

# ***Sonny Rollins Discography & Biography-***

Born in Harlem on September 9, 1930 Sonny Rollins began his career in music at an early age, studying piano and alto saxophone from age 11 and eventually taking up the tenor saxophone in 1946. Growing up in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem Rollins' teenage running mates included future jazz masters Jackie McLean, Arthur Taylor, and Kenny Drew with whom he had a band in high school. Situated in both the time and place where be-bop was being formulated, Rollins and his teenage cohorts were greatly intrigued and inspired by the innovations being made in the new jazz idiom. They grew up idolizing those musicians, only slightly older than themselves, at the helm of the new music like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Bud Powell. Rollins was the first of his peers to reach a level where he could join some the older bop players and beginning in the late 1940s Rollins recorded and performed with Parker, Powell, Thelonious Monk, and Miles Davis among others. In fact, Rollins first appearance on Blue Note was on a Bud Powell date recorded on August 9, 1949 which also featured be-bop stalwarts Fats Navarro on trumpet, Tommy Potter on bass, and Roy Haynes on drums. Shortly thereafter, throughout the early 1950s, a frequent associate with whom Rollins worked as a sideman was Miles Davis and in 1955 he replaced Harold Land in the tenor chair of the Clifford Brown-Max Roach quintet. Rollins remained with the pioneering bop drummer after Brown's untimely death, playing in his group throughout 1957.

It was during his tenure with Max Roach that Rollins began to record as a leader, making albums for both Prestige and Blue Note. Thus, it is only fitting that Roach be behind the drum set on Rollins first album recorded for Blue Note. The December 16, 1956 date which eventually came to be titled simply Sonny Rollins, Volume One also featured trumpeter Donald Byrd, pianist Wynton Kelly, and bassist Gene Ramey. While this is certainly a memorable date with Rollins' rich, husky timbre in good form, more notable is the session done a few months later. Recorded on April 14, 1957, Sonny Rollins, Volume Two is of special interest because of the presence of two of the most important- but drastically different stylistically - pianists in the history of modern jazz. While hard bop progenitor Horace Silver is at the piano chair for three of the selections, the very unique Thelonious Monk accompanies Rollins on a beautiful rendition of his ballad "Reflections". Moreover, on what could be considered Monk's most famous and important composition, the haunting blues line "Misterioso", Thelonious and Horace share the piano chair with Monk accompanying Sonny at the beginning and end of the song and Silver taking over in the middle. Here, in one song an intriguing contrast between two bebop innovators is witnessed. On the one hand there is Monk's jutting, discordant style in contrast with the bluesy, soulful stylings of Silver. The piano presence notwithstanding let us not forget the performance of the session's leader as Rollins playing throughout is superb. One example is his extraordinary solo on "Misterioso" where his improvisatory ideas appear to be limitless.

Rollins final two sessions for Blue Note were recorded in close proximity to one another roughly five months later. The first was a studio date entitled Newk's Time recorded on September 22, 1957. This quartet date featured Wynton Kelly on piano, Doug Watkins on bass, and Philly Joe Jones on drums. A loosely constructed blowing session by nature, Newk's Time is notable for the strong performance by Rollins as well as the solidity of this rhythm section. Miles Davis' "Tune Up" for instance is given a whirlwind treatment with Rollins displaying in his ingenious solo what was dubbed by music historian Gunther Schuller as "thematic improvisation", a improvisatory style invented by Rollins which consists of the spontaneous reworking of an initially stated theme or motif. Newk's Time is also representative of Rollins aesthetic code in that it exemplifies his penchant for giving jazz treatment to hackneyed popular material. On this

record Rollins turns to the popular show tunes "Wonderful!Wonderful!" and "The Surrey With The Fringe On Top".

