Drumming to a different beat

BRUCE ROBINSON ASSESES THE LIFE AND WORK OF MAX ROACH

THERE can be few musicians who have revolutionised the way their instrument is played, helped change the whole history of their music and remained innovative and open over 50 years.

Add to that a radical social and political commitment and a keen awareness of how that was expressed in the history of jazz and could be expressed in his own music, and you get Max Roach, the jazz drummer, who has died aged 83 in New York.

Max Roach first began getting noticed in the early 1940s just as the new jazz style of bebop was starting to take off. Many of bebop's innovations were rhythmic and Max, alongside Kenny Clarke, defined a new style of drumming to match. The basic rhythm was now spelled out on the cymbals, leaving the bass drum to punctuate the music with accents ('dropping bombs') and allowing a more varied role to the drummer.

From 1945-9 Roach was at the forefront of the new music as he played in Charlie Parker's quintet, also taking part in Miles Davis' 1949 "Birth of the Cool" recordings. In 1954, he started the first of his own groups with the young trumpeter Clifford Brown, again pointing the way forward in the music. When Brown died in a road accident aged 26 in 1956, Roach was shattered but continued to put groups together, eventually discovering another new trumpet star, Booker Little (also to die in his 20s).

In the 50s Roach began to rebel against the way the "bebop business" was run. He was a co-founder of an independent record label, Debut, with Charles Mingus. He also took part in the alternative "rebel" Newport Jazz Festival in protest at the ignoring of a whole range of black musicians across the generations by the organisers of the main event.

The 50s also saw African colonies win independence andthe start of the US Civil Rights movement, both of which had considerable impact on black jazz musicians. In

Max Roach

1960, a time when support for the Civil Rights movement could by no means be taken for granted, Roach brought out *We Insist! — The Freedom Now Suite* featuring a cover depicting three Civil Rights protestors sitting in at a segregated lunch counter. The music evoked slavery – a drum-voice duet with his then wife, singer Abbey Lincoln, graphically painting its torture and terror — followed by themes of the false hopes of Emancipation at the end of the US Civil War, and the struggle against apartheid. He followed it with two other "political" albums, *Percussion Bitter Sweet* and *It's Time*, which featured a large choir. For much of the rest of the 60s he was effectively banned from recording and during this period identified himself as a supporter of Malcolm X.

In the 70's he got a post in a university teaching Black Studies and continued to record. In 1981 he set King's "I have a dream" speech to a very strong drum solo. He recorded an album about the Scottsboro boys, victims of a judicial lynching in the South of the US in the early 30s (whose fate had been the subject of a big campaign by the Communist Party).

While most of Roach's recording at this time was with his own quartet, he remained open to newer musical styles, recording with jazz avant-gardists, Archie Shepp, Anthony Braxton and Cecil Taylor, and hip hop artists, whom he saw as directly in the African-American tradition of music making. He also worked with a string quartet, making use of them to play jazz lines, rather than using them as orchestral backing as in the "With strings" bands of the 50s.

This openness corresponded to his conception of the drummer's role in jazz, which he never saw as one of providing rhythmic background interspersed with the odd crash-bang solo. Rather he saw the modern drum kit as a full musical instrument, a new invention of the 20th century, which black jazz musicians had played a major role in developing. (He paid his musical respects to predecessors such as Big Sid Catlett and Jo Jones).

His solos had a logic, and he used the different tones available on the kit so that one could often hear a melody, directly or implied. From the 50s, he began investigating alternative time signatures to 4/4, which then dominated jazz. Many of his performances featured a solo using the foot-operated hi-hat cymbal to show the range of musical expression he could get from even such a limited instrument, and in the 80s he would sometimes appear solo. In the late 70s, he put together a group, "M'Boom" consisting entirely of percussion instruments.

The connection between music and politics was, for Max, not dependent on explicitly political musical content. Rather two were inseparable, particularly in the case of jazz, as he stated in a 1980 interview:

"Jazz has always been under attack from the days of Buddy Bolden [ca 1900]… right up to today. Bolden because he improvised. In the 20s they had 'race' records and decent people weren't supposed to listen because the music wasn't 'civilised'. It was an outlet to protest at the indignities faced by black people.

"Now it frees people all over the world."

"Politically, I see jazz as very democratic music. It expresses democracy whereas European classical music expresses imperialism. European music is run by two people - the composer and the conductor who treat the rest of the musicians as slaves. In jazz, we debate a topic, the musicians are free to discuss it. It's like a meeting…

"[Critics] separate art from society, but art grows from society."

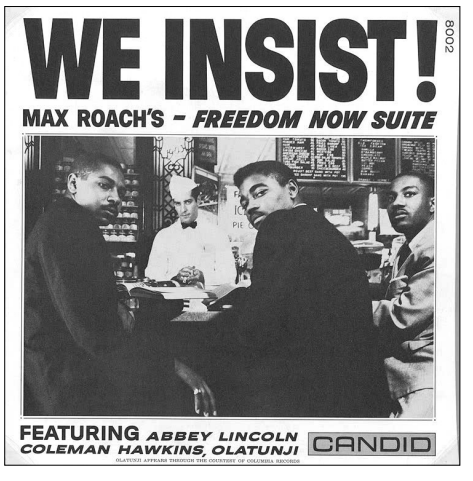
He put this in a broader context and showed a political viewpoint that went well beyond civil rights or "black consciousness":

"Most people believe the Sixties was an isolated period, but it wasn't. There is only one instance of a city being bombed in the United States and it was by the government, to put down a race riot in Oklahoma in 1918. We have the oppression of black people, you in Britain have Ireland; it's the same thing — imperialism…

"You see, this music is very political. Improvisation allows new ideas and it stimulates ideas, musically and socially as well. In Europe, political — very political — people are drawn to jazz. In Portugal, giant concerts are organized for us and the Left organizes them."

