

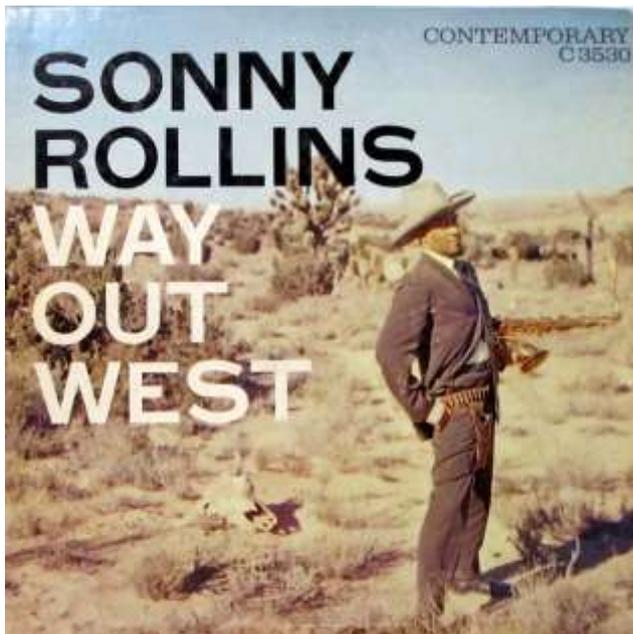
## WAY OUT WEST

by Ian Muldoon\*

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I grew up in Manly, NSW in the 1940s and early 1950s. When we spoke of "way out West" in those days it usually meant, Parramatta or, heaven forbid, Penrith. It should be no surprise that the Sea Eagles is the most hated side in the NRL.

Musically the phrase "Way out west", could mean Marty Robbins or Aaron Copland's *Billy the Kid*, or even the Jay Livingstone song *Buttons and Bows* from the movie *Paleface*. But to jazz lovers, it's Sonny Rollins and that iconic album on Contemporary, and the cover with Sonny sporting a ten gallon hat with a tenor under his left arm and no pistol in the right hand holster. The artist in the desert. And not just any desert, it's the American desert where the white man like Roy Rogers and John Wayne have stood tall in the American dream, the dream of "go West young man" which has meant so much to America and it's sense of itself, overcoming adversity, fighting blizzards and floods, ending up in triumph and rich in California. Unless of course, you were a man or woman of colour.



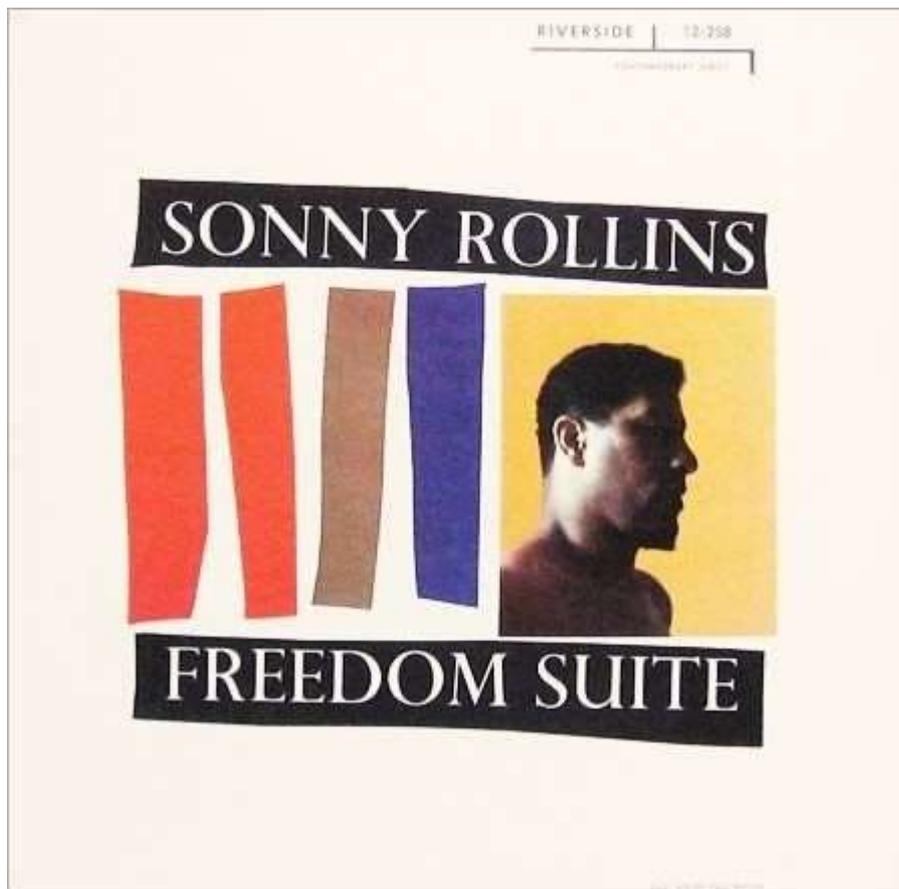
*Sonny Rollins and the cover with Sonny sporting a ten gallon hat with a tenor under his left arm and no pistol in the right hand holster... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM CLAXTON*

