

Thursday, May 13, 2010, 8pm  
Zellerbach Hall

## Sonny Rollins



Sonny Rollins *tenor saxophone*

Russell Malone *guitar*

Bob Cranshaw *bass*

Kobie Watkins *drums*

Victor Y. See-Yuen *percussion*

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**T**HEODORE WALTER “SONNY” ROLLINS was born on September 7, 1930, in New York City. He grew up in Harlem not far from the Savoy Ballroom, the Apollo Theater and the doorstep of his idol, Coleman Hawkins. After his early discovery of Fats Waller and Louis Armstrong, he started playing alto saxophone, inspired by Louis Jordan. At age 16, he switched to tenor, trying to emulate Hawkins. He also fell under the spell of the musical revolution that surrounded him, bebop.

He began to follow Charlie Parker, and soon came under the wing of Thelonious Monk, who became his musical mentor and guru. Living in Sugar Hill, his neighborhood musical peers included Jackie McLean, Kenny Drew and Arthur Taylor, but it was young Mr. Rollins who was first out of the pack, working and recording with Babs Gonzales, J. J. Johnson, Bud Powell and Miles Davis before he turned 20.

“Of course, these people are there to be called on because I think I represent them in a way,” Mr. Rollins said recently of his peers and mentors. “They’re not here now so I feel like I’m sort of representing all of them, all of the guys. Remember, I’m one of the last guys left, as I’m constantly being told, so I feel a holy obligation sometimes to evoke these people.”

In the early 1950s, he established a reputation first among musicians, then the public, as the most brash and creative young tenor on the scene, through his work with Miles, Monk and the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Miles Davis was an early Sonny Rollins fan, and in his autobiography wrote that he “began to hang out with Sonny Rollins and his Sugar Hill Harlem crowd...anyway, Sonny had a big reputation among a lot of the younger musicians in Harlem. People loved Sonny Rollins up in Harlem and everywhere else. He was a legend, almost a god to a lot of the younger musicians. Some thought he was playing the saxophone on the level of Bird. I know one thing—he was close. He was an aggressive, innovative player who always had fresh musical ideas.”

Mr. Rollins moved to Chicago for a few years to remove himself from the elements of negativity surrounding the jazz scene. He reemerged at the

end of 1955 as a member of the Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet, with an even more authoritative presence. His trademarks became a caustic, often humorous style of melodic invention, a command of everything from the most arcane ballads to calypsos, and an overriding logic in his playing that found him hailed for models of thematic improvisation.

In 1956, Mr. Rollins began recording the first of a series of landmark recordings issued under his own name: “Valse Hot” introduced the practice, now common, of playing bop in 3/4 meter; “St. Thomas” initiated his explorations of calypso patterns; and “Blue 7” was hailed by Gunther Schuller as demonstrating a new manner of “thematic improvisation,” in which the soloist develops motifs extracted from his theme. *Way Out West* (1957), Mr. Rollins’s first album using a trio of saxophone, double bass, and drums, offered a solution to his longstanding difficulties with incompatible pianists, and exemplified his witty ability to improvise on hackneyed material (“Wagon Wheels,” “I’m an Old Cowhand”). *It Could Happen to You* (also 1957) was the first in a long series of unaccompanied solo recordings, and *The Freedom Suite* (1958) foreshadowed the political stances taken in jazz in the 1960s. From 1956 to 1958, Mr. Rollins was widely regarded as the most talented and innovative tenor saxophonist in jazz.

Mr. Rollins’s first examples of the unaccompanied solo playing that would become a specialty also appeared in this period; yet the perpetually dissatisfied saxophonist questioned the acclaim his music was attracting, and between 1959 and late 1961 withdrew from public performance.

Mr. Rollins remembers that he took his leave of absence from the scene because “I was getting very famous at the time and I felt I needed to brush up on various aspects of my craft. I felt I was getting too much, too soon, so I said, wait a minute, I’m going to do it my way. I wasn’t going to let people push me out there, so I could fall down. I wanted to get myself together, on my own. I used to practice on the bridge, the Williamsburg Bridge, because I was living on the Lower East Side at the time.”

