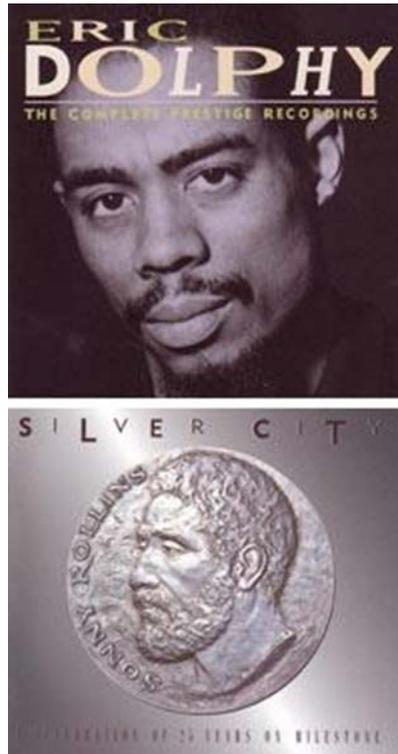


DEFINITIVE DOLPHY, RECENT ROLLINS: Bob Bernotas



In the late 1950s **Eric Dolphy** arrived on the New York jazz scene from Los Angeles at the age of thirty-one. A decade earlier **Sonny Rollins**, a native New Yorker, was recording with bebop pioneers Bud Powell, Fats Navarro, and J.J. Johnson while still in his teens. Dolphy mastered a wide array of woodwinds. Rollins has focused on the tenor saxophone. Dolphy died in 1964 at the age of thirty-six. Rollins remains an active and vital creative force well into his seventies. And both of these original improvisational stylists have left an immense and indelible impact on the course of jazz.

Eric Dolphy's recording career lasted less than six years, beginning with some late 1958 sides with drummer Chico Hamilton's quintet and ending in June 1964, shortly before his death. Still, he packed a huge output into that short span. Easily his most prolific period was 1960-61, during which Dolphy appeared on some of the period's most significant albums: *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*, Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz*, Oliver Nelson's *Blues and the Abstract Truth*, George Russell's *Ezz-thetics*, Max Roach's *Percussion Bitter Sweet*, and John Coltrane's *Olé Coltrane, Live at the Village Vanguard*, and *Africa/Brass* (on which he also collaborated on the arrangements).

This fertile stretch also produced the thirteen sessions that make up ***Eric Dolphy: The Complete Prestige Recordings*** (Prestige PRCD 4418, nine CDs, total playing time: 11:19:53). Here, at his creative peak, Dolphy's instrumental arsenal reveals a decidedly "orchestral" concept, spanning the high (flute), middle (alto saxophone) and low (bass clarinet) registers, and employing a broad range of sound-colors. His tone on all of

these horns, particularly the alto, is singular and unmistakable. And his improvisations exude a surreal dissonance, a degree of "outness" that was unique for its time, laced with jarring note choices far removed from the piece's basic tonality.

The collection opens with Dolphy's debut as a leader, the *Outward Bound* quintet session of April 1960. Even on the relatively orthodox blues, "245," and the poignant flute ballad, Rodgers and Hart's "Glad to Be Unhappy," he is typically forward-looking. In contrast, twenty-two-year-old trumpeter Freddie Hubbard plays hip, state-of-the-art hard bop, but on "Green Dolphin Street" falls into the obligatory Harmon-muted, Miles Davis clichés. Here and elsewhere, Dolphy simply leaves him in the dust. On the other hand, Roy Haynes' provoking, interactive brand of "free-bop" drumming is an ideal match for Dolphy's advanced post-bop vision. This date also introduces Dolphy's structurally daring compositional sense. For example, "G.W.," dedicated to Los Angeles composer-bandleader Gerald Wilson, has two twelve-bar A sections, an eleven-bar bridge, and a truncated, eight-bar reprise of the A theme. "Les," named for another West Coast friend, trombonist Lester Robinson, is a fourteen-bar blues.

The first of two subsequent sideman dates finds Dolphy with saxophonist-composer Oliver Nelson. Nelson's smooth, cello-like tone, especially on tenor, and riff-based improvisations were well-suited to this blues-and-roots date and create an effective contrast to Dolphy's more angular, oblique style. A month later, Dolphy appeared on alto saxophonist Ken McIntyre's debut album. Later a noted avant-gardist, McIntyre, at this time, appears to be influenced equally by Jackie McLean and Ornette Coleman, flirting with freedom, but coloring just inside the lines. Dolphy, who seems to be influenced by no one, is considerably more adventurous.

Dolphy's second session as a leader, *Out There*, from August 1960, stands as a landmark in his discography. This challenging, exciting date features intricate unison lines with Ron Carter's cello (both arco and pizzicato), unconventional forms (like the thirty-bar A-A-B-A title track, divided 7-7-9-7), exemplary work by the bass-drums team of George Duvivier and Roy Haynes, a rare taste of Dolphy's Bb clarinet (on Charles Mingus' "Eclipse"), and no piano. Conceptually, this deep, introspective music represents a huge leap past Dolphy's previous recording, made just four and a half months earlier. No longer "outward bound," he now has arrived "out there."

