

# Maynard Ferguson

Biography

## Biography

*Maynard Ferguson - Trumpeter, flugelhornist, valve trombonist, bandleader, b Verdun (part of Montreal) 4 May 1928. As a child he studied piano and violin, and played the latter instrument in a Fox-Movietone short. Taking up the trumpet at nine, he was a member in his teens of dance bands led by Stan Wood (saxophonist), Roland David, and Johnny Holmes (his older brother Percy, a baritone saxophonist, also played for Holmes) and studied 1943-8 at the CMM with Bernard Baker. Ferguson was heard frequently on CBC radio and on one occasion played a Serenade for Trumpet in Jazz written for him by Morris Davis. While leading his own band in the Montreal area and in Toronto during the mid-1940s Ferguson came to the attention of US bandleaders. As Paul Bley recalled (Montreal Gazette, 28 Oct 1978), 'Maynard would always open the show, and he played three octaves higher on trumpet than anyone else... you ought to have seen the jaws drop on the visiting musicians'.*

*Ferguson went to the USA in 1948 and worked in turn in the big bands of Boyd Raeburn, Jimmy Dorsey, and Charlie Barnet until 1950. It was during his term 1950-3 with Stan Kenton that he first received great public acclaim, winning the Down Beat readers' polls for trumpet in 1950, 1951, and 1952. He made his first records under his own name in 1950, for Capitol, leading the Kenton band of the day.*

*After playing 1953-6 in Hollywood studio orchestras under contract to Paramount and recording with small groups (his own and others), he formed the Birdland Dreamland Band to perform at the New York jazz club Birdland. This was the first of several 'small' big bands (12 or 13 musicians) with which Ferguson toured until 1965, appearing at festivals and in clubs and concerts. He then turned briefly to a still smaller ensemble, although he performed and recorded at Expo 67 with a big band and a sextet, both comprising Montreal musicians.*

*Ferguson spent a year in India studying meditation and lecturing on music, then moved in 1968 to England. It was with a 17-piece English band, which combined the orchestral conventions of jazz and the rhythmic vigour of rock, that he regained and even surpassed his former popularity. The band made its North American debut in 1971, and its recording of MacArthur Park was popular early in the decade. With New York as his home base after 1973, Ferguson gradually replaced the English musicians with young US players, reducing the band again to 13. His recording of Gonna Fly Now, the theme from the film Rocky, was a major hit single (by the standard for pop instrumentals) 1977-8; it was followed by a second lesser hit in 1978, the theme from the movie Battlestar Galactica. His album Conquistador exceeded 500,000 in US sales.*

*In the mid-1980s, by which time Ferguson had moved to Ojai, Cal, he reduced his band still further and in 1987 introduced High Voltage, a fusion septet. By 1990, however, he was leading a more traditionallly-based nonet, the Big Bop Nouveau Band. Ferguson's extensive touring itinerary, which still found him on the road 8 months of every 12 in the early 1990s, has included many Canadian appearances. He performed on such CBC TV shows as 'Parade' and 'In the Mood' and, with his band, has played at the Stratford Festival (1958), in many concert halls (Massey Hall, PDA, etc), at Canadian Stage Band Festival (MusicFest Canada), regularly during the early 1980s at Ontario Place, and in 1982 and 1990 at the FIJM. He also played solo trumpet in the opening ceremonies of the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Several Canadians have been members of his bands - eg, the singer Anne Marie Moss, the tenor saxophonist Georgie Auld, and the trombonists Rob McConnell and Phil Gray. Kenny Wheeler composed and arranged for Ferguson's English band.*

*While Ferguson's dramatic virtuosity in the extreme upper registers of the trumpet (extending with ease to double-high 'C') and the bravado and invariably au courant style of his band have taken his popularity beyond the jazz world, they also have brought him a certain amount of critical disdain. Typically, the FIJM aside, the Ferguson band was rarely heard at the Canadian jazz festivals that flourished in the 1980s. His tendency towards exhibitionism - his grandstanding high notes and his use for many years of an aria from I Pagliacci as an encore - has led to his dismissal in some quarters as a mere showman. However, much of his work in the small-group context reveals a mature improviser whose high-note facility becomes a well-integrated aspect of an expressive and lyrical style. A natural leader, Ferguson has shown the ability to form and mould an ensemble of young musicians, and to infuse it with his own considerable energy and enthusiasm.*

*Source: Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*

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