

Sonny Rollins Interview Conducted By Stuart Nicholson: 10 September 2009

Q: It would be nice if you could talk about your association with London, which goes back to 1966 and the Ronnie Scott club

SR: When I first came to London for those series of club dates at Ronnie Scott's [in the 1960s] I agreed to do something which I was not in the practice of doing, which was to play with a new rhythm section, since my early times I had my own rhythm section. However, for whatever reason – I forget why I agreed to do this – I was very pleasantly surprised, I had a great group of people, Stan Tracey, Ronnie Stephenson and Rick Laird was our bass player and they were all very competent, talented people so it made my stay there very comfortable and rewarding musically.

Q: What do you remember about playing with them and how did you feel things worked out as things progressed

SR: Well, we hit it off right away it was very comfortable. It was the original Ronnie Scott's club on Gerrard Street and it was quite a homely place. Pete King was there, and I reminisced with him a while ago that when I left my engagement with Ronnie Scott's, I brought presents for some of the staff there, which I am sure was highly unusual. I don't know, maybe others had done it, but I never heard of it being done. I did it because I really made friends with the people there, I really felt a strong bond with the staff and everybody around the club and parting I felt I wanted to leave something of a remembrance when I left and that indicates how much I felt part of the family, so to speak.

Q: I was going to ask you about recording *Alfie* in Twickenham, was that 1965?

SR: Yes, I did it when I was working at Ronnie's, and the producer of the film came in, we having a nice successful season in the club, lots of people coming by, and I guess we had some notoriety as being 'a good ticket.' And so the producer – actually was the producer's son – and heard me playing as said, 'Gee Sonny, you're the right person who we feel would express the character of Alfie.' Now, I don't know if you've seen the movie, but I don't know if I should have taken that as a compliment or not! But anyway, I was anxious to do the film, so I did the film – actually I wrote the music for the film in the club. When I got through an evenings performance I would have had to have gone home to a hotel and try to get to sleep, it's always hard to come down from a concert right away and just get yourself into bed. So I said, 'Ronnie, after I get through playing tonight I'd like to stay in the club, just lock me up, and I'll stay here until they come by in the morning to open up, because I want to work on the music and I'll have a nice private space to do it.' And Ronnie said, 'Yes, fine, if you want to do that.' So, that's what we did, and I got locked in at night and in the morning the people came to open up the club and clean up the club and everything and I spent that time working on the score that we used for the film.

Q: There has always been a debate about whether it was Ronnie Scott or Tubby Hayes who played on the session

SR: Tubby Hayes was a frequent visitor to the club during our time there but I'm not certain whether – I know Ronnie and Tubby had played together – I would have probably have remembered if Tubby had been doing the soundtrack, I don't think so, I think it was Ronnie, Stan Tracey, Phil Seaman – the drummer, a good guy we had a lot of fun with Phil – and all the guys, as I said I was quite friendly with everybody and it was

really a very bright period of my life that time when I was playing at Ronnie's, I think it was at least two weeks, maybe three weeks. Of course I was coming to the UK for the first time so they probably thought two or three weeks would be appropriate in those circumstances, someone who was a recording artist in the States and never worked in the UK, so as I say I think they probably felt that two weeks would not be a strain on the economy in that regard

Q: Did you ever hear Tubby Hayes or play with him

SR: I never played with Tubby Hayes, I saw Tubby Hayes a lot of times, I heard him play on record, I met Tubby Hayes when he came over here to the States, I met him one time, I think we had a drink with him and everything, I met him up on 48th Street, the music street at that time, that's where all the stores were, a couple of bars where all the guys hung out, anyway I met Tubby when he came here and I heard him play on record and I admire him, a fine player!