In four days Dolphy would return to the studio for a pleasant, if not wholly compatible, meeting with the Latin Jazz Quintet, a group of little-known, but capable, players. It's a Latin date only in part, thanks to a quasi-mambo and a bolero version of "Spring Is Here," a feature for Dolphy's lovely flute. Otherwise, it sounds like a typical early '60s soul-jazz pick-up session, congas and all, the kind of thing you might expect from Lou Donaldson or Cannonball Adderley. A month later, Dolphy played second alto on an Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis big band album. It is included in this collection "in the interest of completeness," and while the music, arranged by Oliver Nelson (his first recorded big band charts) and Ernie Wilkins, is very good, there are no Dolphy solos.

In December, the day after he participated in Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* double quartet session, Dolphy was joined by the brilliant young trumpeter, Booker Little, for the *Far Cry* album. Even at twenty-two Little was an original stylist and the two proved wonderfully compatible. Dolphy explores a wide expanse of sounds, moods, and forms, including a stunning version of "Tenderly" for unaccompanied alto saxophone, a slightly tongue-in-cheek bass clarinet treatment of the Doris Day hit, "It's Magic," and an original fourteen-bar ballad, "Miss Ann." This date sits alongside *Out There* as one of Dolphy's most profound recorded statements.

Oliver Nelson's *Straight Ahead* was recorded in March 1961, only six days after his classic septet album, *Blues and the Abstract Truth* (for Impulse, and also featuring some excellent Dolphy), and it is just as good. Although Nelson has just two horn voices to work with, he ingeniously combines the various woodwind timbres at his disposal: two alto saxophones, alto saxophone and bass clarinet, alto saxophone and flute, and, in a fascinating canon treatment of Milt Jackson's "Ralph's New Blues," his Bb clarinet and Dolphy's bass clarinet. This track also offers a finely crafted, yet funky, tenor saxophone solo by Nelson, a scorching one from Dolphy's bass clarinet, and compelling support from - who else? - Roy Haynes.

A Ron Carter-led session from June recalls the format of *Out There*, but with Mal Waldron's piano added and Carter playing bass as well as cello. There are two superb Randy Weston tunes ("Where?" and "Saucer Eyes"), and a Dolphy-less "Bass Duet" for Carter and George Duvivier, two of the all-time great bassists. But it's Carter's date, so Dolphy is a supporting player. A week later, most of the same musicians reassembled for a fine session under Mal Waldron's leadership. The date is distinguished by Waldron's interesting and unusual compositions (like his eight-bar blues in 5/4 time, "Warp and Woof"), his lean, dark-hued piano solos, the exciting tenor saxophonist Booker Ervin (a colleague of Dolphy's from Charles Mingus' group), and more Dolphy than on Carter's recording. On Waldron's modal ballad, "Warm Canto," Dolphy even plays Bb clarinet, although with some slight squeak and intonation problems.

In mid-July, during their two-week engagement at the famous East Village club, the Five Spot, the quintet of Dolphy, Little, Waldron, bassist Richard Davis, and drummer Ed Blackwell recorded two and one-half hours of pure, non-stop electricity. "The Five Spot recordings," musician Bill Kirchner observes in his insightful liner notes, "define all five players as major jazz musicians who were expanding bebop parameters in order to explore new territory." But there is also an air of tragedy about these recordings. In less than three months, on October 5, 1961, Booker Little would die of uremia at the age of twenty-three. He was, in the areas of harmony, phrasing, tone, and lyricism, already an important trumpet voice, and should have become a major force in jazz.

This mammoth boxed set closes with a group of live performances drawn from two Copenhagen concerts in early September. Dolphy is backed by a Danish rhythm section, competent beboppers, but well below the sublime standards set by his Byard-Carter-Haynes and Waldron-Davis-Blackwell teams. (Visiting bassist Chuck Israels joins Dolphy for an impromptu flute-bass duet on Randy Weston's "Hi-Fly.") In deference to

this pick-up group, he called only standards, bebop tunes, and blues. The material is less challenging than his Five Spot repertoire, but Dolphy, in a string of virtuoso performances, makes the most of it.

Dolphy's relentless, breakneck pace on "The Way You Look Tonight" (on alto) and "Oleo" (on bass clarinet) all but overwhelms his Danish colleagues. Undaunted, his boundless harmonic imagination carries him to the very limits of bebop and then beyond to another, distant musical plane. Dolphy invests the ballads, especially his alto saxophone rendering of "Laura," with as much emotion as can be found anywhere in his recorded work. And his a cappella bass clarinet exploration of "God Bless the Child" (which he also performed on the Five Spot session) is, simply, a masterpiece.

