

SONNY SIMMONS

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"I was labelled a free player when I first came to New York. Ornette Coleman and free jazz, that was no problem for me – I would jump on that train too, and have a good time!" But Sonny Simmons has a curious ambivalence towards the free jazz that made his name: "I got sucked into the avantgarde when I was a young cat. I said 'This is the lick, I'm going with it'. But actually, I'd just as rather just play beautiful melodies, with my own compositions, with a groove. That's my true heart. Avantgarde and free, man, that's cool, but it only goes so far....People want to hear a snap [he clicks a groove with his fingers]." He's done a lot of free playing, so he must have a lot of feeling for it? "Of course I do – if I'm with the right musicians, I can stretch out and play all my ideas within a parameter. But now that I'm in the autumn of my years, I want to come inside again – I've been outside a long time!"

There's more than one simple metaphor here. "Outside" also refers to being homeless, busking on the streets, of people being so unaware of his work that they think he died in the 1970s. The saxophonist confides these thoughts during an interview in the cluttered, homely apartment in Manhattan that he shares with his partner and her two lively cats – a couple of minutes from the burgeoning night-life of 9th Avenue with its new efflorescence of eating places. Sonny speaks quite slowly, with gravitas, in a deep Southern drawl. He's an imposing presence, his tall and gracious bearing belying his 73 years. You sympathise when he says that now, what he wants is "a dignified job for a dignified wage". He talks excitedly about his recent association with Norwegian Jon Klette, and recordings on the latter's Jazzaway Records – "he revived my career", the saxophonist explains – and about his upcoming UK tour, his first at full-length, with Tight Meat.

Huey "Sonny" Simmons was born in Sicily Island, Louisiana, in 1933. His father was a travelling Baptist preacher who also practised the benign art of voodoo. He was a drummer, and gave Sonny his first instrument, a squeeze-box accordion, at the age of 6. The only instrument he had as a kid, he played it in church every Sunday. He had no music lessons. "I came from a very musical family, but no one pursued it – I just received the genes!" These genes have also contributed to his longevity as a performer – one of his grandmothers lived to 100. His early love for jazz came from listening on the radio to Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, and also classical music. He also followed blues, Western Swing and rhythm 'n' blues – which influenced him as they did fellow-Southerner Ornette Coleman.

In 1944 the family moved to Oakland, California. Simmons described it as "a fat-ass town", rich with great entertainment. It was the home of the "late, great Black Panthers", as he calls them. Though he didn't participate in the political agenda of the New Thing, he respected Black Power: "I knew all those guys, we grew up together – Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, Angela Davis. They wanted me to be a part of it. I was ready for the revolution! But I said, 'No – when you put on big rallies, I'll be the band', you dig?"

Starting on tenor-sax at the age of 16, in 1949 he experienced a bebop epiphany when he saw Charlie Parker with Jazz at the Philharmonic in Oakland: "Bird filled up this whole auditorium [with his sound] – I never heard such beautiful music coming out of a saxophone. It changed my life". He tried to sneak backstage to speak to the master, but Parker, who was doing very well by this time, was whisked away in a long Cadillac limo: "He had on this white suit like in the Charlie Chan movies", Simmons recalls.

In the early 1950s he began working with dance bands, and with bluesmen such as Lowell Fulson, Amos Milburn and T-Bone Walker. "Playing tenor saxophone... put meat and potatoes on the table, so I stayed with rhythm-and-blues", he's explained. It also gave him a

rich musical background, he believes. In Oakland he hooked up with Texan reeds-player William "Prince" Lasha. Lasha was a boyhood companion of Ornette Coleman, and had come to the West Coast about 1954. "He's quite a charmer!" Simmons explains, also implying a certain deviousness. In the later 1950s Simmons formed several groups, often with Lasha. Their partnership finished in the 70s, and Lasha now lives near San Francisco, but has worked quite recently with Odean Pope.

