Giant Walks the Earth – essays on Sonny Rollins, from *Faces in the Crowd*, by Gary Giddins, © Oxford University Press, 1992

Giant Walks the Earth

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 - one of those natural things you can only get from yourself ~~ Sonny Rollins, 1976

ALONE AT LAST

Sonny Rollins, the world's greatest living saxophonist, performed alone in the Museum of Modem Art's Sculpture Garden on July 19, 1985. In the estimation of one police officer, he drew about 2500 people to 54th Street, about half of whom were able to get into the free concert. Among the many tunes Rollins did not play, and in some cases did not play many times, were "To a Wild Rose," "Autumn Nocturne," "Love in Bloom," "I Can't Get Started," "Open the Door, Richard," "Shortnin' Bread," "Should I," "Peter and the Wolf," "Frankie and Johnny," "It's Raining," "St. Thomas," and "There's No Place like Home." That is, he quoted fragments, shards, often just a couple of notes from those and other melodies - a few of which cropped up in every selection - but never got farther than allusion. Each piece, then, excepting an encore of Coleman Hawkins's "Stuffy," consisted of shambling riffs that momentarily blossomed into familiar cantabile and then skulked back into additional, deliberated riffs.

Skulk is the wrong word for an artist as forthright as Rollins. His concerts are psychodramas precisely because he gives so much of himself so transparently. He can give the audience what it wants or thinks it wants; he can play to the gallery, he can dazzle the musicians in the house, he can be romantic or funny or thrilling or analytical or euphoric. Indeed, he has been all of these things - but only, to cite the title of his worst record, when that's the way he feels. On this lovely night, before an ecstatic audience, the way he felt was apparently discursive. And also, my guess is, nervous. Looking now at those song titles, an olio so omnifarious no one but Rollins could stir it up, one may begin to decipher an autobiographical subtext that touches upon children's ditties, signature themes of his early idols, pop hits, originals, semi-classics –

even an observation to explain the evening: “I Can’t Get Started.” The performance may have been disappointing, but it was never dull. As the pianist and critic Amy Duncan noted, "It was like an entire evening of foreplay."

The event was one of the most eagerly awaited in jazz history. Rollins has been promising a solo concert for 30 years, though never explicitly. When interviewers asked him whether he would ever do one, he'd say something like, "Well, that's something to think about." Yet the fact that people often asked suggests how logical it always seemed. The idea of a solo recital by a wind player has long been implicit in jazz itself; even before Louis Armstrong *s* startling "West End Blues" cadenza, there were the two-bar breaks that climaxed New Orleans jazz. Every iazz musician practicing alone has experienced the elation of self-generating rhvthms. In 1948, Hawkins recorded "Picasso," an unaccompanied abstraction of “Body and Soul”, and a decade later Rollins recorded his own solo versions of “Body and Soul” and “It Could Happen to You.” Moreover, Rollins regularly appeared with just drums and bass, sometimes for no discernible purpose other than companionship or to spell him when he paused; the rhythms all came from Rollins. His legendary cadenzas, which could fall anywhere, were often the highlights of his sets - like traditional two-bar breaks elaborated into expansive fanfares, suspending the music and the listener until he brought in the band for a chord of resolution. Several Rollins cadenzas have been captured on records - the Impulse "Three Little Words" and the Milestone "Autumn Nocturne" are outstanding - and they whet the appetite for more. The logical extension of more is a solo concert or record.

I don't recall any demands for unaccompanied wind recitals in the '60s by Rollins or anyone else. But in the '70s, when everyone was doing 1t, usually for financial rather than musical reasons, Rollins loomed as the one musician fated to take up the challenge. His solo solos were different than those of Shorter or Shepp, Braxton or Brown, Hemphill or Lake or Murray or Bluiett. When Rollins played by himself he wasn't any more arcane than when he played with a rhythm section. Since he stuck by familiar melodies and seemed to swing even harder to compensate for his solitude, his solos sustained a sense of exhilaration. Yet Rollins defied his fate, though not entirely. His unaccompanied improvisations were highlights of the Milestone Jazzstars tour; he

confused the hell out of Johnny Carson's audience by playing a 10-rninute solo one night when Bill Cosby was the host; he regularly inserted solo pieces or lengthy cadenzas in his concert and nightclub sets. Such moments were cherished almost as much for their rarity as their tension, especially since his recordings were so uneven.

