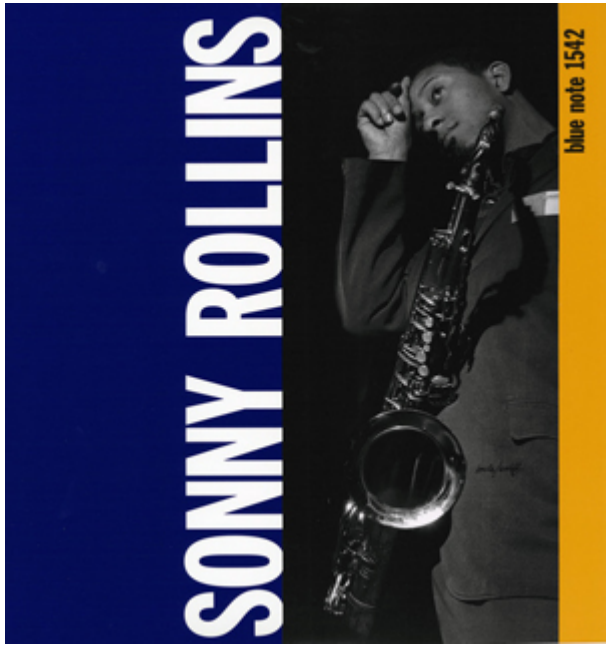

HIGH FIDELITY

Blue Note **1542**

SONNY ROLLINS

DONALD BYRD, trumpet; **SONNY ROLLINS**, tenor sax; **WYNTON KELLY**, piano; **GENE RAMEY**, bass; **MAX ROACH**, drums.

MAX ROACH PERFORMS BY COURTESY OF BOB SHAD, MERCURY RECORD CORP.

DECISION — **PLAIN JANE**
BLUESNOTE — **SONNYSPHERE**
HOW ARE THINGS IN GLOCCA MORRA

(left) like an oak life and time, is a family affair. Out of its trunk grow branches, and from the branches twigs emerge, and before long the leaves on these tender shoots are as fresh and green and pleasing to the senses as was the youthful tree itself.

In jazz the family tie is not visible to the eye, nor always immediately to the ear. It takes a discerning study of the habits and customs of the nation to figure out the heredity of jazzdom's citizens. The tenor saxophone, perhaps more than any other instrument, has given birth to several generations of styles, all carrying visible in their approach to the rhythm of tone, phrasing, dynamics.

Theodore Walter Rollins is one tenor saxophonist who illustrates all the above observations. He is the student who has turned teacher, the soloist who becomes a school. During his high school days on an alto saxophone he reputedly recorded like Louis Jordan, but in 1944 he heard Charlie Parker, and from that moment on his theme song could have been I'll Never Be The Same Again. Bird was his main influence, though when he switched to tenor in 1948 it was evident that he had listened attentively to Coleman Hawkins, and presumably to Ben Webster and Lester Young. This North Impact was probably the most important of these three. (If this sounds incompatible with a Parker influence, play one of Hawkins' LP records speeded up to 45 r.p.m. You'll be amazed at the Bird-like sound that will emanate from your speaker.)

Born in New York City, Sept. 7, 1929, the younger brother of a violinist, Sonny began piano studies at the age of nine. The above-mentioned alto debut, and the subsequent switch to tenor, led to his professional born around 1948, gigging with Bude Gonsalves. Sonny was only nineteen when Art Blakey came, saw and was conquered by his rapidly developing style and technique. Art hired Sonny for a series of dates, and during the next two years he was elevated to the companionship of the big-timers, notably Todd Dameron, Bud Powell and Miles Davis. Miles was perhaps the first to recognize fully the Rollins potential, to the extent of offering him verbal encouragement. On first recordings, and a prominent featured solo spot on their joint in-person appearances.

In 1950 Sonny spent most of his time around Chicago. The following January, when Max Roach and Clifford Brown were in town with their combo, he subbed for Harold Land, tenor man with the group. When they were getting ready to leave town Max asked Sonny to continue with them; he has been driven by the spur of the Roach Mile ever since.

