

Music

EUPHONIUM MAN

Brad Felt makes waves in jazz with an unlikely instrument

By MARK STRYKER
FREE PRESS MUSIC WRITER

This is the most challenging gig I've ever done," says Brad Felt, euphonium in hand. "I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but I couldn't resist." Felt, who leads his own quintet at next Sunday's Michigan Jazz Festival, was speaking last week at Cliff Bell's in Detroit, where he was the only horn in a trio led by drummer Bill Higgins with Gary Schunk on organ. The evening was devoted to classic, sophisticated post-bop compositions by Joe Henderson from the '60s. Tackling them in such a lean setting would test any horn player, but only a truly brave — or foolish — soul would take the plunge on euphonium, the smaller, higher-pitched version of the tuba.

Yet Felt's no-prisoners improvisations were so fleet, harmonically aware and rhythmically flexible that he made you forget that his instrument is still regarded as something of an interloper in jazz. Felt, 54, an unsung hero on the Detroit scene, remains one of just a handful of musicians playing modern-mainstream jazz on the euphonium and tuba, his first instrument. Though he has toured internationally with tuba hero Howard Johnson's Gravity ensemble and contributed to all manner of local groups, Felt has reached a new creative peak with his NuQuartet Plus, which is devoted to his sturdy original compositions.

Question: Why the tuba?

Answer: I was in junior high school band in Bloomfield Hills with a great band director named H. Wayne Tilton, a really inspiring guy. I was the last-chair trumpet player and they needed a tuba player. So he asked me to switch, and I said yes. He basically shut me in a room with a beginning tuba book and mostly left me to my own devices until I was ready to rejoin the ensemble. It was a drag at first, but I rapidly came to love it. I really blossomed in high school.

Q: How did jazz come into the picture?

A: It was really my brother who got me into it. He was listening to fusion by people I refer to as Miles' (Davis) children — people like Herbie Hancock's Headhunters and the Mahavishnu Orchestra. They related more to our roots growing up listening to rock 'n' roll, but being the inquisitive type, he said, "Well, I'm going to look for everything with Herbie Hancock on it," so he got into the more straight-ahead stuff.

We had a group of people in high school that would get together to listen to music, and every-

body would have the opportunity to choose something to play. So maybe I'd play some harpsichord sonatas by Scarlatti and maybe my brother would put on something like Wayne Shorter's "Night Dreamer."

Q: What was the turning point?

A: When I heard Charlie Parker's "Live at the Royal Roost." That was the moment. It wasn't the first time I had heard Charlie Parker, but this time, it was like an awakening. I was 18, the summer between high school and university.

Q: Was there ever a disconnect between your desire to play jazz and the fact that the tuba wasn't really considered a jazz instrument?

A: Never. I was aware that I was going to be learning from people who weren't playing my instrument. Like a lot of people, I would take the turntable and turn it down to half-speed and learn Charlie Parker solos.

Early on, I began to think that this could be a good thing. If you play the saxophone, you've got all that baggage of all the great saxophone players that came

before you. But I always thought it might be good that the people you are studying don't play your instrument. You're not dealing with that ball-and-chain of being connected to the instrument. There are no biases related to the horn. You can pick any instrument you want to emulate. There's a certain freedom.

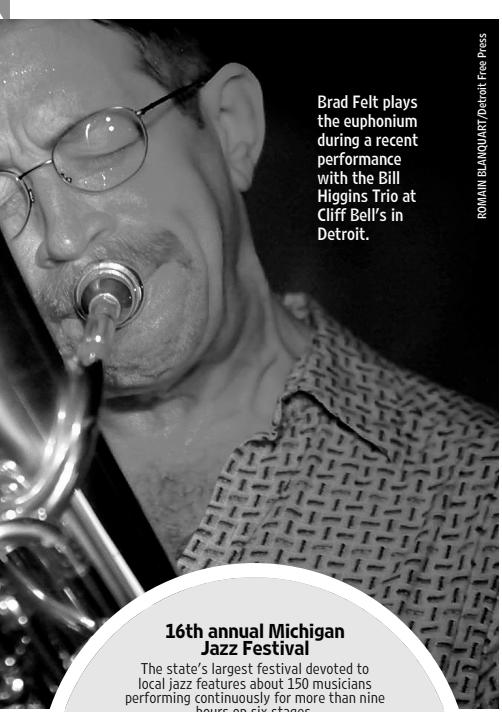
Q: So you don't have to phrase like a tuba. You can phrase like a saxophone or a trumpet or anything else?

A: If you want to get a little more technical about it, I would say that phrasing on a tuba or eupho-

nium has more in common with a saxophone than a trumpet, because tuba and euphonium have a conical bore rather than a cylindrical bore like a trumpet or trombone. A conical bore gives you a more diffuse sound and lends itself to less percussiveness and more to a connected-type thing that's more like a saxophone. But you also have the choice to do those brass-like percussive things like a trumpet. In a way, you've got a foot in both worlds.

Q: The euphonium is basically a baby tuba, right?

A: That's how I think of it. I'm



Brad Felt plays the euphonium during a recent performance with the Bill Higgins Trio at Cliff Bell's in Detroit.

ROMAIN BLAQUART/Detroit Free Press

16th annual Michigan Jazz Festival

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VisTaTech Center at Schoolcraft College
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Brad Felt NuQuartet Plus performs at 3 p.m. on the Leven Stage (Red Tent).

Other performers include Hot Club of Detroit, George Benson, Paul Keller Trio, Bob Seeley, Gary Schunk Trio, Perry Hughes Trio, Johnny Trudell Big Band and Alma Smith.

it in performance and how that might affect me as I write. We play my original music and all of the musicians have strong voices. I'm seeking something distinctive. It's hard to be more specific, but my goal is to realize the concept and ideas inside each composition.

The reason you establish a strong concept is so it can evolve and then you can begin to deconstruct it. That's a big challenge. You really have to be working a lot. There's the rub. I'm constantly looking for opportunities. I'd like to see if I could tour overseas, because going on the road for a month would achieve the path that I have in mind.

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TUBA JAZZ: FOUR GREAT MOMENTS

Brad Felt picks four landmark recordings featuring the tuba and euphonium

- Bob Stewart (tuba), heard on Arthur Blythe's "Lenox Avenue Breakdown" (Columbia)
- Howard Johnson (tuba), "Right Now" (Verve)
- Kiane Zawadi (euphonium), heard on Freddie Hubbard's "Ready for

Freddie" (Blue Note)

■ Kiane Zawadi (euphonium), heard on Yusef Lateef's "The Last Savoy Sessions" (Savoy)

Note: Detroit native Zawadi was born Bernard McKinney and is part of a dynamic jazz family of Detroit.

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