So here we are in 1985, when the fashion for solo sax has long since passed, and Rollins announces that he will give his last solo recital ever at the Museum of Modern Art, and it will be recorded. His *last* recital. The press release neglected to add that it was also his first. Well, you could cut the anticipation with a knife. At 8:10, he stepped before the reverent audience and hunkered into what I naively described in my notes as a "long cadenza." "To a Wild Rose" wafted by. "Autumn Nocturne" made a pass. "Mr. P.C." appeared, and as Rollins noticed the Henry Moore couple behind him he played at them for a while. A car horn blasted from the street, and he responded with "Pop Goes the Weasel." But it was all cadenza, no theme. During the second piece, he harmonized with the sounds of a police siren, quoted a couple of songs, and hinted at a calypso rhythm - which aroused everyone's attention with the promise of concerted swing. But it was just a tease. Give him room, you thought, he'll get there. Dressed in white pants and sneakers and a striped polo shirt, he bowed rhythmically from the waist without bending his knees, nudging short, blustery riffs-always imposing, wielding his tenor at times like a pickax.

By the third and fourth pieces, it was obvious that he couldn't get certain tunes out of his head, though he didn't want to play more than fragments of them. Nor was he interested in swinging, per se. There was no doubling or halving of tempo, no sustained groove, no rebounding accents: just a determined effort to locate himself in a music that seemed continuously to elude him. The Charlie Parker vamp on "Bird of Paradise" set up an intense gambit that might have taken off but segued instead into "Frankie and Johnny," then "No Place like Home," which he indulged for nearly a chorus, then big band licks, then "To a Wild Rose," then "It's raining it's pouring the old man is snoring," then "Love in Bloom." At least once during each piece he interrupted the music to declaim "thankyouthankyou thankyou" or "gottagogottagogottago," which may be his way of keeping those pieces off the record. Then, incredibly, he did go.

In a few minutes, however, he returned and began to dally with "I Can't Get Started." Now it will happen, you thought, easing back and waiting for the throbbing to

begin. But if you blinked, you opened your eyes on "St. Thomas," and if you applauded that anthem you drowned out two others he tested and re1ected. At this point I believe I heard him mutter, "What can I do now?" He jumped back into the fray, stomping in place, hinting at a calypso, returning to wooden riffs, biting off and spitting out "Fly Me to the Moon," "Alfie," "Mr. P. C.", "To a Wild Rose." He found countless figures that lent themselves to chromatic modulation, up and down, down and up, and he never relieved the tautness of his bow. "Thankyouladiesandgentlernen gottagogottagogottago." But at this point he didn't want to go any more than the audience wanted him to. The amazing thing about Rollins is that even when he's off he's on. He kept starting up again as though he'd find what he was looking for this time for sure. And had he continued searching until dawn, I suspect a good part of the audience would have remained no less vigilant. Finally, however, he made his last foray and, prompted by audience time-clapping, played a few hot choruses of "Stuffy" – now strolling, now stomping in place. Then something incredible happened. Rodin's Balzac, who had looked skittish throughout, flung away his cloak, jumped off his pedestal, and began leaping into the air. It took the efforts of several **MOMA** attendants to wrestle him to the ground and subdue him with tranquilizers. Asked to comment, Rollins remarked, "Thankyouthankyouthankyou."

(August 1985)

DANCING, ROMANCING, CHANTING

Who is that subtly dexterous hand-drummer keeping up phrase for phrase, shadowlike, with Sonny Rollins's opening cadenza on his new recording of "Dancing in the Dark?" Of course, it's Rollins himself, and no, he wasn't overdubbed. The castanet effect results from a tight recording that picks up the tenor's clicking keys and thumping pads as he plays. As an example of micro-phone technique that turns presumed extra musical sounds into music, it recalls records Ben Webster made for Verve in the 1950s, which captured and reified his gusty breathing as an integral part of his tonal production. With Webster, the issue was embouchure; with Rollins, rhythm. Thal kind of gilded fallout is less pronounced in concert where the eye undercuts the car. Heard live the percussive clicking of Rollins's keys is merely another offshoot of the man's imposing presence and force. He carries the tenor up and down the stage like a bagpipe, musical phrases filling out in the naturalness of his breathing. His virtuosity is Jaunting not least because it bespeaks absolute intellectual control. I mean, imagine writing one perfect sentence on top of another without hesitation, let alone revision.

