

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

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C 1000 Sun, 50¢ Sat • City & Suburbs

Sunday, March 21, 2010 ★ Locally Owned & Independent Since 2006 ★ \$1.75

#1 in news circulation outside the metro area

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*A father cannot forget a 1984 performance and wonders what his own children might hold as dear.*

## From one generation to next, in-the-moment music

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As long as I have looked forward to having children I have looked forward to the time when we could attend concerts together. Exposing them to the same magical, magnetic pull that has always tugged at me was, I felt, a joyful parental obligation (as well as a way for me to hear more great music).

Over the years, and according to my children's tastes, my wife and I have taken our four teens to a variety of events ranging from classical, to bluegrass, to pop, to blues, to world music. Perhaps because of this, they've become talented musicians who don't have to be told to practice. Our house is adorned with guitars, keyboards, a clarinet or two, drums, a trumpet, and a cello.

So, when I heard that Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck were to play Madison Square Garden last month in their only U.S. stop on a six-city tour, it seemed preordained that my two guitar-playing sons and I

make our way to New York to see two of the best guitar players of the last 50 years.

Will and Dan were wide-eyed as we walked to our seats just before the show started. Jeff Beck ably demonstrated why he's one of the all-time best, and getting better. And Eric Clapton was, well, Eric Clapton. Their joint set was stunning, even when they played "Moon River." I could tell from my sons' reactions, during and after the show, that it was a momentous event for them.

I recalled a similar event in my life. I've seen many, many performers, but nothing will ever top Sonny Rollins at the Blue Note in New York. Visually, Rollins always looks as if he needs sleep. Tall, with an elongated face, he has wise, tired eyes. He looks as if he is crawling to the end of a marathon, cover-to-cover recitation of Homer's *Odyssey*.

His personal odyssey includes 10 months inside Rikers Island as a very young man. After a heroin-related parole violation, he volunteered for an experimental metha-

done program and tossed the monkey off his back.

From there, the enigmatic tenor-sax player stood the jazz world on its ear when he released *Saxophone Colossus* in 1956. While there were other, equally influential, releases over the years, for a time in the late 1950s and early '60s he dropped out of the business — but not out of music. He spent years practicing alone on the Williamsburg Bridge because he did not want to disturb his Lower East Side neighbors. An idiosyncratic master of improvisation and musical quotation, Rollins took sabbaticals and quests to study things such as Eastern philosophy only add to the mystique. By the time my brother Joe and I saw him perform around 1984, he was a certified but still vital legend.

Joe and I arrived at the Blue Note early and sat on opposite sides of a table that physically butted up against the stage. I don't remember if there was an opening act. Or if Rollins had a trio or a quartet. It doesn't matter. I saw and heard only Sonny Rollins. It was like witnessing the Get-

tysburg Address.

Part of the fun of hearing Sonny Rollins live is to try to identify the quotes from other tunes. Musical prestidigitation. He might pull two bars of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" out of his "Pent-Up House" hat, or a snippet of "Honeysuckle Rose" from his "St. Thomas" sleeve. A musician tells the story of hearing Rollins late on a Saturday night before Easter Sunday one year. During "St. Thomas," at the stroke of midnight, he briefly quoted the melody from "In Your Easter Bonnet" then seamlessly returned to "St. Thomas." That's Sonny.

At the Blue Note, Rollins had everyone's attention. He was masterly, flawless, and endlessly inventive. I was in heaven. At one point, he was in one of his stunning, never-to-be-repeated, five- or 10-minute up-tempo improvisations. As he played, he very slowly walked over to where I was sitting. He leaned over fully at the waist and placed the bell of his tenor a few inches from my face. Literally.

I slowly looked up out of that gap-

ing maw from which the perfection poured, past a tangle of blurred brass, over the fluttering ivory keys, past the mouthpiece, all the way up to his face, about two feet from mine. I couldn't tell where Sonny ended and the Selmer tenor sax started. For a full minute, he continued playing as we stared at each other, unblinking. His facial expression hadn't changed, but mine must have. It was like staring at the sun.

It was the most precious gift a fan could ever receive. I don't remember what happened after it was bestowed. Don't remember going home. Don't remember much about the times I have seen him since, which were decidedly two-dimensional in comparison. Whatever mental infirmities crouch patiently in the grass of my future, I'm pretty sure that the last memory to go will be of that time at the Blue Note.

I wonder what memories my sons will have in 25 years.

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