



Swing's the thing

Jazz and politics, the rival merits of swing and even eighths, the relationship between jazz and programme music embodied by Sonny Rollins's *Way Out West* – these and more exercise former Coltrane and Rollins drummer Pete LaRoca Sims as he reflects on a life in jazz in the presence of **ANDY HAMILTON.**

I first realised what a fine drummer Pete LaRoca was when many years ago I heard *St. Thomas: Sonny Rollins Trio In Stockholm 1959* on Dragon. It features an extraordinary, long version of Rollins's classic composition, in which the tenorist is powered by the rhythm section of Henry Grimes and LaRoca. Clearly this was one of the great drummers of modern jazz – sensitive, responsive, swinging and with a beautiful touch. Since then I've sought out his recordings, but knew nothing of his current activities. Interviewing David Liebman last year for *Jazz Review*, I found that LaRoca

was still on the scene, and might be persuaded to talk – and so began the email correspondence on which this article is based.

Born Peter Sims, the drummer started his career playing timbales in Latin bands, at which time he changed his name to Pete LaRoca – he now works under the name Pete LaRoca Sims. He worked with Sonny Rollins (1957-early 1959) and had associations with Jackie McLean, Slide Hampton, Booker Little and Marian McPartland. He was the original drummer for the John Coltrane Quartet in 1960.

LaRoca led his own group in 1961-62, was the house drummer at the Jazz Workshop in Boston (1963-64) and worked with Art Farmer (1964-65), Freddie Hubbard, Mose Allison, Charles Lloyd (1965), Paul Bley and Steve Kuhn among others.

He's probably best known for two classic 60s albums – [*Basra* with Joe Henderson, on Blue Note, and *Turkish Women At The Bath*, recorded in 1967 on Alan Douglas's label, noted also for recordings by Jimi Hendrix and by The Last Poets. Douglas showed him the Ingres painting "Turkish Women At The Bath", and asked LaRoca if

he could create an album based on it. The result, which comprised entirely the drummer's compositions, featured Chick Corea, Walter Booker and John Gilmore.

Jazz – and in particular his kind of swinging jazz – was in a downturn by this time. LaRoca started driving a cab in 1966, and then attended law school 1972-75. He stresses, though, that he didn't "change careers" – he continues to be both a musician and a lawyer. But he recognised that his beloved swing was being overshadowed by fusion. "Though I have often seen such things in

oured of Sonny's correlation to symphonic programme music. Eventually, I was most impressed by his adherence to the jazz vernacular – he didn't create a new language, he just reamed the existing one."

When I ask him how he feels about Sonny's later career, he responds with a very trenchant statement that shows his depth of feeling about the events that made it impossible for him to pursue a full-time jazz career in the late 60s. "I'm a jazz drummer – I swing. Trane's vernacular, which ended up in free music, tended to make me obsolete. Miles's move to fusion did pretty much the same. As far as I know, with minor exceptions, Sonny has stayed with the swing vernacular. For me, that's the most important thing."

We move on to discussing the process of improvisation, and what he feels when he catches himself playing a phrase he's used before. Does he consciously try to exclude that, or is he happy to have personal licks – and how do these issues apply in particular to a drummer? "Early on, I made an effort to forget whatever I just played. The point, of course, was to be obliged to find what to play each time anew. This is quite different from symphonic work, where one is likely to identify an item as a 13-stroke roll that begins with the left hand. As a drummer, some things don't change – a downbeat is a downbeat, some hits have to be made with the ensemble. Otherwise, however, and particularly when accompanying a soloist, I take my lead from what the other players are doing. For the most part, that keeps things flexible and avoids repetition, which is what I think of as improvisation. I imagine that non-drummers have an easier time, since they also have the devices of pitch and harmony to work with."

Has he ever taught improvisation, and what is his view of the way that jazz has increasingly become an academic subject, taught in colleges rather than on the bandstand? "I wouldn't know why I'm occasionally associated with it. I'm always pleased to hear people seeking new things to play. That keeps things interesting

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if I do well my job of accompanying, I might give a soloist the confidence to feel that he's not alone, which may encourage him to explore further."

Given his trenchant views on the role of swing in jazz, we turn to free jazz and how, in particular, many free players adopted a political stance. "Actually, I don't think there's any role for politics in music. I'm a music-for-music's-sake guy – it's a treat for the ear comprised of tones, rhythms and harmonies. Using music for a political message is sort of hijacking it for a lesser purpose and usually results in music that, if heard without the message, is pretty uninteresting. Music, of course, lends itself to all purposes great and small."

