



# SPACE IS THE PLACE

THE LIVES AND TIMES OF SUN RA

JOHN SZWED

*with a new preface*

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JOHN SZWED

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PRAISE FOR SPACE IS THE PLACE

“The story of the experimental jazz composer, keyboardist and band leader Sun Ra . . . is told with brilliance and grace by the Yale anthropologist John Szwed in this deeply simpatico new biography. . . . The achievement of this biography is that it carefully articulates such views of life and art at the same time that it provides hard data and analysis to locate Sun Ra’s theories in historical context.”—ROBERT G. O’MEALLY, *The Washington Post*

“Against the odds, Szwed carves out a central image of Sun Ra as a man whose sincerity was unquestioned, whose heart was pure. Essential reading for the millennium.”—DAVID TOOP, *Village Voice*

“Szwed also makes a strong case for Sun Ra  
as creative genius.”—*Kirkus*

“The book consistently succeeds in making the idiosyncrasies of [Sun Ra] much less strange by placing them within the mainstreams of African American culture. . . . Szwed is especially convincing when he documents the origins of Sonny’s unique blend of mysticism, Egyptology, Afrocentrism, and nonsense. . . . Thanks to Sun Ra, and to this extraordinary book by John Szwed, jazz must be conceived as something much richer than an austere art music.”—KRIN GABBARD, *American Music*

“Compelling.”—LLOYD SACHS, *Chicago Sun-Times*

“A brilliant book, a sprawling, curlicued, swinging account of an extraordinary man’s great adventure with a bunch of ideas that made sense to him out of a senseless world.”—NICK COLEMAN, *The Independent*

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“Szwed has unearthed a treasure trove of Ra data . . . [and ] through extensive personal interviews and archival materials, Swzed fills in the murky blanks of Ra’s early years. . . . Swzed’s portrait of Ra is both scholarly and affectionate. While many fans would often put brackets around aspects of Ra’s persona, perhaps turning a blind eye to his convoluted philosophies or his space gypsy stage shows, Swzed embraces them, contradictions and all.”—JOHN DILIBERTO, *Billboard*

“Through deft writing and detailed chronology, Yale professor and music critic Swzed manages to make the seemingly unintelligible, shiny-turbaned pioneer of big-band free jazz more accessible to society at large.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Alongside Swzed’s absorbing musical chronicle, the biographer tackles the more contentious subject of the vast framework of Sun Ra’s poetry, theology, and philosophy, and makes a miraculous effort at synthesizing that massive body of often deliberately contradictory statements and beliefs. . . . While he brings academic rigor to his research, however, he writes with an easy flow and peppers the investigation with many memorable anecdotes recalling Sun Ra’s idiosyncrasies. Swzed’s book is as absorbing an account of Sun Ra’s fascinatingly unorthodox life and times as we are ever likely to see.”—KENNY MATHIESON, *The Scotsman*

“Through collating practically everything written or known about his subject, Swzed doesn’t diminish the singularity of Ra’s musical achievement, he enhances it. . . . There’s an inspirational quality to Swzed’s revelations as he demonstrates Ra’s commitment to a course that could only be his own, with rewards that make money and fame seem paltry in comparison.”—DON MCLEESE, *Austin American-Statesman*

“John Swzed’s excellent 1997 biography *Space Is the Place* traces the in-depth study that lay behind Ra’s fascination with Ancient Egypt, etymology and space, while making a case for the idea that Ra’s Afrocentric cosmology not only reflected the tumult of the 1950s and 1960s, but transcended it.”—MIKE HOBART, *Financial Times*

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Cover art: Portrait of Sun Ra on the Golden Gate Bridge. Photo by Jim McCrary / Redferns.

TO SUE AND MATT  
AND  
TO THE MEMORY OF  
ANN ELIZABETH ADAMS  
(1952–1996)

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“Our music is a Secret Order.”

LOUIS ARMSTRONG, 1954

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The logo for Duke University Press, featuring the word "DUKE" in large, bold, white capital letters on a dark gray rectangular background. Below it, the words "UNIVERSITY" and "PRESS" are stacked in smaller, gray capital letters on a white rectangular background with a thin gray border.

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# PREFACE

WHEN I FIRST heard Sun Ra's music in 1966 it seemed a bit strange to me, but in retrospect I think it was not so much the music itself that was so odd, but its lack of context and information. The recordings I heard were on ESP Records, and every one of that company's long-playing albums was then packaged with a black-and-white starkness that hinted at the music's obscurity, coming from who knows where. Even the company's name was unclear: ESP meant extrasensory perception? Maybe, but it might have been Esperanto, since there were a few words in that constructed international language on some of the back covers.

