

PLAYING IN “STORY” TIME

BY CRISTOFER GROSS

Vibraphonist Stefon Harris and Saxophonist Sonny Rollins will tell it like it is in separate Center concerts this April



HARRIS

Improvisational solos by great jazz musicians are more than just a trail of notes. They are trains of thought.

“There used to be a saying in jazz when I was coming up,” saxophone legend Sonny Rollins told *Revue* recently, “that when a guy was doing a solo, he had to tell a story. It had to make sense; have beginnings, endings, middles and so on. It was a way to characterize an intelligent, happening jazz solo.”

In April, Orange County Performing Arts Center Jazz Series audiences will hear as two great minds from different generations offer stories that are as intelligent as they are engaging. Vibraphonist Stefon Harris and his band Blackout will perform in Samueli Theater on April 3 and 4. Rollins follows on April 30 with an 8 p.m. performance in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall.

At 78, Rollins continues to tour and record. In October, his Doxy label released *Road Shows, Volume 1*, the first sampling of an estimated 200 concerts he recorded since the late 1980s, and *Live in Vienne*, a high-definition DVD of his acclaimed performance at the 2006 Jazz à Vienne Festival. It’s the latest in a conversation between the jazz giant and the public that began with records released in 1949 by Bebop singer Babs Gonzales, J.J. Johnson, Bud

Powell and Fats Navarro. In 1951 he recorded with Miles Davis, in ’53 with Thelonious Monk, and then joined the Max Roach-Clifford Brown quintet from 1955–1957.

“From then on, he was always a leader,” writes Scott Yanow on Allmusicguide.com. “His skill at turning unlikely material into jazz, his unaccompanied flights, and his rhythmic freedom and tonal distortions have kept Sonny Rollins one of the masters of jazz. He has literally dozens of superior recordings available.”

When we reached him at his home in New York, the immediate story was that a repairman had just left him with the news that he would probably have to replace his refrigerator. Do such banal irritations ever affect what he has to say in a song?

“Any anger and other frustrations I might have with this life are sublimated to what happens when I play,” he said in a husky, thoughtful voice not unlike the sound of the lower register of his tenor. “All these things are expressed through my horn in one way or another. When Charlie Parker was asked what he was going to play one night, he said, ‘Well, I’m going to play what I experience in the day before I get to the nightclub.’ That’s about it. To a greater or lesser extent, as long as I’m a human being here on the earth,

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ROLLINS



I’m going to play the things that happen to me. It’s way down in the subliminal, but it’s all about what I’ve experienced.”

At 35, and about to become a father this month, Stefon Harris still has plenty of life experience since he began playing music at age 6 and by his teens had become proficient on 20 instruments. When it was time to focus on one, the choice was between piano, drums or vibraphone—all of which might be described as “logistically challenged.”

“I think that’s the euphemism of the year, man,” Harris laughed as he spoke by phone while running errands near his New York home. “I think it’s a testament to the power of mentorship that, because of my music teacher Richard L. Bradley’s passion and love of music, I just chose the instrument that he played.

“But to me, the instruments really aren’t that important,” added the man the *Los Angeles Times* called one of the most important young artists in jazz. “Ultimately it’s about the story that’s being told. So if I weren’t a vibraphonist, I’d be a pianist or bass player; I would be expressing myself in some way. Who knows? Maybe a writer,” he laughed.

After graduating from The Manhattan School of Music he was

signed by Blue Note Records and released six CDs before moving to Concord Music Group this year. He earned Grammy nominations for Best Jazz Instrumental Solo for *Black Action Figure* in 1999, and Best Jazz Album for *Kindred*, a quartet recording with the pianist Jacky Terrasson in 2001, and *The Grand Unification Theory*, an 11-movement piece blending diverse musical influences in 2003. His Concord debut is due out in fall 2009.

He was part of The Classical Jazz Quartet, with Kenny Barron, Ron Carter and Lewis Nash, and toured and recorded with Joe Henderson, Wynton Marsalis, Cassandra Wilson, Kurt Elling, Cyrus Chestnut and Steve Turre, among others. His formative influences are Miles Davis (“the type of bandleader that I aspire to be is *totally* influenced by Miles Davis”), Shirley Horn (“I really learned a lot about how to phrase and how music is used as a tool to tell a story from Shirley Horn”) and John Coltrane (“one of the most emotionally articulate musicians of the century”).

In April, he will appear with Blackout, four musicians he has recorded and toured with for years: Marc Cary, keyboards; Terreon Gully, drums; Casey Benjamin, alto saxophone and vocorder; and Darryl Hall, bass.



“Marc is from Washington, D.C., and has a lot of go-go, R&B influence in his playing,” he said. “Terreon learned to play at church, and with my mother being a Pentecostal minister, I grew up in a church as well. There’s a certain sound, a certain feeling and emotional commitment in Gospel music that we’re able to reference and relate to. Casey Benjamin is very influenced by Prince and Stevie Wonder, and I’m a *huge* Stevie Wonder fan, too. So there are times where we may randomly go into a part of a Stevie tune, or a quote from Missy Elliott tunes, and we all know it.

“We’re all basically of the same generation, and I think we all have a similar story to tell and can relate directly to one another in a special way that happens when you have people who are like brothers with one another.”

Rollins, who says he “cringes when I listen to my own music because I’m always criticizing myself,” is nevertheless working with his nephew Clifton Anderson (his band’s trombonist) to find the best of his recordings to release. However, he would rather look forward and create new music.

“I really don’t look back at my career because I’m still in the middle of trying to get it together,” he said. “So there isn’t really time to look back. If ever the time would come, hopefully never, when I can’t play, then I’ll have plenty of time to look back at my career. I’m working on a different method of songwriting. Instead of sitting down like I used to do in the past and conjuring up something that is akin to a song, I’m going to depend more on finding songs born in the moment.”

So Rollins, who after outliving most of his fellow jazz legends, is now outliving his appliances, and is poised to find new ways to explore human life through music.

“I have done things like my global warming albums and my civil rights albums of the ’50s,” he said. “But when I’m just soloing and playing what’s happening, then it’s life experiences that you hear. In each person, there are deep, deep feelings. Fortunately an artist has a chance to bring them out.”

And tell them to us in ways that go beyond jazz?

“Well,” he says, “there’s nothing beyond jazz. Jazz is at the top of the pyramid.”

Cristofer Gross is a frequent contributor to Center publications.

Stefon Harris

SAMUELI THEATER

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Tickets: \$42

Sonny Rollins

RENÉE AND HENRY SEGERSTROM

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