BENJAMIN GIVAN

Becoming Sonny Rollins

In late 1939 a twenty-five-year-old Harlem resident named Ralph Ellison stopped to talk to a small boy on the sidewalk near the corner of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. Ellison, who had arrived in New York three years earlier from Tuskegee, Alabama, was on a job collecting urban folklore for the Federal Writers’ Project. Pencil in hand, the aspiring novelist asked the child whether he knew any rhymes. His youthful informant cheerfully offered a few lines about the local elementary school, which was just a stone’s throw away: “Remember the Eight, Remember the Nine, Remember that ‘City Dump’ 89.”

Public School 89 was one of upper Manhattan’s most overcrowded, underfunded city schools; in dimly lit classrooms with broken blackboards, pupils as old as twelve sat cramped in seats meant for kindergartners. The dilapidated building nevertheless stood at the bustling epicenter of Depression-era African American urban life, near an intersection where crowds often congregated around soapbox orators. Within a couple hundred yards’ radius could be found the Harlem branches of the New York Public Library and YMCA, the local NAACP and Urban League headquarters, the offices of the Amsterdam News and New York Age, and Harlem Hospital. A few minutes’ walk southward, an array of clubs and saloons known as “Jungle Alley” was clustered along 133rd Street. Ninety-eight percent of those inhabiting the congested blocks surrounding the four-story schoolhouse were African Americans; scores hailed from the southern states, and many were Caribbean migrants and

Benjamin Givan is associate professor of music at Skidmore College. His previous research on Sonny Rollins appears in the articles “Gunther Schuller and the Challenge of Sonny Rollins” (Journal of the American Musicological Society, 2014) and “On Intergenerational Jazz Performance” (Epistrophy, 2018).

American Music Winter 2019
© 2019 by the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois
their offspring. Among the latter was another young boy enrolled at PS 89, a nine-year-old whose family rented a nearby apartment at 69 West 135th Street. His name was Walter Theodore Rollins. Everyone called him “Sonny.”

His parents, Valborg (1904–58) and Walter William Rollins (1903–76), had arrived in New York ten years earlier from the US Virgin Islands, not long after the formerly Danish West Indian colony’s residents were granted American citizenship. The couple brought with them two small children, a boy and a girl; Sonny, their youngest, was born a year later, in 1930. Like many Harlem families, the Rollinses moved often, and within a decade they had lived at four different addresses in the same neighborhood. One day, around 1939, walking home from PS 89, Sonny passed by a local nightclub called the Elks Rendezvous and gazed up to see a captivating photograph of the venue’s tuxedo-clad resident bandleader, Louis Jordan (1908–75), clutching a shiny King Zephyr alto saxophone. Not long afterward, he asked his mother to buy him a horn.

In the decades to come, with a horn in his hands, Sonny Rollins would make countless international tours and record dozens of albums; he is today acclaimed by many as the world’s greatest living musical improviser and widely regarded as, along with John Coltrane (1926–67), one of jazz’s two most influential tenor saxophonists since World War II. Rollins has also come to epitomize a popular romanticized notion of the individual jazz artist as a lone creative spirit. He has been called “a heroic figure,” and the critic Nate Chinen even described one of his late career outdoor summer performances in New York City, attended by thousands, as a “descen[t] from Mount Olympus.” There is something to all this: the saxophonist has long relished solitude, and the musicologist Barry Kernfeld proposes that “if ever there was an argument for conceiving of jazz group playing . . . as being dominated by a great individual artist, that artist is Rollins.” Yet Rollins has always rejected any heroicization of his personal achievements, preferring to credit the experiences of his youth—the music suffusing his daily world, the performers who influenced him, and those with whom he played and studied. When honored with accolades or awards he typically insists, “My idols . . . deserve to get this award and in getting it I am getting it for them.” Looking back, he says, “I just was born in the right place at the right time.”

It would be hard to imagine a musician who better personifies jazz’s deep roots in the communal environment of black America during the first half of the twentieth century. For all that some scholars have justifiably viewed the idiom as “transnational”—the “lingua franca” of a “global musical culture”—jazz, as Rollins experienced it during his early years, was very much a local phenomenon. This stands to reason. “The greatest quantity of immaterial culture,” anthropologist Greg Urban notes, “is transmitted through propinquity,” and as Travis A. Jackson adds, even “face-to-face contact has to be qualified” inasmuch as jazz’s
sonic properties can potentially be replicated or adapted without any concomitant recognition, understanding, or preservation of the music’s attendant social meanings and functions. Historically, the best route to learning how to play and understand jazz has always been to live near those who already know how. Although the structural and ideological forces shaping interwar Harlem’s culture and demographics were far from universal determinants of its residents’ artistic interests and accomplishments—most of the area’s inhabitants were certainly not destined to become jazz musicians—these particular conditions provided unique opportunities and increased the odds of serendipitous individual circumstances and personal encounters that all would be enormously advantageous for would-be musicians with the desire and perseverance to capitalize upon them. For those so inclined, Rollins among them, few times and places have been so propitious.

Embarking on his life’s musical journey, Rollins acquired expertise through exposure to myriad people, places, and things. There were the relatives, acquaintances, and professional associates who taught, mentored, and encouraged him. There were technologies and media of musical production, reproduction, and distribution: radio broadcasts, feature films, and material objects such as records, books, and of course musical instruments. And there were venues and locales: homes, schoolhouses, clubs, cafés, and ballrooms where the music was practiced, rehearsed, and performed, as well as streets, parks, and indoor public gathering spots where friends congregated to share thoughts and ideas as they went about their daily lives. In this milieu, bearers of musical knowledge habitually imparted their wisdom informally, a social practice that was as much about fostering communal ties and nurturing spiritual well-being as it was about conveying aesthetic principles and their associated methods and techniques. Yet this musical “gift economy” was also suffused with commercial modes of transmission whereby music was commodified and knowledge was exchanged via monetary transactions, through relatively standardized pedagogy, and within public and private educational institutions. In actuality, the commercial musical sphere subsidized the gift economy: professional musicians happily offered their expertise free of charge because they earned their living as performers. As the years passed and jazz grew less commercially viable, they became less disposed to do so; grade-school and conservatory jazz performance programs with remunerated instructors gradually supplanted the custom of gratis knowledge sharing, a turn of events that could scarcely have been foreseen in Rollins’s day.

One thing is certain: the community that fostered Rollins’s early musical aspirations was wrought by racial residential segregation. This white supremacist system of social control was, historian Richard Rothstein observes, “a nationwide project of the federal government in the twentieth century,” and its instruments of enforcement included covenants
imposing racially discriminatory prohibitions on home sales.\textsuperscript{24} Such legally sanctioned practices were directly experienced by innumerable individuals, including Sonny’s childhood friend Andy Kirk Jr. (1929–67), whose father, the famed bandleader Andy Kirk (1898–1992), sought in 1942 to move his family away from Harlem but was thwarted from purchasing a house in the outer city borough of Queens when the Kirks’ prospective new white neighbors filed an injunction compelling the property’s seller to honor a restrictive covenant.\textsuperscript{25} Rollins now considers bebop, the new jazz of his adolescence, to have symbolized the gradual—if far from total—alleviation of these oppressive forces. ‘Bebop represented the freedom people felt in being able to go where they wanted—geographically, politically and artistically—and no longer being confined to one area,’ he asserted in the early 1990s. Yet the saxophonist also acknowledges the cruel irony that African Americans’ conditions of involuntary proximity yielded robust, valued communal ties: ‘It’s only now that I look back and say, ‘Damn, what happened to the community?’ There was nothing wrong with living in Harlem; it was a great environment when I was young. The freedom was great; it had to happen, but it was not an unmixed blessing.’\textsuperscript{26}

In 1940, when Sonny was ten years old, the Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay noted that, because the city’s African American population was then so geographically concentrated, “there is no other minority group in New York having such an extraordinary diversity of individuals of achievement and wealth who are compelled to live in the midst of the mass.”\textsuperscript{27} Rollins remembers his own neighborhood as “the sort of place where most of the black artists—who were able to—lived. . . . And all of the great [musicians] lived there. . . . So it was a beautiful place to grow up.”\textsuperscript{28} A fellow resident of his block during their teenage years was Roy Eaton (b. 1930), a future advertising professional and accomplished classical pianist who later recalled, “It was segregated, yes. But it was a segregation that allowed seeds to be planted and blossoms to occur that could not have occurred in any other environment.”\textsuperscript{29} Of all the art forms that flowered in this setting, none has proven more vibrant, distinctive, and enduring than jazz, and few artists of the interwar generation have become more visible beacons of the music’s cultural influence than Sonny Rollins. If we hear in his improvisations a remarkable individual creative mind at work, we also hear the deep collective wisdom of a great community at a unique historical moment.

“\textit{You Were Expected to Play a Musical Instrument}”

Rollins was raised in a musical home. His paternal grandfather, Stedman Rollins, was, according to family lore, an amateur singer in St. Croix, and his father, who was enlisted in the US Navy and stationed in Annapolis,
Maryland, during most of his children’s youth, had at one time played
the clarinet a little “just for amusement.”

