

THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Tuba or not tuba: that is Brad Felt's big jazz question

By MICHAEL G. NASTOS
NEWS SPECIAL WRITER

The tuba is an instrument misunderstood and shunned by many. No one in high school wants to play the bulky sousaphone in marching band, much less in orchestra.

In jazz, the tuba is even more of a rarity. People like Ray Draper, Jack Jeffers, Jim Self, Bob Stewart, Joe Daley and Howard Johnson comprise the tuba consortium in improvised music. Detroit has its own champion of the big horn (specifically the double b-flat tuba) — Brad Felt.

Felt works frequently as a sideman for larger ensembles and big bands, but is bringing his potent quartet made up of pianist Kenn Cox, bassist Rodney Whitaker, and drummer Ron Johnson to the Polo Club of the Ann Arbor Hilton for his second performance there this year. The acoustics of the Club are

perfectly suited to Felt's low register, bop-flavored jazz.

Felt, 34, first was taken by music hearing his father sing Frank Sinatra tunes while shaving, listening to Stan Getz bossa nova records during his parents' parties, and seeing the film "Man With The Horn." He took up the trumpet in grade school.

"I was last chair," he recalled. "I had braces which made it difficult, so the band director put me in a room with the tuba and a beginners tuba book. I was on my own, and didn't appreciate it at the time."

In time, Felt found a jazz role model in Ray Draper. "His albums were a start, but it was at Oakland University, thinking that I would

play with a symphony some day, that I took the jazz ensemble course with Doc Holladay, Sam Sanders and, especially, Herbie Williams, who was a great early influence on me."

A jazz convention at the University of Pittsburgh, where Felt heard Sonny Rollins, Nathan Davis, Jaki Byard, Ron Carter and Alan Dawson was the turning point.

"It blew me away. From then on I was a changed person. And listening to Charlie Parker — I had a turntable you could turn down from 33 to 16 rpm. I slowed many of his solos to half-speed and took 'em off the record."

Felt then gravitated to Marcus Belgrave's Jazz Workshop, played with Sanders' Pioneer Jazz Orchestra, Eddie Nuccilli's Plural Circle, and formed the award winning quintet with saxophonist and flutist Steve Wood. Work with Kenn Cox, Gary Schunk and Kamau Kenyatta's combos formed the basis for his own quartet.



FELT

"I wanted to take the final step to have no other horn but the tuba in the front line. I know I'm at the point where I can elucidate the lines and have the clarity, the facility, and the articulation to make the tuba the voice in front of the rhythm section. And I have a pool of musicians who are not only the best in Detroit, but anywhere."

A big difference between Felt's horn and others are his use of rotary valves (similar to those on a french horn) vis a vis the piston valves of a sousaphone.

"I keep 'em good and oiled up, so that they will travel as fast as I want," he said. "Since the mouthpiece is so big, you have to be more careful to make clear every note. Then people can really hear what you're playing."

The Brad Felt Quartet plays the Ann Arbor Hilton's Polo Club, 610 Hilton Blvd., 9 p.m.-1 a.m. Saturday Admission is free. For more information, call 761-7800.