

## WHY WE GO

The Sonny Rollins Sextet

Symphony Hall, Boston, Massachusetts

April 6, 2007

Many reviews of Sonny Rollins' spring concert tour began along the lines of, "Seventy-six year old Sonny Rollins . . . ." But let's tell the truth: Many of us attend a Sonny Rollins concert these days hoping to somehow hear twenty-six year old Sonny Rollins. In considering Mr. Rollins' recent work it's worth exploring both the legacy and the artist present before us today.

Mr. Rollins made his name as one of the most creative improvisers in jazz music during the 1950s. It is no exaggeration to say that Sonny Rollins was one of the two most influential tenor-players of that decade (alongside John Coltrane). His records include such instant and lasting classics as Saxophone Colossus, Way Out West, and a sublime session with Dizzy Gillespie and Sonny Stitt called Sonny Side Up. He famously cooled and schooled none less than Mr. Coltrane in their sole recorded duo, "Tenor Madness." Perhaps standing over any of them is the Freedom Suite, Rollins' 1958 politically-charged CD which presaged Miles Davis' work on Kind of Blue and Ornette Coleman's on Shape of Jazz to Come.

But as the saying goes, genius visits few and rarely stays long. The list of jazz artists who blazed multiple new trails over several decades is short indeed. (Miles, Chick and Herbie. Hawk?) Even as a young man Mr. Rollins was forced to confront the realization that his groundbreaking work was behind him although his influence remained deep and powerful. He actually retired from public performance several times in order engage his muse.

Ultimately Mr. Rollins decided to continue performing simply because he loved the music. He may no longer be pushing the boundaries of jazz but his own brand of joy is all the inspiration he needs. Indeed, we all must one day engage the fact that our salad days are past and Mr. Rollins' example of perseverance may be his deepest inspiration to others.

Now, no doubt to his own surprise, the saxophonist is The Last Man Standing and the role of Elder Statesman is thrust upon him. Mr. Rollins has earned respect and it is our privilege to offer it to him every time we can. But of course, he is not only an icon, he is a working musician. Mr. Rollins' Symphony Hall appearance was not merely a valedictory, it was a jazz concert. It was pretty good, too.

First off, there was no doubt that the saxophonist came to play. Long years of diligent practice have left his facility thoroughly intact and it was well-displayed throughout the evening. His lifelong capacity to play for chorus after chorus was well in evidence. His sense of humor, musically and verbally, was well-displayed. His proclivity to quote musical compositions – one of those aspects of his playing that some love and some don't – was present but reigned-in. Equally important, Mr. Rollins' joy in playing – musical generosity, no less – is undiminished. Mr. Rollins played off guitarist Bobby Broom with vigor several times throughout the evening. This is Mr. Broom's second spin through the Rollins Band and he has obviously absorbed the master's lessons about finding an emotional center and grasping the moment. The same is true of

long-time percussionist Kimati Dinizulu.

Harmonically Mr. Rollins' pallet was as rich as ever. However, it was exercised over a considerably more restricted canvass than that which he might have employed twenty-five years ago. Almost all the compositions were either one-chord vamps or pieces with a single tonal-center (such as his long-time signature piece, "Don't Stop The Carnival"). Through two sets the only piece offering real harmonic complexity was Duke Ellington's "In a Sentimental Mood." On that piece Mr. Rollins bowed out very quickly in favor of an overextended solo by the veteran bass-guitarist Bob Cranshaw.

One of the hallmarks of Mr. Rollins' early work was his jaw-dropping ability to shift time and subdivide within a phrase, bar or beat. The Boston concert made it clear that the saxophonist has undergone a rhythmic sea-change. Unfortunately, at least for this evening, he has landed in an uncomfortable position. His playing at Symphony Hall was remarkably "ricky." Instead of a swinging 'dah-bah dah-bee' the sound we heard was "dup ba-dup ba-dup" and the result, frankly, was less satisfying musically.

It's also fair to question whether Mr. Rollins' current band meets the standards set by his former ensembles – either those of the 50s and 60s featuring musicians like Jim Hall and Max Roach, or his 70s/80s bands with such fine players as Mark Soskin on piano and double-bassist Larry Klein. On the positive side, trombonist Clifton Anderson has developed into a solid, nuanced player over the past several years. On the other hand, new drummer Kobie Watkins appears to have a longer road yet to travel. A swinging player, Mr. Watkins clung too hard to his ride cymbal even as Mr. Rollins worked to engage him throughout the evening. At one point, Mr. Rollins tried hard to trade phrases of irregular length – which many players find is just plain hard to do – and the drummer kept bringing things back to regular "eights."

But let's not lose the forest for the trees. What I brought away from the evening – why we need to go see Sonny Rollins, even now – is all about one moment.

The final tune of the first set ended with a long, drawn-out note. It's a common device but on this night a virtuoso made it into uncommon music. Many a band closes a show by hanging on a note for a few seconds before landing, but not this one. Mr. Rollins -- one of jazz' great masters at playing alone -- kept searching, probing, seeking, while his band built a static but emotionally-rich musical platform for him to stroll on top of. The sound went on and on, with cymbals crashing and guitar sustaining, for what seemed like several minutes, while Mr. Rollins found and mapped a place of joyous spiritual expression. It was like listening to Sonny Rollins taking his time playing the opening "Acknowledgment" from John Coltrane's A Love Supreme, in the way that only Sonny Rollins can. The moment was unique, beautiful, spontaneous – all that the finest jazz has to offer.

Was that one moment worth driving four hours and spending a hundred bucks for two tickets? You bet. This was one of jazz' greatest artists digging deep and finding something to new tell us about life at 76. There aren't enough of those moments, ever. "Don't Stop the Carnival," Mr. Rollins. Not yet.