Q: You said in an interview you got feelings in London you didn't get anywhere else

SR: That's probably true, I had a great time over there, we had a good group, a fine group, a quartet at the club but when we did Alfie we expanded it, it was a really a nice period, I really enjoyed playing there, the people accepted me, and as I said when I look back on that period it's really a very positive period in my life when I first went over there, making a movie and everything and also associating with the guys hanging out, of course I've been over there after that, I played the 'new' club and everything so I've been to London quite a few times over the years playing Ronnie's club before I began playing concerts exclusively, but those early days were particularly fruitful, I really had a great time and made some great friends, Ronnie was a great friend of mine, and Stan Tracey, and Pete King was

very close, I understand Pete is a little ill now and maybe cannot come out too much, he did come by to see me at the Barbican one night, it was good to see him and we took a picture together, which I have, it was good to think back on all the fun we had, especially at the old club. The 'new' club was good but the old club maybe smaller and a little more – how shall I say – earthy. I like the new club, its was still the same people, but that initial period when I went over there to Gerrard Street was really made an impression and really positive experience for me.

Q: I saw from *The New York Times* that you played with a trio in Carnegie Hall in 2008, and I wonder if you could speak about this aspect of your career which seems to exist in parallel with your other work, and I wonder what you think were your most rewarding trio albums

SR: When I look back on my career I find that I was playing trio almost from the beginning. You know when I first met Miles I was playing an opening act for Miles Davis, Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis, some of these stars that were playing down on 52nd Street. This was a place up in the Bronx called the 845 Club and I was hired to play and open up for these guys and as I look back I remember I had a trio then. When Miles, I remember, offered me a job in his band he heard me in a trio originally, when I look back on my career I find there is many records were made with a trio, that's why when people nowadays you find saxophone, drums, bass groups there's a little bit of Sonny Rollins in that line-up, and I found I had been doing it for so much of my career. I didn't even realise it until somebody asked me about it a year or so ago, and I looked back and I realised how much of my work was with trio. Some of my records like *A Night at the Village Vanguard*, *Way Out West*, *Freedom Suite* a lot of records were made with trio. I had some more than useful accompaniment too! I had people like Elvin Jones, Max Roach, Oscar Pettiford, Ray Brown, Shelley Manne I mean I had configurations of groups which really had the crème de la crème

and so the success of those records is certainly not only my playing but I do find it has been some years since I played in that grouping and the reason for that is I find that as a soloist it gives me more freedom to hear the harmonic possibilities of any piece of music that we're playing. With due respect to the piano players, and I have worked with some of the best, the piano is a dominating instrument and if you have eighty-eight keys and the person is playing chords behind you when you are soloing it is very difficult to deviate from their harmonic direction, so with a bass and drums I don't have that, I can hear my own harmony and fill it in myself. I've always liked that, when I first started playing as a kid I used to be in the house playing by myself, for hours and hours, and my dear Mother used to call me, 'Sonny, Sonny, it's time to eat dinner.' And I'd just be in there in the bedroom playing in my own reverie, my own peaceful trance so to speak, I have always been a person who has been able to create my own harmony when I play, and the fact that other people are doing it today, I'm glad, because I feel it's good. And it's not that pianos are not great too, they're good, it's all good, it's not a matter of that, but in my case I find it was a natural progression with the piano-less group.

Q: I wonder what date it was that you were playing the 845 Club

SR: That would have been in – I'm not sure – 1948, or 1949 maybe 1948 actually. I was a teenager, but I was a determined teenager, who knew what I wanted to do, I wanted to play music, I wanted to be a jazz musician. People have asked me, 'Sonny, you played with people like Charlie Parker when you were young, didn't it make you feel a little bit scared?' So I said no. Actually I loved all those people they were my gods, but still I had something in me that made me always feel as if I belonged, and that I should be there where I was. So, I was young but I always had a feeling, I was so certain I wanted to be a musician. I shouldn't say certain because there were a lot of people who I grew up with, we all wanted to be jazz musicians.

That was the only thing to be, we all wanted to be jazz musicians and some of us tried but couldn't make it, didn't have the natural ability like I did. So it wasn't a fate accomplie that I should be a musician, so I don't want to be too glib about this, I didn't know I was going to make it, but I just had a feeling that I was in the right place with the right people, people like Charlie Parker, our idol, our prophet our god.

