

Memorable jazz: So What

By Philip Elwood
EXAMINER MUSIC CRITIC

DRUMMER Max Roach calls his brass quintet currently playing at Yoshi's the So What Brass 5, derived, as he explains, from Miles Davis' tossed-off retort to adverse comments about his stage attitude and varying musical style.

Roach initially thought that his unusual brass quintet, even if driven, propelled and inspired by the finest drummer of the past half-century, might draw criticism from the bopsters and jazz purists.

Not to worry — the initial set of the six-night Yoshi's engagement proved to be a masterful and memorable presentation.

With Roach at his drum set in mid-stage, Mark Taylor, French horn, and Delfeayo Marsalis, trombone, seated (in high-back leather chairs) to his right; trumpeters Rod McGaha and Eddie Henderson, and tuba player Antonio Underwood similarly seated on his left, the presentation is like a minstrel show, with Roach the interlocutor, Taylor and Underwood the end-men.



Max Roach: "Pure improvisation"

Roach and So What Brass 5 play without amplification. Their presentation is masterfully constructed and cleverly organized — moving from one theme, or soloist, to another.

This is definitive chamber jazz, conceived by Roach to display the role of a drummer as a flowing, supportive, constantly shifting rhythmic undercurrent for various combinations of the brasses. "Pure improvisation," Roach said, reminding many older listeners that

the brass street bands in New Orleans (and elsewhere) a hundred years ago were embryonic jazz groups.

The sextet began the first set with Roach's "Ghost Dancers," his finest and most accessible work. Backed by subtly accented rolling drum rhythms (played with soft-head mallets) the brass ensemble played melodic themes with rich harmonics, sounding at times like a calliope, at others like a pipe-organ. Standing in solo, the tall, lean McGaha's bright trumpet tones carried out over the ensemble like a clarion. Solos by Underwood, Marsalis and Taylor followed, each supported by a different percussion pattern, each backed by his brass colleagues.

As the climactic soloist in "Ghost Dancers," trumpeter Henderson brought the house down with one of his best-ever performances, at first going it alone;

then, with Underwood's tuba joining in, swapping licks like a couple of boxers.

And this was only the beginning. Underwood's solo on "God Bless the Child" (shades of Eric Dolphy's classic bass clarinet reading of this Billie Holiday tune) was followed by an ensemble piece that, again, had a New Orleans street band sound — including a dirge-like ending.

Taylor's "My French Valentine" variations on French horn, Marsalis' solo within "Ghost Dancers," the hell-bent pace of Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee" by the ensemble, and the delightful take on "The Star-Spangled Banner" were all magnificently turned.

Max Roach and the So What Brass 5 play at 8 and 10 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and at 8 p.m. Sunday. There will be a "Kids-OK" matinee at 2 p.m. Sunday. Yoshi's is at 510 Embarcadero West (Jack London Square), Oakland. Call (510) 238-9200.