



**Vol. 1**  
**Sonny Rollins (Blue Note)**  
by George Kanzler

1956 was a watershed year for tenor saxophonist Sonny Rollins; he recorded seven albums as a leader and appeared on at least four more as a sideman. So its understandable that some of them have been under-appreciated, including this effort for Blue Note, which became *Vol. 1*, after a second eponymous LP was done in 1957. At the beginning of the year, Rollins joined the Clifford Brown-Max Roach Quintet, cutting the classic *At Basin Street* (EmArcy) as well as a Prestige album with the same personnel released as *Sonny Rollins + 4*. He was with John Coltrane on *Tenor Madness* and recorded his iconic *Saxophone Colossus*. He continued playing with Roach's quintet through most of 1956, also recording on Thelonious Monk's classic *Riverside LP Brilliant Corners*.

For his debut as a leader on Blue Note, Rollins created a hardbop quintet in the mold of the band he'd been working in all year, enlisting Roach on drums, trumpeter Donald Byrd, pianist Wynton Kelly and bassist Gene Ramey. A bluesy midtempo dominates three of the leader's four originals, two of them in blues form. "Decision" is uniquely Rollins, a 13-bar blues with 2-note block phrases Rollins extends in a

solo akin to those on *Saxophone Colossus*, which prompted Gunther Schuller to declare a new, thematic style of improvisation. It's also notable for Roach using brushes throughout and Byrd's very mellow, Miles-ian take. In the middle of Rollins' four originals is his feature ballad, "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" from *Finian's Rainbow*, a fine example of Rollins' affinity for embracing pop ballads. Side Two of the LP has two AABA 32-bar originals, each close to 10 minutes long, giving Rollins ample space to engage in what had become a highlight of his year with Roach, extended four- and two-bar exchanges that still sound as fresh and exciting as ever. This LP reissue allows you to savor each side and the liner notes, by Leonard Feather, are not only right in front of you but are richly informative—something increasingly rare in CDs.

For more information, visit [bluenote.com](http://bluenote.com). A Rollins tribute is at *Jazz at Kitano* Aug. 29th. See *Calendar*.



**Remember When Things Were Better Tomorrow**  
**Jonah Parzen-Johnson (Primary)**  
by Kurt Gottschalk

With the saxophone as pervasive as it is (likely because it's as pervasive as it is) it's rare to hear a genuinely unique voice. John Butcher and Sam

Newsome have added considerably to the lingua franca in the last decade and the younger Jonah Parzen-Johnson looks to be leaving a mark as well.

Parzen-Johnson's second album of baritone saxophone without human accompaniment is a quick 37 minutes of layered, coherent pieces, not quite songs but structures. He deals with melody and pulse and thematic progression but is never tied to them. They just occur, like cornices on the face of a wall. 2012's *Michiana* showed his dexterity on the big bari. For *Remember When Things Were Better Tomorrow*, he adds analog synth to the mix, creating thicker, fuller performances. The harsh lullaby "If You Can't Sleep, Just Shut Your Eyes" works with strong rhythmic ideas while "Eyes Like Paddles" allows the synth to take the fore, submerging nearly into psychedelia.

Heard live, the pieces lose some of their nicely obfuscating edge. At Silent Barn in Bushwick (Jul. 13th), his slurring dissonances became more embodied. With the means of production on display, one might have wondered if his concept was getting in the way of his (acoustic) talent, or if he just added layers to what he already achieved via circular breathing and powerful blowing. One might later have lost the trust in oneself to discern the acoustic from electronic. At another point, one might decide it doesn't matter.

At the risk of over-metaphorizing (and when is that really a risk?), Parzen-Johnson goes beyond what Butcher, Newsome, Roscoe Mitchell and Anthony Braxton have done with the instrument, coming closer in fact to the fantasies of Kraftwerk and Devo. He has become the man-machine. The electronics are neither a novelty nor a crutch. They are an integral, if inorganic, part of his unusual—and quite likable—music.

For more information, visit [primaryrecords.org](http://primaryrecords.org)

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