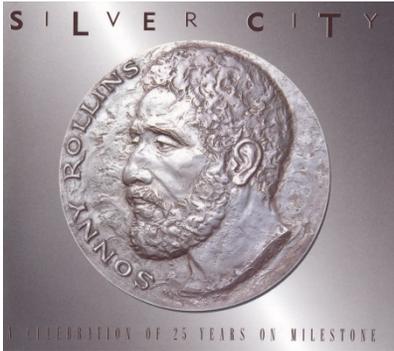


RECENT ROLLINS: Bob Bernotas



In the late 1940s, tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins, a native New Yorker, was recording with bebop pioneers Bud Powell, Fats Navarro, and J.J. Johnson while still in his teens. In less than a decade he would emerge as 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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