When he returned to action in early 1962, his first recording was appropriately titled *The Bridge*.

By the mid-1960s, his live sets became grand, marathon stream-of-consciousness solos where he would call forth melodies from his encyclopedic knowledge of popular songs, including startling segues and sometimes barely visiting one theme before surging into dazzling variations upon the next. Mr. Rollins was brilliant, yet restless. The period between 1962 and 1966 saw him returning to action and striking productive relationships with Jim Hall, Don Cherry, Paul Bley and his idol, Coleman Hawkins, yet he grew dissatisfied with the music business once again and started yet another sabbatical in 1966. “I was getting into Eastern religions,” he remembers. “I’ve always been my own man. I’ve always done, tried to do, what I wanted to do for myself. So these are things I wanted to do. I wanted to go on the bridge. I wanted to get into religion. But also, the jazz music business is always bad. It’s never good. So that led me to stop playing in public for a while, again. During the second sabbatical, I worked in Japan a little bit, and went to India after that and spent a lot of time in a monastery. I resurfaced in the early ’70s, and made my first record in 1972. I took some time off to get myself together and I think it’s a good thing for anybody to do.”

In 1972, with the encouragement and support of his wife Lucille, who had become his business manager, Mr. Rollins returned to performing and recording, signing with Milestone and releasing *Next Album*. (Working at first with Orrin Keepnews, by the early 1980s Mr. Rollins was producing his own Milestone sessions with Lucille.) His lengthy association with the Berkeley-based label produced two dozen albums in various settings—from his working groups to all-star ensembles (Tommy Flanagan, Jack DeJohnette, Stanley Clarke, Tony Williams); from a solo recital to tour recordings with the Milestone Jazzstars (Ron Carter, McCoy Tyner); in the studio and on the concert stage (Montreux, San Francisco, New York, Boston). Mr. Rollins was also the subject of a mid-1980s documentary by Robert Mugge entitled *Saxophone Colossus*; part of its soundtrack was released on CD as *G-Man*.

He won his first performance Grammy Award for *This Is What I Do* (2000), and his second for 2004’s *Without a Song (The 9/11 Concert)*, in the Best Jazz Instrumental Solo category (for “Why Was I Born”). In addition, Mr. Rollins received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences in 2004.

In June 2006, Mr. Rollins was inducted into the Academy of Achievement—and gave a solo performance—at the International Achievement Summit in Los Angeles. The event was hosted by George Lucas and Steven Spielberg and attended by world leaders and distinguished figures in the arts and sciences.

Mr. Rollins was awarded the Austrian Cross of Honor for Science and Art, First Class, in November 2009. The award is one of Austria’s highest honors, given to leading international figures for distinguished achievement. The only other American artists who have received this recognition are Frank Sinatra and Jessye Norman.

In August 2010, the MacDowell Colony, the United States’ leading artist residency program, will present its 51st Edward MacDowell Medal to Sonny Rollins. The MacDowell Medal has been awarded annually since 1960 to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to his or her field, and this year marks the first time the Colony has recognized the field of jazz. Mr. Rollins joins an impressive list of past recipients, including Leonard Bernstein, Alice Munro, I. M. Pei, Merce Cunningham and Georgia O’Keeffe.

“I am convinced that all art has the desire to leave the ordinary,” Mr. Rollins said in a recent interview for the Catalan magazine *Jaç*, “and to say it one way, at a spiritual level, a state of the exaltation at existence. All art has this in common. But jazz, the world of improvisation, is perhaps the highest, because we do not have the opportunity to make changes. It’s as if we were painting before the public, and the following morning we cannot go back and correct that blue color or change that red. We have to have the blues and reds very well placed before going out to play. So for me, jazz is probably the most demanding art.”