs and hip-hop performers.

Mr. Roach explained his philosophy to The New York Times in 1990: "You can't write the same book twice. Though I've been in historic musical situations, I can't go back and do that again. And though I run into artistic crises, they keep my life interesting."

He found himself in historic situations from the beginning of his career. He was still in his teens when he played drums with the alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, a pioneer of modern jazz, at a Harlem after-hours club in 1942. Within a few years, Mr. Roach was himself recognized as a pioneer in the development of the sophisticated new form of jazz that came to be known as bebop.

He was not the first drummer to play bebop — Kenny Clarke, 10 years his senior, is generally credited with that distinction — but he quickly established himself as both the most imaginative percussionist in modern jazz and the most influential.

In Mr. Roach's hands, the drum kit became much more than a means of keeping time. He saw himself as a full-fledged member of the front line, not simply as a supporting player.

Layering rhythms on top of rhythms, he paid as much attention to a song's melody as to its beat. He developed, as the jazz critic Burt Korall put it, "a highly responsive, contrapuntal style," engaging his fellow musicians in an open-ended conversation while maintaining a rock-solid pulse. His approach "initially mystified and thoroughly challenged other drummers," Mr. Korall wrote, but quickly earned the respect of his peers and established a new standard for the instrument.

Mr. Roach was an innovator in other ways. In the late 1950s, he led a group that was among the first in jazz to regularly perform pieces in waltz time and other unusual meters in addition to the conventional 4/4. In the early 1960s, he was among the first to use jazz to address racial and political issues, with works like the album-length "We Insist! Freedom Now Suite."

In 1972, he became one of the first jazz musicians to teach full time at the college level when he was hired as a professor at the [University of Massachusetts](#) at Amherst. And in 1988, he became the first jazz musician to receive a so-called genius grant from the [MacArthur Foundation](#).

Maxwell Roach was born on Jan. 10, 1924, in the small town of New Land, N.C., and grew up in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. He began studying piano at a neighborhood Baptist church when he was 8 and took up the drums a few years later.

Even before he graduated from Boys High School in 1942, savvy New York jazz musicians knew his name. As a teenager he worked briefly with [Duke Ellington](#)'s orchestra at the Paramount Theater and with Charlie Parker at Monroe's Uptown House in Harlem, where he took part in jam sessions that helped lay the groundwork for bebop.

By the middle 1940's, he had become a ubiquitous presence on the New York jazz scene, working in the 52nd Street nightclubs with Parker, the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and other leading modernists. Within a few years he had become equally ubiquitous on record, participating in such seminal recordings as [Miles Davis](#)'s "Birth of the Cool" sessions in 1949 and 1950.

He also found time to study composition at the [Manhattan School of Music](#). He had planned to major in percussion, he later recalled in an interview, but changed his mind after a teacher told him his technique was incorrect. "The way he wanted me to play would have been fine if

I'd been after a career in a symphony orchestra," he said, "but it wouldn't have worked on 52nd Street."

Mr. Roach made the transition from sideman to leader in 1954, when he and the young trumpet virtuoso Clifford Brown formed a quintet. That group, which specialized in a muscular and stripped-down version of bebop that came to be called hard bop, took the jazz world by storm. But it was short-lived.

In June 1956, at the height of the Brown-Roach quintet's success, Brown was killed in an automobile accident, along with Richie Powell, the group's pianist, and Powell's wife. The sudden loss of his friend and co-leader, Mr. Roach later recalled, plunged him into depression and heavy drinking from which it took him years to emerge.

Nonetheless, he kept working. He honored his existing nightclub bookings with the two surviving members of his group, the saxophonist Sonny Rollins and the bassist George Morrow, before briefly taking time off and putting together a new quartet. By the end of the 50's, seemingly recovered from his depression, he was recording prolifically, mostly as a leader but occasionally as a sideman with Mr. Rollins and others.

The personnel of Mr. Roach's working group changed frequently over the next decade, but the level of artistry and innovation remained high. His sidemen included such important musicians as the saxophonists Eric Dolphy, Stanley Turrentine and George Coleman and the trumpet players Donald Byrd, Kenny Dorham and Booker Little. Few of his groups had a pianist, making for a distinctively open ensemble sound in which Mr. Roach's drums were prominent.

Always among the most politically active of jazz musicians, Mr. Roach had helped the bassist Charles Mingus establish one of the first musician-run record companies, Debut, in 1952. Eight years later, the two organized a so-called rebel festival in Newport, R.I., to protest the Newport Jazz Festival's treatment of performers. That same year, Mr. Roach collaborated with the lyricist Oscar Brown Jr. on "We Insist! Freedom Now Suite," which played variations on the theme of black people's struggle for equality in the United States and Africa.

The album, which featured vocals by Abbey Lincoln (Mr. Roach's frequent collaborator and, from 1962 to 1970, his wife), received mixed reviews: many critics praised its ambition, but some attacked it as overly polemical. Mr. Roach was undeterred.

"I will never again play anything that does not have social significance," he told Down Beat magazine after the album's release. "We American jazz musicians of African descent have proved beyond all doubt that we're master musicians of our instruments. Now what we have to do is employ our skill to tell the dramatic story of our people and what we've been through."

“We Insist!” was not a commercial success, but it emboldened Mr. Roach to broaden his scope as a composer. Soon he was collaborating with choreographers, filmmakers and Off Broadway playwrights on projects, including a stage version of “We Insist!”

As his range of activities expanded, his career as a bandleader became less of a priority. At the same time, the market for his uncompromising brand of small-group jazz began to diminish. By the time he joined the faculty of the University of Massachusetts in 1972, teaching had come to seem an increasingly attractive alternative to the demands of the musician’s life.

Joining the academy did not mean turning his back entirely on performing. In the early ‘70s, Mr. Roach joined with seven fellow drummers to form M’Boom, an ensemble that achieved tonal and coloristic variety through the use of xylophones, chimes, steel drums and other percussion instruments. Later in the decade he formed a new quartet, two of whose members — the saxophonist Odean Pope and the trumpeter Cecil Bridgewater — would perform and record with him off and on for more than two decades.

He also participated in a number of unusual experiments. He appeared in concert in 1983 with a rapper, two disc jockeys and a team of break dancers. A year later, he composed music for an Off Broadway production of three Sam Shepard plays, for which he won an Obie Award. In 1985, he took part in a multimedia collaboration with the video artist Kit Fitzgerald and the stage director George Ferencz.

Perhaps his most ambitious experiment in those years was the Max Roach Double Quartet, a combination of his quartet and the Uptown String Quartet. Jazz musicians had performed with string accompaniment before, but rarely if ever in a setting like this, where the string players were an equal part of the ensemble and were given the opportunity to improvise. Reviewing a Double Quartet album in The Times in 1985, Robert Palmer wrote, “For the first time in the history of jazz recording, strings swing as persuasively as any saxophonist or drummer.”

This endeavor had personal as well as musical significance for Mr. Roach: the Uptown String Quartet’s founder and viola player was his daughter Maxine. She survives him, as do two other daughters, Ayo and Dara, and two sons, Raoul and Darryl.

By the early ‘90s, Mr. Roach had reduced his teaching load and was again based in New York year-round, traveling to Amherst only for two residencies and a summer program each year. He was still touring with his quartet as recently as 2000, and he also remained active as a composer. In 2002 he wrote and performed the music for “How to Draw a Bunny,” a documentary about the artist Ray Johnson.

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