Sun Ra's recordings on his own El Saturn Records albums first appeared in 1957 but were exceedingly difficult to find, their existence and distribution as mysterious as the rest of Ra's life. The albums were assembled by a strange sense of order: they often mixed together recordings made at rehearsals, in studios, and in different years, then were labeled as having the same dates, or with the wrong personnel, so that the Arkestra might appear to be playing in widely divergent styles. Their covers were often hand drawn, titled with a magic marker, sometimes with wrong titles, or none at all, maybe labeled as being in "Solar High-Fidelity" or registered with "Interplanetary BMI." There might be no dates, they used erratic numbering, and the names of the leader and the band changed over time. Later, other Saturns might have elaborate and colorful artwork, with the whole album wrapped in a transparent scrap of an old shower curtain. But never was there a decipherable clue to what their contents might sound like.

That same sense of wonderment and dislocation was magnified once I saw the Arkestra live. Its performances in the late 1960s and 1970s could

be mystifying and even scary. The exotic, the down-home, eccentric, hip, archaic, and the freaky could come at the audience in overlapping waves. Whether at Swarthmore College or Slugs' Saloon on East 3rd Street in New York, performances could begin in total darkness, and as the lights slowly came up there were revealed acrobats, dancers streaming batiked silks, the band chanting, marching, and bunny hopping (like astronauts on the moon) through the audience in Egypto-space clothes, a drummer yelling into his cymbals, two baritone saxophonists battling musically and physically, and the maestro himself in his cockpit/pulpit playing an electric keyboard, sometimes with his back to the keyboard, his fingers upside down on the keys, sometimes with his butt—all of this enacted in front of a silent movie of the band capering among the pyramids of Egypt. Was it vaudeville, circus, a happening, *Hellzapoppin'*, Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk?

The closest thing to Sun Ra in that time period was a Hungarian theater group that came to New York City in 1977, moved into a storefront, and called it Squat Theatre. The group's performances erased the line between theater and reality by means that could confuse and shock even hard-core off-off-Broadway regulars who lived to not be surprised. The Squat's audiences watched the performers in front of a large window that faced West 23rd Street. From there they could witness what seemed to be kidnappings, gangland shoot-outs, fires, and riotous behavior on the street, and they sometimes panicked when it spilled into the theater. It's no surprise that the Sun Ra Arkestra appeared in that theater on occasion.

But the Arkestra was scary in a different way. White people had never seen black performers in such assertive, unpredictable roles, even though some of their performances—marching through the audience, the vocal call-and-response between the leader and the band, and musical “battles” among singers and musicians—had deep roots in church services and in earlier jazz. But black people, too, could find the band frightening, and even some of the Arkestra's musicians feared what might be coming next. Not everyone got into the spirit of these “space rituals”: some black musicians thought Ra was conning white people into taking him seriously, others thought he was Tomming, playing to whites' stereotypes. Closet high-modernist jazz critics like Nat Hentoff and Martin Williams dismissed Ra's music as amateurish and his interviews as naive and embar-

rasing. But then bebop had embarrassed a lot of musicians, as did Dizzy Gillespie's introduction of Afro-Cuban drumming into bebop in the late 1940s and the rule-changing appearance of free jazz in the 1960s. Such is the cost of innovation in a music that's been labeled the sound of surprise.

After seeing a number of the Arkestra's performances I felt an urge to write a biography of Sun Ra. He and I were both raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and had lived there at the same time. Years later we were living a short distance away from each other in Philadelphia. If I didn't write it, I thought, no one else would. That was slim grounds for writing a biography, I'll admit. What's worse, I had never given any thought to how biographies are written or what they were supposed to accomplish. When I did, it seemed to me that biographers work from letters and published texts, maybe audio and video sources, and that they interview those who knew the subject of the book; time lines are constructed, events described, quotes inserted, and hopefully some order would come out of it all. If that was correct, Sun Ra was a bad choice for a beginning biographer. He denied being born (he actually abhorred the words *birth* and *death*), said he and dates didn't get along, disallowed any earthly origins, and in fact rejected being human. Interviews with Ra were notorious for his evasiveness about details, as well as his use of the occasions to lecture the world about its evils. He also made it clear that jazz was a disguise for his message. His time line (or timeless line) stretched between ancient Egypt, Alabama, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Saturn.

