

## Sonny Rollins: *The Bridge* (1962)

By Will Ryan, Champlain College

At the end of the 1950s Sonny Rollins began to question his own popularity as well as the music that had brought him his early rise to fame. After a series of landmark recordings in which Rollins explored various approaches to soloist themed jazz in several different such as bop and calypso, the tenor saxophonist withdrew from public performance in order to brush up on his craft. He felt he was finding too much, too soon, and that his playing didn't live up to his reputation. He felt his early success was not found on his own terms, which was key to Sonny, and a theme that would remain pervasive to the whole of his career. This was also the first sabbatical of several Rollins would eventually take, but it is perhaps his most important as the rest from performance provided the time he needed to produce what is most often held as his most important work, 1962's *The Bridge*.

Before recording the record Rollins was living in the Lower East Side of Manhattan during most of his three-year public musical hiatus and found it hard to find a polite place to play: "I [...] experienced some of the problems with trying to play a horn with neighbors," said Rollins in an interview with the Academy of Achievement<sup>1</sup>, "so I had to find someplace to practice. I practiced in the house because I had to practice, but I felt guilty sometimes, because I'm a sensitive person, and I know that people need privacy in the apartments." He eventually found a place nearby that would come to provide a title for the forthcoming album: Williamsburg Bridge. The accompaniment of boats passing under the bridge and the subway rolling over provided a private place where he could play as loud and as long as he wanted—sometimes as much as sixteen hours a day.

After three years of honing his craft, Rollins returned to performance and assembled Bob Cranshaw on bass, Ben Riley on drums, and Jim Hall, one of the most celebrated jazz guitarists, to round out his quartet. The three others provide a backdrop, and often times, a counterpart—especially on the part of Jim Hall's intimate guitar playing—to Rollins' solo sessions. The quartet is able to capture Sonny's descriptions of the three years he spent alone beneath Williamsburg Bridge. From the bustling energy of "John S." and "The Bridge" to the eerily nostalgic "Where Are You?" there's always a certain sense of place and experience as if Rollins truly brought his time beneath the bridge into the studio. The record showcases some of the saxophonist's most imaginative solos and fulfills Rollin's reputation as one of the most thematic improvisers in jazz.

While *The Bridge* did not provide the revolution many expected it marked a musician's strident progress and determination as a musician. The album's double meaning shines through very clearly once the story behind its conception is revealed and it remains one of Sonny Rollins' greatest achievements, especially as a personal document, and is arguably his most complete recording.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/rol0int-6>