"Asked how he would define himself, Roach replied 'In the States, I would be called a socialist. I am just for monetary change so the masses get a big share of the wealth'."

With the passing of Max Roach we lose not merely almost the last link to the early days of bebop and a musical revolutionary, but also a revolutionary musician, not frightened to stand against oppression.



"Balanced communalism" in Lebanon

DAVID BRODER REVIEWS FAWWAZ TRABOULSI'S A HISTORY OF MODERN LEBANON (PLUTO PRESS)

BAPTISED its publisher as "the first comprehensive history of Lebanon in the modern period", Traboulsi's is a thorough account of almost 500 years of ethnic and religious conflict in the Middle Eastern state. However the author, a 1970s leader of the Organisation of Communist Action (OCA), obscures his own analysis and views in favour of a work which rarely amounts to anything more than dry chronology of events, dates and facts.

As a self-proclaimed Marxist, one might have thought that Traboulsi would take an interest in the long history of workers' struggle and labour movement activity in Lebanon. The book is however merely interspersed with occasional nuggets of information on this score — a page on what he calls the "nearly uninterrupted series of strikes and protest movements" from 1964-7, a paragraph on a seven-week student strike in 1968 and just a sentence or two on massive wildcat strikes in Mukallis-Tall al Za'tar organised by his own OCA party.

Much better covered are the activities of left-ish movements and popular fronts such as the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), which included the OCA, Communist Party, Ba'athists, Nasserites, Amal and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

Later substituted by the Lebanese National Resistance Front (LNRF), the LNM's programme was based on abolishing Lebanon's sectarian political structures, and the formation of some sort of bourgeois-democratic secular order. It is interesting to note that Traboulsi makes no real attempt to relate the history of the LNM, which attempted a coup in 1975, or even the Communists, to that of the labour movement or the working class. No doubt his assertion that the LNM merely aimed "to impose a new superstructure on the Lebanese oligarchy" through "simple democratic reforms within the context of the capitalist system" is accurate — but this is commented upon only matter-of-factly.

The whole work is coloured by abstractions and terminology which camouflages class distinction, such as the repeated reference to "progressives and leftists" and ill-defined "social movements". Throughout the author counterposes the fortunes of the free-marketeer "merchant society" and strong oligarchy to the lot of "the poor" and peasants. Although worthwhile background information, this presents the oppressed as passive victims of political feuds going on above their heads, rather than posing questions about their own organisations and political allegiances.

Nevertheless, there is much of value to be found within the pages of Traboulsi's *History*. As a long-time fighter for secularism, the author does bring out effectively his central idea, namely that Lebanon's sectarian political order, formalised in the National Pact of 1943, was itself at the heart of ethnic and religious conflict, rather than providing the intended balance between different groups. He explains the contradiction in a system which not only recognises all Lebanese people as "citizens" of an "independent state enjoying indivisible unity and integral sovereignty" , but also pigeon-holes them into hierarchical religious communities, allocating parliamentary seats to each on a confessional basis according to quota.

The problem is not merely that these allocations could be deemed unfair to one religious group or another, the system assumes that there is some inherent commonality of interests of co-religionists. It aggravates sectarian divides by giving autonomy to each. It puts politics on the terrain of religion rather than individuals' political beliefs.

Indeed, Traboulsi comments that it was when the principle of religious communities' autonomy was played out in its purest form — sectarian militias controlling different districts and towns like fortresses, collecting taxes, and lording it over their "own" populations during the civil war — that inter-communal tensions were most aggravated.

But again, Traboulsi has disappointingly little to say about a working-class riposte to sectarian politics. He refers in the chronology at the back of the book to trade union demonstrations against religious chauvinism on all sides during the civil war, but makes no mention in the text itself. Instead the author lauds without criticism the "Ta'if agreement" which brought the Lebanese civil war to a close in 1990 — an accord which gave Muslims as many parliamentary seats as the Christians, while keeping the sectarian political order in place. Of course, such measures amount to little more than shifting around the proverbial furniture when the whole structure is rotten, but Traboulsi dignifies Ta'if with the character of a workable system. His history ends in 1990 with "peace".

This cut-off point seems particularly crude given that so much has happened to redefine the contours of Lebanese politics since, in particular the rise of the clerical fascist Hezbollah movement. The book is after all very new, and we are now living in 2007, a year after the summer war with Israel.

So what is Hezbollah's social base? Why is it so strong and the secular left so weak? Can it unite non-Muslims behind it in a "national cause" against Israel? Besides this sin of omission, Traboulsi seriously underplays Hezbollah's role in the civil war, which receives only the scantest of reference.

Overall therefore the work is of poor use as a guide to understanding Lebanon through the prism of its history. Besides the dense writing style "this happened and then this happened and then this happened..." and the sweeping coverage of hundreds of years of history in just 200 pages, Traboulsi has singularly failed to integrate his mass of empirical knowledge into any sort of analysis of religious sectarianism or its