I suppose it's fortunate that Rollins fails just often enough to prove how extraordinary the successes are. Otherwise, we might dismiss him as a warlock and not take to heart the standards he sets. One indication of how unique his place is among living jazz musicians is the disappointment invariably sounded by critics and fans at every performance that is less than a five-alarm blaze. With equal severity did people respond to Ellington and Armstrong concerts: Genius was never enough, it had to be genius at the apex of self-renewal. At Town Hall last week, Rollins played with a vivacity and amplitude so far beyond the ken of most musicians that it might shame the most apprehensive among them into another line of work. During intermission, the audience was brimming with his contagious energy. Perhaps because the second set was less propulsive than the first, the final verdict was a knowing shrug: It wasn't the best we've ever heard him. What a position to be in. No wonder Armstrong took to opening every set with "Indiana"; having started out on Mount Olympus in the '20s, there was no way he could continue to please the expectations of mere mortals 30 years later. Better to please himself.

In fact, the concert did have moments of revelation - the kind that almost always follows on the heels of a new album, when Rollins hits the road to show that the studio

recording was just a warm-up and, oh, look at me now. One highlight was his new ballad, "Promise," delivered with an unaffected and graceful attack, the arpeggios bubbling upward like champagne, the afterbeats nodding in crosscurrents of supple wit. "Promise" is a relative dead spot on his album *Dancing in the Dark,* in which the melodic pull of the pretty piece keeps him in check beyond the theme statement. "O.TY.O.G.," which helps light up the record, was even more jubilant as the opener at Town Hall. The piece is parsed in 16-bar passages, with a change in rhythm between the first and second 8-bar units, so that at first Rollins retards the beat and then leaps on top of it. Good as the recorded version is, it hardly prepared one for the surging double-time, thematic hammering, loopy quotations, and sustained notes - especially at the blistering close - of the live one On the other hand, the live "Duke of Iron," Rollins's latest calypso, was a throwaway; his six-chorus solo on the album is incomparable lyric swing, at once boisterous and lucid.

Significantly, the concert's highlights did not plug the new record. an unidentified waltz with a Dameronian cast, in which Rollins eschewed harmony for an intense davening in riffs; an exquisite "Autumn Nocturne" with a jocular cadenza that married "St. Thomas," "Swanee River," and "Doin' What Comes Naturally"; a relatively brief but heavily thematic "G-Man"; and, the encore, his "Theme from Alfie," delivered with fly munificence, including an exchange of fours that allowed drummer Al Foster to shine. In contrast to those pieces, the record is an exercise in controlled lyricism - a deft chaser after last year's exhaustingly brilliant *G-Man.* My first impression was - surprise! - disappointment. But the disc has grown on me steadily. The reverse side of Rollins's euphoria in the past decade has been a cloying melodicism that inhibits his improvisation. Gone with the sardonic probing of his early playing is the kind of introspection that allowed him to flay open a ballad, taking from it what appealed to him and then fleshing it out with his own variations or fleeing for parts unknown. Strong melodics now exert a powerful gravity that he can dispel only with the kind of pyrotechnics that defuse the song's appeal.

The Mann-Weill hit "Just Once" doesn't have much appeal, and perhaps Rollins recorded it in the hope of finding another "Isn't She Lovely." He wrings from it a convincing, bluesy, after-hours paraphrase that climaxes in a few seconds of fierce reed-biting. But though you wish he'd squeal in way beyond the tune's focus, he complacently lets it fade

out More irksome is "I'll String Along with You," because it has the promise of a perfect vehicle; yet it's roped to a contrived dance beat vamp, and though Rollins begins his solo with a singing riff, he quickly collapses back into the melody, never finding his own. The bulk of the album is fairly marvelous. After the cadenza on "Dancing in the Dark," Rollins seems intent on deconstruction the superb ever-climbing Arthur Schwartz melody, poking around without milking it. He establishes a peace between the song and his own diction of stark, energizing riffs, doubling the time and sharing it with drummer Marvin Smith, who anticipates his every move. Consequently, the fade-out is a drag. In addition to "O.Y.T O.G.," "Promise," and the irresistible "Duke of Iron," there is a beguiling original called "Allison," a 52-bar construction in which two 8-bar segments arc followed by a 10-bar segment (twice). Rollins improvises a neat countermelody and then trades fours with Smith for a chorus. On the CD, there's an alternate take of "Allison," in which the rhythm vamp is absent, the theme statement is foreshortened by half, and the tenor solo cuts far closer to the bone. If *G-Man* was an invocation to the gods, *Dancing in the Dark* is a gentleman caller's bouquet of roses. Even the respective cover photos tell you that.