His mother, who worked as a domestic for a family on Park Avenue and had studied music as a teenager, brought her offspring to Caribbean dances in Harlem and owned records by calypso artists such as Gerald Clark and his Caribbean Serenaders. She sang to them. (Rollins learned from her the traditional West Indian melody “Fire Down There,” which he later recorded as “St. Thomas,” retitled after the island where she was born.) And she took them to hear European operettas; as a youngster, Rollins saw a summer outdoor performance of Gilbert and Sullivan’s The Pirates of Penzance at Harlem’s Colonial Park (since renamed Jackie Robinson Park), most likely in 1935, as well as other productions at New York’s City Center, which opened in 1943. From early on, he heard a wide range of musics from different parts of the world.

The family owned a banjo, a xylophone, and a player piano along with some piano rolls by the stride pianist James P. Johnson. Sonny’s sister, Gloria (1928–2008), took piano lessons, and their brother, Valdemar (1925–2018), occasionally played songs by Duke Ellington at the keyboard. Valdemar’s main instrument was the violin, however; both he and Gloria were classically trained and attended New York’s High School for Music and Art. The two elder siblings become proficient enough to play Mendelssohn’s violin concerto together at home, and after finishing high school Valdemar was recruited by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, though he instead enrolled at City College and, after receiving a degree from Meharry Medical College, became a physician. Among Virgin Islanders, elite European music was considered a mark of class status and social cultivation, and the Rollins family subscribed to the integrationist ethos that has more recently been termed a “politics of respectability.” “In a West Indian family you were expected to do well in school,” Gloria recalled. “You also were expected to play a musical instrument. . . . From the Virgin Islands, you had to play the piano or the violin, or something to ensure that you were inclined toward the better things in life—I’ll put it that way.” Her younger brother, Sonny, remained conversant with Western classical music throughout his life, citing a love for composers from Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart through Debussy, Ravel, and Puccini, quoting works by Verdi, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Prokofiev in his improvisations, and even at one point recording a theme from Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique Symphony.

Religious music was another strong presence. Gloria Rollins sang in the choir at the Moravian church that the family regularly attended (probably Beth-Tphillah Fourth Moravian Church on West 136th Street, where Reverend Charles D. Martin preached). Most congregants were of West Indian origin, and the denomination’s liturgical music was heavily Europeanized. “It wasn’t gospelly,” Sonny remembered. “It was
very straight hymns and Bach Cantatas. . . . The Moravian church was very straight-laced with the organ and this type of thing.”43 His maternal grandmother, Miriam Hansen (née Walcott), also occasionally took him to services elsewhere, from Harlem storefront churches to major houses of worship such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church, on West 138th Street, and the Pentecostal Faith Church, on Lenox Avenue at 130th Street, presided over by Mother Rosa A. Horn, a South Carolina native.44 Mother Horn’s sermons, which Rollins also heard on radio broadcasts, were demonstratively impassioned affairs, with congregants often falling out during the services.45 “It was one of these real sanctified churches that had band instruments playing,” he remembered, describing the music as “sort of jazz-gospel.”46 He recalls “hearing a trumpet player playing with Mother Horn’s church who was really swinging.”47

During his youth, Rollins often heard gospel music over the New York airwaves as well: he would tune in to popular national Sunday broadcasts by the Golden Gate Quartet and the Wings Over Jordan Choir, a large vocal ensemble that sang African American spirituals.48 By the 1930s commercial radio had become a major cultural force in the United States, and Rollins became an avid radio devotee as a small child, once even asking his grandmother to pause while midway through saying dinnertime grace so that he could listen to The Lone Ranger.49 Decades later he was still playing songs that he first heard as Depression-era radio show themes.50 “All of these things stay with me,” he reflected. “And I try to use them in my own expression.”51 “Radio more than any other medium,” according to historian David W. Stowe, “was at the heart of the synergy that drove the swing industry,” and by his midteens Rollins was regularly listening to jazz shows presented by New York disc jockeys such as Fred Robbins and “Symphony” Sid Torin.52 Though American radio networks were routinely broadcasting nationwide, much of the music he heard on air originated only blocks away, such as the weekly live transmissions from the nearby Apollo Theater’s amateur night, hosted on Wednesday evenings by Ralph Cooper and Willie Bryant.53 One of the first jazz musicians he remembers hearing on air was the stride pianist and singer Fats Waller, who grew up on West 134th Street, attended PS 89 a generation before Sonny did, and began his career playing the organ for silent films at the Lincoln Theater on West 135th Street, across from where the Rollinses lived during the late 1930s.54 Sonny cites broadcasts of Waller singing “I’m Going to Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter” as “one of my earliest memories of jazz. . . . It struck a chord someplace in my back lives.”55 He thought Waller “a fantastic musician/entertainer . . . [a] great guy and comic similar to Louis Armstrong,” and he was also greatly impressed by Waller’s keyboard playing.56

At around the same time, Rollins was spending many hours in the care of his mother’s half-brother, Reuben Victoria (1908–81), whose girlfriend,
Becoming Sonny Rollins

Lizzie, a Georgia native, owned several country blues records by guitarist Lonnie Johnson and singer-guitarists Big Joe Williams, Tommy McClennan, and Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup. But the discs in Sonny’s aunt and uncle’s collection that truly captured his attention were by another artist: Louis Jordan, his first musical idol. “It’s really [Jordan] who inspired me to take up jazz,” he recalled. “You can’t imagine how much I admired him!” By the early 1940s Rollins had acquired his own copies of several Jordan records, including “Knock Me a Kiss” and “I’m Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town,” a two-sided hit 78 recorded in late 1941, and songs such as “Five Guys Named Moe” and “It’s a Low Down Dirty Shame,” from the following year. A rambunctious showman, ebullient singer, and adept horn player, Jordan was one of the era’s most popular African American artists, somewhat underrecognized by jazz scholars because he has tended to be classified as more of a rhythm-and-blues forerunner. Still, in later years Rollins looked back on Jordan’s Tympany Five, with its lineup of two saxophones and trumpet plus a rhythm section consisting of piano, bass, and drums, as “the model for a lot of jazz, almost to this day, instrumental small band jazz.” “That led into the [bebop] Charlie Parker–Dizzy [Gillespie] group—I mean that type of sound,” he observed.

“Where to Put Your Fingers”

At his parents’ behest, Rollins started taking piano lessons at about eight, but he showed little interest in the instrument; it was at around the same age, while enrolled in elementary school, that he took up the saxophone instead. Many upwardly mobile African Americans of the era took a dim view of jazz, regarding it as, in Ellison’s words, “a backward, low-class form of expression,” and Rollins’s immediate family, which he recalls as “middle class,” disapproved of his eventual decision to pursue the music professionally. But his mother, at least, was happy to encourage his initial enthusiasm for the saxophone and introduced him to an alto player named Hubert Myers, a family friend (or possibly an uncle or other distant relative—Rollins is unsure) who was performing at Harlem’s Renaissance Ballroom around that time. Myers procured for the youngster a secondhand alto saxophone.

Rollins practiced long and hard from the moment he received his first horn. Although he has always considered himself largely “self taught,” he received a smattering of formal instrumental instruction during his early years, beginning with some tuition at the New York Schools of Music. With over a dozen sites throughout the city and surrounding suburbs, the New York Schools of Music offered twenty-five-cent lessons in folk and popular instruments such as the banjo, ukulele, and accordion, as well as in traditional classical instruments such as the piano and
Givan violin. At the school’s Harlem branch, at 101 West 125th Street, Rollins was given a few elementary technical pointers in “how to hold the horn, where to put your fingers.” He recalls that his teacher was “Mr. Bastien”—most likely Tony Bastien (1917–74), a white jazz musician who had recently arrived in New York from Minnesota and was soon to join big bands led by Sonny Dunham and Vaughn Monroe; he was, according to Rollins, “one of these saxophone players that played with a double embouchure.” Closer to home, Sonny also studied for a short time at the 135th Street branch of the YMCA, and his mother asked Tapley Lewis (1910–84), a West Indian baritone and alto saxophonist living nearby who played briefly with Don Redman and Louis Armstrong, to give her son a few lessons. Throughout all his early instrumental instruction Rollins always played mainly by ear, but he also learned to read Western staff notation, at one point practicing études and tone-production exercises from a saxophone method book by Ben Vereecken.

