

SONNY ROLLINS:

MEDITATING ON A RIFF

A Journey Into His World of Spirituality

HUGH WYATT

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Dedication

To my late sister, Nona Wyatt Hill.

Acknowledgments and Credits

This biography, *Sonny Rollins: Meditating on a Riff*, would not be possible without the expert guidance, editing, and design efforts of Amanda Wyatt, my daughter. Although I have known Sonny Rollins for more than a half-century, Amanda, who is a quick study, frequently corrected me and provided additional details about Sonny that I had long forgotten.

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Edward escorted 95-year-old Eubie Blake to the piano at one of the ragtime artist's last Brooklyn concerts. He was also an editor of publications in Japan and gave me invaluable advice about one of the world's greatest jazz capitals.

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Hugh Wyatt

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Introduction

Sonny Rollins travelled many bumpy roads during a seven-decade music career, but it may have been his secret journey into otherworldly realms, including those of Egypt, East Asia, and India, that helped to transform the former Harlem heroin addict and stickup man into one of the most respected and beloved jazz musicians in the world.

Atheists and other nonbelievers may argue that Sonny was able to kick his habit, end a crime spree, and become a jazz legend through sheer force of character. They attribute his conversion to his natural talents, sharp intellect, and the strong will of a man capable of successfully fighting off these evil demons.

But, were these traits sufficient to satisfy a demanding man who needed more out of life?

For the spiritually-minded—be they Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, Rosicrucian, Taoist, or of any other belief system—the right spiritual journey can be more than satisfactory. It may lead one

to Heaven, Nirvana, Enlightenment, or similar destinations. They assert that taking such an unconventional road enables powerful, mystical experiences, such as establishing direct contact with God, immortality, or developing other skills that go beyond the natural scope of normal human beings.

Sonny's quest—akin to that of an Indian *swami* or a Buddhist monk—was to acquire, through a life of meditation and spirituality, the knowledge and supremacy required to fight off his demons, as well as to unlock the secrets of the universe.

But would he be forced to embrace the unknown, perhaps even darker side of life, in order to enter this realm? Would he be a practitioner of the occult, which refers to a clandestine character, someone who has hidden knowledge of the paranormal?

There are many indications that he trekked along those paths, but since he is so secretive, he has reluctantly revealed only a few such endeavors, such as levitation from the floor to the ceiling. Could the great Sonny Rollins be putting us on?

In his book *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, Dutch scholar Wouter Hanegraaff said of occultism that it is “a category in the study of religions, which comprises all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world, or alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world.”

Hanegraaff quoted Danish scholar Marcello Truzzi, who also posited that the very term “occult” is problematic: “In many ways, the occult is a residual category, a wastebasket, for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way, that do not fit the established claims of science or religion.” The occult is, then, a vague term for beliefs and practices ranging from astrology, alchemy, and magic to mysticism, spirit channeling, and even UFO abductions.

Regardless, many of Sonny's beliefs can fall into the category of “the occult,” and millions of his fans worldwide—including spirituality buffs, diehard jazz aficionados, New Agers, and everyday people—accept him at face value for his varied and eccentric spiritual explorations. Most of them only sense his spirituality, but a few friends and family members claimed to have witnessed validations of Sonny's other world.

But it is the world of jazz where his credentials are unchallenged. In

the realm of jazz, Sonny has towered over widely-known giants of the tenor saxophone, with the exception perhaps of John Coltrane. Many fans argue that although he is technically superior, Coltrane's spiritual achievements may have surpassed those of Sonny's. However, these long-standing disputes among most jazz aficionados and spiritualists may never be resolved.

Coltrane essentially cemented his title as leader of this new, experimental, Eastern-style jazz sound with the historic recording *A Love Supreme* in 1965, which became a benchmark for music lovers of all ages and genres seeking to pursue a more spiritual approach in life.