(May 1988)

BIGGER THAN LIFE

Let me begin with a ludicrous, indefensible statement: Sonny Rollins is the most commanding musician alive. It's a ridiculous thing to say; my credibility is shot. Avoid further embarrassment by turning the page. Still, if you were at Carnegie Hall on May 19, you know, or at least suspect, I'm right. He confirmed two things we've known for a while that nonetheless demand annual confirmation. First, he has an unchallengeable monopoly on those musical emotions characterized by jubilance or euphoria. Second, he no longer plays tenor saxophone in any conventional sense; the horn is an appendage of the man, like a surgically implanted amplifier. Charles Mingus once said something to the effect that if Charlie Parkcr were thinking of a woman while playing, you could tell the color of her hair and eyes. With Rollins, you can count the fillings in her teeth.

Of course, his thoughts hardly seem that mundane. John Coltrane was considered a spiritual musician because of the chanting grandeur with which he drove home a brittle religiosity. Rollins's spirituality is a good deal earthier, but no less profound. Nearing 60 (this, too, is ludicrous, but biographical sources insist), he summons forth a contagious energy that must either transform you or leave you ashamed dof your inability to rise to its challenge. "Don't worry, be happy," is not his song-"sing hallelujah, be ecstatic" comes closer to the mark. Shameless as ever, the man who once resurrected "Toot, Toot, Tootsie," 'I'm an Old Cowhand," "There's No Business like Show Business," and "To a Wild Rose," has now reclaimed the "Tennessee Waltz." Over march rhythms. With an interpolation of the Alphonse Picou clarinet lick from "High Society." Daring you to get sentimental or titter or turn away from the light.

Rollins possesses you with his own possession, getting inside you to restore recollections of the first time you ever realized music was bigger than life. When I was a kid I felt the small hairs on the back of my neck rise during an impetuous performance of the harpsichord cadenza m the fifth Brandenburg Concerto; later that year, I heard Louis Armstrong's 1928 "Basin Street Blues," where the trumpet emerges from the fog, taking on shape and weight with every bar, and I had to stop the album to breathe awhile before I could go to the next cut. In restoring for me a sense of wonder and passion, Rollins reminds me why music is worth living for and defines the distinction between musicians who play music and musicians who arc music. Think of Armstrong or Coleman Hawkins or Bud Powell at their most assured, of Gilels playing Beethoven or Schnabel playing Schubert or Casals Bach, and if that isn't enough name-dropping, think of Rollins himself, the sound and substance of his phrases riding roughshod beyond bar lines and notes to the place where meaning and feeling are all, and doing it with a fractious wit that ambushes every conceit with deliberated surprise You think you know how that headlong arpeggio is going to resolve, but somehow it travels four more measures to another place altogether. He honks repeatedly for eight bars and imparts a different nuance to every blast. He overtakes his own electrifying dance turns with cresting waves of notes, then lands nimbly on his feet ready to meet the next self-generated wave.

I've compared Rollins to Louis Armstrong before, and I find the comparison

increasingly unavoidable, if for no other reason than that Armstrong developed a sound on the trumpet so personal and consequently inimitable that it made all other trumpets sound relatively dim. Rollins's sound is Gargantua come to life. It's so capacious you could step into its palm and never see all the fingers; the result of a three-decade search, this is the sound he strove for through all those experiments in timbre, when he masked the core virility of his tone with edgy, cold, gritty, congenial, winking, appliques - never quite satisfied with any of them for long, never quite dispelling the suspicion that his truest timbre was the rounded, noble bebopping clarity he perfected in the mid-1950s. Among his predecessors on the tenor, Ben Webster alone comes to mind as someone who perfected one sound in his youth, then developed another that transcended the instrument. Mottled as the acoustics in Carnegie are, Rollins's timbre burnished the place. At no point did he lose his footing or inspiration; or if he did, he was prescient enough to cut the piece off before anyone knew about it. Who else can keep you upright all night, and who else can sustain his unsurmountable level of energy for the exclusive expression of well-being?

