

On Max Roach : for Jazziz magazine 2007.

My drumming was rooted in a fertile sub-soil of Max, Art, and Joe (Morello), and you could mine those three seams for a lifetime. Two are gone now. As a teenager in England in the 60s, it was perhaps Max who had the greatest influence on me in terms of style and approach. He came into my pre-Beatles world like a thunderbolt, with a bagful of astonishing ideas. He played the whole set, for example, as if it were one instrument rather than a collection of instruments. He didn't only just wait his turn for a solo after the bass player, as seemed to be some rule, but he also played whole solo pieces, with beginnings, middles and ends, on the drums. Now ya talkin'. If Hendrix' AK47 was his guitar, then Max's was his drums. The Freedom Now Suite with Abi Lincoln was enough to curdle the blood, even in the leafy lanes of Surrey, England. We may have been a world away from the United States and two worlds from Vietnam, but plenty of us were listening. I play that now for my age twenty-something students who think drumming began with Bonham and Moon, just so I can watch the blood drain from their faces.

Like all great innovators, his achievements are now part of the air we breathe, but none the less potent for their familiarity. Every time you play a pretty phrase on the drums, repeat it, offer a variation, and repeat the original, sonata-form, you're thinking like Max. But drummers didn't always do that.

From him you could learn Big Things - elegance, economy, melody, and a sense of phrasing even at flat-out tempos. I covered 'Self-Portrait' and 'The Drum also Waltzes' because they offered a chance to be musical with fewer notes. There was something in his personality on the set that chimed well with me, resonated deep inside. There are many explanations of the origin of bebop, but one version that I've always grown up with is that the tempos got so fast that he got tired of playing the conventional four notes a measure on the bass drum - tired, or couldn't do it anymore - and just thought the heck with this, I'll leave some bass drum out, carry the time a bit more definitely on the cymbal, and drop the kick in when I want. I'm guessing, but my sense is that he was a renegade, a maverick, not afraid to make his own way. He was from a fast-disappearing older analogue world, and I shall miss it and him, and what he represented.