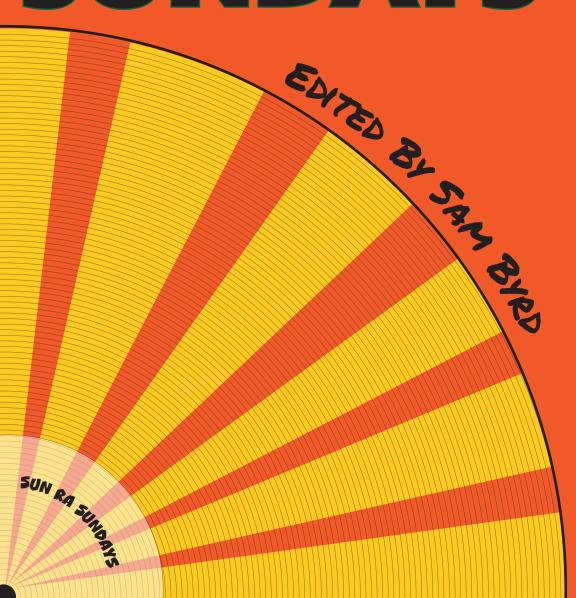
RODGER COLEMAN'S

SUNDAYS SUNDAYS



Rodger Coleman's Sun Ra Sundays

SUN RA SUNDAYS

By Rodger Coleman

Edited by Sam Byrd



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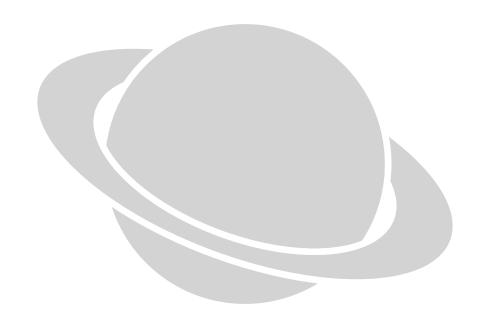
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Author's Foreword

It all started as a lark.

The lawyer I was working for at the time was interested in starting one of those new-fangled "blogs" and tasked me with figuring out how to make it happen. While the attorney's blog never came to anything, "NuVoid" grew into something I never could have imagined at the time. I sporadically continued to post, using the blog to post photographs and muse about various subjects but I didn't really take any of it very seriously. You have to remember this was long before the rise of a ubiquitous social media.

While I enjoyed the research and writing aspects of my work in the law office, the stress of day-to-day litigation could make Sunday nights extraordinarily depressing. I often found that listening to Sun Ra's music cheered me up and, on a whim, I titled a post "Sun Ra Sunday" and wrote a little review. I subsequently wrote a few more "Sun Ra Sundays" as the mood struck but only later decided to apply my legal research and writing skills to a systematic examination of my favorite albums of the Sun Ra discography: the magical Choreographer's Workshop recordings of the early-1960s. These ultra-rare Saturn Records releases had been reissued by the Evidence label—but in an arbitrary and haphazard batch of CDs that desperately needed sorting out (at least in my own mind).

Thus began a multi-year, chronological assessment of every Sun Ra recording I could find—an over-ambitious project that was, predictably, doomed to fail.

There are several places along the line where I should have stopped and circled back around to the beginning. No doubt that would have made a more satisfying book. And I never should have gone down the rabbit hole of ratty-sounding "bootlegs"—oh, what a chore they could be to listen to, irrespective of their musical merits. As the project became more like work than play, I started to burn out. Similarly, I eventually left the world of litigation for the sake of my mental health, and my research/writing chops started to wither

on the vine. So, by the end of 2016, I pulled the plug on the whole thing, feeing like a failure. In the end, even after so many thousands of words, I'm not sure I even scratched the surface of whatever is really going on in Sun Ra's music.

I have always maintained that Sam Byrd, my long-time friend and musical compatriot, was way more qualified to write this book than I ever would be. He is the one who knows this stuff inside and out, who answered my endless questions, and who provided me with CDRs of rare material. His support for the blog and this project has been unflagging—as evidenced by his subsequent marshaling of the diverse material and his deft editing of the book you now hold in your hands. It is a fact that none of this would exist without Sam's tremendous efforts, and I cannot thank him enough for all his hard work.

I have to also thank Irwin Chusid, administer of the Sun Ra estate, who has made the vast majority of Sun Ra's catalog available in definitive, high-quality editions via Bandcamp.com. All of my myriad complaints about poor pressings, crappy transfers, and bad "needle-drops" have finally been rendered moot—hallelujah! Irwin's new liner notes for these releases sometimes quote from my blog and he contacted me asking is he could host a .PDF file of "Sun Ra Sundays" on the Sun Ra webpage, to which I readily agreed. It was nice to see my scribblings reach a wider, interested audience.

Finally, and seemingly out of the blue, Prof. William Caraher contacted me last year about putting out this monograph by a genuine academic press, something I could have never imagined when I tapped out these blog posts so many years ago. "Sun Ra Sundays" are the epitome of amateur scholarship: fragmentary and un-credentialed, done purely out of love for the subject. It is therefore a prestigious honor to have these bagatelles become part of the growing body of literature about Sun Ra and his music. Born on a whim, this book is not what it could have been, but it is what it is. I hope you find it a useful guide in your own journey into Sun Ra's galactic discography.

Space is the place!

Rodger Coleman Nashville, Tennessee March 2021

Editor's Introduction

When Rodger Coleman started his blog *NuVoid* in September of 2006, I don't think he had an inkling that it would turn out to be the home of more than 150 posts of detailed critical analysis focused on the recordings of master musician Sun Ra. Tagged as "Sun Ra Sunday," the posts started out as occasional comments on miscellaneous albums he was listening to, and evolved into a chronological in-depth foray into the recorded work of Ra, starting with the Choreographers Workshop recordings of the early 1960s and ending with two studio albums from 1979. He delved into everything he could get his hands on: official (and not-so-official) albums, concert recordings, radio shows, rehearsal tapes. Over a period of a little over six years, week after week Rodger churned out wonderfully astute examinations of all these recordings, placing them in biographical, historical, and musicological context and making sense of them in new ways.

But all good things must come to an end, and the Sunday entries began to peter out as Rodger's energy and appetite for the endeavor flagged. He terminated the blog itself, and Sun Ra Sundays with it, after Election Day 2016.

Maybe this is the place to say that I don't come to this unbiased at all. In the interest of full disclosure, I'll say right here that Rodger is one of my closest friends. We met in Boston in 1988 and played music together for seven years in the punk-jazz-rock group UYA. Since then, Rodger moved to Nashville and I to Richmond, and we have managed to keep up our musical friendship with semi-regular home studio sessions and the occasional gig. I was no stranger to Ra, but Rodger was elemental in re-igniting my interest in him, an interest that grew into a passion that has not abated since.

After it became apparent to me that there were to be no more Sun Ra Sundays, I took it upon myself to download all of the blog entries, rearranging them chronologically by recording date into a massive PDF for my own ease of use. Unknown to me, music curator Irwin Chusid, administrator of Sun Ra LLC (the legal entity comprised of Ra's heirs), had much the same idea, although his PDF version is chronological by date posted. Both of these are available online, as is the actual blog itself (see bibliography). What, then, is different here? First of all, I have gone through and edited every entry for clarity, coherence, accuracy, and consistency. I also consolidated several entries where Rodger had written more than once on the same album, usually years apart, where he returned to a recording as new versions became available.

Sun Ra Sundays is a collection of critical essays, not a biography or a discography. To supply historical and biographical context, Rodger relied heavily on Space Is the Place, John Szwed's biography of Ra, and he quoted extensively from it. This may have worked well for the blog, but to keep the focus on Rodger's criticism, I trimmed down the quotes considerably while still, I hope, acknowledging Rodger's debt to Szwed's research. For further background, the interested reader should definitely track down Szwed's book. For discographical details such as personnel, tracks listings, release dates, and labels, Rodger relied most heavily on The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra, Robert L. Campbell and Chris Trent's indispensable discography, and he included much more information in his blog posts than is given here. Enough information is retained to inform the reader which version Rodger is critiquing, but for more details such as catalog numbers, matrix numbers, or exhaustive personnel, instrumentation, and track listings, the reader is referred to the second edition of Earthly Recordings and to Trent's updated discography in the second edition of *Omniverse Sun Ra* (see bibliography for details).

What works for a blog does not always work outside that context. So, for example, I have removed most of Rodger's references to writing the blog, which were appropriate for the week-by-week unfolding of his work but less interesting for the flow of the book as a whole. I have also omitted all of the comments, including my own, keeping the book solely in Rodger's words. Factual corrections have been silently made, but I have occasionally added updates and points of clarification; these appear in brackets, designated as "Editor's note." I have not included blog posts that were placeholders: Sun Ra poems, various photographs, and other posts marking time as Rodger worked through the recordings. Finally, blog posts that

dealt with tangential recordings with which Ra was not directly involved have been left out.

Each entry is listed by the version of the recording reviewed by Rodger. These versions are primarily reissues, either on vinyl or CD (mostly released by the Evidence label). For original vinyl records not yet commercially released (mostly on Sun Ra's own Saturn label) and for unissued material (mostly private recordings of live shows), Rodger relied on CDRs created by private collectors and shared physically, accumulated by him back in the days before Internet file sharing of uncompressed audio became prevalent.

In the twenty-some years of the 21st century, in the years since Ra's death in 1993, the universe of available Sun Ra music has expanded at a steady pace, his stature and legacy growing along with it. Numerous record labels such as Art Yard, Atavistic, and Corbett vs. Dempsey have kept the flame of interest alive with remastered reissues as well as brand new discoveries. Since the establishment of Sun Ra LLC, Irwin Chusid and Ra archivist Michael D. Anderson have done a massive amount of work remastering Ra's recordings as well as licensing them for release. Their exemplary efforts have culminated in the presentation of streaming files, many of them remastered as 24-bit transfers from the master tapes, of almost all of the recordings released by Ra in his lifetime (as well as many that were not), first on iTunes and subsequently on Bandcamp.

All of this activity was just ramping up as Rodger's Sun Ra Sundays were winding down, and Rodger did not address any of these newer versions in his blog. For each entry then, wherever possible, the Bandcamp URL is given in addition to the original listing of the version Rodger reviewed. If an official version has appeared on a commercial label since Rodger's original blog post, that too is listed. By "official," I mean recordings sanctioned and/or licensed by Sun Ra LLC. These can include releases from the aforementioned labels Art Yard and Corbett v. Dempsey, as well as from ESP-Disk', Cosmic Myth, Strut, Modern Harmonics, and Roaratorio. A word of caution, though: recordings in the Ra universe go in and out of print at the speed of interstellar light, so just about anything listed here may or may not be available by the time you read this. That being said, the Bandcamp website should be considered the current home of the most up-to-date, canonical versions of these recordings.

In addition to the name of the recording, two further pieces of information may appear with each entry: an indication that the recording in question has never been available commercially (this applies mostly to the many concert recordings covered), and a symbol denoting that the recording is part of the core collection (see the full list at the end of this book).

A long time ago, I dreamed of writing a book about Sun Ra that would, track by track, cover all of his recordings, much in the style of Eddie Lambert's classic *Duke Ellington*: A *Listener's Guide*. I only dreamed of it, though; Rodger actually *did* write it, and here it is. Thank you, Rodger, for all the Sun Ra Sundays!

Sam Byrd Richmond, Virginia 001

Sun Ra: Spaceship Lullaby (Atavistic CD) The Vocal Groups featuring Nu Sounds, the Lintels, & the Cosmic Rays: Chicago 1954-1960

When Evidence released The Singles in 1996, it came as something of shock (to me, anyway) to learn that Sun Ra had been actively involved with doo wop vocal groups prior to the establishment of the Arkestra. In fact, the very first release on the fledgling El Saturn label in 1955 was a 45-RPM single featuring the Nu Sounds covering Gershwin's "A Foggy Day" on the A-side and the Cosmic Rays contributing to a Sun Ra ditty titled "Daddy's Gonna Tell You No Lie" on the flip. Amazingly, Ra continued to record scattered singles with vocal groups up until about 1960. Of course, vocal performance would go on to assume a significant part in the Arkestra's Cosmo Drama, especially in group space chants and the incantations of June Tyson and Sun Ra himself. But this stuff is something different: an obvious attempt at commercial pop that some Ra aficionados will find downright hokey. But, Sonny would likely reply, "This hokey shit is somebody's hopes and dreams...Don't be so hip!" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 352). In any case, this being Sun Ra, any pop sensibility is decidedly skewed towards the weird and utterly lacking in the kind of vapid slickness that might have aided any entry into the marketplace.

Released in 2003 on Atavistic, *Spaceship Lullaby* shed more light on this mysterious period in Ra's discography, gathering together several never-before heard rehearsal tapes of some of the various vocal groups Ra worked with in the mid-to-late 1950s. The Nu Sounds and the Cosmic Rays were both (semi)professional groups and their repertoires are remarkably diverse: jazz standards, show tunes, pop numbers, and Ra compositions that range from the proto-space-chant "Spaceship Lullaby" to the virtuosic "Chicago USA." Apparently written for a contest to determine Chicago's new theme song, it's a tour de force of rich imagery and onomatopoeia. The Lintels, on the other hand, were clearly amateurs, probably just young kids taken in off the South Side streets and introduced to disciplined arrangements and enforced self-respect by intergalactic

community organizer Sun Ra. You can hear Ra working with them, getting them to try some odd harmonies before calling it a day. Nothing else is known about the Lintels beyond this snippet of tape—not even their names. What remains is a tantalizing glimpse of the kind of street-corner doo wop culture that has been long lost.

Most of the tapes are home recordings with only Ra's prodding accompaniment on the piano. Occasionally, some spare percussion joins in on the first Nu Sounds session (and Pat Patrick contributes some bari-sax train sounds on the second take of "Chicago USA"). However, a few tracks with the Cosmic Rays feature the entire Arkestra. "Africa" would appear in wordless form on Nubians of Plutonia and here is a mere fragment, suggesting an interesting alternate approach to this seminal Ra composition. The sound quality is rough overall, but somehow that only contributes to this record's considerable charm. Perfect for a Sunday evening.

002

The companion to Spaceship Lullaby, Music from Tomorrow's World is another collection of never-before heard music from Sun Ra's tenure in Chicago. The first thirty minutes of the disc consists of an amateur recording of a live set at the Wonder Inn, where the Arkestra, stripped down to a sextet, was in residency for much of 1960. The sound quality is remarkably good considering the era and the less-than-ideal circumstances. Certainly it is full of delightful ambience: the cash register clinks, folks are laughing and talking. But one woman is way into it, shouting encouragements like, "Play it, Sun Ra, play it like you want!" And he does. The repertoire is pretty adventurous for nightclub work, opening with three Ra originals: "Angels and Demons at Play," a slinky 5/4 ostinato groove with some pretty flute playing by Marshall Allen; "Spontaneous Simplicity," featuring more beautiful flute work over gently rolling rhythms (but who is the second flutist?); "Space Aura" swinging hard and fast with a typically brilliant tenor saxophone solo by John Gilmore. Next up are some earnestly goofy vocal numbers, including a truly bent version of "It Ain't Necessarily So." It's interesting to note that Sun Ra plays both acoustic and electric piano in a live setting, using the Wurlitzer for color and not convenience on the cramped stage. "How High The Moon" begins with a Sun Ra poem which leaves the audience puzzled, but things heat up with a cooking Gilmore solo and by that time the crowd is into it, calling out to the musicians, clapping hands, hooting and hollering. A spooky rendition of "China Gate" concludes the set with metallic percussion clattering ominously behind warbling, over-the-top vocals. Fascinating!

The remainder of the disc is given over to a forty-minute Majestic Hall studio session also recorded in 1960. Transcribed from a lowly cassette tape several generations away from the now-lost master recording, it's pretty rough going sonically compared to the Wonder Inn stuff. Nevertheless, it's a sparkling performance by an eight-piece Arkestra and includes three previously unheard

original compositions by Ra. It's well worth fighting through the murky sound quality to hear these intriguing bits of music. What's striking about this session is how polished and well-rehearsed the Arkestra sounds, executing the variety of material with confidence and finesse, especially in the ensemble sections where the rich orchestrations require precision and balance. Too bad it's so hard to discern amidst the noise and distortion. Still, it's listenable if you can acclimate yourself to the rather gnarly sound.

Shortly after these recordings were made, Sun Ra and his most dedicated musicians would make their way to New York City (via Canada) and Philadelphia, never to return to Chicago for any extended period of time. With *Music from Tomorrow's World*, Atavistic has provided us with another glimpse into Sonny's working life prior to fulfilling his alter-destiny and is therefore a crucial historical document for Sun Ra fans.

By 1961, Mr. Sun Ra and a diminished Arkestra had inadvertently relocated from Chicago to New York City and, although gig opportunities were slim, Tommy Hunter had rejoined the band on percussion. Hunter subsequently purchased an Ampex 601 reel-to-reel tape recorder at a pawn shop in order to record the Arkestra's frequent rehearsals. Hunter was also fortuitously employed, first at Columbus Rehearsal Studio on 8th Avenue between 57th and 58th Streets and later at the Choreographer's Workshop at 414 West 51st Street. Thanks to Hunter, the Arkestra was able to rehearse and record rent-free on nights and weekends for the next three years (see Szwed 1997, 186-187). Ra had frequently recorded rehearsals back in Chicago, but 1961 would mark the beginning of a particularly fruitful period.

Bad and Beautiful is the very first of a long series of wonderful Saturn records made at the Choreographer's Workshop in the 1960s. This particular session was recorded in "a room on the third or fourth floor, where the acoustics and the piano were not to Ra's liking" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 93). Sonny apparently preferred the basement where there was "a good piano and better acoustics" (Szwed 1997, 187). Indeed, there is a noticeably hissy and tinny quality to the sound. But there is also that pleasantly reverberant atmosphere that characterizes all of the Choreographer's Workshop records: They have that Saturn Sound. Along with Ra and Hunter, the sextet includes Marshall Allen on alto sax and flute. John Gilmore on tenor sax, Pat Patrick on baritone sax, and Ronnie Boykins on bass. They sound supremely relaxed, languidly exploring hoary standards and show tunes along with some rather conventional Ra originals. Gilmore is in his usual fine form throughout but his ohso-smooth solo on "Search Light Blues" is truly deep and soulful. Pat Patrick plays the unwieldy baritone saxophone with astounding grace on the riff-based "Ankh" and on the gently swinging "On the Blue Side." But then "Exotic Two" points to the future with each Arkestra member banging away on percussion instruments in dense polyrhythms while Ra punches out stiff chord sequences on the piano. (Small percussion instruments can be heard chattering away on "Search Light Blues" as well.) The album closes with a languorous ensemble arrangement of "And This Is My Beloved." In all, Bad and Beautiful is a transitional, historically important album, and its subdued atmosphere and sophisticated musicianship also makes for a simply pleasant Sun Ra Sunday.



Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra: Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow (Evidence CD)

Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow tacks on two leftover tracks from 1961's Bad and Beautiful recording session but mostly consists of a 1962 rehearsal recorded in the basement of the Choreographer's Workshop. The sound quality is notably improved even if the source tape for this CD is significantly degraded. More importantly, Ra's music is clearly moving in a new, exciting direction. Drummer/recordist Tommy Hunter had been recording rehearsals on his Apex reel-to-reel and accidentally discovered the feedback/echo effect that appears here for the first time. So while Bad and Beautiful was a somewhat traditional jazz combo album full of show tunes and semi-conventional Ra originals, Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow lives up to its title, moving forward into the kind of experimental avant-garde music that would cement Ra's reputation in the 1960s and 1970s while also retaining a connection to the living tradition that would continue to center the Arkestra's aesthetic throughout its career. To paraphrase Michael Shore's comment in the liner notes to this Evidence CD, if Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy is a Rosetta Stone, then Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow is Ra "beginning to carve it in earnest" (Shore 1992).

"Cluster of Galaxies" is a brief but portentous opening with its spacey "thunder drums," "sun harp," and "spiral percussion gong" all drenched in thick cosmic echo and reverb. Afro-psychedelia starts right here—in 1962! P-Funk mastermind George Clinton once remarked, "[Sun Ra] was definitely out to lunch—the same place I eat at" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 264). Shifting gears, the next track is another remake of "Ankh," which was originally recorded in 1956, appearing in a more florid arrangement on the Delmark LP Sound of Joy and more recently on Bad and Beautiful. This composition was obviously important to Ra and the various renditions are fascinatingly diverse. Here, baritone saxophonist Pat Patrick shares solo space with a rare appearance by Ali Hassan on trombone. The mood is brighter, less ominous than usual with some funky gospel

handclaps supporting the lumbering riffs. "Solar Drums" is another brief space-out featuring echoing drums, small percussion, bells, and faintly tinkling piano. The hissing feedback ebbs and flows across the sonic landscape, sometimes threatening to overwhelm everything until Tommy Hunter suddenly turns a knob, bringing things back into focus.

The next two tracks appear to be Ra's earliest experiments with a new kind of form: loosely structured, non-idiomatic, conducted improvisation. This is a form that Ra would expand and perfect as the decade proceeded, resulting in such masterpieces as Other Planes of There and The Magic City. With atonal piano, knotty contrapuntal horn lines, and total absence of drums, "The Outer Heavens" sounds more like contemporary classical chamber music than big-band jazz and points the way to the later music of the AACM and Anthony Braxton. In contrast, a barrage of ceremonial drums and percussion dominates "Infinity of the Universe" with Ra agitatedly rumbling around in the piano's lowest registers. Michael Shore points out in the liner notes that "his repeated bass-clef piano runs mark the first appearance of what would, in a few years, turn into the launch pad for one of his greatest pieces, 'The Shadow World'" (Shore 1992). I think that's correct and a fascinating insight into Ra's working methods. Towards the end, the horns enter with fleeting and plaintive cries over the increasingly pounding percussion before the track quickly fades to silence.

The album closes with the two orphaned tracks from the *Bad and Beautiful* sessions and a return to its cool, swinging combo mode. "Lights on a Satellite" was originally recorded in Chicago in 1960 but unreleased until 1965 on *Fate in a Pleasant Mood*. The version here eschews the ornamental flute obbligato and becomes a soulful ballad vehicle for Ra's Monkish piano. Unfortunately, the track fades out prematurely just as Gilmore begins to blow. "Kosmos in Blue" is a typical Ra blues, bouncy and maybe a little old fashioned rhythmically, but full of dissonant voicings and an unpredictable, disjointed harmonic structure. Gilmore's tenor saxophone solo stands out for its stately reserve and concise eloquence.

As we proceed to move chronologically through the Choreographer's Workshop recordings, next up would be *Secrets of the Sun*, the first really mature work of the period. But from there to *Cosmic Tones*, the discography gets a little murky.

Back in the early 1980s, when I was coming of age, hanging out with other weirdo musicians at the New England Conservatory and discovering Sun Ra's music for the first time, Ra's records were extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find even in a big city like Boston. I managed to snag a couple of Saturn LPs while working at Strawberry's Records ca. 1984 but they were totally unlabeled, extremely poor pressings, and contained a mish-mash of material recorded at various times and places. Or at least that's how I remember them since I have no idea what the titles were; sadly, I later sold them in a fit of self-induced poverty and poor judgment. As the CD era dawned, contemporaneous recordings were issued on foreign labels like Black Saint (Italy), DIW (Japan), and Leo (England), while crummy-sounding bootlegs of the classic ESP recordings were also floating around the underground record shops. But for the most part Sun Ra's vast body of work was shrouded in mystery. When the U.S. major label A&M released the crisply produced Blue Delight in 1989, Ra was suddenly something of a commodity, and a steady stream of archival material began to flow in the 1990s.

In today's instantaneous information- and media-saturated age, it might be difficult to imagine what a revelation it was when Out There a Minute appeared in 1989. Billed as "Sun Ra's personal selection of rare Arkestra recordings from the late 1960s," this CD allowed a glimpse into the darkest recesses of Ra's most obscure period. But in typical Saturnal fashion, the packaging was devoid of liner notes beyond some cryptic Ra poetry leaving any definitive information as to dates and personnel merely inferred or totally unknown. That is, until the efforts of Robert L. Campbell to compile a definitive Sun Ra discography began to circulate on the nascent internet. Thanks to Prof. Campbell (and the small but avid cyber-community of Ra fanatics), one could in the coming years finally piece together the murky history of Sun Ra's Arkestra and gain an understanding of the material that appears on Out There a Minute. The

Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra was subsequently published by Cadence Jazz Books in 1994 and a greatly enlarged second edition was published in 2000.

