

Celebrating M'Boom

By Thomas Taylor

As we embark on the 101st year of drummer Max Roach's birth, Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU) percussion professors and M'Boom alumni will come together at PASIC50 to present a concert of music from the American jazz percussion group M'Boom, founded by Roach in 1970. All members of the group played an array of percussion instruments during their performances including marimba, timpani, xylophone, vibraphone, gongs, bells, an array of drums from around the world, and drumset. The tribute performance will consist of some of the original M'Boom pieces from the recordings created in the 1970s and 1980s.

The performing ensemble will feature Joe Chambers (original surviving M'Boom member) and Stefon Harris (who played briefly in the ensemble before Roach's passing). The HBCU percussion professors who will participate are Thomas Taylor, Dr. Lamont Lawhorn, Dr. Sean Daniels, Dr. Don Parker, Marcia McCants, and Malcolm Jackson. Come celebrate the ensemble and original compositions created from its original members.

A CONVERSATION WITH JOE CHAMBERS

Thomas Taylor: Tell us about your birthplace and your musical influences.

Joe Chambers: I was born in Stone Acre, Virginia. We stayed there about a year, and then my family moved to a town called Chester, near Philadelphia. My education there was excellent. There was a lot of emphasis on art, music, and dancing. There was a program called "rent an instrument." Children could rent an instrument monthly, so everybody played. It became like a fad. Everybody was renting and playing instruments.

Taylor: What was the instrument you rented?

Chambers: Of course, the drums. We had a piano in the house. Lesson wise, I started on piano. Another brother played piano, one played the reeds, saxophone, clarinets, and another one played trombone. And my sister danced. So we were a musical

family. I was playing the piano and I was banging on pots and pans, setting them up like drums. I had those instincts.

Taylor: Who were some of your musical influences?

Chambers: My first influences were on TV. I saw Gene Krupa on TV, chewing gum, sticks flying in the air, and stuff. That was my first influence. And then Buddy Rich was out, but he wasn't as popular. I didn't know about Max Roach until I was about 13 years of age. I had a friend who had an older brother who had a record collection. We went around to his house, and he was playing Clifford Brown/Max Roach stuff and Miles Davis. I was immediately attracted to that. I said, "I gotta find out what this is all about."

Taylor: How much did you play in the Philadelphia area before you moved to other major cities?

Chambers: I played a lot in school. The educational system at that time put an emphasis on science and math, but there was lots of musical activity. There were marching bands, concert orchestras, even jazz bands. So that was happening, and there was a lot of activity in the neighborhood because there was an abundance of other talented people, and I played a lot of R&B coming



Joe Chambers

up. I played on a talent show when I was eight years old. Paul Whiteman had a TV talent contest for young people, and I was on that show.

I was athlete and a musician. I played, I ran track, I played football, and I was pretty good. I was playing with local R&B people in clubs and dances and stuff. From the time I was about 14, I was a weekend, working musician. Bobby Charles was popular around that time, and when he went to D.C., I went with him. I liked D.C. so I decided to stay in Washington. It was a thriving place for musicians, and they had a long history, because Duke Ellington and a host of others came from D.C. Then, I got a job with a group called the JFK quintet in a club called Bohemian Caverns. We played six nights a week for three years!

Taylor: There are some key albums that almost every jazz musician should know, and you are on many of them. Joe Henderson's, *Mode for Joe*, Bobby Hutchison's, *Oblique and Components*. Freddie Hubbard's *Breaking Point*, Donald Byrd's, *Mustang*. I didn't realize that you were on Chick Corea's, *Tones for Joan's Bones*, and Miles Davis's *In a Silent Way*. Most importantly, Wayne Shorter's, *Etcetera* and *Adam's Apple*. Those are such classic albums.

