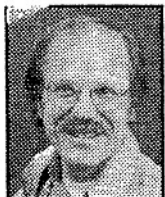


To Brad Felt, the tuba is the top brass

Such embarrassment: A junior high schooler's braces are seriously impeding his progress on the trumpet. The band director hands him a tuba, an instruction book and tells him to go practice while his schoolmates have band rehearsals. All his pals have fun while he sits in the practice room alone trying to figure out this big, clunky brass elephant of an instrument.



Jim Dulzo

"I hated it," recalls Brad Felt, digging into his beer and pizza. "I really despised the whole situation I was in. But then something happened and it grew into a deep love for the instrument."

Twenty years later, at age 33, the love affair continues. Felt is Detroit's one and only modern jazz tubist. No laying down bass oompah lines for an ultra-traditional trad jazz band: He thinks the tuba is a lead instrument.

THE MAN does blow a mean and impressive tuba. Just ask those who've heard him play around town — with Eddie Nuccilli's big band, Kenn Cox's Guerilla Jam band, the Creative Arts Collective Ensemble, Wendell Harrison's Jazz Hand Orchestra or as co-leader of the Brad Felt/Steve Wood quintet (which reached the final round of the 1989 Hennessy National Jazz Search). Saturday he takes a big step — presenting a concert of his own works underwritten by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, with both a quintet and a sextet at the Detroit Institute of the Arts.

"The tuba has more octaves than any other wind instrument," says Felt, counting the ways he loves the horn. "It can play a ballad better than a trumpet can; it just has more available, but nobody knows it. I guess when you love something you know more about it than anybody else knows."

"It is big, it is hard to play, but it has kept me alive. The amount of energy required every day to wake up in the morning and deal with the instrument keeps me alive."

Felt discovered his love for jazz while attending Oakland University on a performance scholarship. Growing up in Detroit's northern suburbs, his brother had primed him with old Charlie Parker and Lee Morgan records, but it was rubbing shoulders with Oakland's then-excellent jazz faculty and traveling to a jazz festival in Pittsburgh that really did the trick. Until then he'd assumed his career would be in symphonic brass. But the fact that jazz tubists are an almost non-existent breed actually encouraged him.

"I'M VERY dogmatic and compelled by differences," Felt says, grinning slightly. "I think, as you say, the ridiculousness of it appeals to a part of my makeup as a person. I mean, we are talking about physical pain, mental pain, long hours, the doubt, nobody believing in what you are doing. But in my



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JAZZ

by JIM DULZO

personality there's always that compulsion towards what was different, what was difficult."

Observing that "some instruments are hard to learn while all are equally hard to master," Felt says he's discovering new things about the tuba all the time. He's listened a lot to old Ray Draper records. The early modern tubist eschewed pyrotechnics for a relaxed, easy-going improvisational approach. He notes that Howard Johnson, a mainstay on many old Blue Note Records sessions, rarely if ever soloed, and renowned contemporary tuba player Bob Stewart plays the part of a bass, reeling off stunningly kinetic lines, avoiding solos.

"I have boundless respect for that guy," Felt says of Stewart, "but his is a totally different thing. He has a strong belief that the tuba shouldn't be doing what I'm trying to do. That's his view of it."

Saturday night the audience will get Felt's view of it.

"For years I've been a mad scientist trying to get it to the point where I deserve to be more widely heard," he explains. "Just in the last year or so I've come to the conclusion that I am ready. When you put a Jaribu Shahid, a Danny Spencer, a Kenny Cox together (respectively on bass, drums and piano, joined by saxophonists Steve Wood and

PREVIEW

Who: The Brad Felt Quintet and Sextet

Where: The Detroit Institute of Arts recital hall.

When: Saturday at 8 p.m.

Tickets: Call 833-2323.

James Carter and vibraphonist Rob Piphon), you had better stand back because every range that you want expressed in your music is more than available and probably there will be a few things that you didn't know about that will happen, too."

FELT'S NEXT step is not clear. He is not interested in New York City; he dreads the conformity that the city's intense commercial pressure brings — even to tuba players. He'd like to connect with venues in Europe and Japan but has to gain some national profile in the States first. In the meantime, he'll play rodeos, classical brass consorts, studio sessions, whatever comes along that strikes his fancy and offers "the correct amount of cash."

Says Felt: "If I am really true to the instrument, I think there is a place for me. There is no bailout. I am committed so completely that there is no other answer to the equation other than complete success."

"For right now, I want people to walk out of the DIA into the night air and say to themselves, 'I cannot believe what I just heard.'"