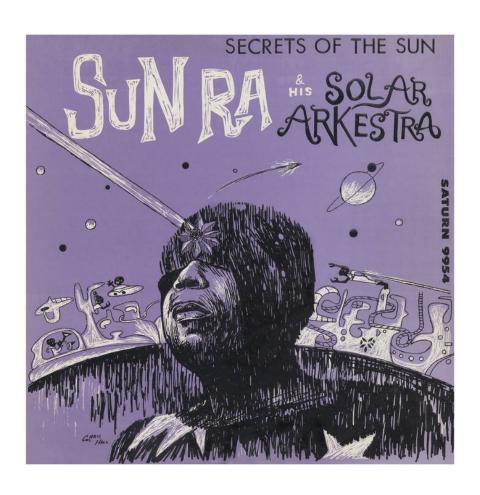
So, it turns out that Out There a Minute contains several tracks that were later issued on CD in their proper album context on Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow, When Angels Speak of Love, and Night of the Purple Moon, along with two tracks from the Continuation LP from 1968. I will not consider any of these tracks here. The remainder of the CD consists of never-released recordings, some of which derive from the Choreographer's Workshop era and therefore fit chronologically into our discussion of these crucial early/mid-1960s sessions.

"Somewhere in Space," "Dark Clouds with Silver Linings," and "Journey Outward" were all recorded in 1962 and demonstrate Ra's evolution from the more swing-based traditionalism of the Chicago era to the experimental, avant-garde music that first appeared on Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow and was perfected on Secrets of the Sun. "Somewhere in Space" is a lumbering two-chord march featuring Art Jenkins on "space voice," actually wordless, improvisatory singing through an inverted ram's horn (see Szwed 1997, 192-193 for the whole story). After a while, the horns enter with a simple but affecting batch of riffs before each picking up small percussion instruments in support of a string of rather meandering solos: Pat Patrick on baritone saxophone, John Gilmore on tenor, Marshall Allen on flute. "Dark Clouds With Silver Linings" is a more conventional Ra original with a mid-tempo blues structure but with some typically unexpected harmonic twists. Gilmore states the melody and his tenor solos glide effortlessly through the weirdly bop-ish changes. Meanwhile, Ra explores some interesting two-handed counterpoint along with his stabbed comping. The ensemble sounds a little unsure of itself when it enters with the restatement of the theme, which yields some mild inadvertent dissonance before the close. "Journey Outwards" appears to be another early example of the conducted improvisations that would characterize this period's most important work. It opens with Gilmore on mellifluous bass clarinet over softly mumbling drums. Then Gilmore drops out as the percussion builds into a polyrhythmic African groove. Al Evans enters with some mellow, richly melodic flugelhorn statements and Ra joins in with some angular piano figures before fading out.

Very nice.

The title track, "Out There a Minute," remains somewhat of a discographical mystery. According to Prof. Campbell, it could have been recorded at any time between 1962 and 1964, but to my ears it sounds very similar to the hissy, distant quality and subtly swinging combo feel of 1961's Bad and Beautiful. In any event, it's another patented off-kilter blues with some slippery piano work from Ra and a spirited Patrick solo on baritone saxophone. "Other Worlds" jumps ahead to the Magic City sessions of spring 1965, with a larger Arkestra and more aggressively avant-garde approach, but probably not recorded at the Choreographer's Workshop (for one thing, it's in stereo). Ra plays a quietly intense introduction on simultaneous piano and bell-like celeste before the Arkestra bursts in with a hard-driving atonal workout. Throughout the piece, Ra's piano attack is every bit as ferocious as Cecil Taylor's and the entire 11-piece Arkestra blows hot and heavy, tossing lines around with seemingly wild abandon. But repeated listens reveal a tightly controlled compositional integrity that packs the wallop of John Coltrane's "Ascension" into a mere four minutes and forty-eight seconds. Incredible stuff. "Jazz and Romantic Sounds" probably dates from about 1969 given Ra's electronic organ. Also, Gilmore is notably absent, but Marshall Allen and Danny Davis duke it out on alto saxophones while Ra conjures up the "space-age barbeque music" vibe similar to My Brother the Wind Vol. 2.

These never-before-released tracks make *Out There a Minute* a must-have proposition for the hardcore Sun Ra fan, while the whole disc is full of prime cuts and a suitable introduction for the novice. Sadly, the CD is now out print although its widespread distribution means it's readily available in the secondary market and well worth the effort to track it down. *Essential*.



006

Atavistic continues to make the rarest of the rare Saturn records available once again and to a mass audience all thanks to John Corbett's "Unheard Music Series." Rejoice!

In fact, Secrets of the Sun is so rare, that the CD had to be mastered from a vintage LP, with its occasional (but inevitable) pops and clicks. But don't let that stop you! This is primo Sun Ra, recorded in rehearsal at the Choreographer's Workshop in New York City, where the relaxed vibe (free rent!) and pleasant acoustics inspired an amazing run of albums from 1962-1964. Many of those titles were (thankfully) re-issued by Evidence in the 1990s but this nearly-lost 1962 session is a most welcome addition indeed.

Listened to chronologically, the Saturn LPs recorded during the Choreographer's Workshop period exhaustively document the evolution of the Arkestra from the tightly arranged big-band material found on *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra* to the adventurous and edgy avant-garde weirdness of *Heliocentric Worlds*, Vols. 1-2. As such, these Saturn records are some of the most intriguing (and downright pleasurable) albums in all of Sun Ra's vast discography. Emerging from its decades-long obscurity, *Secrets of the Sun* presents a missing link in the history of this period.

The smallish ensembles are simply recorded (in mono) in a lushly reverberant ambient space which gives the recordings a suitably unearthly quality that epitomizes that "Saturn Sound" so unique to Sun Ra's home-brewed record label. The opening track, "Friendly Galaxy," is typical in how it constructs a whole other world in miniature: the unusual frontline instrumentation (bass clarinet, flute, flugelhorn, and the rarely-deployed electric guitar) creates beautifully floating melodies and ethereal textures while the agile and propulsive rhythm section of Ronnie Boykins on bass and Tommy Hunter on drums combine with Sun Ra's off-kilter piano to provide a buoyant and supple ostinato accompaniment. Individual solos briefly take flight before returning to the theme and ending,

appropriately, after a mere four minutes and fifty-three seconds. *Brilliant!*

"Solar Differentials" takes things a bit further out with "space bird sounds," "space voice," and primitive electronic echo and feedback (remember, this is 1962!), all of which is punctuated by Sun Ra's percussive stabs on the piano. Ronnie Boykins once again shines with his rock solid bass anchoring the chaotic proceedings. "Space Aura" is slightly more conventional, beginning with a march-like processional before giving way to a relaxed swing, with everyone contributing pithy but exploratory solos, Pat Patrick's honking and squealing baritone saxophone being a particular delight. The following track, "Love in Outer Space," went on to become a standard in the Ra songbook but here is given a somewhat minimalist treatment: after a short allusion to the theme, John Gilmore moans and wails on bass clarinet over some percolating bass and percussion before the whole thing trails off inconclusively.

"Reflects Motion" points towards the future with its episodic construction: bass and drums duet and solo before Ra's enervated piano figures enter, which presages the spiky, atonal melody that is taken up by the horns. This soon gives way to more bass/percussion grooving and the relatively succinct and swinging solo sections are interspersed with yet more percussion interludes. John Gilmore's fleeting tenor saxophone solo demonstrates a breathtaking command of the instrument, from the growling lowest register to altissimo cries and multiphonic shrieks. John Coltrane acknowledged Gilmore's influence on the music he would go on to make a couple years later beginning with A Love Supreme, and here you can hear that influence loud and clear. "Solar Symbols" closes out the album proper with a two-minute-forty-two-second spaceout, featuring echoey sleigh-bells and pitter-pattering percussion with Sun Ra essaying on "sun harp" and gong. Very cool.

The bonus track "Flight to Mars" was contemporaneously recorded for the B-side of an unreleased LP and is previously unheard. Opening with a crude tape collage which culminates in the vocal exhortation "all the way into space!" the rest of the piece is essentially a seventeen-minute blowing session punctuated with further percussion blowouts. Marshall Allen shines with a sparkling flute solo and, again, Ronnie Boykins demonstrates his extraordinary (and sadly unrecognized) genius with a bowed bass solo that

inspires juicy interjections from Pat Patrick's baritone saxophone and a little bit of bouncy Ra piano before the close. This is truly a bonus track that lives up to the name.

This lovingly produced reissue is a must for all Sun Ra fans and as good a place as any for the novice to begin the interplanetary journey. *Essential*.



"I'm Making Believe" (Saturn) 007

Sun Ra:

Little Mack:

The Singles (Evidence CD):

"Tell Her to Come On Home" /

Sun Ra:

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991

(Strut/Art Yard)

Another single was recorded in 1962 and eventually released by El Saturn sometime in the mid-sixties. The label of El Saturn 144M reads: "Presenting Little Mack" with "Le Sun Ra: Music Director." According to Gilmore, Little Mack was an R&B singer who liked the Arkestra and financed this recording session, which can be found on The Singles. "Tell Her to Come On Home" is a plaintive blues with an unsteady rumba beat. Gilmore and Ra conjure up some cool riffing in support of Little Mack's quirky but sincere vocals. On the other side, "I'm Making Believe" is an old-fashioned torch song full of maudlin emotion foreign to Ra's usual vibe. Even so, it's a touching performance with Ra leading the way with some ornate piano, Gilmore filling in orchestrally on saxophone. According to Ra, Little Mack was a virtuosic singer, who would sing in different keys depending on the acoustic properties of the concert hall, but nobody seems to know what happened to him. Too bad.

800

Sun Ra: What's New (side A) (Saturn)
Sun Ra and His Astro Infinity Arkestra:
Cosmo Earth Fantasy:
Sub Underground Series Vol. 1-2 (Art Yard CD)

The discographical murkiness continues with this 1975 LP containing four swinging Choreographer's Workshop recordings from 1962 on the A-side and a contemporaneous concert fragment on side B. Confusingly, later pressings substitute side A of *The Invisible Shield* for the B-side (see below). In any case, the kind of hot jazz found here probably represents a taste of the Arkestra's working-gig repertoire during the lean early years in New York. Of course, Ra came out of the big-band tradition of the 1930s and 1940s and had vast experience arranging standards and show tunes for various ensembles. His flair for instrumental color (check out Marshall Allen's flute!) and ornamental counterpoint are much in evidence on the title track, even if the end result comes across as a mere blowing session. "What's New" was, after all, a staple of the Arkestra's live sets throughout their career.

Curiously, two original compositions by Arkestra newcomers Al Evans and Calvin Newborn were also recorded at this Choreographer's Workshop rehearsal. Newborn's "Wanderlust" is a rather nondescript jazz waltz but it elicits strong solos by John Gilmore on tenor saxophone, Al Evans on flugelhorn, Danny Davis on alto sax. The composer himself steps out with an aggressively electric guitar solo—a rarely heard timbre in the Arkestra's recorded history. Ra then builds a solo around distant chordal substitutions before the head returns for the close. Evans brings out the funky side of the Arkestra with his honky-tonk strut aptly entitled "Jukin'." Evans's tone is warm and bluesy, while Newborn offers at times some near-psychedelic, noise-infused comping beneath the ever-riffing horns. These two tracks are perhaps a bit lightweight, but still a lot of fun. Evans continued his association with the Arkestra off and on throughout the 1970s and 1980s while Newborn moved on to moderate success in the blues world.

The Arkestra drops down to a quartet on the hoary old chestnut, "Autumn in New York." But don't be fooled—after a lushly romantic opening piano statement, Gilmore plays one of the most breathtakingly heart-rending solos of his long, brilliant career! He starts out by teasing the melancholy melody with spacious, wideopen phrasing, slowly building to register-spanning exclamations, delicate filigrees, and pathos-filled one- and two-note worryings. Every note is just exactly the right note at the right place and at the right time. As if awestruck by the sheer beauty of Gilmore's playing, the band drops out during the second chorus, leaving him to blow an a cappella cadenza that miraculously holds the thread of the tune while overflowing with prodigious, risky invention. Suddenly, Ra enters with an (almost) incongruous double-tempo section that slows down just in time for Gilmore to re-state the theme with the kind of stately grace and tender emotion that marked his opening choruses. This track demonstrates that, despite his (well-deserved) reputation as an altissimo-fueled avant-garde noisemaker, John Gilmore was truly one of the great post-bop saxophonists of all time. This version of an over-familiar standard has to be heard to be believed. Incredible!

009

Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: The Invisible Shield (side A) (Saturn) Sun Ra: Standards (1201 Music CD)

Now things get even more confusing. This LP was originally released in 1974 with six 1962-63 Choreographer's Workshop recordings on the A-side backed with some stray cuts from the late 1960s and early 1970s on the B-side. It has also been variously titled A Tonal View of Times Tomorrow Volume 2, Satellites are Outerspace..., and Janus. As mentioned above, these tracks also appeared as the B-Side on most copies of What's New (which is really where they belong given their similarly straight-ahead feel). Some (but not all) of these tracks were sold to Black Lion in 1971, but never issued. Finally, in 2000, some (but, bafflingly, not all) of those tracks were officially released on Standards. Like I said: very confusing! It certainly would have been nice if all of these 1962-63 tracks were gathered in one place, but so it goes in Sun Ra's Omniverse. That said, the Standards CD does boast superior sound quality and includes a rare 1955 home recording of Ra duetting with bassist Wilbur Ware on "Can This Be Love" and is therefore (grudgingly) recommended.

Anyway, "State Street" is a sprightly Ra original that is omitted from *Standards* on the grounds that it is, well, not a "standard." Too bad, since it's a barn-burning big-band outing with a full-blown brass section consisting of the aforementioned Al Evans on flugel-horn, Ra's childhood friend Walter Miller on trumpet, and Ali Hassan on trombone. Michael White adds a Gypsy element with some keening violin while the virtuoso drumming of Clifford Jarvis drives the Arkestra with an infectious, toe-tapping groove. The saxophones and brass exchange complex, interlocking lines at the head and riff away happily during the string of brief solos, all of which culminates in a brilliant flourish by baritone saxophonist Pat Patrick before the final coda.

"Sometimes I'm Happy" finds the Arkestra reduced to a quartet of Ra, Gilmore, Boykins, and the more subdued Lex Humphries on drums. This lightly swinging number is the perfect vehicle for another eloquent statement by Gilmore, punctuated by Ra's roiling

piano and Boykins's rock-solid bass. Jarvis and Miller then return for the remaining tracks. Two takes of "Time After Time" exist, but take one is inexplicably omitted on *Standards*. This familiar tune is taken at a briskly bebop-ish pace and showcases Miller's immaculate technique and burnished tone atop Jarvis's smooth yet hard-driving drums. On take two, Miller takes more chances, splitting tones into multiphonics and allowing for more open, silent spaces between his phrases. "Easy to Love" is another hard bop vehicle for Gilmore with Jarvis's hyperactive bass drum and overlapping polyrhythms relentlessly propelling the music forward. Boykins interjects with some sure-footed walking bass between Gilmore's increasingly abstracted choruses until, finally, Ra enters with the trumpet to (somewhat raggedly) repeat the theme and end.

"Keep Your Sunny Side Up" is another up-tempo number with Jarvis and Boykins swinging like mad and Gilmore once again demonstrating his prowess as a post-bop genius. Yes, it's another brilliant Gilmore solo! But Miller reveals in one brief chorus what a formidable trumpet player he really was and how sympathetic he was to Sun Ra's vision—especially as it applied to the living tradition and the so-called mainstream. While economic realities prevented Miller from committing full time to the Arkestra, he remained an always welcome visitor throughout their existence. Unfortunately, Ra's brass sections would remain in flux during these early New York years.

Along with What's New, this material reveals a part of the Arkestra's history that was long concealed by the vagaries of the Saturn enterprise (not to mention a genuine desire to promote Ra's original music over "standards"). Beyond the stellar musicianship on display, these tracks showcase Ra's bountiful gifts as an arranger and his Herculean work ethic. While the times were penurious, Ra continued to compose, rehearse, and record the Arkestra, and found paying work where he could. Arranging and playing standards was (and still is) the lingua franca of jazz and Sun Ra was a master. But he could also write a tune like "State Street" that sounded as if it had been composed during the golden age of the big bands. This music may not be as exhilaratingly modern and original as, say, Secrets of the Sun or Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy, but it is ebullient and supremely well-crafted.

Sun Ra and His Myth Science Arkestra: When Sun Comes Out (Evidence CD)

010

When Sun Comes Out is truly a landmark record in Ra's discography: it was the first New York recording to be released on Ra's own El Saturn label, and it contains some of Tommy Hunter's first stereo recordings made at the Choreographer's Workshop—quite technologically advanced accomplishments for a shoestring operation in 1963. Some years later, Sun Ra deposited a manuscript with the Library of Congress entitled "When Sun Comes Out," which contains a fairly detailed score for most the tracks on the album assembled into a kind of suite. Clearly, Ra considered this an important work—although it is impossible to tell from the score whether it was produced before or after the recording. As with many aspects of Sun Ra's work, this document poses at least as many questions as it answers.

"Circe" opens the album with ominous, irregular strikes of a gong—loud and soft, ringing and choked, fast and slow. Bells and hand drums enter with a stuttering rhythm while a mysterious singer named Theda Barbara vocalizes wordlessly (and somewhat melodramatically) with a big, warbling vibrato. The mostly pentatonic melody is fully notated in the score with alternating measures of 5/4 and 9/4 over the gong's droning G. Subsequently, the bells, gong, and hand drums coalesce into a steady rhythm before suddenly fading out. "The Nile" sets out with gently rolling percussion with Ra and Boykins engaging contrasting three-note ostinato patterns to support a beautiful, Arabic-sounding flute melody scored for Marshall Allen. Allen takes considerable liberties with the melody as it goes along, but always hits specified targets, indicating that the score might predate the recording. "Brazilian Sun" features suitably Latin-sounding hand drums and claves with Boykins holding down a circular riff on bass. Ra stabs out parallel chords to spell out a tense, unresolved melody. The sunny percussion contrasts with the tonally shiftless piano to create a definite atmospheric tension—a bit of spiritual unease despoiling the fantasy of tropical paradise perhaps?

The version of "We Travel the Spaceways" heard here is a bit more aggressive than on the eponymous LP, and it is also recorded in stereo. Teddy Nance and Bernard Pettaway sit in on trombones, giving the tune a darker, more menacing tone. After the opening space chant, the increasingly dissonant interplay between Gilmore's energetic tenor solo and Ra's percussive piano gives this rendition a decidedly avant-garde feel. Ra slides in some dreamy celeste during the vocal sections, demonstrating his uniquely orchestral approach to keyboard accompaniment. "Calling Planet Earth" benefits as well from the more spacious stereo recording. A fully notated vocal ensemble urgently intones the title until Pat Patrick enters with some coruscating baritone saxophone which is reinforced by Ra's furious two-handed piano attack. Adding to the tumultuous assault, both Lex Humphries and John Gilmore are pounding away on drums. Yes, John Gilmore on trap drums! And Ra sounds more like Cecil Taylor than Cecil himself did in 1963! This is some wild stuff!

The other stereo recording is "Dancing Shadows," cut at the same session that yielded several tracks on The Invisible Shield. It is a classic Ra-styled atonal bebop number full of strident tritones and breathtakingly wide interval leaps, all driven hard by Clifford Jarvis's frenetic drumming. Ra spins a mesmerizing piano solo before giving way to yet another incredible Gilmore solo on tenor sax. Walter Miller again demonstrates his prodigious technique with a bristling, angular trumpet solo before the reprise. (Incidentally, the melody for "Dancing Shadows" is contained within the otherwise ultra-enigmatic "Twenty-First Century" suite from one of the manuscripts deposited by Ra in the Library of Congress.) [Editor's note: See the entry "Sun Ra Literature" below.] "The Rainmaker" is more dizzying, harmonically restless swing but with more polyphonic riffing throughout. Ra peals off another excellent piano solo and Jarvis is at his Jarviest, bass drum pumping away maniacally. Gilmore enters with yet another patented genius tenor sax solo culminating in hair-raising, multiphonic blasts at the end. Holy crap!

"When Sun Comes Out" replaces Jarvis with the comparatively more laconic Lex Humphries, who is bolstered with some busy hand percussion by the rest of the Arkestra. Ra plays slippery, chromatically descending fourths atop an oscillating, two-note bass which is doubled by Boykins. Marshall Allen and Danny Davis proceed to dance and duel on wailing alto saxophones with some pinched,

emphatic Walter Miller trumpet interjected here and there. Meanwhile, the rhythm section explores a subtly shifting harmonic landscape. Interestingly, the Library of Congress manuscript barely outlines the opening piano figures which appear to be jumping off points for improvisation. Again, this makes me think that the score is something more than a transcription and possibly predates the recording. Who knows?





Announced way back in 2009 but not released until 2013, the two-CD reissue of *Continuation* (containing previously unissued material) has been lovingly packaged in a deluxe, triple-gatefold cardboard sleeve and released in a limited edition by Corbett vs. Dempsey, John Corbett and Jim Dempsey's Chicago art gallery. It's been well worth the wait.

Continuation has always been one of the rarest and most discographically obscure items in the El Saturn catalog—and that's saying something! Released in a single, miniscule edition in 1970, the recording dates have always been assumed to be 1968 or '69 (with side B taken from a live performance)—although Prof. Campbell expresses some doubts, suggesting that "on stylistic grounds an earlier date is possible" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 148). It doesn't help matters that the original album jacket contains boatloads of inaccuracies and outright misinformation: neither Wayne Harris nor Akh Tal Ebah are playing trumpet on side A; it is, instead, Walter Miller on trumpet and Ali Hassan on trombone. Moreover, Robert Barry does not play drums ("lightning" or otherwise) and you will not hear Danny Thompson on "Neptunian libflecto." To make matters even more confusing, the jacket places the recording place as "EL SATURN STUDIOS: Minneapolis, Minn." but I don't think anyone ever took that too seriously. In an earlier version of this review, I wrote: "The presence of Tommy Hunter and his echo-echoecho machine on 'Earth Primitive Earth' and 'New Planet' makes me think these tracks were recorded prior to 1968. In fact, the overall ambience (and massively increased hiss) sounds like some of the Choreographer's Workshop recordings (but this might just be wishful thinking)."

As it turns out, that is *exactly* where these recordings were made, during a single session on March 10, 1963 which (according to Corbett's liner notes) produced parts of the classic albums *Other Planes of There* ("Sound Spectra/Spec Sket"), *When Sun Comes Out*

("Calling Planet Earth"), and When Angels Speak of Love ("Ecstasy of Being" and "The Next Stop Mars"). Amazing! The Choreographer's Workshop recordings hold a particular fascination for me and were the original impetus for my starting Sun Ra Sunday in the first place: I wanted to try and unlock their mysteries, particularly as they were presented un-chronologically on the Evidence CDs of the 1990s. To have another piece of the puzzle firmly in place is reason enough for celebration – but to have an additional 40 minutes of previously unreleased material from this period is truly miraculous!

The album itself is a classic (and now that we know its provenance, we know why). Side A begins with "Biosphere Blues," a typically spaced-out blues, taken at a relaxed, almost somnambulant tempo. Interestingly, John Gilmore is probably playing drums on this home recording. After Ra's piano introduction, Walter Miller takes a nice solo on trumpet, his tone warm and mellow, his note choices exquisite. Next up, Ali Hassan takes a single tasteful chorus on trombone. Then, Pat Patrick jumps in with an incongruously aggressive solo on baritone saxophone before giving way to Ra's jaunty piano. A swelling space chord ends the piece with an odd dissonance. "Intergalaxtic Research" sounds every bit as alien and forbidding as its title. James Jacson plays log drum along with other unidentified percussionists who construct throbbing, asymmetrical cross-rhythms while Art Jenkins does his bit on space voice. Ra twiddles with his space organ and clavinet like a mad scientist, emitting random blasts of noisy timbres, dense, lurching chords, or rapidly spinning constellations of notes. This is a wonderfully strange piece.

