

## Sun Ra: A Profile

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Never quite as famous as figures like John Coltrane and Miles Davis, Sun Ra occupies a uniquely polarizing position in the history of jazz and improvised music. Eccentric, visionary, and devoted wholly to his work as a musician, he has been alternately dismissed for his outlandish beliefs (he claimed to be from the planet Saturn) and heralded as an immensely talented musician and social visionary. According to music writer Benny Green, the general controversy over Ra hinges on the question of knowing “where to draw a firm line between the tomfoolery of an entertaining charlatan and the sincere missionary beliefs of a musical pioneer” (qtd. in Lock 13). Yet despite this conflict, Ra’s status as an innovator in a broader sense is beyond doubt. His personal record label was “one of the first artist-owned, independent jazz labels and certainly one of the longest running” (Gross). His highly improvisatory performances were some of the earliest to involve dancers and electronic instruments, and his band, the Arkestra, was a unique organization of dozens of rotating musicians who often lived together and created a community incorporating a number of cultural traditions (Heble 128). In all, though, Sun Ra’s biggest legacy is “not primarily musicological,” to borrow a phrase from Graham Lock (14). Ra’s fascination with ancient Egypt and what he perceived to be the European erasure of black cultural history, his ensemble’s use of spacesuits and Egyptian costumes, and his enigmatic philosophical teachings all played a part in what was

arguably his radical pedagogical envisioning of a utopian mythology for African American life.

Hints of the beginnings of this mythology can be found in Ra's early years. Born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, Ra's first experiences were of a community torn by racism. The city, according to biographer John Szwed, was likely "the most segregated in the United States" and constantly on the brink of race-related violence (3). And although black residents were severely restricted in their freedoms, Birmingham was also "flush with music" in clubs and churches that provided touchstones for black cultural life (13). Blount quickly demonstrated a prodigious aptitude for the piano and began playing seriously by the time he was in high school. He simultaneously developed a reputation as a brilliant student with interests in world history and science fiction, interests that would lay the groundwork for his later mythological envisioning (21). Yet early adulthood, in contrast to his school days, proved to be a trying time for Blount. He refused to serve in the US Army during World War II and was briefly imprisoned. Shortly after the War, Blount's Aunt Ida, who had been primarily responsible for raising him, died, leaving him with few ties to his home and growing sense of isolation. He moved to Chicago in 1945 and legally changed his name to "Le Sony'r Ra" in 1952, thus beginning a journey that would lead to a disavowal of his past and the creation of the enigmatic persona of Sun Ra. The point to be drawn from these descriptions of Ra's early life is that his eccentric career can be understood partly in terms of his environment. Having experienced racism and familial alienation, it is understandable that he would seek to refashion his identity. Because he grew up immersed in a rich musical culture, it makes

sense that music would become a central component of his artistic life. And, having been exposed to a broad array of academic pursuits, it is unsurprising that Ra would become interested in the history of black culture. Ra's background, in short, helpfully situated him to fashion a career that combined the social, historical, and musical into a highly transformative artistic practice.

It is somewhat ironic, then, to note how outwardly apolitical Ra was. He was exposed early on to both a fledgling labor movement in Birmingham and the local Musicians Union, yet he had almost no interest in either (38). A brief engagement with racial politics later captured his attention, but this too gradually dissolved; Szwed quotes Ra as claiming "At one time I felt that white people were to blame for everything, but then I found out that they were just puppets and pawns of some greater force" (311). More telling than this comment, however, is his falling out with the Black Panther Party: he was kicked out of a house owned by the party in Oakland, California, and Daniel Kreiss suggests that the feud stemmed from Ra's discomfort with the group's revolutionary ambitions and focus on the use of weapons (57). He also objected to the way leading figures in the civil rights movement co-opted what Graham Lock calls "Jude-Christian version[s] of black history" (23). Even the Free Jazz movement with its attendant politics was of limited interest to him, as Ajay Heble notes: Ra's brief membership in the renowned Jazz Composers Guild ended shortly after he had a musical falling out with Archie Shepp and Cecil Taylor (133). Overall, Sun Ra was anything but ensconced in the many efforts to create social change that characterized postwar America.