In Depression-era Harlem many musical idioms—European and American, black and white, old and new, religious and secular, rural and urban, middle and working class, art and entertainment—coexisted and intersected in ways that belie any notion of jazz as a discrete idiom with markedly distinct aesthetic practices. Jazz notably differed, however, from other genres in uptown Manhattan in the degree to which it was a local music as much as a national or global one. All of the artists who initially inspired the young Rollins—most of them major figures in jazz—lived or performed close by. He described “walking by the Savoy Ballroom and seeing the pictures of all the celebrities appearing there,” recalling the well-known dance venue on Lenox Avenue at 140th Street. “And many of them lived in our neighborhood.” At the same time, technologically mediated music was omnipresent. Some jazz scholars have rightly argued that the many fans, critics, and historians who encounter the music at a geographical or temporal distance from its origins, with more limited opportunities to hear it played in person, are prone to overestimate the importance of recordings. Yet in Sonny’s youth technologies of reproduction and dissemination—piano rolls, radio, and films, as well as commercial discs—were as commonplace as live events. At the movies he heard many popular songs that remained in his professional repertoire decades later; he was enthralled by Hollywood film musicals such as the 1936 Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers feature Swing Time, with songs by Jerome Kern, which ran at the Lincoln Theater, and the 1943 black-cast extravaganza Cabin in the Sky, starring Lena Horne and Ethel Waters along with an appearance by the Duke Ellington Orchestra, which he saw during a summer visit to his father in Annapolis. In fact, even though most of his greatest musical influences often played nearby, he first heard them all through media. At first he was too young to hear live jazz. (In the late 1930s, Louis Jordan’s earliest evening set at the Elks
Becoming Sonny Rollins

Rendezvous, a cabaret that of course served alcohol and did not admit children, opened at 10:00 p.m.) But even when he grew old enough to attend shows, they could never be as conveniently and cheaply accessible as radio and records.

Edgecombe Avenue

Nevertheless, Rollins’s urban surroundings offered unique daily experiences and opportunities that were crucial to his musical development. In 1940 his family moved a mile north to Sugar Hill, a somewhat more prosperous Harlem neighborhood where many of New York’s prominent African American citizens made their homes. “That was sort of the elite section where black celebrities, socialites lived,” he remembered. “Doctors and lawyers and intellectuals—the intelligentsia.” Local residents included the sociologist Kenneth Clark, singer/actor Paul Robeson, and boxer Joe Louis. Even so, the area was quite economically diverse. “Everybody that lived on Sugar Hill was not necessarily well-to-do,” recalled Rollins, whose father’s income in 1939 was $1,260 (under $23,000 in 2019 dollars). At 377 Edgecombe Avenue, on a quarter-mile-long block rising gently northward from 150th Street, the Rollinses’ new apartment building faced a wide bench-and-tree-lined sidewalk that abutted a cliff overlooking Colonial Park, where a public swimming pool had recently opened. Within earshot, a couple of blocks uptown across 155th Street, stood the Polo Grounds, home of the New York Giants baseball team; farther off to the east, one could see Yankee Stadium over the Harlem River in the Bronx (major league ball was all-white at the time).

Sonny, a Yankees fan, often played ball with friends in the street and was even made captain of his neighborhood team, the Edgecombe Avenue Aces. Local luminaries often passed by. Rollins remembers being “a little kid playing what we would call stoop ball, and we’d be hitting the ball up against the side of the building. So here comes W. E. B. Du Bois, walking down the avenue.” The renowned sociologist, historian, and campaigner for racial equality, then in his seventies, lived at the north end of the block, at 409 Edgecombe Avenue, as did the future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, NAACP officials Roy Wilkins and Walter White, and the painter Aaron Douglas. An aristocratic elitist by temperament, Du Bois showed little outward conviviality toward his working- and middle-class neighbors. “He’d sort of be looking at us in a disdainful way,” Rollins thought. “Like, ‘Here are these little ruffians.’ I’ll always remember that. He was sort of a strict-looking guy.”

“That whole area was great,” Rollins said, years later. “It was the center of the Harlem cultural community.” There was no shortage of nightspots and eateries. On 155th Street, a few blocks eastward at the foot of the hill, stood the Rockland Palace (formerly the Manhattan Casino); closer
by on the same street the Fat Man’s Bar-and-Grill drew celebrities from afar.92 A block west of Edgecombe Avenue, on St. Nicholas Place, were Lawson Bowman’s Melody Room and, a little southward, Estelle and Edwin Craigg’s Colony Club.93 In 1943 the stride pianist Luckey Roberts opened a bar, Luckey’s Rendezvous, three short blocks farther down-hill to the south, where St. Nicholas Place dovetailed with St. Nicholas Avenue.94 A few doors beyond Luckey’s was Jimmy’s Chicken Shack—where, around that time, both Charlie Parker and Redd Foxx washed dishes and Malcolm X briefly waited tables—and across the street was Al’s Luncheonette, a diner with a jukebox that Sonny and his friends would frequent in the years ahead.95 They would also congregate on the nearby benches at Donnellan Square, a tiny sliver of a park colloquially known as “Goof Square,” where 150th Street intersected St. Nicholas Avenue.96

In his new neighborhood, Rollins enrolled at Edward W. Stitt Junior High School, a half mile uptown on Edgecombe Avenue at 164th Street, not far from the Audubon Ballroom.97 As with most middle-grade US public schools of the era, musical instruction at Stitt Junior High focused on singing, with some additional time spent on music appreciation, then a relatively new educational trend.98 New York’s public schools during World War II were staffed by many highly qualified teachers who, according to education historian Diane Ravitch, “in better times might have become college professors,” and Stitt’s head music teacher, Esther Ostroff, was a skilled Juilliard-trained pianist.99 She conducted a glee club choral ensemble whose members included Lowell Lewis, a close friend of Sonny’s who was to become a promising jazz trumpeter.100 But the school offered no instrumental instruction, and there was no organized student band.101 Its music appreciation classes were mainly geared toward familiarizing pupils with songs such as Gilbert and Sullivan operetta arias and popular melodies from previous generations, along the lines of “Poor Butterfly.”102 There were also occasional live performances, such as a recital of spirituals by operatic tenor John Eckles, who was another teacher on staff, and his wife, Blanche, both of whom had sung with the Hall Johnson Choir.103 During Rollins’s final term students at the school painted a mural depicting “the outstanding contributions of many [cultural] groups to the folk music of our country.”104 At the very least, Stitt pupils were exposed to a variety of musical idioms and to accomplished classical performers.

But needless to say, the Harlem community remained a far superior repository of musical knowledge and expertise. Within a few blocks of the Rollinses lived the nationally recognized band leaders Duke Ellington and Jimmie Lunceford, as well as Count Basie, Erskine Hawkins, and Andy Kirk, all three of whom resided a short distance uptown at 555 Edgecombe Avenue, whose occupants also included Lena Horne and the arranger Don
Becoming Sonny Rollins

Redman. Also close by were another well-known arranger, Sy Oliver, singer Jimmy Rushing, trombonist Tyree Glenn, pianists Mary Lou Williams and Willie “The Lion” Smith, bassist John Kirby, and drummers Sidney Catlett, Jimmy Crawford, and Denzil Best. One of Valborg Rollins’s friends knew Best, who had only recently taken up the drums after starting out as a trumpeter, and Sonny, in his early teens, tried to seek the musician’s advice: “I used to go by and ring his bell. One time, I knew the guy was there, so I just kept ringing and ringing. Finally, he opened it. He was half-sleepy. So I asked him some questions about playing with Coleman Hawkins. He was just . . . ‘Get this kid out of here.’”

“Hawk Had a Way about Him”

As it happened, by 1942 Coleman Hawkins (1904–69) himself, an epochal jazz tenor saxophone virtuoso, was residing on West 153rd Street at St. Nicholas Avenue, about five minutes’ walk from the Rollinses’. After spending most of the 1920s and early 1930s with Fletcher Henderson’s Orchestra, followed by five years in Europe, Hawkins had returned to New York in 1939, sealing his reputation that fall with an acclaimed recording of “Body and Soul.” During the early 1940s, Rollins recalls, Hawkins’s disc could be heard on jukeboxes all over Harlem; Sonny first encountered the dazzling two-chorus improvisation at around ten years old while standing on 135th Street outside the Big Apple Bar, where it was spinning on one of the coin-operated machines. One of his saxophone-playing neighbors owned a notated transcription of the solo (perhaps the one that Down Beat magazine published in the fall of 1940), and Rollins himself tried playing some of it. He was struck by the simple fact that Hawkins “was improvising. That, in itself, was significant, that it wasn’t somebody singing. It wasn’t more obvious, accessible music. This was really difficult, highly artistic music; improvisational music, at its highest level, played on a saxophone.” By the time Hawkins settled on 153rd Street, two years later, he was at the peak of his fame.