During his much-discussed hiatus from the music industry between 1959 and 1961, Sonny set a spiritual precedent for himself when he virtually lived on the Williamsburg Bridge, between Manhattan and Brooklyn, while practicing on the pedestrian walkway. He was studying yoga, Rosicrucianism, and many ancient Egyptian and Eastern religions—and secretive cults—in his Grand Street apartment.

It should be noted that Coltrane claimed he had experienced a “spiritual awakening” earlier in 1957, prior to Sonny's sabbatical. Afterwards, Coltrane acknowledged his involvement in Kriya yoga, a little-known but nonetheless powerful form of yoga that emphasizes God-realization, among other things.

It was during this time that the emerging “spiritual sounds” of both Sonny and Coltrane started to appeal on a widescale basis to mostly young, white, avant-garde listeners and New Agers—seekers drawn to the more esoteric principles of Buddhism, Hinduism, yoga, Jainism, Taoism, Islam, and astrology. Many young black intellectuals and artistic types had already begun to explore ancient and Eastern religions as far back as the 1920s, when some chose to embrace the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith.

Regardless of Sonny's spiritual influence on his fans, trumpeter Miles Davis, pianist Thelonious Monk, and other stalwart jazz figures maintained that Sonny was the number-one tenor saxophonist on the planet. They argued that he outperformed other highly regarded tenor saxophonists, such as Coleman Hawkins (his idol), Lester Young, Chu Berry, Don Byas, Dexter Gordon, Ben Webster, Gene Ammons, and Stan Getz.

Although a comparison should not be made between Sonny and Charlie “Yardbird” Parker, who was unquestionably the supreme alto saxophonist,

Sonny reached similar heights on the tenor saxophone. Parker's influence, which was phenomenal, extended beyond alto saxophonists to include other instrumentalists all over the world who tried to emulate his style and sound. Both Parker and Sonny are undeniable geniuses.

Like Parker, Sonny also changed the direction of jazz. Bird, as Parker was called, introduced bebop to wider audiences, effectively ending the reign of the big band style of jazz known as swing in the early 1940s. Sonny's reign on the tenor began in the early 1950s, and his style became the gold standard.

Although the twelve-bar blues format was Sonny's initial musical foundation, due to the infusion of exotic religious sounds and stylings into his music, the influence of the blues was less apparent by the early 1960s. Still, Sonny continued to be as bluesy as ever, reflecting his personality. As much as any other player, he had paid his dues and lived a life of almost unprecedented suffering.

Unlike Coltrane, who incorporated Hindustani *ragas* (scales), Sonny adopted a subtler approach to integrating spiritual influence into his compositions. What was clear, however, was that his music radically changed after his 1959 to 1961 sabbatical from the jazz scene.

Many older fans and purists voiced concern over his relatively new avant-garde style. Sonny, on the other hand, believed the changes were necessary for the continued improvement of his music.

This biography, *Meditating on a Riff*, will not simply regurgitate previously published books, articles, and accounts of the life of Sonny Rollins. This story will depart from the conventional, retrospective fare and explore the results of an intensive decades-long probe into Sonny's jazz and secretive (and not-so-secretive) life, both on and off stage, vis-à-vis an analysis of his lifelong journey into the world of spirituality and its practices.

It will attempt to uncover many of his hidden secrets, such as his ability to achieve a deathlike state through respiratory control and meditation, and his ability to reach deep levels of trance that helped him to develop his reputation as the world's "greatest living jazz musician." This is a bold description, but many fans have not taken issue with it.

Sonny has the extraordinary gift of continuously playing for more than thirty to sixty minutes nonstop while engaging in a form of deft,

unparalleled improvised thematic development—an accomplishment that has been the envy of other tenor saxophonists worldwide. Many players average only about five to ten minutes per solo.

Sonny honed his skills during his time on New York City's Williamsburg Bridge. His abrupt departure created worldwide concern throughout the jazz world and the world at large; at the time, such attention being paid to a jazz musician was unique.