In 1958, Ornette Coleman's first recordings appeared, on the Los Angeles label Contemporary. "That's how I began to associate with beautiful Lester Koenig", Sonny explains. When he first met the visionary producer in 1961, Koenig said he had to surrender the music rights – which was common then – and Simmons walked away. "But Lester Koenig was no crook", he adds. Lasha and Simmons eventually signed a contract for two records, and in November 1962, The Cry appeared. With Simmons on alto-sax and cor anglais, and Lasha on flute, plus two basses, it was an unusual line-up. Bassist Gary Peacock was a West Coast player who soon went on to record with Albert Ayler. "I first met Gary in the early 60s, when the flower kids was about to flourish – with all that psychedelia, you dig?", Sonny explains. "He fit the bill with what we were doing musically... I prefer the olden days – it was more loose and free".

In April 1963 Simmons and Lasha arrived in New York, and hooked up with Sonny Rollins during the latter's freest period. They joined the tenor-player and his rhythm section of Henry Grimes and Charles Moffett for a gig at the Village Gate, and within five months had become leading figures of the avantgarde. Rollins wanted to feature Simmons on a session for RCA, with Don Cherry and Billy Higgins, but a dispute with the producer resulted in the project being cancelled. Simmons hung out a lot with Rollins, and was pushed into a freer area as a result, he explains: "We'd go out into the forest at Englewood Cliffs New Jersey – he'd get me up at 5 a.m., and we'd stay there till 5 p.m. practising, you dig it? I couldn't believe that this cat chose me out of all the young cats in New York. He said to me, 'Man, you got a style I like, I want to learn how you do these fast moves!' Newk [Rollins] was the greatest. At that period he was going towards the avantgarde."

Rollins wanted to learn from the free players, though he didn't continue with that trajectory. "Newk was a very deep cat!", Simmons affirms. He did record with Eric Dolphy, for whom he wrote the jazz standard "Music Matador" – "He treated me very royally, like all the great artists did at that time. I learned so much from them!", Simmons comments. Then in the summer of 1963, Lasha's familiarity with Coltrane led to Illuminations with the Elvin Jones-Jimmy Garrison Sextet, in which Simmons plays cor anglais on Tyner's "Oriental Flower". This album gave him his first major exposure, and the direction his career would have taken, had he continued to work with such players, and been supported by comparable production, can only be surmised.

But shortly after, Sonny headed back to California, stressed out by the constant pressure of trying to make it on the New York scene. He missed out on 1964's "October Revolution" – the Jazz Composer's Guild, the birth of ESP-Disk, and Coltrane embracing the avantgarde. But he had progressed enormously. "So much shit happened to me then, it was like a whole decade in one year", he explains.

Returning to New York in 1966, he cut two legendary records for ESP with trumpeter Barbara Donald, Staying On The Watch and Music From The Spheres. Bebop trumpeter Benny Harris had recommended to Donald that she contact Sonny. She became a student of his, and then his wife. "I had a lot of problems with the cats in New York because here's this beautiful white lady standing on the bandstand in a mini-skirt with a black musician, which had never happened in the history of the music...", Simmons has explained. These albums are full-on, declamatory free jazz, with John Hicks on the customary ropey upright piano. But "Zarak's Symphony", named for his son begins with a groove, which persists loosely

throughout; its repeating chord sequence is reminiscent of a Blue Note number. The sound is one of the label's better efforts.

I was going to call this his "heroic period", but then with Sonny Simmons, all periods are heroic. In 1969 Simmons moved with his family up to Woodstock to join the counterculture. He lived in a commune with Juma Sutan, Sunny Murray and others. Juma was a conga player who worked with Jimi Hendrix. Before this Woodstock period, Sonny and Hendrix had lived near to each other in Manhattan, and one time, Hendrix asked him over to play cor anglais – he didn't particularly like saxophone, Sonny recalls. "I loved Jimi Hendrix! I think of him as a great improviser. At Woodstock in '68, I think it was, we featured Jimi with some avantgarde musicians – we got a chance to play one date during that summer. With all this psychedelia, Woodstock was a great circus!", he recalls.

