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**Detroit tuba player Brad Felt says the tuba can and should be more than just a background instrument in jazz.**

# GROOVE TUBA



## Tubaist says his instrument belongs with jazz's big brass

BY ROBIN D. GIVHAN  
Free Press Staff Writer

**H**ow difficult it is to talk about the tuba. To speak of it as art and jazz while others hear only the rumbling oompahs of marching bands and see the bumbling steps of the fool.

Detroit's Brad Felt — tall and slim, his Carlton cool tempered by an eager laugh — embraces his tuba and tries to explain. "It's like having a lover in your arms," Felt says.

In playing the tuba for 20 years, both in the United States and abroad, Felt has succumbed to his addiction and discovered its beauty.

Felt and a minority of musicians around the world are on a mission to put the tuba on equal footing with the stars of jazz instruments: the trumpet, the sax, the piano. They play their instruments with a vengeance, soloing, composing and innovating. They want to shatter the tuba's stereotypes, to disprove the myths and reveal the romance and beauty of this seemingly cumbersome instrument, to make it a vital part of modern jazz — what Felt describes as "modern African-American indigenous music."

"In this music, there's a power of what's known as a groove," Felt says.

"It's an energy thing, really. By being part of a groove, you're in a community with other members of the band."

"If they're putting down a good groove," Felt says, "you can ride it, follow it, dodge it."

He performs in clubs and jazz festivals, sometimes as a soloist, sometimes with an ensemble. The accompaniment and surroundings

don't really matter. When Felt finds the groove, his notes soar out of a deep well of emotion, rising higher and higher, faster and smoother until he's spinning a musical tale of sweet melancholy.

Despite the emotion and spirit that grows from a community of musicians, the jazz tuba player's work is solitary.

"I have to look beyond the tuba to look for peers," says jazz tuba player Bob Stewart. At age 46, Stewart has been playing jazz tuba for 27 years. The native New Yorker has played with various ensembles throughout the United States and Europe. He recently released his first album, "First Line," on the J.M.T. label, and has recorded with such musicians as Charles Mingus, Arthur Blythe and Gil Evans. The tuba "never evolved



Felt says holding the tuba is "like having a lover in your arms."

# Detroit jazz tuba player lays down a deep groove

**TUBA**, from Page 1E through swing and bebop," Stewart says. "What I have to do is figure it out now."

The tuba's heyday was in the '20s — Dixieland days. It was an era before electronic amplification, and the tuba had an obvious advantage over the string bass.

Then the music and the technology changed. Instead of rhythmic marches, musicians played works that demanded greater fluidity. Some tried to play the new music on the tuba, but most exchanged it for the more flexible string bass. Better amplification meant bass players could more easily be heard. By the '30s, the tuba had largely been phased out of jazz, says James Dapogny, a University of Michigan music professor and an expert in jazz history and theory.

In the early '40s, a small contingent of West Coast musicians, believing that jazz had lost its roots, searched within the sounds of the tuba. Since then, isolated examples of jazz tuba have emerged. Experts point to Miles Davis' "Birth of the Cool" in 1949 as one of the most important efforts.

That work was different from what now brews. Modern jazz tuba players hope to build a movement, although they've learned that they still must relish the moments.

Felt calls himself an existentialist, envisioning his life as a series of instances, some enriching and some painful. To look into the future is anathema to him; to project himself into it an impossibility. His music reflects this philosophy because the tuba, missing from much of the jazz continuum, thrives in single mesmerizing moments packed with emotion.

"I don't know the end of the road that I'm on," says Felt, who has yet to record or tape, but "my whole life's work is to find new ways to play my instrument, to play my music."

Felt hears only his muse. To him, the cynics are murmurs. Dapogny does not deny the tuba's validity as a bass instrument or its contribution to jazz, he simply doubts its ability to be played as a frontline horn.

"If you look at the range of instru-

ments we use in jazz," Dapogny says, "they basically occupy a certain register. . . . The tuba is lower than that, and I believe the tuba is doomed never to take full part because it won't work melodically."

But those are words from the intellect. Tuba players speak with their hearts and their music. Felt believes most questions could be answered with a few delicate notes. Ask Stewart whether new audiences will struggle to appreciate his music, and he says, "If they heard what my band was doing, they would enjoy it. That's worth a thousand words." "It would expose them to different aspects of what the tuba can do."

What the tuba can do is a combination of what Stewart remembers from his early days as a trumpeter, the rhythms he hears from bass players and the phrasing coming from singers such as Nat King Cole, Barbra Streisand and Frank Sinatra.