"Earth Primitive Earth" and "New Planet" pit Ra's echoing piano against a skittering flute choir. On "Earth Primitive Earth," Hunter plays some kind of metal scraper quite near the microphone, making for an unsettling, spooky atmosphere. "New Planet" takes the echo thing to a whole other level and Robert Cummings turns in another spectacular solo on bass clarinet (I am really starting to appreciate what a great player Cummings is on that most difficult and unwieldy instrument). Incidentally, both of these tracks appeared on the 1989 compilation CD, Out There a Minute, although "Earth Primitive Earth" was slightly edited and re-titled "Cosmo Enticement" and "New Planet" was re-titled "Song of Tree and Forest," presumably at the request of Sun Ra himself.

Side B can now be properly understood as another in a series of innovative, long-form conducted improvisations in the same vein as "Other Planes of There" and "The Magic City." The spontaneous appearance of "The Second Stop Is Jupiter" amidst all the strangeness most likely prompted discographers to assume this was recorded in concert ca. 1968 but all the tracks are clearly from the same Choreographer's Workshop session. In retrospect, it's hard to believe that the mellifluous Walter Miller could have ever been confused with the rough-edged Ebah—but now it all comes together and makes sense. Not '68, '63! [Editor's note: In his updated discography appearing in the second edition of Omniverse Sun Ra, Chris Trent continues to date Side B as "ca. 1969," with personnel variations (Geerken and Trent 2015, 184).]

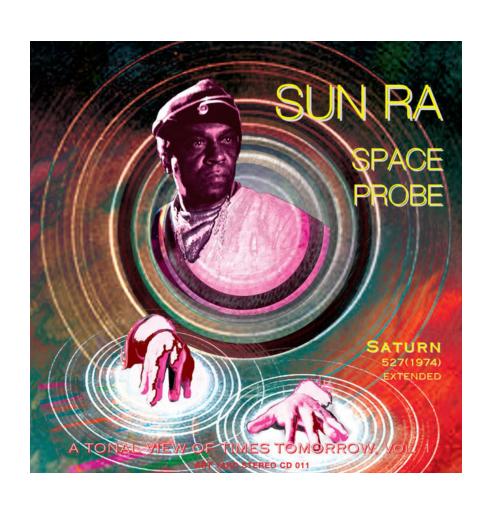
The nearly continuous nineteen-minute live concert segment is a corker. "Continuation To" opens with the Arkestra already in full flight over sultry African percussion, but Ra soon takes over with a roiling piano solo, full of booming left hand chords and scampering right hand clusters. After bringing things back down a bit, Akh Tal Ebah extemporizes on trumpet while Ra hints at ballad forms and hand percussion gurgles nervously in the background. Suddenly Ra produces a bouncy, repetitive figure and bass and drums join in for some good, old fashioned swinging. Ebah, a newcomer to the band since Sun Ra's relocation to Philadelphia in the fall of 1968, manages to hold his own amidst the shifting musical landscapes and things really start to heat up when the Arkestra enters with big angular space chords, full of wiry clarinets and blatting trombones. But just as Boykins begins to solo, the track cuts off. "Jupiter Festival" picks up with the end of Boykins's bass solo and he quickly moves to the fast walking to introduce "Second Stop is Jupiter." Ra joins in and the Arkestra chants, climaxing with "all out for Jupiter!" A massive space chord erupts which melts into manic group improvisation. Gilmore emerges from the din with a lengthy, super-intense tenor saxophone solo, full of "sheets-of-sound" flurries of notes, heroically over-blown honks and squeals, and impossible multi-register leaps. Sun Ra prods things along with more furious piano, conducting brief entrances and exits of musicians while Gilmore continues to wail. The music finally simmers down a bit with the various horns exhaustedly sighing and moaning but with Boykins agitatedly scraping away with the bow. At one point, there is a tense, held note before the return of the busy piano figures after which screaming clarinets provide contrast against some sweetly melodious alto sax and rippling brass, with Jarvis propulsively pounding away in free rhythm. This deliciously complex texture continues on for some minutes before abruptly cutting off. Argh!

Nevertheless, *Continuation* is another fascinating album from a fertile, if spottily documented, period in Ra's career and well worth hearing.

The nine "bonus" tracks offer further revelations into the obscure history of the Choreographer's Workshop period. Several tracks ("Meteor Shower," "Conversation of the Universe," and "The Beginning Of") sound like experimental soundchecks, testing Hunter's echo/reverb device with various instruments. The vibe is typically spooky and spacey, but the music never really develops into anything cohesive. Elsewhere, otherwise unknown compositions make their first (and perhaps only) appearances: "Blue York" (a pun on their newly adopted hometown) is a wistful blues featuring a breathy, romantic lead from John Gilmore on tenor sax, while "Ihnfinity" is a beautiful ballad form for piano and Miller's warmtoned trumpet. At less than three minutes each, these lovely pieces are far too short—they're over before you know it! [Editor's note: Two of the "unreleased" tracks here originally appeared on When Sun Comes Out: "Endlessness" is actually "The Rainmaker," while "Red Planet Mars" is actually "When Sun Comes Out." | The disc ends with "Cosmic Rays," a vaguely familiar-sounding construction of dissonant block-chords which gives way to more "New Thing"styled free jazz. Gilmore sounds possessed, but he leaves plenty of space for Miller and Hassan—and we even get some tasty bass clarinet from Cummings. But an overlong drum solo and a pointless coda of uninspired group improv after "The Next Stop Mars" breaks the spell. As nice as it is to have additional Choreographer's Workshop material available, these "bonus" tracks reveal Sonny's astute editing skills more than anything else (especially during this period): he used only the best stuff for the albums.

That said, the CD mastering is superb and Sun Ra fans will definitely need to have this long-overdue reissue in their collections – but don't hesitate! While there is nothing expressly indicating a limited edition, in *The Chicago Reader* Peter Margasak states that "most" Corbett vs. Dempsey CDs are "strictly limited to

1000 copies—once they're gone, they're gone" (Margasak 2012). Vinylphiles should also note that an LP reissue (minus the bonus tracks and complete with erroneous information on the jacket) is also available on El Saturn Research (now a part of Universal Music Group). Interestingly, this one is not pressed on 180-gram vinyl—and perhaps that's a good thing since several of the heavyweight Saturn reissues I bought suffered from severe warping and non-fill problems. My copy of *Continuation*, however, looks and plays fine. In either format, this one is essential!



Sun Ra: Space Probe (Art Yard CD)

Space Probe is another super-obscure Saturn release with a tortured history. Originally released in 1974, early discographies assigned a catalog number Saturn 527, although no known copies bear this number. Instead, matrix numbers 14200A /14200B appear on most labels, although the sides are sometimes reversed (Campbell and Trent 2000, 107). To make things even more confusing, the album was sometimes titled A Tonal View Of Times Tomorrow, Vol. 1 —and, worse, there are numerous hybrid versions of Space Probe with a completely different B-Side (See Campbell and Trent for all the gory details). And that's just the beginning of the discographical weirdness. So it goes with Sun Ra records! And that's essentially why I feel compelled to write about this stuff—it's the only way I can make sense of it all. Thankfully, the Art Yard label has reissued the original version of Space Probe in an expanded CD edition which includes unedited performances and several unissued outtakes from the era. Hooray!

The title track was recorded in August, 1969, shortly after Sun Ra purchased his first Minimoogs, making it one of the first epic synthesizer solos he ever recorded. And it is truly epic: almost eighteen minutes of spaceship noises, cosmic bloops and bleeps, and other electronic mayhem. While not as hair-raising as later live performances would be, it's still an adventurous solar voyage and demonstrates his near-osmotic mastery of the complex technology. Michael D. Anderson, Executive Director of the Sun Ra Music Archive, makes an interesting (if somewhat garbled) statement about Ra's electronic keyboards in his liner notes for this release:

Sunny was great in using the moog and other organs as an extension of himself reaching out into the outer spheres. This is why later in the mid 80's when the Moog, Farfisa and the Yamaha organs were stolen in the [sic] Sunny began to strictly play piano and more standard music material. I knew that this unnoticed by others [sic] pained him. I would look at the expression

on his face and you could see that he had so much more to say but was limited without the organs. (Anderson 2011)

I had never heard Sun Ra's keyboards had been stolen and Ra biographer John Szwed makes no mention of it. I just figured he went digital like everyone else by the mid-1980s. In any event, it's true: the big multi-keyboard freakouts were eventually abandoned by that time.

Side B of Space Probe goes in a completely different direction, consisting of two tracks recorded at the Choreographer's Workshop in New York City on April 29, 1962. Originally, "Primitive" was just a couple of minutes of percussion jamming, but when Evidence was preparing the CD release of When Sun Comes Out in 1993, they discovered an unreleased track running backwards in an unused stereo channel. On hearing the track for the first time in thirty years, John Gilmore gave it the title "Dimensions in Time" and it appears there as a bonus track. Echoing drums and tapping glass bottles underpin Gilmore's seductively meandering bass clarinet. His tone is dark, rich and gorgeous as he weaves delightful melodies around the pitter-pattering percussion. Unfortunately, just as he reaches a climax, the track suddenly ends. As it turns out, the second part of this piece can be found on the original LP. "Primitive" cuts in exactly where "Dimensions in Time" ends, with the last few notes of Gilmore's bass clarinet statement, after which the percussion vamp continues for another couple minutes before fading out. As discrete fragments, these two pieces are a bit frustrating to listen to (despite Gilmore's brilliant playing). For the Art Yard reissue, the two tracks have been digitally rejoined, retitled as "Earth Primitive Earth," and it's sublime! [Editor's note: This track also appears on Bandcamp as a bonus track for When Sun Comes Out. There, it's more accurately titled "Dimensions of Time (a.k.a. Primitive) (Previously Unreleased Complete Version)." Note that the timings are different: the Art Yard version is 6:37, while the Bandcamp version is 6:18. Note also that "Earth Primitive Earth," an entirely different piece, appears on Continuation, and on Out There a Minute as "Cosmo Enticement."] The question remains: did Sun Ra deliberately edit out Gilmore's solo, leaving only a percussion track? Or did the first half just go missing prior to 1974? If this track is compiled from the two known fragments, it is seamlessly well done—or is this the original, unedited master? Well, in my opinion, the inclusion of Gilmore's rarely heard bass clarinet playing greatly improves the track and the album as a whole, whatever Sonny's intentions were. Maybe he was mad at him that day...

More discographical mysteries: Originally titled "The Conversion of J.P.," Art Yard has retitled this track "The Conversation of J.P." Huh? I'm not sure if that's a typo or if that is the real title but it certainly changes the meaning considerably! Plopping drums create a feel similar to "The Nile" with Marshall Allen's expansive flute melody rising and falling amidst long spells of trance-inducing percussion. Then, at about the eight-minute mark, Ra enters with some incongruously gospel-ish piano chords. I guess this is the conversion happening! Ra then moves through a whole hymnal's worth of plain, Protestant harmonies before a final, insistently repeating cadence. Hallelujah! Now, who exactly is J.P? And how are we to take all this apparent proselytizing given Ra's complicated, if not downright contentious relationship with the Christian church? Indeed, the tension between the pagan percussion/Pan-flute and the holy-rolling piano never quite comfortably resolves. Now if the real title is "The Conversation of J.P.", well never mind. Either way, it's a wonderful piece—but I think "The Conversion" is a more evocative and fitting title than "The Conversation." And we still don't know who J.P. is.

Oh, and while the liner notes claim this version is "complete" and previously unreleased, it is actually the same as on the original album, except for perhaps a smoother fadeout at the end. Another curious thing about this track is that, at almost fourteen minutes, it is by far the longest stretch of continuous recorded music from this era. It makes me wonder if "When Sun Comes Out" was truly conceived and recorded as an extended suite (as in the manuscript), with only selected excerpts edited out for release on LP. Just another mystery of Mr. Ra to be infinitely pondered.

Art Yard generously fills out the rest of the CD with five previously unissued tracks recorded during the Choreographer's Workshop period, ca. 1962-63. Two of them are mere fragments: a forty-seven second alternate take of "Circe" featuring Theda Barbara's dramatic vocalizing, and "Destiny," thirty-three seconds of spacey piano and percussion bathed in Bugs Hunter's reverb/echo device. The rest are more substantive: "Solar Symbols II" is an extended

alternate take from When Sun Comes Out, featuring clankety cans and bottle percussion accompanying Ra's dreamy, rhapsodic piano while "Dance Of The Wind" works in a similarly tensile, polyrhythmic fashion, with the plodding hand drums pushing and pulling against Ra's increasingly enervated keyboarding. Finally, "Recollections of There" again features Theda Barbara, who wordlessly intones a modal melody with Sun Ra's densely figured piano and sparse, eerie percussion. Ra is playing at an astonishing level of virtuosity here (albeit on a beat-up, out-of tune piano). At the core of the piece is a fleeting chord sequence which appears and just as quickly dissolves into controlled abandon, Sonny tossing off spiky, ten-fingered polyphony across the entire range of the instrument. It's quite a display and a reminder that he was an extraordinarily gifted and visionary pianist.

Ultimately, *Space Probe* is something of a mixed bag—a fact that is reflected in its unstable discographical history. The title track is a wild synth space-out—but not something I want to listen to every day. However, the Choreographer's Workshop stuff is where it's at for me. There is a certain vibe to those recordings—the sound, the ambience, the relaxed, experimental approach—that was never quite replicated as the Arkestra became more professional and routinized. Those recordings are magical, even if they sometimes fail to cohere musically. Even the tiniest fragments offered on this expanded CD reissue are tantalizing to listen to, full of promise. So for me, this is an essential purchase (the complete "Primitive" and "The Conversion of J.P" are classic tracks, whatever the titles). But the merely curious should consider starting elsewhere and go from there.

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Sun Ra and His Arkestra featuring Pat Patrick: "A Blue One" / "Orbitration in Blue" (Saturn)
Sun Ra:

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991 (Strut/Art Yard)

This super-obscure seven-inch 45-RPM single was discovered too late to appear on Evidence's *The Singles*, and that's too bad because it's a stunner and it remains sadly out of print. [Editor's note: Both sides of the single have subsequently appeared on *Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991*, Strut.] Note that Arkestra stalwart Pat Patrick receives a rare co-billing on the disc's label; well, his spectacular baritone saxophone playing on these two Choreographer's Workshop tracks suitably justifies the honorific.

Laurdine "Pat" Patrick was born November 23, 1929 in East Moline, Illinois and was the first of several graduates of Captain Walter Dyett's DuSable High School who would fall in with Sun Ra in Chicago after around 1950. (For more information on Captain Dyett, see Szwed 1997, 87-89 and George E. Lewis, A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music, 2008.) Szwed aptly sums up the importance of Ra's early association with the youthful Pat Patrick (Szwed 1997, 87-88).

Patrick was a charter member of Sun Ra's Space Trio, the Arkestra's precursor, and a 1951 home recording entitled "Treasure Hunt" documents Patrick's already full-bodied sound and smooth, thoughtful invention. Patrick would remain committed to Sun Ra until the end of his life in 1991, but he also worked with such luminaries as Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Mongo Santamaria, with whom he co-wrote the 1963 hit, "Yeh Yeh."

The A-side of this little gem, "A Blue One," is a rollicking mid-tempo Ra blues, with a simple pssh-tap-bang rhythm and solid walking bass that sets up a subtly killing groove. Ra takes a brief turn on the piano before Patrick enters with a burbling bari-sax solo that ranges freely from the resonant growls of the lowest registers to high-register wails and cries, with astonishingly fleet passagework full of widely spaced intervals and intricate legato runs. Boykins takes the lead with some funky, stop-start bass before fading out. This should have been a hit! The B-side, "Orbitration in Blue," is

a bluesy, drummer-less ballad featuring another wild excursion on bari-sax. Incongruously opening with some honking low notes, Patrick's playing is simultaneously suave and smooth and rough and edgy. At about 1:44, he blasts out one of those seemingly "wrong" notes that Jacson mentions, full of buzzing squeaks and harmonics that somehow manages to resolve itself beautifully as the piano and bass navigate the lush chord changes. Patrick concludes his solo with a flourish and the track quickly fades out. *Far out!*

Pat Patrick once said, "Sun Ra was another kind of being. He was educational, he helped you to grow and develop. He was a black self-help organization run on a shoe-string...If he could've had the resources, the planet would be a better place. That's all he's done: tried to make life better" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 89). This single is brimming with high-spirited and uplifting swing and inspired improvisation. Listening to it does make the planet a better place—for a few minutes anyway.

Sun Ra: Janus (1201 Music CD)

Janus was apparently conceived by Sun Ra as a self-contained album around 1970, but it was never issued. In 1971, the tapes were sold (along with a bunch of other recordings) to Alan Bates, but Black Lion also failed to release any of this material. Eventually, some of these tracks were scattered across various obscure Saturn LPs of the 1970s and 1980s, such as Invisible Shield and Space Probe, and only on exceptionally hard to find, hybridized pressings at that. Thankfully, 1201 Music rescued this long-neglected album, releasing it essentially as Ra originally conceived it on this 1999 CD, complete with insightful liner notes from Prof. Robert L. Campbell himself. The music was mostly recorded around 1967 to 1970, although there is a tantalizing expanse of music from the magical Choreographer's Workshop period tacked onto the title track—a precocious bit of editing that demonstrates Ra's skills with a razor blade and splicing tape. Despite their variable sound quality and sometimes haphazard packaging, Sun Ra constructed his albums with great care and considered the LPs as something more than mere documentation of his work: as works of art in and of themselves. Janus is an excellent example of his craftsmanship.

In his liner notes, Campbell aptly describes "Island in the Sun" as "one of those relaxed, flowing compositions with mildly exotic rhythms that are much beloved by Ra fans" (Campbell 1999). Indeed, it is a beautiful example of what I call Ra's "space ballads." Marshall Allen's flute harmonizes so nicely with Danny Davis's alto clarinet on the lilting, sing-song-ing melody while Ronnie Boykins lays down a loping bass line atop the cheerfully pitter-pattering hand drums. Sonny enters with a sparse solo consisting of floating piano chords before Allen returns to lead into the final, peaceful refrain. What a lovely way to begin the album.

Despite the label text, the CD combines "The Invisible Shield" and "Janus" into one thirteen-minute-long track, which makes sense in a way, since these two tracks are constructed from three

different performances and the one segues directly into the other. (Still, I'd rather have each title separately indexed, and the label is misleading.) Recorded live in 1970, "The Invisible Shield" opens with an outrageous alto saxophone solo by Marshall Allen, accompanied by Danny Ray Thompson on the ghostly Neptunian libflecto (a bassoon with a French horn mouthpiece), but Ra soon takes over with a two-fisted organ/synthesizer solo that sounds like a mad scientist conjuring up doomsday. Right at the apocalyptic climax, a tape edit slams us into "Janus," the first thirty-five seconds of which are from a Sun Studio recording ca. 1967 or '68 with Ra on clavinet or gongs (or both), heavily amplified and distorted, creating ominous thunderclouds and sonic lightning. Then another quick edit splices in a very spacey improvisation recorded at the Choreographer's Workshop ca. 1963, full of Tommy Hunter's over-the-top reverb and echo effects along with Allen's piccolo and Art Jenkins's eerie "space voice." A final edit ends the piece with quietly chiming bell sounds. Ra's sequencing of this wildly disparate material into a satisfying whole is a perfect example of his visionary, DIY approach to record-making.

The album closes with two live recordings from early 1968. "Velvet" is a swinging, big-band bop number that dates back to 1959's Jazz in Silhouette. The ensemble sections are a little shaky, but Pat Patrick turns in an exemplary performance with his rumbling baritone sax solo, Robert Northern provides a couple of choruses on the rarely heard French horn, and Ra delivers a typically terse statement on piano before the reprise. "Joy" is a conducted improvisation that begins with dissonant, braying horns over Ra's cascading piano clusters and pounding drums and percussion. The ensemble eventually drops out leaving Danny Davis to extemporize a cappella on the alto sax before the rhythm sections returns to provide frenzied support. After a while, the full ensemble resumes its scattering of contrary lines, honks, and squeals and Ra plays rippling, romantic chords on piano along with pure-toned whines on the Clavioline. The music gets slowly quieter while Jarvis takes over with a typically manic drum solo that abruptly cuts off after a minute or so. Did the tape run out? Or is this another deliberate edit? Either way. I'm grateful: there is no doubt Jarvis went on and on for several more minutes! Certainly, it is an odd ending to an otherwise very interesting piece of music.

Janus not only contains precious documentation of a crucial period in Sun Ra's music, but it is also a supremely well-crafted album in its own right. Covering a wide range of material in a mere thirty-five minutes, it would make an excellent introduction to Ra's sixties-era music for the novice; for the connoisseur, it is absolutely essential.

RA

SUN "COSMIC TONES FOR MENTAL THERAPY"

and his myth science arkestra





Sun Ra and His Myth Science Arkestra: Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy (Evidence CD)

Of all the outlandish and evocative titles in Sun Ra's discography, Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy stands out in its audacious, baldly prescriptive claim. But, to be sure, the title is no idle put-on. In fact, Ra had presciently been involved in what would nowadays be known as "music therapy" back in the late-1950s (Szwed 1997, 92-93). While the term "music therapy" may conjure up some kind of dulcet, inoffensive, New-Age-y pabulum, the Cosmic Tones marshaled here are anything but easy-listening. Ra practices a kind of electro-shock treatment to the soul, seeking to, as with the catatonic mental patient, "touch the unknown part of the person, awaken the part of them that we're not able to talk to, the spirit" (Szwed 1997, 256). Ra did not consider the Arkestra to be musicians so much as "tone scientists" (Szwed 1997, 112) whose investigations and manipulations of musical phenomena could help mankind in its earthly struggles. "People are disturbed and need your help 24 hours a day," he would lecture the band (quoted in Szwed 1997, 374).

Electro-shock treatment is also an appropriate metaphor in that electronic technology was always an important tool in Ra's medic bag. On *Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy*, Ra eschews the piano altogether for the mewling whine of the Clavioline (an early keyboard synthesizer) and the swirly Hammond organ. Further, electronic echo is slathered onto the proceedings by recordist/percussionist Tommy "Bugs" Hunter, who had accidentally discovered the effect while fooling around with the Ampex 602 tape recorder he had purchased at a pawn shop in 1962. By plugging in a cable from the output jack into the input on the machine, massive reverberant echo was produced.

Astonishingly, all of this proto-psychedelia was created years before Timothy Leary and the hippies discovered LSD and invented "acid rock." While Ra sought the kind of change in consciousness that psychedelics promised (and, later, he certainly profited to some extent from the hippies' taste for spacey freakouts), he abjured drugs

and forbade his musicians from indulging themselves. And no matter how outrageous his music might sound, it was never merely a free-form "freakout." No, the members of the Arkestra were sober, disciplined scientists conducting advanced research and revealing their findings.

Much of the music on *Cosmic Tones* appears to be in the form of brief conducted improvisations (a form that would later be refined and expanded on *Other Planes of There* and *The Magic City*). Unusual instrumentation (and a conspicuous absence of brass instruments) predominates: besides Ra's electronic keyboards, Marshall Allen concentrates on oboe and flute while John Gilmore plays bass clarinet and percussion exclusively. Known for his prowess as a tenor saxophonist, Gilmore's brilliant solo on the quasi-rhumba "Adventure Equation" demonstrates his remarkable virtuosity and inventiveness on the notoriously recalcitrant bass clarinet. Interestingly, the Arkestra rarely plays all at once, giving the music a contemporary-classical, chamber music quality, albeit with that "Saturn Sound" that is so unique to Sun Ra.

"And Otherness" opens the album with middle-eastern-sounding oboe and clip-clopping log drums before throbbing, low-register "space chords" assert themselves amongst the horns and Clavioline. Pat Patrick enters with herky-jerky blasts on the baritone saxophone before gently flowing, antiphonal horn lines bring the piece to an open-ended close. "Thither and Yon" again features some snaky oboe, this time with echoey minimalist percussion tapping, scribbled flute ornamentation, and Ronnie Boykins's forceful pizzicato and delightfully singing arco bass. "Moon Dance" stands out as an almost funky strut with its repetitive bass riff, lackadaisically propulsive drums and small percussion, and Ra's occasionally soaring, soulful organ. "Voice of Space" is a kind of improvised concerto for Ronnie Boykins's bowed bass, accompanied by stabbing organ chords, clattering percussion, and thick, heaving echo. Danny Davis shines on alto saxophone, weaving wiggly filigrees in the background or more aggressively battling the hissing reverb feedback that always threatens to overwhelm. At one point, Boykins's bass tremolos merge imperceptibly with Ra's rumbling organ which then duets with Gilmore's woody bass clarinet—a moment of group mind at its most sublime.

