

I was Sonny's pianist for 20 years. In 1978, I auditioned for him in California and thought that there would be a band. No band—just me and Sonny. We played some tunes and afterwards he said that I was in the group. The next day we did a live recording at the Great American Music Hall, *Don't Stop the Carnival*, with Donald Byrd, Jerome Harris, Tony Williams. It was all very exciting. We went on the road, traveling the world and recorded many more albums. He was supposed to start a new band and play some amazing venues but got sick and the tour was canceled. After that we would speak on the phone often. I was very close to Sonny Rollins.

—MARK SOSKIN (piano)

Words cannot express the depth of feelings sparked by Sonny's transition. He plucked me up when I was just 16 years old, watched me grow, then put me in his band, twice: 1982-88 and 2005-10. I have no idea how many gigs that totaled. Thousands perhaps. Anecdotes of our relationship span the gamut—from serious insights he shared, to gut-busting gig and road stories, to personal advice. One of many stories that comes to mind was in 1987. I'd recently done a live recording at the Village Vanguard with Kenny Burrell's Jazz Guitar Band. I'd also just gotten the gig with Miles Davis' band and had received an itinerary with a handful of dates. One of Miles' dates fell on the same day as a gig that I had on the books with Kenny. The Burrell gig would've marked the first live date after the release of our record. I called Sonny for advice. After explaining the situation (including that Miles' gig would be in Chicago and possible for family and friends to attend), I offered my feelings. "Part of me just wants to do the gig with Miles..." After a brief silent pause, Sonny said quite plainly, "What part is that?" From that response I knew what I had to do. I called Miles and got him a sub for the gig. Imagine that?

—BOBBY BROOM (guitar)

Personally, I've been very fortunate to have played with some wonderful musicians. I am still enjoying that privilege. I am saddened that Sonny Rollins, one of those people who helped shaped my career as a person as well as a musician, has left the concert. His musical wisdom, his trust in his fellow musicians and his spirit made every job I did with him a pleasure not just to play with him, but to watch the process. He's upstairs now playing with the other guys. I enjoyed playing with him down here. Let us remember him in joy.

—RON CARTER (bass)

What can I say? He has influenced every note I've played from my early teens till present day. I only met Sonny once, at Perry Ritter's Woodwind Repair shop in 2001, not long after 9/11. Perry was fixing my horn and I went out for a coffee, and when I came back to the shop an hour later, as I walked up to the counter, I saw a man with his back to me and heard that unmistakable voice. It's the only time in my life I've felt "star struck." I went up to the counter and told Sonny how he had been such a huge influence and thanked him. Then Perry handed me my horn and said, "Try it and see if that feels better." I started sweating profusely, realizing that I now had to play in front of Sonny. I played the first A section of "You Go to My Head" and Sonny said, "Yeh! Nice big sound"—the greatest compliment you could ever hope for as a tenor player. I've been fortunate to have known many great jazz musicians and, over the years, see them go and been sad and mourned, but I have to say that Sonny's passing has left a feeling of emptiness and an absence that's the closest to the feeling of losing a parent I've felt in the years since losing mine. But as I've always felt, the beauty of a great artist like Sonny is that his mind and music run through the hands of myself and so many others, and his musical DNA will be passed on for many generations to come. Sonny lives!

—GRANT STEWART (tenor saxophone)

Many of us apply the term "icon" to those whose cultural work has earned wide renown. I understand that, but I feel that "icon," "titan" and "colossus" tags can distract us from recognizing the humanity of those whose contributions we cherish. As a prodigious instrumentalist and spontaneous musical thinker, whose intuition and consciousness enhanced each other, Sonny Rollins had undeniably rare gifts. But crucially Sonny also did the work, as exemplified by his love-fueled engagement of time, thought and physical practice on the bridge that deserves to be graced with his name. And as documented in the published edition of his personal notebooks, he engaged in notable spiritual and intellectual work as well. His lifelong quest to live up to the example of artists he revered set a path that anyone, musician or non-musician, can choose to follow and benefit from. I'll be forever grateful that Sonny chose to include me in parts of his long artistic journey, but we are all fortunate to have shared time on the planet with him. His recorded legacy will continue to inspire; his memory is a blessing. Thanks, Sonny!