Inspired by Hawkins, Rollins started using a tenor reed on his alto saxophone. The larger instrument’s allure only grew when he visited a family friend named Herbert Vanterpool, a St. Thomas native who kept an eye-catching shiny tenor in a velvet-lined case. Sonny “pestered” his mother for a while, and eventually, around 1942 or 1943, she took him to buy his own tenor saxophone at Manny’s Music on 48th Street (the midtown blocks known as “music row,” then lined with musical instrument dealers, repair shops, and sheet music vendors, as well as teaching studios). Rollins later recalled that proprietor Manny Goldrich “was a big believer in me” who subsequently “used to try to get me into the more commercial aspect of music—not playing, but just to get me known [and] greater acceptance.”
Before long, at around the age of fourteen, Rollins plucked up the nerve to ask Hawkins for an autograph, and he eventually began regularly stopping by his hero’s apartment to ask for playing tips; occasionally they practiced together.\textsuperscript{118} The older musician’s records were an equally important source of knowledge and inspiration—Rollins distinctly remembers “Sweet Lorraine,” “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance,” and a disc pairing “Stuffy” with “It’s the Talk of the Town.”\textsuperscript{119} One disc that stood out for him was a tour de force 1943 rendition of Gershwin’s “The Man I Love.”\textsuperscript{120} “In that solo, he was not only playing the changes,” Rollins observed. “He was also playing the passing chords . . . and still, he was getting the jazz intensity moving.”\textsuperscript{121} Along with his powerful tone, Hawkins’s deep knowledge of harmony especially impressed his young acolyte.\textsuperscript{122} The swing saxophonist used various sorts of chromaticism, including tritone chord substitutions, that were fairly uncommon in jazz improvisation before the mid-1940s.\textsuperscript{123} “He was a diagonal player, up-and-down more than linear, with a huge sound and a sort of operatic grandeur,” Rollins said.\textsuperscript{124} “You had to know theory in order to play like that. . . . That was a challenge, and as a young aspiring musician, I thought, ‘I’d better learn this.’”\textsuperscript{125} Hawkins’s technical facility and harmonic mastery seemed to Rollins to be marks of intellectual sophistication and gravitas.\textsuperscript{126} More than just a musical role model, the older player’s “dignified demeanor” projected a conception of jazz as a serious art, as well as a compelling form of entertainment.\textsuperscript{127} In effect, musicians such as Hawkins decoupled the etiquettes of cultivated black masculinity from the Eurocentric artistic traditions generally favored by more conservative neighborhood paragons of gentility such as Du Bois.\textsuperscript{128} “He was always very well dressed,” Rollins noted.\textsuperscript{129} “Hawk had a way about him that everyone respected. His deportment was always gracious, and he took care of business.”\textsuperscript{130}

\textit{“You’re Disturbing My Neighbors”}

By his early teens, Sonny was devoting hours each day to his saxophone. “He could be heard practicing his horn above the street sounds and the boys’ screams as they played stickball in the street below his window,” remembered Faith Ringgold (née Jones), a girl his age who lived a few doors down the block, at 363 Edgecombe Avenue. According to Ringgold (b. 1930), who grew up to become a successful visual artist, Rollins displayed a “strong sense of purpose” from early on, persevering while “people would laugh at him when he played ‘off notes.’ . . . My mother would say, ‘Sonny, please, you’re disturbing my neighbors,’ when [he] would bring over his horn on weekends.”\textsuperscript{131} At his own mother’s suggestion, Rollins began practicing in a closet to avoid bothering other tenants, some of whom, as it turned out, were warmly supportive.\textsuperscript{132} “I would
play in the closet so the sound didn’t get all up and down the building,” he recalled. “I never thought about it as practice. I just loved to play and I would get in the closet and blow for hours—nine, ten hours and I would get lost in my reverie, in the sound. I really didn’t practice any one thing, I’d just play songs and blow in a stream-of-consciousness way. Our neighbor, Mr. Mason, he would always encourage me. When I’d see him, he’d yell, Yeah, Sonny, that’s it, and Yeah, Sonny, go.” It is Rollins’s exceptional practice ethic, more than anything else, that distinguishes him from the countless other individuals who grew up in the same time and place with similar musical experiences and opportunities: “I don’t look at it as work,” he reflected. His method of self-education—which foreshadowed the famous extended live unaccompanied cadenzas of his later career—perfectly exemplifies the close connection between musical autodidacticism, improvisation, and individuality. Motivated principally by inner determination and with at most only intermittent instructional guidance, Rollins mastered the saxophone through an exploratory process of trial and error. Informed by his daily immersion in music as a listener, this mode of spontaneous creativity involved a total integration of instrumental technique with auditory conceptualization and sonic realization. For Rollins, playing, practicing, and learning were all inseparable, and all always improvisatory.

As time passed he increasingly began hearing jazz performed live—listening to music became a public communal pursuit, as well as a domestic one centering on records and the radio at home. Before he was old enough to be admitted to nightclubs, Rollins frequented the Apollo Theater on 125th Street, a storied venue that he later called “my university.” Open to audiences of all ages and presenting four or five stage shows, along with cartoons and feature films, each Saturday afternoon, the Apollo was where many of New York City’s young jazz enthusiasts of the day first saw their idols in person. There, Sonny heard big bands led by Ellington, Basie, Lunceford, Erskine Hawkins, and Fletcher Henderson and saw singers such as Billie Holiday, Billy Eckstine, and Sarah Vaughan. Eventually, while still underage, he began making his way to New York’s midtown clubs on 52nd Street, where he finally had a chance to hear Coleman Hawkins perform. It was at the Apollo, though, that he witnessed, firsthand, signs that the trends in jazz toward increasing musical complexity and artistic seriousness, exemplified by Hawkins and younger bebop musicians, were attracting shrinking audiences. Acts that played relatively accessible entertainment-oriented music, such as Lionel Hampton, Tiny Bradshaw, and Dinah Washington, packed the theater, whereas artists such as Coleman Hawkins and Charlie Parker drew far sparser crowds.

Jazz musicians and listeners were becoming a subculture. “We had a small group of guys that really dug jazz,” Rollins remembered. “As
opposed to a lot of the guys we were growing up with who liked rhythm and blues.” With World War II drawing to a close and the swing era fading into history, American society was changing, and a new generation was starting, more than ever, to treat the music as an earnest endeavor, somewhat independent of and at times counterposed against mainstream popular and commercial trends. In their midteens, Rollins’s close circle of friends included several individuals destined to become significant postwar jazz artists. Some, like pianists Walter Bishop Jr. (1927–98) and Kenny Drew (1928–93), lived a short way downtown, but several lived in his immediate neighborhood, such as drummer Art Taylor (1929–95) and alto saxophonist Jackie McLean (1931–2006).

The fall of 1945 saw Rollins and his junior high school classmate Lowell Lewis enroll at Benjamin Franklin High School, a boys’ public school that had recently opened a new building overlooking the FDR Drive at 116th Street, in an area of East Harlem populated mainly by Italian immigrants. With a student body approximately half Italian American and a third African American, the school was known for its progressive educational philosophy (though its reputation for intercultural tolerance was marred, a few weeks after Rollins and Lewis arrived, by an outbreak of violence by white pupils against their black schoolmates). Several other students were serious jazz players—Rollins remembers tenor saxophonist Percy France, drummer Sonny Payne, and trumpeter Andrew “Red” De Stefano; Jackie McLean also attended briefly. There were occasional opportunities to hear popular music and jazz performed—Frank Sinatra and Nat “King” Cole both gave concerts during a period of reconciliation following the racial disturbances. But the official curriculum, typically for its time, focused on Western classical music and devoted no attention to jazz. (African American spirituals were the only form of black music then widely recognized as legitimate in US educational institutions.)

Rollins played in the school band, directed by violinist Silas Birnbaum, and he enjoyed singing classes. (One song in the students’ repertoire was Vincent Youmans’s “Without a Song,” which appeared regularly on Rollins’s set lists decades later.) Studies with the chair of the school’s music department, Bessie Carroll Redmond, suited him less well. A classical pianist in her early sixties with two degrees from Columbia University’s Teachers College, Redmond taught a well-received music appreciation class and had recently coauthored an anthology of symphonic themes, from Haydn through Shostakovich, with a preface by Deems Taylor. Rollins felt that Redmond, who was a longtime member of the segregationist Daughters of the American Revolution, “didn’t like me and was always on my case. She kind of traumatized me about musical skills like writing and harmony.” In her counterpoint course, he remembered, “we were learning about things like parallel fifths, which really made music mysterious when it shouldn’t have been.” (His friend Lowell apparently found her more supportive.) A music curriculum
Becoming Sonny Rollins

The Rollins family’s apartment building at 377 Edgecombe Avenue, in 2016
Givan

Walter “Foots” Thomas, Rollins’s saxophone teacher on West 48th Street

Bessie Carroll Redmond, Chair of Music at Benjamin Franklin High School

Sonny Rollins’s high school graduation portrait, 1947
privileging one particular epistemological system can easily shake the self-confidence of students who, however musically accomplished or ambitious, apprehend music in other ways; for his entire career, Rollins would feel ambivalent about standardized music theory.\textsuperscript{152} Years afterward, he still recalled feeling “insecure” due to his lack of traditional Westernized training: “It sort of put a mental block in my head. . . . And it might have had some kind of a psychological effect on my thinking about formalized teaching of the music.”\textsuperscript{153} And yet, he is almost certainly Redmond’s most distinguished student.

Rollins’s most important musical education continued outside school. By the mid-1940s, with big bands’ popularity waning, large numbers of professional jazz players were seeing their income from gigs decline, and many were leaving the music business. (Tapley Lewis, who had since married Sonny’s paternal aunt, Gwendolyn [1922–91], took a job with the US Postal Service.)\textsuperscript{154} Some began offering paid instrumental lessons, and since jazz performance conservatories barely existed—Berklee, the first, was founded in 1945—they worked independently.\textsuperscript{155} As the Cab Calloway Orchestra neared the end of the road, several of its members rented studios at 117 West 48th Street; trumpeter Doc Cheatham (1905–97) and saxophonist Andy Brown (1900–1960) shared a two-room space, and another office was occupied by drummer Cozy Cole (1909–81) and saxophonist Walter “Foots” Thomas (1907–81).