Q: He was something of a mentor to you

SR: Definitely. Oh yes, well he looked at me in rather an avuncular way, myself and a lot of other young people, all trying to play like him, and I think he was very proud of us, really.

Q: What aspects of his playing gave you the most inspiration

SR: Gee, that's very hard to say because my idols were originally Louis Jordan the rhythm and blues saxophonist, then I gravitated to Coleman Hawkins and I stayed with Coleman Hawkins trying to absorb him and then I familiarised myself with Lester Young, all the time of course I had heard Ben Webster and tried to absorb some of his playing, the great Don Byas was one of my ultimate favourite saxophone players that I think was one of these unsung people. So I tried – I learned a lot, [laughs] I wish I could have learned more from these people, I studied them a lot let me say that! I studied all of them a lot, and Charlie Parker came along and I studied Charlie Parker a lot, the fact that Charlie Parker came on the scene just at the time when I was coming into my adolescence he became a prominent source of my inspiration at that time. When I first heard Charlie Parker it was the forties, and when I heard him – the first record I had by Charlie Parker was a record called 'KoKo' it was a famous record of him playing on 'Cherokee,' it was on Savoy, on the other side of that record was 'How High the Moon' by Don Byas, and I actually bought that record for Don Byas because I didn't really know Charlie Parker, so

listened to Charlie Parker play, it was interesting but after playing it for my friends at school I realised this guy has got something going here, and I began to become a devotee of Charlie Parker, but originally Don Byas was the reason for my purchasing that record and to this day I still love Don Byas, Don Byas is great. But when you're young it has to be this or that, but as you grow older and get more mature you're able to realise everyone has something unique and special to say in jazz, everybody should really play instead of being better than this guy or that, if you love jazz you can contribute to it, if you have talent you can make a contribution. You don't have to be as good as Sonny Stitt, to play saxophone you can make your own kind of contribution

Q: Very important for young students to realise

SR: Exactly

Q: How did you make yourself known to Charlie Parker

SR: As I began playing more and getting some recognition from some of the older players and so on, finally I got to the point where I was playing with Miles [Davis] and our paths crossed, and Miles said to Charlie Parker, listen to this guy, and Charlie Parker, the first time he heard me, he said, 'Hey, man! That's me!' So I really felt great, and he was like a father figure to us all, mentor and everything.

Q: When you mention Miles Davis it would be interesting to talk about your association with him, as he gave you first refusal for the tenor chair when he was forming his 1955 quintet.

SR: [Laughs] Well I had been playing with Miles. When I was away from New York he gravitated towards me to start his band up, we were very good friends, Miles and me used to hang out, at my house, I've been in his house, this kind of stuff. And

although I had played with Miles and Coltrane in 1949, I think that's right but my chronology could be off a little bit, we both played with Miles [around then], so Miles knew Coltrane and he knew me, I think he recounts some of that in his biography, I was very excited of course when he wrote he wanted to get Sonny, but I think that was because he and I were very close personally and musically, so probably that's why he wanted to get me back when he formed his band, but I'm sure Coltrane was available and was someone who he would have taken also, I think he just mentioned my name as the first one at that point, but Miles loved to have a strong saxophone player, that was one of his desires, he always wanted to have a strong saxophone player, as you know he always had strong saxophone players with him, I think it set his playing off in relief, which he enjoyed and he realised it was good musically to play against the pattern of saxophone sounds, it set his playing off in relief that made it made him more cogent and I think he knew that

Q: I'm thinking of 'Paper Moon' that you recorded with him

SR: Oh yeah! 'Paper Moon,' right! Oh yeah, boy, I haven't heard that in a long time!

