

# Sonny Rollins and the Challenge of Thematic Improvisation

by Gunther Schuller

Since the days when pure collective improvisation gave way to the improvised solo, jazz improvisation has traveled a long road of development. The forward strides that characterized each particular link in this evolution were instigated by the titans of jazz history of the last forty-odd years: Louis Armstrong; Coleman Hawkins; Lester Young; Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie; Miles Davis; collectively the MJQ under John Lewis' aegis; and some others in varying but lesser degrees. Today we have reached another juncture in the constantly unfolding evolution of improvisation and the central figure of this present renewal is Sonny Rollins.

Each of the above jazz greats brought to improvisation a particular ingredient it did not possess before, and with Rollins thematic and structural unity have at last achieved the importance in *pure* improvisation that elements such as swing, melodic conception and originality of expression have already enjoyed for many years.

Improvisatory procedures can be divided roughly into two broad and sometimes overlapping categories which have been called *paraphrase* and *chorus* improvisation. The former consists mostly of an embellishment or ornamentation technique, while the latter suggests that the soloist has departed completely from a given theme or melody and is improvising freely on nothing but a chord structure. (It is interesting to note that this separation in improvisational techniques existed also in classical music in the 16th to 18th centuries, when composers and performers differentiated between ornamentation [*elaboratio*] and free vibration [*inventio*].) Most improvisation in the modern jazz era belongs to this second category and it is with developments in this area that this article shall concern itself.

In short, jazz improvisation became through the years a more or less unfettered, melodic-rhythmic extemporaneous composing process in which the sole organizing determinant was the underlying chord pattern. In this respect it is important to note that what we all at times loosely call "variation" is in the strictest sense no variation at all, since it does not proceed from the basis of varying a given thematic material but simply reflects a player's ruminations on an *un-varying* chord progression. As André Hodeir put it in his book *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*, "freed from all melodic and structural obligation, the chorus improvisation is a simple emanation inspired by a given harmonic sequence."

Simple or not, this kind of extemporization has led to a critical situation: to a very great extent, improvised solos—even those that are in all other respects very imaginative—have suffered from a general lack of over-all cohesiveness and direction,—the lack of a unifying force. There are exceptions to this, of course. Some of the great solos of the past (Armstrong's *Muggles*, Hawkins' *Body and Soul* [second chorus,] Parker's *Ko-Ko* etc.) have held together as perfect compositions by virtue of the improviser's genial intuitive talents. (Genius does not *necessarily* need organization, especially in a strict academic sense, since it makes its own laws and sets its own standards, thereby creating its own kind of organization.) But such successful exceptions have only served to emphasize the relative failure of less inspired improvisations. These have been the victims of one or perhaps all of the following symptoms: (1) the average improvisation is mostly a stringing together of unrelated ideas; (2) because of the *independently* spontaneous character

of most improvisation, a series of solos by different players within a single piece have very little chance of bearing any relationship to each other (as a matter of fact, the stronger the individual personality of each player, the less uniformity the total piece is likely to achieve); (3) in those cases where composing (or arranging) is involved, the body of interspersed solos generally has no relation to these non-improvised sections; (4) otherwise interesting solos are often marred by a sudden quotation from some completely irrelevant material.

I have already said that this is not altogether deplorable (I wish to emphasize this), and we have seen that it is possible to create pure improvisations which are meaningful realizations of a well-sustained over-all feeling. Indeed the majority of players are perhaps not temperamentally or intellectually suited to do more than that. In any case, there is now a tendency among a number of jazz musicians to bring thematic (or motivic) and structural unity into improvisation. Some do this by combining composition and improvisation, for instance the Modern Jazz Quartet and the Giuffrè Three; others, like Sonny Rollins, prefer to work solely by means of extemporization.

Several of the latter's recordings offer remarkable instances of this approach. The most important and perhaps most accessible of these is his *Blue 7* (Prestige LP 7079). It is at the same time a striking example of how *two* great soloists (Sonny and Max Roach) can integrate their improvisations into a unified entity.