So does *Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy* live up to its restorative claims? The usual disclaimers apply: any medication can affect people in different ways and the potential side effects are unpredictable. You may experience dizziness and disorientation, but this is normal. Thankfully, overdosage is rarely fatal. In any case, if you find yourself suffering from psychic imbalances, this can be an effective cure.

This CD also contains Art Forms Of Dimensions Tomorrow, recorded in 1962 and tenuously connected to Cosmic Tones in venue and in the prevalence of Tommy Hunter's echo machine. Otherwise, it is its own thing and worthy of close examination.



HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?



Roz Croney, Queen of the

TIMRO

It's Linbo Time - Limbo Like Me Doggie in The Window Limbo The Linbo Rosen - Bagpipe Limbo What Makes The Limbo Rock Evryday Limbo - Kachink Limbo Bossa Nova Limbo - Loop De Loop Limbo Kiwa Liwa Duest Lala Limbo Whole Lot of Shaking Goling On

016

While Sun Ra was extensively recording Arkestra rehearsals at the Choreographer's Workshop and exploring the outer realms of (im) possible music, there was little actual paying work in New York. Fortunately, Ra had developed two important connections over the years: filmmaker/auteur Edward O. Bland and (soon to become) legendary producer Tom Wilson, both of whom had worked with Sonny in Chicago. As soon as Ra found himself stranded in the big city, Bland and Wilson helped him out, resulting in the Savoy LP *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra* (1961). Often working in tandem, Bland and Wilson continued to throw commercial work the Arkestra's way during this crucial period—like, for instance, this limbo fad cash-in attempt rush-released in 1963.

Upon graduating from Harvard in 1954, Tom Wilson borrowed \$900.00 to start the Transition record label which was devoted exclusively to the most progressive jazz. In 1956, Wilson released Cecil Taylor's first record, Jazz Advance along with Sun Ra's first LP under his newly assumed name, Jazz by Sun Ra Vol.1 (later titled Sun Song). A second volume was also recorded and released as Sound of Joy. As the nineteen-sixties progressed, Wilson eventually abandoned jazz for rock music and went on to produce landmark albums by Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa & the Mothers of Invention, Simon & Garfunkel, the Velvet Underground, Soft Machine, and others. Wilson was one of the first and most successful African-American record producers but died tragically young at 47 in 1978.

Edward O. Bland was a radical young Chicago disc jockey and early supporter of Sun Ra who enlisted the Arkestra to participate in a short experimental film entitled *The Cry of Jazz* (available on Atavistic DVD). Bland shrewdly convinced the band to work for free in exchange for whatever publicity the film might generate. *The Cry of Jazz* premiered at Roosevelt University in early 1959 and remains a crucial document of black cinema. By 1961, Bland had relocated

to New York City and was working as a journeyman composer and arranger, sometimes (as here) in association with Tom Wilson.

Honestly, How Low Can You Go? is an example of the kind of imminently disposable, fashion-driven product that would appear to be the antithesis of Ra's own (mostly unheard) music of the time: it is simply work-for-hire without any artistic pretentions whatsoever. But what is remarkable about the Arkestra's (uncredited) performance is the complete lack of irony or condescension; it is professional to the point of anonymity. And upon close listening, one can confirm Gilmore's raspy bass clarinet on "It's Limbo Time" and Ra's slinky organ work on "Bossa Nova Limbo" and "Whole Lotta Shaking Going On." Of course, the limbo originates from a Trinidadian funeral ritual where the dancer moves to the rhythm under a stick held up by two persons without knocking or touching the stick; if successful, the dancer repeats the maneuver again and again with the bar being lowered each time. The symbolism of this triumphant dance of life over death surely appealed to Ra's sensibilities, even if this LP was ultimately destined for the trend-conscious cocktail parties of the "space-age bachelor pad." Sadly, little else is known about Roz Croney, Queen of the Limbo, beyond this obscure recording, and the limbo conceit is fleshed out to album-length proportions with some truly dreadful material, including a limbo-ized take on "How Much Is that Doggie In The Window?" Needless to say, How Low Can You Go? has never been (and never will be) released on CD and is not really worth seeking out unless you're a totally committed Ra-fanatic.

Richard "Popcorn" Wylie: "Marlene" / "Do You Still Care for Me" (Epic)

017

Again in 1963, Tom Wilson and Ed Bland hired the Arkestra for a pop/R&B session backing the (otherwise unknown) singer Richard "Popcorn" Wylie. "Marlene" b/w "Do You Still Care for Me" was released as a 45-RPM single on Epic Records. According to Bland's recollections at the Jazz Institute of Chicago:

...I was notified by his office only 24 hours before the session was scheduled to hit. I had to transcribe 4 lead sheets from Wylie (who was musically illiterate) arrange and copy the 4 charts, and contract the musicians.

While I was working with Wylie (who was drunk) trying to transcribe the lead sheets he vomited on me in the apartment of the Jazz trombonist / arranger / composer Tom Mcintosh [sic] (who came to additional fame with the Jazztet, James Moody and the Shaft pictures) (Bland 2003).

McIntosh (along with Bland and Wilson) was also involved with the infamous *Batman and Robin* LP in 1966.

Bland portrays Wylie as a helpless drunkard while Prof. Campbell describes Wylie as a "Sam Cooke wannabe," but the session isn't quite as bad as all that. "Marlene" is a pleasant mid-tempo soul groove complete with crooning backup singers and Wylie's own pleading vocals. Gilmore turns in an inimitably pithy solo on bass clarinet during the break, making this worth a listen. On the other hand, "Do You Still Care For Me?" is a more pedestrian shuffle with some unremarkable horn parts honking away in the background. Someone (is it Popcorn?) whistles aimlessly at the end. Another curiosity in the discography!





Sun Ra and His Myth Science Arkestra: When Angels Speak of Love (Evidence CD)

When Angels Speak of Love is one of the very rarest of the already exceedingly rare Saturn LPs. Prof. Campbell estimates that two lots of seventy-five were pressed for a grand total of 150 LPs circulated (Campbell and Trent 2000, 108). Therefore, this music was virtually unheard by anyone but the most obsessed (and well-heeled) when Evidence released it as part of their final installment of Saturn reissues back in 2000. Recorded in full-blown, down-home Saturn Sound at the Choreographer's Workshop in 1963, it is one of Ra's most expansive, downright out-there recordings. Not surprisingly, it was not released until 1966, at the height of the free-jazz Afrocentric radicalism that was, for a time, willing to accept Ra's most avant-garde inclinations. Conceived way ahead of its time, When Angels Speak of Love points the way forward to Heliocentric Worlds and beyond.

John Szwed singles out this album, saying it was "made more bizarre by extreme echo, horns straining for the shrillest notes possible, rhythms layered, their polyhythmic effect exaggerated by massive reverberation (which was abruptly turned off and on)" (Szwed 1997, 199). In the liner notes to this Evidence CD, the ever-astute John Corbett discusses how Tommy Hunter's fortuitous feedback discovery was as radically prescient as Ra's music itself:

Ra's space...was alienated, de-naturalized; his use of echo more in common with pioneers of experimental and electronic music ... At that time, as a recording art, free jazz was still totally ensconced in the naturalizing concept (still really is), and the extreme use of echo on these tracks is a significant indicator of how far Ra was willing to push the sonic envelope (to make a bad resonance joke) in his own, unique electronic jazz maneuvers. (Corbett 2000)

Szwed elaborates further on this aspect of Ra's genius:

By the 1950s commercial recording companies had developed a classical style of recording which assured that the recording process itself would be invisible ... But Sun Ra began to regularly violate this convention on the Saturn releases by recording live at strange sites, by using feedback, distortion, high delay or reverb, unusual microphone placement, abrupt fades or edits, and any number of other effects or noises which called attention to the recording process. (Szwed 1997, 188)

All of this is wholly correct, even though this is not the first appearance of Hunter's reverb effect and, with the exception of "Celestial Fantasy" and "Next Stop Mars," the rest of the album eschews the radical displacements of the echo-machine for a (somewhat more) "naturalistic" recorded space. But even where the echo and reverb effects are absent, this album is swathed with that charmingly de-centered "Saturn Sound" that epitomizes the period. Significantly, both Corbett and Szwed touch on the importance of Ra's use of new technologies as musical instruments and Ra's visionary engagement with the record-making process, despite near-zero budgets and ultra-limited distribution. Ra embraced mediation on its own terms and deliberately created sonic objects which transcend the mere representation of some ideal performance. Imbued with a do-it-yourself, hand-made authenticity, El Saturn LPs were works of art unto themselves.

"Celestial Fantasy" opens the album with gentle gongs and cymbals to introduce Walter Miller's jarring, high-register trumpet squeals. Marshall Allen then commences with a densely echoing, wildly inventive oboe peroration while Boykins enters with plucked bass throbs. After Allen concludes his "fantasy," Miller resumes his high-wire screeching before dropping down to the mellowest, lowest-registers to spar with the increasingly busy bass and drums, all of them echo-echo-echoing in the lushly reverberant space. Miller is sadly underrated, yet he was such a thoughtful and thoroughly "complete" trumpeter, putting him in the category of a very select few. Anyway, the instruments drift off to a pregnant moment of echoing near-silence before Miller and Allen return for further

exploration of their highest *tessituras* to end. This is a very intense beginning to a very intense album! Thankfully, the next piece, "The Idea of it All," is another patented Ra original: a crazy, atonal bebop number driven by the madly swinging Clifford Jarvis on drums which provides for yet another killer Gilmore solo on tenor saxophone. What more needs to be said?

Things take a (re)turn for the strange on "Ecstasy of Being." Opening with a meditation on the paradiddles of marching drums, Jarvis leads the Arkestra's parade of joyously honking carryings-on. After a while, the instruments drop out to allow for a shift to more subtle, sensuous rhythms—an erotic dance between bass and percussion. The horns return with more ecstatic wailing until about the nine-minute mark when Ra signals a complexly-voiced, fortissimo "space chord" to end the piece. It would perhaps be too easy to interpret this piece as: ecstasy = being at war and being in love. Nonetheless, it is interesting to ponder the wealth of symbolism in Ra's œuvre.

"When Angels Speak of Love" is a quirky, slow-tempo ballad featuring Pat Patrick's most romantic bari-sax crooning over Boykins's half-time bass. Miller takes a graceful turn on trumpet, including some precariously high, yet perfectly pitched notes. Meanwhile, Ra's piano meanders while click-clackety percussion outlines a shaky beat. Gilmore and Robert Cummings (on bass clarinet) take brief, somewhat tentative solos until Miller and Patrick return to restate the minimalist, dissonant theme. The album closes with the epic "Next Stop Mars." At almost eighteen minutes, this is by far the longest recording of the Choreographer's Workshop period. It is, as Szwed describes, full of extended horn techniques producing "the shrillest notes possible" with Ra "relentlessly spinning around a single tonal center with two-handed independence, then rumbling thunderously at the bottom of the keyboard" (Szwed 1997, 199). Here and there, ticking and tapping percussion rise and fall but the texture is chamber-like: piano, bass, and horns. As Gilmore, Allen, and Davis shriek and honk, Robert Cummings weaves winding threads of virtuosic bass clarinet while Walter Miller punches holes in space and glides effortlessly on his silvery trumpet. Ra's piano is uncharacteristically voluble and aggressive. At first listen, the piece appears to be an anarchic free-for-all—but that is hardly the case. As Ra explains in the liner notes, "I can write something so chaotic you would say you know it's not written. But the reason it's chaotic is because it's written to be. It's further out than anything they would be doing if they were just improvising" (quoted in Corbett 2000).

In fact, there is a two-page score deposited in the Library of Congress entitled "When Angels Speak of Love" that contains sketches for the title track, "Next Stop Mars," and "Ecstasy of Being." They are, alas, but sketches – perhaps hasty transcriptions at that—and they tell us little about the final result as evidenced by the recording, although they are full of curious details (e.g. the cryptic instruction to "play celestially"). Even so, the presence of such a manuscript is indicative of Ra's fierce control over the musical material, despite its surface aural appearance. Even though his music sometimes sounded "free," it was not about freedom, it was about discipline.

019

Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra: Other Planes of There (Evidence CD)

The title track to *Other Planes of There* marks the first recorded appearance of extended group improvisation by the Arkestra but this is anything but "free jazz." Sun Ra was deeply suspicious of the notion of freedom, remarking that the only free person was in the graveyard (Szwed 1997, 309). In all of his work, he stressed the importance of discipline over freedom. At the height of the civil rights movement in 1968, he flatly stated: "Don't be fooled, talking about revolutin'...what the white race got to revolute against? They got everything. That's not for you. Not no revoluting for black people, no freedom, no peace. They need unity, precision, and discipline" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 100).

The twenty-two minute piece opens with a long, portentously held space chord declaimed by the entire ensemble, but then immediately gives way to a series of small sub-group and solo episodes whose entrances and exits are cued by Ra at the piano. His own ruminations vary from lushly harmonic voicings that vaguely hint at some forgotten jazz standard to interlocking atonal arpeggios that foreshadow Cecil Taylor's work a couple of years later. At one point, a trombone choir improvises antiphonally amidst pealing trumpet and honking baritone sax. The next minute, Marshall Allen solos on his snake-charming oboe. Heat and energy levels increase as John Gilmore's squalling tenor saxophone rides waves of skittering percussion and roiling piano figures but then subsides, leaving a stuttering trombone to solo before the return of massed space chords that herald the climaxing ensemble improvisations. With a flourish, the piece decisively ends. While lacking any overt themes or chord progressions beyond the thickly voiced space chords, "Other Planes of There" is organically structured, contemplative, and at times sounds more like modern chamber music than the unrelenting "energy music" that was/is propagated by many proponents of "free jazz." For Sun Ra, meaningful freedom meant the imposition of severe limits.

"Sound Spectra/Spec Sket" is another, less ambitious attempt at group improvisation. After establishing a chugging drum set groove over which Walter Miller's trumpet lazily sings, Sun Ra's piano abruptly enters with a contrary and agitated rhythm that is extended with the addition of bass and yet more percussion. Before anything else is able to happen, all the instruments drop out and a reverb-drenched drum solo pitter-pats thoughtfully until the piece comes to a sudden, inconclusive end.

"Sketch" brings us back to the world of straight-ahead, bop-in-fluenced jazz with a small-group rhythm section backing John Gilmore's throaty saxophone. But things are not quite what they seem, having returned from an interplanetary voyage. Artificial reverb ebbs and flows across the sound field, giving the proceedings a constantly shifting, otherworldly sheen. Sun Ra's first piano solo quickly turns disjointed and dissonant, and Gilmore's solo subtly explores the shrieks and howls of multiphonics over the rapidly modulating chord progression. Then, the almost hokey ching-ching-a-ching of the cymbal signals a conventionally old-fashioned solo from Ra before the reverb retreats and the Arkestra finally enters to state the theme behind Gilmore's lead. Fascinating.

"Pleasure" seems even more old-timey with Pat Patrick's breathy baritone saxophone sounding as buttery smooth and romantic as Harry Carney. Yet an element of strangeness pervades. As Neil Tesser puts it in his liner notes: "Very odd, very peaceful, the piece seems to have wafted out of some hip but unpretentious lounge on, say, Venus" (Tesser 1992). Quite so. Also quite beautiful.

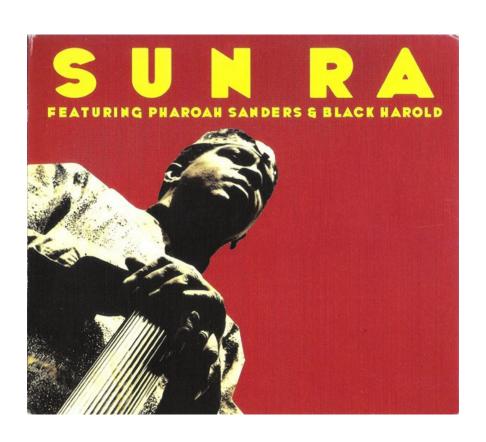
"Spiral Galaxy" concludes the album with a loping space waltz, full of pounding percussion and braying horns, all slathered with a hefty helping of artificial reverberation. Solos come and go, sometimes forcefully, sometimes merely lurking in the background. At times, the distortion threatens to overwhelm the music altogether but then the reverb knob is suddenly dialed back, revealing the naked Arkestra, choogling along comfortably. So it goes for ten or so minutes, leaving the listener quietly unsettled. Of course, this kind of electronically driven disorientation would be taken up years later in the "dub" music of Jamaican reggae but, again, Sun Ra was truly ahead of his time—a man from the future.

Other Planes of There is a landmark album in Sun Ra's considerable discography. For the first time, Sun Ra combined pure freedom

with rigorous discipline while also maintaining a genuine connection to a deep tradition and thereby producing music of startling originality. *Essential*.

This concludes our examination of the known Choreographer's Workshop recordings. In sequence, these albums include: Bad and Beautiful, Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow, Secrets of the Sun, Out There a Minute, What's New/The Invisible Shield, When Sun Comes Out, Continuation, Space Probe, "A Blue One" (single), and Janus. After When Angels Speak of Love, Ra recorded Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy and, finally, Other Planes of There. We will continue moving forward chronologically up through Heliocentric Worlds and on into The Magic City.

After listening to the other super-obscure recordings Ra and the Arkestra made as unlikely sidemen in 1962-1963, it's hard to imagine that any of those records made much money for Ra or his musicians beyond a minimal payment upon performance. It was perhaps enough to buy some groceries. 1964 would be an especially difficult year with several key band members leaving the Arkestra (if only temporarily) for greener pastures. The Arkestra would continue to perform commercial work here and there through the 1960s in order to survive. But Sun Ra was also active within the short-lived but crucial Jazz Composers Guild. The Guild, which included Bill Dixon and Cecil Taylor among others, mounted a series of high-profile concerts in New York which planted the seed for the Arkestra's future. Attorney Bernard Stollman was in the audience in 1964 and he would shortly thereafter sign Ra to his boutique label, ESP-Disk'. Suddenly, things were looking up.



020

Sun Ra: Featuring Pharoah Sanders & Black Harold (ESP-Disk' CD)

With little paying work for the Arkestra, John Gilmore quit the band in August 1964 to tour the world with Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers. This could have been a crushing blow to Sun Ra, if not for his involvement in the short-lived Jazz Composers Guild and its predecessors. Trumpeter/composer Bill Dixon had been putting on performances at the Cellar Café on West 91st Street, and these efforts developed into the legendary "October Revolution in Jazz." These concerts drew large crowds to hear the cream of the "New Thing," including Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, Paul Bley, Jimmy Giuffre, Andrew Hill, Steve Lacy, and others who would go on to define the cutting edge of avant-garde jazz. Shortly thereafter, Dixon and Taylor decided to form a cooperative called the Jazz Composers Guild which would promote the new music while seeking an economic alternative to the exploitative nightclub system. Sun Ra and the Arkestra were quick to join, and two months later, the Guild mounted a series of concerts at Judson Hall called "Four Nights in December," the last of which featured Sun Ra's Arkestra. Portions of that concert are presented on this recently re-issued CD on ESP-Disk'.

Sonny had known Farrell "Little Rock" Sanders since 1962, when Sanders was working as a waiter at the Gene Harris Playhouse (where the Arkestra was playing to miniscule audiences). Ra took him in and gave him some clothes and suggested he take on the name, "Pharoah." By the time Gilmore split, Sanders was ready to join the band and you can hear that he's already developed the blisteringly intense sound quality that would make him famous with John Coltrane's band. Not much is known about Black Harold a.k.a Harold Murray a.k.a Sir Harold a.k.a Brother Atu a.k.a. Atu Murray, etc. except that he played flute and a big hand-carved drum with Sun Ra during this brief period. This recording is the only known document of Pharoah's and Black Harold's tenure with the Arkestra.

The rest of the personnel for this concert is kind of a mystery. The liner notes to this new CD give the following: Sun Ra: piano, celeste; Pharoah Sanders: tenor sax; Black Harold (Harold Murray): flute, log drum; Al Evans: trumpet; Teddy Nance: trombone; Marshall Allen: alto sax; Pat Patrick: baritone sax; Alan Silva: bass; Ronnie Boykins: bass; Cliff Jarvis: drums; Jimmhi Johnson: drums; and Art Jenkins: space voice. Campbell and Trent add Chris Capers on trumpet; Bernard Pettaway on trombone; Robert Northern on French horn; Danny Davis on alto sax, flute, and percussion; and Robert Cummings on bass clarinet, but they omit Boykins. It is definitely a largish Arkestra, though they rarely all play at the same time, so it's hard to tell. I do hear Cummings's bass clarinet and, after repeated listening, I believe there are two bassists on this gig.

The CD starts out with nearly forty-five minutes of previously unissued material from this New Year's Eve concert recorded in stereo. The brief "Cosmic Interpretation" opens the proceedings with some frenetic solo piano that outlines a vague tonal center. Ra then moves to the chiming celeste while the arco bass gets increasingly busy. Solo bass plays a jagged ostinato figure to introduce "The Other World" where Pharoah is well into his fire-breathing modus operandi. The first several minutes features some intense "New Thing"-styled group improvisation. Pat Patrick takes a brilliant a cappella baritone sax solo, until trumpet joins in for a duet. After a less-than-convincing return to the pummeling free-jazz feel, things just sort of peter out at about the six minute mark, yielding an incredibly lengthy and rather pointless drum solo. At about the nineteen minute mark (!), trombone leads the horns back in for some honking and shrieking to introduce the space chant, "The Second Stop is Jupiter," while the bass returns to the jagged ostinato figure. Someone emphatically declaims: "All out for Jupiter!" and the cacophonous horns return with trombone once again leading the way. After a while, all drop out for, yes, more drums! Thankfully, the track fades out after only another minute or so.

"The Now Tomorrow" begins with a lovely setting for piano and flutes in bittersweet harmony. Bowed bass enters and then things start to get weird when Marshall Allen takes a labyrinthine turn on oboe along with what sounds like a second oboe or soprano saxophone joining in along the way. And perhaps there are two basses sawing away here? I think so! Ra enters with rumbling piano to a

smattering of applause. Ra plays intricate, contrasting figures on piano and celeste simultaneously until the horns (including bass clarinet) play fragments of the original harmonies to end. This is a *very* interesting piece of music.

On "Discipline 9," Ra starts out with a twisty piano intro for some yearning horn figures that hover and glide over a stumbling ballad tempo. Two altos and bass clarinet twirl around the meandering rhythm while trombone interjects clipped statements here and there. Ra then establishes the brooding three-note vamp of "We Travel the Spaceways," which the rest of the band takes up in song. The horn break in this version is particularly loose, fragile, and hauntingly beautiful. The rhythm section settles into a comfortable groove while Art Jenkins does his "space voice" thing. The rest of the Arkestra takes up percussion instruments before the reprise of the singing and horn break. Someone blows ceremonially into a large conch shell while sleigh bells jingle...some applause...is it over? Then the bass riff returns and the applause dies down. Gentle percussion pitter-patters until a big conducted "space chord" charges in full of honking and wailing and pounding drums. Then the bass riff starts up again with flutes and trumpet dancing around. It sounds like they're marching off the stage leaving only bass to end.

The original Saturn LP (recorded in mono) follows. "Gods on a Safari" showcases some furious two-handed piano action from Ra and some abstract ensemble figures, all which quickly subsides leaving some slip-sliding arco bass(es?) and the quiet tinkling of bells. Ra takes over with some slyly dissonant piano that launches into the roiling up-tempo drive of "The World Shadow." The piano and rhythm section build up the agitated feeling, similar to "The Shadow World," with Pharoah approximating the knotty melody, but it sounds tenuous. Eventually, he glides into more of his leather-lunged multiphonics and extreme over-blowing. Pealing trumpet takes over as the rhythm becomes ever more intense and abstract. Suddenly, there is a relaxation of tension, leaving some polyrhythmic percussion and a droning conch shell. More space voice warblings from Jenkins follow until Ra enters on the toy-like celeste. Bass then sets up the groove for "Rocket Number 9" and off they go. Ra and the bass(es?) outline the skittering chord sequence while the ensemble chants, "Rocket Number 9 take off for the planet Venus! Venus!" A brief drum solo follows until the horns enter in full polyphonic force, culminating in a big, blasting "space chord." Pharoah then wails some more on tenor sax over the scattered, enervated rhythms, Ra stabbing out angular chords on piano. Pharaoh takes one last turn before giving way to some bass and drum grooving that quickly fades out.