While Newk's Time is an important record on these counts, Rollins next and final recording for Blue Note proved to be his most significant output for the label. Moreover, this recording is considered by many one of Rollins finest recordings of his career. A Night At The Village Vanguard (Volumes 1 and 2) is significant first because it was Rollins only live record done for Blue Note and; furthermore, because it has come to epitomize and define live jazz recordings at their very finest. Recorded during the afternoon and evening sets on November 3, 1957 at New York's famed Village Vanguard, this record captures the essence of jazz conveyed upon hearing the music live in its spontaneity, intellect, energy and feeling. The live session is also notable because Rollins mastery of improvisation is at its highest level given the extended format of the club date. Here Rollins is not confined to the time restrictions of the studio and; thus, truly stretches out producing lengthy and brilliantly constructed improvisations. Lastly, A Night At The Village Vanguard is a landmark record because it captured Rollins' pioneering idea of the jazz unit in the pianoless tenor saxophone trio. This minimalist approach gave the rhythm section a emptier, freer feel as accompaniment for Sonny's blazing tenor. Lastly, the date is interesting because it includes Rollins with two different trios. The afternoon session featured bassist and Donald Bailey and drummer Pete La Roca while in the evening Sonny was accompanied by Wilbur Ware on bass and Elvin Jones on drums.

Rollins output for Blue Note is notable because it was during this period that he became widely regarded as the most talented and innovative tenor saxophonist in jazz. At this time Sonny became the most influential and widely-imitated jazz saxophonist, establishing himself as the most outstanding saxophonist since Charlie Parker (and later superseded by John Coltrane). However, a year and a half after the Village Vanguard session he withdrew from public life as a result of personal and musical frustrations. A little over two years later, however, Rollins re-emerged out of seclusion with an expansion of his already fortuitous technique. Throughout the 1960s, Rollins also began to experiment with avant-garde jazz movement of the period, free jazz. From 1969 to 1971 Rollins took another public hiatus, but in 1972 he resumed playing once more, leading groups of various young musicians but this time performing in a more commercial vein. Nonetheless, Rollins allegiance to the hard bop tradition has endured throughout the 1980s and 90s as he continues to perform and record his own personal interpretation of the idiom he both mastered and helped define.

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### ***From Jazz Central Station:***

Theodore Walter Rollins was born on September 7, 1930 in New York City. He grew up in Harlem around the corner from the Savoy Ballroom, not far from the Apollo Theatre, and the doorstep of his idol, Coleman Hawkins. In fact, he started out on alto saxophone and the music of Louis Jordan, but at the age of sixteen, insisted his mother buy him a tenor when Hawk became his man. As a teenager, he fell under the spell of a musical revolution called Bebop and came under the wing of Thelonious Monk, who became his mentor. Up on Sugar Hill, his neighborhood musical peers included future Jazz stars Jackie McLean, Kenny Drew and Art Taylor, but it was young Sonny who was first out of the pack, working and recording with Babs Gonzalez, J.J. Johnson, Bud Powell and Miles Davis before he turned twenty.

"Of course, these people are there to be called on because I think I represent them in a way," Rollins said recently of his peers and mentors. "They're not here now so I feel like I'm sort of

representing all of them, all of the guys. Remember, I'm one of the last guys left, as I'm constantly being told, so I feel a holy obligation sometimes to evoke people."

In the early fifties, he established a reputation first among musicians, then the public, as the most brash and creative young tenor on the scene, through his work with Miles, Monk, and the MJQ.

Miles Davis was an early Sonny Rollins fan and in his autobiography wrote that he "began to hang out with Sonny Rollins and his Sugar Hill Harlem crowd...anyway, Sonny had a big reputation among a lot of the younger musicians in Harlem. People loved Sonny Rollins up in Harlem and everywhere else. He was a legend, almost a god to a lot of the younger musicians. Some thought he was playing the saxophone on the level of Bird. I know one thing--he was close. He was an aggressive, innovative player who always had fresh musical ideas. I loved him back then as a player and he could also write his ass off..."

After a few years off the scene to eliminate a drug problem, Sonny reemerged in Chicago at the end of 1955 as a member of the Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet, with an even more authoritative presence. His trademarks became a caustic, often humorous style of melodic invention, a command of everything from the most arcane ballads to calypsos, and an overriding logic in his playing that found him hailed for models of thematic improvisation.

