“Saxophone Colossus” Sonny Rollins dies at 95

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5 June 2026

On May 25 tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins died peacefully at 95 in his home in Woodstock, New York, from progressive pulmonary fibrosis. His death marks the physical and “biographical” end of an era that began with the founding of bebop in New York during the final years of World War II. Musically and culturally, that era, of course, concluded decades ago.

Rollins was indisputably one of the major figures of 20th century American music. His passing has been widely covered by the US media and has triggered an outpouring of respectful, well-deserved accolades, including glowing references in his *New York Times* obituary to “the greatest living jazz improviser” and “the greatest virtuoso ever produced by jazz.”

Notably, Rollins was the last survivor of the 57 musicians in the iconic 1958 photograph by Art Kane known as “A Great Day in Harlem.” The image has been frequently invoked as capturing the “Golden Era” of jazz, a period that coincided with the emergence of the US as the leading capitalist economic and political power but riven by social contradictions.

Rollins’ breakthrough 1956 album for Prestige Records was aptly named *Saxophone Colossus,* also the title of Aidan Levy’s extensive but somewhat uneven and tedious 2022 biography. While not the last surviving bebopper—the superlative vibraphonist Terry Gibbs is very much alive at 101—Rollins deserves consideration among such pioneers as alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Navarro and Miles Davis, pianists Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell, and drummers Max Roach, Art Blakey and Roy Haynes.

A large, handsome and imposing man who seemed welded to his instrument, Rollins had an earthy, broad sound that incorporated the pre-bop saxophone sound of Coleman Hawkins with the transitional style of Lester Young and Parker’s astounding new harmonic and rhythmic innovations. Rollins’ improvised solos on records and during his innumerable live performances, which at times could extend 10 minutes or more, were always lyrical and emotive, occasionally with surprising references to popular and classical music. He practiced incessantly, and used his virtuosity to develop spontaneous, fresh melodies thematically, at times while walking around a stage in search of the optimum acoustics.

Rollins’ repertoire consisted of blues, jazz standards and an occasional Tin Pan Alley rarity—He recorded “I’m an Old Cowhand” and “Toot, Toot, Tootsie, Goodbye,“ for example. Rollins performed dozens of his own compositions, many of which have become jazz standards in their own right, including the rapid-fire “Oleo,” a jam-session staple, “Doxy,” “Airegin,” the blues line “Sonnymoon For Two,” and the captivating calypso “St. Thomas” that harkens to his family roots in the Caribbean.

Rollins was a genuine improviser who frequently spoke about blanking his mind during performances to better channel melodic invention. As a result his live performances could be uneven, but frequently they were inspired and fresh. Rollins was critical of his own performances, always insisting that the music could have been better.

Indicating something about his fanatical devotion to his music, in 1986, Rollins was performing at Opus 40, a sculpture park in Saugerties, New York. During the concert, he missed the landing on a jump from the stage mid-solo and landed heavily on the stone surface six feet below, instantly and painfully breaking his heel.

After a brief and tense pause, he lay on his back and began playing the opening to “Autumn Nocturne”—then finished the entire concert. He only learned afterward that he had broken his heel.

The whole episode was captured on film. Documentary filmmaker Robert Mugge was there shooting *Saxophone Colossus* (1986) and had his four cameramen keep rolling as it happened.

Walter Theodore Rollins was born September 7, 1930, in New York City to recent immigrants from a former Dutch colony in the West Indies. His father, educated and fluent in several languages, was a life-long sailor in the U.S. Navy, which relegated him to waiting on officers.

Rollins was raised in Harlem by his mother Valborg and her sister Mirium, an eclectic left-wing activist, in a family profoundly affected by the Harlem Renaissance afterglow cast by W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson but also the shadow of black nationalist, charlatan and swindler Marcus Garvey , an immigrant from Jamaica who formed a “Back to Africa” movement in Harlem before being convicted of mail fraud and deported.

As a youth, Rollins attended Camp Unity in Wingdale, New York, described by his biographer Levy as “an interracial, antichauvinist, anticapitalist summer camp,” established by the New York branches of the Communist Party. Many black artists turned toward the CP as the supposed continuator of the 1917 October Revolution and a beacon in the struggle against oppression. Tragically, the Stalinized Communist Party had shifted sharply to the right, doing everything in its power to subordinate

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the working class to the Democratic Party and the liberal sections of the ruling elite.

Rollins later recalled, "It was considered a communist camp, … a bad word to some people but a good word to the people in my community because it offered a lot of the black Americans intercourse with some of the other activities that you otherwise would be prohibited from engaging in."

