

**This interview with
SONNY ROLLINS
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 27, 2018**



Library of Congress: You have made many remarkable albums over the years, including of course “Saxophone Colossus,” but when you think back to this specific album, what leaps to mind first?

Sonny Rollins: It’s a very interesting album. What I think about first is my personnel. I thought I had a great personnel: the great jazz drummer—well, I shouldn’t call him a “jazz drummer,” he’s just a great drummer—Max Roach. I had him on drums. I had the great Tommy Flanagan on piano. And I had a great young bassist—Doug Watkins.

I remember that we all working, we were all very busy at that time, recording other places with other people. I had just come off a session with a different company.

And I, of course, remember the “St. Thomas” variation that we did and the good press we got. But basically I remember the great personnel.

LOC: Was this your first time working with this group of musicians?

SR: I had worked with Max Roach. I had worked with Tommy. And I had done one engagement with Doug Watkins. So, when we all got together, we were all familiar with each other.

LOC: Did you get to get to hand pick these gentlemen for the sessions?

SR: It’s hard to remember but it’s highly probable that I did. Like I said, I had played with them all before. In fact, in 1955, I had been on a long trek with Max and Clifford Brown; that was in ’55 and [early] ’56. Tommy Flanagan--he and I had just worked together, so it’s likely I did pick them, yes.

LOC: Where did the title of the album come from?

SR: I did not title that album. After it came out, and had a certain amount of success, that question started to come up. It took a whole lot of detective work before we found out. It was a person who worked at Prestige [Records] in the promo department. He’s not with us anymore

but he was the one who came up with it. It was a long process before we finally found out who came up with the title.

LOC: Did you like the title?

SR: Yes, I thought it was quite flattering, really. Great and complimentary. “Saxophone Colossus”!

LOC: Was it normal for you not to pick your own album titles?

SR: I think in those days it was normal. Later on in my career we titled our albums but, early on, it’s not my recollection that we ever did. The company did that; that was another department.

LOC: I know that there was some controversy after the album was issued about the writer’s credit for “St. Thomas.” I think you are credited but you didn’t want to be...?

SR: Well, the story is this: my mother comes from the Virgin Islands. The Virgin Islands were owned by the Danes at that time, they were the Danish Virgin Islands. The song was a Danish song called “Vive La Compagnie.” But, I always called it “St. Thomas” because I didn’t know much about the [Islands]; I wasn’t born there, my mother was. My mother would sing it, I’d hear her sing it....

What I composed was a derivation of that Danish song, “Vive La Compagnie.” And I did several versions of it before I got it to be “St. Thomas.” I sort of arranged the melody; that’s the most credit I ever take. The song is of the Danish; the people in the Islands sang it and sang different lyrics. Then, Sonny Rollins made an arrangement of it....

But, in regard to “St. Thomas,” what was important in those days was the publishing. Prestige wanted to have the credit because publishing was a large percentage of the income from the records, so they credited it to me as though it was composed by Sonny Rollins.

It’s very confusing. But I didn’t write it. But the record company was more than happy to ascribe composing to me—so that they could take the proceeds.

LOC: When you began work on “Saxophone Colossus,” did you want to do something different—communicate something different—than you just had with your prior release “Tenor Madness”?

SR: On this album, I did want to record the songs that I was playing at the time—“Moritat,” “Strode Rode.” They were the songs I was playing on my own and was personally familiar with, things I was sure of. All the songs were my choosing.

LOC: That then begs the question: was it normal sometimes for you to have to record songs that weren’t of your own choosing?

SR: In my career, I always chose my own material...with maybe one or two exceptions later on. My producers trusted my talent. They couldn’t really choose for me. I felt I was the best person to choose my material. I think they knew that...or, anyway, that’s what I surmised.

LOC: Interestingly, there is no producer credited on this album. Did you have one?

SR: I probably did not have a producer at that time. I think that Bob Weinstock, the owner of the label, and Ira Gitler, who worked at Prestige, were the only people involved. I probably

chose the musicians and the songs. That's what I did—so I guess I didn't need a producer!
[Laughs]

LOC: On this album is “Moritat,” from the “Threepenny Opera,” how did you come to record that?

SR: That's “Mack the Knife,” of course, and I had seen the opera, heard the song. Louis Armstrong's version. Heard Lotte Lenya's version. Then, of course, Bobby Darin had a big hit with it. It was quite ubiquitous at the time. I knew it quite well.

I called it “Moritat,” what it's called in the German production but it means the same thing.

LOC: I think I read that you get asked about this album, “Saxophone Colossus,” more than almost any other album of yours. Is that true and do you have a theory as to why that is?

SR: “Saxophone Colossus” seems to be my most popular album. It even became a gold album in Japan! It's a very popular record. “St. Thomas” is a very effective song. And, again, I think it's because we had such a great band. And I think we were all playing at our peak at that time. I was pretty young—I think, 26 years old at the time.... I was bright eyed and bushy tailed!
[Laughs]