Writing a biography under the best of circumstances is a chastening experience. Attempting to understand how another person lived takes you into places, people, histories, and ideas that are invariably unknown to you. What you thought you knew comes into question. Beyond the gossip, the press releases, the media quick takes, biographers, like anthropologists, find themselves in unfamiliar terrain. I think I was trying to rationalize my way into writing about someone who refused to be situated in a life by reminding myself that writing or reading about a life is never the way a life is lived. In "real" life, memory is fallible: some things are forgotten, others remembered and given undue emphasis. Something said one day is different the next. What appears to be patterned, reliable, and inevitable in a biography is actually far sketchier and uncomfortably closer to fiction. A biography of Sun Ra would put all of this to the test.



How was I to write about him when he already had a number of stories attached to him that were contradictory or highly improbable and dwelled on the mysterious? I was already put off by biographers who pretended to know what their subjects were thinking and covered themselves by using speculative past tenses like “he might have known” or “she would have thought.” I wanted to write as free of interpretation as possible—to be as objective as I could. I was already predisposed to that kind of writing from my background in anthropology, and I even wondered if it wouldn’t be possible to write a bioethnography.

So I tried to approach the Sun Ra Arkestra as an ethnographer, learning and writing from what the band members told me. I traveled with them when I could, spent a day a week with them for months, talking endlessly with as many of the members and former members as possible. I found that everyone in the band had a fascinating story, and the diversity of the group was surprising—one had been a member of a fearsome Chicago gang, the Blackstone Rangers; another was a former student of the Yale School of Music who had been recruited by the composer Paul Hindemith; there were some older musicians who played at the highest level, and a few who seemed to have been added for other reasons; some were true believers and others skeptics along for the music. But somehow, they all cohered in a unique band that lasted for years and through many changes of style and taste.

I listened and absorbed Sun Ra’s talk of space and nonhuman identity uncritically, attending to hints of arcane knowledge that could challenge the laws of nature. I didn’t always understand it, but rather than try to confirm or debunk it, I took it as linguistic evidence and hoped that at a later date I could find parallels and analogues to Sun Ra’s thought among other mystics and theologians. When I was given access to Sun Ra’s library, I attempted to read as much of it as I could, following what he had read and the annotations he made. I read his poetry and listened to his lectures. It was a long and exhausting experience, but the education was worth the price.

Looking back over my notes on my first visit to Sun Ra’s house on Morton Street in Philadelphia—“the city of brotherly shove,” “the home of the devil,” as Sun Ra called it—the first thing I wrote down was that the window frames were tinted blue and the windows were covered with tinfoil. On the stoop of the row house next door a young girl was doing

her homework. Across the street was a vacant lot, what remained of an old Germantown mansion, and the stump of a tree that I later learned had been struck by lightning and whose trunk was carved into the large “thunder drum” that always opened the Arkestra’s shows.

Inside, Sun Ra’s front room was filled with state-of-the-art electronics, keyboards, and computers, some of them broken. A large TV was tuned to a muted religious channel. There was a painting of members of the Arkestra emerging out of a jungle, done in the style of Henri Rousseau, maybe painted by Bob Thompson. Sun Ra’s current reading was scattered about the room: several issues of *Popular Science*, a book by a freed slave who reinterpreted history in light of spiritual x-ray, and the key writings of the theosophists, many of whom had an affinity for the healing powers of music and embraced synesthesia and chromesthesia. I saw several volumes by R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, an Alsatian theosophist, archaeologist, and an advocate of an “alternative Egyptology”; his belief was that the Egypt we know was the inheritor of the culture of another Egypt, an ur-Egypt 25,000 years older, which was a more advanced and culturally oriented civilization, but one that had been flooded (and thus was the Atlantis of Plato). I gathered that this was what scholars might call street corner Egyptology or crackpot archaeology, but I was captivated by it nonetheless.

There were the works of nineteenth-century cultural diffusionists like Grafton Elliot Smith and William Perry, once-important figures who now receive only a few paragraphs in anthropology texts as examples of heliocentrists who traced all cultures—Irish, Indonesian, Amerindian, German, whatever—to Egypt. Two large “alternative Bibles” were there, *The Urantia Book* from 1955 and *Oahspe: A New Bible*, 1882, both of which had generated their own cults and attracted some famous followers among musicians. There was a Hebrew dictionary, a biblical concordance, and texts on hieroglyphics, etymologies, color therapy, and how to locate angels. Other books were on black folklore from the South, *The Travels of Livingstone*, and antipapal tracts that accused Catholics of being worshippers of Nimrod, a scarcely mentioned Old Testament figure who was believed to be black.