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*\*Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

The image of Sonny on the cover of *Way Out West* is an image for the ages where it's not just any artist in any (cultural) desert, but a black artist in the American West. Photographed by William Claxton, it's Sonny the black man as big, as confident, as real, as the air you breathe. There was no "yippee aye aeee", no "east is east and west is west" about his tenor either, it was a big sound, like that of Hawkins, Booker Ervin, JD Allen and the glorious full throated cry of Coltrane.

It was a sound, in its various manifestations which rang across the world. It was the clarion call for freedom, with one album even called *Freedom Suite*. It was freedom not just from the apparent musical constraints of the well-tempered scale or the Western classical tradition or standard chord progressions, but freedom from the notion the black musician was here mainly to entertain, freedom of all people from injustice anywhere especially injustice based on one's cultural heritage such as that suffered by Afro-Americans in the land of the music's birth. That sound, that cry, with its subtle rhythms, stunning melodic inventiveness, complex harmonic progressions, individual voice and its passion including joy (Armstrong), anger (Shepp), ecstatic yearning (Coltrane) and every other human emotion had an immediate appeal to millions.



Like much that was happening politically, socially, culturally, the music reflected the revolutionary times. It seemed to give musical expression to the yearning to be free by those who believed in Rousseau's dictum that man (woman) is born free, and yet everywhere he (she) is in chains. For African Americans the chains were all too real. The struggle was manifest in the music of Rollins and his contemporaries - Roach, Shepp, Blakey, Mingus, Bartz et al.

One of the great struggles for justice that has gained serious prominence in recent times has been that of women whether it's been at a global level where slavery has burgeoned on the back of globalisation or on the domestic level where violence against women occurs at an alarming rate. Not least has jazz been a voice for women whose own struggles throughout the world continue. And improvised music (jazz) is the perfect vehicle to give expression to that yearning to be free, not least, of fear, of violence, of exploitation.

In recent times there have been some stunning artists in the music: Geri Allen (1957-2017), Maria Schneider, Nicole Mitchell, Myra Melford, Jane Ira Bloom, Mary Halvorson, Ingrid Jensen, Susie Ibarra are just some that spring to mind.



*Geri Allen (1957-2017): improvised music (jazz) is the perfect vehicle to give expression to that yearning to be free, not least, of fear, of violence, of exploitation...*

Australia in recent times has seen some world class artists follow in the footsteps of the likes of Sandy Evans, including Linda May Han Oh, Andrea Keller and Lisa Parrott. Which reminds me.....

