

The Forward Eagle

Compiled Weekly

“Let us endeavor mutually to enlighten one another.”

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Page 1 of 1

Current Events

1.

Jazz saxophonist/composer Sonny Rollins, one of the most honored and influential figures in American music of the 20th century and beyond, died in the afternoon on May 25th at his home in Woodstock, NY. He was 95.

He is survived by his nephew Clifton Anderson and his nieces Vallyn Anderson and Gabrielle DeGroat.

No public memorial is planned at this time.

You may share a special memory, photo, or condolence on Sonny's Tribute Wall at www.gormleyfuneralhome.com

“I think when the creative person ends, he continues in the next existence. I’m a person who believes this life isn’t the be-all and end-all of everything. A spiritual person doesn’t feel like that.”

—Sonny Rollins, 2009

2.

Theodore Walter Rollins was born Sept. 7, 1930, in New York. Both of his parents were from the U.S. Virgin Islands, and his father became a Navy chief petty officer, the highest rank that Black sailors could achieve at the time.

The family settled in the Sugar Hill neighborhood of Harlem, a hotbed of political and racial awareness and the home of many jazz musicians. His grandmother took young Sonny, as he was known from childhood, to civil rights speeches and demonstrations.

An older brother became a doctor, but Mr. Rollins was always fascinated by music, from the recordings of pianist-singer Fats Waller to the calypso music his parents brought from the Caribbean. Not far from Mr. Rollins’s school was a nightclub where the singer and saxophonist Louis Jordan performed.

“There was a picture of Jordon in the window, wearing these cutaway tails and white tie — looking really sharp — and he had this gleaming King Zephyr saxophone,” Mr. Rollins told the Daily Telegraph. “I thought, ‘Wow, that’s what I’m going to do! Be like Louis Jordan and play saxophone.’”

In his teens Sonny Rollins formed groups with other young neighborhood musicians. They sometimes penciled fake mustaches on their upper lips in order to slip into jazz clubs to hear their musical idols.

Rollins practiced 14 hours a day, sometimes standing in a closet to muffle the sound. He was deeply influenced by the pulsing, heavy sound of Coleman Hawkins, who in the 1920s and ’30s became a major tenor sax star in jazz. Rollins and Hawkins recorded an album together in 1963.

Besides Hawkins, the musician Rollins admired most was Charlie Parker, the charismatic alto saxophonist and bebop pioneer. Like so many other musicians, he also followed after Parker in becoming addicted to heroin. Rollins sometimes held up pharmacies to steal drugs and was jailed in 1951 after being convicted of armed robbery.

Rollins later entered a federal drug treatment program in Lexington, Kentucky, kicked the habit as one of the first people to use methadone as a heroin substitute. He then settled in Chicago, where he took menial jobs. If he wanted to return to the life of jazz, he knew he would have to stand up to his old friends who remained addicted. “I resisted,” he said.



Sonny Rollins, 1930-2026

3.

After 60 years of playing all kinds of jazz, Sonny Rollins tried to explain his motivation. It only partially involved communication with others. “I tried to make myself a better person,” he said. There were many stops along the long journey.

Most of the time, Sonny Rollins didn’t play anything like Lester Young. But Rollins admired Young’s big, lush relaxed sound, which he thought conveyed emotional depth much more effectively than did shorthand bursts of sound.

What Rollins added was endless improvisation. He was infinitely playful, both inside the music and criticizing it from the outside. When insufficiently challenged, he loved to add sounds that clashed with whatever was going on.

“When I’m really playing,” he told a reporter from The New York Times, “my mind is completely blank.”

His last public musical performance was the year before he moved to Woodstock. He stopped playing altogether two years later.

Sonny moved from an ancient farmhouse in Germantown to Woodstock 13 years ago for the reason that elderly people have given since time immemorial. He was growing old. He wanted to live in a house that had central heating and a less steep staircase. He also wanted to live in a community with other musicians.

<https://hudsonvalleyone.com/2026/05/27/sonny-rollins-1930-2026/>

4.

In 1958 Sonny Rollins was the youngest musician in Art Kane’s Esquire magazine photograph “A Great Day in Harlem,” depicting dozens of the brightest stars in jazz. He later appeared in an Oscar-nominated documentary about the photo, and was the last surviving musician in the group. At the time, he was reaching his creative height and was acclaimed as one of the top tenor saxophonists of his generation, along with John Coltrane and Stan Getz. Then suddenly he disappeared.

Tired of nightclubs and dissatisfied with his playing, Rollins stopped performing for more than two years and was rarely seen in public. By chance, he discovered a new place to practice where he wouldn’t disturb his neighbors: the Williamsburg Bridge connecting Manhattan and Brooklyn.

“When you look back on it, it’s poetic and romantic,” Rollins told the Telegraph in 2010. “One day I was walking by and I happened to notice these steps leading up to the bridge. So I walked up, and when, in the crowded city, I saw there was no one up there, I thought, Wow! This is a place where I could practice.”

When Rollins returned to the music world in 1962, his new album, called “The Bridge,” became another part of his mythic story.

Much had changed in jazz during Rollins’ self-exile. During the 1960s he moved in seemingly every musical direction, from frantic, near-abstract improvisations to albums of standards. He wrote and recorded the score for the 1966 Michael Caine film “Alfie” and, from 1968 to 1971, took another hiatus, studying Buddhism in Japan and yoga in India.

When he returned to music, he stopped performing in nightclubs and concentrated exclusively on concert halls. He signed with Milestone, a small jazz label from California that gave him artistic control. For the next decade, he experimented with styles including electronic music and funk. Band members came and went, except for bassist Bob Cranshaw, who stayed with him for 50 years.

His wife, the former Lucille Pearson, managed his career, and he performed only when and where he directed him. Lucille Rollins died in 2004. An earlier marriage to Dawn Finney ended in divorce.

In his later years, he lived alone on a farm in Germantown, New York, following a simple routine of practice, reading and solitude. Without announcing a formal retirement, he gave his final performance in 2012. Years earlier he was quoted as saying this about his music:

“Just because I’m able to touch people with my music doesn’t mean that what I’m looking for in my music has been met. What I’m looking for is perhaps unattainable. I know that. But I certainly have a right to try to achieve it. It’s my duty to achieve it.”

Word of the Week

syncopation

noun

syn·co·pa·tion ,sɪŋ-kə-ˈpā-shən ,sin-

1 : a temporary displacement of the regular metrical accent in music caused typically by stressing the weak beat

2 : a syncopated rhythm, passage, or dance step

adjective: syncopated

ˈsɪŋ-kə-,pā .tɪd ˈsin-

Syncopation in a sentence:

His lines frequently featured *syncopation*, chromatic passing tones, and unexpected rhythmic accents, giving Motown songs their distinctive sense of movement and groove. — *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 22 Apr. 2026

The first known use of the word *syncopation* was in 1597 in the sense defined in the first entry above.

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