

How Sonny Defeated the Dragon

In his six-decade career, legendary saxophonist Sonny Rollins has claimed many a triumph. But his greatest may have come during a quiet period in Chicago
By Neil Tesser (Chicago Reader)

A decade ago, on September 9, 1998, the YMCA building at 3763 S. Wabash became an official Chicago landmark. Completed in 1913, it gained an annex in 1945, and today it remains a hub of neighborhood activity. Stately on its quiet and well-kept Bronzeville block, it bears a plaque describing it as “an important center of community life” that offered housing and job training for “new arrivals from the South during the ‘Great Migration’ of African-Americans in the first decades of the 20th century.” In a perfect world, there would be a second plaque below it: “Sonny Rollins slept here.”

Another such plaque might adorn the considerably less well-kept Central Arms Hotel at 520 E. 47th, just east of Vincennes. Still another could mark an empty lot on the 300 block of East Garfield, where the Rhumboogie Club once stood, but it wouldn’t say anything about sleeping: Rollins played at the Rhumboogie with the man who would become Sun Ra, and nobody slept with Sun Ra around.

In 1955 Rollins was already a veteran of studio groups led by Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, and he would soon be acclaimed as the outstanding tenor saxophone voice of his generation. But for most of that year he lived in obscurity on Chicago’s south side, working menial jobs and barely gigging.

He still considers Chicago his second home, in part because the casual congeniality of the Bronzeville scene made such a deep impression on him. He also met his wife, Lucille, in Chicago; they got married in ’65 and stayed that way till she died in 2004. And it was here that Rollins joined the band led by Clifford Brown and Max Roach, one of the greatest jazz quintets of the 50s; when they passed through in late ’55, he left with them, returning to his native New York City. But the most important thing Sonny Rollins did in Chicago in 1955 was to reclaim his life from addiction.

Rollins, who’s a few days from his 78th birthday and makes his home in a small town in upstate New York, is often called the greatest living saxophonist in jazz. He opens this year’s Jazz Fest in spectacular style on Thursday, with a free concert in Millennium Park. In the 50s, like many of his peers, he extended and expanded upon the innovations of Charlie Parker, but it was Rollins who most clearly showed how bebop, a product of the 40s, could respond to a new decade without losing its original soul. Like James Dean, his music spoke of cool rebellion; like Mort Sahl, it did so with wry commentary and wit. In the late 50s, working with such towering figures as Monk, Roach, and Coltrane, Rollins emerged as perhaps the genre’s most innovative structuralist.

But then he withdrew. In 1959, at home in New York City, he took a couple years off to woodshed and rethink his music. He was getting very famous very quickly, he says, and felt he needed to brush upon certain aspects of his craft. Though he returned to great fanfare in 1962, by ’66 he was chafing at the demands of the music business and dropped out again. Eager to study Eastern religion, he traveled to Japan and then India, where he lived in a monastery until reentering the public arena in ’72 with Sonny Rollins’ Next Album.

Since then he’s released nearly two dozen records; in 2006 he started his own label, Doxy, to put out his latest, Sonny, Please. In the past decade he’s won two Grammys, and last year the Royal Swedish Academy of Music awarded him the Polar Music Prize, often referred to as the Nobel Prize of music.

For all that, his greatest triumph may have come when he left the narcotics hospital at the federal prison in Lexington, Kentucky, and came to Chicago in the first weeks of 1955. “I’m not proud of many things in my life,” he says, “but I’m proud of that—of defeating the dragon.” The dragon, of course, was heroin; like many jazzmen of the 40s and 50s, Rollins had followed Charlie Parker’s example in more than music. Chicago was where Rollins proved—to his friends, to the authorities, but mostly to himself—that he could stay clean.

The feds had been experimenting since the 30s with treating addiction as a medical problem instead of simple villainy; by the 50s, Rollins says, the program in Lexington had become famous among musicians. “It was a big departure from the usual way drug addicts were treated at that time,” he says. “Different from the penitentiary. It was sort of like the Betty Ford clinic, a real hospital-like atmosphere.” He speaks in a sort of northern drawl, and its timbre comes as a shock if you’ve only heard his deep, dry tenor tone—his voice is thick and relatively high-pitched, with a touch of the “Fat Albert” character that Bill Cosby (a big Rollins fan) used to do in his routines. “I think the cure took four and a half months,” he continues. “You could leave before then, but most of the people wanted to get off drugs and stayed the whole time.”

Determined to make the cure stick, Rollins left Lexington and went not to his New York stomping grounds but directly to Chicago, which had appealed to him on previous visits. In fact he'd been here just before entering Lexington. "I was 'carrying the stick,'" he says. "You know what that means? It means you're homeless, like a hobo; I was sleeping in parked cars during the winter and all this stuff. I was doing very nefarious things." But despite all that, Rollins says, "I loved Chicago. It was so earthy. There were a lot of musicians, a lot of music going on—24-hour jam-session clubs, all this kind of thing. I found a home there."

Chicago, and Bronzeville in particular, had much to offer an African-American artist in the 50s, but what Rollins liked best was that it wasn't New York. He sums up the reason with a story: "There was a place on 63rd and Cottage Grove, the Circle Inn, where you could just look in through the window and see the proceedings. One morning when it was just getting light, I walked by and Lester Young"—the influential saxist whose style presaged the cool-jazz school—"was on the bandstand, with a rhythm section, just jamming.