It was during this time that Sonny acquired a nickname, "Newk." As Miles Davis explains in his autobiography: "Sonny had just got back from playing a gig out in Chicago. He knew Bird, and Bird really liked Sonny, or "Newk" as we called him, because he looked like the Brooklyn Dodgers' pitcher Don Newcombe. One day, me and Sonny were in a cab...when the white cabdriver turned around and looked at Sonny and said, 'Damn, you're Don Newcombe!' Man, the guy was totally excited. I was amazed, because I hadn't thought about it before. We just put that cabdriver on something terrible. Sonny started talking about what kind of pitches he was going to throw Stan Musial, the great hitter for the St. Louis Cardinals, that evening..."

In the mid-50s, Sonny Rollins finally arrived. In '57 he won the prestigious Down Beat magazine Critics Poll as New Star of the tenor saxophone. He began to record classic sessions, and to work under his own name beginning in 1957, often in a pianoless trio setting that provided still greater freedom to his imagination. By the decade's end, Rollins and Coltrane were generally recognized as the dominant new voices of the tenor.

Rollins's first examples of the unaccompanied solo playing that would become a specialty also appeared in this period; yet the perpetually dissatisfied saxophonist questioned the acclaim his music was attracting, and between 1959 and late '61 withdrew from public performance.

Rollins remembers that he took his leave of absence from the scene because "I was getting very famous at the time and I felt I needed to brush up on various aspects of my craft. I felt I was getting too much, too soon, so I said, wait a minute, I'm going to do it my way. I wasn't going to let people push me out there, so I could fall down. I wanted to get myself together, on my own. I used to practice on the Bridge, the Williamsburg Bridge because I was living on the Lower East Side at the time."

When he returned to action in early '62, his first recording was appropriately titled *The Bridge*. By the mid 60's, his live sets became grand, marathon stream-of-consciousness solos where he would call forth melodies from his encyclopedic knowledge of popular songs, including startling segues and sometimes barely visiting one theme before surging into dazzling variations upon the

next. Rollins was brilliant, yet restless. The period between 1962 and '66 saw him returning to action and striking productive relationships with Jim Hall, Don Cherry, Paul Bley, and his idol Hawkins, yet he grew dissatisfied with the music business once again and started yet another sabbatical in '66. "I was getting into eastern religions," he remembers. "I've always been my own man. I've always done, tried to do, what I wanted to do for myself. So these are things I wanted to do. I wanted to go on the Bridge. I wanted to get into religion. But also, the Jazz music business is always bad. It's never good. So that led me to stop playing in public for a while, again. During the second sabbatical, I worked in Japan a little bit, and went to India after that and spent a lot of time in a monastery. I resurfaced in the early 70s, and made my first record in '72. I took some time off to get myself together and I think it's a good thing for anybody to do."

Since returning to recording and performing in 1972, he has released a steady, yet by no means excessive stream of recordings (all on the Milestone label), performed a constant though modest schedule of concerts, and gained worldwide acknowledgment as the great living Jazz soloist.

## ***Sonny Rollins Discography - Studio Sonny Rollins Albums***

1951 Sonny Rollins Quartet Prestige  
1951 Sonny and the Stars Prestige  
1951 Sonny Rollins with the Modern Jazz Quartet Prestige/OJC  
1951 Mambo Jazz Prestige  
1954 Sonny Rollins Quintet Prestige  
1954 Sonny Rollins Plays Jazz Classics Prestige  
1954 Moving Out Prestige/OJC  
1955 Taking Care of Business Prestige  
1955 Work Time Prestige/OJC  
1956 Three Giants Prestige  
1956 Sonny Rollins Plus Four Prestige/OJC  
1956 Saxophone Colossus Prestige/OJC  
1956 Tenor Madness Prestige/OJC  
1956 Sonny Boy Prestige/OJC  
1956 Rollins Plays for Bird Prestige/OJC  
1956 Tour de Force Prestige/OJC  
1956 Sonny Rollins, Vol. 1 Blue Note  
1957 Alternate Takes Contemporary  
1957 Way Out West [JVC] JVC  
1957 Wail March Blue Note  
1957 Sonny Rollins, Vol. 2 Blue Note  
1957 Sonny's Time Jazzland  
1957 The Sound of Sonny [Riverside/OJC] Riverside/OJC  
1957 Sound of Sonny Rollins DCC  
1957 Newk's Time Blue Note  
1957 More from the Vanguard Blue Note  
1957 Sonny Rollins Plays/Jimmy Cleveland Plays Period  
1957 Sonny Rollins [Everest] Everest

