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### The Impermanence of Musical Taste

When I first heard Sonny Rollins play *Without a Song*, I almost certainly didn't make it through the entire track. Shutting off the music at my distaste for his playing, which I thought "went too outside too quickly" (which I now completely disagree with), I dismissed his sound as outside of my taste. Now, returning to that same tune several years later, the awe and admiration with which I listen to Rollins' rendition has inspired me to consider how our musical tastes can develop and morph over time.

This phenomenon, in which we develop an opinion early on and then return later to contradict ourselves, seems to be rather commonplace in music. Oftentimes, our tastes open up to encompass even more styles and ideas, though sometimes they expand at one end and constrict at the other, phasing out our past preferences in favor of new ones. In a sense, these developments make perfect sense: we, as people, are always evolving through new experiences, and how we react to other stimulus evolves in accordance. When you listen to something now, and then listen again later on, the music may not have changed, but you certainly have. You're hearing that music as a different person--someone who has heard more, and has heard differently--than the one before. In this way, the passage of time can really serve to warm us up to tastes we lacked before.

I can certainly attest to this change through my own listening experience with *Without a Song*. This 1929 tune was written by Vincent Youmans, with lyrics by Billy Rose and Edward Eliscu for the musical *Great Day* [1]. It has since been recorded by a range of artists, including Frank

Sinatra, Billy Eckstine, and Oscar Peterson, and was even featured in a reharmonized version on Joe Henderson's album *The Kicker* [1].

My first encounter with this tune was through Bill Evans' *You Must Believe in Spring*, on which it was included as a bonus track in a 2003 reissue [2]. The lineup for this album was Bill Evans (p), Eddie Gómez (b), and Eliot Zigmund (d), all of whom blend together wonderfully and explore the tune with sensitivity. Evans starts with a tender solo piano introduction, bringing his careful touch and rich voicings to the forefront as he plays through the entire form, alone. The intensity mounts as he reaches the bridge, incorporating thundering sounds from the bass range of the piano in his left hand accompaniment, which almost sounds like a composed counter-melody to the tune's head. Joined by the full trio on the second chorus, Evans maintains a relaxed tempo, and begins to branch out from the melody even further. Zigmund places the emphasis on beats 1 and 3 for the first few choruses, aligning with Gómez's half-note feel, and giving the tune an almost funky vibe, until they transition to a straight-ahead swing groove as the piece builds. The tune finally closes out after they pedal the V chord and Evans ascends chromatically, ultimately restating the melody one final time as they land first on Eb7 #11 (the IV), and then resolve to D-6 (the iii) in an eerie finish.

Upon first hearing this, I was struck by Evans' flawless melodic lines that felt at home in the changes. His expressive, vulnerable solo piano interpretation at the top revealed his careful manner in unfolding and exploring this already beautiful piece of music. It was exactly what I wanted to hear. And it was exactly the opposite of what I heard from Sonny Rollins on his 1962 album *The Bridge*, his first release after a three-year period of recession from performing, during which he practiced his horn religiously on the Williamsburg Bridge in New York City [3]. On this album, Jim

Hall (g), Bob Cranshaw (b), and Ben Riley (d) form a rhythm section that bolsters Rollins' sound magnificently.

My initial negative response to Rollins' *Without a Song* was likely a reaction to its sheer distance from the Evans rendition I'd come to worship. The brisk tempo and horn-led group felt unfamiliar and brash in relation to the piano trio I was accustomed to. To me, Rollins' solo felt eager to break out of the melody, which I took as impatient and self-serving. Since revisiting it this past weekend, however, I could not have a more different impression of that exact same cut.

Rollins opens his solo with a single idea, centered around the tonic. Following the general rhythmic phrasing of the tune, he starts to develop this idea, always keeping a short pause between each abrupt expression as he dances around the tonic. Sometimes, he invokes the melody directly, but is careful to return home to the tonic at the end of each remark. Pursuing this same concept throughout the first two A sections, he finally leads into the B section with the release of an eighth note line that provides an extremely satisfying contrast of linearity to the abrupt, jagged phrases he had been teasing out earlier. Make no mistake, however, as he lands once again on the root (this time an octave lower), tying together this first collection of ideas coherently and casually. This is the genius of Sonny Rollins. Finally closing out the tune with a saxophone cadenza which he cues seamlessly back into the head for one more A section, Rollins ultimately finishes by transposing the opening phrase of the tune several times, in an extended ending.

It is possible that I didn't make it this far in the cut the first time I listened, but regardless, I find it hard to understand my own willingness to dismiss such a piece of music that I now revere. Perhaps I have gained more listening tools with which to appreciate the cleverness and intricacy of Rollins' music. Perhaps I have simply reached a different moment in my life in which I am

inexplicably more receptive to these different ideas. Regardless, I do believe our musical preferences can shift as dramatically as our personalities, appearances, maturities, and any other personal phenomena that are subject to the passage of time and events. With this in mind, I hope to continue to revisit music that I may have put off in the past, in the hopes of staying present with my own musical identity.

#### References:

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Without\\_a\\_Song](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Without_a_Song)

[2] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You\\_Must\\_Believe\\_in\\_Spring\\_\(Bill\\_Evans\\_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/You_Must_Believe_in_Spring_(Bill_Evans_album))

[3] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Bridge\\_\(Sonny\\_Rollins\\_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bridge_(Sonny_Rollins_album))