A quick edit cuts into "The Voice of Pan." As befitting the title, Black Harold's breathy, vocalized flute soars over tippy-tapping percussion and subtle bass figures. This has a similar feel to some of the Choreographers Workshop material and even shares some of that echo-y ambience—added, perhaps, after the fact. Harold's shtick is pretty amusing and gets a rise out of the audience. Then, a widely-spaced ensemble chord introduces "Dawn Over Israel," a lurching ensemble piece with sing-song-y bowed basses, fleeting horn figures and Ra's convoluted piano. Ra suddenly takes over with a furiously pounding piano solo that eventually breaks up into some really nasty (unintended) distortion. Ra brings things down with some gentle chords to introduce "Space Mates." Mellow flute melodies float over piano and celeste while bass(es) and percussion murmur in the background until the horns offer some supporting harmonies for a gentle close. Nice. This expanded re-issue of an obscure Saturn LP is definitely a welcome addition to the Ra discography.

The Jazz Composers Guild shortly disintegrated due to the inevitable bitterness and acrimony that arises in such leaderless, ad hoc groupings of ambitious people. Dixon himself would be the first to leave and Ra abandoned ship shortly thereafter, complaining that the Arkestra was doing all the work. Despite its failings, the Guild's efforts continued to resonate throughout the sixties and seventies with the Jazz Composers Orchestra, the Black Artists Group, the AACM, and others. More immediately, Bernard Stollman, a local attorney who represented musicians, was inspired enough by the music he heard at these Guild-sponsored concerts to sign many of the performers, including Ra, to his ESP-Disk' label. Stollman had previously established ESP-Disk' to promote his other obsession, the "universal language" of Esperanto, so he knew how to make records with minimal expense. Stollman gave the musicians free reign (if limited budgets) to produce their music: "The artists alone decide what you will hear on their ESP-Disk" was the motto. These records became exemplary documents of the era, and the label helped to establish Ra's reputation as the cosmic messenger of out jazz.



Sun Ra: The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra Vol. 1 (ESP-Disk')

By March of 1965, Gilmore was back in the fold, and in April the Arkestra headed into RLA Studio in New York City to record their first LP for ESP-Disk'. Buoyed by the modest successes of the October Revolution and the prospect of wider recognition offered by the fledgling but ambitious record label, Ra expanded upon the experimentation of the Choreographer's Workshop period to make *Heliocentric Worlds Vol.* 1 a defining statement.

Consisting mostly of the kinds of conducted improvisations that Ra had been developing over the past year or so, Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1 retains a similarly ultra-modern chamber music feel throughout. Often the highest and lowest registers of the ensemble are emphasized with piercing trumpet and piccolo set off in stark relief against the rumblings of trombone, bass trombone, baritone saxophone, bass clarinet, tympani, bass, and Ra himself on bass marimba(!). At other times, Ra plays piano and electric celeste simultaneously with stunning two-handed polyphony, or the horns improvise wildly swinging anti-bop figures. But the music is more about contrasting textures than solos and accompaniment and there is a remarkable diversity of material approaches in each piece: densely orchestrated "space chords" rise and fall, percussion pounds or falls back, horn solos come and go in an instant. The music is dissonant and intense one minute, serene and contemplative the next. Even so, the music sustains a consistently mysterious mood, an air of tense expectancy that makes the diverse strains of out-and-out weirdness cohere into an enormously compelling, vibrant whole.

While the music appears to be totally improvised, Ra is clearly in control. Regarding these sessions, Szwed includes an extended quote from Marshall Allen describing Ra's approach to conducted improvisation (Szwed 1997, 216). Despite Gilmore's brief defection and return, the Arkestra executes Ra's vision of disciplined freedom with dedication and astonishing precision. As Szwed points out, "[t]he Arkestra at this point had such confidence in what they were

doing that the rest of the group could suddenly drop away in the moment to reveal a cymbal solo or a bass and tympani duo" (Szwed 1997, 216). Horns resolutely enter and exit with succinct, emphatic statements that move the music inexorably forward (or outward) while the rhythm section ebbs and flows in natural reaction (or in deliberate opposition). Throughout it all, Ra provides deft direction, through his playing and by signaling his intentions to the musicians. No note is wasted. There are no empty gestures or tossed off clichés. The music is not merely episodic, as Ra builds complex yet satisfyingly unified edifices upon the accretion of discrete, semi-autonomous events. As many times as I've listened to this record, it always sounds fresh, revealing deeper insights with each listen. All of my attempts at a track-by-track analysis have been woefully inadequate to elucidate the elusive magic of The Heliocentric Worlds. The music simply defies my meager descriptions and must be experienced to be even remotely (mis)understood.

Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1 is rightfully considered a landmark recording and belongs in every serious record collection. It has remained pretty much consistently available (either legitimately or on bootleg editions) since the day it was released, and its appearance transformed Sun Ra from an obscure Lower East Side eccentric into his rightful role as the globe-trotting emissary of interplanetary music. Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 1 is, in a word, a masterpiece, but just one of a series of extraordinary recordings that Ra would make during this period.

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Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra: The Magic City (Evidence CD)

Sun Ra often claimed he was not from this planet but from Saturn, sent to Earth on a mission to help save humanity from itself. But in 1914, Herman "Sonny" Poole Blount was born in Birmingham, Alabama. Nicknamed "The Magic City" for its booming economic growth at the turn of the century, Birmingham was, of course, also the scene of harsh racial injustices which eventually erupted into violence and protest during the civil rights movement. Sonny left Birmingham for Chicago in 1946, legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra, and never looked back. Yet Sun Ra retained some affection for his hometown, composing such homages as "Magic City Blues," "The Place of Five Points," and "West End Side of Magic City," and regularly performing "Stars Fell on Alabama" and "Alabama" in concert. Sonny admitted to MTV's Michael Shore that "The Magic City" was indeed about Birmingham and listening to it, one can sense Ra's conflicted ambivalence towards his subject. At almost thirty minutes, it is Ra's magnum opus and, while comparable in scope and ambition to Ornette Coleman's Free Jazz (1960) and John Coltrane's Ascension (1965), "The Magic City" sounds nothing like either of them. Disavowing the churning rhythms and fire-breathing onslaughts typical of "The New Thing," "The Magic City" maintains a chamber-music-like intimacy and reserve with horn duos and trios forming and dissolving around Boykins's arco bass, Ra's fleet piano work, and the reedy whine of the Selmer Clavioline. Only near the end does the full ensemble briefly engage in some full-throated, high-energy group improvisation. Szwed astutely points out that "Sun Ra's music often attempts to completely integrate the soloists with the ensemble to make a single statement" (Szwed 1997, 214) and "The Magic City" is a perfect example of this attempt. Gilmore stated that the piece was never performed in concert because it was "unreproduceable, a tapestry of sound" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 214).

Ra had been working with the material that would become "The Shadow World" at least as far back as "The Outer Heavens" (on Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow) and it appears in rough form on Sun Ra Featuring Pharoah Sanders and Black Harold (there, titled "The World Shadow"). Here, the fiendishly difficult composition gets its first complete performance. A complex unison melody for saxophones is set off against a 7/4 rhythm and Ra's contrary, angular piano. After a brief series of solos, saxophones return with the melody while trumpet states the counter-melody originally intimated by the piano. Szwed writes: "Sun Ra took considerable pleasure from the agitated difficulty of the piece, and he noted that once during a rehearsal for a French TV show the producer was so disturbed by it that he threatened to cancel the show if they insisted on playing it" (Szwed 1997, 215). "The Shadow World" would become a fixture of the Arkestra's live sets going forward, often performed at impossibly fast tempos.

"Abstract Eye" and "Abstract I" appear to be different takes of the same piece and, according to the discography, there is a twelve-inch test-pressing from Variety Recording Services in existence where the pieces are entitled "Abstract Experiment Take 1" and "Abstract Experiment Take 2" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 119). This reinforces my suspicion that these tracks might be rehearsals for what would become "Heliocentric" and "Outer Nothingness" on Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1. They share the same, bottom-heavy instrumentation of bass, bass marimba, tympani, and braying trombones with piccolo and trumpet providing extreme high-register contrast. The feeling here is a little more extroverted, with the saxophones taking a more prominent role in the proceedings, but the tracks are notably similar in structure, with flittering solo statements set against rumbling bass marimba, pounding tympani, and singing arco bass. Very interesting.

Another track from these sessions, entitled "Other Worlds," is available on the 1989 Blast First compilation Out There a Minute.

Sun Ra: Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 3: The Lost Tapes (ESP-Disk' CD)

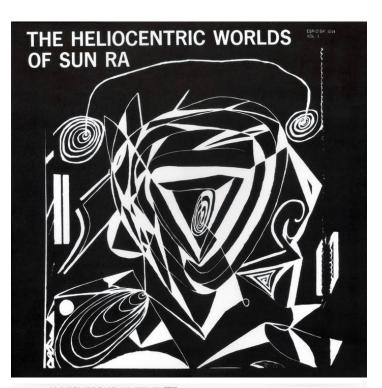
In 2005, ESP-Disk' released *Heliocentric Worlds Vol.* 3: The Lost Tapes, purported to be unreleased material recorded at the November 16, 1965 session that produced *Heliocentric Worlds Vol.* 2. After some close listening, I am pretty certain this date is incorrect, although some of this material might have been recorded at the April 20th session for *Heliocentric Worlds*, Vol. 1 (but then again, maybe not). Confusing? Yes! But these are the eternal mysteries of Mr. Ra! Nevertheless, the discovery of previously unheard music from the 1960s makes this CD essential listening for the Ra-fanatic.

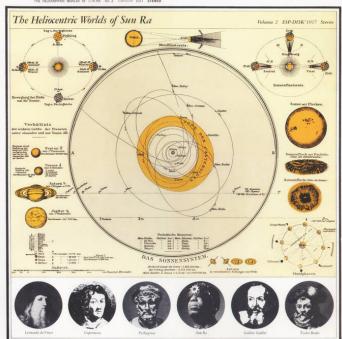
"Intercosmosis" is another expansive, 18-minute conducted improvisation wherein Gilmore establishes a terse melodic cell that is subsequently passed around the Arkestra in small concertino groupings punctuated with a cappella horn solos and cued "space chords." Meanwhile, the rhythm section lays down a propulsive free-tempo groove that enters and exits on cue—but the percussion is mostly held in reserve so that the relentless motion is internalized and carried forward by the chamber music-like instrumentation. Ra plays densely arpeggiated piano throughout and the piece climaxes with an extended alto saxophone duel between Marshall Allen and Danny Davis which gives way to an almost-pretty piano interlude, with Pat Patrick blowing beautiful, breathy baritone saxophone. The rest of the ensemble enters with an improvised coda before a conducted ending. Was this recorded on November 16th? Admittedly, the piece shares a conceptual similarity to "The Sun Myth," but the unmistakable presence of Danny Davis is troubling since he is not audible on the other Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 2 material. Also conspicuously absent is the Selmer Clavioline, whose electronic whine defined the sound of that album. Finally, the presence of subtle reverb effects suggests the presence of Tommy Hunter, which would require an earlier recording date. Some have speculated this track was recorded at one of the When Angels Speak of Love sessions and, further, that When Angels Speak of Love was recorded later than 1963 as posited by Prof. Campbell. Who knows? Regardless, it is classic long-form Ra material.

It is plausible that the remainder of the CD was recorded at the April 20th session, with Ra on bass marimba, piano, and electric celeste, and the prominence of trombones and tympani. The fragmentary "Mythology Metamorphosis" opens with tumultuous trap drums and hand percussion to which Boykins adds some thrumming bass. Ra enters on the bass marimba while Marshall Allen plays sinuous oboe. The instruments drop out leaving Ra to rumble around on the bass marimba until Boykins enters with an insistent bass figure to which Allen replies with a brief oboe phrase. At the four-minute mark, clattering percussion re-enters just before the track cuts off. "Heliocentric Worlds" is a showcase for Ra's orchestral piano and electric celeste playing with only bass, trap drums, and booming tympani to provide intermittently dramatic accompaniment. "World Worlds" is an interesting ballad form, obviously rigorously composed (if somewhat raggedly performed). After a piano/celeste introduction with bowed bass pedal, thick blocks of dissonant chords blare forth from the full ensemble, rich with trombones, saxophones, flute, and trumpet. Over a gently swinging pulse, brief solo statements hew closely to the weirdly shifting chord changes until the big, held ensemble chords return with a brassy trumpet lead to end. After repeated listenings, this piece sounds vaguely familiar—was it ever recorded again under a different title?

The final track, "Interplanetary Travelers," is actually an alternate take of "Other Worlds" from *Heliocentric Worlds Vol.* 1, which first appeared on the 1989 Blast First compilation Out There a Minute. However, Prof. Campbell dates this to the April-May 1965 session that yielded side B of The Magic City, creating yet more discographical confusion. In any event, this track is a stunner, a full-throttled New Thing-style blowout with lots of two-fisted piano/celeste action, intensely wailing horns, and hard-driving drums. Is it possible that Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1, side B of The Magic City, and tracks 2-5 of Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 3 were all recorded at the same session on April 20, 1965? For that matter, is it possible that When Angels Speak of Love was also recorded during this time period? The stylistic resemblances are striking, and, taken together, all of this music demonstrates how intently Ra was developing his composed

improvisational approach in the mid-1960s. *Heliocentric Worlds Vol.* 3 adds another fascinating piece to the puzzle, yet ultimately raises more questions than it answers.





024

Less than seven months after recording *Heliocentric Worlds Vol.* 1, a smaller, eight-piece Arkestra returned to RLA Sound Studios to record *Vol.* 2. "The Sun Myth" is another epic-length directed improvisation based upon a two-note figure that is freely extrapolated by the ensemble across eighteen highly variegated minutes. Anchored throughout by Boykins's sliding, microtonal bass, Ra starts out by banging on tuned bongos and a cymbal before moving to the piano/Clavioline combo. Energy and intensity levels rise and fall with brief horn solos, duets, and trios that come and go, always yielding to the buzzing Clavioline and singing arco bass. According to Campbell, this track has been mastered three different ways:

(1) The original release ... (mono and stereo) had African singing throughout the piece, mixed as loud as the instrumental parts ... (2) The original release was quickly withdrawn, and replaced with a more common variant in which the African voices are mixed way down and can be faintly heard at the beginning and end ... (3) The final remastering removed the African voices entirely (Campbell and Trent 2000, 122).

Interesting! Were these vocals added in some kind of primitive overdub? After all, this album was recorded in a low-budget studio in 1965! I have only ever heard the final, instrumental version and I can't even imagine what this track would sound like with "African vocals."

"A House of Beauty" is a strangely beautiful piece. It opens with Marshall Allen on silvery piccolo and Ra on the monophonic Clavioline. Boykins enters with the bow while Ra adds a fourth voice on piano. Eventually, piano and pizzicato bass improvise a lushly tonal ballad form supported by some soft percussion. Clavioline and piccolo return with some busy free-tempo counterpoint until a held Clavioline tone and arco bass figures bring things to a gentle close.

The album ends with the aptly-titled "Cosmic Chaos," a fifteen-minute New Thing-styled group improv punctuated with virtuosic a cappella turns by Pat Patrick on baritone saxophone, Gilmore on tenor saxophone, and Robert Cummings on bass clarinet. Ra is back on tuned bongos and cymbal, generating complex polyrhythms against Roger Blank's roiling trap drums while Walter Miller blows some exciting post-bop trumpet. Curiously, what sounds to me like electronically processed bells peal in the background throughout. What is making that sound?! Is it Tommy Hunter's echo-machine? The piece decisively ends with a grouping of obviously conducted "space chords."

Ultimately, *Heliocentric Worlds Vol.* 2 is a bit less focused and not quite as compelling as either *Vol.* 1 or *The Magic City*, but it still retains an air of mysterious discovery. The album cover, on the other hand, is a classic of the period with an antique illustration of the solar system perched above pictures of archaic scientists: Leonardo, Copernicus, Galileo, and Tycho Brahe. In the middle are portraits of Pythagoras and Sun Ra himself, "calling attention to Sun Ra's links to the Greek astronomer-mathematician-musician who studied in Egypt, and who formed a brotherhood which attempted to purify their souls to allow the initiates to escape the 'wheel of birth' and to aid them in the transmigration of the soul after the death of the body" (Szwed 1997, 217). *Perfect!*

While the record deal with ESP-Disk' (and a concomitant flurry of releases on the El Saturn label) would eventually establish Sun Ra's reputation within the burgeoning subculture, the 1960s would remain penurious times for the Arkestra. Even Sun Ra himself would find it necessary to take paying gigs here and there as a sideman especially if his old friend, Tom Wilson, made the call. In late-1965, Wilson came up with the idea for a quickie movie-tie-in LP to be led by vibraphonist Walt Dickerson, and he summoned Ra and sometime Arkestra drummer Roger Blank to participate in the recording sessions. Impressions of "A Patch of Blue" was billed as an "interpretation" of Jerry Goldsmith's soundtrack to "A Patch of Blue," the Sidney Poitier film that boldly addressed miscegenation at a volatile moment in the Civil Rights period. Wilson had previously recorded Dickerson in a moderately successful jazz interpretation of the "Lawrence of Arabia" soundtrack for Audio Fidelity in 1963, so it probably made sense to try to repeat that formula—with the added benefit of timeliness and topicality. Unfortunately, Goldsmith's score is unremarkable and the film itself overwrought. Although the movie enjoyed tremendous box office success, Impressions of "A Patch of Blue" sold poorly and was promptly deleted. It was finally reissued on CD by Verve in 1999, but only in an extremely limited edition that quickly disappeared.

Walt Dickerson was a phenomenal vibraphonist, but he never got his due as an important and innovative musician. He was a graduate of Morgan State College (and, according to the original liner notes, the Peabody Conservatory), making several records for Prestige and Audio Fidelity in the early 1960s and winning Down-Beat's "New Star" award in 1962 and "Innovator of the Year" award in 1963. Dickerson radically broke away from the Lionel Hampton/Milt Jackson tradition by playing the vibraphone with small, rubber-tipped mallets, gripping them near the head and using the motor and damper with the utmost restraint, resulting in a dry, clear,

almost staccato articulation even at swift tempos. Sadly, and perhaps due to its commercial failure, *Impressions of "A Patch of Blue"* was the last record Dickerson made before withdrawing into a decade-long exile from music, thereby ceding the mantle of *Great Modern Vibraphonist* to Bobby Hutcherson virtually by default. Dickerson resurfaced in 1975 and made a number of records for the Danish Steeplechase label, including a lovely duet recording with Sun Ra (*Visions*) in 1978. Sadly, Dickerson once again dropped from sight in the early 1980s and died, unjustly un-famous, in 2008.

Despite its apparent status as a (failed) cash-in attempt, *Impressions of "A Patch of Blue"* is a very fine album and well worth hearing – even beyond the novelty of Sun Ra's presence. According to session bassist Bob Cunningham, any connection to Goldsmith's actual score was tenuous at best: "I don't think there was any music there to refer to. Or if there was, we didn't necessarily follow it" (quoted in Davis 1999). The resulting music has a loose, late-night feel, but this is not the kind of cheese-ball commercial pabulum you might expect in such a work-for-hire situation; there is some adventuresome musicianship on display within these mellow grooves. In fact, the musicians approached their work with a solemn dignity appropriate to the film's subject. Francis Davis writes in the liner notes for the Verye CD:

Along with Dickerson's genuine admiration for the movie, the philosophical underpinning of *Impressions of "A Patch of Blue"* was provided by the lengthy discussions about race and other matters he had with Sun Ra. "Our conversations were not the norm," Dickerson told me. "Sometimes it was a conversation without periods or commas, and we would extend that into the musical realm, with no musical composition as such. Music was part of our extended conversation." (Davis 1999)

This conversational tone is part of the record's relaxed yet scintillating presence. On four of the eight tracks, Ra spins gossamer spiderwebs of notes on a tinkling harpsichord (of all things), while his piano playing is deftly virtuosic, with a particularly daring solo on "A Patch of Blue—Part 2." Ra also lays down some tasty, bluesy funk on "Bacon and Eggs" and, sometimes, he plays piano and harpsichord simultaneously, creating a delicate, weirdly polyphonic

texture. Dickerson himself displays his innovative technique at the bars, especially on the expansive "Alone in the Park—Parts 1 and 2." His quadruple-time swinging on "Selina's Fantasy" is truly astonishing, yet far from mere empty showboating. Cunningham and Blank make for a sensitive rhythm section, with Cunningham's solid pizzicato and arco bass complementing Blank's singularly impressionistic (rather than overtly propulsive) trap drums. Blank also plays some darkly Arkestral tympani on the spooky set-piece, "High Hopes." Impressions of "A Patch of Blue" is not just an obscure historical document, of interest only to obsessive record collectors; it is a transcendently beautiful work of art in its own right, an overlooked gem.



Sun Ra and His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Strange Strings (Atavistic CD)

026

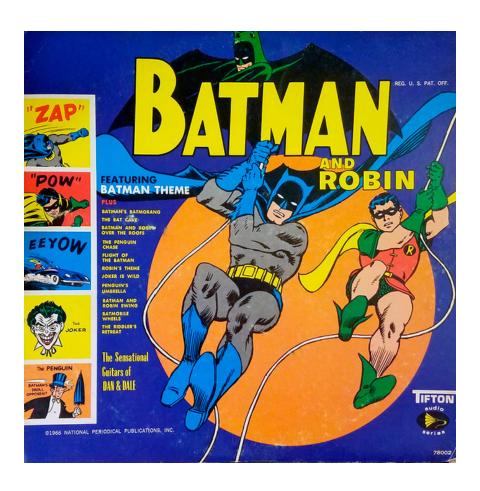
Strange Strings is one of the most obscure and downright weird recordings in all of Sun Ra's immense (and weird) discography. By 1966. Ra had acquired a selection of odd stringed instruments ukuleles, kotos, zithers, etc.—to be played exclusively here by members of the Arkestra. That the musicians did not how to play them was the whole point; it was, according to Ra, "a study in ignorance." Structurally, the music builds on the kind of conducted-improvisation found on The Magic City, but the unfamiliar instruments create a truly otherworldly din. Homemade metallic instruments clatter and thrum while strings are plucked, bowed, struck and scraped; sometimes drums and tympani pound ominously. Thick reverb saturates or, at other times, dries up the acoustic, creating shifting and distorted sonic perspectives. Sounding more like Iannis Xenakis than Fletcher Henderson, this stuff is definitely not for the faint of heart! The bonus track, "Door Squeak," features Sun Ra on, yes, a loudly squeaking door (which actually sounds very much like the Minimoog, which he would take up years later), while more strange strings chatter in the background. Detailed liner notes by Hal Rammel and super deluxe packaging make this CD a must have for the connoisseur of Sun Ra's furthest interplanetary journeys. Thank you, Atavistic, for another fine Sun Ra Sunday!



Released from Roaratorio Records in 2013 is *Other Strange Worlds*, containing previously unheard recordings from May 1965 from the Sun Ra Archive. While only available on limited-edition vinyl, it also contains a coupon for a free MP3 download—so, whether or not you even *have* a turntable, every Sun Ra freak needs to jump on this quick!

According to archivist Michael D. Anderson's brief liner notes, the recording was intended as a "second volume" to the wonderfully weird *Strange Strings* album but, for whatever reason, was never released. Certainly, the approach is similar, with an arsenal of exotic instruments deployed in what Sunny called "an exercise in ignorance." But on *Other Strange Worlds*, the Arkestra is substantially reduced, down to a quintet of Sun Ra, John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Ali Hassan, and Art Jenkins. Along with the koras, zithers, kalimbas, and fiddles, Gilmore and Jenkins stick mostly to percussion while Allen takes keening leads on oboe and Hassan adds warm trombone. Occasionally, Ra will brighten the texture by tinkling on the celeste, but most of the time he is subtly guiding the improvisations, turning them into challenging and sublime pieces of spaceage chamber music.

