

Maynard Ferguson

By ROBERT J. ROBBINS

On Thursday evening, February 15, the Maynard Ferguson Orchestra, fresh from recording sessions in London, descended upon the stage of Marple-Newtown High School (my alma mater) and presented the most dazzling musical performance ever to rock the community of Newtown Square. The SRO audience was extremely enthusiastic and rose to its feet in bravissimos for the band no less than ten times during the concert. Maynard danced his way around the stage when not playing himself and even poked his head into the trumpet section several times. By the end of the program, one wondered how Maynard got the energy to shuffle around and simultaneously blow extreme high notes on his specially-built "M. F. Horn."

In addition to trumpet, Maynard played Fluegelhorn, valve trombone, and baritone horn, and the band featured such great musicians that it sounded much larger than its thirteen members. Lin Biviano, a native Philadelphian and former Buddy Rich sideman, led the powerhouse trumpet section. The saxes consisted of Britishers Andy Nackintosh, alto, and Bruce Johnston, baritone, plus Australian Tony Buchanan, the "Brisbane basher," on tenor and flute. Billy Graham and Eddie Bern were the two trombonists.

Electric pianist Pete Jackson headed the driving rhythm section consisting of Joel DiBartolo on acoustic and Fender basses, and Randy Jones, a super--dynamic drummer who even competes with Buddy Rich!

The opening number was "Give It One," an uptempo composition by former Ferguson saxist Keith Mansfield spotlighting the entire trumpet section and Maynard on valve trombone. Two tracks from the band's soon-to-be released Columbia album *M. F. Horn Three* ensued, followed by Sonny Rollins' "Airegin," a chart by saxist Willie Maiden (now

with Stan Kenton) with a flugelhorn-sax duet by Maynard and Bruce Johnston sounding much like the Miles Davis-Gerry Mulligan collaboration of 1949. Closing the first set was another Keith Mansfield original "L-Dopa," from Maynard's first Columbia album. This number is a fifteen-minute opus consisting of numerous rhythm and tempo changes, strains of Bartok, Ravel, and Stravinsky, improvised counterpoint between Pete Jackson's keyboard and Joel DiBartolo's Fender bass, a polytonal invention leading to a recapitulation of the main theme, and finally Maynard holding a series of stratospheric notes on trumpet for one minute. Incidentally, "L-Dopa" is the theme music for a spy thriller on BBC Radio, and it has also been heard in some TV commercials in the United States.

Although I had been at Maynard's dynamite performance at West Chester a year ago, I must say that this year's band is infinitely superior to last year's. Maynard grooves much easier than before, and he now has a distinctive sound which makes his band readily identifiable. Before the concert, I had the opportunity of saying a few words with Maynard, and he told me that the basic philosophy underlying his band is artistic freedom, controlled only by the inner discipline of the musicians themselves. Maynard is a tremendously nice guy who will even interrupt his own solos so that the audience may applaud a solo by a member of the band, which, according to last year's *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "you won't find Harry James doing."

Maynard was the trumpet soloist at Tanglewood with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic in a symphonic work by his Koussevitzky-winning Kenton comrade Bill Russo, and an entire movement of Bob Graettinger's polytone poem *This Modern World*, which Stan Kenton Orchestra performed twenty years ago, was built around Maynard's trumpet. I had even heard the rumor that Eugene Ormandy wanted him as solo trumpet in the Philadelphia Orchestra, but when I asked Maynard whether this was true, he replied, "I don't know where you heard that because it isn't true, but I take it as a real compliment," for Maynard Ferguson certainly could play in the world's greatest orchestra if he wanted to. But Jazz is his bag, and he will continue to play jazz as long as he wishes.

The results of this year's *Down Beat* readers' poll placed Maynard ninth in the Hall of Fame and as

Jazzman of the Year, sixth in the Big Band category, tenth in Miscellaneous Instrument for his baritone horn, and fourth in the Trumpet category, beaten only by Miles Davis, Freddie Hubbard, and Dizzy Gillespie, all of whom are major influences on Maynard's virtuosity.

Maynard and his band will be returning to the Philadelphia area on April 7, when they will be appearing at the Walnut St. Theatre in what promises to be another fine concert. The release of their new Columbia album, *M. F. Horn Three*, should coincide with this event. For more information about Maynard and many other jazz greats, I invite you to listen to my program on WKVU Friday evenings from 6 to 10 p.m.