

Sonny Rollins's place in jazz has neither precedent nor parallel. He has been a recording artist for six decades. We can point to other jazz musicians who match or exceed his longevity and his artistic consistency. But no one else has represented as much concentrated change and reflection; nor has anyone else maintained for so long absolute centrality to the music's development. He was 26 when a classic album forever baptized him as a Saxophone Colossus; and yet now, in his late 70s, he is a far bigger international star than ever before. His concert performances, often held in stadiums and parks before crowds numbering in the thousands, have become musical séances that transcend jazz—much as an open-air performance of Beethoven's Ninth transcends classical music. He has reinvented the jazz concert, achieving a secular spirituality that, in the regal tradition of Louis Armstrong, sets as its goal pure pleasure and emotional catharsis.

Change in jazz can have various meanings: rebooting its fundamental context, breaking with convention, fusing jazz with other types of music. For Rollins, it means a personal growth animated by the belief that tomorrow he will play a better solo than he has ever played before. He recently observed that one cannot improvise and think at the same time, and his entire career can be viewed as the passage to an inexpressible perfection. He has prepared his audience to expect the unexpected while anticipating at least a glimmer of that perfection. Practicing constantly, Sonny is constantly reexamining what he can do with timbre, phrasing, rhythm, harmony, and melody; he never gives less than a hundred percent, but he would rather play poorly than dishonestly.

Sonny enjoys ruminating about his past and the legendary musicians he has known, but he does not enjoy listening to recordings that document his past. At a recent conversation we had on stage at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, he described the experience of hearing an excerpt from one of his 1950s albums as "excruciating"; a live recording from the 1980s was less painful, but he insisted, "I can do better." It has been said many times that Rollins's critics aren't nearly as unforgiving of his work as he is. The first time we met, in the 1970s, he complained of a favorable review he had just received for what he considered a substandard performance.

But the concerns of some critics have little relevance to his music. Locked in Rollins's past, they can't fathom the magnanimity of his art, let alone the subtleties and

nuances of his developing skills. They continue to think of him as a 1950s hard-bop tenor saxophonist, a role he abandoned almost half a century ago. The paradox of his genius, evident as far back as *The Bridge* (1962), is that he is, at once, a sublime melody player and an aggressively forceful avant-gardist who thinks music ought to make you want to dance. Much as I revere Sonny's early work, I believe his greatest period begins in the late 1970s, when he resolved issues that had led him to experiment with his sound and framework, and mastered the distinction between records and live performances. This peak period is still in full flower.

Road Shows, the first volume in what promises to be a long series, is like no other recording. One of the things that makes it so remarkable, beyond the magnificence of the performances, is that the artist himself chose the selections—the selections gathered here measure up to Sonny Rollins's own exacting standards. The project was triggered in part by a businessman and dedicated Rollins enthusiast, Carl Smith, who collected hundreds of recordings of Rollins concerts from around the world, offering them to Rollins to use at his discretion. When Clifton Anderson (the longtime trombonist in the band) began producing this album, he combined tracks from Smith's archive with soundboard recordings he had made at concerts. The process of editing the album took months—as Sonny, between his current gigs, weighed, rejected, accepted, changed, and accepted again the final tracks. *Road Shows, vol. 1* is one of the finest Sonny Rollins albums ever released. In the studio, every note counts. In concert, Sonny courts exultation. In concert, he pursues the thin line between beauty and danger. In concert, a nearly irrational spontaneous magic is permissible. This record is full of such magic.

It begins with a tour de force, "Best Wishes," performed in Tokyo, in 1986, four years after Sonny introduced the tune on his album, *Reel Life*. The studio version sounds hesitant by contrast. The engaging riff tune is based on blues form with nimble harmonic substitutions. Sonny gambols through the 12-bar framework an incredible 35 times, playing the full range of the horn, doubling down on the time and the funk, shifting accents, briefly visiting the Hall of the Mountain King, and careening into a full stop. Sonny first recorded the Vincent Youmans ballad, "More Than You Know," with Thelonious Monk in 1954. He revived it for a much deeper interpretation at a 2006 concert in Toulouse, beginning with a brief cadenza before stating the theme (Clifton Anderson takes the bridge and provides counterpoint), and paraphrasing the melody with long winding phrases. After Bobby Broom's stylishly bluesy guitar solo, Sonny returns: With Bob Cranshaw's bass laying down vivid harmonies, Rollins is free to push the

harmonic envelope and is especially inspired on the bridge, which he reprises for a breathtaking cadenza that reworks the song as a tenor saxophone chaconne.