Chambers: A lot of those dates were not working bands. Back in those days, you would get a job that would last, especially in New York. My first job in a club was at the old Five Spot for six weeks,

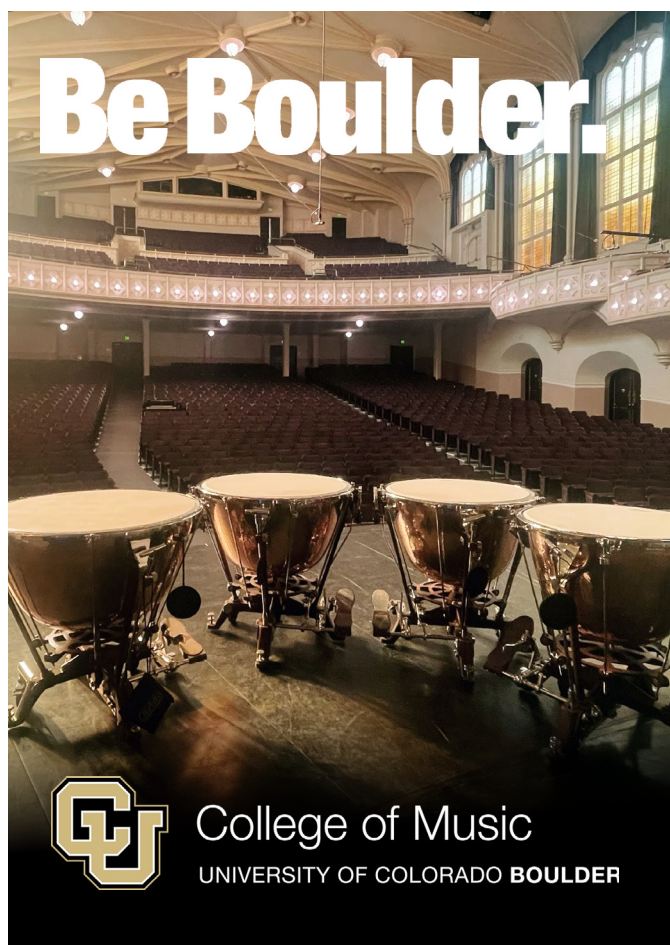
six nights a week. I worked at Minton's Playhouse for the whole summer of '65. But as far as recording, with Blue Note records, you would rehearse for about four or five days in succession. Then you'd go in and record, and it sounded like a working band.

Taylor: How did you become the house drummer at Blue Note and start working with Wayne Shorter?


Chambers: In D.C., when I was working in the Bohemian Caverns club six nights a week, people like Miles, Duke, and many others would come down and hang out in the Caverns. My first job in New York was with Eric Dolphy at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In the band was me, Freddie Hubbard, Richard Davis, and Bobby Hutchison. And Eric had a recording date with Blue Note. Eric told me to come to the rehearsal and bring music. I came to the rehearsal with a piece I wrote called "Mirrors." The thing you must realize is that there were no drummers writing music except Max Roach. Freddie Hubbard liked "Mirrors" and said he was going to record it. But Duke Pearson recorded it before Freddie Hubbard. So that's how I got in at Blue Note. They must have looked at "Mirrors," and looked at those voicings, and said, "Damn, this dude knows what he's doing!"

Taylor: How did you meet Max Roach and how did you all develop M'Boom?

Chambers: There was a show called Gretsch Drum Night at Bird-



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land. It would have Max Roach, Art Blakey, Philly Joe Jones, and Elvin Jones. So in the summer of 1970, Max calls me and all the other original members, and says, “I want to explore percussion.” The band was Max, myself, Warren Smith, Freddy Waits, Roy Brooks, Omar Clay, and Ray Mantilla. So, every Saturday from about late August 1970 we would get together at Warren Smith’s studio — no gigs in sight and not looking for any. Smith had all the percussion, and we were learning the instruments. You had to learn how to play the timpani correctly. You had to learn the mallets. That began my journey into learning to play the mallets. I already had a piano background, so it wasn’t a big deal for me. Learning all the percussion instruments, the hand drums, the idiophonic instruments, the shakers, and stuff — there are techniques to all those instruments. I saw the need for a legitimate hand percussionist, so that’s how Ray Mantilla got into M’Boom.

Taylor: Who named the group M’Boom?

Chambers: Max. That name comes from Africa. There’s a tribe called M’Boom. It’s now the Democratic Republic of the Congo and it comes out of that mythology. I don’t specifically know the meaning of it. I know it’s supposed to designate the configuration of elders in a tribal situation — elders who become your mentors.

Taylor: How did M’Boom get into recording?

