

Nat Hentoff Remembers Max Roach



The Constitution of a Jazzman

Max Roach, at 83, left us on August 16, but his liberating presence lives on in his music

Early one morning years ago, I was at the Blues Alley jazz club in Washington, D.C., to do a television interview with Max Roach. As always, I was early. There was no one in the club except Max, alone at the drums, practicing for the night's gig. He played with as much intensity—and as many surprises—as if he were before hundreds of listeners.

Like Roy Eldridge and Phil Woods, Max always played as if it were his last gig on earth. With Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and another drummer—Kenny “Klook” Clarke—Max changed the direction of jazz as Louis Armstrong had decades before.

Washington Post jazz critic Matt Schudel distills how Max liberated jazz drumming: “By playing the beat-by-beat pulse of standard 4/4 time on the ‘ride’ cymbal instead of on the thudding bass drum, [he] developed a flexible, flowing rhythmic pattern that allowed soloists to play freely, [and] by matching his rhythmic attack with a tune’s melody, Mr. Roach brought a newfound subtlety of expression to his instrument.”

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