

**DURING A CAREER HIATUS, MUSICIAN TRAVELLED TO INDIA FOR SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING**

## Pioneer of jazz saxophone Sonny Rollins passes away at 95

MATHURES PAUL

Calcutta: In 1968, the legendary saxophonist Sonny Rollins took a hiatus from his music career, searching for spiritual understanding. The tenor saxophonist, who died at his home in Woodstock, New York, on Monday at the age of 95, journeyed to India.

"I was drinking. I was smoking. I was using drugs. I didn't have anything firmly that said: 'Oh, this is it.' So I was looking for spiritual uplift. I came upon yoga, taught myself, and then went to India to pursue it further at an ashram," he said years later. He arrived in Bombay — Powai to be exact — with little more than a bag and his horn. "It worked out well."

The Harlem-raised musi-

cian came to jazz at an early age, first as a pianist before switching to the saxophone. "My mother gave me my first saxophone, an alto, when I was seven years old. I went into the bedroom and started playing — and that was it," he told *Jazz Times*. "I was in seventh heaven. I love playing by myself. I'm practising, but I'm also communicating with my musical muse."

Unlike other young jazz saxophonists of the late 1940s, he possessed a full-bodied sound in the mould of Coleman Hawkins. As his career as a bandleader took off in the following decade, he stepped away for over two years — remarkable for a man who had released 21 albums between 1953 and 1959. Miles Davis described

his output around 1954 as "something else. Brilliant".

Rollins arrived on the scene as bebop was gaining momentum, absorbing its harmonic sophistication and rhythmic daring while pushing well beyond it. Over the course of his career, he embraced avant-garde, jazz-rock fusion and a range of other styles. His first recordings date to 1949, alongside the singer Babs Gonzales, and he quickly became an in-demand figure on the New York scene, working with Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell.

Two albums from 1956 stand out as undisputed classics: *Tenor Madness* — which features his only recorded encounter with fellow saxophonist John Coltrane — and

*Saxophone Colossus*.

Among his most celebrated works are also several albums recorded without piano, including *The Freedom Suite* (1958), notable for its extraordinary 19-minute title track, and *East Broadway Run Down* (1967). Jazz reached a new level with Rollins. His compositions happened live, in the moment.

"A lot of people couldn't comprehend why I would stop playing," he told *DownBeat* in 2001. "But I learned something. It was necessary for me to do, to have the kind of confidence I need to play music like this."

Before his trip to India, he wrote and recorded the soundtrack for the acclaimed 1966 British film *Alfie*. A recording drought followed

and in 1972 he returned to the studio for his *Next Album*. His affection for India never wavered — at the inaugural Jazz Yatra in Bombay in 1978, he delivered a memorable rendition of Stevie Wonder's *Isn't She Lovely*.

The 1980s brought him to a wider audience, with an appearance on the Rolling Stones' *Tattoo You* track *Waiting on a Friend*, alongside the late drummer Charlie Watts, a long-time admirer. "There are people who burn bright and fade quickly, and there are those who burn bright and keep going," Watts said in 2010. "Sonny has never made a bad record — ever."

He faced criticism in that decade for incorporating backbeats and guitars, but

remained unapologetic. "I was trying to find different ways to make my music relevant. I've never thought of myself as being on some pinnacle where I can't play a calypso or a backbeat."

Rollins credited his wife, Lucille Pearson — his manager and co-producer on many albums — as a driving force behind his success. He received a lifetime achievement Grammy in 2004, and retired a decade later after being diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis.

Even then, his ambitions remained undimmed. "People say, 'Sonny, take it easy. Your place is secure. You're the great Sonny Rollins; you've got it made. I hear that and I think: 'Well, screw Sonny Rollins. Where I want to go is beyond Sonny Rollins. Way beyond.'"



Sonny Rollins.  
(Reuters file picture)