However, he then qualifies that position somewhat: "I should add that there's a mid-zone of opera, religious music – I particularly like Rachmaninoff's *Divine Liturgy Of St. John Chrysostom* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* – as well as movie and show music. Perhaps programme music such as *La Mer* should be included. These all 'limit' the infinite choices available to a composer by the requirement that a story be told. Accordingly, they are not purely music-for-music's-sake. Nevertheless, even without the spectacle and without understanding the lyric, these works present us with a challenging and satisfying gift for the ear."

As far as free jazz is concerned, Peter continues "I've never been a proponent of it and don't know why I'm occasionally associated with it. I'm always pleased to hear people seeking new things to play. That keeps things interesting



and is always informative, even if only to indicate things I wouldn't want to play. Composers and players sometimes surprise by doing something other than what they've led the listener to expect; sometimes the listener's expectation can be presumed to add an unplayed element to the ensemble. When free jazz suspends all the rules and anything goes, then there are no expectations. Of course, if artist or audience enjoy that kind of thing..."

"My position was and is that the essence of jazz is swing," Peter insists. "Give up swing and the music loses much of its identity as jazz. The onslaught of rock in the 60s and the phenomenal sales that it produced caused many in the music business, including jazz artists, to want a piece of the action." This was not something he was sympathetic to. "Rock and most folk music use even eighths-notes. They generate a strong groove – an obvious rhythmic pulse – as often as not indicating when dancers' feet should touch the ground. Swing is a unique syncopated groove, specific to jazz, which, during the big band era was the dominant dance rhythm."

"Many jazz artists are symphonically trained and can literally play anything," he continues. "The move from swing to even eighths was absurdly

simple for them. As I mentioned, jazz drummers were somewhat obsoleted. Of course, we also might have adapted but, frankly, if it were not for swing, I would never have become a drummer. Even eighths are boring. How would you like to play the same thing measure after measure after measure?"

Peter did not give up playing without a fight, as he explains. "It might be said that I made a nuisance of myself trying to keep swing alive. The crisis came in 1965 when the leader of an ensemble that I was in decided to combine with a rock band for a recording. The rockers weren't going to suddenly develop jazz skills, so the jazz band was going to have to accommodate them with suitable material and even eighths. I couldn't stop the trend but I thought it unacceptable to lend my name to assisting it. People in the music business then stopped returning my calls."

At least one listener regrets not hearing one of the great drummers of the 60s develop and evolve through a longer series of recordings. However, as I noted earlier, occasional albums appeared, and there are new ones upcoming. "I have conceptualised two more albums and hope to get to do them. I've had a lot of time to accumulate an unrecorded, and sometimes unplayed, repertoire." Let's hope someone out there can help to get this material recorded and released. ■

print – even in liner notes for my own album – I was never depressed, discouraged or disenchanted about the onslaught of rock. I was very disappointed at not being able to continue playing, but that's it. I never abandoned the music. Actually, I carried a blue book with me and wrote some of the *Turkish Women* album in the cab. But I had a family and needed to make a living. Five years in a cab was enough."

He's continued to play swing jazz, and albums have appeared irregularly over the years. The most recent was the very enjoyable *Pete (LaRoca) Sims: SwingTime*, released by Blue Note in 1997.

In our email correspondence, I began by asking – predictably, but in a way that provoked some engrossing details – which musicians were the greatest formative influence on him as a young player. "Actually, the greatest influence was the time," he explains. "I grew up in Harlem in the 40s. Then, if you were breathing, you were inhaling jazz. The big bands were happening. Until the 60s, the dance forms were based upon jazz. There were two all-day jazz stations in New York City and at least a couple more that played jazz at certain times of day – one station played four hours of Sinatra every Sunday afternoon. Most of the major jazz clubs employed two bands. The smaller clubs in Harlem had jam sessions on Monday nights and many had them every night after hours. It wasn't unusual to hear people in the street whistling or humming some of the licks from one great jazz solo or another. For a young player, it was almost impossible to miss jazz, and that's not something I was trying to do. It was also relatively easy to get to play with more experienced musicians, and nothing advances one's playing more than that."

Other factors were involved too. "There was education and family. I got to junior high school in the same year as a teacher who was intent upon creating a junior high symphony orchestra. He was a clarinetist, but he taught every instrument. His knowledge of drumming was relatively superficial, but he was not ashamed to

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reveal and share his deep enjoyment of music. That was very reinforcing for my then great but unfocused love of it."