Recorded in Sun Ra's apartment on the Lower East Side of New York (you can hear the telephone ring several times during the proceedings), *Other Strange Worlds* actually sounds quite clear and clean—especially compared to the noisy and distorted *Strange Strings*. The smaller ensemble obviously contributes to the transparent sound quality, yet Sun Ra's mastery of effective lo-fi recording techniques is quite in evidence here. Thankfully, Roaratorio has done an excellent job with this vinyl pressing: my copy is flat as a pancake and quiet as a ghost, and sounds flipping fantastic. Officially out this Tuesday, run—don't walk—to your nearest record store and grab yourself a copy. Or do what I did and order it direct from their website. *Other Strange Worlds* is another essential addition to the Sun Ra discography and should not be missed!



In a discography defined by indefinable strangeness, this has to be, on the surface anyway, the weirdest record of them all. In January, 1966, producer Tom Wilson cooked up yet another quickie cash-in attempt, this time based on the campy hit television show and aimed squarely at the children's market. Wilson again enlisted Edward O. Bland to churn out some slapdash arrangements, to be played here by the Greenwich Village-based acid-rock band the Blues Project (billed as "The Sensational Guitars of Dan & Dale"), plus Sun Ra on occasional Hammond organ, John Gilmore on tenor sax, and Pat Patrick on baritone sax. The band is filled out with studio session stalwarts Jimmy Owens on trumpet and Tom McIntosh on trombone, along with some anonymous female vocalists. Sounds like a sure thing, right? What do you mean, "No?"

The Blues Project consisted of Danny Kalb on lead guitar and harmonica, Steve Katz on rhythm guitar, Andy Kuhlberg on bass, and Roy Blumenfeld on drums. They were hailed as New York's answer to the Grateful Dead, after picking up organist Al Kooper during their short-lived stint on Columbia Records. Kooper, of course, was originally a guitarist, but became better known as an organist after his impromptu appearance on Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone"—a session, not coincidentally, produced by Tom Wilson in 1965. The Blues Project made a couple records for Verve before disbanding in 1967. But in 1966, they were at the height of their powers and hungry enough to take a gig making a pseudonymous, one-off kiddie record.

It is puzzling why Wilson felt the need to add Sun Ra and his core musicians to the mix—on first listen you would never know it's them. On the other hand, they do provide a certain big-band, jazzy élan that the Blues Project could never have pulled off on their own. Ra can be heard playing some bumptious organ on four of the twelve tracks, his "space-age barbeque" style contrasting with Al Kooper's more conventionally rock-ish approach. Gilmore and

Patrick are clearly audible in the ensemble passages and Gilmore even takes an appropriately glib solo on "The Riddler's Retreat." (It is unclear who is playing the loopy slide-whistle on "Flight of the Batman" or the boing-boing-ing jaw harp on "Joker is Wild.") Kalb peals off a number of stinging electric guitar solos that might have seemed pretty groovy in a different context but, despite the musical firepower at Wilson's disposal, Bland's "compositions" are nothing but laughable arrangements of material lifted wholesale from the public domain (and elsewhere). As Prof. Campbell explains:

Except for the Batman theme [composed by Neil Hefti], nearly all of the music on this album was plundered from various sources. "Batman's Batmorang" uses the slow movement of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony; "Penguin's Umbrella" takes over Chopin's A-flat Polonaise; "Batman and Robin Swing" is based on the love theme from Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet, and "Batmobile Wheels" makes do with Bach's Minuet in G, already recycled as "I Hear a Symphony" by the Toys. "The Riddler's Retreat" lifts its guitar licks from "She Loves You" by the Beatles. (Campbell and Trent 2000, 125)

One can only imagine a child's disappointment when, after begging his parents for the *Batman and Robin* record, he discovers only a raggedy, ersatz rendition of his favorite TV theme and a bunch of hokey tunes punctuated with incongruously psychedelic guitar solos. Needless to say, the record sold poorly and only became a pricy collector's item due to Sun Ra's (un-credited) involvement and the connection to the Blues Project and Al Kooper. In 2001, the Italian label, Comet/Universe, issued the album on CD, complete with deluxe, gatefold mini-LP packaging, along with several other gray-market Ra reissues. While *Batman and Robin* is a fun bit of commercial ephemera of interest to hard-core Sun Ra fanatics, Blues Project aficionados (and, I suppose, comic book geeks), it is pretty much worthless musically beyond its value as pure sixties kitsch, a strange and curious artifact from a far-gone era.



In May of 1966, the fledgling ESP-Disk' managed to book a package tour for some of its artists under the auspices of Bernard Stollman's Esperanto Foundation, who had somehow finagled financial support from the New York Council for the Arts to spread the ESP musico-philosophy to the denizens of various New York State public colleges and universities. The musicians included Sun Ra and the Arkestra, Ran Blake, Patty Waters, Giuseppi Logan, and Burton Greene, and much of the music was recorded and later released on ESP-Disk'. Nothing Is, released in 1969, captures the large-format Arkestra at the top of its game during this tour, bravely navigating conducted improvisations while also swinging hard on the jazzier numbers and otherwise bursting into space-chanting and polyrhythmic percussion freakouts. It is the perfect soundtrack for the inspirational but imminently doomed counter-cultural revolution then at its peak in the wake of the Summer of Love, Woodstock, and widespread demonstrations of dissent. On the surface, Sun Ra's music seems to fit right in with the outrageous sounds of the psychedelic era, but as has been noted, Ra's politics were more complicated and quasi-authoritarian than might be expected. Ra's ideal was not freedom, but discipline. Even John Sinclair had to admit: "We knew he was a dictator, but at least he was a benign dictator" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 245).

Perhaps that is why, unlike much of the music of this period, *Nothing Is* still sounds fresh and not like a hopelessly nostalgic curio from a distant past. In fact, it still sounds like music from the future. One can only imagine what those college students thought about it at the time; surely many minds were blown. *Nothing Is* became a defining album for Sun Ra and, as with the *Heliocentric Worlds* albums, *Nothing Is* was widely bootlegged after ESP-Disk's dissolution. I've owned various versions of this record: an Italian boot CD in the late 1980s; the heavily No-Noised German ZYX CD ca. 1990; the better-sounding Dutch Calibre CD released in 2000; and now,

the expanded 2005 edition on the resurrected ESP-Disk'. While the 2005 reissue includes almost thirty minutes of bonus material (and improved sonics), the tracks are disconcertingly rearranged. This album is indelibly etched into my brain through decades of repeated listening, so it was something of a shock the first time I heard the new CD. Upon reflection, it does seem likely that this rearrangement better reflects the running order of Ra's sets of the time, but somehow the intensely visceral impact of the original is slightly diffused. Ra took great care in the construction of his albums, and while additional, previously unreleased music is always welcome, I will probably keep my older CD containing the record as it was originally released, just for reference.

Be that as it may, *Nothing Is* is definitely one of the all-time great Sun Ra records and an essential document of the period. Highlights include a jaw-droppingly stunning Gilmore solo on the twisty postbop composition "Dancing Shadows," the definitive performance of the insanely complicated "Shadow World," and an evocative rendition of "Exotic Forest" featuring Marshall Allen's serpentine oboe over that menacing 5/4 ostinato. Interspersed are brief space chants and songs ("Theme of the Stargazers," "Outer Spaceways Incorporated," "Next Stop Mars," and "Second Stop is Jupiter"), enormous, universe-engulfing space chords, and terse, densely compacted group improvisations. As for the bonus tracks, "Velvet" is an old-timey swing vehicle for Pat Patrick's honking, squealing, and growling baritone saxophone, with pithy trombone and piano solos snuck in before the closing reprise. "Outer Nothingness" is fifteen-minutes of delirious, "New Thing" styled free jazz, marred only by an overlong drum solo by the irrepressible (and overindulged) Clifford Jarvis. (N.B. In a lazy bit of titling, this track bears little to no relationship to "Outer Nothingness" as found on Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 1.) A truncated "We Travel the Spaceways" ends the disc with a premature fadeout that feels somewhat anticlimactic. With or without the bonus material, *Nothing Is* is a must-have album for any Sun Ra fan and, truthfully, it belongs in any serious collection of post-war jazz.

Sun Ra: College Tour Vol. 1: The Complete Nothing Is...

030

(ESP-Disk' CD)

ESP-Disk' recently unearthed over ninety minutes of unreleased material from the May 18, 1966 concert at St. Lawrence University in Potsdam, New York, and has released the whole shebang on a two-CD set entitled College Tour Vol. 1: The Complete Nothing Is... The discovery of previously unreleased Sun Ra music from the 1960s is reason enough to celebrate, but this release exceeds all expectations. Of course, Nothing Is... is a perfect album in itself, but it was skillfully edited to showcase the more out-there extremes of the Arkestra's live act. This expanded edition restores the concert's proper sequence, including some of the old-timey swing numbers and groovy space chants which were omitted from the original album; to hear this edition of the Arkestra rip through some of the 1950s-era material such as "Advice for Medics" or "Space Aura" is a rare delight indeed! And the second disc is truly revelatory, opening with an unusually expansive, contemplative version of "The Satellites Are Spinning" and going on from there.

This was one of the best bands Sonny ever assembled: Ronnie Boykins and Clifford Jarvis in the rhythm section (along with James Jacson and Carl Nimrod on percussion); John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Pat Patrick, and Robert Cummings filling out the reeds; and, instead of the more usual trumpets on top, there are the trombonists, Teddy Nance and Ali Hassan, who give the ensemble sections a darker, mellower tone while also being strong soloists in their own right. My only complaint is the interminable drum solos-why, oh why, did Sun Ra indulge Jarvis so? It's not that I have anything against drum solos per se (although I generally think they're a bad idea); it's just that Jarvis always just plays a bunch of flashy bullshit. Excuse my language, but it's the most appropriate term. Every time he goes off like that, he abandons the truth of the music for the lie of empty technical displays. Usually, Sonny has to finally cut him mid-paradiddle so as to get things back on track. Left to his own devices, I swear he would go on forever.

But I quibble. Disc two includes almost thirty-five minutes of the evening's soundcheck/rehearsal featuring two previously unknown compositions. "Nothing Is," a floating, rhapsodic kind of blues, is propelled by Ra's wandering piano sometimes countered by long-toned horns, while "Is Is Eternal" sets angular piano chords amidst cascading, rubato rhythms over which the horns heave and sigh in densely orchestrated harmony. Brief solo statements break the surface here and there, but this is very much a through-composed ensemble piece that was, apparently, never performed elsewhere. Interesting. A leisurely romp through the riff-happy "State Street" follows, featuring dueling bari-saxes in the lead, and "The Exotic Forest" concludes the disc in what sounds like a rehearsal although, curiously, applause can be heard at the end. Is it merely tacked on? Who knows? Regardless, College Tour Vol. 1 is a most welcome addition to the Sun Ra discography, an essential document from this most fertile period. The Arkestra played five concerts on this tour, all of which were supposedly recorded by ESP-Disk'. Could this mean more volumes will be forthcoming? One can only hope. In the meantime, this will certainly do!

While Sun Ra is highly regarded as a pioneer of electric keyboards in jazz, his prodigious gifts as a pianist have largely been overlooked, obscured by and subsumed within the Arkestra's overall musical activities. Monorails and Satellites is one of the very few solo piano recordings Ra ever made, and it is a fascinating document of his instrumental technique and singular musical thinking. Ra does not possess a dazzling virtuosity, but he approaches the piano as an immense orchestra, full of vibrant colors and contrasting timbres. Like a child at play, Ra delights in the resonant rumbling of the lowest octaves and the plinking, chattering chimes of the highest notes above. But Ra's two-hand independence is sometimes truly astonishing: each hand in a different meter, in a different key, ten fingers layering multiple outer and inner melodies to create complex rhythmic/harmonic webs. Ra's touch is aggressive yet supple, achieving illusionistic "bent" note effects. In a 1991 interview with Keyboard magazine, Ra was asked if he could hear quarter tones, the notes "between the notes" on a piano:

... the way you attack a note can create those effects. Depending on how hard you hit the key, you can hear the third or the fourth or the fifth – those sounds in the cracks – coming out. So the touch, the attack, is very important. (quoted in Szwed 1997, 240).

Aside from the delightfully swinging standard, "Easy Street," all the compositions are Ra's and you can hear him using the piano as a sketchbook for the Arkestra's larger canvas. "Space Towers" pits an agitated bass ostinato against jumping chords and horn-like riffing. "Cogitation" spills out tumbling blocks of clashing harmonies. "Skylight" is a beautiful ballad form spiced with intensely pungent dissonances. "The Alter Destiny" begins with an ominous roar and builds up a brittle, herky-jerky rhythm only to melt into sentimen-

tal tunefulness. "Blue Differentials" is a classic Ra blues, bright, uptempo, maybe a little old fashioned. The rhapsodic "Monorails and Satellites" contrasts gently rolling arpeggios and glissandos with enervated, multivoiced counterpoint. Finally, "The Galaxy Way" sounds more through-composed than wholly improvised as it maps the entire compass of the instrument through a sequence of descending chords and fleeting melodies. In the end, this is far from your usual jazz piano album, but it offers a rare glimpse into Ra's most intimate music-making.

It's too bad Evidence was unable to secure the rights to reissue Monorails and Satellites Vol. II, which contains additional solo piano music recorded at the same session (and would have easily fit on CD). Interestingly, "Astro Vision" opens with a bit of musique concrete with Ra's sprightly piano set against sheets of howling electronic noise, generated by contact microphones and overdriven, distorted reverb (Boykins and Hunter are the likely suspects). It sounds to me like the effect was overdubbed after the fact, since Ra does not interact with it in any way and the noise eventually subsides some time before he finishes. Curious. The remainder of the album consists of four piano solos that are more expansive than on the first volume, but also more diffuse. Several of the longer pieces rely upon an improvised, episodic construction that moves from ambiguous chordal statements through gentle ballad forms until finally evolving into furiously dissonant two-fisted attacks. "Solar Boats" is a little different and sounds more pre-arranged: Ra's left hand sets up an off-kilter 5/4 groove while his right hand tosses off pan-tonal melodies and strident, widely-spaced chords. Vol. II contains a great deal of dynamic pianism, but lacks the first volume's compact cohesiveness. Even so, it is well worth seeking out, if only for another opportunity to hear Sun Ra alone at the piano with his musical thoughts.

The radically experimental *Strange Strings* was also recorded around this time period; I wrote about Atavistic's excellent reissue of this bizarre masterpiece above. Ra's discography gets very confusing at this point, with various albums containing material recorded at different times and places, with a slew of singles thrown in to boot. This sort of confusion continues until well into the 1970s!



033

This record certainly has a tortured discographical history! In December, 1971, Sun Ra sold a cache of tapes to the Black Lion label so as to pay the Arkestra's traveling expenses from Denmark to Egypt. Sadly, much of this music was never released. In 1974, El Saturn released this album as Outer Spaceways Incorporated —although it was sometimes entitled A Tonal View of Times Tomorrow, Vol. 3. Inexplicably, some of this music also appeared on numerous hybrid pressings of later Saturn albums such as Primitone and Invisible Shield among others. Finally, in 1998, the German Freedom label released a three-CD box set entitled Calling Planet Earth, containing some (but not all) of the Black Lion holdings, wherein this album is stupidly re-titled Spaceways. I say stupidly because another disc in this otherwise fine box set is inanely titled Outer Spaceways Incorporated, making an already confusing discography needlessly opaque. This is the kind of thing that makes Campbell and Trent's Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra so absolutely necessary!

In any event, Spaceways (or whatever you want to call it) is a great companion piece to the classic Nothing Is. Most of the music appears to have been recorded around 1966, given the presence of the trombonist Teddy Nance (who died in 1967) and Ra's distinctive piano/Clavioline combo. Recorded in stereo, it offers remarkably good sound quality for the period. The first track, "Prelude and Shadow-Light World" (originally titled "Chromatic Shadows" on the El Saturn LP), opens with a long, dramatic piano introduction which prepares the way for the ensemble chant "Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space." Then comes the notorious "Shadow World," which is marked by a slightly more relaxed tempo than usual and a honking, wailing bari sax solo from Pat Patrick. Ra takes a solo turn before giving way to burbling percussion. Finally, Ra conjures up a mammoth space chord to bring things to a close. The second track, "The Wind Speaks," appears to be from the same concert and is another beautiful Ra ballad featuring a choir of flutes and piccolo. Eventually, Boykins takes a solo turn with the bow and Ra enters to duet on the electric Clavioline. Ra then returns to the piano for some frenetic variations on the theme before an elegiac, full ensemble re-statement. This composition was later re-titled "Somebody Else's World" after acquiring lyrics.

June Tyson's unmistakable voice singing the end of "Satellites Are Spinning" opens "We Sing This Song," indicating a probable 1968 recording date (the sound quality is also noticeably inferior to the rest of the album). Her singing gradually trails off leaving the stage to Sun Ra's rhapsodic, thunderous piano. "Outer Space Incorporated" [sic] returns to the previous concert, with the bouncy space chant setting the stage for a swinging piano solo. Ra suddenly holds down a deep bass tremolo causing the rhythm section to die down, leaving Nance and Bernard Pettaway to engage in a friendly trombone duel, sometimes joined by Ra's Clavioline or some jib-jabbering percussion. Ra then lays down a heavy piano chord which signals another lengthy drum solo from Clifford Jarvis. Now, Jarvis is a technically brilliant drummer (check out that bass drum!), but drum solos are almost never a good idea, in my opinion. Thankfully, after a few minutes, the rest of the Arkestra takes up various hand-percussion, giving things a more interestingly pan-African, poly-rhythmic feel (despite Jarvis's continued showboating). Ra shuts things down with a startling piano entry, signaling another heaving space chord. Some deft editing surreptitiously launches us into "We Travel the Spaceways," which is clearly taken from a different concert, given the subtle change in soundstage (Boykins is suddenly stage left!). This version retains the original arrangement, featuring the prominent metallic clanging on the fours but, unfortunately, the Arkestra only sings the refrain a few times before the track fades out. Despite the anomalous titling on this reissue, Spaceways is a delightful album and an important live document of the Heliocentric-era Arkestra. The Calling Planet Earth box set is currently out of print, but it can found on the secondary market for a modest premium. It is definitely worth seeking out, even with its myriad documentary flaws.

This is yet another record with a horribly tortured history. In 1971, Sun Ra sold a stash of tapes to Alan Bates of the German label, Black Lion, who shortly thereafter issued this album under the title *Pictures of Infinity*. A 1994 CD reissue added a previously unreleased bonus track ("Intergalactic Motion"), and all cuts were again reissued in 1998 on the three-CD box set *Calling Planet Earth*, but there the album is stupidly re-titled *Outer Spaceways Incorporated*. I say stupidly because a 1974 album originally titled *Outer Spaceways Incorporated* (Saturn 14300A+B) was also re-issued in the same box set and inexplicably re-titled *Spaceways*, thereby creating all kinds of unnecessary discographical confusion. Be that as it may, this album (whatever its title) is drawn from an excellent stereo recording of a live performance in New York City ca. 1968 and provides a rare, hi-fi glimpse of the newly evolving "cosmo drama."

The Arkestra declaims, "Somewhere There!" and immediately blasts off into full-blown, New Thing-styled energy music, Gilmore taking the lead with an astonishingly fleet tenor solo. Unfortunately, a good half of the track's fifteen-minute duration is taken up with more pointless drum solos by Clifford Jarvis and his hyperactive bass-drum pedal. When the Arkestra finally interjects some aimless space chords and free-jazz squealing and honking, it all seems a bit anticlimactic. Maybe you just had to be there. "Outer Space Incorporated" [sic] opens with some rubato free improv until Ra introduces the bouncy chord progression, taken at a bright tempo. The Arkestra chants the words in increasingly dissonant harmony before brief, quiet solos from piano and bass. The free rubato section returns with braying horns, busy percussion, and cacophonous piano before quickly fading out to modest applause. "Intergalactic Motion," whose correct title is actually "Ankhnaton," is a jaunty bigband number that dates back to the 1960 album. Fate in a Pleasant Mood. The composition alternates a hugely catchy riff with a swinging bridge section. Bernard Pettaway and Ali Hassan dominate with dueling trombone solos before giving way to Ra's nimble piano, where he explores the nooks and crannies of odd harmonic inversions. Boykins and Jarvis provide a solid foundation of joyous swing and Boykins eventually takes over with a typically virtuosic bass solo before the horns return for a ragged reprise to end.

"Saturn" is another classic Ra composition dating all the way back to 1956. The A-section sets a serpentine, atonal melody atop an agitated up-and-down rhythm while the B-section suddenly unleashes contrastingly fast and furious swing changes. It is the perfect vehicle for Gilmore's prodigious talents and he does not disappoint here. Ra adds a pointed statement on piano before Gilmore leads the ensemble through the complex head to end. Some pitter-pattering percussion segues directly into "Song of the Sparer," a slow modal ballad introduced by Ra's piano. Held notes on saxophones, piccolo, flute, and trumpet outline subtly shifting, suspended harmonies over Ra's restless chord progression. It's an interesting piece, somewhat tentatively performed (apparently only this one time). The final track, "Spontaneous Simplicity," is possibly from an earlier concert (perhaps 1967), given the slightly different ambience and a noticeably smaller Arkestra. Prof. Campbell also suggests this is Gilmore on drums rather than Jarvis and, after close listening, I think that might be right. (If it's Jarvis, he is playing with uncharacteristic restraint!) In any event, Marshall Allen plays scrumptiously delicious flute along with Ra's delicate piano filigrees while Boykins holds down the two-note bass-line over a bed of gently percolating percussion. A beautiful example of one of Ra's patented "space ballads."

Despite the anomalous titling and sometimes ragged ensembles, this album is definitely worth hearing for the opportunity to hear the Arkestra in a live setting during this crucial (yet sparsely documented) period of transition.

Sun Ra and His Outer-Space Arkestra: "The Bridge" / "Rocket #9" (Saturn)

Sun Ra:

The Singles (Evidence CD)

Sun Ra:

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991

(Strut/Art Yard)

Released in 1968, Saturn 3066 is a seven-inch 45rpm single consisting of two tracks recorded at Sun Studio in 1967 and is available on The Singles. "The Bridge" is an accompanied recitation of Sun Ra's poem "The Fire and the Dry Weeds," which was later published in the 1972 edition of The Immeasurable Equation. Ra begins with spindly, echoing chords on electric organ and tremulous Clavioline until the horns and percussion enter with squalling, distorted space chords, tautly controlled by Ra's conducting. Mobarak Mahmoud (an aspiring actor then residing with the Arkestra) dramatically declaims the poem, his voice swathed in claustrophobic, bathroom reverb. At the climactic line "They must walk the bridge of the cosmic age!" the rest of the band joins in staggered, variously impassioned exclamations of "They must walk the bridge! They must walk the bridge!" Hmm. Some more keyboard noodling and a final, blasting space chord wraps things up in suitably enigmatic fashion. Curiously, "The Bridge" was reissued as a one-sided single in 1982, indicating that Ra considered the work to be of some inscrutable, talismanic importance. The flip-side, "Rocket #9," finds the Arkestra re-tooling the all-purpose space chant with a radically slowed tempo, transforming it into a kind of funky march from the boiling, bigband swing of the original version heard on Interstellar Low Ways. Ra leads the Arkestra from the delicate electronic celeste, spelling out melodic figures to be taken up by the horns. Unfortunately, the track abruptly cuts off before the bridge or solo sections. Incidentally, Terry Adams claims that he was given a copy of this single by Sun Ra himself and it is this riff-happy arrangement of "Rocket #9" that was adapted by NRBQ on their debut album in 1968.

035



Song of the Stargazers was released in 1979 and is mostly a hodgepodge of various live recordings from the 1970s. But one track was obviously recorded much earlier, probably in 1967 or 1968, according to Prof. Campbell. Performed in a large, reverberant space in front of a sizable and enthusiastic audience, "Cosmo Dance" is an interesting quasi-modal composition featuring some evocative flute and oboe. Clacking wooden sticks set up a simple, repetitious rhythm with Boykins's bass and Pat Patrick's "space lute" plucking out a droning three-note groove. Low horns and bowed bass enter with convulsively heaving whole-note fourths while flute and oboe and bass clarinet dance a medieval round. Flute and then oboe embark on expansive, Middle-Eastern sounding solos over the clacking sticks and throbbing bass/space lute, the audience bursting into spirited applause after each. Finally, the low horn/bowed bass whole-note fourths return, repeating several times before ending to more justifiably hearty ovation. Ra himself is not heard playing on this track, but the murky sound quality makes it hard to clearly make out who is doing what. Campbell says Marshall Allen is playing both flute and oboe, but that is impossible since both instruments are heard simultaneously during the ensemble section. So, is it Danny Davis on flute? It certainly sounds like him. There is also some talking barely audible throughout—is that Sun Ra lecturing the crowd or just random audience noise? In any event, this is a beautiful, prototypical Sun Ra composition of the period, perfectly realized by his Arkestra.