Q: That encapsulates what you were just saying

SR: I guess so, I guess so. I think also when I look back on the songs he made with Charlie Parker he played differently to Dizzy Gillespie when he played with Charlie Parker, you know when Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker came out, they were both playing basically in the same style, the bebop style and sense, the bebop style playing a lot of notes and so forth. But when Miles played with Bird he played the opposite, he played much more introspectively, it was different, of course Miles was a genius, that stuff he did was great, and I think he had that in mind all the time, one day I'll have a strong saxophone player so

he could play his style, it would set off his style more prominently.

Q: Another trumpet player Clifford Brown, 'Valse Hot' and 'Pent Up House' leap to mind, but of course a completely different player to Miles Davis

SR: Yes, yes. Yes, he was quite different to Miles, Miles was Miles, you have to look into past trumpet players to find parallels with Miles, people like Freddie Webster that's one guy who Miles loved, you could sort of see Miles trying to get a lot of his things from Freddie Webster, but other people coming on after; you had Dizzy Gillespie, you had the great Fats Navarro, who was a fantastic trumpet player. I had a guy playing with me, a great pianist Stephen Scott, and Stephen Scott used to tell me, he said, 'Oh, man. I think Fats Navarro was my favourite trumpeter.' And that's perfectly legitimate, because he could play anything. I had the good opportunity to play some jobs with Fats Navarro. But to get back to Clifford Brown, Clifford Brown I would say had a style akin to Fats Navarro. That was his inspiration. Clifford was so fresh, he was young, he was fresh and he was exuberant, beautiful sound, everything, he was just a gift to the music profession when he came out, he was somebody very, very special.

Q: For me, I find him the most rewarding trumpet player in jazz to listen to

SR: Okay, well I certainly wouldn't give you an argument over that at all. He was fantastic, he was so full of life in his playing, so much life in his playing, just wonderful, just wonderful. Well, Clifford was a fine, consummate musician, but I certainly didn't feel, 'Boy, Clifford Brown, I don't know if I should be up here.'

Q: What impact did he have on you, both as a person and as a musician. What were you able to take from that experience?

SR: Well, as person he had a great effect on me, as a musician also, but first as a person he was a very humble person, very businesslike, very nice. For a person who could play that much music, when we played together he could bring down the house, he was still a very humble person and at the time he was a very clean living person, which unfortunately artists and musicians don't always go that route in their personal lives, this is not a criticism of jazz musicians, because jazz musicians have hard, hard, hard lives and they are prey to the usual things artists are prey to – alcohol, drugs all these things. In fact jazz musicians being the discards of society it makes them even more so, but I would say all artists are subject to getting involved in these things because it sort of goes with living trying to get closer to nature and music, and these things are hard to find in every day life, every day society, so artists and writers may get into drinking and all that, because we're trying to find essences of things you're not going to find in everyday life. That's what make art 'art,' something separate, so one of the pitfalls is that in order to find those things you drink a lot, you use drugs a lot, you find ways that at least temporarily give you a different consciousness, and with Clifford Brown he was a guy who played so much music but he was clean living person. At that time in my life I was struggling to get away from some of these bad habits, all of which I had indulged in, so when I came across Clifford it was 'Wow, this guy can play so much music, and yet he's clean living, he what I want to be: a clean living person.' So he ended up being a perfect model for me, at particularly dangerous time in my life, if I can put it that way.

Q: You would put it that strongly would you?

SR: Well, you see I had been in a rehabilitation hospital for substance abuse, and when I joined Clifford Brown and Max Roach I had been fighting to get free of all of these things, I had been going along very nicely, in fact I had turned a corner in

many ways, I had turned a corner but I had to stay away from music for a while, I had to stay away from the environment of music until I got myself strong enough to be around music and not fall prey to drinking and drug abuse and all that stuff. So I was right at a critical point in my life when I had turned a corner and I was ready to going back to playing, and that's when I met the band and they asked me to join it and Clifford became such a light to me, because he was playing so great and yet he was completely clean, a clean living person. So he was a great influence on me in a very, very positive way

Q: And as a musician, what little bit of Clifford Brown did you take away from that experience?