One activity available to everyone in Harlem, of course, was music, with the major big bands of Duke Ellington, Jimmie Lunceford and Chick Webb based in the neighborhood, along with innumerable individual performers such as Fats Waller. Rollins took up the saxophone at age eight and by his mid-teens was proficient enough to start working around New York City, just as the clubs on 52nd Street were becoming the ground zero for bebop.

Among Rollins' first recordings is an excellent 1949 session led by pianist Bud Powell for Blue Note Records that included the brilliant trumpeter Fats Navarro, sadly the year before his death from heroin addiction at age 26. Rollins' brief solos show the degree to which he had absorbed while still a teenager the harmonic and rhythmic language of modern jazz.

Rollins made outstanding records during the 1950s in groups led by Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis, including one notable session with Charlie Parker switching to tenor saxophone. Unfortunately, like too many of his peers, Rollins became addicted to heroin. He spent time in custody before breaking the habit mid-decade, leading to the most creative and productive years of his career.

In 1955, Rollins joined the Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet and began recording prolifically under his own name, including the classic *Saxophone Colossus*, *Tenor Madness*, featuring a "battle" with the up-and-coming John Coltrane, and a daring trio album—only bass and drums, no piano or guitar—in Los Angeles for Contemporary Records, *Way Out West.*

Rollins followed up with *A Night At the Village Vanguard*, also with only bass and drums, and several other albums for Blue Note, before 1958's remarkable *Freedom Suite* for Riverside Records, using the same spare instrumentation for an unusual four-movement composition based on a recurrent motif. Intended as a political statement, the liner notes by Rollins express his inexhaustible spirit of struggle and optimism but also the undoubted influence of black nationalism.

"America is deeply rooted in Negro culture," Rollins wrote. "How ironic that the Negro, who more than any other people can claim America's culture as his own, is being persecuted and repressed."

As much as any other American artist in the postwar period, Rollins was shaped by the vicissitudes of the political situation and the influence of disparate ideological trends, including existentialism and varieties of "Eastern philosophy."

In 1959, despite his success, Rollins suddenly vanished into a self-imposed exile. "I felt for a long time that I wasn't going anywhere, that I had ceased to speak the truth." Rollins became a Rosicrucian and took up yoga. He followed a lengthy daily practice regimen using intricate, mathematically derived schemata, famously practicing on the Williamsburg Bridge (between Brooklyn and Manhattan) so as not to disturb his neighbors.

Rollins emerged in 1962 with *The Bridge* on RCA Victor, a major label, joined by guitarist Jim Hall. Rollins issued a series of remarkable albums on the Impulse! label, including a 1963 album with his early influence Coleman Hawkins and a 1966 film score for *Alfie*, starring Michael Caine in his signature role, directed by Lewis Gilbert.

In 1968 Rollins abruptly left music again, this time to study meditation in India. He remained on sabbatical, more or less, until late 1971, when he returned for the final decades of his career.

Rollins' style remained instantly recognizable, sometimes fusing elements of his previous periods with rock instrumentation and increasing doses of calypso. Rollins provided three saxophone tracks for the Rolling Stones' 1981 *Tattoo You* but declined their invitation to tour.

As an elder statesman, Rollins won multiple awards and honors from the music industry, academia and the political establishment. He was always gracious and modest in interviews and with aspiring musicians.

On September 11, 2001, Rollins was in his apartment a few blocks from the World Trade Center when the buildings were struck by airliners and collapsed. Toxic particles infested the area, and he could not be evacuated until the next day, when he had to descend 39 flights. While no causal link was proven, Rollins subsequently developed pulmonary fibrosis, which ended his career. Rollins' last public performance was in 2012.

A notable episode in 2014 highlights Rollins as a victim of the general decline of American culture. The *New Yorker* magazine published a piece purportedly quoting Rollins that jazz is "the stupidest thing anyone ever came up with." Not clearly marked as satire—and not remotely amusing—the piece shocked and confused fans. Rollins responded graciously, stating that the article "hurt his feelings" and that it felt like someone being kicked "when he is down."

The legacy of Sonny Rollins embodies the best traditions of jazz and art in general—democratic, rooted in tradition, disciplined and yet expressive of individual freedom and expression. It is a legacy worth fighting for—against the cheapening of popular taste, the racialist reduction of art and the postmodernist and irrationalist currents that sometimes drove Rollins inward or away from performing music altogether.

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