I realize fully that music is meant to be listened to, and that words are not adequate in describing a piece of music. However, since laymen, and even many musicians, are perhaps more interested in knowing exactly how such structural solos are achiev-

ed than in blindly accepting at face value remarks such as those above, I shall try to go into some detail and with the help of short musical examples give an account of the ideational thread running through Rollins' improvisation that makes this particular recording so distinguished and satisfying.

Doug Watkins starts with a restrained walking bass-line and is soon joined by Max Roach quietly and simply keeping time. The non-committal character of this introductory setting gives no hint of the striking theme with which Rollins is about to enter. It is made up of three primary notes: D, A-flat and E.<sup>1</sup> The chord progression underlying the en-

tire piece is that of the blues in the key of B-flat. The primary notes of the theme (D, A-flat, E) which, taken by themselves, make up the essential notes of an E seventh chord thus reveal themselves as performing a double function: the D is the third of B-flat and at the same time the seventh of E, the A-flat is the seventh of B-flat and also (enharmonically as G-sharp) the third of E, the E is the flatted fifth of B-flat and the tonic of E. The result is that the three tones create a bitonal<sup>2</sup> complex of notes in which the blue notes predominate.

At the same time, speaking strictly melodically, the intervals D to A-flat (tritone) and A-flat to E (major

third) are about the most beautiful and most potent intervals in the Western musical scale. (That Rollins, whose music I find both beautiful and potent, chose these intervals could be interpreted as an unconscious expression of affinity for these attributes, but this brings us into the realm of the psychological and subconscious nature of inspiration and thus quite beyond the intent of this article.)<sup>3</sup>

This theme then—with its bitonal implications (purposely kept pure and free by the omission of the piano), with its melodic line in which the number and choice of notes is kept at an almost rock-bottom minimum, with its rhythmic simplicity and segmentation—is the fountain-

<sup>1</sup> The notes c, d-flat and A in bar 5 are simply a transposition of motive A to accommodate the change to E-flat in that measure, and all other notes are non-essential alterations and passing tones.

<sup>2</sup> Bitonality implies the simultaneous presence of two tonal centers or keys. This particular combination of keys (E and B-flat—a tritone relationship), although used occasionally by earlier composers, notably Franz Liszt in his *Malediction Concerto*, did not become prominent as a distinct musical device until Stravinsky's famous "*Petrushka—Chord*" (F-sharp and c) in 1911.

<sup>3</sup> It should also be pointed out in passing that *Blue 7* does not represent Rollins' first encounter with these particular harmonic-melodic tendencies. He tackled them almost a year earlier in *Vierd Blues* (Prestige LP 7044, *Miles Davis Collector's Items*). As a matter of fact the numerous similarities between Rollins' solos on *Blue 7* and *Vierd Blues* are so striking that the earlier one must be considered a study or forerunner of the other. Both, however, are strongly influenced, I believe, by Thelonious Monk's explorations in this area in the late forties, especially such pieces as *Misterioso* (Blue Note LP 1511, Thelonious Monk, Vol. 1).



Leroy McLucas

head from which issues most of what is to follow. Rollins simply extends and develops all that the theme implies.

As an adjunct to this 12-bar theme, Rollins adds three bars which in the course of the improvisation undergo considerable treatment. This phrase is made up of two motives. It appears in the twelfth to fourteenth bars of Rollins' solo, and at first seems gratuitous. But when eight choruses later (eight counting only Rollins' solos) it suddenly reappears transposed, and still further on in Rollins' eleventh and thirteenth choruses (the latter about ten minutes after the original statement of the phrase) Rollins gives it further vigorous treatment, it becomes apparent that it was not at all gratuitous or a mere chance result, but part of an over-all plan.

A close analysis of Rollins' three solos on *Blue 7* reveals many subtle relationships to the main theme and its 3-bar sequel. The original segmentation is preserved throughout. Rollins' phrases are mostly short, and extended rests (generally from three to five beats) separate all the phrases—an excellent example of how well-timed silence can become a part of a musical phrase. There are intermittent allusions to the motivic fragments of his opening statement. At one point he introduces new material, which, however, is also varied and developed in the ensuing improvisation. This occurs four bars *before* Max Roach's extended solo. A partial repetition of these bars *after* Max has finished serves to build a kind of frame around the drum solo.