New York City politicians are considering changing the bridge's name to the "Sonny Rollins Bridge" in homage to the legendary saxophonist. The rededication of the bridge, which could take place sometime in 2018, would represent a tribute to Sonny himself, and how he inspired others to improve the quality of their lives through the intense study of global religions and cultures—acts which dramatically altered his life.

Politicians are also honoring Sonny for his intensely haunting, mesmerizing, and captivating jazz sound, derived from his integration of exotic elements into both his compositions as well as his performances. His sound is a result of his study and practice of these African, Asian, and Eastern religions—and even occultism—to which he was dedicated during the time he spent on the bridge.

On the bridge, Sonny would playfully honk his horn back at passing tug boats in the East River, which led in part to the incorporation of sardonic, caustic wit into his music. As part of his humor, he would frequently change the tone of a serious song and infuse a commercial, funny melody of a song, like "There's No Business Like Show Business." He would even incorporate nursery rhymes into songs.

Sonny's other gifts include his incredible speed on his instrument, his smooth and mellow tone, and his adroit ability to improvise so well that he is seemingly composing several "new" songs within one song—a period ranging from five minutes to upwards of an hour. But it is his mastery of breath control that stands out, similar to that of a seasoned yogi.

Sonny's spiritual journey started with his birth. His family members appeared to be visionaries themselves when they called his arrival an "omen." His family rightly characterized his birth as that of a "special child"—someone who would make a major difference in life. Few fans would argue with their assessment.

Sonny's spiritual trek in jazz began in the mid-1940s when he was

surrounded and influenced by many fellow bebop jazz musicians—men and women who had abandoned Christianity in favor of foreign faiths. During this time, he became an even stronger believer in God, although he had abandoned Christianity.

In 1967, not satisfied with his ability to properly meditate and achieve other powerful spiritual feats, Sonny went to India, where he lived in an ashram for several months, learning the secrets of yoga and Hinduism. Some of them will be presented in this book.

As the world's greatest living jazz musician, Sonny follows a tradition of jazz pioneers, such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Coleman Hawkins, Mary Lou Williams, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Art Tatum, Bud Powell, Max Roach, Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, J.J. Johnson, Pepper Adams, Bill Evans, and Gil Evans, among others.

Although he retired in 2010 due to pulmonary and other medical issues, he will still be remembered for his vast contributions to both jazz and spirituality, not only in America but also in Tokyo, London, Paris, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, Lagos, Mumbai, Tel Aviv, Rome, Berlin, Madrid, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and other big and small venues throughout the world.

In fact, audiences abroad are more responsible for Sonny's success than those inside the United States. In Japan, for instance, fans treat him with special reverence, as if he were a saint. The fans there are extremely supportive, and they are also vastly knowledgeable about the history of Sonny, as well as jazz overall and its important relationship to spirituality.

Though on the surface it seems to be inward-looking and insular, Japan embraced and adapted many Western cultural styles and artifacts over the past two centuries. Japan has been the greatest supporter of jazz and saved the music from virtual extinction—even in New York City and other parts of America.

Since the end of World War II, American music, especially jazz and modern dance, has been exported to many countries on all continents. It is in some of these worldwide capitals that Sonny is viewed as a rock star; a musician who can earn an estimated \$100,000 for a single night's performance while other jazz musicians typically receive only a small fraction, like \$10,000 per night, if that. He filled stadiums and arenas while his peers struggled to fill up a small nightclub.

Meditating on a Riff hopes to reveal how Sonny has always had an aura of secrecy and mysticism, especially during his unconventional childhood. As an adult, he is highly regarded as a sort of sage or guru by many fans and fellow musicians—offering up images of a man possibly endowed with psychic powers, one to whom the many secrets of the universe have been revealed.

Sonny's honor extends to his business dealings. His closest friends and fellow jazz artists say that his spirituality is what prevents him from being a stereotypically greedy bandleader intent on exploiting his fellow musicians. Many former band members said he often doubled or tripled the pay his musicians received when compared to that of most other bandleaders.

