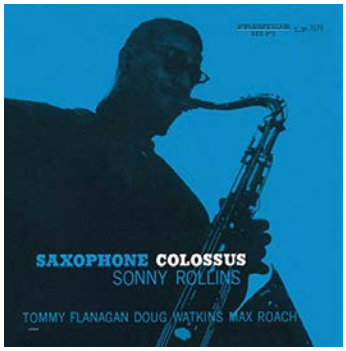
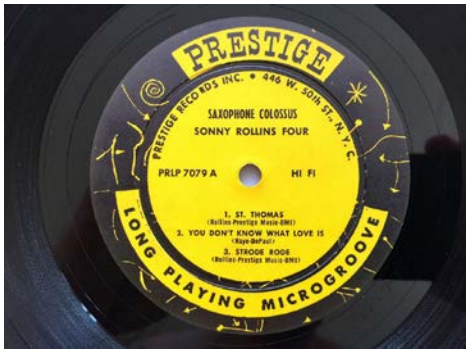
“Saxophone Colossus”—Sonny Rollins (1956)

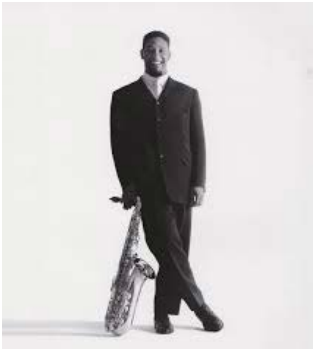
Added to the National Registry: 2016
Essay by Hugh Wyatt (guest essay)*



Album cover



Original album


Rollins, c. 1956

The moniker “Saxophone Colossus” aptly describes the magnitude of the man and his music.

Walter Theodore Rollins is better known worldwide as the jazz giant Sonny Rollins, but in addition to Saxophone Colossus, he has also been given other nicknames, most notably “Newk” because of his resemblance to baseball legend Don Newcombe.

To use a cliché, Saxophone Colossus best describes Sonny because he is bigger than life. He is an African American of mammoth importance not only because he is the last major remaining jazz trailblazer, but also because he helped to inspire millions of fans and others to explore the religions and cultures of the East.

A former heroin addict, the tenor saxophone icon proved that it was possible to kick the drug habit at a time in the 1950s when thousands of fellow musicians abused heroin and other narcotics. His success is testimony to his strength of character and powerful spirituality, the latter of which helped him overcome what musicians called “the stick” (heroin).

Sonny may be the most popular jazz pioneer who is still alive after nearly seven decades of playing bebop, hard bop, and other styles of jazz with the likes of other stalwart trailblazers such as Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Clifford Brown, Max Roach, and Miles Davis. He follows a tradition begun by Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker.

Eight months after overcoming his habit at a drug rehabilitation facility called “the farm” in Lexington, Kentucky, Sonny made what the jazz cognoscenti rightly contend is his greatest recording ever—ironically entitled “Saxophone Colossus”—which was recorded on June 22, 1956.

Nineteen fifty-six was a marathon recording year for the 26-year-old Sonny. He made six solo albums and appeared as a guest musician on several other musicians’ albums. Many of his other works recorded in 1956 have also become classics in their own right, like “Tenor Madness,” which was recorded just a month before “Colossus.” Prior to that, Sonny had released only three solo albums since his recording debut with singer Babs Gonzales back in 1949.

“Saxophone Colossus” remains, after more than six decades, one of the most awe-inspiring jazz albums of all time. It straddles the divide from classical bebop to hard bop and its newer manifestations.

On “Colossus,” Sonny performs five lengthy songs, each of which shows his vast improvisational skills as well as his big sound. He explores his Caribbean roots on “St. Thomas,” providing the song with the kind of rhythm that makes the listener feel as if they are on the island.

Another song, “You Don’t Know What Love Is,” shows the romantic side of Sonny. He proves to opponents of hard bop that the music can be delicate, while at the same time being straight ahead. Besides Sonny’s own prowess, the most outstanding aspect of the album is its stalwart personnel. “Colossus” featured such players as pianist Tommy Flanagan, bassist Doug Watkins, and drummer Max Roach.

The album was also important because it showed that Sonny had successfully made the transition from bebop to post-bebop styles on his own—freeing himself of the influences of the founding fathers of the tenor saxophone, like Coleman Hawkins, Chu Berry, and Lester Young.

This burst of creative energy came at a crucial emotional moment in Sonny’s life. Upon his release from “the farm,” he was “clean” and focused—proving to many skeptics that he could play with the same fire and conviction without the crutch of heroin. Prior to the “farm,” Sonny had also served time briefly at New York’s Rikers Island jail in the early 1950s in connection with drugs, petty theft, and a parole violation.

During his time at Lexington, however, Sonny began to instead adopt a spiritual regime—one that would eventually lead him to yoga, Buddhism, meditation, and other forms of mysticism. He also attributed his musical success and his recovery to hard work, long hours of study, and his incessant practice every day on his tenor saxophone.

While living in Chicago in 1955, he joined the Clifford Brown and Max Roach Quintet. It was trumpeter Brown, a clean-cut intellectual, who convinced Sonny that heroin does not enhance the playing ability of a musician. He proved it by becoming as great as trumpet masters Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Fats Navarro.

Brown was not only a powerful moral force but was technically comparable to Sonny. In fact, Sonny believes that Brown was his only true rival, the only jazz musician who could stand “toe-to-toe” to him.

Jazz musicians virtually worshipped Brown because of his intensely beautiful, haunting tone and unparalleled dexterity. His greatest gift to jazz was to prove to skeptical musicians and fans that a wholesome academic could effectively play both funky blues and intricate bebop substitute chords without the use of heroin and other narcotics.

Sadly, Brown died on June 26, 1956, just four days after "Saxophone Colossus" was released. Sonny recalled:

> Brownie had a tremendous impact on me. He was clean living. That's what amazed me, definitely, because he was so clean, and he played so much, and he was still straight. I had never really seen that. Every cat I knew that played got high. So, this was a revelation to me. I said, hey, this kid is an angel, man.

The fallacy of believing virtuosity can be enhanced by dope became popular during the early 1940s when fellow beboppers and their fans mistakenly believed that bebop guru Charlie "Yardbird" Parker became a genius on his instrument because of his heroin use. He strongly denied it, however.

Despite the denial, scores of musicians and others continued to use drugs because of Parker who became a pied piper. They all wanted to clone him. He died in New York in 1955 at the age of 34 from complications of excessive heroin and alcohol abuse.

Sonny beat the odds. The Harlem-born African American icon is still alive at the age of 88. And while he no longer performs due to medical issues, his mind is still sharp. A health food and fitness junkie, he recently practiced Pilates, a grueling exercise that is difficult even for the young. As expected, he continues to explore his spiritual side, especially Buddhism and yoga.

Today, millions of his fans across the globe regard Sonny Rollins as a sort of a guru or swami-like character who is highly revered not just as a musical genius, but as a man of deep spirituality.

Author Hugh Wyatt has written a new book titled "Sonny Rollins: Meditating on a Riff." It is a spiritual biography of the man that describes the inner journey of this remarkable musician. Wyatt makes the argument that Sonny's musical prowess must be attributed to his spirituality and discipline, not to the demons of heroin and alcohol that plagued many of his contemporaries.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.