

Max Roach _____ *[by Bill Bruford]*

The minute Max and his gang stopped playing four to the bar on the bass drum and doubled the tempo of everything, there was bound to be good news and bad news for those of us coming along behind. Good news was, life was about to get a whole lot more interesting for us drummers, now liberated from the tyranny of the dance-floor requirement of four to the bar. Bad news was that jazz, thus separated from dance and pop, was about to be consigned spitting and sulking into a Ghetto of the Weird, where some say it has lain sulking ever since.

I was a kid in the UK in the mid-60s when Max came over the horizon like a thunderbolt. Technically he was economical, fast and melodic, but there were implications in his style and approach that burned deeper into my young brain. 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.

Max gave the drums dignity, because he was dignified, made them waltz because he could waltz. He was one of my greatest teachers, although we spoke only a couple of times, and neither time in depth. Always interested, he used to turn up to King Crimson concerts in the 1980s to check out the new-fangled electronic drum thing. I'm sorry we didn't hang out after the shows as much as I would have liked, I didn't dare ask. But I do remember in his later years, well over 70, he managed the unheard of feat of falling asleep in about row five for a large portion of the show, while we continued to rearrange the order of the universe. That shows you relaxed! He was from a fast-disappearing older analogue world, and I shall miss it and him, and what he represented.