SR: Well, Clifford was a fine, consummate musician, but I certainly didn't feel, 'Boy, Clifford Brown, I don't know if I should be up here.' I didn't feel that, but I certainly felt a big challenge playing with Clifford Brown because of his great playing, however, what sort of saved me and the edification of that band was I was playing a little differently to the fellow I followed in the band, Harold Land, a fine saxophone player. But the Clifford Brown/Max Roach band with Harold Land was set in a certain direction, when I joined the band it sort of opened up a lot of other things, it changed a lot about the band, a lot of people observed that, it changed the character of the band, and in so doing it changed Brownie, because I know that because Brownie's wife told me some years ago when I was playing the *Clifford Brown Jazz Festival* in Wilmington, Delaware – his home – she told me, she said, 'You know Sonny, you and Brownie were so close and Brownie was really affected by you.' For someone to say that I had an effect on him as well as him influencing me was a mutual thing, it was very humbling to me, because Clifford was so great, I don't know if I was as great on saxophone as Clifford was on trumpet, I'm not sure about that, you know? But what I am sure is that I had it in my hands to go in a slightly different direction which changed the character of

that band and eventually when his wife, when she told me, she said, 'Yes, you guys were affecting each other,' that was great!

Q: The band seemed to acquire more gravitas when you entered the fold. We had an interview about ten years ago, when we spoke before, you said you would 'work around a creative pattern and still leave creative element sounding free,' and that 'the essence of freedom in improvisation is both creative and formal,' and I was wondering if we could go a little more deeply into this. This was in the context of the creative process as it related to you

SR: Well me try and take a crack at it, the whole act improvisation and really painting – it's the same thing – you try and communicate a subconscious if you will, and a higher power, energy so that it's very interesting trying to create. I love this because I feel that jazz improvisation is the ultimate, you have to create on the spot, the essence of this music from Louis Armstrong and all the great people, it's different, it's not the same, cliché playing may be okay to a point and maybe you learn by playing clichés' but then you throw all of that stuff aside, you see. It's just like when I am working a piece of music, I will study the music, I will learn the music, maybe that's what I meant when I said there is some kind of formal aspect to this, so I learn the melody, the chord progression, in preparation for my instrumental improvisation. Now when I improvise after learning formally these things, I forget them. I don't go up on the stage and think of them, I forget them and that's where the creativity comes in. That little area is quite mysterious, music is magical, we all know that, and that area where you create and your subconscious is at work and you don't know what you're playing, often I play things if I'm in the right groove I'll play things that I surprise myself, those are things that are deep in my subconscious and they come out during my improvisation, but they are not things I went into the song thinking about they are things I hear and come out. And this is why in improvisation

it is so top of the field when it comes to artistic expression, to me, because there is so much skill involved in playing music, and yet it has got to be free and loose – the skill is there, you learn the skill and you forget it, you don't have to play your scales in the middle of the set, you know what your scales are, it's a matter of keeping your embouchure and you know that already so you don't have to think about that. And in fact the way that improvisation is making the mind blank, when I'm playing I'm just in a trance, I'm not thinking of anything, sometimes I've thought about a nice pattern I wanted to play, maybe a little riff on the song, it's very clever and I'd think about it and go 'Oh yeah, this song I'll put in this clever riff, it'll really sound clever, everybody will think I'm clever!' But I can't do it, because when I think about putting it in someplace, the music has gone by so fast that it doesn't work, so I realised, just forget it, just absorb it, okay fine, and whenever it comes out at some weird time and for some weird reason from the subconscious you'll play it, but don't try to manage it and put it in to a solo. So that's what I have learned about music, about improvisation, and it's beautiful. I think somebody told me Miles said something about that, as he learns something he forgets it because you can't be creative if you know too much about what you're doing. There's something else that Miles hated, cliché people. These are some of the best artists in the world have tremendous skill but they play clichés, a cliché is something which is proven to be effective, but if you just use clichés, it's a sort of a different type of playing, it's not really the height of jazz improvisation, it's not where I want to be, that's a different form. – look, I don't put any kind of playing down, certainly there are some great players who play more clichés that I admire because it takes a lot of skill to play clichés in an effective way but it's not – Miles and I used to talk about this all the time – it's not the optimum, it's a different way of playing, but it's not the way I play, it's not the way other people play that I look to, these people in the firmament