—JEROME HARRIS (bass guitar, guitar)

Maestro di Maestri "Saxophone Colossus Supreme" Theodore "Sonny" Rollins has set the pace for generations upon generations, musically and otherwise. He will continue to inspire and elevate all of us to higher unforeseen heights within the fabric of the music and the art of living. His passion, wisdom and embrace will fuel my ideas throughout my lifetime. We have all been blessed for 95 years of Sonny Rollins' majesty! Thanks be to God...Love & Music.

—JOE LOVANO (saxophone)

When my dad died in 1989, my life changed. I was an alto player and Sonny knew that, so after my father passed away, Sonny started calling me to check in and see how I was. He asked, "Are you gonna play that horn I gave your dad?" It was not my intention, but I could tell he wanted me to. At first it was hard, just knowing it had belonged to my father. I did begin to play it, though, and would send Sonny recordings. He would tell me "I hear some Coltrane in your sound" and he suggested some musical things for me to work on. Then we had a conversation and he said, "If you ever need anything, just ask me." An opportunity came with my recording for the Japanese label, King Records, and so I asked him to be involved. He agreed and at the meeting with the producers they asked Sonny what we should name the recording? He said, "Godson. Eric's dad was a best friend." It was truly an honor for him to suggest that. I had earned his musical respect that day.

We lost a special human being, one who I will forever be grateful for what he did in helping me with my first recording as a leader. RIP my Godfather.

—ERIC WYATT (tenor saxophone)

One of the first pieces of music I learned in my school jazz band at age 10 or 11 was "St. Thomas". It was my first introduction to Sonny Rollins. Not long after, I received *Saxophone Colossus* on CD and had that on repeat, getting lost in his playing for hours. Sonny Rollins was truly one of the first jazz musicians I was hooked on; for years I got as many albums of him as a bandleader and sideman as I could find. In my teens I was lucky enough to see him play live at the Barbican Centre for the London Jazz Festival. I was almost in disbelief that after hundreds of hours of listening to him, I was able to see and hear him play. I was completely transfixed. It's a night I'll never, ever forget. For me, Sonny really represented a different energy in the music: beautiful thematic development as well as language, alongside a unique and instantly recognizable sound and writing style. This really, undoubtedly shaped how I wanted to sound, play and write music myself.

—NUBYA GARCIA (tenor saxophone)

Highly-tuned and sensitive players learn different lessons from everyone they play with. But there are those who are both masters, and master teachers. Playing under their tutelage can literally change your playing, and your life. One such master is Sonny Rollins. Sonny taught me how to listen. Because of him I now know half of playing is listening. When I started in Sonny's band, for a year he never said anything about my playing, good, bad or ugly. All he'd say was, "just keep playing." I kept going back to him, asking how it sounded. Nothin'. I was also asking bassist Bob Cranshaw for feedback, but all he would say is: "Well, you're still in the band, right?" (lol) One concert it dawned on me that we had stopped playing this particular song. I had no idea why. As a fairly young player, I was so hungry for feedback. But then I realized that if he didn't like how anyone in the band was playing a particular song, he simply just stopped playing that song, with no words or reasoning why. The song would just vanish. Then, one concert in particular, we were playing one of the songs that I was questioning my playing on, and Sonny noticed my insecurity and hesitancy. As we were playing, he came back from the front of the stage to me and started playing right in my face! And started playing many (probably 20) musical quotes on the horn, followed by about 18 different melodies of songs that I knew the lyrics to (I'm big on vocalists and lyrics).

He told me what size shoe he wears, his favorite flower, the name of his first girlfriend, why he liked coming to a city a few days before his concerts, how he got his nickname "Newk," his favorite meal, why he likes my playing and why I was in the band, his favorite country, city, the first car he ever had, why we were trading 8s instead of choruses and vice versa. I realized these were all musical instructions, like melodic text messages. It opened my ears. In that moment, I realized all I had to do was listen to the music. He was literally talking through the music. He would play a Max Roach quote on his horn to tell us to play this bit like Max. He'd touch on "Goin' to Chicago and I can't take you..." That meant we better be in the lobby at 8 am or you ain't goin'. Once you learn to listen, you don't have to work that hard and you get all the feedback you need from those around you. Thank you Sonny, forever!

