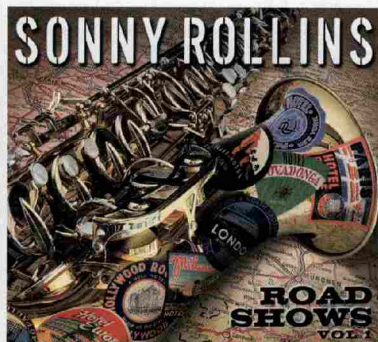


Sonny Rollins

Jazz Artist of the Year
 Jazz Album of the Year



The Colossus has seized the day, once again. Tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins, who was featured prominently in last month's 75th Anniversary issue, has been named our Jazz Artist of the Year. To top it off, his CD *Road Shows, Vol. 1* (Doxy/EmArcy), which earned a 5-star review by Shaun Brady in DownBeat's February 2009 issue, takes top honors as Jazz Album of the Year. We asked three of our critics to weigh in with their takes on what makes the man and his latest recorded release so appealing.

When questions about the vitality, relevance and enjoyment value of jazz today are raised, Sonny Rollins stands as our music's irrefutable answer. He walks onstage slower and stiffer than in his youth, back slightly bent, but when he blows the tenor saxophone clenched between his lips, cleaving the air with the horn that is his lifeline to the world, he straightens, swells and looms, huge, a master of gritty beauty and earthy truth.

Truth and beauty, real because never predictable, suffuse *Road Shows, Vol. 1*, Rollins' selected highlights from 27 years of performances worldwide. Genuinely modest, famously self-critical, he makes no promises about his shows except that he'll try his best, but his every phrase seems driven by purpose. He intends to convey his personal experience, through sound, into meaning all listeners can share. He doesn't talk much about this, dictates no particulars, boasts no grand theories, yet he is among the few who can really do it. In a successful concert, Rollins sweeps the audience up so we recognize his aspirations, realize his crises and are struck



by his revelations. He plays for us and we're convinced that what he plays is what we, also, feel and would play if only we could.

With his passionate lyricism, expressive immediacy, warmth and humor, personal integrity and position of honor within the main course of jazz history, Sonny Rollins remains at age 79 more than a hero. He is in 2009 just what a record album called him in 1956: a colossus. Not a cold one, though. His music overflows with the heart and soul of a man.

—Howard Mandel

much as the world around him shifts and moves onward.

We're told that Rollins seldom feels that his concert recordings are worthy of release, yet the spirit embodied in his playing comes to the fore in his discovery of new vistas such as those heard here on the opening "Best Wishes" and "Blossom," where he tears into the music with sweeping authority and abandon. There are moments of indecision on "More Than You Know," while "Easy Living" is nonpareil. "Tenor Madness" works in small ways, and

the calypso "Nice Lady" ably covers one of Rollins' favorite genres. The closing "Some Enchanted Evening" is a slight disappointment, with Rollins merely skirting the melody repeatedly.

The sidemen play minor roles, but noteworthy are the contributions of drummer Al Foster, pianist Mark Soskin and trombonist Clifton Anderson.

Although this album is short of masterpiece status, it is a most worthy documentation.

—Will Smith

In light of the new (read: historical) Freddie Hubbard album *Without A Song: Live In Europe 1969*, resurrected from the Blue Note vaults posthumously, Sonny Rollins' decision to cull through his audio archives now to compile last year's *Road Shows, Vol. 1* is indeed welcome. Equally important is that he's calling the shots, agreeing to document what he deems are his best performances and having the freedom to release multiple volumes on his own Doxy label—all of which will become more fodder for the Sonny canon. These days if Rollins were attached to any record company—major or indie—it's highly unlikely that he would have such creative license to release this new live material, which his fans have been craving.

What's remarkable about *Road Shows, Vol. 1* is the degree to which Rollins sustains his tenor saxophone solos, a rarity for improvisers. He's arguably the only saxophonist alive who can never take too many choruses. He never rolls with the flow or engages in egotistic acrobatics. He gusts, he hushes, he swings. He's an extemporaneous painter splashing color, a poet who chooses notes carefully, a choreographer who dances to the beat of his own phrases. In his playing, there is a searching ebullience, awestruck mystery, in-the-moment creativity.

My favorite moment comes when the band stops and lets Rollins sing alone at the end of the ballad "More Than You Know." It's heavenly.

—Dan Ouellette

When one considers the element of jazz greatness that's so intriguing for listeners and players alike, the feeling of joyous collective freedom comes most clearly to mind. It is the elation of that "sound of surprise" when one hears something that lifts him/her to another place. It's a zone that fans of tenor titan Sonny Rollins know well.

Rollins has made it clear for much of his 60-year career that he feels no need to be fashionable in his musical choices. The performances on *Road Shows, Vol. 1*, taped at seven venues across the globe circa 1980–2007, have little to do with his classic Blue Note and Prestige recordings, yet they show a musician honoring the past with continuing growth and change,