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M.F.'s Rules of the Road

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By Bob Protzman

Trumpeter-bandleader Maynard Ferguson acknowledges that his image now is that of a rock star, and he says that, honest to goodness, St. Paul's Prom Center was in on the start of it all.

"It's embarrassing to say this to a reporter that the Prom Center is one of our favorite places to play, because you'll figure I'll get on the phone 20 minutes later and say the same thing to somebody in Des Moines," said Ferguson.

"But it's true that it was confirmed that our band had broken away from the others in that young people really liked us when we played the Prom several years ago. The reaction of young people there was tremendous. There was so much enthusiasm then, and there has been since, that our band looks forward to playing there."

What Ferguson said in a telephone interview from Buffalo, N.Y., where the band is beginning a three-month tour of the U.S. and Canada, is not so far-fetched, because the Prom has brought the big bands here at least once every year for a long time. And almost always the crowds are receptive.

The Ferguson band, enjoying almost unparalleled success for a jazz group with its current Columbia album, "Primal Scream," (his seventh for the label) will be in concert in the Prom at 8:30 p.m. Wednesday. The band established a record attendance and gross earnings for the Prom when it attracted nearly 2,000 people there in May, 1975.

"Primal Scream," although harshly criticized by some reviewers, already has sold more than 115,000 copies and was on the pop music sales charts for some time now. It stands a chance of earning \$1 million in sales, thus qualifying as a gold record, an achievement not often reached by a jazz group.

"It's really fun to feel that young people are into your thing," said Maynard, who you'll notice has updated his vocabulary. "I enjoy it very much. I feel our approach is quite artistic and so do the men in the band. We have tremendous enthusiasm for it, and we feel our music has a lot of validity."

The music is popular, Maynard said, because audiences enjoy the adventurousness of it. "Mostly because of improved music education in high schools and colleges, young people are anxious for surprises. And that's what makes jazz a true American art form," said Canadian-born Ferguson. "The listener and the performer are pure adventurers as opposed to a symphony concert - not that I have any lack of love for that; I'm a fan - but there's not that much variance in most classical pieces."

As an example of the adventurousness Ferguson speaks of, he said that for a nine-hour period prior to the interview he and the band and Vemu Mukonda, whom he called one of India's greatest musicians, were rehearsing what he described as a jazz-rock-disco-meditation-Indian raga. "That's actually what this composition is.

Mukonda and I have been composing together off and on for seven or eight years and have done concerts together in London and elsewhere in Europe. He plays an ancient instrument about 2,000 years older than the sitar called the vina. It's similar to the sitar, but has fewer strings and a deeper sound. Mukonda is a fantastic

rhythmic player. You know, most attempts at merging Indian music with western music don't come off. Ours do."

Mukonda is expected to be here with Maynard, and the results of all that rehearsal, a tune called "Saveri" (an Indian goddess) will be among other new material that the band is putting into a new album for Columbia, now that Ferguson's contract with that label has been renewed.

Ferguson is not unaware of his critics. "Anything that is change has to be resisted by a certain number of people," he said. "That will continue when our next album comes out, too. But 'Primal Scream' was an adventure. If you always do the same thing you can become a very dull, uninteresting .300 hitter who never hits a homerun. That may be all right in baseball, but not music.

"For a long time, we were playing the same way for the same audiences who wanted to hear the same tunes over and over again. It got to be a joke the way people insisted that we play 'Maria.' I was playing it three times a night, and in England it got so people knew the tune better than the band. I'm the only guy to have a hit record that was never a record at all. We never did release a single of that tune.

"I understand the negative reviews and where people are at, but I also notice that when they hear us in person their reaction is different. The 'Pagliacci' we do live is 40 times better than the one on the LP."

Ferguson and the band are enjoying the financial success that comes with reaching the huge youth market. "In the 1950s and '60s our band used to get rave reviews that said we were a tremendous artistic success but a financial failure. The difference between what we made then and now is that the guy who plays for Maynard Ferguson now is really having a delightful time with his music and he doesn't have to say I wish I could get a job in the studios where I can make some good bread."

Ferguson, 48, first came to national prominence in 1950 when he was a high-note specialist with the Stan Kenton band. He led his own band after that, featuring such musicians as Willie Maiden, tenor saxophonist and Ferguson's chief arranger who died recently; Slide Hampton, trombone; Lou Soloff, trumpeter at one time with Blood, Sweat and Tears; the late Bill Chase, also a high-note player; pianist Chick Corea; keyboardist Bob James; trombonist, arranger, composer Don Sebesky, still a prominent arranger, and others.

He disbanded the band in 1967 and went to England, where after extensive tours of Europe, he and the band became very popular. "I think getting away from America gave me a chance to destroy my cookie stamp," he says. "I didn't think there was an American market for what I was doing. With no new audiences interested in the directions I was headed, I was stuck with my old audiences.

I hate to use the word 'stuck,' but it does apply in the sense that it got to be play "Maria" one thousand more times. I found that unbearable. I believe in change. I never try to recreate an image of yesterday, especially in my music. Everything we play is new, with new rhythm and new experiments. Even the few old standards we play have been rearranged to recreate a new today feeling."

Because of his ability to hit and sustain super high notes, Ferguson has been referred to as a freak. "It's absolutely true," he laughed. "It's breath control, not an iron lip. I go into that when I teach clinics around the country. I'm almost a perfect breather in Hatha-Yoga, and I'm stronger now than ever because I'm more conscious of how to do it. Now I don't go around with cracked and bleeding lips. Mine are calloused," he laughed again.