In this, Rollins' second full solo, thematic variation becomes more continuous than in his first time around. After a brief restatement of part of the original theme, Rollins gradually evolves a short sixteenth-note run which is based on our ex. 1, part a. He reworks this motive at half the rhythmic value, a musical device called diminution. It also provides a good example of how a phrase upon repetition can be shifted to different beats of the measure thus showing the phrase always in a new light. In this case Rollins plays the run six times; as is shown in ex. 3 the phrase starts once on the third beat, once on the second, once on the fourth and three times on the first beat.<sup>4</sup>

Another device Rollins uses is the combining and overlapping of two motives. In his eighth chorus, Rollins, after reiterating ex. 2, part a, continues with part b, but without notice suddenly converts it into another short motive (Ex. 4) originally stated in the second chorus. (In ex. 5 the small notes indicate where Rollins would have gone had he been satisfied with an exact transposition of the phrase; the large notes show what he did play.)

But the crowning achievement of Rollins' solo is his 11th, 12th and 13th choruses in which out of twenty-eight measures all but six are directly derived from the opening and two further measures are related to the four-bar section introducing Max's drum solo. Such structural cohesiveness—without sacrificing expressiveness and rhythmic drive or swing—one has come to expect from the composer who spends days or weeks writing a given passage. It is another matter to achieve this in an on-the-spur-of-the-moment extemporization. (Ex. 6)

The final Rollins touch occurs in the last twelve bars in which the theme, already reduced to an almost rock-bottom minimum, is drained of all excess notes, and the rests in the original are filled out by long held notes. The result is pure melodic essence (Ex. 7.) What more perfect way to end and sum up all that came before!

This then is an example of a real variation technique. The improvisation is based not only on a harmonic sequence but on a melodic idea as well.<sup>5</sup> It should also be pointed out that Rollins differs from lesser soloists who are theme-conscious to a certain extent but who in practice do not rise above the level of exact repetition when the chords permit, and when they don't, mere sequential treatment. Sequences are often an easy way out for the improviser, but easily become boring to the listener. (In fact, in baroque music, one of the prime functions of embellishment techniques was to camouflage harmonically sequential progressions.) In this respect Rollins is a master since in such cases he almost always avoids the obvious and finds some imaginative way out, a quality he has in common with other great soloists of the past, e.g., Prez, Parker, etc.

On an equally high level of structural cohesiveness is Max Roach's aforementioned solo. It is built entirely on two clearly discernible ideas: (1) a triplet figure which goes through a number of permutations in both fast and slow triplets, and (2) a roll on the snare drum. The ingenuity with which he alternates between these two ideas gives not only an indication of the capacity of Max Roach as a thinking musician, but also shows again that exciting drum solos need not be just an *unthinking* burst of energy—they can be interesting and meaningful compositions. Behind Rollins Max is a fine accompanist, occasionally brilliantly complementing Sonny's work, for example eleven bars after his drum solo, when he returns with a three-bar run of triplets followed a second later by a roll on the snare drum,—the basic material of his solo used in an accompanimental capacity.<sup>6</sup>

Such methods of musical procedure as employed here by Sonny and Max are symptomatic of the growing concern by an increasing number of jazz musicians for a certain degree of intellectuality. Needless to say, intellectualism here does not mean a cold mathematical or unemotional approach. It does mean, as by definition, the power of reason and comprehension as distinguished from *purely* intuitive emotional outpouring. Of course, purists or anti-intellectualists (by no means do I wish to *equate* purists with anti-intellectuals, however) deplore the inroads made into jazz by intellectual processes. Even the rather reasonable requisite of technical proficiency is found to be suspect in some quarters. Yet the entire history of the arts shows that intellectual enlightenment goes more or less hand in hand with emotional enrichment, or vice versa. Indeed the great masterpieces of art—any art—are those in which emotional *and* intellectual qualities are well balanced and completely integrated—in Mozart, Shakespeare, Rembrandt. . .