Q: How would you direct students to work towards that end

SR: Well they should learn their materials, if it's a song pattern, they should learn the melody, they should learn the harmony, learn all of these things and then try and improvise on it. Now people improvise in different ways, some people improvise on the chord progression, some people improvise more on the melody like Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins would be a guy who improvises more on the chord progression, so whatever suits the individual person that's the way to go about it, you'll soon find out if you have the talent to be a jazz musician.

Q: Just finally jazz has lost mentors, we were talking about your mentors, jazz has lost these towering figures and I just wonder what you think if jazz has lost anything by this, the opportunity of playing with someone with a very powerful personality

SR: There is a criticism going around that the kids coming out of the schools don't really have the old style 'hands-on' experience that people got when they were playing in these smoke-filled nightclubs, and there were no schools per se, that's a legitimate criticism, however, what can we do about it? There's nothing we can do about it, so instead of lamenting the fact that we have no – that things aren't the way they were fifty years ago, we just have to hope that we can get people coming out of schools because that's what happening now. The schools is where it's at rather than nightclubs which is where it was at when I started, so things change, things go in cycles and I'm not too concerned about that. I think it might be – I can see why a lot of people say 'everybody sounds alike, they play the same,' well that's probably the beginning of something that might be not so desirable, but I think that will ameliorate given time, you'll find people beginning to follow different models, whatever technology might give people a chance to play with records, whatever it is, or there might be more of a chance for people to play in live situations, in optimum ways that they can get the

essence, which is what a lot of people tell me, 'The essence has gone they playing something they could read out of books!' All of these things, I don't feel too discouraged by them, jazz is a force of nature, nobody can stop jazz, it's nature, you can't stop nature, you can try and control nature but it doesn't work, so you're never going to eliminate jazz because it's a wonderful natural freedom, its very spiritual and creative, I think it is a very high spiritual part of what we consider, other people might think jazz is more funky, whatever you think about it, there's something there is real and these great people we have had have certainly shown that it is a beautiful expression of nature and the spirit, whatever you want to call it. There is nothing demeaning about jazz that anybody can say about it, because I know differently. So I'm not worried that the schools have taken over, I think probably they had to, because society at large always keeps jazz so far back from the consciousness of the people we needed it to have it go to the schools.

Q: Finally, last question. When you sit down to listen to music, who do you turn to

SR: Well, I don't listen to records nowadays, I sort of had a mental block about listening to music for many years now. I don't do that, I used to do that, in fact I am going to start probably listening to music, but I haven't listened to music as a relaxing part of my day for many years, I think because I listened to so much music and was involved in so much music it probably just got to overkill, so I can't really answer that question because I don't do that.

Q: I understand, of course. I thought you might take me by surprise and say Mozart or...

SR: I love Mozart, by the way.

Q: Well, he's very difficult to dislike!

SR: Yes, and there's a lot of other music I mean I'm lucky because I love so many kinds of music, it's great. You hear music all the time, even though I don't sit down and listen to it, usually you can't escape some kind of music, so if I happen to be some place and they play some Mozart, sure, it's great. If I started listening again I'd have to have a room just full of records, I'm a music lover I love all kinds of music. Good music and bad music, that's the two things, if it is good which means its done well, if its done with spirit, if its done with feeling, if its done with heart, its good, if its done without those things then I consider it's bad music – any style, it doesn't matter the style, just those qualifications should obtain. Most music I like it if it's done well.

Q: Thank you, for your time

SR: My pleasure