Who but Rollins would invite Branford Marsalis as his "special guest soloist" and leave him pacing the stage looking for a way to make himself useful? Having confessed to the *New York Times* his expectation of serving Rollins as a “sacrificial lamb," Marsalis can't have been too surprised that the spit was fired and turning when he arrived. But *sacrificial* is the key word here If he hadn't arrived, Rollins might have played a relatively routine set, something more akin to what he plays on records. During the second half, Rollins allowed Marsalis a ballad of his own, "Embraceable You" - his sound, played into a mike (whereas the wily Rollins uses a pickup in the bell of his horn), melted before the hall's cruel indifference. When Rollins later introduced 'Tenor Madness," you anticipated the title’s mandate, but they didn't even trade fours. Rollins's real partner was his heavily featured drummer, Al Foster, the only musician onstage who could spell him without collapsing the tension. Marsalis didn't disgrace himself; indeed, he was charming m his self-effacement, finding utility at one point by announcing the Knicks score. He simply played tenor, while Rollins was the thunder on Mount Sinai - a difference that not even the most intoxicated Sting fan could miss. (To be sure, Marsalis may have earned something of a comeuppance for permitting a five-page bio, perhaps the longest ever, in the *Stagebill;* it included the astonishing claim that he "is the first soloist [to his brother Delfeayo's "knowledge") whose contributions to music *openly* display the

multifarious qualities of all major saxophone stylists in the jazz idiom, in addition to his own." If Rollins happened to read that, he may have been doubly inspired.)

I have had occasion to criticize some of Rollins's rhythm sections, but that, too, is an area fully mastered. After more than a quarter-century, Bob Cranshaw can breathe the right bass lines, and he falls into rigorous lockstep with Foster. Mark Soskin, who miscalculated several years back with a dreary attempt at fusion, remains an effective, fluent soloist who can sustain those few gaps the leader leaves, and guitarist Jerome Harris proved on "Tennessee Waltz" to have a sense of humor equal to his sense of economy. Clifton Anderson, whose trombone is like a one-man brass section to beef up ensembles, has so little to do that when he finally gets a chance to blow, you're surprised at how cagey and coherent he can be.

The program was diverse, as usual: the calypso "Duke of Iron" (Rollins rigor), followed by "East of the Sun" (Rollin lucidity), "The Tennessee Waltz" (Rollins transcendence), "Three Little Words" (hold the phone), "O.T Y.O.G." (Rollins merriment, complete with "Happy Birthday," "I Dream of Jeannie," and "In a Country Garden"), "Don't Stop the Carnival" (Rollins rapture), a three-minute unaccompanied cadenza that ended with the barest nod to "Here's That Rainy Day" (Rollins spellbinding), and farewell glimpses of "Tenor Madness" and "Strode Rode." He brought the capacity audience to its feet three times, most dramatically after "'Three Little Words," which was the highlight of the concert, if not the millennium. This is one piece he has recorded brilliantly m the studio (see Sonny Rollins on *Impulse!),* though even that masterpiece might seem an hors d'oeuvre compared to the impulsive fireworks at Carnegie. After a paraphrase of the you-are-a-dope melody (thank you, Red Skelton), he drew in gusts of air and exhaled a Niagara of sustained lyricism - tensile phrases bounding in effusive song, wrought with visionary exuberance. I leave you with two thoughts: (1) Like all great black musicians, Rollins is not a member of the National Academy of Arts and Letters, unlike. say, John Cage, and (2) like all great Sonny Rollins concerts, this one wasn't recorded.

(June 1989)

YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

Well ...