"You see, New York was more 'sophisticated'; that was the difference. To have a club be open 24 hours, where you could look in and see people playing, that was not sophisticated enough for New York. But I gravitated toward that. It was so homey—it was terrific. And I wasn't really ready to go back to New York. I had left a trail of destruction behind me there, in my personal relationships, in stealing—addict behavior. So I wanted to be clean from drugs and return victorious. I was clean when I left Lexington, but I had to sort of work my way back into society." During his time here Rollins stayed first at the Central Arms, then for a spell with a fellow Lexington alum who lived at 69th and Marquette, trumpeter Robert Gay, nicknamed Little Diz—the brother of gospel star Geraldine Gay. Eventually the YMCA on South Wabash became his home and practice space. To pay the rent he took a series of blue-collar jobs. On the north side, most likely Ohio Street, he says, "I worked as a custodian at a typewriter repair shop. They had, you know, ten or fifteen people working there—it was more of a little factory than a repair shop. I don't think they knew I was a musician. I worked at another place, on Madison west of Halsted, that was a restaurant-supply house. I worked on the trucks, delivering this stuff to Hammond, all over. And at that place I did get close enough to people to tell them I was a musician; in fact, when I came to Chicago to play some years later, a guy who had worked there came by to see me."

Toward midsummer, Rollins says, "I finally thought, 'I'm strong enough to go into the Bee Hive.' And that's where another vignette of my life was enacted." No club's name sparks more memories among Chicago musicians of the era than that of the Bee Hive. Located at Harper and 55th in Hyde Park, it was open from 1948 to '56 and hosted not just locals—from traditionalists like Miff Mole to modernists like Ira Sullivan—but visiting stars like Charlie Parker, who played his last Chicago engagement there in February '55.

"When I got there, I saw a lot of old friends, a lot of the guys: 'Hey Sonny, let's go get high,'" Rollins says. "I had to be strong enough to withstand that. And that's where I faced my Goliath. It was hard, man, because some of these guys knew I was not that far from using drugs. It was one of these biblical-like temptations. I resisted—my palms got sweaty and everything, but I resisted. I went back to my custodial job, but I thought, 'I gotta get back into music.' It was very difficult, because to tell the truth, I just escaped that first time; I just was able to resist all my friends offering these free drugs. But I thought, 'I'm a musician and I have to be strong enough to be around drugs,' because that was the scene."

Rollins made his second trip to the Bee Hive in early September, when Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers were headlining—a risky move because addiction, according to pianist Horace Silver, was "prevalent" in the band. "Bassist Doug Watkins and I were the only ones that didn't have a drug habit," Silver writes in his autobiography.

"I just remember sitting in the car with Horace, and then I went inside to pal around with Art and everybody, and I was able to withstand the temptation again," says Rollins. "And eventually, I was able to go back and be less tempted each time I went."

Confident he could stay clean, Rollins started gigging again, accumulating memories of people and places that are still strong today. He remembers players who are faint ghosts to most of us, like tenor men Linwood Brown and Alec Johnson, as well as better-known figures like Harold Ousley and John Gilmore, who would become a superstar soloist in Sun Ra's Arkestra—Rollins figures he met Gilmore when they both played with Ra at the Rhumboogie, back when the soon-to-be-cosmic keyboardist was still known as Sonny Blount. He talks about pianist Norman Simmons and bassist Victor Sproles, both of whom would soon establish themselves in New York. "Eddie Harris and I used to drive out to the Selmer factory in Indiana," Rollins says, "and bug those guys about what they should be doing on the horns."

In November 1955, the group led by veteran bebop drummer Max Roach and spectacular young trumpeter Clifford Brown—a band that rivaled the Jazz Messengers as the leading hard-bop quintet of the day—came to the Bee Hive. But once they arrived in Chicago, the quintet's tenor player, Harold Land, continued on to Los Angeles to deal with a family emergency. Someone remembered that Rollins was in town; he sat in with the band and clicked immediately. Roach offered to hire him before the band headed back to New York. "I was pretty close to going back anyway," Rollins says. "I had accomplished what I wanted to accomplish. I could have gone back to New York on my own, but it was great playing with Max and Clifford, and that was a great opportunity. So I thought, 'Why not?'"

The next time Rollins came to Chicago, in the summer of 1956, it was as a member of the Brown-Roach quintet. Clifford Brown and the band's pianist, Richie Powell, were driving in from Philadelphia with Powell's wife, Nancy, but they never made it; Rollins, Roach, and bassist George Morrow had already arrived here when they learned that the car carrying the others had gone over an embankment in the rain, killing all three. Rollins briefly stayed on in Roach's band, then left to lead his own groups.

In short order, the clubs Rollins had frequented in Chicago—the Rhumboogie, the Bee Hive, McKee's Disc Jockey Lounge at 63rd and Cottage Grove—all disappeared. Over the years many of the musicians he'd known here moved away: Sun Ra to Philadelphia, Ira Sullivan to Miami, Eddie Harris to Los Angeles. Most of his friends from back then have died. Contemporaries like Joe Segal, proprietor of the venerable Jazz Showcase, remember that Rollins spent time in Chicago in the 50s, but unless they lived in Bronzeville their paths didn't cross.

Of all the people, places, and things from that era that have gone, though, one inspires no mourning. In 1955, Sonny Rollins buried his addiction to heroin on the south side of Chicago, once and for all.