During the past year Sonny has emerged fully as an individual. The respect in which he is held among fellow-workers was most vividly demonstrated when I conducted a poll of 101 jazzmen for the "Musicians' Musicians" poll in the Encyclopedia Yearbook of Jazz. As can be seen by an inspection of the pages that show a breakdown of each vote, Sonny was selected for the "Greatest New Star" in the tenor sax category by such people as Clifford Brown, Bill Hickman, Gene Johnson, Quincy Jones, Red Mitchell, Max Roach, George Wallington, Randy Weston, Ernie Wilkins, and was even hailed as "Greatest Ever" by Miles Davis, Herb Geller, Bud Powell and Horace Silver. The Rollins position—an aggressively swinging style with a tone that is neither as transparent as Stitt's nor as Lester-like as Prestige—can be seen reflected in the work of J. R. Monterose, Hank Mobley and many more of the younger tenor school.

For this session Sonny was joined by a superior and finely integrated quintet. Donald Byrd, a 24-year-old Detroiter, has been on the scene in the Apple since the summer of 1950 and has worked with Wallington, Blakey et al. Wynton Kelly, a native of Jamaica, B.W.I., but raised in Brooklyn, paid his dues in rhythm and blues, but graduated to work as Dinah Washington's accompanist and has been associated with John Gonsalves off and on for several years. Gene Ramey, born in 1912 in Austin, Texas, has seen service in bands of every school, from the Jay McShann crew of 1938-40 (in which Charlie Parker was his intermittent colleague) to the Basie orchestra of 1952-3, with frequent ventures into New York free lance work with various singers and instrumental combos.

Max Roach, who appears through the courtesy of Mercury Records, need hardly be introduced at this point. Suffice it that in the above-listed poll he was accorded a unique honor: the musicians named him as "Greatest Ever" on drums, from Lionel Hampton, who is reputed to hate drummers, voted for him.

The quintet starts pressurelessly and decisively with Decision. This is an unusual minor blues theme 12 bars long instead of the customary 12, characterized by little abrupt blocks of two-note phrases. Sonny's solo, too, says still notice, is very much in the style of the composition itself at certain points. Byrd is in a somewhat Hibbert mood here. Wynton delivers himself of a smooth single-note solo with occasional bumps into fourths and thirds. Max's solo chorus, a simple exercise for brushes on snare, is delightful. Then back to the unison theme.

Bluesnote is a medium-tempo twelve-bar blues with plenty of solo space for all five—Byrd, Rollins, Kelly, Roach, Ramey—followed by some fours.

How Are Things in Glocca Morra is a ballad from Finian's Rainbow that has often appealed to modern musicians. It is done more or less as a solo vehicle, with Byrd used only for the intro and coda. Sonny plays the first chorus leaning fairly closely to the melodic line. Wynton then wanders on the changes, and Sonny ad libs a little more freely in his second solo, building to climactic high notes.

Plain Jane, third of the four Rollins originals in this set, is actually just one eight-bar block of two and two-note phrases, constituting the "A" of an A-A-B-A chorus in which the B contains tenor improvisation. Listen closely to Sonny's wonderful control during his solo here, particularly in the sixteenth-note runs, and in the little up-and-down cascades of clustered notes. Byrd continues the mood with a similarly finer performance. Wynton, during his solo, becomes increasingly funky, and Sonny has some healthy workouts at fours with Max.

Sonnysphere is a bright-tempoed tune with no theme to speak of. Also an eight-bar model! It plunges straight into Sonny's extemporaneous story of I Got Rhythm with a Honeysuckle Bridge. Byrd's work here is exceptionally long, fluent and well coordinated, as is the Kelly piano. Sonny has some exciting fours and trades with Max.

This is an unpretentious session, displaying Sonny Rollins in the kind of setting that can consolidate his recognition, long overdue but now the less welcome, that is finally coming his way.

— LEONARD FEATHER

(Author of The Encyclopedia Yearbook of Jazz)

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