

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Sonny Rollins

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Rollins, Sonny
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins,
Dates:	December 3, 2016
Bulk Dates:	2016
Physical Description:	8 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:30:19).
Abstract:	Jazz composer and saxophonist Sonny Rollins (1930 -) composed the jazz standards “Oleo,” “Airegin,” and “Doxy,” and released over sixty albums in his name, including Saxophone Colossus (1956) and Freedom Suite (1958). Rollins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 3, 2016, in Woodstock, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2016_113
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Jazz composer and saxophonist Sonny Rollins was born on September 7, 1930 in New York City. His parents, immigrants from the U.S. Virgin Islands, raised him in Manhattan’s central Harlem and Sugar Hill neighborhoods. Rollins received his first alto saxophone at seven years old; and was heavily influenced by saxophonist Charlie Parker by the time he enrolled at Edward W. Stitt Junior High School. Rollins switched to tenor saxophone, and was mentored by pianist Thelonious Monk.

Upon graduating from high school, Rollins made his first recordings with Babs Gonzales, J.J. Johnson, Bud Powell, and Fats Navarro. He went on to record with such jazz legends as Miles Davis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. In 1954, Rollins’ compositions “Oleo,” “Airegin,” and “Doxy” were featured on Miles Davis’ *Bags’ Groove*. He later moved to Chicago, Illinois, where he became immersed in the jazz scene at Hyde Park’s Bee Hive club. When Clifford Brown and Max Roach’s band visited Chicago, Rollins was invited to join them, returning to New York City in the summer of 1956. After the tragic deaths of Brown and the band’s pianist, Rollins left the band to lead his own group, recording the acclaimed album *Saxophone Colossus*, which included Rollins’ calypso-inspired composition “St. Thomas.” In 1957, Rollins pioneered the use of bass and drums, without piano, as accompaniment for saxophone solos, a format later adopted by such band leaders like Lew Tabackin, Branford Marsalis, and Ornette Coleman. In 1958, he recorded *Freedom Suite*, which received a limited release before being repackaged by Riverside Records.

In 1959, Rollins spent two years practicing yoga and playing saxophone on the Williamsburg Bridge. In 1962, he released *The Bridge*, which was later inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. He also produced five other albums. Rollins experimented with free jazz and noise on *East Broadway Run Down*, released in 1962. He took another hiatus from 1969 to 1971, travelling to Jamaica and to an ashram in Powai, India. Rollins then began recording more R&B and funk-oriented tracks with Milestone Records, appearing at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art and on *The Tonight Show*. In 1998, Rollins, a dedicated environmental advocate, released *Global Warming*.

Rollins recorded over sixty albums, and was the subject of many documentaries. He received numerous awards and honors, including the Grammy Award for lifetime achievement.

Sonny Rollins was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on December 3, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Sonny Rollins was conducted by Harriette Cole on December 3, 2016, in Woodstock, New York, and was recorded on 8 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Jazz composer and saxophonist Sonny Rollins (1930 -) composed the jazz standards “Oleo,” “Airegin,” and “Doxy,” and released over sixty albums in his name, including *Saxophone Colossus* (1956) and *Freedom Suite* (1958).

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Rollins, Sonny

Cole, Harriette (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Rollins, Sonny--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Saxophonist

Jazz Composer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, December 3, 2016. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_001, TRT: 1:31:58 ?

Sonny Rollins was born on September 7, 1930 to Valborg Solomon Rollins and Walter Rollins. Both his parents grew up in the U.S. Virgin Islands. There, his mother was the daughter of a physician on St. Thomas, and his father was born on the island of St. Croix. Rollins parents met, married and raised his older siblings, Valdemar Rollins and Gloria Rollins Anderson, in the West Indies, before eventually moving to New York City. Rollins' father became a chief petty officer in the U.S. Navy, and was assigned to an officers' club in Maryland. He often requested to be stationed in Brooklyn, but was always denied, so the family only saw him every few years. Rollins grew up in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where he often listened to music with his maternal grandmother, Miriam Hanson. They heard blues on the radio, and player pianos on the street. After seeing saxophonist Louis Jordan perform, Rollins decided to learn the saxophone. His mother found him one, and often had to force him to stop practicing.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_002, TRT: 2:33:21 ?

Sonny Rollins began playing the saxophone at seven years old in New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where he was inspired by the early bebop music of Charlie Parker. Although his older siblings were classically trained musicians, Rollins decided to study jazz, and initially learned by imitating records. After school, he often tried to wake his neighbor, saxophonist Eddie "Lockjaw" Davis, who played in Harlem's nightclubs. However, Davis never agreed to teach Rollins, and he learned from drummer Denzil Best instead. Rollins began his spiritual journey as a teenager, when he almost killed a man during a prank, and began thinking more his actions. He went on to meet pianist Thelonious Monk; and, at seventeen years old, joined Monk's band, where he was introduced to heroin. Like many drug users, Rollins was eventually imprisoned on New York City's Rikers Island. Upon his release, he was influenced by Charlie Parker to admit himself to the United States Narcotic Farm, a treatment facility in Lexington, Kentucky.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_003, TRT: 3:30:48 ?