Rollins took several lessons with Thomas, as well as a few with another saxophonist, Joe Napoleon (1906–72), a white former member of the Tommy Dorsey and Paul Whiteman Orchestras who taught in the same building.\textsuperscript{157} Thomas, who had studied with Andrew Jacobson, an ex-member of John Philip Sousa’s band, was a dedicated teacher who offered a correspondence course in improvisation; his other adolescent students at the time included Jackie McLean and, fleetingly, Ornette Coleman (1930–2015).\textsuperscript{158} He was the only jazz musician of note whom Rollins paid for lessons, but his tutelage did not focus on jazz playing. (“I never had a real jazz lesson,” Sonny later remarked.)\textsuperscript{159} Fingering technique and tone production were his main pedagogical emphasis.\textsuperscript{160} “The most perfect attack is put your tongue on the reed, and as you blow, take it off,” Thomas explained. “Once you attack, let the tongue be all the way down in the mouth and in front of your mouth, touching your lip, and the teeth in front. That way it’s relaxed.”\textsuperscript{161} As a mature artist, Rollins would become widely admired for his mastery of staccato tongued saxophone articulation.\textsuperscript{162}

Well into his career, in the early 1960s, Sonny handwrote, for his own use, a detailed overview of Thomas’s principles of saxophone embouchure:

1. Loosening of the “back jaw muscles.” . . . 2. Advocating of the “unchange embouchure.” . . . 3. In regard to both #1 and #2 the fact of more air necessary for low and for high notes was presented with
the admonition that more air should not change the embouchure or tighten the back jaw muscles. . . . 4. After establishing the sound of the tone in ear, an almost audible hum while simulating playing into the horn should be practiced—for notes around C 523.23 [i.e., an octave above concert middle C]. . . . A) Also to mentally adapt a positive attitude concerning production of these notes and to know that they will be hit when we go for them!! . . . 5. Imagine the notes as emanating from the bell of the horn and never, regardless of note, as from the note holes on the bore.163

Foots Thomas evidently was a highly rigorous instructor whose influence on Rollins’s instrumental technique was deep and lasting. Meticulous and exacting, his teaching method encompassed both physical and psychological aspects of saxophone playing.

Meanwhile, during their high school years Rollins and his friends were gathering at one another’s homes to hear recordings, sometimes slowing down 78 rpm discs while they tried to copy licks.164 Sonny even learned a few recorded solos in their entirety.165 By this time he was listening very widely, above all to tenor saxophonists, and found himself drawn especially to “guys who had big sounds”—an attribute he thought highly advantageous in the days when some venues still lacked amplification.166 After Hawkins, his main influence on tenor was Lester Young (1909–59), beginning with the latter’s 1943 quartet recordings on the Keynote label.167 Young’s five-chorus up-tempo blues solo on “Afternoon of a Basie-Ite” made a lasting impression: “What he’s saying is deep as the ocean. There was a beginning and an end. He was storytelling all the way through.”168 Other tenor players Rollins followed closely during this period were Ben Webster (1909–73), who had often been appearing on 52nd Street since leaving the Duke Ellington Orchestra in 1943, and Don Byas (1912–72), a fleet-fingered saxophonist whom Sonny for a time regarded as “the most modern jazz player I had ever heard.”169

“To Be Like Bird”

In 1946 Rollins bought Byas’s new disc of “How High the Moon” and discovered on its B-side a recording by another musician—with an unfamiliar name.170 “I was following Don Byas,” he remembered, “and there happens to be this record on the other side by this guy named Charlie Parker [1920–55], an alto player.”171 The tune was “Ko-Ko,” a now-famous “Cherokee” contrafact, also featuring trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1917–93), that had been recorded the previous fall (on the same day as the Byas track).172 At first Rollins felt he “didn’t really understand” Parker’s record, with its blistering alto saxophone solo, but he found it “interesting” enough to pique his curiosity, and after he played it for some high school friends it began to grow on him: “I got attracted to it
eventually—I didn’t immediately say ‘that’s it.’ After a while I realized the value in what [Parker] was doing, which, in a way, was an extension of Coleman Hawkins. It wasn’t that different, really, to somebody that really understood what was happening musically, technically.”

The similarities Rollins perceived between “Ko-Ko” and Hawkins’s playing suggest a conception of Parker’s music, which soon became known as bebop, as less of a revolutionary artistic movement, as some have portrayed it, and more of, “in a narrow musical sense, a logical and seamless continuation of swing,” in the words of musicologist Scott DeVeaux, whose work Rollins has read. “There is no separation getting into bebop,” Rollins maintains. “There is not such a big difference.”

This is by no means to say that Parker’s musical innovations were insubstantial. The alto saxophonist’s sheer mental and physical speed was, in itself, something that Rollins set out to emulate: “We got a kick out of being able to do it. The music was fun!” Sonny took especially close note of Parker’s occasional tenor saxophone performances, particularly some records that he made on the tenor not long afterward, in 1947. (Another Parker disc, recorded on alto later that same year, that he greatly admired was the B-flat blues “Another Hair Do.”) Ultimately, though, Rollins believed Parker’s greatest achievement as a soloist was his use of long-range melodic strategies, then a rare phenomenon in jazz improvisation. The “music wasn’t ‘bang—bang—bang—bang,’” Rollins observed. “Charlie Parker did: ‘bang . . . [draws a long arc in the air] . . . bang.’ He connected things which were sort of segmented in the [other] styles of music. He connected everything.”

Insofar as this sort of structural continuity mirrors the organicist formal coherence traditionally associated with European classical works, it affirms modernist conceptions of bebop. Parker’s persona—serious in his bearing, erudite in his conversation, statuesque while performing—in itself framed his music as “intellectually advanced” and deserving of respect. He “had a profound effect on [Rollins’s] life, musically as well as personally.” Sonny and his aspiring musician friends would seek him out, on and off the bandstand: “He came off his sets down on 52nd Street, and actually he was really good to us, you know, he treated us like sons.”

Sadly, Parker’s heroin addiction to some extent validated narcotic use among Rollins and many of his circle: “We all knew Bird [Parker] used drugs, and it made me feel that it can’t be that bad if Bird is doing it. I wanted to be like Bird in every way I could.” For some, the consequences were tragic: Andy Kirk Jr. gave up music in his early twenties and died in his thirties; trumpeter Lowell Lewis was permanently institutionalized after suffering a psychological breakdown. Yet for Rollins bebop remained a positive political force because of its sociopolitical identification as a modernist art form. He and his friends felt it “reflected our alienation from the mainstream,” and they valued it for
being “the first musical movement to completely turn away from the minstrel image of most black entertainment.”\textsuperscript{186} They considered it “a music of freedom, of breaking with the past.”\textsuperscript{187}

\textit{“Monk Was a Magician”}

At about fourteen Rollins played his first professional gig with a small band at a dance hall on Jerome Avenue, a short walk across the Macombs Dam Bridge from his home.\textsuperscript{188} During his early teens he also started attending informal jam sessions that brought him face-to-face with older, more experienced players; at one session he met Dexter Gordon (1923–90), the leading tenor saxophonist of the early bebop era.\textsuperscript{189} Before turning sixteen Sonny had organized his own group, sometimes known as the Counts of Bebop, comprising neighborhood friends such as Lowell Lewis, Kenny Drew or Walter Bishop Jr., and Andy Kirk Jr.\textsuperscript{190} They were often joined by either Connie Henry or Art Phipps on bass, and by 1947 they were also playing with Art Taylor and, a little later, Jackie McLean.\textsuperscript{191} Rollins’s musicianship clearly began to progress by leaps and bounds during this period. He recollects that “everybody wanted to be a musician, but I had a little more talent than a lot of the other guys,” and at times his friends were even taken somewhat aback by his rapidly increasing prowess.\textsuperscript{192} Rollins was always the group’s leader, Taylor recalled, and according to McLean, “Sonny influenced everybody uptown, playing every instrument.”\textsuperscript{193} At first, most of their engagements were for dances and functions, where the conditions could be less than ideal.\textsuperscript{194} “They could get ugly,” Rollins remembered. “You had to be vigilant because fights could break out and you would have to protect yourself and your horn.”\textsuperscript{195} For dances they would sometimes play calypso tunes, a practice that Rollins resumed to great acclaim a decade later.\textsuperscript{196} Their first nightclub performance was at Bowman’s (which later reopened as Branker’s), on St. Nicholas Place at 155th Street.\textsuperscript{197} Rollins also recalls visiting Montreal in 1946, and he has a vague memory of playing at the city’s Alberta Lounge at the time.\textsuperscript{198}

It was during the following year, 1947, that Rollins, as a high school senior, was introduced to the pianist and composer Thelonious Monk (1917–82), who was to be a vital mentor at this formative stage of the saxophonist’s career, as well as a key professional colleague on and off over the next decade.\textsuperscript{199} Monk, who had been the house pianist at Minton’s Playhouse at the time of the now-legendary early 1940s jam sessions involving several future bebop innovators, was not yet well known; within a year he would gain greater recognition through publicity surrounding his first record releases on the Blue Note label.\textsuperscript{200} Rollins had first become aware of him from the records he made with Coleman Hawkins in late 1944, in particular “Flyin’ Hawk” and “Drifting on a Reed,” and had found the pianist’s playing intriguing.\textsuperscript{201}
But in 1947 Monk’s professional career had temporarily lost steam, and his membership in the musicians’ union had lapsed. He was regularly hosting rehearsals in his apartment at 243 West 63rd Street, and at some point Sonny’s friend Lowell Lewis began taking part in these informal musical gatherings. Another tenor saxophonist had already been playing with them, and one day Lowell returned from a practice session and told his high school friend, “Sonny, I’m gonna get you into Thelonious Monk’s band, we’re going to get this other guy out.” Rollins was soon joining a coterie of musicians that included, at various times, trumpeters Idrees Sulieman and Kenny Dorham, as well as tenor saxophonist Coleman Hoppin. (It is not clear whether Hoppin was the player Lewis mentioned; another possible candidate is tenor saxophonist Billy Smith, who played on Monk’s debut Blue Note recording session that October.) Jackie McLean was sometimes there. Another individual often in attendance was the pianist Earl “Bud” Powell (1924–66), who within two years would hire Rollins for a recording session.

