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The Man Who Changed
The Way You Play Drums

MAX ROACH

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M'BOOM

Redefining The Roles Of Rhythm

AS A PHYSICAL MANIFESTATION OF HIS LONG-lived contention that drums are, in fact, *musical* instruments, Max Roach formed M'Boom—an eight-piece all-percussion group—in 1970. From the beginning there was no mistaking M'Boom for a conventional marimba-fueled percussion ensemble: The players all come from an improvisational jazz background, the pieces are performed from memory rather than read from a score, and—more often than not—melodies are coaxed from drums rather than melodic keyboard instruments such as marimba or vibraphone. In a nutshell, M'Boom sets out humbly to alter the world's perception of drum music, and ultimately, the direction of all music.

Except for the tragic death of original member Freddie Waits in 1989 (New York-based drummer Eli Fountain will be taking his place for an upcoming tour), the core of M'Boom has remained unaltered since the group's inception. All together, Roach, Roy Brooks, Joe Chambers, Omar Clay, Fred King, Ray Mantilla, and Warren Smith manipulate over 100 instruments—of both determinate and indeterminate pitch—including marimbas, vibraphones, steel drums, timpani, gongs, congas, bongos, cowbells, and a host of other percussive devices.

More a fraternity of drummers than a full-time gig, M'Boom has recorded and toured only when the multi-talented players could take time away from their primary musical commitments. The members, ranging in age from their mid 40s to mid 60s, were selected carefully by Roach in order to reflect his vision of what an all-percussion

hands. The rudiments are good for building up your hands. Then you can do the same thing with your feet, build the strength up. But the art of the instrument is how to use all these things, separately and equally, and have them make sense as a unit. With the cymbals and other things, you can get a great

M'Boom circa 1989 (left to right): Smith, Mantilla, Roach, Chambers, Clay, Brooks, King, and the late Freddie Waits.

group should be. Fred King, who holds advanced degrees from the University of Iowa and Julliard, says, "Each member was chosen because they were complete musicians, as well as people who had a deep interest in society and the kinds of changes that

were taking place. M'Boom has no stars. We are a collective in every sense of the word, and play as one unit. The group originally started out as a workshop for drummers to create in accord with the unique dynamics that happen when drummers play together."

Omar Clay, whose resume boasts stints with countless jazz giants—including Sarah Vaughan, Charles Mingus, and John Coltrane—adds, "In putting together M'Boom, Max wanted something more than just a traditional percussion ensemble. He wanted something that was unique—an ensemble that would utilize each member's technique, expertise, and knowledge through the use

of percussion instruments. M'Boom built a musical tradition by getting to know how each member played, what each player liked to do, and writing pieces with specific members in mind."

All seven drummers contribute to the repertoire, making for a wide-ranging spectrum of styles and approaches. Writing for M'Boom seems to be an anything-goes proposition, and the percussionists make the most of it, blending improvisation with strict composition, primitive rhythms with jazz inflections, absolute pitches with overtone-laden drum sounds. "There are no limitations in terms of what the group is willing to explore," says Joe Chambers. "Some compositions can be completely written out, while others which are more improvisational in nature are left to individual discretion. The compositions are usually scored and arranged, but there is ample room within each arrangement for improvisation."

M'Boom's three album releases, *Collage* [Soul Note], *M'Boom* [Columbia], and *M'Boom Re Percussion* [Bay State], testify to the band's commitment to percussive purity. Recorded digitally without the use of overdubbing or effects such as echo, reverb, or noise gates, the records simply have served to document the band's live sound.

Playing side by side with Max Roach would seem to be either a drummer's dream gig or an ego-shattering source of intimidation. Omar Clay observes: "Playing with Max is like playing with your father. He was my most important influence. To have him first as a teacher, then as a mentor and colleague is like having the best of both worlds. When you can play with the best and have him accept you, that's a great feeling of accomplishment."

—Dave Black

deal of variety out of the drum set. Since you're dealing with both hands and both feet and all the different things that go along with it, what you can do with the kit is endless. I don't think we've really scratched the surface yet. It's exciting because it's still uncharted sound territory. Drummers, if I can say it, are