After 1969, having returned to the West Coast, Simmons made outstanding recordings for Arhoolie (Manhattan Egos) and Contemporary – Firebirds, Rumasuma and Burning Spirits. In San Francisco, he worked with trumpeter Dewey Johnson and saxophonist Noah Howard. The West Coast has been described as a research laboratory of the avantgarde through the 60s, but to gain exposure you had to go East. Simmons felt that to do so he would have to leave his family behind, so he stayed on, but he's said that he hated California.

When in 1977 Lester Koenig died of a heart attack, Simmons was affected deeply. He felt that his dreams had evaporated. "I didn't play any more, I thought my future in music was over", he comments. Family and personal problems took him to his nadir. For 15 years he was homeless, busking on the streets of San Francisco, strung out on heroin. Though he still recorded infrequently, most of the material is unreleased. The money for the compelling Global Jungle from 1982 was put up by the cello-player, Kirk Heydt. But it seemed like Simmons' glory days were long past.

The development of Simmons' instrumental skills has been unusual, in that he regards cor anglais as his main instrument – as on alto-sax, he's almost entirely self-taught. Tenor-sax was his first instrument, which he worked to buy when he was 16 – his parents couldn't afford it. "Big Jay McNeely was my man – and Illinois Jacquet. I was listening to Bird all the time, but these were my guys", he explains. So he was studying bebop, but playing r 'n' b – though at this time, Simmons, like other artists, made less of a distinction between commercial African-American music and its more "thinking" forms such as jazz. He feels he never got the recognition he deserved on tenor – hence on the sleeve to his tenor album Burning Spirits from the 1970s, he declared that he had created it to silence the doubters about his tenor-playing, "these egotistical bastards", for all time.

As with Ornette Coleman and Jimmy Lyons, Simmons' links with bebop are clear at least in retrospect. Intriguingly, he also claims an influence from Lee Konitz: "I've been digging Lee since that recording on Prestige in the 50s called 'Ezz-thetic', with Miles. He's still a great player. I dug him for being open in the music. Charlie Parker was my main man, but Lee Konitz was the next. Paul Desmond [Dave Brubeck's alto-player] too. We grew up in the same place, but he was in the exclusive white area of Oakland, and I was in the ghetto."

If on The Cry Simmons isn't yet at the height of his powers, the album is an important and intriguing avantgarde statement. Producer Lester Koenig describes "the cry" as the vocalised quality of free jazz derived from the African-American field holler and folk song. The implied contrast is with the sophistication of bebop and cool jazz, and Simmons is quoted as saying that he learned from Ornette Coleman to rely on melody alone, not chord-changes, for direction.

Simmons' long feature on "Bojangles", named after dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, marks the emergence of a major new talent. He might well be confused with Ornette on a Blindfold Test, and on reflection it comes across like the work of a disciple, of which Coleman hasn't had many, certainly not like Charlie Parker did. The Cry, like Ornette's own recordings on the same label, marks the birth but not the full affirmation of an individual aesthetic. Simmons doesn't have the benefit of a band that's had the opportunity to gel like Ornette's quartet, and drummer Gene Stone is no Billy Higgins or Ed Blackwell. There's a definite Ornette-ish feel to themes such as "Red's Mood", "A.Y.", and "Juanita" with its Spanish tinge. In the years after, he forged that influence into a totally personal style, by drawing also on modal and late period Coltrane.

The magnificent Manhattan Egos from 1969 is more fully realised than the ESP discs – Simmons' sound is now richer and more urgently keening, the conception more confident. The Coltrane and New Thing influence is more prominent, for instance on "Coltrane in Paradise", which also features the fiery trumpet-playing of Simmons' wife Barbara Donald. Though the sound isn't as faithful as Contemporary's – not many Simmons recordings before the 90s are – the band is on a new level of drive and cohesion, with blistering support from Juma Sutan on bass and Paul Smith on drums. It may be that Simmons' achievement, from here on in, has been to provide the most challenging synthesis of Coleman and Coltrane in the jazz canon.