Monk, nearing his thirtieth birthday, was living with his mother, and the visiting musicians played in his tiny bedroom, lit by a red light bulb, where his piano stood along with two chairs and a studio couch. “His mother was in one room [and] we were all cramped in one room, about five musicians, trying to read the music,” Sonny remembered. The pianist’s original compositions were far from simple, and Rollins later felt that he may not have fully grasped all their intricacies at the time. Habituately taciturn, Monk gave few directions. “If he liked you, here was the music, and that was that,” Rollins found. “But eventually we would end up playing this unorthodox and hitherto unplayed material.” Sonny came away having learned a great deal about “the geometry of musical time and space” and with growing self-assurance. Thelonious was impressed, too. “Monk would say, ‘Yeah, man, Sonny is bad. Cats have to work out what they play; Sonny just plays that shit out the top of his head.’” The precocious saxophonist was still barely seventeen years old.

Membership in the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) was essential for New York’s professional musicians during the mid-twentieth century, and the city’s Local 802 had over thirty thousand members at the time Rollins joined in December 1947, upon completing high school (he graduated at the end of the fall term). With just a few brief lapses, he would continue paying dues for his entire career, describing himself as “a big union man and proud of it.” His activities during 1948 are only sparsely documented; published contemporary information is scant, and for almost that entire year the AFM imposed a recording ban stemming from a long-running dispute with the radio broadcasting industry. But he clearly was already intent on making music his profession: his
neighbor Faith Ringgold remembered that on the day he received his diploma from Benjamin Franklin High School, “Sonny was talking about his last day at school and how he was going to pursue his music career full time. . . . [H]e knew right away.”

“We Began Getting Hired”

In 1956 Nat Hentoff reported in Down Beat magazine that after graduating Rollins gigged around New York City and New Jersey, and the saxophonist also remembers playing some engagements in Springfield, Massachusetts. He may have spent some time in upstate New York, too; the saxophonist J. R. Monterose saw him play in Albany around this time, and Jackie McLean heard that Sonny remained upstate for several months, possibly even staying with Monterose. In 1972 Rollins additionally recalled that after graduating he declined an offer to join the Woody Herman Orchestra in Chicago. The first reliable indication of his whereabouts that I have found is a November 1948 newspaper announcement that “Sonny Rawlings,” along with bassist Art Phipps and pianist Kenny Drew, were playing at Bowman’s, on Sugar Hill, accompanying vocalist Carl Van Moon, and that this was the three instrumentalists’ first New York City date after some recent out-of-town jobs. Rollins was picking up gigs of all kinds around Harlem: he played a few times with Milton Larkin, a blues-oriented trumpeter, vocalist, and former big-band leader from Houston who had recently settled in New York following his military discharge; and with Jimmie “Baby Face” Lewis, an up-and-coming rhythm-and-blues singer-guitarist who was then regularly appearing locally. Under his own name, Sonny was still often playing for dances and functions at venues such as the Audubon Ballroom and Hotel Theresa.

During this period he frequently led a trio featuring Drew and either a drummer or bassist—the latter was often Percy Heath (1923–2005), who arrived in New York from Philadelphia in 1949. Sometime early that year, after a jam session at Minton’s Playhouse, Rollins was invited to bring the trio to play a Sunday afternoon gig in the Bronx. There, at the 845 Club, on Prospect Avenue in the Morrisania neighborhood, they performed intermission sets for an organized jam session headlined by trumpeter Miles Davis (1926–91). Davis, at twenty-two, had recently left Charlie Parker’s Quintet and just begun making the series of nonet recordings later released as the Birth of the Cool. Rollins’s playing caught his ear, and though it would be another two years until Davis began regularly hiring Sonny as a sideman, they appeared on the same bill again at least twice within the next couple of months, including a performance at the Audubon Ballroom, possibly in January, where Rollins first met and played with John Coltrane.
By this time Rollins had also been contacted by the musician who became his first high-profile regular employer. Babs Gonzales (1919–80), who was renting a room down the block from Coleman Hawkins on West 153rd Street, had been making a name for himself as a comedic bebop singer leading a group called Three Bips and a Bop. “Once they heard in the neighborhood that, oh—there’s these young guys that can play, Sonny and Lowell Lewis and Jackie and Kenny Drew, then we began getting hired by the big-time people,” Rollins remembered. “Babs Gonzales would get a whole bunch of musicians and load us up in the car—one car or two cars—and do a lot of jobs in the area around Philadelphia and Boston and places like that.” Gonzales’s itinerary was far from busy overall, but in New York his band was intermittently working at relatively prominent venues such as the Clique Club on Broadway. Under the singer’s leadership, Rollins was now playing alongside some of the most highly esteemed bebop instrumentalists, including, at various times, trumpeter Fats Navarro (1923–50), drummer Roy Haynes (b. 1925), and tenor saxophonist Wardell Gray (1921–55). An invitation to join Navarro’s own band further boosted Sonny’s confidence, although that collaboration never came to pass because the trumpeter’s health soon began to fail, and he died a year later.

“The Best of the Up-and-Coming Bop Men”

His ascent was meteoric. Within the space of just a few months, several of jazz’s most illustrious figures recognized without hesitation that, at the age of eighteen, Rollins had earned a place in their company and began hiring him for live engagements and record dates; his first two studio sessions occurred under Gonzales’s leadership in January and April 1949. By May word of his prowess had crossed the Atlantic—Miles Davis, visiting Europe to perform at Paris’s jazz festival, told the British journalist Steve Race that Sonny was “the best of the up-and-coming bop men.” If Rollins had hitherto been known as simply the best young jazz player in his neighborhood, there could no longer be any doubt that among jazz musicians his neighborhood was the best anywhere.

Naturally, his musical education was far from over, and especially during the months after joining Gonzales’s group he continued to benefit from the wisdom of his fellow players. Some simply gave him passing advice: pianist Johnny Acea (1917–63) suggested he exchange his American-made saxophone for a Selmer horn. Others, such as the premier modern jazz trombonist, J. J. Johnson (1924–2001), became valuable mentors. A seasoned musician in his midtwenties, Johnson had worked with Benny Carter’s and Count Basie’s big bands, performed alongside leading beboppers such as Parker, Gillespie, and Powell, and recently participated in one of Miles Davis’s Birth of the Cool studio sessions.
played on Rollins’s recording dates under Gonzales’s name; the young saxophonist struck him as “a very outgoing fun person . . . [who] had his own way of playing, his own style of playing that really caught our fancy.” Johnson soon “took [Sonny] under his wing,” helping him improve his music-reading skills and hiring him for two separate days in the recording studio in May 1949, for which Rollins contributed two original blues heads, “Hi-Lo” and “Goof Square,” as well as a minor-key midtempo bebop theme titled “Audobahn [sic].” Rollins’s earliest recorded compositions and improvisations, which warrant an extensive study of their own and thus will not be dealt with here, are inarguably the work of an assured musician who was deeply versed in Charlie Parker’s melodic language, with all its chromatic intricacies and rhythmic complexities, and capable of executing terse, incisive solos, even at lightning speeds.