Carl Smith discovered the mysterious “Blossom,” recorded in Sweden in 1980, and for a while no one knew what it was—until Sonny recognized it as an original that had never been recorded. This is one of the most intricate Rollins performances you will hear anywhere. The theme, which has a movie score quality, has eight-bar sections with stop-time beats in the seventh and eighth measures of each section, and is played with an eight-beat Latin rhythm that varies in intensity. Sonny’s opening solo is a warm-up, leading to brief solos by Mark Soskin and Jerome Harris. When he returns, however, Soskin revs up the Latin rhythm and the ensuing tenor solo—nearly eight minutes long—is a marvel of explosive abstractions in a highly structured format, recalling “East Broadway Run Down” in its heady independence.

Rollins has long admired the songs of Robin and Rainger, and began playing their 1937 hit “Easy Living” in the mid-1970s—he made it the title track of a 1977 album. At a 1980 concert in Poland, he created this version and it is a masterpiece. Here is a supreme instance of his ability to clarify melody with his richly hued, tightly focused, utterly motivated timbre. He completes the theme statement with a delirious turnback to set up a fine twin-chorus solo by Soskin (note Harris’s interplay). And then returns: In his first chorus, he peaks on the bridge, threading a stunning arpeggio through the major and minor chords, prefiguring the miracle of his second chorus. This time he uses the bridge to launch one of his most lucid cadenzas on record, a rubato fantasia that keeps the song aloft while expanding it in every direction, before bringing it and the returning ensemble home in a four-bar reprise as only Sonny Rollins can do. Interestingly, he ends with one of Louis Armstrong’s signature closers. The Warsaw audience knew it had heard something for the ages.

“Tenor Madness” has a fabled pedigree, having originally premiered as a 1956 duet by Rollins and the little-known John Coltrane; Sonny recorded it again 30 years later on *G-Man*. But this 2000 performance from Japan is his most inspired take on what had become a blues standard—30 choruses, spinning ever-outward despite a handful of judicious quotations (not least “Doin’ What Comes Naturally”). After this gleeful romp, the album settles into a breezier but no less heady groove, with the premiere release of a calypso, “Nice Lady,” recorded during Rollins’s first visit to Victoria. No one else can set a mood like this, swaying and cerebral and deep. After the theme, Sonny passes the piece to Anderson, whose trombone trips lightly through four choruses, building to a solid

finish. Sonny reprises the melody and sustains its lyrical feeling through half a dozen choruses, even as he splinters the melody, doubles the time, and stretches the chords. Following a solo by Kimati Dinizulu, he tap-dances out with a shave and a haircut.

The album closes with what may be its most surprising performance. In 2007, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of his first Carnegie Hall concert, Sonny returned to 57th Street to recreate the trio selections he had performed there in 1957. A tape of the 1957 concert had recently been found in the Library of Congress, and the idea was to release the old and new sets on a CD. After listening to the 2007 recording, however, Sonny decided against releasing it. He found the performance substandard. I had to agree: While the evening was one of the most moving I have experienced in a concert hall—a star-studded audience showering Rollins with unconditional love—the performances seemed restrained. Yet requests from fans poured in, mandating another listen. Lo and behold, “Some Enchanted Evening,” the clear highlight of the evening, was far stronger than I had remembered.

Accompanied by Christian McBride, the leading bassist of his generation, and the incomparable Roy Haynes, with whom Sonny first recorded (on a Bud Powell session) in 1949, the year that Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* debuted, Rollins creates an exceptionally tender interpretation of the show’s main aria. He plays the melody teasingly, making each note count, his intonation sure, his tone measured, his tempo achingly personal. Many notes and phrases are sustained longer than expected—at times, he hardly seems to be breathing. Haynes, who seemed to me reserved at the concert, is, in fact, wonderfully elegant and respectful, catching Sonny’s drift. After the tenor solo, Sonny spurs him into a delicate series of exchanges as McBride maintains a rigorous foundation. It’s a perfect closer: gentle, affectionate, profound.

—Gary Giddins