Jazz too, evolving from humble beginnings that were sometimes hardly more than sociological manifestations of a particular American milieu, has developed as an art form that not only possesses a unique capacity for individual and collective expression, but in the process of ma-

turing has gradually acquired certain intellectual properties. Its strength has been such that it has attracted interest in all strata of intellectual and creative activity. It is natural and inevitable that, in this ever-broadening process, jazz will attract the hearts and minds of all manner of people with all manner of predilections and temperaments—even those who will want to bring to jazz a roughly 500 year old musical idea, the notion of thematic and structural unity.

And indeed I can think of no better and more irrefutable proof of the fact that discipline and thought do not necessarily result in cold or unswinging music than a typical Rollins performance. No one swings more (hard or gentle) and is more passionate in his musical expression than Sonny Rollins. It ultimately boils down to how much talent an artist has; the greater the demands of his art—both emotionally and intellectually—the greater the talent necessary.

A close look at a Rollins solo also reveals other unusual facets of his style: his harmonic language for instance. Considering the astounding richness of his musical thinking, it comes as a surprise to realize that his chord-repertoire does not exceed the normal eleventh or thirteenth chord and the flatted fifth chords. He does not seem to require more and one never feels any harmonic paucity, because within this limited language Rollins is apt to use only the choicest notes, both harmonically and melodically, as witness the theme of *Blue 7*. Another characteristic of Rollins' style is a penchant for anticipating the harmony of a next measure by one or two beats. This is a dangerous practice, since in the hands of a lesser artist it can lead to lots of wrong notes. Rollins' ear in this respect is remarkably dependable.

Dynamically too, Rollins is a master of contrast and coloring. Listening to *Blue 7* from this point of view

is very interesting. There is a natural connection between the character of a given phrase and its dynamic level (in contrast to all too many well-known players who seem not to realize that to play seven or eight choruses played resolutely at the same dynamic level is the best way to put an audience to sleep.) Rollins' consummate instrumental control allows him a range of dynamics from the explosive outbursts with which he slashes about, for instance, after Max's solo (or later when he initiates the fours) to the low B-natural three bars from the end, a low note which Sonny floats out with a breathy smoky tone that should make the average saxophonist envious. Rollins can honk, blurt, cajole, scoop, shrill—whatever the phrase demands without succumbing to the vulgar or obnoxious. And this is due largely to the fact that Sonny Rollins is one of those rather rare individuals who has both taste and a sense of humor, the latter with a slight turn towards the sardonic.

Rhythmically, Rollins is as imaginative and strong as in his melodic concepts. And why not? The two are really inseparable, or at least should be. In his recordings as well as during several evenings at Birdland recently Rollins indicated that he can probably take any rhythmic formation and make it swing. This ability enables him to run the gamut of extremes—from almost a whole chorus of non-syncopated quarter notes (which in other hands might be just naive and square but through Rollins' sense of humor and superb timing are transformed into a swinging line) to asymmetrical groupings of fives and sevens or between-the-beat rhythms that defy notation.

As for his imagination, it is (as already indicated) prodigiously fertile. It can evidently cope with all manner of material, ranging from Kurt Weill's *Moritat* and the cowboy material of his *Way Out West* LP (Contemporary 3530) to the more familiar area of ballads and blues. This accounts no doubt for the fact

that to date his most successful and structurally unified efforts have been based on the blues. (*Sumphin'* for instance, made with Dizzy Gillespie [Verve 8260] is almost on the level of *Blue 7*; it falls short, comparatively, only in terms of originality, but is also notable for a beautifully organized Gillespie solo.) This is not to say that Rollins is incapable of achieving thematic variations in non-blues material. Pieces such as *St. Thomas* or *Way Out West* indicate more than a casual concern with this problem; and in a recent in-the-flesh rendition of *Yesterdays*, a lengthy solo cadenza dealt almost exclusively with the melodic line of this tune. His vivid imagination not only permits him the luxury of seemingly endless variants and permutations of a given motive, but even enables him to emulate ideas not indigenous to his instrument, as for instance, in *Way Out West* when Rollins, returning for his second solo, imitates Shelly Manne's closing snare drum roll on the saxophone!