A recording session of still greater historic import took place three months later under the leadership of Bud Powell, one of the era’s most influential jazz pianists and composers. For much of 1948 through early 1949 Powell had been confined to a psychiatric institution with permission to return home tovisit his mother for several hours each Sunday. During one of his weekly furloughs the family’s apartment, on St. Nicholas Avenue just south of 140th Street, received a visit from Jackie McLean, who was a friend of Powell’s younger brother, Richie. By the time Bud was discharged from the hospital in April 1949, McLean was regularly spending time at the Powells’ home, with Rollins sometimes accompanying him. Sonny saw Bud as “a real genius” and an “intense person” who “was only into music. Outside of that, his life was kind of up in the air.” Before long Rollins was appearing alongside the pianist on the bandstand in the company of other preeminent beboppers: on August 2 they shared the stage with Parker and Davis at the Three Deuces on 52nd Street for a performance, organized by critic Leonard Feather, that also featured clarinetist Buddy DeFranco (1923–2014), pianist John Lewis (1920–2001), bassist Tommy Potter (1918–88), and drummer Max Roach (1924–2007). Without doubt, Sonny had arrived. When Powell signed to make his first discs for Blue Note Records he first hired Fats Navarro for the August 9 studio date and then vacillated between asking either Sonny or Jackie to join the session. After giving both saxophonists some time to learn the music that he planned to record, he decided on Rollins, who had quickly mastered all the charts, while McLean still struggled with the ferociously difficult theme “Wail.” Rollins’s authoritative solos on that tune and three others—the classic, definitive versions of “Bouncin’ with Bud” and “Dance of the Infidels” plus a rendition of Monk’s “52nd St. Theme”—display a fluent melodic acuity, rhythmic agility, and at times declarative tongued articulation that already constituted a unique creative voice.
Rollins was expanding his repertoire, too. Also during 1949, probably in early fall, bassist Al King offered him a ride from Montreal, where they had just finished a gig, to Chicago.250 There he had an opportunity to play with the drummer Ike Day, a legendary musician who made few recordings.251 “It was Ike who got me interested in playing songs that were a bit before my time,” Sonny later recalled. “The [Jimmie] Lunceford things, the older jazz arrangements. He used to berate me for not knowing them, so I had to bone-up.”252 Rollins would in time become renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge of songs and themes from diverse genres and eras.253 Even before meeting Day, he was often deftly weaving into his solos quotations of melodies such as Raymond Scott’s “In an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Room” or the 1929 hit song “Tiptoe Through the Tulips.”254 If in 1949 such references expressed wry, whimsical ingenuity, decades later they would be tinged with nostalgia—allusions to Edward MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose” or Denzil Best’s “Wee” evoked the domestic music making and neighborhood escapades of Rollins’s early days.255

“Apprenticeship, Ordeals, Initiation . . .”

The Sonny Rollins of the late 1940s was not yet the fully fledged hard bopper of 1951, let alone the commanding virtuoso of 1956, the bold avant-garde experimentalist of 1963, or the magisterial titanic improvisor of more recent decades. Yet even as a teenager he was a singular artist whose playing augured his future accomplishments. His May 1949 solo on the blues “Hi-Lo” opens with a signature melodic figure that he retained in his improvisational vocabulary for years, reusing it on midfifties recordings such as “Tenor Madness,” “Funky Hotel Blues,” “Sonnymoon for Two,” and “Wheatleigh Hall.”256 Through the century’s close and beyond, through challenges as daunting as a ten-month jail term he endured in 1950, immediately after the period surveyed here, Rollins would establish a monumental legacy, influencing many generations of musicians.257

“When we approach jazz,” Ralph Ellison wrote in 1959, we ought to “speak not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation, ceremonies, of rebirth. For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz . . . he must then ‘find himself,’ must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul.”258 From long days of solitary practice and experimentation, from countless hours spent in rehearsals or after-hours jam sessions, and from many nights on the bandstand with his peers in public, all the while honing time-honored techniques and imagining new possibilities, Rollins achieved a mastery that transcended his conscious awareness to a rare degree.259 “When I play,” he explained,
“what I try to do is reach my subconscious level.”260 “Sonny,” his long-time producer Orrin Keepnews once commented, “is the most intuitive musician I’ve ever met as well as the most intellectual.”261 If Rollins’s vast reservoir of musical knowledge certainly was partly grounded in his public education, professional instruction, and the various commercial media at hand, at the end of the day his most vital cultural resource was always his community—the musical residents of Harlem who cultivated and refined the expressive philosophies and practices that first inspired him as a young child and who encouraged and supported his nascent musicality by endowing him with the wisdom of their own experience and granting him opportunities to gain vital experience of his own. In finding himself as an artist, Sonny Rollins found friends, neighbors, and even—quite literally—family members. He found a world. “Everything I have learned,” he declared well over a half century later, “I owe to the neighborhood where I was born.”262

NOTES

I am extremely grateful to Terri Hinte, Lewis Porter, and especially Sonny Rollins. Thanks are also due to the staffs of the Institute of Jazz Studies at the John Cotton Dana Library of Rutgers University—Newark, the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives at New York University, and the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.


Becoming Sonny Rollins


8. Rollins’s full name has often been given erroneously as Theodore Walter Rollins, but he himself has verified that Walter Theodore is correct. See Larry Appelbaum, interview with Sonny Rollins for the Smithsonian Jazz Oral History Program, February 28, 2011, 1, https://amhistory.si.edu/jazz/Rollins-Sonny/Rollins_Sonny_Interview_Transcription .pdf (accessed December 30, 2018).


30. “Juste pour la rigolade” (François Postif, “Un ténor soufflant: Sonny Rollins,” *Jazz Hot*, April 1959, 28); Appelbaum, interview with Sonny Rollins, 2. In various government documents Rollins’s paternal grandfather’s name is sometimes spelled as “Stedmann,” “Steadman,” or “Steadmann.” The 1911 St. Croix census lists his occupation as a carpenter.


36. Founded in 1936, the High School of Music and Art was the original incarnation of today’s La Guardia High School of Music and Art and Performing Arts. See Benjamin M. Steigman, Accent on Talent: New York’s High School of Music and Art (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1964), 31.


44. Rollins, telephone interview; Goodman, “Sonny Rollins at Sixty-Eight,” 88; Bob Young and Al Stankus, Jazz Cooks: Portraits and Recipes of the Greats (New York: Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 1992), 44. On the history of Mother Horn’s church, see “The Pentecostal Faith Church, Inc.,” http://pfc-inc.org/history.html (accessed July 3, 2015). Rollins’s mother’s maiden name was Solomon (her father was Paul Solomon), but by the time he was born his maternal grandmother, Miriam, had remarried, first to Adolph(us) Victoria and then to Valentine Hansen.


46. “It was one of these real,” from Panken, “It’s Sonny Rollins’s Birthday”; “sort of jazz-gospel,” from Rollins, telephone interview.

47. Panken, “It’s Sonny Rollins’s Birthday.”


63. Sonny Rollins, out-take interviews for the film A Great Day in Harlem, dir. Jean Bach (HVE 3035, 2005).
66. Rollins, telephone interview.
68. Taylor, Notes and Tones, 166.
69. “Self taught,” from Rollins, out-take interviews; Josef Woodard, “This Is What I Do!,” Jazz Hot, December 2003, 20; Appelbaum, interview with Sonny Rollins, 8.
71. Appelbaum, interview with Sonny Rollins, 8.
72. “Mr. Bastien,” and “one of these saxophone players,” from Bendian, interview with Sonny Rollins; David T. Bastien, email communication, July 19, 2018. A double embouchure involves holding the saxophone’s mouthpiece between both lips rather than between the lower lip and the front teeth, as is more customary.
73. Nisenson, Open Sky, 20; Rollins, telephone interview.
75. For a list of some widespread received “assumptions about jazz practice,” see Tony Whyton, Beyond a Love Supreme: John Coltrane and the Legacy of an Album (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.
79. Chilton, Let the Good Times Roll, 63.
80. Since Rollins recalls that he was nine years old when he moved from West 135th Street to Sugar Hill, the family must have relocated sometime between April 7, 1940, when the US Census documents them living on 135th Street, and September 7 of that year, when he celebrated his tenth birthday. Ratliff, The Jazz Ear, 24; Billy Heller, “Sonny Rollins,” New York Post, August 27, 2006, https://nypost.com/2006/08/27/sonny-rollins/ (accessed December 30, 2018).


88. Gonzalez, “In Sugar Hill,” A16; Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 343.


92. Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 72, 341.


96. Rollins, telephone interview. See also Davis and Troupe, *Miles*, 145.

97. Academy of Achievement, “Sonny Rollins Interview.”


101. Information from Lewis Porter, based on his own interview with Sonny Rollins in March 2015.

102. Ibid.


130. Guidry, “Sax Takes Rolls;”


147. Information from Lewis Porter based on his own interview with Rollins; Joseph Antonucci, “A Visit to Franklin’s Choral Club; Or, An Excursion to the Abode of Musicians,” in Maroon and Orange: Benjamin Franklin High School Class of June 1949, 42–43.


154. Rollins, telephone interview. Gwendolyn Rollins Lewis was the half sister of Sonny’s father, Walter. (Stedman Rollins was their father; her mother was Romalia Duvergie, and his was Grace Ann Claxton.)


159. “Je n’ai jamais eu de vraie leçon de jazz” (Woodard, “This Is What I Do!,” 20).

160. Rollins, telephone interview. Rollins told me that later on, probably in the late 1950s, he took some clarinet lessons with another member of the Calloway Orchestra, Eddie Barefield. See also John McDonough, “Sonny’s Side of the Street,” Down Beat, December 1992, 25; Appelbaum, interview with Sonny Rollins, 27; and Woodard, “This Is What I Do!,” 20.
161. Milt Hinton, interview with Walter “Foots” Thomas for the Jazz Oral History Project, January 5, 1981, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ.


163. Sonny Rollins Papers, box 4, folder 2.

164. Rollins, telephone interview.


171. Panken, “It’s Sonny Rollins’s Birthday.”


175. Christopher Dennison, “Primary Sources: An Examination of Ira Gitler’s Swing to Bop and Oral History’s Role in the Story of Bebop” (MA thesis, Rutgers University, 2015), 16.