This assessment is backed up by Bay Area bassist Chuck Metcalf, who worked with Simmons in 1979-80. Metcalf, a highly reflective musician with credits from Benny Goodman to the players out of the 60s avantgarde, recalls him playing a beautiful version of the bebop test-piece "All The Things You Are", outlining the changes in a way that Ornette Coleman would not, or could not. Metcalf argues that Coleman's music sprung Simmons from being a pure bebopper – for instance, while his compositions have chord changes, these are dispensed with in solos – and that he took his expressive stance from him and later, from final period Coltrane. These questions invite a longer treatment of Simmons' output than there's space for here. But there's no doubt of the impact on him of Coltrane's early death in 1967. "When John died, I died. Jimmy Garrison used to come over to my studio that time. He explained that The Chief – that's what he always called him – had been ill a long time with a liver problem. I was devastated."

Simmons was the first to produce a genuine jazz sound on the unlikely cor anglais, first captured on record on The Cry in 1963 – Garvin Bushell had appeared on the instrument on Coltrane's "India" on Live At The Village Vanguard from 1961, but as we'll see his sound was more legitimate. Simmons was inspired to play cor anglais, the alto oboe or English horn, a double reed instrument only played in symphony orchestras, by the soundtracks of Cecil B. De Mille's Ali Baba films: "I fell in love with that Eastern sound – and I'll love it, till I pass away". He wanted to play it in the school orchestra, which played "overtures" like "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Old Man River" – "nothing heavy classical". But they couldn't loan him the instrument, and his parents couldn't afford one, so he was moved to saxophone – "I was broken-hearted", he recalls.

Orchestral players normally double on oboe and cor anglais, but Simmons didn't care for oboe – it was the haunting sound of cor anglais that he loved. He bought his own instrument, which was relatively cheap then. He admires classical sound on cor anglais, but he was the first to get a big jazz sound out of it. Among saxophones, soprano is closest, and he was always a fan of New Orleans master Sidney Bechet – "I was blown away, it was such a big sound!" "People found it so strange, because it's a classical instrument", he explains. But the sounds of cor anglais and soprano-sax can be similar. Coltrane started playing soprano about 1961. "He was the greatest soprano player after Bechet that I heard, and he sounded like a cor anglais at times, it was Eastern... He had to struggle to get the sound that he achieved. He used an Eastern concept on the beautiful scales he was playing. I love 'My Favourite Things',

his version is a masterpiece. That's heavy!" He wanted to get a sound like theirs on the apparently unpromising cor anglais.

Simmons had not had any instrumental lessons at all – it had all been self-study, and hints from other players. His single lesson with Swing Era player came about through his friendship with Eric Dolphy, who was studying with Bushell. "I thought 'Great as this cat is, he's taking lessons?!' That really astounded me." Sonny asked to be taken along, even though Bushell's fee was \$100 an hour – a lot for those days. But Bushell was a great teacher, and showed him things about technique, or "mechanics" as Simmons calls it, that he was able to work on for years. "Eric [Dolphy] was a master of the altissimo range on the alto, he got that from Garvin Bushell. It was clean and legit, it wasn't fake like a scream – he'd be in tune. It took me years to do that, and I learned it from Eric Dolphy and Garvin Bushell". Bushell's sound on cor anglais was too legitimate for him, and his playing on the Trane date wasn't so strong. Simmons feels that classical teachers are often more knowledgeable on the mechanics of the instrument than jazz players. Though he dislikes the classical saxophone sound, he admires the work of Sigurd Rascher, who he came across through Sonny Rollins' recommendation, and raves about a 1930s recording of Rascher and the London Symphony Orchestra.