Lest I seem to be overstating the case for Rollins, let me add that both his live and recorded performances do include average and less coherent achievements. Even an occasional wrong note as in *You Don't Know What Love Is* (Prestige LP 7079)—which only proves that (fortunately) Rollins is human and fallible. Such minor blemishes are dwarfed into insignificance by the enormity of his talent and the positive values of his great performances. In these and especially in *Blue 7*, what Sonny Rollins has added conclusively to the scope of jazz improvisation is the idea of developing and varying a *main* theme, and not just a secondary motive or phrase which the player happens to hit upon in the course of his improvisation and which in itself is unrelated to the "head" of the composition. This is not to say that a thematically related improvisation is *necessarily* better than a free harmonically-based one. Obviously any generalization to this effect would be

(Continued on Page 21)

<sup>4</sup> It is also apparent that Rollins had some fingering problems with the passage, and his original impulse in repeating it seems to have been to iron these out. However, after six attempts to clean up the phrase, Rollins capitulates and goes on to the next idea. Incidentally, he has experimented with this particular phrase in a number of pieces and it threatens to become a cliché with him.

<sup>5</sup> In this Rollins has only a handful of predecessors, notably Jelly Roll Morton, Earl Hines, Fats Waller and Thelonious Monk, aside from the already mentioned Lewis and Giuffre.

<sup>6</sup> A similarly captivating instance of solo thematic material being used for accompanimental purposes occurs in the first four bars of John Lewis' background to Milt Jackson's solo in *Django* (Prestige LP 7057).

Ex. 1 X = primary notes

Ex. 2

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

Ex. 5

Ex. 6

Musical score for Ex. 6, featuring a piano solo. The score is written in G-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of 32 measures across seven staves. The dynamics range from *f* (forte) to *mp* (mezzo-piano). The score includes various articulations such as slurs, accents, and phrasing slurs. Measure 5-8 is marked as a drum solo. The score is annotated with letters 'a' through 'g' and numbers 1 through 32, indicating specific musical motifs and measures.

Ex. 7

Musical score for Ex. 7, showing a piano solo. The score is written in G-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of two staves. The first staff contains a long, continuous melodic line with various articulations. The second staff contains a shorter melodic line. The score is annotated with letters 'a' through 'g' and numbers 1 through 32, indicating specific musical motifs and measures.

a is derived from our Ex. 2, part a; b from Ex. 2, part b; c from Ex. 1; d from Ex. 4; f from Ex. 1, motive a; and g comes from the same, using only the last two notes of motive a;

e is derived from the new material used in the "frame" passage around Max's solo. Measures written in small notes use non-related material.

Bar 26 in this example is an approximation; Rollins delays each repetition by a fraction of a beat in such a way that it cannot be notated exactly.

perfect objects which can give us an image of what life may be, through man's mind and soul, conquering and organizing sounds and rhythms into an ultimate unity.

I do not want to fit music onto the Procrustean bed of a system. I am asking that we look (as we must) at an object and try to find out what can be said about it, what its point is, what quality it has.

It is probably obvious that many aspects of the above five positions overlap. Elements of the relational view are seen in the other four: a subjectivist does indeed judge, the historian does employ some selectivity and does make comments, the absolutist is often forced to view the object in its total context, the partial absolutist is sure but is not certain of how much he can be sure. If we can presume that there is some truth in the position I submit, or in the position I submit as it is contiguous with the other above positions, I suggest the following qualifications for music criticism:

1. The critic must be trained as a musician. Not only must he play or have played but he must know the compositional aspects of music since these are present in all parts of music, including performance. The jazz critic, especially, must have an ear of well-developed proportions, since he must be able to know what the improviser is doing; there is no printed score of the jazz solo and it often occurs once, in a club or at a concert, not to be repeated. If he cannot know all that he hears he is like a man criticising Chaucer without having studied middle English; he gets the idea and the feel but he doesn't really know the object.