—TOMMY CAMPBELL (drums)

My first introduction to The Saxophone Colossus came through "The Eternal Triangle" on the historic 1957 recording *Sonny Side Up*. As a 12-year-old, I found hearing Sonny Rollins and Sonny Stitt battle it out on tenors mind-blowing. Rollins had a big, husky sound, lines that jabbed from different harmonic angles with the wit, finesse, and sophistication of a musical boxer. He was sonic poetry. His discography alone is a rarity in jazz. You can find recordings of him from the very beginning of his career as a tenor through over 60 years of his evolution as a saxophonist, improviser and composer. He witnessed and was a key part of the evolution of jazz, from the bebop era to present day. Hearing his sonic journey, from an avid Charlie Parker disciple in his early recordings to forging his own path, was an inspiration not just to saxophonists but to musicians of all instruments. As a saxophonist, he taught me the importance of being the drummer, the harmony, and the "comping" on the saxophone; how to hear and see yourself outside the limits of your instrument. I had the great privilege of seeing him perform live and was struck by how he was a never-ending fountain of creativity, pushing boundaries and exploring. Musicians are storytellers, giving healing musical sermons through sound. He made the whole audience forget we were outside in the middle of NYC for two hours, taking us on a journey into his musical world that uplifted everyone spiritually. I knew from seeing and hearing him that being a musician is about making an impact on humanity through sound. He lived a life that did exactly that, and it inspires me to want to do the same as an artist.

—CAMILLE THURMAN (tenor saxophone, vocals)

My uncle Sonny has always been a prominent presence in my life. Looking back it seems I was destined to figure somewhat prominently in his as well. While people know him as The Saxophone Colossus, I knew him first as my uncle that my mother dearly loved. His sister was his biggest fan and probably knew him better than anyone else. She told me one day we would play music together and instilled in me the duty to always be there for him. He gave me my first horn when I was seven. About eight years later he came to the house for us to play together. After hearing the sound that came out of his horn, I was so intimidated I couldn't play. Ten years later I was on stage with him performing in Canada and ended up working with him for almost 30 years. The journeys throughout these years were filled with far too many lessons, experiences and life-changing excursions that have shaped my understanding of myself, life, music and beyond, to even attempt to touch on here. I know that I reside in a unique place because of this. Many around the world will forever be inspired by his gifts, music and performances and the standards he's set throughout his life as a musician and human being. I am blessed to have been part of his journey. Sonny leads by examples for us to follow. Let's follow the leader—The Saxophone Colossus, Uncle Sonny.

—CLIFTON ANDERSON (trombone)

Sonny Rollins spoke with love and excitement about growing up in Harlem. Stories he had probably told a million times—about what Joe Louis meant to him and his generation, Willie Mays and the old Polo Grounds, how his mother marched in the streets of Harlem protesting various injustices before the Civil Rights movement took shape. Most importantly, he didn't have a bad word to say about anyone. He never stopped practicing until health issues in his late 80s forced him to. But even then, he never stopped learning. He never stopped listening. He never stopped loving. He never lost faith in the human condition. That's rare.

When I first saw Sonny Rollins live in the summer of 1987 at Penn's Landing in my hometown of Philadelphia, it was beyond incredible. Even at age 15, I was well aware that I was watching perhaps jazz' greatest improviser. A few years later, I began working with Roy Haynes. After one set, Roy casually dropped a question so heavy and so out of left field that I couldn't process it: "Hey man, did Sonny call you?...Expect a call from him soon." I was floored. About a week later, the phone rang. In that beautifully quirky, almost Kermit the Frog (down an octave) voice, I heard: "Hello, Christian. This is Sonny Rollins." What he told me next exceeded anything I could have imagined. He was preparing for one of his Carnegie Hall concerts, but this one would celebrate the 50th anniversary of his first appearance at the legendary hall. At that 1957 concert, he performed in a trio with bassist Wendell Marshall and drummer Kenny Dennis. He wanted to put together a new trio with Roy Haynes and me. I could have dropped the phone. In fact, I might have. I said, "I'd be honored to be part of such a historic night...whatever the date is, I'll be there." Then he added something that nearly made me tear up. "I was talking with Roy about this, and he said you were the bass player who should play this gig. Roy really loves you, man. And I've been curious about you for quite some time. You've been tearing it up, young man." Sonny said he would book rehearsal time so we could "feel each other out." I didn't realize he meant just the two of us! The endless drive, creativity and curiosity of the world's greatest living improviser was astonishing. For three hours, I got to play duets with Sonny Rollins. It was easily one of the greatest days of my life. The concert, as expected, was a triumph. I had just played one of the most anticipated jazz concerts of our time with two titans. I'm honored to have been in his orbit. Thank you, Mr. Rollins.