AN INTERGALACTIC-SPACE TRAVEL IN SOUND

SUN-RA
and his
ASTRO INFINITY ARKESTRA

AHANUS



Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: *Atlantis* (Evidence CD)

Sun Ra & His Astro-Solar Infinity Arkestra: "Blues on Planet Mars" / "Saturn Moon" (Saturn)

Sun Ra:

The Singles (Evidence CD)

Sun Ra:

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991 (Strut/Art Yard)

037

After a flurry of recording activity that began with the Arkestra's arrival in New York City in 1961 and culminated with the ESP-era recordings of 1965-1966, the following years (until about 1970) are, by comparison, sparsely documented, with individual tracks spread across various compilations, singles, and only a very few self-contained albums. So it seems to make sense to continue our chronological investigation with the albums proper (along with contemporaneous singles) before doubling back with the miscellaneous compilations that fill in the blanks. In other words, I'm putting off dealing with *The Solar Myth Approach Vols.* 1 & 2 until all else has been examined from this time period!

Which means we jump ahead a year to Atlantis, recorded in 1967. There are changes afoot in the band's sound: always an early adopter of technology, Ra can be heard on side A playing exclusively a Hohner Clavinet, a recently released electronic keyboard that was later popularized by Stevie Wonder (e.g. "Superstition" in 1972). Ra renames it the "Solar Sound Instrument" and plays it in his own inimitable fashion. Recorded in rehearsal at the Sun Studio (the Arkestra's rented townhouse located at 48 East Third Street in Manhattan's Lower East Side), these tracks feature a bare-bones Arkestra: Gilmore can be heard from time to time on tenor saxophone, but these pieces mostly feature Ra's clavinet over beds of percussion and sound more like sonic experiments than full-fledged compositions. But what interesting experiments!

"Mu" is a slow 5/4 clavinet vamp with Gilmore tentatively outlining an up and down melody. "Lemuria" is another 5/4 boogie with Gilmore laying down some heavy-duty riffing on top of Ra's extra-funky clavinet. "Yucatan" is a dreamy, modal ballad wherein Ra demonstrates his remarkably sensitive touch on the primitive electronic keyboard. Hartmut Geerken points out in the discography

that what sounds like electric bass is "actually two tightly interlaced African drum patterns!" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 136). "Bimini" consists of roiling polyrhythmic percussion with Ra interjecting some jabbing chords on the clavinet. The Evidence CD also includes an alternate version of "Yucatan" that mistakenly appeared on the 1973 reissue of *Atlantis* on Impulse! Actually, this track has nothing to do with the other composition of the same name but is rather another noisy percussion-fest interspersed with Ra's distinctive clavinet chording. A telephone rings, signaling a quick cadence to end.

The side-long title track was recorded live at the Olatunji Center of African Culture sometime after May, 1967, and is essentially one long Ra solo on the other new keyboard in his arsenal: a Gibson Kalamazoo organ. The Kalamazoo was a lower-priced copy of the Farfisa portable organ made famous by rock musicians of the time (think "96 Tears"). Ra attacks the instrument with unrelenting, two-fisted zeal, summoning forth a tsunami of sound that duly evokes the mythical flooding of Atlantis. It is a hair-raisingly terrifying performance and as menacingly psychedelic as any music of the period. After about fifteen assaultive minutes, an eerie calm sets in and the Arkestra plays an aching, moaning, richly voiced ensemble passage while Ra's screeching organ threatens to overwhelm. The tension continues to mount until it is almost unbearable—then suddenly Ra cues the space chant: "Sun Ra and his band from outer space have entertained you here..." Holy moly! As Michael Shore puts it in his liner notes on the Evidence CD, "Atlantis" is "frightening, fascinating, enthralling, and finally overpowering music...[It] is one of the most monumental achievements of an artist who was always working in super-colossal terms" (Shore 1993). Essential.

The Sun Studio session(s) also yielded a single released in 1969 and available on *The Singles*. "Blues on Planet Mars" is a typically spaced out blues, this time scored for the boing-ing clavinet and some lurching, cross-rhythmic percussion. The B-side, "Saturn Moon," is something else entirely: Ra sets up some droning, guitaristic accompaniment on the clavinet for the Arkestra's quietly majestic, harmonized humming while drums tap away ominously in the background. *Interesting!* Neither of these tracks would have conceptually fit on *Atlantis* but are intriguing works in themselves and I can understand why Ra thought them worthy of release as a single.

Sun Ra & His Solar-Myth Arkestra: The Solar Myth Approach, Vols. 1 & 2 (Charly 2CD)

038

The French record label BYG/Actuel was founded in March 1967 by Fernand Boruso, Jean-Luc Young, and Jean Georgakarakos (a.k.a. "Karakos") as an outgrowth of Actuel magazine, an underground arts journal active in the student protest movements of the time. In July, 1969, the Pan-African Arts Festival attracted a number of American musicians to Algiers, and photographer and hardcore jazz fan Jacques Bisceglia was enlisted to attract some of the expatriate Americans to Paris with a promise of paying work and the opportunity to record. A number of studio recordings were made that summer by such luminaries as Don Cherry, Archie Shepp, Anthony Braxton, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and Dave Burrell. The label also planned an Actuel Festival to be held in Paris, but the French government denied them permission given their (tenuous) connection to the riots of 1968. The festival finally occurred in October, 1969 in the Belgian town of Amougies and while it was an economic disaster, the music was excellent and provided further material for the fledgling label. By 1972, BYG/Actuel had released almost fifty LPs documenting the cream of American and European free jazz and experimental musicians, but financial difficulties caused the partnership to disintegrate into acrimonious litigation and eventual bankruptcy. The original albums, with their striking graphic design by Claude Caudron, quickly fell out of print and remain valuable collector's items today. Accusations of impropriety have tainted the label ever since its dissolution, and bootlegged editions of certain titles (including this one) have been widely available over the years, lending credence to these allegations. Georgakarakos went on to found Celluloid while Young started Charly, small record labels with their own reputations for questionable business practices. Nevertheless, in 2002, Charly commissioned Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and journalist Byron Coley to curate Jazzactuel, a three-CD box set of highlights from the BYG era. For a few years thereafter, legitimate (and, later, not-so-legitimate) reissues of the catalog started appearing on the market. (Currently, the BYG/Actuel label has been seemingly resurrected and is re-releasing titles on LP only, but I haven't heard any of them.) Ethical issues aside, the music is uniformly wonderful and well worth seeking out.

Sun Ra himself was unable to personally attend the festivities in Europe, but instead compiled two LPs worth of music for the label entitled Solar Myth Approach Volumes 1 and 2, which were released as BYG/Actuel 529.340 and 629.341 in 1972, toward the end of the label's existence. Consisting of various recordings made between 1967 and 1970, each volume is carefully sequenced to highlight the most avant-garde, experimental and downright trippy elements of the Arkestra's music while remaining satisfyingly coherent. "Spectrum" sets the mood, opening Volume 1 with thick, dissonant chords that rise and fall over the ominous heartheat of Ra's clavinet. Meanwhile, Gilmore blows tightly controlled overtones on tenor with Patrick asserting angular counter-figures on baritone sax. The drummer-less texture sounds more like contemporary classical music than any kind of "jazz" but the following track, "Realm of Lightening," features clattering clouds of trash-can percussion and blatting trombones over a hypnotic, repeated bass line. Things briefly settle down with a lovely rendition of "The Satellites Are Spinning," taken at a lugubrious tempo with June Tyson and Gilmore singing in unison over Ra's rhapsodic clavinet and some softly supportive hand drums. "Legend" is the centerpiece of the album, an astounding ten-minute excursion for straining trombones and frenzied oboes, with Gilmore and Ra engaged in pitched battle, Sonny attacking the clavinet with an unusually Cecil Taylor-ian aggression. "Seen III, Took 4" is another inventive Minimoog solo from 1970. By de-tuning the oscillators and with a call and response form, Ra simulates polyphony on the monophonic instrument, adding creative volume swells and filter and ring modulator effects, and ending with swooning pitch bends. "They'll Come Back" is a short but tantalizing composition that calls to mind both Bélá Bartok and Duke Ellington with its interlude of fiercely rumbling piano and ringing, childlike celeste before a dramatic full stop and beautifully rendered coda. Volume 1 closes with "Adventures of Bugs Hunter," which starts out as a groovily choogling number for Ra's funky clavinet and Boykin's rock-solid bass. But then Marshall Allen intercedes with some ear-piercing piccolo, in a deliberately contrary key and rhythm, all of which is swathed in Hunter's patented echo/reverb effect. Far out, man! A perfect ending to an adventurous LP.

Volume 2 is perhaps even more intense, opening with "The Utter Nots," another minimalist composition for maximalist Arkestra, consisting of an insistent one-note figure interspersed with blasting space chords, Jarvis pounding away on drums. A series of energetic, wide-ranging solos (buttressed by Ra's crazy, out-of-tune piano) builds up cresting waves of tension and release across the track's eleven minutes, culminating in Danny Davis's achingly overblown alto clarinet. The lilting space chant "Outer Spaceways, Inc." offers a bare minute of respite, with droning trombone and bassoon combined with Ra's twanging clavinet, while Tyson and Gilmore enticingly sing: If you find Earth boring, just the same old same thing/ Come on sign up with Outer Spaceways, Incorporated. "Scene 1, Take 1" is another epic Minimoog solo, over eight minutes of thoughtful knob-twisting, wah-wah-ing filter effects, buzzing noise, and farting, sustained pitches. The piece ends with an almost Vangelis-like swirling fade-out. Ra turns to clavinet solo on "Pyramids," at times sounding more like a harpsichord or Spanish guitar on this moody, harmonically shiftless set-piece. "Interpretation" presents another delightful Strange Strings session, recorded in spacious and spacey stereo. Sadly, the fragile instruments were destroyed when the Arkestra's van careened off the road on the way back from their second trip to California in 1969, making this the last known recording of Ra's own "scratch orchestra." Up next is a ponderous re-make of "Ancient Ethiopia" (originally titled "Ancient Aiethiopia" on the 1959 Saturn LP, Jazz in Silhouette), with Allen musing on low-register flute and Ra scattering chords around the piano's tinkling, uppermost range. Volume 2 ends with "Strange Worlds," a live recording from around 1969 or 1970. Ra's organ and Akh Tal Ebah's "space dimension mellophone" conjure up a spooky atmosphere and the music moves through various moods and feelings leading up to Tyson's solemn declamations regarding the strangeness of the world. Suddenly, big, high-tension space chords unleash torrents of squalling horn solos, Ra furiously assaulting the Gibson Kalamazoo with his fists and elbows. Then, everything stops cold. Is it live or a deft edit? Either way, it's a powerful conclusion to another mind-blowing album. Essential.



039

Sun Ra and His Arkestra: The Electric Circus, New York, NY, April 1968 (AUD CDR)

Sun Ra:

Newport Jazz Festival - The Electric Circus (Transparency)

I do not intend to write very much about the myriad audience or soundboard tapes, FM broadcasts, videos or other bootleg-type material which circulates amongst Ra collectors because, for one thing, I do not have it all and, for another, I do not really want it all! Let's face it, I'm already feeling overwhelmed by Ra's official discography! And so while such recordings (and I do have quite a few) are sometimes of extremely high quality, they are simply outside the scope of what I'm trying to do with Sun Ra Sunday. Be that as it may, this ninety-minute concert fragment is worth a mention here.

The Electric Circus was a hippie hang-out located on St. Mark's Place in New York City and the Arkestra's appearance at this venue (and the fact that some unknown fan decided to make this audience recording) demonstrates how Ra's music and its audience were changing during this period. Recorded in mono, likely with a single microphone to a reel-to-reel machine, the sound quality is not too bad, all things considered, and it provides a singular glimpse into an Arkestra in transition ca. April 1968.

The tape fades in with "Lights on a Satellite," already in progress. Horns and flute choir play the singsong-ing melody a few times over the sensuous rhumba rhythms before giving way to a frenetically twanging and clanging clavinet solo by Ra—his attack is so ferocious the instrument's delicate times quickly drift out of tune. Nevertheless, Ra charges into the bouncing ostinato of "Friendly Galaxy." The largish Arkestra sounds a bit tentative on the twisting, asymmetrical ensemble section, but once a solid groove is established, a lengthy sequence of solos and percussion jams is absolutely mesmerizing, with Alan Silva's cello giving this section an eerie, almost "Strange Strings" feeling. After bringing things to a full boil, Ra reintroduces the up-and-down bassline while the Arkestra gracefully elides the slip-sliding melodies ending with an exquisite, extended ritardando. After some polite applause, Ra introduces "The Satellites Are Spinning" and the Arkestra takes up

the chant over a slinky groove. Sadly, it fades out after only a couple of minutes.

An untitled improvisation follows, fading up mid-oboe solo, sailing over throbbing African percussion, Silva's cello singing along with Ronnie Boykins's bowed bass. The piece moves through various moods and instrumental groupings (notably more oboes and French horn, of all things), climaxing with an aggressively apocalyptic organ solo by Ra. As the sonic fallout subsides, a child's wailing and screaming perfectly blends with the moaning and sighing horns. Unfortunately, the tape cuts off just as things start to heat up again. With a hearty chant of "Calling Planet Earth!," the Arkestra rips into some full-bore group-improv energy-music which, unfortunately, gives way to an overlong drum solo from Clifford Jarvis. Oh well. Next up, an early version of "Somebody Else's Idea" is chanted rather than sung by an unidentified female vocalist—definitely not June Tyson. This is very interesting as it suggests that Ra was looking to add a female vocalist to the Arkestra prior to Tyson's appearance on the scene later that summer/fall. After choogling along for several minutes, Ra signals the ending with some emphatic, churchy organ chords that lead into the gentle "space ballad" "Spontaneous Simplicity," a vehicle for Marshall Allen's mellifluous flute. But as the percussion gets heavier and Ra's organ gets more dissonant and distorted, the music verges on the kind of dark funk Miles Davis would get to later on in the 1970s. And from there it disintegrates into a caustic noise fest that brings to mind primal Sonic Youth before returning to the burbling exotica of the theme. Incredible! Then Ra's quivering organ tones introduce the whackedout big-band number "Space Aura," wherein John Gilmore is finally given an opportunity to shine on tenor saxophone, engaging in a fiery duo with Jarvis à la Interstellar Space before launching into an astonishingly virtuosic a cappella solo which elicits some enthusiastic cheering from the audience. Ra then re-enters with the theme just as the tape begins to fade out.

Despite the sometimes rough sound quality and some unfortunate edits, this audience recording is definitely worth seeking out for the opportunity to hear an expanded Arkestra performing at one of New York's grooviest nightclubs at the height of the psychedelic sixties. Here is the blueprint for the wildly expansive "Cosmo Drama" that would expand and evolve throughout the 1970s. Fascinating stuff!

040

Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)/ Sun Ra & His Myth Science Arkestra: A Black Mass (Son Boy 1 CD)

The controversial writer/activist LeRoi Jones was a fellow denizen of Greenwich Village and an early, influential supporter of Sun Ra's music in New York. After the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, Jones changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka, moved to Harlem, and founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS). Sun Ra remained downtown, but he was intensely active in the short-lived institution, making the trip to the Harlem office "almost daily" (Szwed 1997, 210). However, BARTS quickly disintegrated and Baraka decamped to his hometown in Newark, New Jersey, where he established Spirit House in a rented one-family dwelling. The first floor's interior walls were removed to create performance/work space that would also come to house a book store and a record label, provocatively named Jihad.

A Black Mass was written in 1965 and published in Four Black Revolutionary Plays (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). It was first performed at Procter's Theater in Newark in May, 1966, with Sun Ra's Myth Science Arkestra supplying incidental music. The Arkestra shared the stage with the actors and improvised its parts by following cues in the script such as "Sun-Ra music of shattering dimension" or by interjecting music or percussion amidst the actors' speaking lines. For Jihad's first LP in 1968, Baraka enlisted members of the Black Arts troupe and the Arkestra to record the play, loosely based upon the Muslim myth of Yacub, wherein an evil white monster is accidentally created by an overly curious black magician. Despite the overt racial prejudice inherent in the work, Szwed helpfully points out that, "in Baraka's retelling, it is the aesthetic impulse gone astray which is at center... a violation of the spirit of the black aesthetic" (Szwed 1997, 211). Baraka reinforces this message in the liner notes to this CD reissue: "Art is creation and... we must oppose the 'creation of what does not need to be created" (Baraka 1999). Even so, the play presents a number of problems for white listeners such as me!

The work begins with a brief guided improvisation by the Arkestra which introduces the actors, who enter humming and singing the melody to "The Satellites Are Spinning," a theme which runs throughout the play as a kind of leitmotiv. Unfortunately, the recording is crude and the acting is stagy and way melodramatic. Here is a representative declamation: "What we do not know does not exist. We know beyond knowing. Knowing there is nothing to know. Everything is everything." A chorus of women screeches and screams when the white devil is unleashed. Meanwhile, the Arkestra keeps a running commentary varying from splattery percussion and the plinking of "strange strings" to alternatively aggressive and spacey organ/clavinet workouts or dissonant, massed space chords. Occasionally, horns make succinct solo statements or engage in vocalized call and response with the actors. Despite the ponderous, heavy-handed rhetoric, Baraka's play surely appealed to Sun Ra's own black sci-fi mythology, even if Ra's musico-philosophy was more ecumenical than insurgent. Interestingly, Szwed takes pains to demonstrate Ra's influence on Baraka's thinking during this period: "[Ra] is there in [Baraka's] historical allusions, in the tone and pitches of his reading, in his sense of the importance of language, and in his consciousness of the possibilities of playing the spoken word against the written, unleashing the phonetics buried in the printed word" (Szwed 1997, 209). Baraka would continue to be an important advocate for Sun Ra and his music. In Eulogies (1996), Baraka wrote: "Ra was so far out because he had the true self-consciousness of the Afro American intellectual artist revolutionary..." (quoted in Szwed 1997, 209). Yes, but A Black Mass seems to me a dangerously incendiary piece of sixties countercultural history and a difficult, painful listen, despite the sometimes interesting music.

Sun Ra and His Arkestra:

041

Newport Jazz Festival, Newport, RI, July 3, 1969 (AUD CDR) Sun Ra:

Newport Jazz Festival - The Electric Circus (Transparency)

The Arkestra's transformation from obscure, local oddballs into the restlessly world-touring juggernaut it eventually became was a long time coming. From the mid-1950s until 1961, Sun Ra was known (if at all) only in and around Chicago, and a doomed excursion to Montréal left the Arkestra stranded in New York City, impoverished and almost virtually unknown. Yet Sonny persevered with the small group of musicians that remained, rehearsing, recording, and picking up gigs here and there around the city, barely eking out a precarious existence. It really wasn't until ESP-Disk' released Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1 in 1965 that Ra's reputation slowly began to spread beyond the confines of New York (and Chicago) and allowed for larger ensembles and the growth of his homegrown Saturn record label, which would proceed to document a lot of previously unheard music. Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 2 appeared in 1966, followed by a brief tour of New York State colleges (which yielded Nothing Is, released in 1969). Significantly, the Arkestra began a long-term Monday night residency at Slug's Saloon in 1966, and the regular paying work attracted fresh young musicians to Sun Ra's interplanetary big-band concept. With an enlarged band of more or less dedicated musicians with which to work, Ra began to develop his unique stage show, which he dubbed "The Cosmo Drama" or "Myth-Ritual."

Ra believed music could change the people of Earth and that myth was "something that's greater than truth" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 256). The truth is something too horrible to contemplate; but through myths about the future told with music, Ra hoped to demonstrate that the impossible could become possible. Szwed sums up Ra's musico-philosophy thusly: "The future that people talk about is no good; we need to do the impossible, for everything possible has been tried and has failed. Truth (the possible) equals death; but myth (the impossible) equals immortality...Music could be used to coordinate minds. It could touch the unknown part of the person, awaken the part of them that we're not able to talk to, the

spirit" (Szwed 1997, 256). The Cosmo Drama would often begin with the "thunder drum" alone with the staggered entry of the ensemble, dancing and banging on percussion instruments, leading into a group improvisation before Ra himself would make his dramatic appearance. Various original compositions, conducted improvisations, big-band rave-ups, solos and duos, space chants and oracular proclamations would proceed across sometimes vast expanses of time, ending with an extended, dancing exit, everyone joyfully singing "We Travel the Spaceways." While the overall structure of the Cosmo Drama would remain relatively fixed, the sequence of events was finely tailored to the venue and audience vibe: according to Danny Thompson, the Arkestra had "as many as fifteen different arrangements of the same piece—such as "El Is the Sound of Joy"—and any one might be used. It was adjusted to the time, the city, to what people need to hear" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 259). The astounding, wide-ranging music, the musician's outrageous theatricality and fanciful costumes combined with colorful stage lights, films, and slideshows could make for an over-stimulated, multisensory "happening" that suited the times.

By 1968, the United States found itself suffering from violent convulsions as the civil rights and anti-war movements gathered momentum, and self-styled intellectuals, college students, Black Nationalists, hippies, and Yippies alike were all drawn to Ra's spaced-out mysticism, the Arkestra's high-spirited musicianship, and the accompanying quasi-psychedelic spectacle, although the mainstream "jazz" community remained mystified and dismissive. Sun Ra made his Carnegie Hall debut in April and the New Yorker dismissed it out of hand: "It wasn't a good movie, and it wasn't a good concert, and it wasn't good Dadism. It wasn't even adept puton" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 254). Despite such withering condescension, Sonny was finding his audience. In June, the activist/agitator John Sinclair brought the Arkestra to Detroit to open for the radical, proto-punk rock band, MC5, at Wayne State University. The MC5 so revered Sun Ra, they co-credited "Starship" with him on their debut album, Kick Out the Jams (Elektra).

Singer/dancer June Tyson had joined the Arkestra by the fall of 1968 and in December, the Arkestra made its first trip to California, playing concerts at the College of Marin, San Jose State College, the Oakland Auditorium Theatre, and the San Francisco Art Institute.

They made a second, more successful, journey to the west coast in April 1969, where they appeared at the University of Santa Clara, two nights at Dorsey High School in Los Angeles, U.C. Davis, and the suspiciously named Maryjane Coffeehouse in Sacramento. However, on their way back east the Arkestra's van overturned on Route 80 between Fernely and Lovelock, Nevada. Thankfully no one was injured, but most of the fragile *Strange Strings* instruments were completely destroyed. Sinclair again hosted the Arkestra for the Detroit Rock and Roll Revival at the Michigan State Fairgrounds in May, where they shared a bill with MC5, The Stooges, Ted Nugent, The Amboy Dukes, and Chuck Berry.

In a measure of the Arkestra's new-found prestige, they were invited to appear before 4,000 people at the famed Newport Jazz Festival on July 3, 1969. However, the Arkestra's interplanetary extravaganza must have seemed comically out of place amidst the staid conventionality of Phil Woods and Kenny Burrell, with whom they shared the bill. It also didn't help that it rained all day at the outdoor festival, and the audience's reaction to Ra's performance was lukewarm at best. However, a thirty-six minute audience tape survives and shows the Arkestra in full flight, making no concessions whatsoever to the elitist, patrician atmosphere. To be sure, the sound quality is pretty dreadful, but an approximation of the music can be discerned amidst the murk.

