‘A Proud Man Playing a Big Horn'

By Gary Giddins Jan. 4, 1976

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Sonny Rollins, one of the world's finest saxophonists and surely among the seminal improvisers in jazz history, has always been a controversial figure and en experimenter. For his Carnegie Hall concert on Jan. 10 he will add yet another refinement to his performances—a tiny, tubular microphone attached to his horn with wires leading to Carnegie's amplification - and - speaker system. ‘'It's so I can move around, and wave the horn up and down,” he explains.

Sonny's penchant for mobility is legendary. He used to startle audiences at the Village Vanguard by beginning a set at the club's entrance and then weaving his way through the tables and onto the stage. The main purpose of the mini-mike, though, is to add power to Rollins's sax. “I hope this works,” he says, examining the fragile device in his huge hands. “It's hard to get the sound I need with all those electric instruments backing me up.” Those electric instruments he presently favors in his band, Nucleus, are another reason for Rollins's controversial reputation — they are in disfavor with many jazz traditionalists who object to amplification because of Its association with rock music.

But Sonny Rollins has always gone his own way. Unlike many jazz musicians, who become known and admired for a single style or a vocabulary of original melodic ideas, Rollins's career is studded with variety, performances that seem to sum up the various directions he has taken: his versions, for instance, of “The Stopper,” “There's No Business Like Show Business,” “There Are Such Things,” “Wagon Wheels,” “The Freedom Suite,” “John S.,” “Autumn Nocturne,” “Dearly Beloved” (RCA version), “Three Little Words” (Impulse version), “Alfie,” “Skylark,” “Lover Man” and “Azalea.” He prides himself on defying pigeonholes: “The music I'm trying to create is beyond the Idiom. I like to hear people say, ‘Man, you didn't do what you were doing Monday,' or ‘Man, I never heard you play like that before’.”

Yet he is an autobiographical player — that is, he reworks his past performances, keeping all the options open. He has twice recorded several standards and originals, distilling new meanings from them each time. Although his current bow is toward the pop world, that does not mean he has abandoned the free style he adopted in the early sixties. “I did a concert recently at Montreal,” Rollins recalls, “where we played ‘Dearly Beloved' in the arrangement I did with Don Cherry in 1963, so I still feel that music.”

Rollins is not a facile player, for all his virtuosity. If he is uninspired or distracted, he sounds it. How does he react to the disappointment expressed by members of his audience when he changes style? “I hope they're not disappointed, because you have to be a Sonny Rollins believer; if you're a Sonny Rollins believer, I won't let you down.”

In the late fifties, Rollins was considered innovative for reducing his accompaniment and performing either with bass and drums only or alone. With firm rhythmic conviction and an oaken, swaggering sound, he gave the tenor sax a prominence it had not previously enjoyed. In recent months, and on his latest album, “Nucleus” (Milestone 9064), he is moving in the opposite direction, bathing himself in a rhythm section with as many as seven players. His tone has taken on a husky, scratchy quality, and his repertoire — which is uncommonly large — now includes several modal, backbeat numbers that seem, occasionally, to restrict his improvisational agility. To Rollins, however, the appearance of a major stylistic change is illusory.

Sitting on the floor of his music shed, on his nine-acre estate in Germantown, N.Y., huddling against the brisk air and, perhaps, the interminable questions, he remarks, “People may view what I'm doing as a temporary change, but I don't think it's a significant one. I'm not thinking about anything except reaching a point in my music where I can be happy with what I'm doing. It's just something I'm doing in regards to my whole playing experience.”

Would he consider *Nucleus* an evolutionary step? “I wouldn't want to make it so definite. You know I've made a lot of records and I like to do the unexpected. I'd hate someone to say, .0h, this Is what Sonny Rollins Is doing.' Asking me if I'm happy with the new record is like asking me if I'm happy with the way I played last night. Now one of these days it will he different and you can look hack in retrospect. Asking me to look back now is hard. Remember what Satchel Paige said: ‘Don't look back — something may be gaining on you.'”

Rollins has never stood still long enough for anything to gain on him and, in truth, his sound has changed at least as many times as his record label affiliations. At 45, he has been an influential musician for a quarter of a century; he attributes the volatile nature of his career and his music to an unusually brief incubation.

“I wasn't like the guy who started out, played for years and years, found a style, and then somebody heard him, got him a record date and everybody liked him. That's not my story. My story is that from the time I was a teenager I was on records with great musicians. I've put a lot of things on records as I've progressed, but I'm not looking for any kind of satisfaction front my past records. I'm looking for getting to it now, tomorrow night, the next record, the concert at Carnegie. I'm interested in music lasting only while I'm alive. I’m not writing for the future.”

Rollins's first inspiration was Louis Jordan, of Tympani Five fame, whom he first heard at the Elks Club on 134th Street. As a result, he bought an alto sax: “I still love the alto, I'm planning to come out with some things on alto soon.” From Coleman Hawkins, the patriarch of the tenor, he ‘'learned how to be a proud man playing a big horn.” Bud Powell, whom Rollins considers the ultimate musician, was a neighborhood influence, as was Thelonious Monk.

‘I was trying to finish high school at the same time as rehearsing and playing all night — whenever I was able to play. Thelonious had a young band and he gave me a chance to play. Monk was a magician. The musicians would look at his music and say, ‘Oh no, this is impossible, how can I make that jump from here to there, it can't be done, hey man, what is this?' And by the time we'd leave that night, everyone would be playing it and would be beautiful.”

To reminisce with a musician of Sonny Rollins's generation means inevitably to deal with the premature deaths of so many extraordinary artists. After enthusiastically discussing some that were especially close to him — Clifford Brown, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler — he becomes sullen. “It's not just jazz, it's the performing arts. Getting on a stage and creating is hard on people, sometimes it's tragic.”

Sonny asks me if I would do him “a favor” and toss a softball with him. Sloshing through the dewy grass in front of his Germantown house, we threw a softball back and forth. Afterwards, limbered and relaxed, he said, “Don't ever shrink from the belief that you have to prove yourself every minute, because you do, and probably it's a healthy thing. When you sound good, it gives you the encouragement to go on, that's what it's all about. Every time you get there, you're encouraged to go farther. That's one of those natural things you can only get from yourself.”