But to acknowledge this disengagement is not to detract from the political significance of Ra's work. His focus on Egyptian history and culture, according to Lock, was "part of an attempt to revise the history of black people as represented by white cultural and academic establishments" (16). He quotes Ra as saying that African Americans were trapped in "a past that somebody manufactured for 'em" (20), and cites lyrics like "When the black man ruled this land / Pharoah was sitting on his throne / I hope you understand" to further demonstrate the political motivations behind the Arkestra's Egyptian-themed performances (16). Egypt, according to Daniel Kreiss "became Ra's dominant metaphor for a powerful black technical civilization" and a symbol of black achievement that encouraged African Americans to revise how they thought of themselves (61). Heble, too, sees Ra's work as a "cultural reclamation" (124), but argues more broadly that Sun Ra's improvisations can be understood in educational terms, as an "oppositional pedagogy" that promotes social change by urging listeners to critically examine existing forms of knowledge (122):

Ra's rehabilitation of swing-era tunes, his reworking of traditional jazz forms such as stride, stomp, and blues, as well as his attempt to reclaim ancient Egypt as a black civilization have the pedagogical effect of encouraging a radical rethinking of institutionalized history. (123-24)

Heble also notes Ra's explicit self-description as an educator (117-18), along with his use of lyrics like "They tried to fool you / So I've got to school you / About jazz" (127), to highlight the instructional purpose of his unorthodox musical practices. In all, the commentary and scholarship on Ra achieves a fairly evident consensus on the role that

his songs and performances played in creating a revisionary history of black culture and life.

Just as important for Ra, though, was the future. The themes of space travel and otherworldly technologies in the Arkestra's music arguably paralleled his use of what Kreiss calls "performative projects" that revise black history (57). Ra readily connected the technical competency of the Egyptians with a "techno-utopian vision" for the future involving space travel and scientific advancement (75). As Kreiss explains:

Through his music, Sun Ra constructed and performed what I call a 'black knowledge society,' a metaphorical utopia of consciousness facilitated by science and technology and grounded in the cultural values of ancient Egypt and a re-imagining of outer space. Sun Ra's engagement with artifacts and metaphors of energy, outer space, and advanced technologies represents a black cultural uptake and reconception of cold war science in terms of long-established African-American social narratives of liberation and empowerment. (61)

This use of improvised music as a means to metaphorically create an imagined future is also discussed by Lock, who argues that Ra explicitly saw his music in visionary terms; liner notes that describe a "new world of sounds" that seeks "a better self and a better world" substantiate this point (27). Lock further explains the use of space themes in Ra's music by claiming that he used "outer space as metaphor for inner space, [or] the realm of the imagination" (29), thereby corroborating Kreiss's view of Ra's music as the performance of a "metaphorical utopia of consciousness" that was visionary in essence

(61). Finally, if any doubt remains as to the political relevance of Ra's musical practices, a quick look at some of his most famous lyrics should dispel it:

Outer space is a pleasant place  
 A place that's really free  
 There's no limit to the things that you can do  
 There's no limit to the things that you can be  
 Your thought is free  
 And your life is worthwhile. (qtd. in Lock 28)

Locating such liberatory sentiments within improvisatory performances involving Egyptian costumes, spacesuits, and futuristic sounding electronic instruments confirms what Heble, Kreiss and Lock seem to be arguing: that Ra's apolitical tendencies are better viewed as deference to the imagination and mythology as a salve for social ills. By creating music that, through improvisation, embodies freedom and is unlimited by the conventions of traditional musical practices (28), Ra symbolized very effectively the importance and value of freedom in society in general. Heble perhaps puts it best when he writes that Ra's lifework represents a "salutary commitment to enabling oppressed peoples to become subjects of their own histories and futures" (138).

In later years, Ra's beliefs changed very little. He lived for stints in Philadelphia and New York, touring consistently with the Arkestra, and he made a brief foray into film with 1974's *Space is the Place*. Egypt and space themes always featured heavily in his music, and he firmly established himself as being both somewhat apart from and central to the 20<sup>th</sup> century jazz tradition (Allen et. al.). Yet he left the planet in 1993 leaving no

resolution to the controversy surrounding his highly unorthodox views and music. A *Jazz Times* article published a month prior to his death ran the headline “Sun Ra: Visionary or Con Artist?” thereby succinctly summarizing conventional perceptions of the man (qtd in Lock 13).

How best, then, to view Sun Ra’s legacy? He may have been delusional in claiming to be from outer space, but perhaps the better approach is to understand Ra’s beliefs in metaphorical terms. As a musician heralding an imagined future of utopian societies hearkening back to the technological sophistication of ancient Egypt, Ra symbolized the spirit of his times and the struggle for equality and prosperity that was so central to African American life. And given that the Arkestra continues to tour frequently under the direction of Marshall Allen while numerous jazz performers and more mainstream groups like Outkast have taken up Ra’s music as an influence, it is fair to say that his efforts did not go unnoticed (Baxter). Scholars continue to ponder over the significance of his performance practices, and many of the innovations he helped establish, such as independent record distribution, are now taken for granted. With all of his work, Sun Ra gave the world a new understanding of what music can be and do, and as such, his name is one of the first to consider in any discussion of the social significance of improvised music.

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