

# Maynard Ferguson rides a new wave of success

By DAVID STERRITT  
Christian Science Monitor

NEW YORK — "The first thing is to keep loving music! Then keep your head wide open, and listen to everything — and play everything — in a creative way . . . The two severest critics I know are on the two sides of my own head. But don't worry; they know how to applaud too . . ."

Maynard Ferguson started listening to those "critics," and studying music, at four years of age. At nine he was a conservatory student in his native Montreal. At 15 he formed a big band with sidemen averaging twice his age. At 20 he played the United States with Jimmy Dorsey, Charlie Barnet, and Stan Kenton — whose band made him a star.

trick, but staying there is a better one. Ferguson's latest Columbia album — Primal Scream — sold more copies in five weeks than any of his previous hits sold in a year. Why does a huge young audience dig Maynard so much?

"We're into today's music a lot," muses the musician. "Kids identify with the rhythms we get into. Yet our approach is a mixture. My daughter is my manager, and she once said, 'It isn't jazz, it isn't rock, it isn't pop — it's just Maynard Ferguson, the band, and what they're doing today.'"

### It's popularity

"That sounds pompous, but it's the seed of what we're all about. Still, you could turn that negative into a positive and say, 'It is jazz, it is rock,

and it is what pop represents: popularity!"

One key is listening for new ideas wherever you can find them. "If you hear something new that happens to be electronic, don't say, 'What do we need that for?' Say instead, 'I wonder if there's a way we could use that so it would turn me on.'" This attitude helps explain an electric mix like Primal Scream, which moves from disco to Latin, from Chick Corea's Cheshire Cat Walk to a jazzed-up Pagliacci. It's all Maynard, and Maynard loves it all.

Despite his current broad popularity, Ferguson is aware of critics who snipe at eclectic styles, calling them "impure" and commercially motivated. "Some people like purists," the trumpeter responds, "but who is pure? Louis Armstrong started doing something dif-

ferent when he left King Oliver's band, so was he 'impure' forever after that? The only real purist is some African drummer somewhere."

"These people want to see me walking around with a beatup old cornet under my arm in a paper bag," Ferguson smiles, "looking to borrow five bucks from someone like in all those old movies. But most people are away from that image of jazz musicians now . . ."

A continuing challenge for any big-band leader is finding fresh talent for his ensemble. Ferguson has his own method of keeping his ears open for reports and recommendations, and asking prospective musicians to send tapes of themselves playing "in a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere."

He has "never been a fan of the audition, which often leads to a case of nerves. I could give you a very famous list called Maynard's Mistakes of talents I missed when I did audition. So the in-person audition has been depleted from my repertoire. I've struck out too many times with it."

One reason for this approach is Ferguson's dislike of unnecessary competitiveness. "Often a sensitive, creative musician enters into music without wanting to keep score," he says. "I dislike that competition in an art form. Especially when you're trying to educate children. It's destructive to tell one 12-year-old that he came in last while another is the best."

### Praises schools

This implies no disrespect for music educators in general, however, whom Ferguson calls "those great friends of

ours, along with the school systems and the 20,000 stage bands that are in America today. The upgrading of music education in the schools has been the greatest improvement in the last 15 years." He grins as he thinks of "all those kids getting into a wider form of music . . ."

For Ferguson, some of those emerging youngsters might be future sidemen. He admits to getting attached to members of his band, and mourning when they leave for other pursuits.

The main problem, he says,

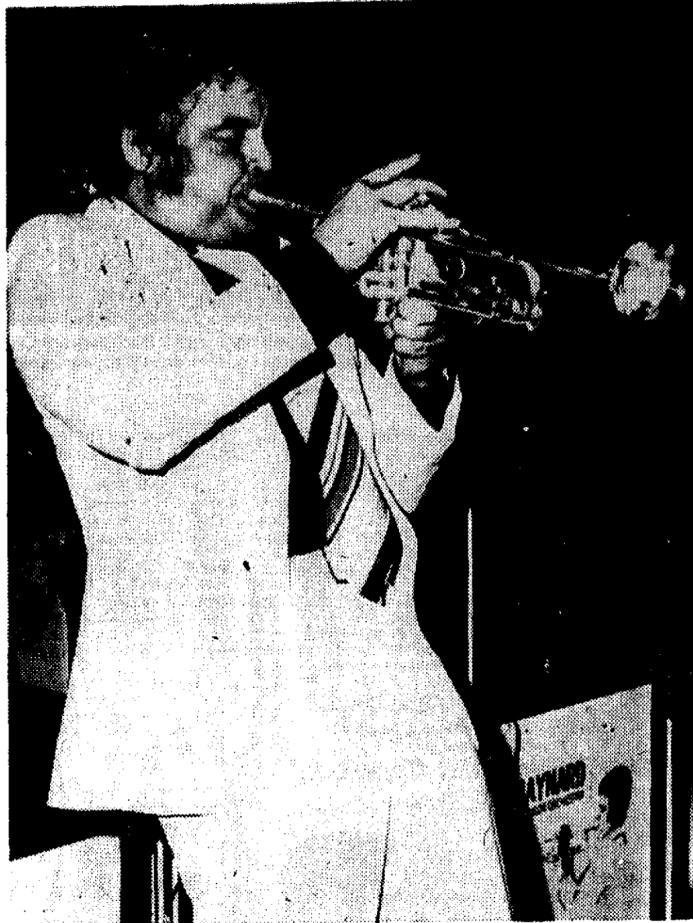
isn't finding talent, but selecting from the profusion of good players who are available. He recalls the "wild" jazzman Charlie Barnet saying he didn't care about a man's five non-musical qualities, preferring "a dummy who can play." Says Ferguson, "I don't need dummies. There are so many wonderful people coming along today . . ."

Though Ferguson's career has prospered, the road hasn't always been smooth. "When I was nine I just loved music," he recalls. "And the rate of pleasure I get from playing and performing has been going steadily up."

"But in the late '60s I got disenchanted with the cookie-cake Maynard Ferguson I was playing. Audiences weren't so adventurous then — they just wanted to hear Maria instead of what I wanted to play." So Maynard took off for India and England, after disbanding his band. But he never forgot the thrill of leading that band and blowing his own horn — "I approach the instrument very physically" — before an

American audience. "Not many people still believe the old stuff about playing only for yourself," he insists. So he returned to the U.S. and found listeners "widening their interests."

He gave them the diversity they wanted, and soon found himself back in the swing — and with a growing reputation as a designer of instruments, such as the M. F. Horn Trumpet, M. F. Superbone and M. F. Firebird that he plays on Primal Scream.



Band leader Maynard Ferguson is achieving his biggest success in a long career with the album, Primal Scream. Born in Montreal, Ferguson has lived in the United States, England and India.

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