When he placed first the "New Star: Alto Saxophone" category of the 1961 Down Beat critics' poll Dolphy wondered, plaintively, "Does this mean I'm going to get work?" During the next three years he did perform and record with Charles Mingus, Freddie Hubbard, pianist Andrew Hill, and John Lewis' Orchestra USA, and he produced the definitive *Out to Lunch* album for Blue Note in February 1964. But gigs as a leader remained rare and Dolphy spent most of the remainder of his life in poverty, barely surviving.

In early 1964 he left for Europe. "I can get more work there playing my own music," Dolphy told writer A.B. Spellman. Unfortunately, his health was bad and in late June, while in Berlin, Dolphy fell seriously ill. Treated - perhaps mistreated - for a diabetic coma, he went into severe insulin shock. On June 29, 1964, jazz lost one of its most unique and innovative jazz artists, just nine days after his thirty-sixth birthday.

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Before Eric Dolphy made his first recordings, tenor saxophonist **Sonny Rollins**, although two years younger, was already a major power in jazz. Archetypal albums like *Tenor Madness* and *Saxophone Colossus* (recorded for Prestige in 1956), *Newk's Time* (Blue Note, 1957), and *The Freedom Suite* (Riverside, 1958) established him as one of the most stimulating improvisors to emerge from the 1950s. Then, after a two-year hiatus (his legendary Williamsburg Bridge period), a refreshed and reinvigorated Rollins took the 1960s by storm with his RCA Victor milestones, *The Bridge* (1962) and *Our Man in Jazz* (1964), as well as *East Broadway Run Down* (Impulse, 1966).

But in recent decades, Rollins has been the object of an annoying and persistent critical slander that goes something like this: "Sure, Sonny can be brilliant, but most of the time he's inconsistent and disappointing, just coasting, really. It's too bad, but Sonny's best days are behind him." In particular, that was the party line at the *New York Times*, where for years the former resident jazz critic (or "criticizer," as singer Jon Hendricks likes to call this type of hack) got his kicks from taking glib, gratuitous swipes at Rollins. So perhaps it's best just to consider the source and move on.

Even better, consider this fine compilation, ***Silver City*** (Milestone 2MCD 2501, two CDs, total playing time: 2:19:30), drawn from the saxophonist's 1972-1996 output for the Milestone label. For Rollins, who has broken more than his share of new ground, that period has been one of consolidation rather than innovation. And so, this collection presents the many sides of a major musical artist secure in his accomplishments and displaying them on an extraordinarily high level. That should be enough for anybody.

But this is not to say that Rollins has stopped advancing. His penchant for employing a variety of tones and inflections, yet maintaining his essential sonic identity, and his mastery of unaccompanied improvisation have blossomed during recent decades. There could be no better proof than the opening track, a live 1978 version of "Autumn Nocturne," the kind of sentimental tune he loves to milk. Rollins' extended a cappella solo gives full vent to his melodic imagination and rich timbral palette, as he leads the audience through one unexpected turn after another.

On ballads Rollins has a special gift for locating the emotional center of a particular song and then using it to focus his performance. He is, in turn, obliquely lyrical ("Cabin In the Sky"), ardently passionate ("Someone to Watch Over Me"), plaintive and searching ("Skylark"), and reflective ("Darn That Dream," cradled by a Jimmy Heath-arranged brass quintet). Yet, there is a common thread: whatever his mood of the moment may be, Rollins' manner is always frank and straight-forward, never guarded, never holding anything back.

Two more standards, "Where or When" (which also features one of our greatest pianists, Tommy Flanagan) and "I'm Old Fashioned," illustrate what, for want of a better term, could be called "that Sonny Rollins tempo," an infectious, medium-brisk groove midway between ballad and up. "Lucky Day" is appropriately bright and sunny, and, as with many of Rollins' solos, he never loses sight of the melody. There is also a slight taste of funk ("Harlem Boys"), some strong minor blues ("McGhee"), and a high-intensity, motive-based improvisation (the 16-minute "G-Man").

In 1956, Rollins' classic tune, "St. Thomas" - that is to say, his classic appropriation of a Caribbean folk melody - helped introduce the calypso into jazz. Fifty-plus years later, calypso remains one of his favorite forms and, even though it appears three times in this collection ("Duke of Iron," "Mava Mava," and "Tell Me You Love Me"), Rollins' personal take on the irresistible island rhythm never loses its charm. During that same period, Rollins also raised a few eyebrows when he embraced such offbeat material as "There's No Business Like Show Business," "I'm an Old Cowhand," and "Toot, Toot, Tootsie." Here again he indulges that affinity for oddball tunes, arty ("To a Wild Rose") and banal ("Tennessee Waltz"), enlivening this unlikely repertoire with wit and humor. Good news: Rollins still has plenty of both.

In fact, Rollins still has plenty of everything and these nineteen sides are living proof. Forget the naysayers and the nitpickers, this is no lion in winter. He is still a colossus, matured, but not mellowed, and very much worth hearing.

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