

ITALIAN JAZZ Sonny's Life Lesson

Enzo Capua (September 18, 2014)



Sonny Rollins. The American tenor saxophonist is widely recognized as one of the most important and influential jazz musicians and he loves Italy ...

A short while ago I traveled to see a friend of mine. That might sound like nothing special; we all travel to see friends. But if they haven't been unwell lately and are on the mend, then paying a visit becomes for them—and for us—a little more thrilling. It enriches the feeling of seeing one another again and catching up. But there's something else about my friend that makes seeing him even more special: he happens to be a truly extraordinary person, one of the great musicians in the history of jazz, a giant who breaks the mold, as if he too were carved into the side of Mount Rushmore beside the four presidents of the United States. And he wouldn't look the fool next to Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Jefferson. In fact, even at eighty-three, my dear friend still answers to the nickname given him sixty years ago, a name that corresponds to the instrument he



plays with such insurmountable grace and skill: Saxophone Colossus. Even people who only know a little about jazz know I'm talking about Sonny Rollins.

Colossus now lives outside New York, near Woodstock, in a beautiful house deep in the country. Ten years ago, Sonny lost his beloved wife, Lucille, who was also his manager. Lucille was one of the only two loves of Sonny's life. The other, obviously, is more ethereal but every bit as powerful: Music. In his case it's totally appropriate to write that word with a capital M; Sonny is an integral part of American history. He has received every recognition there is over the course of his long and glorious career, even the National Medal of Arts, which was awarded to him by President Obama in 2010. He's a true living legend, and his contribution to jazz is immeasurable. In 200 years, people will still be talking about Sonny Rollins and listening to his records. It's clear, then, why being a friend of Sonny's is a point of pride for me, and going out to see him in semi-retirement in the country, spending hours talking about music and life, is a privilege I'll cherish forever. Sonny's life has had sharp highs and lows. He has nearly died from drug-use. He has lived in monastic solitude. He has played his saxophone alone under the Brooklyn Bridge. Yet he has still gotten everything an artist could want out of life, and if there's one thing about him that makes an impression on anyone that comes across his path, it's the deep humility that trumps any pride or vanity the man might possess. There's not a hypocritical bone in his body. It's a life lesson that shouldn't be ignored.

Sonny loves Italy, and anyone who loves jazz can't help but adore him. Among the great Italian saxophonists, not one can say he hasn't taken to heart Rollins' great artistic lesson. Many have imitated him. Few have succeeded in achieving his technical mastery. No one can equal him. Last year, when he was invited to play once more in Perugia during the Umbria Jazz Festival, Sonny decided to call two brilliant trumpet players to accompany him onstage, Enrico Rava and Paolo Fresu. It was an unprecedented honor for a European musician. Unfortunately, the concert was cancelled on account of Sonny's health. But, as I said, he's on the mend. Next year, when he turns 84, he plans to return to the stage. "I need to play, to blow my horn again onstage," he told me. Loving what you do and loving yourself without hiding your own weaknesses—now that's a life lesson!

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