

Jazz history-1



For a musician to be considered truly “ influential” it seems he or she must satisfy two conditions: first, possess a talent no one else has, and second, find a way of expressing that talent on an instrument. When musicians make innovative and appealing changes to the way an instrument is played in a musical movement, such as bebop, he is bound to influence any number of musicians trying to imitate and enhance the styles of the movement. In the case of Max Roach, often considered to be the greatest bebop drummer, it can legitimately be claimed that one man set the standards, and continually reset them, of bebop drumming. As a drummer myself, I can attest to the difficulty of creating unique ways of rhythm within a song.

Max Roach’s style of drumming was visibly influenced by the style of Kenny Clarke, an early bebop drummer at Milton’s Playhouse. However, even though Clarke’s style was certainly innovative, Roach made a few changes to the method. Roach made bebop drumming more melodic and more polyrhythmic (Larson 133). In the 1940s, the jazz scene was changing in the wake of the War. Bebop had officially begun in New York, centered around Milton’s Playhouse, where Kenny Clarke was already playing when Max Roach began. Rather than keeping time with the bass drum, as was traditional at the time for swing drummers, Roach switched to time-keeping on the ride cymbal. This had the effect of making songs seem lighter and more propulsive. In addition, Roach freed his hands for more extravagant rhythms that ultimately defined his style as a bebop drummer (Mathieson 126-9).

During the 1940s, Roach played with a number of the most recognizable names in the bebop scene. Most notably, he played in the Parker/Gillespie quintet in 1944 and in the Parker/Davis quintet in 1947. This brought Roach

the fame and recognition he deserved, keeping rhythms and times for world-renowned trumpeters. But even as conventional bebop declined in popularity coming into the 1950s, Roach co-lead a quintet named after him and Clifford Brown, forming one of the most noteworthy hard bop groups of the decade, incorporating such names as Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt between 1953 and 1956 (Larson 133). Roach's influence would live on in his recordings which still influence countless drummers to this day.

A more critical look at Roach's biography reveals a number of interesting musical influences on his style. By 10, the young Roach was drumming in gospel bands, and, immediately after graduating from high school, he was already playing as a substitute for Sonny Green in the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Because Roach had to know all of Greer's parts in the composition, it is inevitable that Roach's own style would be influenced by him. When Roach began his foray into bebop drumming, his style was heavily influenced by Kenny Clarke. Both men envisioned the role of the ride cymbal as a time-keeping device, instead of using the bass drum for that purpose (Mathieson 126). From what seems to be a mutual influence between Clark and Roach, bebop drumming was created. Other than Clarke and Greer, it is unclear specifically who else impacted this revolutionary drumming style.

Because Clarke and Roach essentially defined the standards of bebop drumming together, one could list any number of bebop, hard bop, and cool jazz drummers who found Roach to be a major influence. The emergence of bebop in the 1940s and hard bop in the 1950s left any possibility open.

Names like Art Blakey, Roy Haynes (Giddins 573), Art Taylor, and Buddy Rich immediately come to mind. Each of these artists embodies the style and

drumming standards popularized by Roach's virtuosity.

Works Cited

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Larson, Thomas. *History and Tradition of Jazz*. New York: Kendall Hunt, 2002.

Mathieson, Kenny. *Giant Steps: The Story of Bebop*. New York: Canongate, 2001.