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## Introduction

In 1959, Sonny Rollins disappeared. At 28, he was one of the undisputed masters of the saxophone—a teen prodigy whose early work with Bud Powell, Charlie Parker, and a young Miles Davis had incubated a complex, rhythmically guided mode of composition and improvisation. Rollins’ 1956 album, *Saxophone Colossus*, had cemented both his popularity and critical standing; in 1958, the leading jazz critic of the era, Gunter Schuller, could confidently describe Rollins as the “central figure” of contemporary jazz improvisation. But after a successful tour of Europe in the first half of 1959, Rollins stopped recording and stopped performing. He would not reappear as an artist until late in 1961.

The practice of woodshedding—retreating from the public stage to hone musical craft, refine a particular piece, or change stylistic direction—is common within the jazz world. Looking back now, even a two-year withdrawal is not in itself unusual; judged against Rollins’ later career, this break was neither his first nor his longest hiatus from performance. But this inward turn does stand out for a number of reasons—reasons which speak to qualities characteristic of both Rollins himself, and the way that jazz is popularly imagined.

During the last months of his break from performance, Rollins was discovered in the throes of practicing by the jazz journalist Ralph Berton. Though Berton disguised both Rollins and his whereabouts in the article he wrote up about the encounter, the truth quickly got around. For nearly two years, Rollins had been practising, mostly alone, on the Williamsburg Bridge, sometimes for 15 hour stretches. Although Rollins only practiced at night a handful of times, the

image took hold. The saxophonist silhouetted against the lights of the New York skyline seemed to embody the ideals of jazz: its urban, nocturnal spirit; its association with the solitary genius; its potential for a romantic flow of spontaneous and unpremeditated art. It is hardly surprising that it remains one of the most enduring and repeated visual signifiers of jazz.

But while the dramatic staging of his practice on the bridge added to Rollins' mystique—and gave his next album its title and thematic focus—the less obvious aspects of Rollins' bridge years are actually the most revealing. Rollins would go on to speak several times of an intense dissatisfaction with his own abilities and direction of travel that came to a head in 1959. It was this spirit of self-critique that prompted his withdrawal. To an observer, these claims might seem baffling. By 1959, Rollins was ten years into his career. He had performed and recorded with some of the leading figures in bebop—not just Parker and Powell, but Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, whose vision and ethos imprinted on Rollins. He had recorded more than a dozen albums as band leader, and since 1955, had been laying down a huge number of pieces that would become jazz standards, including “Oleo,” “Doxy,” “Airegin,” and the calypso inspired piece that became his trademark, “St Thomas.” But Rollins' virtuosic improvisation were driven by a keen intelligence and intense self-reflection. These qualities were expressed in his playful and frequently under-rated 1957 album *Way Out West*, where Rollins reimagined the clichéd soundscape of western films into an experimental and often beautiful album, and in *Freedom Suite* a 1958 protest album whose political message so confounded his record company that they decided to retitle, republicize, and rearrange the recording.

The same qualities that propelled his composition and improvisation were also manifested in the way that Rollins approached his period of reflection. In one of his first accounts of those years of withdrawal, an interview in *DownBeat* from 1961, Rollins explained that “When I quit, I suppose I had the intention of changing myself drastically, my whole approach to the horn.” When he “realized after awhile that that wasn't what was needed or what was bothering me,” Rollins changed tack, and “began to study what I had been doing, and I

explored all the possibilities of that.” Over the two years, he followed a disciplined practice schedule, setting himself specific goals that he returned to and re-evaluated frequently. Musical practice was complimented by physical exercise and meditation. He adopted a strict regimen of reading and research, which blended diverse musicological texts with philosophical and political treatises.

Before now, Rollins had been in the occasional habit of jotting down short notes to himself, frequently on yellow legal pad. His liner notes had revealed to the wider public something of his nuanced ability to offer thoughtful cultural-political observations with a distinctive style that favored parallelisms and qualifying asides. In the notes to *Freedom Suite*, for instance, Rollins had observed that “America is deeply rooted in Negro culture: its colloquialisms; its humor; its music,” before addressing “how ironic” it was that “the Negro, who more than any other people can claim America’s culture as his own, is being persecuted and repressed; that the Negro, who has exemplified the humanities in his very existence, is being rewarded with inhumanity.” These were striking claims for anyone to be making in 1958, and here they were, coming from a jazz musician who, the year before, had posed on the cover of an album in a ten-gallon hat (an image whose irony Rollins was not only aware of, but which he cultivated).

Crucially, this tendency towards written reflection—in an artist who had pioneered the concept of a purely instrumental jazz protest album—sharpened over the bridge years. Rollins began to write more frequently, and adopted a sustained and self-consciously reflective programme, commensurate with the physical, intellectual, and musicological rigours of this protracted isolation. Almost sixty years later, in 2017, Rollins donated his personal archive to the New York Public Library. While scattered notes exist from before 1959, it is during his bridge years that Rollins turned to writing as a sustained and conscious practice.

Why did Rollins turn to writing during his first years of withdrawal, with more frequency than any other period in his life? In part, it was the natural corollary to the way he spent those years: in a more complete withdrawal from performance, and most of his friends and peers, than later stints in the woodshed. More importantly, though, the intensity with which he wrote is entirely in keeping with his motivations for retreating from the public stage in the first place. And motives, as his notebooks attest, were of the highest order to Rollins. Talking to the *New Yorker's* long time jazz critic, Whitney Balliett, in November 1961, Rollins put his finger on why he'd felt dissatisfied with jazz in 1959. Unlike other interviews, he did not focus principally on his own performance. This was a general dissatisfaction with the world of jazz. "People are not doing things as well as they can do them any more," Rollins said. The answer, though, was not to criticise others, but to focus on himself; he had wanted "time to practice" and "to study."

Rollins left the scene during a year that, even at the time, was seen as a monumental moment of transition. The hard bop style that Rollins had helped to define was branching outwards, spiralling in one direction into the modal jazz of Davis' *Kind of Blue*, and shooting off into another, following the free jazz trajectory of Coleman's *Shape of Jazz to Come*. Faced with this fork, Rollins wanted to choose his own path. His notebooks show how thoroughly committed he was to expanding and deepening his musical knowledge. Already infamous for the vast range of musical references he could draw on when improvising, Rollins' 'study' comprised an idiosyncratic reading list. He read extensively in classical European composition and musical theory, and was particularly fascinated with Sigurd Raschèr's ideas about saxophone tonality. The two shared an obsession with mouthpieces and embouchure that later led to correspondence, and friendship. But Raschèr was complemented with notes on the structure of ragas and principles of Hindu music—the start of an enduring investment in Indian culture and beliefs. But study for Rollins was always two parts practical experimentation for every one part theory. His detailed notes on the placement of one's fingers on the keys, and in the position of the tongue inside the mouth when playing were frequently accompanied by ink sketches and

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diagrams. But even for a non-musician, the startling directness and verve of his style communicates his rethinking of musical concepts in a vivid, tangible way; we feel the tension and excitement when he finishes some observations on whether “a note can be different and yet the same” with the enjoinder “now to see if this implies and bears out what I think...”.