"Sonny was not only an incredible musician to work with, but I have to admit that I liked playing with him because he paid me and other band members quite well," recalled Bob Cranshaw, his longtime bassist of nearly a half century.

Yet, at the same time, Sonny could be "mean-spirited and demanding," according to one former band member who spoke with anonymity: "He was prone to berating some of his sidemen when they failed to live up to their musical potential, or when they would show up late for gigs. He was a stickler for being on time and being correct about business affairs."

Sonny was also strongly influenced by the cultural scene in Harlem, which attracted droves of black artists, writers, and intellectuals who were drawn to the area. Many of them were also followers of Asian, Eastern and African religions, including strange sects that helped define the community.

The life of Sonny Rollins has always been shrouded in mystery. There is an unknown side to the reclusive musician, who legally changed his name from "Walter Theodore Rollins" to "Theodore Walter Rollins" in the 1950s. Some said he wanted to hide a criminal past that resulted in an almost two-year stint in New York's infamous Rikers Island jail.

The overarching issue here begs the question—was the jazz saxophonist successful in pursuing lofty spiritual goals or was he just posing as many people do? This biography attempts to answer that question and many more as it takes readers on a spiritual journey into the vast unknown with Sonny Rollins.

Meditating on a Riff also reveals a day in France during which Sonny reportedly reached the pinnacle of his spiritual journey, a time when he

saw a vision of what appeared to be another world—perhaps Heaven or a similar destination.

This biography struggles against being merely a “puff piece,” an expression some journalists use to describe a story that is highly complimentary and often bordering on being untrue. The noble intention is to present readers with a serious, uncompromising look at Sonny Rollins, warts and all.

Criticism aside, Sonny may go down in history as perhaps the only African American since the key founders of jazz—Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Charlie Parker—to be considered by countless fans as the number-one remaining jazz pioneer.

Fans accept Sonny not just because of his musical genius, but because of his universal views on spirituality and religion. He firmly believes that there is “only one truth” when referring to these diverse belief systems.

Given the worldwide strife among religions and spirituality—especially the tensions among Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and others—it is important to note that there are millions of different faiths around the world whose many followers have long embraced cooperation and a peaceful coexistence.

Sonny Rollins is one of those followers.

CHAPTER 1

Prophecy of the Bells

The birth of the baby boy appeared to be an omen to family members who stood in awe and silence after hearing two bells ring out at the same time from two different churches in Harlem.

Their sonorous chiming wove a jazz-like ostinato, a gladsome riff of pure sound that swaddled the newborn in its penumbra, drowning out the piercing screams emanating from the kitchen of a sixth-floor tenement on West 137th Street where Walter Theodore Rollins was making his rollicking debut on September 7, 1930.

Two of the nation's largest and most celebrated churches flanked that block: Mother AME Zion between Seventh and Lenox Avenues, and Adam Clayton Powell's Abyssinian Baptist, a block away on West 138th Street.

It was from the storied pulpit at Abyssinian that Adam Clayton Powell and his son, the Congressman, preached militant sermons that called down divine judgment on racism and oppression. But on this particular sabbath, alarmed neighbors likely wondered what was happening inside

the Rollins flat. Was someone being beaten or killed?

The noise was coming from Valborg Rollins, a recent émigrée from the Virgin Islands, who was about to give birth to a new child.

On that Sunday, her contractions became more painful as they drew closer together. They had begun five minutes apart, but then it was only 80 seconds between each of the spasms that ran throughout her body. It was a painful birth, reported family members.

As the contractions intensified, she could not so much as catch her breath, but she pushed as if her life depended on it, and that of her infant son. The pains subsided as his head emerged, then a cute, tiny face. As the midwife lifted his shivering form from the kitchen table, young Walter Theodore cried for the first time. Valborg smiled and became silent. She had done her duty.