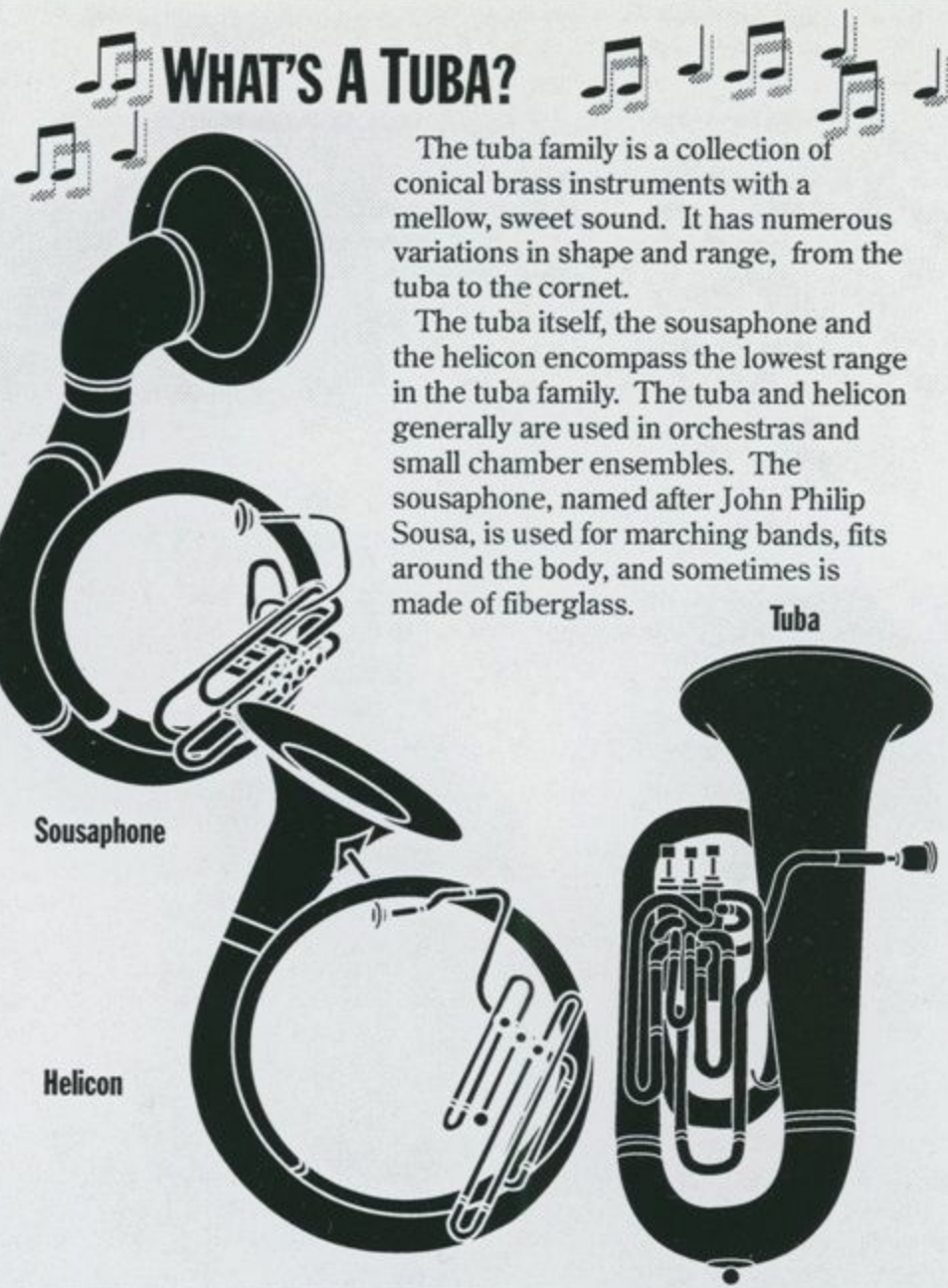
That tuba players would turn to vocalists for inspiration is quite logical. Next to the human voice, the tuba and other members of the brass family are the most physical of instruments, says Harvey Phillips, a professor of music at Indiana University.

Phillips plays both jazz and classical tuba. He was a founding member of the New York Brass Quintet — which inspired other brass groups — in the mid-'50s. And in 1973, he began Octubafest, an annual gathering of tuba players and composers from around the world.

"The tuba," Phillips says, "is my life."

In husky tones, he brags about the tuba's wide range, encompassing more than half of the piano keyboard. The tuba can play from the lowest bass notes to about an octave above middle C, Phillips says.

Tuba players talk about the power of the instrument — some 50 pounds of brass. They don't mean volume or control, but the authority it embodies and requires. Brad Felt stands when he plays his tuba. So does Howard Johnson. They stand for neither attention nor ego, but to put their entire selves into the playing of their instrument. To



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blow a full and powerful breath into the cup-shaped mouthpiece and sense the air vibrating through 22 feet of curling brass.

Johnson, a tuba player for 38 years, loves the low, sensual notes that belong solely to the tuba. Johnson's six-tuba band, Gravity, which has been around in some form since 1968, takes advantage of that sensuality and virility, but also explores the higher range of the instrument. Clearly, Johnson says, the controversy over whether the tuba can be a solo jazz instrument ends as soon as the band plays.

But the maligning of the tuba is more than a question of whether the instrument *can* it hold its own in jazz. It's a question of whether it *should*.

"It really is just like racial prejudice," Johnson says. "People have a need to put something down."

Johnson, born in Montgomery, Ala., has been performing in Hamburg, Ger-

The tuba family is a collection of conical brass instruments with a mellow, sweet sound. It has numerous variations in shape and range, from the tuba to the cornet.

The tuba itself, the sousaphone and the helicon encompass the lowest range in the tuba family. The tuba and helicon generally are used in orchestras and small chamber ensembles. The sousaphone, named after John Philip Sousa, is used for marching bands, fits around the body, and sometimes is made of fiberglass.

many, for almost a year and proving the stereotypes wrong. Recently, he came to Detroit to perform at the Montreux Detroit Jazz Festival. Here, he met Felt.

It is easy to imagine them questioning and answering through riffs on their instruments. To them, it is so clear that the tuba and its sounds — filled with jazz history and tradition — are lively and vital.

"Explode the controversy," Johnson says. "It's so jive."

Brad Felt will perform with the Jazz Hand Orchestra Sunday, Nov. 17, in "An Evening of Jazz" at the Riverview Ballroom in Detroit's Cobo Center. Also performing are Ellis Marsalis, Hank Jones and Jon Hendricks. A reception begins at 1 p.m. Showtime is 2 p.m. Tickets for the reception and show are \$25 (\$22.50 for seniors), available at Ticketmaster outlets. Call 875-0289, 9-5 Monday-Saturday for more information.