2. The critic must have some larger view of life against which he can place the work of art. If life is only tactile sensation to him he cannot talk about Lester Young, for at times Lester talks with the gods.

3. He must be able to express his ideas clearly; his writing must be an adequate vehicle for his thoughts. (How many critics can resist a cute remark or a clever observation—even if untrue?)

4. The critic must know the arts generally. This is connected with the large view spoken of above and also with the fact that the parallels between the arts are numerous and helpful.

5. The critic must have a soul. What is this? Well, let us make a vague pass at definition: he must have sensitivity; the art must communicate to him; he must be enraged and saddened and glad and tearful when he hears music.

6. He must operate primarily to aid and direct the artist. He must free the artist from tyrannical arbitrary public opinion.

7. He must aid the audience in understanding and evaluating the music.

Of course, the jazz critic is faced with serious problems. He must deal with the ephemeral quality of improvised music and this is very difficult, even after the music is recorded. He cannot use the standards of European music by themselves (although the ideas that underlie these standards are operative) and there has been very little codification of thought in jazz criticism. In fact, there has been very little real criticism in the jazz world.

At present the "jazz critics" are completely inadequate. They are not technically trained; they are journalistic; they reflect general opinions rather than create them; they are not aware of the process of creating or performing; they are disposed towards language tricks and elegance and jokes. They have weakened the strength of critical magazines and critical thought. They have so corrupted the reader that real criticism will stand little chance of being recognized as such.

(This paper was originally delivered at the first critics Symposium at Newport in July of this year.)

## MODERNS

of the "new" passing tones in his solo.

At this point, I am tempted the further re-iterations of reminding of Earl "Bud" Powell's youthful work with Cootie Williams, say, or Thelonious Monk's in 1944 with Coleman Hawkins. But it might be more to the point for an interim report like this one to list a few other men who are frequently called transitional figures: the later Clyde Hart, Ken Kersey, pianist Julius Monk (did he ever record?), Russell Procope, Don Stovall, Eddie Barefield, Dud Bascombe (a fascinating trumpeter with Erskine Hawkins, 1940-42), Frankie

Newton, the later Bob Zurke. For that matter, play a Miles Davis record for an older musician and he will almost inevitably mention Johnny Dunn's changes. And there are things like *Kinklets* (1906), *Shreveport Stomp* (1925)—not to mention either Scott Joplin's later work or Ellington's middle period at all.

And have you ever noticed that rather unusual chord in the last few bars of Earl Hine's 1928 solo of *57 Varieties*? It's a flatted fifth.

## ROLLINS

unsound: only the quality of a specific musician in a specific performance can be the ultimate basis for judgement. The point is not—as some may think I am implying—that, since Rollins does a true thematic variation, he therefore is superior to Parker or Young in a non-thematic improvisation. I am emphasizing primarily a *difference* of approach, even though, speaking quite subjectively, I may feel the Rollins position to be ultimately the more important one. Certainly it is an approach that inherently has a potential future.

The history of classical music provides us with a telling historical precedent for such a prognosis: after largely non-thematic beginnings (in the early middle ages), music over a period of centuries developed to a stage where (with the great classical masters) thematic relationships, either in a sonata or various variational forms, became the prime building element of music, later to be carried even further to the level of continuous and complete variation as implied by Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique. In short, an over-all lineage from free almost anarchical beginnings to a relatively confined and therefore more challenging state. The history of jazz gives every indication of following a parallel course, although in an extraordinarily condensed form. In any case, the essential point is not that, with thematically related solos, jazz improvisation can now discard the great tradition established by the Youngs and Parkers, but rather that by building *on* this tradition and enriching it with the new element of thematic relationships jazz is simply adding a new dimension. And I think we might all agree that renewal through tradition is the best assurance of a flourishing musical future.