

Sonny Rollins at the Cerritos Center for Performing Arts

April 8, 2006

The Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts is an interesting venue. It strikes me as a cross between a classic Italian opera house and a suburban shopping mall. Located in a commercial area of the Los Angeles suburb of Cerritos (home of the world's largest auto mall), it is surrounded by generic office parks and freeways. The program at the Cerritos Center is most often devoted to presenting light popular fare designed to appeal to the middle class inhabitants of its surrounding environs. On this night though, the draw was jazz legend Sonny Rollins, unquestionably one of the great innovators of the genre and one of the most proficient instrumentalists to ever pick up a horn.

With its mostly steel and glass exterior, the Cerritos Center seems to have been designed to harmonize with its office park neighbors. The lobby is hardly generic though, a high atrium with a sweeping staircase. Its décor is dramatic – purple and orange lighting, brass sconces, concrete columns inset with colored tile.

The Center's main hall is designed in a modular manner that allows the space to be reconfigured according to the needs of any particular performance. On this occasion, it was configured as an 1800-seat concert hall. Rows of theater seating rose around a broad open stage. Opera boxes jutted out from along the side walls. It is definitely an upscale venue, but the over-the-top décor brings to mind a Las Vegas casino. You wouldn't mistake it for La Scala, that's for sure.

Although the performance was scheduled to begin at 8:00pm, on this Saturday night in April there was already a large crowd gathered within the cavernous lobby by

7:30. A long bar proffered one's choice of libation and a considerable throng milled about, chatting and sipping their drinks in a very urbane and civilized manner.

As I stood among the crowd, I was struck by the diversity of the assemblage. This was not at all a typical Los Angeles jazz audience. Southern California's full diversity was well-represented this night. People of a wide spectrum of social and economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and age groups made up this congregation. Among them, teen couples in neo-eighties regalia, middle-class urban sophisticates in suits and evening dress, mature Downtown artistes in blazers and turtlenecks, 30-somethings in concert t-shirts, Afro-culture devotees in dreads or skullcaps, as well as a smattering of the de rigueur LA jazz fans – mostly middle-aged white men with gray beards and their spouses or girlfriends. They were a blend of cultures and ethnicities: African-American, white, Latino. It was quite possibly the most diverse audience I have seen at a jazz performance in Los Angeles and was a testament to Rollins' genius, staying power, and marketing savvy that the prospect of seeing him perform drew an audience of such variety.

The band, consisting of Rollins on tenor sax, backed by trombone, guitar, bass, drums, and percussion, took the stage at the appointed hour and proceeded to run down a set of jazz standards and Rollins' originals. This combo differed from the standard small jazz group by using trombone in the front line and a rhythm section with electric (as opposed to acoustic) bass – instrumentation that has been characteristic of Rollins' outfits since the seventies when he began to incorporate elements of rock and R&B into his aesthetic.

Interestingly, the band did not sound all that good to me. Partially I attribute this to the theater's sound system which, although of very high quality, was not powerful

enough to really fill the hall and actually sounded rather puny. Composed of world-class players, the band was certainly not lacking musicianship, but they did not play authoritatively as unit. This may have been due to a lack of rehearsal, or they may have had trouble hearing each other on the broad stage. The tunes did not seem to be formally arranged. Although this approach is common in jazz club performances (the ubiquitous “head” arrangement), it is atypical for a concert hall performance where the least expensive ticket sells for more than \$50.

Rollins in long black coat and trademark shades, presided over the band with a kind of regal authority possessed by only a few of the greatest musical figures of our time. The band responded to his every direction and supported his improvisatory flights with a kind of reverence. But the fire and excitement that has always typified Rollins’ playing was minimal. This is not to imply that he has devolved into a mere caricature of the tremendous artist that he once was – even at 76 the man can still deliver the goods and played a nearly two hour set without sitting out a single tune. But his playing lacked the force and urgency that it once possessed in abundance. I fear the death last year of his beloved Lucille Rollins, his spouse and business manager of fifty years, may have taken the wind out of his sails.

The audience generally listened attentively and somewhat reservedly, as though at a classical music concert, and responded mostly with polite applause. Some of the real hard-core fans in the first few rows cheered and whistled a bit, but for the most part, the audience was fairly austere. At points during the performance two middle-aged men seated behind me repeatedly insisted on trying to impress each other with what they clearly believed to be their encyclopedic knowledge of jazz, making comments such as

“this is a Billy Strayhorn tune” (in reference to “In a Sentimental Mood” – a song composed by Duke Ellington). But for the most part, the audience was rapt, concentrating on the performance.

After the last tune and again after the encore the audience rose from their seats to give Rollins a hearty standing ovation. This collective gesture seemed to me to be more an acknowledgement of the man and his inestimable contribution to American culture and the jazz lexicon than a reaction to the performance itself, which I did not find particularly inspiring. Miles, Bird, Coltrane, Monk, all long gone. Rollins is perhaps the last of the of the music’s titans. The opportunity to be present with this man and to hear him play his instrument under any circumstances is an honor and privilege and an experience not be forgotten regardless of any musical shortcomings.

There was a certain sad irony to this event. In contrast to the typical jazz performance, where the music itself often takes precedence over the personalities or personae of the performers, this concert was important not necessarily because the music itself was particularly significant, but because this may very well be one of the last opportunities for jazz devotees to offer their respect and admiration to this giant of the idiom. That is what made this a singular event and even a kind of spectacle.

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Sonny Rollins – tenor saxophone

Clifton Anderson – trombone

Bobby Broome – guitar

Bob Cranshaw – bass

Kwaade Duzulu – percussion

Joe Carsalo – drums