

The Bridge Sonny Rollins

An appreciation by **BRIAN MORTON** (*Penguin Guide to Jazz*)

In 1930, the poet Hart Crane published *The Bridge*. Its guiding metaphor is the majestic Brooklyn Bridge in New York, which dominated the view from Crane's apartment, once occupied, he learned later, by one of the bridge's most influential builders. For Crane, the bridge represented many things: a place where gay men went cruising for sex, but also a symbolic connection between past history and future destiny, and to that degree an "act of faith." What *The Bridge* actually is, in literary terms, has been disputed, but we can return to that.

In 1959, Sonny Rollins gave up playing in public to work on his technique and his musical vision. Without a viable rehearsal space in his crowded apartment block, he took to the walkways of the Williamsburg Bridge, practicing for more than twelve hours a day in all weathers and seasons. Rollins' sojourn has become a symbol of the artist's dedication to his craft. Then in 1962, he returned to recording and, naming the album after one of his original compositions, called it *The Bridge*.

Perhaps a few recognized the coincidence with Crane's poem. Both evoked very similar reservations. No one has ever known quite how to describe the Crane work. Is it an epic? If so, is it a modernist epic? Or is it simply a collection of shorter poems, some of them much better than others. Many who have heard the story of Rollins' lonely woodshedding come to his album expecting a record of devastating structural grandeur, cantilevered with great themes and innovative techniques, and are perhaps a little disappointed to find that it, too, is an album of smaller parts, standard tunes (with the exception of the two middle tracks, "John S." and "The Bridge") played in a relatively conventional manner by a regular combo. The problem for Rollins was the same problem everyone who decides to duck out of the race for a while always has to confront. One can retreat from the world, but the world doesn't stop in our absence. While Rollins, who had been the rising star of the tenor saxophone prior to 1959, came back, it was to a jazz world that had been galvanized by the radical experiments of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Eric Dolphy and Cecil Taylor. However exquisitely crafted and deeply felt his album was, it was bound to seem a little like last year's fashion in the face of new developments.

Passing time quickly removes such expectations and prejudices. Putting on *The Bridge* now is to be presented with a bona fide masterpiece. The components may look familiar enough. It opens with a tune, "Without a Song," that was

first heard when Crane was putting the finishing touches to his *Bridge*, and that is followed up by "Where Are You?" a tune from the movies. Even the originals don't suggest that a stylistic revolution has taken place. What *has* happened though, is that Rollins' artistry has gone through a process of annealing. What was hard has become pliable and mobile. Every note relates to those before and those after in a newly organic way. It's music that lives because its creator lived with it. Don't approach *The Bridge* as a piece of architecture. Approach it as if it was a person.

BRIAN MORTON



THE BRIDGE in the 21st CENTURY – *Jazz Magazine*

Adored and recognized by his peers as the undisputed leader of young saxophonists engaged in the hard bop revolution since his active participation in the mid-1950s in the famous Max Roach Quintet (in the company of the brilliant trumpeter Clifford Brown) and the recording as a leader of his manifesto album *Saxophone Colossus*, at the turn of the 60s Sonny Rollins, full of breathtaking inventiveness, mastery and audacity, was going through a moment of questioning himself both on a personal and aesthetic level. Mentally exhausted, haunted by the advent of a new tenor saxophone monster in the person of John Coltrane, disconcerted by the libertarian irruption of free jazz, and aware of having reached the limits of a certain style, he decided to temporarily retire in order to reflect on the directions

to give to his music. Released in 1961 after long months of retirement, *The Bridge*, as splendid as it is paradoxical, is the album that marked his "rebirth". At the head of an admirable quartet of fluidity and balance, where the great guitarist Jim Hall shines throughout with his clear aesthetic lines, Rollins showcases his inimitable voluminous sound, and transcends in long lyrical improvisations imbued with a moving serenity a repertoire of heady ballads, signing one of his most tender and peaceful works. An album of a formal classicism perfectly against the trends of fashion and provocative at a time when everything around was ablaze.

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Side A

- 1 **WITHOUT A SONG** 7:30
- 2 **WHERE ARE YOU?** 5:12
- 3 **JOHN S.** 7:44
- 4 **GOD BLESS THE CHILD** [alternative version] 5:50 *

Side B

- 1 **THE BRIDGE** 5:59
- 2 **GOD BLESS THE CHILD** 7:30
- 3 **YOU DO SOMETHING TO ME** 6:51
- 4 **THE BRIDGE** [alternative version] 5:19 *

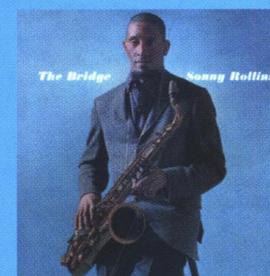
SONNY ROLLINS, tenor saxophone
JIM HALL, guitar
BOB CRANSHAW, bass
BEN RILEY, drums (on Side A, B1 & B3)
HARRY T. SAUNDERS, drums (on B2 only)

New York, January 30 (B2), February 13 (A2, A3, B3) & February 14 (A1, B1), 1962.

Original sessions produced by Bob Prince

* BONUS TRACKS: Same personnel as above (Riley on drums). Ralph Gleason's "Jazz Casual" TV Show, San Francisco, March 23, 1962.

Originally issued as *The Bridge* (RCA LSP-2527)



★★★★★ **DOWN BEAT**

"At the risk of being unable to give Rollins a higher numerical rating when he surpasses this album (and I have every confidence that he will) this set still has to be placed in the superlative class." (*Ira Gitler*)

★★★★½ **ALL MUSIC**

"The interplay between Rollins and Hall is consistently impressive, making this a near-classic and a very successful comeback." (*Scott Yanow*)