He walks out, blinding red shirt hanging loose over black ascot and pants, followed by Bob Cranshaw, Al Foster, Mark Soskin, and Clifton Anderson, and the audience, primed with hair-trigger adulation, rears. He says, "Thank you," and the audience, which had just quieted down, goes crazy, because it is very good sign when he talks, and besides, everyone seems to recognize that of all the places one could be on April 13 at 8, Carnegie Hall is, biblically speaking, the chosen venue. He introduces the band and announces "a little standard, 'Long Ago and Far Away,' " which he preps with a short cadenza. Bang! - he's off. Chorus after chorus after chorus after chorus, never leaving the melody far behind, but playing catch-up with the time, so that a furious effusion of arpeggios will suddenly, after seven bars of free-fall, swoop into an eighth bar downbeat. Foster monitors every second - still, those arpeggios arc like extended press rolls. They lift you up, and you don't know when you're going to touch down. He does it several times, retard and catch up, retard and catch up, and every time he hits the ground, people applaud in gratitude. Soskin's keyboards are miked too high (every chord crunches), but the tenor sax is splendidly imaged; you can hear all the nuances, the chortling double-time figures, the countless ways of paraphrasing the key melody, which he returns to at the top of every chorus. By keeping the melody in focus, he can sustain interest in a solo for hours. He nervily caps it off with a shave-and-a-haircut, by way of setting up fours with Foster's drums. So far, tour de force. Then a new calypso with old New Orleans changes gets underway via solos by Cranshaw on bass guitar, Soskin on two keyboards, and Anderson on trombone, but they are as interludes, breathing spaces, before the leader returns swinging with a serpentine vivacity, snakehips stuff, all patterned on riffs. When he plays there is a hot chill in the air, and when he doesn't it's all pretty mortal. "Now," he says by way of bringing out trumpeter Roy Hargrove, who is barely into his 20s, "the young man we've been hearing so much about." With Anderson off to the right and the master standing by the piano, Hargrove begins his solo feature, "Once In a While." Of course, this is madness. You don't debut with a slow ballad while the Lord Sonny Rollins stands 12 feet away from

you, politely staring. You come out blowing, and then, after the blood has left your eyes, you take your solo bow, and even then you might want to avoid a slow ballad. Unless you are very, very sure. Hargrove is. The night turns out to be a major coming-out party, though his triumph gets off to a tentative start: His opening phrases arc so legato that the rhythm section can't quite figure out where and how deep to cut a backbeat. But as the theme chorus continues, he lets more brass into his sound and pushes the rhythm; by the time he is out of the tune's gravity (Foster is like a chef with brushes), he makes it clear to those who might have expected another Wynton or Terence or even the somewhat inhibited Roy of his first solo album, that his strongest suit is unbridled wailing. The response is so exuberant, Hargrove blushes. Yet, to paraphrase a composer whose music Rollins recorded in the '50s, we ain't heard nothing yet. The next piece is Charlie Parker's "Big Foot." For emphasis, I repeat: The next piece is Charlie Parker's "Big Foot." My gosh. Let me not spend time on the ebullient tenor solo, which passed the baton to Hargrove by means of a quote from "Sentimental Journey," or the trumpet solo, a rip-roaring case of Brownie *reditus,* or the trombone solo by the much underrated Anderson, who eschews riff patterns in favor of complicated expansions of melodic ideas (who has he been listening to?) devised with rapid slide-work, and get to the heart of the matter, the fours. My hair stands straight up. In fact, a couple of minutes into this episode, which is exclusively a tenor-trumpet thing, the whole audience looks like Al Pacino in *Godfather III*. Astonishingly, the master has largely dispensed with the throatiness of his modern sound. The reach-back also extends to content, such as steely orchestra riffs that he stretches over the bar lines, so that the exchange quickly becomes dialogue or call-and-response. Hargrove echoes some of Rollins's calls before they are fully laid out. No preening here, just rampaging trumpet in the tradition of Brown, Dorham, and the young Howard McGhee. Unlike just about every other young guest Rollins has feted at these annual rites of initiation, he holds his own. Soon they are down to twos, then ones-you know, the kind of thing you usually have to turn to Gene Norman Presents records to hear anymore. This is why the blues were invented, to straighten your hair. Three-quarters through the first set, the benign mob of an audience rises. The closer is a new piece written by Rollins in honor of "Young Roy"; the eight-bar ditty repeated with a four-bar extension embodies, the only indication thus far of the great man's normative '90s style.