1957 Tenor Titan Verve  
1958 Freedom Suite Riverside/OJC  
1958 Shadow Waltz Jazzland  
1958 Sonny Rollins and the Big Brass Verve  
1958 Brass & Trio Verve  
1958 Quartet Verve  
1958 Sonny Rollins and the Contemporary Leaders... Contemporary/O  
1958 Sonny Rollins and the Contemporary Leaders... JVC Japan  
1958 Brass Trio Verve  
1959 Saxes in Stereo Riverside  
1962 The Bridge Bluebird/RCA  
1962 The Quartets Featuring Jim Hall Bluebird  
1962 What's New? Bluebird/RCA  
1962 Alternatives Bluebird  
1962 On the Outside Bluebird  
1963 Sonny Rollins [Prestige] Prestige  
1963 All the Things You Are Bluebird/RCA  
1963 Sonny Meets Hawk! RCA  
1963 Stuttgart (1963) Jazz Anthology  
1964 Now's the Time RCA Victor  
1964 Sonny Rollins & Co. 1964 Bluebird/RCA  
1964 Three in Jazz RCA  
1964 The Standard Sonny Rollins RCA  
1965 There Will Never Be Another You Impulse!  
1965 Sonny Rollins on Impulse! Impulse!  
1966 Alfie Impulse!  
1966 East Broadway Rundown Impulse!  
1972 Next Album Milestone/OJC  
1973 Horn Culture Milestone/OJC  
1975 Nucleus Milestone/OJC  
1976 The Way I Feel Milestone/OJC  
1977 Easy Living Milestone/OJC  
1978 Green Dolphin Street Quintessence  
1979 Don't Ask Milestone/OJC  
1980 Love at First Sight Original Jazz  
1981 No Problem Milestone  
1982 Reel Life Milestone  
1984 Sunny Days, Starry Nights Milestone  
1986 G-Man Milestone

### ***Sonny Rollins Discography - Studio Sonny Rollins CDs***

1986 The Quartets [US] RCA  
1987 Dancing in the Dark Milestone

1988 Sonny Rollins/Thad Jones Jazz Archives  
1989 Falling in Love with Jazz Milestone  
1991 Way Out West [OJC/Contemporary] Contemporary/O  
1991 Here's to the People Milestone  
1993 St. Thomas 1959 [live] Dragon  
1993 Old Flames Milestone  
1994 The Sound of Sonny [Spotlite] Spotlite  
1994 The Meeting All of Us  
1995 Without a Song Four Star  
1996 Sonny Rollins Plus Three Milestone  
1998 Global Warming Milestone  
1998 Meets Hawk Classic  
1999 Now's the Time [Bonus Tracks] BMG  
1999 Our Man In Jazz [Import] Jazz/BMG  
2000 Sonny Rollins [Jamey Aebersold] Jamey  
2000 Way Out West [Contemporary Limited] Contemporary  
2000 This Is What I Do  
2001 Way Out West [Analogue Productions] Analogue  
2002 Sonny Rollins Plus Four Prestige  
2002 Mambo Bounce Epm Musique  
2002 Plus Four Mobile  
2002 Scoops Past Perfect  
2002 Solid Past Perfect