Years later, the man who became known to the world as Sonny Rollins recounted family lore about his birth amidst the cacophony of Harlem sounds that morning.

“My sister said that when I was born on Sunday morning, the church bells were ringing. Not that that means anything,” Sonny said with a laugh.

But others would disagree. For some superstitious friends and members of the family, a birth heralded by church bells was clearly seen as a premonition, even an omen. While Africans have long prized the drumbeat as a repository of ancestral wisdom, those in the diaspora, particularly in the Christian tradition, are attuned to the significance of bells.

Bells have been used across the globe for spiritual purposes, and some faiths use them to communicate with spirits or to communicate with a deity directly. Some in the Buddhist tradition often use Tibetan bells to communicate with the dead and sound them during prayer or yoga sessions.

Some believe that ringing bells can be used to drive away demons or evil spirits. For others, hearing bells can mean that one is in the presence of a holy figure. Remember the scene in the Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*, when guardian angel Joseph reminds George Bailey that a bell rings every time an angel gets his wings.

Could the ringing of the bells that September morning suggest that the little tot would one day become a special gift from God? A seer? A swami?

A saint? A healer? A clairvoyant? A spiritualist? Or even a jazz great? Who knew?

Although linguists do not know the exact origin of the word “omen,” some speculate that it is related to the Latin verb *audire*, which means “to hear.” Some cosmologists believe that the universe is essentially made up of sound patterns, noting that creation was called into being when God spoke the words “Let there be light.”

And although many people today think of the word “omen” as being foreboding and negative (hence, the term “ominous”), omens can also be positive, suggesting good fortune, prosperity, or the birth of a singular human being.

Many of Sonny Rollins’s family members that September morning felt that something out of the ordinary had just taken place because of the robust pealing of Harlem’s church bells during his nativity. It can be said that his birth evoked a kind of supernatural stillness that saturated all their thoughts.

They whispered and stared as if they were humbled by some newfound awe. They sensed that this child was special—whatever his actions were to be, wherever his journey would lead him. The bells suggested that Sonny would one day be extraordinary.

For one, the birth of her new grandson had left Miriam Solomon ecstatic. When Sonny finally entered the world that Sabbath day, she rushed out of the kitchen to find her two other grandchildren—Valdemar, 5, and Gloria, 3. Like an angel announcing the birth of a divine child, she proclaimed: “You have a new little brother!”

Family members would have easily seen the analogy. The Rollinses were devout Moravian Christians who, like many other immigrants in that era, maintained some of the strong mystical folk beliefs of the Caribbean and Africa.

“Anyone born while two church bells are ringing together must be special,” Valborg Rollins finally declared that evening. Valborg—whose name was a vestige of the Danish settlers who had once colonized the Virgin Islands—was a dignified, reserved woman who spoke with a West Indian lilt.

Valborg’s mother, Miriam, agreed with her. As special as she found her other grandchildren, she couldn’t help but sense that Sonny was destined

to be extraordinary. “There is something about him that is truly unusual,” she said. “I just know it; I can feel it.”

Sonny’s father, Walter William Rollins, nodded in silent agreement. A St. Croix native, he had gone to sea as a young man, hoping to see the world. Now he was a chef (and, later, a chief petty officer) in the Navy who had brought his family to New York from the West Indies in search of a better life.

“My father became a man of the world because he joined the Merchant Marines when he was very young,” Sonny’s sister, Gloria, later recalled. “He joined the Marines when he was still in St. Thomas, and he and my mother were married there.

“Then he took off and he went all over the world. He used to speak eloquently about the places he had visited. He lost his accent, but my mother maintained that St. Thomas accent to some degree.”

In the late 1920s, Walter Rollins moved his wife and two young children to Harlem, eventually into the sixth-floor tenement walk-up apartment on West 137th Street, between Lenox and Seventh Avenues, where Sonny was born.

