

JVC Jazz Festival Newport

SUNDAY, AUG. 10 | SONNY ROLLINS

A-hunting he will blow

BY MATT KEEFER

Clifford Brown, Art Blakey, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Max Roach. These are the jazz musicians that dreams are made of, who played two-bit dumps and grand music halls, who shaped jazz into its modern form. And who all have recorded with one of the last remaining giants of the past century, tenor saxophonist Theodore "Sonny" Rollins.

On Sunday, Aug. 10, he graces the Newport Jazz Festival again. Over the phone, his husky warble of a speaking voice contrasts the pure, crystalline assurance produced by his tenor saxophone. "I practice every day and I'm still searching for my 'lost chord.' I'm still in the hunt, so to speak," he says.

The hunt has lasted nearly six decades of recordings; the 77-year-old continues to perform and cut new albums, the latest of which is 2006's Grammy-nominated "Sonny, Please." He started on the alto at 7, picking up the tenor a few years later to emulate Coleman Hawkins, with whom he's also performed. He pegs his early influences as Hawkins' "cere-

bral" playing and Louis Jordan's more "earthy" style. And after all these years, he still finds the time to be critical of his work.

"I was still, as I am now, a student, and I always look at Coleman Hawkins as a master," he speaks about his '63 album "Sonny Meets Hawk!" "That was the relationship, and at the same time, I couldn't just be a student on the record. He was, of course, a consummate musician."

What distinguishes Rollins' sound is a clear, saccharine tone with almost angular, probing musicality. To classify Rollins as a student is not to rob him of the accomplishments of classic albums such as "Saxophone Colossus" and "The Bridge," but rather to acknowledge the breadth of musical past he represents. "I'm a person that really has stood on the shoulders of my forefathers, so to speak. Whatever I have to offer, I give honor to these people that came before me."

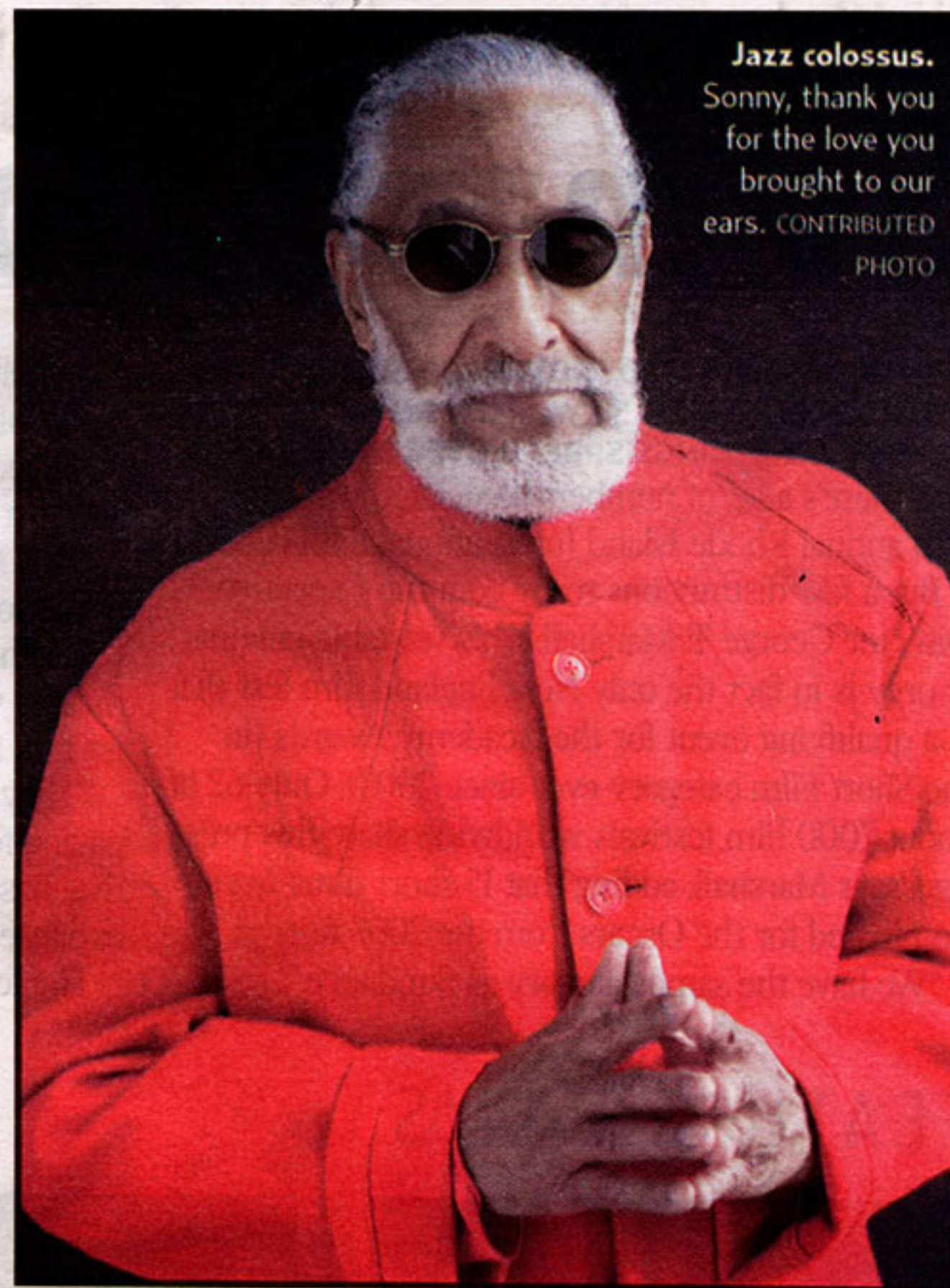
Which would make Rollins' own shoulders, well, colossal. But he does owe a great deal to his wife and manager, Lucille,

who passed away in 2004; the title for "Sonny, Please," is in recognition to her. "There's hardly a night goes by that I don't have a dream and she's in it some place."

It was her urging that spurred Rollins to perform a few days after his evacuation on 9/11. "I was sort of shaky, but she said 'No, this is something we have to do.'" What followed was the critically acclaimed "Without a Song: The 9/11 Concert."

Rollins sees a decline in the profitability of jazz, but finds it a vital source for "spiritual rejuvenation." He dismisses the notion of jazz's diminishing influence. "There's been articles recently that 'jazz is dead,' but you know, I've heard this so many times during my long career." Rollins finds this music "one of the great things that people still love about America around the world."

"It means a freedom of thought, it means nature, it means that there's still spontaneity of the weather: it's hot, it's cold, it's rain. This is what jazz is all about, it's a very organic point of everything all around us."



Jazz colossus.
Sonny, thank you
for the love you
brought to our
ears. CONTRIBUTED
PHOTO

'I'm a person that really has stood on the shoulders of my forefathers, so to speak. Whatever I have to offer, I give honor to these people that came before me.'

SONNY ROLLINS

CELTICA