Later I was to learn that Sun Ra was not just a voracious reader but that he had developed his own way of reading, a different form of literacy, and one that I never fully understood. He could start reading anywhere in a text

and stop anywhere, in the belief that all ideas are already in our brains and need only to be awakened. On the other hand, he considered English a language of duplicity, and he had found that many “true” words in the Bible had been distorted when they were first written. But their meanings could be revealed once they were read and then spoken aloud so that the similarity of words that only looked different could be heard (*birth* and *berth*, *right* and *write*). Further illumination of meaning could be found by understanding the numerical weighting of words by assigning numbers to letters.

This was not all of Sun Ra’s creation. There were methodologies of biblical literacy galore: Bible code, Theomatics, Gematria, Isopsephy, English Qabalah, not to mention the Rastafarian Dread hermeneutics of “citing-up” (or “sighting-up”) by comparing biblical texts to earthly events. Ra’s way of decoding language by finding “equations” through “wordology” was something akin to the play of words through puns and joking. It was his method of reading the Bible, and he was well aware of what Bible scholarship required: the ability to quote and recite from memory; a knowledge of critiques of Bible history and scholarship; the location of lost or hidden books of the Bible; and a sense of the problems of biblical translation, especially those that occurred when oral texts were written down. Such was the beginning of my home study at Sun Ra’s, which would not win me an equivalency certificate entitling me to eternal life or enable me to raise the dead but would surely give me trouble in the academic world in the unlikely event that any of them read the book.

Sun Ra had built an alternative universe, a different history (not “his story,” but “my story,” he said), one in which ancient Egypt and outer space were its defining polarities, and the metaphysical and metaphorical dimensions of his thinking could not be ignored or downplayed. But close attention should also be paid to his songs about interplanetary escape from earth to see their relationship to old Negro spirituals or to biblical stories of flight and escape to the Promised Land. In spite of his rejection of earthly origins, he rather consciously leaked a considerable amount of detail about his life on earth. There was much in his early years for him to be proud of: his college education and high ranking in his class, his early success as a band leader in Alabama, his work with a number of singers and musicians, and especially his time as a pianist with Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra, the first great swing band.

Later in life, Ra was one of the first musicians to own his own record company; he recorded more than two hundred albums and left a large library of unreleased recordings and arrangements, some of which have yet to be heard or seen. He gave up his name, his family, and his bodily freedom when he resisted the draft and was imprisoned during World War II. Ra created his own cosmology and yet took care of earthly business by keeping a band together for forty years. This should at least give pause to those who think Sun Ra was crazy, a con, or an outer space minstrel man.

When Ra departed this planet in 1993 there were those who thought that the Arkestra/spacecraft had been designed to disintegrate, that without Ra as its main musical and curiosity attraction the band would dissipate. But the Arkestra has never stopped playing. For the past twenty-six years it has been led by Marshall Allen, the most loyal and modest of Sun Ra's musicians, and has continued to record and tour, even in places that Sun Ra never reached, such as Mongolia and Radio City Music Hall. It is true, though, that without Sun Ra's jeremiads, his outrageous stagecraft, and the shock of his electronic explorations, the Arkestra may seem safer for the whole family. Ra's legend has been redacted to the point that those too young to have known him may now see him as an avuncular eccentric, a sort of Mr. Rogers of the space neighborhood.

On the other hand, there are now poets, artists, intellectuals, and musicians of every stripe who have found in Sun Ra a spiritual godfather and continue to delve into that huge body of compositions, writings, and recorded music. It was something Ra anticipated. He felt that all his work should be documented, and if some records sold only twenty copies while others sold thousands, they should all be available and known. His writings on race, politics, and science were typed up as broadsheets and handed out to people on the street. The scope and range of his music are still hard to grasp: there are reinterpretations of classical compositions, pre-swing and early swing band music, bebop, marches, chants, exotica, doo-wop, crypto-disco, blues, electronic music, experimental sound art (including squeaking doors, twanging springs, shimmering sheet metal, and musicians playing instruments that they had never seen before), and enough American songbook pieces that recorded collections of his treatments of popular standards, Disney tunes, and Gershwin songs have appeared. There are recordings of his classroom lectures, interviews, and poetry

readings, and several boxed sets that trace Sun Ra's career from his days as an R&B pianist and arranger for other big bands. His music has been reworked and sampled by Lady Gaga, Thundercat, Bilal, Moor Mother, Solange Knowles, Yo La Tengo, NRBQ, Thurston Moore, Madvillain, Trey Anastasio, Scott Robinson, MC5, Madlib, Flying Lotus, Lonnie Liston Smith, Idris Ackamoor and the Pyramids, Jaga Jazzist, and many others.