Way out West to me in 1983 meant a town called Walgett which still had an Aboriginal “mission”. I’d volunteered to teach High School at Moree but there was no vacancy and I was offered Walgett instead a little bit south of Moree. So I filled up a dozen milk crates with my jazz records, packed a suitcase and from Uralla headed West past such places as Gunnedah and Come By Chance. I don’t know if I brought any good thing to the children over my five year stint but I got a first class education myself into understanding what it meant to be a “fringe dweller” in Australian society.



*The Canadian director Ted Kotcheff: his film Wake in Fright got it partly right, but that film ignored the lot of Aboriginal people...*

*Wake in Fright* by Ted Kotcheff got it partly right, but that film ignored the lot of Aboriginal people. The high school at Walgett was something of a haven from the grim town and Mission, the reality of poverty, and social dysfunction, and a culture held together mainly by Aboriginal women. To be a “shoo-in gubba” ( white person who’s got it ok and may not be around a long time) used to “big city lights” and plenty of entertainment, like cinema, like theatre, like concert hall, there was in Walgett the RSL and The Sporting Club (The Sporto). For me and a few of my colleagues it was “let’s get pissed” on Wednesday night and Sunday night and play a few games of pool.

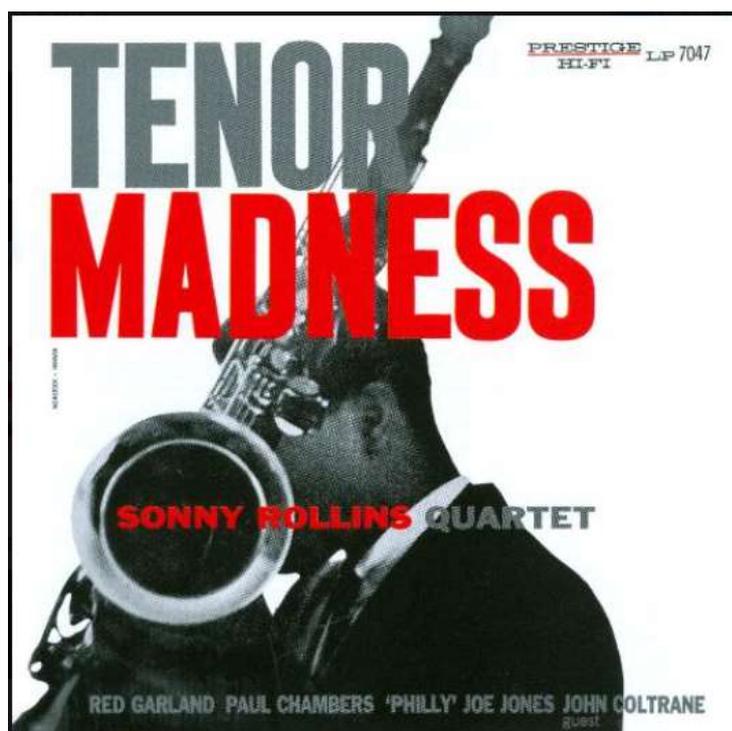
One night the word was out a band was in town. I went with very low expectations to the “Sporto”. I had a few schooners and at eight o’clock wandered into the room to hear the band. The band opened with *Straight No Chaser* and I swear to Christ I started to cry.



*A young Lisa Parrott (left, on soprano sax), pictured here in 1988 with Andrew Dickeson (drums) and Cameron Undy (bass)...*

Lisa Parrott was on alto sax, she looked about 13, and I think she sounded like Eddie Condon describing Bix Beiderbecke the first time "The sound came out like a girl saying yes" only much much better, at least to me, then, way out west, in the desert.

At the break I shot home and got the album *Tenor Madness* and brought it back and gave it to her saying "You must hear this. Sonny and Trane. Made in heaven." She laughed, and said "Thank you!".



Here is a recent photo of Ms Parrott with an old guy at the 2014 Wangaratta Jazz Festival asking if she's finished listening to the album *Tenor Madness*.



*Saxophonist Lisa Parrott (left) pictured here at the 2014 Wangaratta Festival of Jazz with Ian Muldoon... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

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