—CHRISTIAN MCBRIDE (bass)

Mr. Walter Theodore "Sonny" Rollins has been a part of the saxophonic soundtrack of my life since the age of 13. My first exposure to him was courtesy of hometown NPR affiliate, WDET-FM Detroit when they played in its entirety, Sonny's pianoless album *Our Man in Jazz*. Hearing this document for the first time confirmed to me that the sky's the limit, as Sonny had inexhaustible ideas and the energy to bring them forth. No matter what the material, his spirit, humor and intelligence always would shine through. He always cited Coleman Hawkins and Charlie Parker as his chief influences and one of the items he adopted from Hawk was to encourage and play with the younger generation in a series of concerts titled "Sonny Rollins & Friends." Over the years he had Wynton Marsalis, Roy Hargrove and Branford Marsalis, to name a few, as special guests. In April 1996, I was privileged to add my name to this list and share the stage with The Saxophone Colossus at Severance Hall in Cleveland, OH. The month before, I was in Kansas City, MO, playing the Drum Room when I received a call from Willard Jenkins alerting me that "Sonny will call you about the gig and make a set list, shouldn't take more than 15 minutes on the hotel phone line." Sonny called ten minutes later and after the gig particulars were discussed, we proceeded to talk freely for the next two and a half hours about everything under the sun. Upon checkout time, I had a telephone bill close to \$100, time and money well spent. Over the years, in phone conversations and festival encounters, I always loved how he was so free with his time to continue encouraging the youth and his contemporaries. I thank Sonny for allowing me access to him at his home on his 95th birthday. Sonny was still swinging even without the horn in hand, encouraging me and others to "Keep fighting the good fight!"

—JAMES CARTER (woodwinds)

What can one say? We lost the generator. Hawkins was the source, Sonny Rollins was the one to carry the torch and show us special ways to develop personal expression and improvisational storytelling; a Zen master at one with the universe. I never will forget the many hours as a youngster in Philadelphia, hearing him create long, wondrous, magical paintings full of humor, joy and compositional clarity. These experiences are etched in my soul. Sonny is alive in the sonic universe for so many of us. RIP my hero. You gave so much.

—LEW TABACKIN (tenor saxophone, flute)

Sonny was truly a father figure to me. He always cared about me, how I dressed and looked onstage and always giving me advice. One day he caught my attention, looked at me and said "I want you to be yourself. Don't please me, be who you are."

Sonny was the president of improvisation, the ambassador of uniqueness. There will never be another who could manipulate this art form better than him. Every time he picked up his horn, he tried to find something new. He was a truly adventurous musician. And he was truly himself. That's what made Sonny Rollins a genius.

—SAMMY FIGUEROA (percussion)

Some musicians leave behind a body of work. Sonny Rollins left behind a way of searching. When I was twelve years old, I switched from alto to tenor saxophone after hearing his sound. It felt less like discovering an instrument and more like discovering a voice—one that carried strength, vulnerability, humor, wisdom and an endless sense of possibility. His sound seemed to contain a whole life within it. As a young musician, I spent countless hours listening to and transcribing his solos. What I found was much more than notes and phrases. I found courage. Sonny taught us that improvisation is not the art of having answers; it is the art of asking deeper questions. Every solo felt like a journey into the unknown, guided by an unwavering trust in curiosity and truth. What moves me most when I think of Sonny is his lifelong devotion to growth. Even after reaching heights most artists only dream of, he continued searching. He never stopped listening for something beyond himself. That restless spirit became as inspiring as the music itself. For generations of saxophonists, Sonny was more than a master of the instrument. He was a reminder that our voice is not something we find once, but something we spend a lifetime uncovering. His sound remains, echoing through the music, through the lineage and through all of us who continue the search.

—MELISSA ALDANA (tenor saxophone)



# SONNY ROLLINS

## 1930-2026

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