There are video documentaries like *Mystery, Mr. Ra*, the BBC's *Sun Ra: Brother from Another Planet*, and *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*. The Arkestra appears in art films such as Edward Bland's *The Cry of Jazz* and Phill Niblock's *The Magic Sun*, and there are any number of live performances on video. But the most important is Sun Ra acting as himself in the 1974 film *Space Is the Place*.

Since the book *Space Is the Place* first appeared in 1998, there have been a flood of Sun Ra books. Some of them examine the meaning of Ra's life and teachings (Paul Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism*; Thomas Stanley, *The Execution of Sun Ra*; Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*; and John Corbett, Anthony Elms, and Terri Kapsalis, *Traveling the Spaceways: Sun Ra, the Astro Black and Other Solar Myths*); there are books on his poetry and prose (James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken, *Sun Ra: The Immeasurable Equation*; Adam Abraham, *Sun Ra: Collected Works Vol. 1: Immeasurable Equation*; John Corbett, *The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra's Polemical Broadsheets and Streetcorner Leaflets*; Sun Ra, *This Planet Is Doomed: The Science Fiction Poetry of Sun Ra*; John Sinclair, *Sun Ra: Interviews and Essays*; Sun Ra, *Prophetika*; Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*); his artworks (John Corbett, Anthony Elms, and Terri Kapsalis, *Pathways to Unknown Worlds: El Saturn and Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground, 1954–68*; John Corbett, *Sun Ra and Ayé Aton: Space, Interiors and Exteriors, 1972*); a book on his film (*Space Is the Place: 40th Anniversary Edition*); his discography (Robert L. Campbell and Christopher Trent, *The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra*, 2nd ed.); and a children's book (Chris Raschka, *The Cosmobiography of Sun Ra: The Sound of Joy Is Enlightening*).

The number of articles in print or on the Web continues to accumulate. The articles include numerous examples of artworks inspired by Ra, and many discuss his music. Others study Ra's influence on writers such as Amiri

Baraka and Henry Dumas, or reevaluate Karlheinz Stockhausen, Theodor Adorno, John Cage, and Lil Wayne in light of Ra's work. There are historical and political discussions of the cultural underground of Chicago in the period when he began to develop his space music. Others compare and contrast Sun Ra to Elijah Muhammad, former leader of the Nation of Islam, or liken Ra's utopianism with that of the eighteenth-century mystical commune of Ephrata, Pennsylvania; still others assess the Black Panthers and the Arkestra; there is an essay that weighs the ideology of Sun Ra's film *Space Is the Place* against the *Matrix* films and others that relate Ra to films about planetary exile or speak about musicians who choose to present themselves as aliens; and dozens of others discuss Ra's role in creating Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism is a complex, diffuse, and energized aesthetic and sociological movement, but one that's difficult to define, since at this point it draws on history, art, science fiction, music, technoculture, African diasporic experiences, and contemporary politics, and operates free of the constraints that often separate those fields. It offers the opportunity to bring into full view African diasporic culture that was never lost, despite what historians and social scientists have said. Afrofuturism promises the possibility of stepping into the future, but one never dreamed of by a century of those whose tired promises tell us that technology like AI, robots, and such will set us free and make us all equal.

Sun Ra is considered by many to be the founding figure of Afrofuturism. That's not surprising, given that he used every available medium, including music, film, painting, dance, performance art, staging, poetry, prose, light shows, and photography; he drew on philosophy, anthropology, comparative religion, and political writing; he also reclaimed Egypt for Africa (which generations of archeologists and art historians had fought against), and in doing so made a claim for the African origins of a significant portion of classical European culture.

This is not an avant-garde movement in the European sense. It's not about the alienation of the artist, offending the bourgeoisie, rejection of tradition, and breaking with the past, or even a search for the new in other cultures. Afrofuturism embraces what might be called retrofuturism, the return to the past to complete unfinished projects and to bring forward neglected or suppressed culture. Sun Ra's sense of the future was firmly rooted in a long memory that allowed him to use largely forgotten music

of the past in the process of creating something new. He saw no contradiction when in the middle of what might sound like musical chaos he suddenly switched to a highly structured pre-1930s form of jazz like early Duke Ellington or Fletcher Henderson, or turned to a composition of his own based on older African rhythms. There was a logic and an ethic in summoning up those ghosts of the past in the midst of what he called his music of the future. (Stefan Brecht, son of Bertolt Brecht, one of the first to write about his music, observed, “Sun Ra is not ironic.”) It’s no accident that the DJs who introduced sampling into hip-hop and rap by mixing in older forms of black music like jazz were African Americans.