### ***Sonny Rollins Discography - Live Sonny Rollins Albums***

1957 More from the Vanguard Blue Note  
1957 A Night at the Village Vanguard, Vol. 1 [live] Blue Note  
1957 A Night at the Village Vanguard, Vol. 2 [live] Blue Note  
1957 A Night at the Village Vanguard, Vol. 3 [live] Blue Note  
1957 A Night at the Village Vanguard [live] Blue Note  
1957 European Concerts [live] Bandstand  
1958 Sonny Rollins at Music Inn Teddy Edwards at... Metrojazz  
1959 In Stockholm (1959) [live] Dragon  
1959 Aix-En-Provence [live] Royal Jazz  
1962 Our Man in Jazz [live] RCA Victor  
1963 Live in Paris (1963) Magnetic  
1965 Live in Europe (1965) Magnetic  
1973 In Japan [live] JVC  
1974 The Cutting Edge [live] Milestone/OJC  
1978 Don't Stop the Carnival [live] Milestone/OJC  
1978 Milestone Jazzstars in Concert [Bonus Tracks] [live] Milestone  
1985 The Solo Album [live] Milestone

## ***Sonny Rollins Discography - Live Sonny Rollins CDs***

1993 St. Thomas 1959 [live] Dragon  
1995 Denmark, Vol. 1 [live] Moon  
1995 Denmark, Vol. 2 [live] Moon  
1999 A Night at the Village Vanguard [2 CD Set] [live] Blue Note  
2000 Immortal Concerts: Village Vanguard,... [live] Giants of Jazz

## ***Sonny Rollins Discography - Compilation Sonny Rollins Albums***

1949 The Complete Prestige Recordings Prestige  
1951 Vintage Sessions Prestige  
1951 First Recordings [Prestige] Prestige  
1953 Jazz Showcase Original Jazz  
1956 Sonny Rollins [Blue Note] Blue Note  
1956 The Complete Blue Note Recordings Blue Note  
1956 The Freelance Years: The Complete Riverside... Riverside  
1956 The Best of Sonny Rollins Blue Note  
1956 The Essential on Riverside Riverside  
1957 The Freedom Suite Plus Milestone  
1957 First Recordings 1957 Jazz Anthology  
1972 Silver City: A Celebration of 25 Years on... Milestone

## ***Sonny Rollins Discography - Compilation Sonny Rollins CDs***

1992 Compact Jazz: Sonny Rollins and Friends Verve  
1994 Rollins Meets Cherry, Vol. 1 Moon  
1994 Rollins Meets Cherry, Vol. 2 Moon  
1995 1st Recording 1957 Musidisc  
1996 Oleo Jazz Hour  
1996 Rollins' Round Midnight Camden  
1997 The Complete RCA Victor Recordings RCA x  
1997 Jazz Masters GRP  
1997 Priceless Jazz Collection GRP  
1998 Jazz Profile Blue Note

1998 Greatest Hits RCA  
1998 Quartets BMG  
1998 Airegin: 1951-1956 Giants of Jazz  
1998 Tenor Madness 1956 Giants of Jazz  
1998 Freedom Suite 1956-1958 Giants of Jazz  
2000 Les Incontournables Wea  
2000 The Best of the Complete RCA Victor... RCA Victor  
2000 Jazz Essentials: The Sound of Sonny Master Dance  
2000 Ken Burns Jazz Verve  
2001 Jazz Casual: Fine and Mellow Koch  
2001 Just in Time Starburst  
2001 Toot Toot Tootsie International  
2002 Sonny Rollins' Finest Hour Verve  
2002 Ballads Blue Note  
2002 Real Crazy-Young Sonny: 1949-51 Jasmine  
2003 Complete 1949-1951 Prestige Studio Sessions Definitive

### ***Sonny Rollins Discography - Sonny Rollins Videos***

1986 Sonny Rollins Live at Loren Rhapsody  
1986 Sonny Rollins Tokei  
1998 Sonny Rollins & Dexter Gordon Vidjazz  
1999 Jazz Casual: Sonny Rollins [live] Rhino  
2000 Sonny Rollins: Saxophone Colossus... Hal Leonard