Chambers: Max was already a recording artist. And everybody was working; nobody was dependent on M’Boom to make money. It was just a learning process. I was working with bands and recording, and stuff. Smith was doing Broadway shows, plus, he was a professor at old Westboro University. Omar Clay was working with singers like Sarah Vaughn. Freddie Waits was working with groups. So we had other means of making money. We did our first record for a company called Strata East. That was Charles Tolliver and Stanley Cowell’s company. The next record was with Columbia Japan.

Taylor: What is the current state of M’Boom and your other project of M’Boom with horns?

Chambers: I’ve got a couple of M’Boom with horns performances coming up soon. There are 2025 and 2026 concerts at Pittsburgh University and North Carolina Central University. If it’s successful, maybe we can get this moving.

Taylor: I hope that people will reach out to you at PASIC. Now tell me about your eBook, *Cross Rhythms* (Hudson Music). What made you decide to put this book out?

Chambers: There was a student at Illinois University around 2013 working on his dissertation about me. Part of the book is that dissertation and part of it is my autobiography. I talk about a lot of things. I talk about the music business and about how rock and roll came to be. And there’s a section called “Blues as Ethos.” Understand that the blues is the most misrepresented, ill-defined idiom of all. Blues is an African retention. The modality of the blues

M’Boom at PASIC 1982.



PHOTO BY RICK MATTINGLY

— the blues scale, the notes — comes out of Africa. That’s the only modality in the world that combines major and minor simultaneously. I’ve got records of music from East Africa, Mauritania, that sounds just like blues.

Taylor: I’m excited to be able to share the stage with you. And I hope that a lot of people come out and see our performance. That performance will be just a snapshot in time, but I’m excited about learning the music and memorizing it, and getting my parts together with the rest of the HBCU tribute ensemble.

Thomas Taylor is a working jazz drummer and university percussion professor at North Carolina Central University. He has played and taught music, drumming, and jazz on five continents for more than 25 years. He has written university textbooks, articles for *Modern Drummer* and *Percussive Notes*, and has a new jazz drumming method book. [PN](#)

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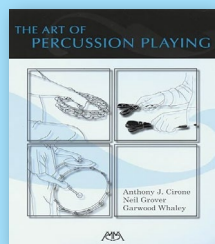
Friday

Founded in 1962, the Percussions de Strasbourg are world-renowned ambassadors of musical creation. With their exceptional repertoire, the group performs 20th-century masterpieces and commissioned new works with the same concerns: to bring life to a contemporary heritage while revisiting it constantly, and to continue to innovate in a context of artistic diversification.

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The daily commitment of the ensemble to educational activities is reflected in their various actions, particularly with the public in Haute-pierre, where the ensemble is in residence.

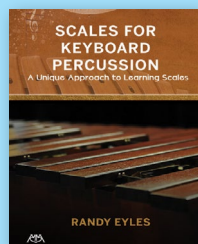


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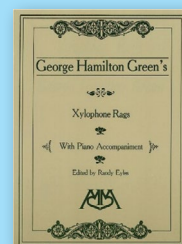


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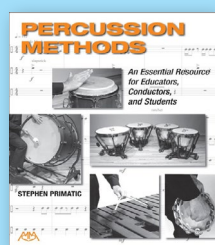


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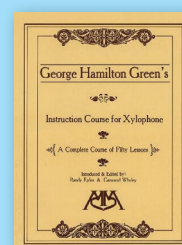


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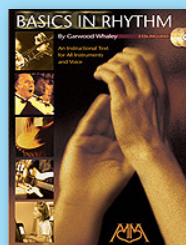


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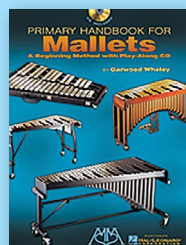


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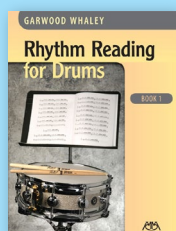


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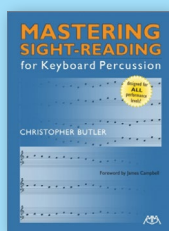


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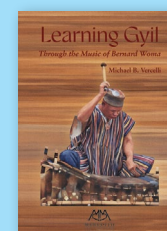


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