Even Sun Ra’s outer space stage rituals and futuristic projects were in part based on Southern Baptist preaching and spirituals, his own Bible study, and Black Muslim texts. Elijah Muhammad was in Chicago at the same time as Sun Ra, who was familiar with Muhammad’s discussions of outer space contacts with earth. Muhammad’s source was derived from his predecessor, W. D. Fard, and both used the Bible as attestation. (Muhammad and Sun Ra at times both treated the Bible as if it were science fiction.) Muhammad spoke of a giant wheel-like invisible “mother plane” that sent out hundreds of smaller ships armed with bombs that were capable of destroying all of their enemies. He pointed to Ezekiel 1:15–21, where the prophet describes the wheels he saw surrounding angels in the sky before he was swept into a whirlwind and lifted into the heavens. (Muhammad’s successor, Louis Farrakhan, also had such a vision.) Muhammad literally weaponized Ezekiel’s vision of heavenly ascendance. The image of a giant wheel has been the basis of many different readings over the centuries, as in many versions of the spiritual “Ezekiel Saw the Wheel,” such as in this folk spiritual:

Wheel, oh Wheel  
 Wheel in the middle of the wheel, the wheel of time  
 Way up yonder on the mountain top  
 Every spoke of the wheel is humankind  
 My Lord spoke and the chariot stop  
 Way up in the middle of the air  
 Faith is the big wheel  
 The grace of God is the driver of the little wheel

Here the wheel is conflated with Elijah's encounter with a flaming chariot in 2 Kings 2:11. But neither Ezekiel nor Elijah saw these means of transportation as capable of destruction. It was John Milton in *Paradise Lost* who described the fiery "chariot of paternal deitie" in which the Son of God is sent to slay the rebel angels in the War in Heaven. Malcom X noted this and wrote that Milton and Elijah Mohammed were saying the same thing.

Sun Ra was well aware of these folkloric conceptions, for among his papers was this jotting of poetry:

You need to listen to your black ancestor who said  
 Swing low, space chariot coming for to carry you home  
 Your home is among the stars

Sun Ra's quick shifts between past and present, earth and space, were difficult for me to convey to a reader. Sometimes his cross-referencing was outrageous, though always presented cheerfully, but it was something you came to expect if you were to understand him. At times it was not so much what he said as what he was connected to and the way he flickered in and out of current history. Here, for example, is an instance that might be called "A Tale of Two Aliens."

In 1997 I traveled with the Sun Ra Arkestra to Berlin, where they were to appear in the Volksbühne theater as part of a conference called "Loving the Alien." The gathering was focused on the many meanings of *alien*: stranger, immigrant, terrorist, an abductor from another planet, an invader. It could even refer to an alien race or apparently a master race, since Leni Riefenstahl—filmmaker, photographer, actress, girlfriend of Adolf Hitler—imagined several such meanings in her own photography: she filmed Hitler as he descended from the sky in a plane at a Nuremberg rally in *Triumph of the Will* and later photographed the Nuba peoples of Sudan for *Die Nuba von Kau*, a book she subtitled "Like People from Another Planet." (George Clinton, a fellow traveler in space with Sun Ra, when asked about his recording "Nubian Nut," said he got the idea from a book by "some German chick.")

While giving a talk in one of the theater's two bars, I told the audience that Sun Ra said that on his first trip to Berlin he had been kidnapped and



taken to a building (which he described in great detail), where he had to endure torture because he would not reveal the secrets of the Black Space Program, a project that Ra had conceived. Members of the Arkestra, however, said it was just one of his jokes, that his interrogators were probably jazz journalists.

After my talk I was approached by several people in the audience, one of whom was a man who, eyeing me through a monocle, told me that the place Sun Ra described was Humboldt University, where during World War II a portion of it was fenced off, as that was where rocket scientist Wernher von Braun's laboratory was housed. When the Americans "bought" von Braun after the war, he said, they moved him and his research staff to Huntsville, Alabama, where the early NASA space program was located. There von Braun insisted on having his Berlin laboratory replicated in every detail, down to the wallpaper. Huntsville was also where Sun Ra had studied and graduated from Alabama A&M University years before von Braun had arrived. Yet Sun Ra regularly made a point of noting that he had been educated where the "spaceships" were developed. It was also the place where he experienced his first encounter with space aliens, though he stressed that he had been invited into space, not abducted, and that he had refused the aliens' offer to work with them on civilizing earth. Not your usual space alien encounter, but in Sun Ra's conception the aliens were saviors and redeemers, not abductors and attackers. His was not the Cold War "them v. us" subtext of 1950's sci-fi.