That style seems likely to return to the shadows at the outset of the second set,

when Cranshaw brings out-to tumultuous applause - a real honest-to-God doghouse bass, reportedly at the insistence of Jim Hall. As everyone knows, more than 30 years ago, Rollins - to protest the expulsion of the Dodgers, whose great pitcher, Don Newk, was so named after his resemblance to Rollins, known in his youth as Newcombe - retired from music and played exclusively in the Lincoln Tunnel, dodging cars while using his horn to catch coins tossed by exasperated if sympathetic drivers, or something like that. He returned to form in 1961 with a much-celebrated quartet, including Hall and Cranshaw (drummers were caught in a revolving door), and a much-publicized contract with RCA, which produced six records that didn't sell as well as expected but quickly earned the status of world-renowned classics. (In the U.S., those classics are either O. P. or pointlessly reconfigured for CD and lacking all composer credits.) So here they are, nearly 30 years later, Rollins in a white-fringed black jacket that might have seen service on the cover of *Way Out West;* Hall, in a suede vest; and the ageless Cranshaw, holding his instrument like a woman instead of a log. The air is now charged in a completely different way. If Rollins is the master of sustained elation, good for what ails you, Hall is the master of space and economy, good for mental push-ups. The guitarist's graceful lyricism and especially his harmonies - the unexpected phrase-ending, the chord that goes just left of where you anticipated - charts a new landscape, and Rollins fills it with *his old sound.* He hasn't lost it - here it is, just as you remembered. Cranshaw, contrary to rumors that he can't play stand-up anymore, hasn't lost it either: He plucks and sometimes strums lovely lyric lines, fleet and easy. On "Without a Song," Rollins and Hall share the theme, followed by the latter's spare variations; both of them comp a written figure during the bass solo. When Rollins hits the bridge (so to speak) in his solo, Foster starts pressing, Hall strumming, and Cranshaw plucking, until they buoy him on waves of rhythm, which he crests into a cadenza followed by an extended coda by the quartet. Hall's feature (Rollins, seated at the piano, listens intently), "With a Song in My Heart," is introduced with oblique harmonies and then springs forth into melody, like the sun darting through clouds. He and Cranshaw achieve semi-counterpoint in the last chorus, closing with eight bars of parallel chords. Rollins returns for "Where Are You?" and "The Bridge." The chief virtue of the first is the tenor cadenza midway, and the set of chords Hall lays out to bring Rollins and the ensemble together again; the second starts with beaming energy, Hall strumming up tension behind a heated tenor invention, but dissipates during a long

and subtle drum solo This music is so much more cerebral than what we've come to expect from Rollins that, notwithstanding the pleasures of the harbor (so to speak), the night is ripe for another blast of growly post-1960s fury. Back comes the ensemble (and the bass guitar) for "The Everywhere Calypso," on which the master revs himself up, banking riffs into small cathedrals and imparting the expected rush. Before anyone else has time to comment, he spins into "St. Thomas," and now Carnegie shakes once more. Hargrove is biting off high notes and shooting them at the chandelier, and for his turn, Rollins is dancing and bowing; just when you think Hall is going to get his say, master turns to prodigy and starts the fours going. They converse in rapture, and the piece turns out to have more false endings than *Gone with the Wind.* The ensemble is looking at Rollins for a cue, but after the fours, he starts a new solo and then another, until finally he strolls to the apron and barks a huge implacable Beethoven-like finish. They leave, but four or five minutes of shouting, stomping, whistling, cheering (no way is this audience dispersing without an encore) brings them back. “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," he says, which from him is like a benediction. "Tenor Madness": Hargrove goes for it, with Rollins clapping in time through the whole performance, and Hall, after a spare survey of blues territory, follows suit. But the leader isn't giving much on this - a couple of choruses of fours with Foster and out. Then he looks out at the crowd and walks away from the ensemble. Digging deep - his classic sound intact once more - he limns a ballad cadenza that slowly, evenly, brilliantly shapes up as another blast from Charlie Parker's past, "This ls Always." Such a poet!

It was an old-time concert, or so it seemed, because they don't happen like this very often - the mixture of excitement, subtlety, and surprise, of unembarrassed rapprochement with the past and a major debut for tomorrow. The audience played an important role, too: It crossed not only the lines of race and gender but of age, as graying beboppers from the '40s cheered side by side with kids including one group who told me they attended 1989's Rollins concert to see guest Branford Marsalis, whom they knew from his Sting tour, and discovered this god whom they had known by name only. Was it recorded? No, at least not officially. Is Rollins a member of the Academy of Arts and Letters yet? Of course not: It's easier to mourn the days when giants walked the earth than to face up to the giants in your path.

There are no words.

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