Simmons' 90s comeback was almost as dramatic as his New York debut. As Sonny explains it, a French club owner heard him playing on the streets in San Francisco and hired him. He went to Paris in 1995, and started making good money – he had at that point also landed a major label deal, recording Ancient Ritual for Warner. On Live In Paris (Arhoolie), Simmons is working at high intensity, in the house band of Jacques Avenel and the late George Brown. Simmons sees Brown as a great drummer, Paris's "in" counterpart to Sunny Murray, "the out drummer, the father of free music drumming". When I mention that Avenel was a long-time bassist with Steve Lacy, he expresses his admiration for the soprano-player: "I knew him back in '63. Every week I was into something different then. We were all struggling to grow to be great artists. Steve Lacy was among the pack."

His second album for Warners was the consummately Coltrane-ish American Jungle, also from 1995. The label asked him to re-sign, but offered less money, and perhaps unwisely, he turned them down. Around 2000 he formed the Cosmosamatics with fellow saxophonist Michael Marcus, a group that has recorded prolifically on the Boxholder label. He's also worked with Anthony Braxton, and recorded two solo saxophone albums, including beautiful Jewels (1992), which showcases his memorable compositions. Tales Of The Ancient East evokes Eastern musical idioms, while an association with noise artist Jeff Shurdut – The Future Is Ancient – reiterates the connection of ancient and avantgarde. He's also returned to France with a poetry project – Fatherlands with Bruno Grégoire – and a new group, The Triangular Force.

In his later career Simmons has oscillated between free and less free playing – for instance, in the 1980s he recorded the very free Global Jungle, and Backwoods Suite, a boppish album whose consistent groove is powered by drummer Billy Higgins. Always his craft-based take on freedom is apparent. He's argued that after the Golden Era in the 60s, New York free jazz dissipated: "I'm one of the founding fathers, along with Ornette Coleman. [But] I wasn't playing no noise; it had validity, it had composition."

Simmons has described himself as "a brother who is still alive...who walked with the giants...played music and recorded with them". Many of his partners from the glory days have passed on – in the last year or so, drummers Bobby Braye from Oakland and Oliver Johnson in Paris, and pianist John Hicks. Sunny Murray and Bobby Few are still thriving, and he'll be working with the Paris-based pianist soon. Sonny is working in and around New

York City, but nothing regular. A big highlight from earlier this year in Oslo was working with the Kork Symphony Orchestra, his first time with a classical ensemble, brought about by Norwegian benefactor Jon Klette.

His UK tour with Tight Meat – David Keenan (sax), George Lyle (bass) and Alex Neilson (drums) – came about because he was impressed with their concept of free improvisation. In light of his strictures about noise, it'll be interesting to see what he'll make of their punk-primitive post-noise mindset. But then Simmons' openness to new playing contexts has resulted in many of his most compelling recordings. Probably more of these are available now than ever before. "But there's so many more that could have been done, over the years", he remarks. Let's hope there are many more yet to come.

Selected Recordings

The Cry with Prince Lasha (Contemporary, 1962)
Eric Dolphy Conversations (FM, 1963)
Elvin Jones/Jimmy Garrison Illuminations (Impulse, 1963)
Sonny Simmons: The Complete ESP Disk Recordings, comprising That was Music from the Spheres and Staying on the Watch plus interviews (ESP, 1966)
Firebirds with Prince Lasha (Contemporary, 1967)
Manhattan Egos (Arhoolie, 1969)
Burning Spirits (Contemporary, 1970)
Backwoods Suite (West Wind, 1982)
Global Jungle (Deal With It, 1990)
Ancient Ritual (Qwest/Warner, 1995)
American Jungle (Qwest/Warner, 1995)
Live In Paris (Arhoolie, 1995)
Cosmosamatics Cosmosamatics (Boxholder, 2001)
Cosmosamatics Three (Boxholder, 2004)
I'll See You When You Get There (Jazzaway, 2006)
Live At Haugesund (Jazzaway, 2006)

Sonny Simmons is touring the UK in November with Tight Meat – see listings.
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