Wernher von Braun, Sun Ra, and Huntsville? Could all this be true? Maybe, though the next person to approach me after my Berlin talk was a tall, stunningly garbed black woman who insisted that *she* was Sun Ra. Her business card said she was a DJ.

By then I had learned never to take Sun Ra lightly, so when I began to look into the Huntsville nexus, I found that the African American press had been critical of NASA almost from the beginning. It was not just that there were no blacks in the program but that the whole project was a waste of money on high-tech nonsense that ignored the needs of the poor in the United States. For these journalists the exploration of space was ultimately connected to suburban segregation and the plight of inner-city people. While NASA and most of the press were interpreting the symbolic differences between the US and the Russian space programs (the United States

was more peaceful in its aims, more open, more humane), *Ebony* magazine reported in 1965 that ten minutes away from the Huntsville research site there were black people living in shacks without water. Wernher von Braun replied in a letter to *Ebony* that the blacks in that town should take pride in being so close to the space age.

The *Chicago Defender* in that same year reported on segregation in Huntsville itself. Only 1 percent of the town's blacks worked at NASA, and half of them had menial jobs. Just before the *Apollo 11* flight to the moon, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference staged a "poor people's" demonstration at the Cape Kennedy rocket launch site. By the fall of 1969, *Ebony's* editorials connected space exploration to exploitation, equating the *Apollo* ship with slave ships and ships like the *Mayflower* that brought white settlers to America. Von Braun would go on to write a science fiction novel, work for Walt Disney Studios on three TV programs about space exploration, and publish short pieces in *This Week* magazine promoting his idea for the United States to build a space station that could dominate outer space. Meanwhile, NASA engineer Josef F. Blumrich claimed in *The Spaceships of Ezekiel* (1974) that it was not God that Ezekiel had encountered but ancient astronauts in a shuttlecraft from another planet.

Sun Ra treated the moon landing as an occasion to remind humans how late they were in understanding the importance of space travel. When asked by *Esquire* to join a group of distinguished authors, scientists, and politicians in offering celebratory words for the accomplishment, he instead welcomed earth people for joining him in the space age, even at this late date. A fuller statement by Ra was yet to come in *Space Is the Place*, the film, where he criticizes white efforts to control space, and in an echo of his story of his Berlin abduction, two NASA agents hold him prisoner, torture him, and demand that he tells them the secrets of black space travel that used music as fuel. Whatever the technology, Ra's plan was to leave for a planet and take some worthy people with him. It was only a movie, but Sun Ra wasn't through yet. When he received a questionnaire from the real NASA asking for advice on how it should involve artists in the space program, he wrote back, "Without the proper type of music your program will be more difficult than need be." NASA never replied.

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# INTRODUCTION

CLOTHIER HALL, Swarthmore College, in the high-sixties: a school where the students are as tuned in and turned on as any in the country; the site of major draft resistance and antiwar organizing, hotbed of civil rights agitators, the home of the first rock-and-roll-magazine. . . . The students enter the auditorium joking, or distant and cool, wearing retro evening gowns, granny glasses, work clothes, military-uniform detritus from wars before their times . . . one boy is naked except for the American flag draped around him. The lights dim for the concert to start. And they continue to dim, dimming below Quaker gray, until total darkness covers the hall. Minutes pass and nothing happens, the audience is subdued, trapped in their seats. Then a faint sound in the aisles, a rustling, a sense of movement. Someone whispers something about rats and nervous laughter follows.

So slowly that it seems not even to be happening, the lights begin to come up. A single drummer in dark glasses, hood, and sparkling tunic, who can just be made out standing behind a six-foot carved drum, raises two strangely shaped sticks and begins a rhythm; others who can now be seen around him, in robes, weird hats, all in dark glasses, take up his beat and add to it until the rhythm becomes a polyrhythmic snarl. And as the lights continue to rise it becomes clear that a kind of procession is under way: dancers in flowing gowns hold richly dyed silks in front of changing colored lights; others parade before the audience paintings of Egyptian scenes or of monsters coiled around their victims. A conversation of flutes begins; the musicians sway in fabulously shimmering robes; tinted lights scatter amorphous shapes across the walls and ceiling; a film begins, pro-

jected silently on the wall behind them, showing the same musicians on some other occasion. Now the horns are heard, one by one, then all in a knot of dissonance, a trumpet piercing the air above them. Smoke begins to slither across the floor as a dancer enters carrying a large glowing ball like some turn-of-the-century art study. A woman with a beatific smile seems to float to the front, and begins to sing until she is joined by others who look like some crazed monks lost in time:

When the world was in darkness  
 Darkness is ignorance  
 Along came Ra. . . .