Also living with them was Grandma Miriam and Uncle Reuben, Valborg’s mother and brother. Grandma Miriam’s husband had been a physician who studied at the Sorbonne in Paris. He went on to become a general practitioner in Haiti. They eventually separated, and she moved to New York to live with her daughter.

The extended family that lived together in the 137th Street apartment was far from unusual—members of many clans with limited financial resources all sleeping under the same roof.

Unfortunately, the Rollins family arrived just in time for the Great Depression, heralded by the 1929 Wall Street crash just a year before Sonny’s birth. But it is undeniable that, as the Roaring Twenties drew to a disastrous close, there was definitely a racial divide in the response. While mostly white businessmen throughout the country stared at the ticker-tape with shock and dismay, many black residents of Harlem found themselves leaping from the skillet into the fire.

Members of the Rollins family were part of the massive migration of Europeans, southern African Americans, and Caribbean people to the Northeast in the 1920s. Blacks flooded New York City mostly because of the



Fig. 1 Abyssinian Baptist Church has served as a place for African American spirituality, politics and community. The Abyssinian Baptist Church congregation traces its history to 1809.



Fig 2. Mother AME Zion Church is the oldest African-American church in New York City, and the “mother church” of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion conference.

huge number of jobs and educational opportunities that were not available to them in the segregated Jim Crow south or in the nearby offshore British possessions.

All these different groups brought with them their own folk cures and superstitions, but these were more pronounced among people of color who often could not afford doctors and hospitals.

As compensation, both the American black and Caribbean immigrants relied on voodoo, hoodoo, and other beliefs branded as “superstitious” by their white counterparts. Many of these immigrants used potions and herbal draughts derived from African magical traditions, as well as other ancient remedies distinctly absent from any manual of the American Medical Association.

Although Valborg’s father had been a well-educated physician, some members of the family nonetheless believed in the power of the “spirit world” and that God sent mystical beings to Earth for specific purposes.

In the Virgin Islands, there are a variety of beliefs about magical powers and superstitions, some of which stem from the African folk religions. For example, one common phrase in the Virgin Islands is “Don’t let the Jumbies get ya!” Jumbies are spirits that live around households. Some say that they’re the spirits of a deceased person, while others say they’re the souls of living people who live in dead bodies.

Though the Rollins clan subscribed in one form or another to some of these traditional beliefs, they also subscribed to the beliefs of the Moravian Church, which offered a more “modern” approach to spirituality.

The Moravian Church is one of the oldest Protestant denominations in the world. It traces its roots back to the 15th century, when a priest named Jan Hus in Bohemia (the modern day Czech Republic) sought to reform some of the practices in the Roman Catholic Church. In the 18th century, Protestant religious refugees from the Bohemian region of Moravia fled to what is now Germany, and the church grew rapidly from there.

“The Moravian religion is similar to the Lutheran religion, except that it is more musical,” said Gloria Anderson (née Rollins). “The Moravian service is laced through and through with music. They sing practically everything, and they have beautiful hymns. That’s the one thing that is just great about it.”

In addition to music, Moravians place particular emphasis on personal

piety, ecumenism, and, notably, doing missionary work. In fact, Moravians constituted the first major Protestant missionary movement. They sent missionaries to all four corners of the world, especially the Caribbean. Today, there are roughly 1.1 million Moravians worldwide, over 200,000 of whom live in the Caribbean or Latin America. About 15,000 live in the Virgin Islands, including St. Thomas.

“My mother said that she had us christened Moravian because when there were slaves on the islands, the Moravians were the only missionaries who would marry the slaves to one another,” Gloria added. “The others said they could live together and procreate and all the rest, but they would not marry slaves. Only the Moravians would do that.”

Although Sonny recalled his father “wasn’t too religious,” it appears that Valborg was much more spiritually inclined. In addition to the Moravian Church, Valborg also took her brood to the nearby African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church.

What is significant here is that young Sonny Rollins got his start in the bosom of the church, and that made a great deal of difference in his life.