Sonny Rollins was treated for heroin addiction at the United States Narcotic Farm in Lexington, Kentucky alongside numerous celebrities, including actor Peter Lorre. Upon his release, Rollins moved to Chicago, Illinois, and lived with gospel singers Geraldine Gay, Evelyn Gay and Mildred Gay. He found a day job, and avoided the city's nightclubs, where drug use was common. Rollins slowly returned to the music scene, visiting clubs like the Beehive, where he saw his friends without relapsing. He eventually moved to the Wabash Avenue YMCA and met trumpet player Booker Little, with whom he played in the building's basement. Rollins joined the Clifford Brown and Max Roach Quintet after the departure of saxophonist Harold Land; and toured the country with the group, often staying in rundown hotels because of segregation. In 1956, Rollins, Roach and George Morrow were awaiting the arrival of quintet members Brown and Richie Powell in Chicago, when the two were killed in a car accident in Pennsylvania.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_004, TRT: 4:31:06 ?

Sonny Rollins made his first record in 1949 with singer Babs Gonzales, which was followed by an album with Bud Powell, Fats Navarro and Roy Haynes. He continued recording, and released his first album under his own name in 1950. In 1953, Rollins made an album with Miles Davis that included his composition, 'Airegin,' which became a jazz standard. After the death of Clifford Brown in 1956, Rollins continued playing with Max Roach, and released 'Saxophone

Colossus.’ As his music gained popularity, Rollins recorded jazz interpretations of calypso songs, and had a brief marriage to model Dawn Finney. In 1958, Rollins released ‘Freedom Suite,’ a protest album informed by his early experiences of activism with his maternal grandmother, Miriam Hanson; and wore his hair in a Mohawk to protest the mistreatment of blacks and Native Americans. He received pushback from fans and critics, and decided to take a sabbatical in 1959, during which he practiced his saxophone on the Williamsburg Bridge in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_005, TRT: 5:29:39 ?

Sonny Rollins was among the first saxophonists to perform without accompaniment, and popularized the form in 1959 at the Berkeley Jazz Festival. In the 1960s, he became interested in yoga and esoteric philosophy, and joined a group of Rosicrucian mystics. During the height of his musical popularity in 1967, Rollins took a sabbatical and travelled to India. There, he stayed at an ashram in Mumbai, where he was taught by Swami Chinmayananda Saraswati; and, near the end of his stay, held a small concert with a man who played the nageswaram, an Indian wind instrument. Rollins returned to New York City after four months, and lived with his wife, Lucille Rollins, in Brooklyn, New York near the home of musician Bob Cranshaw. In 1972, Rollins and his wife moved to Germantown, New York. He received a Guggenheim fellowship in the early 1970s, and used the money to build a practice studio at his home. He focused on experimenting with genres; and, in 1974, invited jazz bagpiper Rufus Harley to join his band.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_006, TRT: 6:27:50 ?

Sonny Rollins appeared as a solo act on ‘The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson’ in 1979. In 1981, Rollins’ wife, Lucille Rollins, persuaded him to play as featured musician on the Rolling Stones’ album, ‘Tattoo You,’ although he asked not to be credited and refused to tour with them. During the 1980s, Rollins sought to raise the profile of jazz music by performing in concert halls rather than nightclubs, including Carnegie Hall in New York City. In 1998, he released ‘Global Warming,’ an album promoting environmental activism. On September 11, 2001, Rollins was at his apartment in Manhattan when he heard the first plane hit the World Trade Center; and, as the collapsed building released toxic waste, was forced to evacuate to his home in Germantown, New York. Soon after, he recorded ‘Without a Song: The 9/11 Concert’ live in Boston, Massachusetts. In 2004, Rollins received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. The same year, his wife passed away after an illness.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_007, TRT: 7:22:24 ?

Sonny Rollins founded Doxy Records in 2006, and named the company for a jazz standard that he composed in the 1950s, and recorded with Miles Davis. Soon after, Rollins released the label’s first album, ‘Sonny, Please,’ which received a Grammy Award nomination. He talks about contemporary jazz and hip hop music, as well as the eminence of jazz among musical genres. He describes his hopes for the future, including unity for all people; and reflects upon his life, and his advice to aspiring jazz artists.

Video Oral History Interview with Sonny Rollins, Section A2016_113_001_008, TRT: 8:03:13 ?

Sonny Rollins narrates his photographs.