The living myth, the living myth  
 The living Mister Re

And there in the middle of it all, his face impassive, sits a stocky, middle-aged black man in a cockpit of electronics. On his head is a cap which appears to be a working model of the solar system. He fingers, then thrashes the keyboard around him with his fists and forearms. And so it would go for the next four or five hours, though a generous number of students have fled the hall immediately and would not know this.

Sun Ra was in the house and in his universe.

Even in the excesses of this era there were few audiences prepared for an ominous, ragtag group of musicians in Egyptian robes, Mongolian caps (Mongolian, as from the planet Mongo of Flash Gordon), and B-movie spacesuits who played on a variety of newly invented or strangely modified electronic instruments (the sun harp, the space organ, the cosmic side drum) and proclaimed the greatness of the most ancient of races (this, the Sun Ra of the Solar-Myth Arkestra); or, on yet another night, a merry band in jester's motley, jerkins, and pointed caps (à la Robin Hood or perhaps the Archers of Arboria) who marched or crawled through the audience chanting cheerful songs about travel to Venus. It was intensely dramatic music, moving from stasis to chaos and back, horn players leaping about, or rolling on the bandstand, sometimes with fire eaters, gilded muscle men, and midgets, an all-out assault on the senses. At the end of the

evening the musicians and dancers moved among the audience, touching them, surrounding them, inviting them to join the Arkestra in marching off to Jupiter.

As much as these spectacles were a part of the times, they were far from what hippies called freak-outs: Sun Ra's performances were shaped by a rationale and a dramatic coherence drawn from mythic themes, Afro-American liturgy, science fiction, black cabaret, and vaudeville, yet strangely open to free interpretation. Depending on who you were and under what circumstances you heard Sun Ra live, you saw him as a traditionalist, an aggressive and threatening magician of black arts, a laissez-faire multiculturalist, or maybe an avuncular but eccentric senior citizen.

Some years ago a German journalist headed his review of a Sun Ra performance, "Genius or Charlatan?" He might as well have added "madman" to his question, because these are the roles in which this legendary and semirecursive American jazz musician was cast, and part of the mystery of one of the strangest artists that America has ever produced. Yet for well over forty years he managed to successfully hold together the Arkestra, his band of dozens of musicians, dancers, and singers, which performed in every conceivable venue, from conservatory to country-and-western bar; his longevity as a leader was longer than most symphony conductors', longer even than Duke Ellington's; he recorded at least 1000 compositions on over 120 albums (many for his own company, El Saturn Research), and his hand-painted records have long been high-priced collectors items, with arguments over even the existence of some of them becoming the basis of legends. And in spite of being the quintessential underground figure, he managed to turn up on *Saturday Night Live*, *The Today Show*, *All Things Considered*, and the covers of magazines and newspapers like *Rolling Stone*, the *Sobo News*, *Reality Hackers*, and *The Face*. Sun Ra created an Arkestra which became the most continually advanced and experimental group in the history of jazz and popular music. And by locating himself in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, the major centers of jazz, he affected all of the music of his time.

Yet there was a curious tension between the musician and the mystic in Sun Ra, something very "*National Enquirer*" about his synthesis. The far-out gave way to the merely old-fashioned at a moment's notice. His obsession with the links between the universe and the musical had its basis

in pre-Newtonian physics, and at some instants seemed not so much mysterious as simply out-of-it. Yet he also had an uncanny ability for making the everyday seem strange. As personal as his vision was, it was nonetheless drawn from many currents of Afro- and Euro-American thought, most of them unknown to the public. He spoke from a long tradition of revisionist history by way of street-corner Egyptology, black Freemasonry, theosophy, and oral and written biblical exegesis, all bound together by a love of secret knowledge and the importance it bestows upon those excluded from the usual circuits of scholarship and power.

This is the biography of a musician who confronted the problems of creating music for an audience who expected nothing more than to be entertained, but who at the same time attempted to be a scholar and a teacher, and to take his audiences beyond the realm of the aesthetic to those of the ethical and the moral. It is then also a biography of his music as a living entity, a music which had its own role to play in what he would have called the cosmic scheme of things.

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