196. Rollins, telephone interview.
197. Nisenson, Open Sky, 32; Smith, interview with Art Taylor; Appelbaum, interview with Sonny Rollins, 28.
198. Rolls, telephone interview. Rollins can date this visit to Montreal because he recalls that it occurred during the year that Jackie Robinson was playing for the Montreal Royals, the minor-league affiliate of the Brooklyn Dodgers, which Robinson joined the following year as the first African American to play on a major baseball team. See also Patrick Sauer, “The Year of Jackie Robinson’s Mutual Love Affair with Montreal,” Smithsonian. com, online at http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/year-jackie-robinsons-mutual-love-affair-montreal-180954878/?no-ist (accessed December 30, 2018).
201. Rollins, telephone interview; Panken, “It’s Sonny Rollins’s Birthday”; Buskirk, “Q&A”; Coleman Hawkins, “Flyin’ Hawk” and “Drifting on a Reed” (JDavis 8250), rec. October 19, 1944.


205. Panken, “It’s Sonny Rollins’s Birthday.”


208. “Creator of Be Bop Objects to Name and Changes in His Style,” *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1948, 9.


Two days after Christmas 1948, Rollins was a featured instrumentalist with a band headed by bassist John Stoney that played a holiday show sponsored by the Helvetian social club at Harlem’s Audubon Ballroom—the performance included tap dancing and a male vocal quartet. See Carol Jean Lewis, “Teen Age,” New York Age, December 18, 1948, 12; Lewis, “Teen Age,” New York Age, January 8, 1949, 16; and the 1949 AFM Local 802 directory. On April 19, 1949, Rollins led a sextet that entertained guests at the Top Hats social club’s post-Easter celebration in the Skyline Ballroom at Harlem’s upscale Hotel Theresa. See Carol Jean Lewis, “Teen Age,” New York Age, April 16, 1949, 4.


Gonzales recalled that he did not begin playing with Rollins until shortly after signing a contract with Capitol Records, which was around the beginning of December 1948. See Babs Gonzales, I Paid My Dues: Good Times—No Bread (East Orange, NJ: Expubidence, 1967), 54; and “3 Bips and Bop Join Capital [sic] Plattery Works,” Pittsburgh Courier, December 4, 1948, 21.

Gonzales, I Paid My Dues, 48. Gonzales’s address is indicated as 458 West 153rd Street in the 1949 AFM Local 802 directory; the 1948 edition gives his address as 568 West 149th Street.

Spellman, “Meet the Artist.”


Percy Heath considered Rollins to be “the greatest saxophone player on Sugar Hill,” and Jackie McLean remembered that local gigs always “were given to Sonny first.”
and “wherever he played he dominated.” See Wyatt, *Sonny Rollins*, 70; Brower, interview with Jackie McLean, 46; and Lehman, “Interview with Jackie McLean.”


248. Ibid., 121–23.


250. Dutilh, interview with Sonny Rollins; Nisenson, *Open Sky*, 40. I have not uncovered any reliable information precisely dating Rollins’s 1949 visit to Chicago, but he recalls driving there from Montreal; (1) I have found no record of his presence in New York from September through November 1949; and (2) Gonzales played in Montreal in the early fall of that year. See Gonzales, *I Paid My Dues*, 61; and Dolores Calvin, “Be-Bop Vocalist Is a Little Hazy on What Is Art,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 6, 1949, 8. Rollins was in New York by early December, when he played for a dance at the Lincoln Square Center. See David Johnson, “Teen Age,” *New York Age*, December 10, 1949, 12.


253. Branford Marsalis wryly remarks, “People will say, ‘Well, how do you play like Sonny Rollins?’ I say, ‘Well, I think the first thing you have to do is you have to learn about ten thousand songs.’ As opposed to the fifty songs that are in the fakebook. . . . And then you use it as a vocabulary” (interview with Sonny Rollins, *Jazz on 3*, BBC Radio, May 5, 2012, https://soundcloud.com/bbcjazzon3/branford-marsalis-interviews [accessed June 23, 2015]).

254. Rollins quotes “In an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Room” at 0:49 in his solo on “Then You’ll Be Boppin’ Too” with Babs Gonzales, and he references “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” at 0:42 in his solo on the master take (i.e., take 5) of “Bee Jay” with J. J. Johnson.

256. Rollins plays the figure in question at 1:27 on “Hi-Lo”; at 2:12 on “Tenor Madness,” Tenor Madness (Prestige 7047), rec. May 24, 1956; at 0:00 and 5:08 on “Funky Hotel Blues,” Blues for Tomorrow (Riverside 12-243), rec. June 19, 1957; at 0:41 on “Sonnymoon for Two,” A Night at the Village Vanguard (Blue Note 1581), rec. November 3, 1957; and at 7:56 on “Wheatleigh Hall,” Dizzy Gillespie, Duets (Verve 8260), rec. December 11, 1957. In perhaps the first published press review of Rollins’s playing on disc, Michael Levin wrote that on “Hi-Lo,” “tenor man Rollins . . . solos to no great effect” (“J. J. Johnson’s Boppers,” Down Beat, September 9, 1949, 14). Rollins was recorded at least once or twice outside of commercial studios prior to 1950, though such recordings are either not widely accessible or may no longer exist. Carl Smith, an amateur collector, possesses a two-minute recording that is said to document Rollins playing the alto saxophone in Seymour’s Record Mart in Chicago, probably in 1949 (email communication, July 24, 2015). Rollins also told musicologist Lewis Porter that well before 1949 he made an amateur recording in a recording booth at a store on 42nd Street (information from Porter, based on his own interview with Rollins).

257. See, for example, the testimonials from musicians such as Wayne Shorter, Pat Metheny, Joe Lovano, Jim Hall, Don Byron, and David S. Ware in Redman, “Newk’s Time,” 48–55, 130. For more on Rollins’s experience in jail, see Nisenson, Open Sky, 40, 49; Gross, All I Had to Do, 216–17; Academy of Achievement, “Sonny Rollins Interview”; and Michael Jackson, “Don’t Stop the Carnival,” Jazzwise, September 2005, 28.


260. Arun Rath, “Sonny Rollins: ‘You Can’t Think and Play at the Same Time,’” All Things Considered, National Public Radio, May 3, 2014, http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=309047616 (accessed December 30, 2018). Among Rollins’s practice materials of the early 1960s is a typewritten quotation from William James’s The Principles of Psychology (1890): “We must make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can . . . The more of the details of our daily life we can hand over to the effortless custody of automatism, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their own proper work.” Sonny Rollins Papers, box 3, folder 1.


262. “Tout ce que j’ai appris, je le dois à ce quartier où je suis né” (Genone, “Sonny Rollins”).
Works Cited

Private Communications
Bastien, David T. Email communication, July 19, 2018.
Rollins, Sonny. Telephone interview, June 2, 2016.
Smith, Carl. Email communication, July 24, 2015.

Archival Sources
Hinton, Milt. Interview with Walter “Foots” Thomas for the Jazz Oral History Project, January 5, 1981. Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ.

Books and Articles

“Andy Kirk Loses RigHt to Live in Exclusive Section.” Pittsburgh Courier, May 9, 1942, 3.
Antonucci, Joseph. “A Visit to Franklin’s Choral Club; Or, An Excursion to the Abode of Musicomaniacs.” In Maroon and Orange: Benjamin Franklin High School Class of June 1949, 42–43.
Bartley, G. Fitz. “Sonny Rollins in Jamaica.” Daily Gleaner, October 18, 1969, 7


Cox, Edna R. “People Worth Knowing.” *Utica Observer Dispatch*, August 11, 1957, 6B.


“Creator of ‘Be Bop’ Objects to Name and Changes in His Style.” *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1948.


Becoming Sonny Rollins


__________. “The Final Portion of Hawk’s Masterpiece.” Down Beat, October 1, 1940, 16.


__________. “Teen Age.” *New York Age,* January 8, 1949, 16.


*Manhattan Telephone Directory,* 1946.

*Maroon and Orange: Benjamin Franklin High School Class of January 1948.*


Becoming Sonny Rollins

Milkowski, Bill. “Happy Newk Year.” *Jazz Times*, January/February 2012, 22.


Becoming Sonny Rollins


“School Notes: Students Present Cantata.” *New York Age,* May 12, 1945, 5.


Radio


Videography


“Sonny Rollins Lifetime Achievement Award from the Jazz Foundation of America.”
“Sonny Rollins on Pres.”
__________. “Radio and the Movies.”
__________. “Thelonious and Theodore.”
Spellman, A. B. “Meet the Artist—New Mexico Jazz Festival, 2007.”

**Discography**

Becoming Sonny Rollins


“Drifting on a Reed.” JDavis 8250. Rec. October 19, 1944.


“52nd St. Theme.” The Amazing Bud Powell, Volume 1.
“Sonnymoon for Two.” A Night at the Village Vanguard.
“Three Little Words.” Sonny Rollins on Impulse!
“To a Wild Rose.” There Will Never Be Another You.
“Don’t Stop the Carnival.” Tramps, NY (late set).