He was also fortunate in having an uncle who managed meeting and rehearsal space above the famous Lafayette theatre, and who helped to steer musicians to the after-hours clubs and rent parties. "Lots of jazz bands rehearsed in the rooms above the Lafayette, and, being related to the manager, I was able to wander in at will and see how bands were put together while I was studying symphonic music in school. Also, that uncle, noticing that I was wearing out his vinyl collection of 78s while playing along by beating up on the furniture, and that I took particular interest in a ten-inch solo recording of Baby Dodds, used his connections to enable me to attend a radio broadcast from Carnegie Recital Hall of Mr. Dodds and James P. Johnson. My uncle and I were the entire audience."

Peter's stepfather was a jazz trumpeter, though not a well-known one, and after hearing the junior high orchestra, he started taking him to his gigs. "I would play bongos whenever the band called a calypso, rumba, mambo or cha-cha. That was a great thrill for a guy just reaching his teens. Even more significant was that his band's usual drummer was originally a violinist. Consequently, his touch and choice of what to play were extraordinarily ensemble-aware, in other words very much like what the great composers wrote for ornamental percussion, as opposed to what might be called standard drum 'licks'. He was probably my first real drum teacher. I ran into him years later and told him I was then attending law school. His response was 'Well, that's nice, but it ain't got nothing to do with no bebop!'"

Peter's first jazz record pur-

chases were Stan Getz's *Long Island Sound*, Sonny Rollins's *Way Out West*, and the Modern Jazz Quartet's *La Ronde*. "Sonny's album was notable for several reasons. First, the idea of Sonny playing cowboy music was totally mind-bending. Obviously, on close listening, it's clear that he's swinging every step of the way. Ray Brown being Ray Brown, swing is a given. Then there's Shelley Manne. Shelley played what might be defined as ricky-tick, horsey clop-clop rhythms that in most contexts would be laughable. Here, however, he made something of a bridge between symphonic's programme music and jazz's select-and-swing. Programme music tells stories using musical devices, such as Debussy capturing the sea in *La Mer*. Jazz's select-and-swing finds musical material, whatever its origin, and retells its story by applying swing. Clearly, these processes are not the same, but their common bond of storytelling is essential. Those were my greatest formative influences."

Since Peter began his studies in classical percussion, I ask him what made him change to jazz, and what his feelings are now about classical music. "I changed to jazz because I got the opportunity to play with some great jazz artists and realised that it wasn't going to get any better than that." But his love of classical music endures: "I don't hear as much symphonic music as I would like, but my enjoyment of it continues to increase as I learn more – which is also true of jazz."

What does he feel about classical players' reluctance to improvise – a process that seems alien to them? "That's an interesting question. My sense is that symphonic music is the realm of composers. The written work is the main event. Composers undertake complex,

multi-layered ideas and carry them out in elaborate detail – at a writer's pace. Quite different from the hurry-scurry, stand-and-deliver pace of the improviser who, in effect, composes on the spot. The written work is the foundation for the improviser's flight of fancy, but the flight is the main event. Instrumentalists in both environments must execute with precision. Where the improviser adds material not explicitly found in the original work, the symphonic instrumentalist adds interpretation. Pablo Casals' version of the Bach cello suites is quite different from that of Yo-Yo Ma. The same is true of renditions of the same work by different conductors. In each case, the written work is executed literally and precisely, but it is realised in a unique manner. I think such interpretation is every bit as exciting as improvisation."

Peter began playing at a very creative period in jazz, in the late 50s and early 60s, and worked with some of the greatest names at that time. His best-known associations were with Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane. I ask him how they compared as bandleaders, and what did he feel about the alleged rivalry between them at that time? "I never knew about any rivalry between Newk and Trane, though I did hear that Sonny was affected by Trane's success to the extent of withdrawing from the scene for a period of self-reflection. I can't verify whether that's true. I did have the privilege of playing with both of these jazz giants. As a drummer, I'm always an accompanist – even in my own band. An accompanist doesn't judge, he just adapts to what's happening."

Consequently, he feels, he doesn't really want to compare these two great artists. "I was fortunate to play the first six months of Trane's band, because Elvin was unavailable. Actually, Trane didn't even hire me. Miles called me and said Trane needed a drummer. I called Trane, said I would like to do it, and got those six months. Ultimately, Trane created his own vernacular – not a lightweight accomplishment. Reviewers of the time referred to it as sheets of sound. As I've mentioned, I was first enam-