The tape opens in the middle of one of those roiling dark funk jams with piercing shards of dissonant organ and braying horns. Suddenly, the ensemble plays a sweet-sounding sectional right out of the 1940s—until the ending fermatas swell into universe-shattering space chords. This is a very interesting composition (whose title is presently unknown); perhaps it is a precursor to the famous "Discipline" series of compositions Ra would begin in the 1970s (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 151). Ra then wrestles the band into a blistering rendition of the fiendishly complicated "Shadow World" which quickly segues into a gospelish space chant, "Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds," which quotes liberally from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." A crazed keyboard intro summons up a quick rendition of "Velvet," with Ra's distorted organ sound adding a grating, industrial texture to this otherwise swinging big-band number, which elicits some rather tepid applause at the end. June Tyson then sings "Outer Space (Is a Pleasant Place)" in a pure, soulful tone over a skittering, atonal accompaniment. Soon, however, the instruments take over with some raging sonic chaos which gives way to a mad-scientist organ solo. Ra then introduces the loping groove of "Exotic Forest," a vehicle for Marshall Allen's intensely scurrying oboe and Ra's apocalyptic organ. A quick blast through the fanfare and percussion fest of "Watusi" leads to the cartoony group singalong "Enlightenment" and the Tyson-led space chant "Somebody Else's Idea," which cuts off after a minute and forty-eight seconds. This tape is a fascinating glimpse of one of the Arkestra's first high-profile gigs, but the atrocious sound quality will repel everyone but the most committed fan.

Besides their continued intermittent residency at Slug's, a few gigs at the Red Garter, and their infamous Carnegie Hall debut, the Arkestra played some of the more luxurious New York venues in 1968 and 1969, including a month-long run at the Garrick Theatre, a stint at the Squat Theater, and even a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Opera House. No matter what the establishment critics and jazz traditionalists thought about Sun Ra, it was becoming apparent that he knew how to put on a show and could draw a paying audience. The Arkestra would be on the road constantly from this time forward and would make their first trip to Europe in 1970, beginning an era of non-stop traveling of the world. bringing the Cosmo Drama and Myth Rituals to the people of the Earth. After a period of scant documentation, the discography begins to overflow with live albums, radio broadcasts, and, yes, audience recordings. Sorting out the 1970s is the task ahead here on Sun Ra Sunday.

Sun Ra and His Astro-Solar Infinity Arkestra: My Brother the Wind (Saturn)

042

The advent of the transistor enabled Robert Moog to develop the first modular synthesizer in the early 1960s, and by late 1969 a truly portable synthesizer, the now legendary Minimoog, was already in development. Sun Ra was naturally intrigued by the instrument, with its cutting-edge technology and ability to make truly otherworldly sounds. But in a 1970 *DownBeat* interview, Ra emphasized that synthesizers were not just weird noise machines or souped-up organs:

The main point concerning the synthesizer is the same as in all other instruments, that is, its capacity for the projection of feeling. This will not be determined in a large degree just by the instrument itself, but always in music, by the musician who plays the instrument. (quoted in Szwed 1997, 277)

Indeed, Ra's approach to the Moog synthesizer was altogether different than the instrument's later popularizers. In late 1969, and with the financial support of T.S. Mims, Jr., Ra obtained two prototype models (in order to achieve two-voice polyphony from the monophonic instruments) and booked time at Variety Recording Studio in New York City. He brought along only Gilmore (who mostly plays drums), Marshall Allen, and Danny Davis for the occasion. In addition, pianist/synthesist Gershon Kingsley was hired to program the synthesizer according to Ra's wishes. According to Mims, "It was a duel between Kingsley programming and Sun Ra playing" (quoted in Campbell and Trent 2000, 152).

The title track consists of two wildly contrasting Moog voices: a breathy whistle in the high register and a thick, reedy interval in the bass, with Gilmore supplying some credible free drums. Ra's two-hand independence and control of the highly differentiated textures is really quite remarkable. "Intergalactic II" pits the boing-boing-ing Moogs against braying horns. Gilmore turns in another

typically riveting solo before hopping back on the drums to propel a dual alto sax extravaganza. Hypnotic synthesizer interludes set up some misty textures for the horns at the end. "To Nature's God" features resonant, bell-like sounds on one Moog while the other rumbles around with a rounded, woody bass tone. Meanwhile, Allen and Davis twirl around on piccolo and flute and Gilmore lays down lurching, asymmetrical funk beats.

While the preceding pieces sound a bit like interesting but tentative experiments, "The Code of Interdependence" is more fully realized—a well-considered, conducted improvisation. Clocking in at a near-epic sixteen minutes, Ra explores the outer limits of the Moogs' expressive abilities while Gilmore's drumming provides a remarkably supple, shape-shifting drive. Gilmore is not only a tenor saxophone colossus but a better-than-serviceable drummer as well! Davis sounds great on the rarely heard alto clarinet as he interweaves the sinewy horn with Ra's spiraling synthesizers. Later on, Davis takes up the alto saxophone and again duets with Allen. Amazingly, Ra's Moog textures subtly evolve over the course of the piece—whether by his own knob twiddling or Kingsley's, who knows? He builds up the variegated intensities until Allen breaks through with a taut but assertive solo on alto sax. As the pressure subsides, Ra spins delicate webs of unearthly tones to end. According to Campbell, this piece was deliberately speeded up and mastered out of phase, lending it a sort of humanly-impossible quality that only adds to its considerable mystique. My Brother the Wind is essential Sun Ra and a great example of his innovative artistry on early electronic keyboards. The Minimoog would remain a staple of Ra's arsenal for the next decade and beyond.



Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra: The Night of the Purple Moon (Atavistic CD)

In mid-1970, Sun Ra reentered Variety Recording Studio, this time with a bare-bones Arkestra and yet another new electronic keyboard in tow, the RMI Rocksichord. In his perceptive liner notes to this CD, John Corbett describes the sound of the Rocksichord as an "unforgettable nasal quack" (Corbett 2007a), and that's a pretty accurate description of this primitive, transistorized electric piano. In another person's hands, this would sound cheesy and (now) hopelessly out of date. But Ra builds solid, evocative compositions around the instrument and it is, inexplicably, just exactly perfect. Unfortunately, the original tapes were unsalvageable, so this reissue had to be sourced from a clean LP. There's plenty of surface noise present, so at least we can be thankful the producers didn't get carried away with the noise reduction and de-clicking, which can often just make things worse. Although Impulse! was prepared to reissue this album in the late-1970s, it has remained an ultra-rare artifact until Atavistic released this CD in 2007. Despite the lessthan-perfect sound-quality, The Night of the Purple Moon is one of the great Sun Ra albums—and one of my favorite albums of all time.

Gilmore plays mostly drums throughout, only pulling out the tenor saxophone for "Impromptu Festival," where Danny Davis sits in on the drum stool. While neither were virtuoso drummers, they were more than adequate and, most importantly, well understood the unique rhythmic feel of Ra's music. Stafford James produces a beautiful, rounded tone on the electric bass, at times almost sounding like an upright acoustic. Sadly, this was James's only recorded appearance with the Arkestra. "Sun Earth Rock" sets the tone with the quacking Rocksichord changes over a medium groove and a simple, bluesy head. After a bouncy keyboard interlude, Davis peals off a brief, but astonishingly fluent alto sax solo. "The All of Everything" is a pretty ballad with Davis adding some mellifluous flute to Ra's gently rippling chords. Gilmore's tenor solo on "Impromptu Festival" is another example of his sheer genius: opening with a

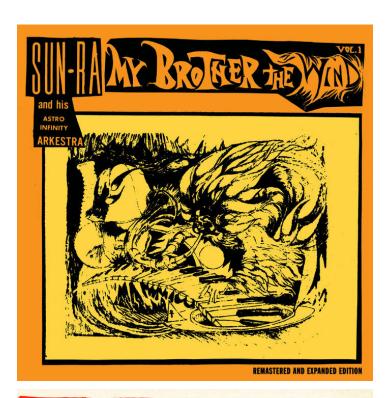
sort of fanfare, he bends and twists the two-note melody and massages the stiff, pre-bop rhythms to construct a trenchant, incisive statement.

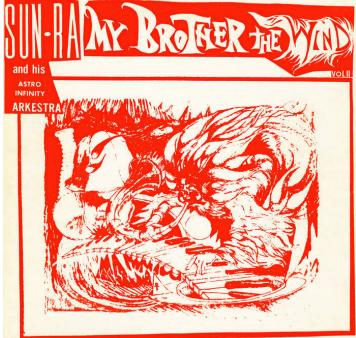
The next three tracks feature Sonny alone with two Minimoogs and the Rocksichord, but unlike the experimental improvisations found of *My Brother the Wind Vol. II*, these pieces are tautly controlled compositions orchestrated for electronic keyboards. "Blue Soul" is a typically moody, down-tempo blues, while "Narrative" sets a loping, asymmetrical bass line on synthesizer against stabbing chords and busy melodic figures on the Rocksichord. "Outside the Time Zone" takes a rubato ballad form and puts the melody in the bass synthesizer, embellished with buzzing, quivering Rocksichord.

The ensemble returns with "The Night of the Purple Moon," which sets up a blues-rock vamp for bass and drums while Ra noodles around in a quasi-Egyptian mode. A tremolo effect gives the Rocksichord a fluttering, psychedelic tinge. "A Bird's Eye View of Man's World" pits lurching bass and Rocksichord unisons against Davis's squealing alto, while Gilmore drifts in and out of time with free abandon. "21st Century Romance" is another lilting ballad, with James holding down a throbbing pedal point with Gilmore's simple but effective drumming. Meanwhile, Davis extemporizes on the richly woody alto clarinet along with Ra's thrumming Rocksichord. "Dance of the Living Image" choogles along with a repeating ostinato and Davis tapping away on bongos. The album closes with a relaxed performance of "Love in Outer Space," a tune which was to become a staple in the Arkestra's songbook. Davis alternates between alto clarinet and bongos, leaving most of the musical space to Ra's percolating Rocksichord.

For this CD reissue, Atavistic has conveniently added the alternate version of "Love in Outer Space" that was previously issued on Out There a Minute. Taken at a slightly faster tempo, this version follows a similar contour, but is perhaps a more satisfying performance due to Ra's interestingly varied electronic timbres. Three additional bonus tracks are also included, derived from a 1964 home recording of Sonny soloing on Wurlitzer electric piano and electric celesta. The Wurlitzer sounds a little worse for wear, but the damaged instrument creates interesting percussive, overtone-laden effects which mesh nicely with the ringing, bell-like celesta. While these tracks are mostly inconsequential, they are conceptually

similar to the Minimoog and Rocksichord solos found on the album proper and serve to further demonstrate Ra's brilliantly coloristic approach to electronics. An appropriate appendix to a near-perfect album.





044

In early 1970, Sun Ra returned to Variety Recording Studio with an enlarged Arkestra, including vocalist June Tyson. Tyson had begun working with the band in 1968 at the recommendation of Sonny's part-time manager, Lem Roebuck, but this is her first appearance on record. While Tyson was an integral feature of the Arkestra's live concerts, with her lush singing voice and flowing dance movements, a woman's full-time presence in the band posed some problems. Sonny considered her family since she was married to the Arkestra's lighting designer, Richard Wilkinson, but Ra was patriarchal, if not downright chauvinistic in his attitudes: "I can't create with women in my environment" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 250). Nevertheless, Tyson became a close confidant to Ra and remained a steadfast member of the Arkestra until her death in 1992.

She sings beautifully on the lilting space chant "Somebody Else's World" and on the slinky, jazz-funk number, "Walking on the Moon," obviously written in response to the Apollo moon landing in July, 1969. Ra also has another new keyboard in tow, a mellow-toned Farfisa organ, which gives these tracks what Robert L. Campbell aptly describes as "spaced-out barbecue music" (quoted in Ephland 1992). "Otherness Blue" is another mid-tempo, off-kilter blues, featuring some tasty trumpet work from Kwame Hadi. "Pleasant Twilight" starts out as a bright, swinging big-band tune, but a rubato section opens up space for Gilmore to blow sweetly on tenor saxophone before the melody returns at half-tempo to end. "Somewhere Else" begins with a fat, lurching riff over a stiff rhythm section, which eventually launches into some medium swing. Short solos come and go while the Arkestra tosses around variations on the opening riff. "Contrast" opens with some squeaking, honking baritone saxophone from Pat Patrick with Alejandro Blake jumping in with furiously plucked bass. Then Ra enters with some sustained, suspended chords and Marshall Allen wails away on oboe, the sound wrapped in think reverb (was Tommy Hunter present?) until fading out.

The remainder of the album is taken up with five brief synthesizer experiments, something of a suite for solo Minimoog wherein Ra, having purchased a brand new Minimoog of his own, conjures up apocalyptic clouds of cosmic noise. "The Wind Speaks" explores white noise and fluttering filter effects, while "Sun Thoughts" focuses on sour intervals and swooping, sea-sick portamentos. "Journey to the Stars" uses the ADSR envelope filter to create wah-wahing attacks and swelling sustained notes, while "World of Myth 'I'" consists of knob-turning pitch-shifting. Finally, "The Design— Cosmos II" conjures up some resonant, bell-tone sounds, with increasingly busy atonal melodies scattered over a repeating bass note. While these tracks may sound a bit tentative, the Minimoog would become a fixture of Ra's keyboard arsenal in the 1970s, and most concerts would feature a lengthy synthesizer solo full of apocalyptic bombast. Unfortunately, My Brother the Wind, Vol. II comes across as kind of schizophrenic: some of this material is the most toe-tappingly accessible in all of the discography, but the Moog experiments are tough going for even the most committed fan. Even so, this is an essential album and a necessary companion to Vol. I.

Another track found on *Out There a Minute* was likely recorded at this session (or shortly thereafter). Entitled "Jazz and Romantic Sounds," it fits right in, with Ra's bluesy, juke-joint organ and Marshall Allen's impassioned solo, with Pat Patrick interjecting a honking riff here and there. It unexpectedly ends with a weird cadence and a minute or so of spaced-out bliss before fading out. Nice.

045 Interlude: 1967-1970

Although the Arkestra was finding an increasing amount of paying work during the late 1960s, maintaining a residence in Manhattan was becoming untenable. Szwed describes the situation and the subsequent move to Philadelphia, what Ra called "the city Brotherly shove," the 'worst place in America," 'the headquarters of the devil in disguise'" (Szwed 1997, 266).

Philadelphia was perhaps not quite as bad as all that; the Morton Street house remained Ra's headquarters for the rest of his life. To this day, Marshall Allen still lives there where he continues to conduct the posthumous Arkestra's business. Nevertheless, the move to Philadelphia was disruptive. In 1968, Ra's music was still virtually unknown outside of New York (and perhaps Chicago), so recruiting competent musicians was more difficult and, with much of the Arkestra scattered across the eastern seaboard, the more intricate ensemble pieces and swing-era showpieces of the old repertoire suffered from inadequate rehearsal time. Philadelphia also lacked a thriving jazz scene, so any paying work would entail travelling back and forth to New York City. Soon, relentless travelling would come to define the Arkestra's existence: first out to California, then to Europe and beyond.

By mid-1970, everything was in place for the next phase of Sun Ra's earthly journey, a great adventure that would take him around the planet as the intergalactic cosmic messenger of space-age jazz. Always an early-adopter of new technology, Sonny had acquired the latest electronic keyboards: a Hohner Clavinet, a Gibson Kalamazoo organ, a more deluxe Farisa, the RMI Rocksichord electric piano, and a Moog Minimoog monophonic synthesizer. Along with the acoustic piano, these instruments would comprise his arsenal throughout the 1970s. On stage, Ra appeared to be piloting a spaceship from behind his cockpit of keyboards with their myriad knobs, switches, and twinkling lights. The core members of the Arkestra were by now wholly committed to Ra's expansive vision; brass

players and rhythm section members would come and go, but these musicians would remain stalwart accomplices to the end. Sonny was refining his compositional approach, writing specifically for these core musicians and incorporating conducted improvisations into the structure of his compositions. Soon he would embark on his ambitious "Discipline" series (which eventually numbered well over one hundred titles), each of which builds insanely complex structures out of the simplest materials. With the addition of June Tyson and other singer/dancers along with a full-blown light show, Sun Ra was transforming live performances into a ritualized "cosmo drama" full of theatrical choreography, sanctified exhortations, elaborate space chants, and maniacal percussion workouts—perfect for the psychedelic-ized audiences of the time. But at the same time, Ra could now rely on his "micro-Arkestra" consisting of John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, and Danny Davis to realize any new music, as The Night of the Purple Moon so ably demonstrates.

Aside from the handful of albums we've just discussed, this transformative period from 1967 to 1970 is (relatively speaking) sparsely documented, and various and sundry tracks only appear on a handful of compilations which were issued in later years.

Sun Ra Arkestra: The Red Garter, New York City ca. July, 1970 (AUD CDR) Sun Ra Arkestra: Live At The Red Garter (Transparency)

According to photographer Lee Santa, Sun Ra's Arkestra played a three-night engagement at the Red Garter (now known as the Bottom Line) in Greenwich Village in early July 1970. The nightclub's "obtrusive Gay '90s décor" can be seen in Santa's photograph which appeared on the original cover of *The Solar Myth Approach*, Vol. 1. Santa recalled that "the first night featured six hours of continuous music; the second and third nights slacked off to a mere five hours, without a break" (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 161). It must have been something to behold.

Fortunately, an intrepid fan surreptitiously recorded a seventy-five-minute segment one night utilizing a very primitive recording device and, while the sound quality is typically horrid, the music itself is terrific. How bad does it sound? Well, the volume levels fluctuate wildly while consistently retaining a significant amount of distortion; there's some serious wow and flutter issues; and the monophonic, single-microphone recording is boomy, muddy, and generally indistinct. It doesn't sound quite as bad as the Newport Jazz Festival recording, but it also doesn't sound nearly as good as the Electric Circus tape. Let's face it: your cell phone could make a far better-sounding recording. Nevertheless, the large-ish ensemble sounds particularly well-rehearsed (perhaps in preparation for their upcoming trip to France) and the free-wheeling performance goes to some very interesting places. For the hardcore Ra fanatic, this is well worth hearing as a rare historical document, but most people will be understandably repulsed.

The Transparency release presents an expanded version of the Red Garter show across two CDs along with a third disc containing 82 photographs of the band by Santa—a really nice bonus. The show is taken from a slightly better source than the circulating CDR as it is a bit longer and appears to present the music in its proper sequence. Certainly, the sound quality is marginally improved. But make no mistake: this is rough going. All the attendant noise,

distortion, and balance problems remain intact. While the music is great (featuring the great Alan Silva on cello), the sound quality is still pretty dreadful.

Caveats aside, the performance captured on this amateur recording is really quite stunning, beginning with a long unidentified title that alternates between a spacey, mellow groove and full-blast assaults of New Thing-styled energy music. Solos by John Gilmore on tenor sax and Ra on mad-scientist organ keep things interesting, ending with Danny Davis's woody alto clarinet interweaving with the Arkestra's antiphonal calls and responses. "Love in Outer Space" follows: a loping bassline holds down the jaunty groove while the entire Arkestra gleefully bangs on myriad percussion instruments, with Ra stating the simple, joyful melody and soloing on electric organ. After a brief pause, Ra segues into a quiet, spooky organ improvisation accompanied by Alan Silva's distinctive cello. After about five minutes, the horns enter with a curiously old fashioned, rubato ballad composition (title unknown) that eventually settles into a gentle swing. Kwame Hadi takes an adventurous turn on trumpet, with Ra rumbling away on organ. Pat Patrick follows with a typically ferocious bari-sax solo while the rhythm heats up and shifting horn sections provide riffing punctuation. After settling back down, the horns return with the old-timey ballad to end. Interesting.

What follows is one of the strangest bits of musical-theater in all of Ra's discography. John Gilmore recalled the title as "Ladies and Gentlemules" and, while the recording is incomplete, the piece appears to be structured like a sanctified church service, with Ra fervently imploring the "gentlemules" to heed his message. The Arkestra plays some bluesy swing and ecstatically chants, but much of the preaching and carrying on is difficult to hear. However, the loud, unison refrain of "another jackass is going to take your place" is clear enough to get the point across. After about six minutes of holy-rolling chaos, the tape abruptly cuts off. Up next is "Somewhere Else," a then-recent composition which would appear on the studio recording My Brother the Wind Vol. II. Not much happens beyond several repetitions of the lurching, block-chord melody over a gospel-ish vamp, but the effect is hypnotizing. After a brief organ and synthesizer solo (with some barely audible spoken incantations), Ra launches into the 1920s-era chestnut "Sometimes I'm Happy." The Arkestra sounds a little tentative in the ensembles, but Gilmore's sure-footed tenor solo demonstrates his unique synthesis of prewar swing, hard bop grit, and avant-garde extended techniques.

The tape concludes with a spectacular, thirteen-minute rendition of another My Brother the Wind Vol. II composition, "Pleasant Twilight." According to Campbell and Trent, there are no other known live performances of this piece, which is unsurprising given its subtle complexity. Ra begins with a rhapsodic, rubato introduction on organ before the Arkestra enters with the brightly swinging composition. The tempo then slows down by half and, while the ensemble gently rocks back and forth between two lushly sustained chords, Gilmore peals off a starkly contrasting barn-burner of a solo on tenor sax. Holy smokes! The Arkestra plays its parts with incredible restraint while Gilmore wails away with a terrifying fury. After a honking, emphatic conclusion, Gilmore leads the Arkestra through a half-time run through of the head before returning the original tempo for a high-spirited trumpet solo from Akh Tal Ebah [Editor's note: or Kwame Hadi?]. The Arkestra adds complementary horn riffs and, as the intensity builds, the tempo speeds up again for an enervated reprise and a big finish. Whew! The much abbreviated studio recording, while sparklingly polished, ultimately sounds downright staid compared to this expansive and inspired live performance. It's a shame this tune fell out of the repertoire.

Given the atrocious sound quality, I cannot recommend that anyone but the most fanatical seek this recording out. But given the exceptionally high quality of the performance and the sheer rarity of tracks like "Pleasant Twilight," it is nevertheless worth hearing. As the 1970s wore on, live recordings would become more and more plentiful and one might pick and choose without missing too much. But given the paucity of material from this particular time period, this one is worth having for that reason alone.





While Sun Ra was struggling to find an audience stateside, Willis Conover had enlisted Sonny (amongst others) into Uncle Sam's Cold War cultural army, broadcasting the Arkestra's records regularly on the Voice of America and, by 1970, Europe had become a more welcoming environment for American jazz musicians than their native country had. Conover and his wife had been instrumental in securing Sonny's Carnegie Hall debut in 1968 and had been urging him to travel to Europe ever since. When they offered to arrange for the Arkestra to appear at the prestigious Fondation Maeght in the south of France for three concerts in August 1970, Ra eagerly accepted.

Ra and a nineteen-member Arkestra traveled to St.-Paul-de-Vence and performed three concerts on August 3, 4, and 5, 1970. The Fondation Maeght is one of the finest small museums in the world and, with its focus on blue-chip modernism, Ra's appearance in such a venue indicated a certain acceptance into the privileged domain of the European avant-garde. The concerts were professionally recorded for broadcast by the state-sponsored radio station and portions were later released on LP as Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Volumes 1 and 2 by the French Shandar label in 1971. These records have been widely bootlegged ever since and my CDs on the Italian Universe label are probably "gray market" bootlegs as well, but they sound fine and are sumptuously packaged in heavyweight, gatefold mini-LP sleeves. As of this writing, they remain in print and are well worth seeking out.

Campbell and Trent insist that *Volume 2* comes from the August 3rd concert (*Volume 1* is from August 5th) and having no reason to disagree, we will begin with *Volume 2*. Campbell also lists a number of tracks contained on the original radio broadcast and an audience tape, but I have not heard this material. Szwed provides a vivid description of Sun Ra's outrageous presentation and the decidedly mixed reaction it generated (Szwed 1997, 279).

The album opens with "Friendly Galaxy No.2," a fascinating piece only tangentially related to the first "Friendly Galaxy," which originally appeared on Secrets of the Sun in 1965. After a burbling organ introduction, the composition moves to a choir of flutes improvising over Ra's languid piano and Alan Silva's whining cello, with a simple but rhythmically insistent trumpet motif recurring throughout. Meanwhile, the rest of the band establishes an exotic space-groove on bass, drums, tympani, and hand percussion. The effect is otherworldly and quite mesmerizing. In an interview with Jazz magazine in 1970, Sun Ra described how he tailored this piece to the unique qualities of the venue: "... the flutes had never played this passage with the piano, but because of the peculiar acoustics in the room I knew that it would be absolutely necessary that I play at the same time because the flutes would be bothered by an echo that the audience fortunately wouldn't hear at all" (quoted in Szwed 1997, 280). "Friendly Galaxy No.2" would be performed several times over the next couple of years only to disappear from the repertoire. Too bad, as it is truly a unique work, with the massed flutes and brass technique demonstrating Ra's audacious genius at orchestration.

"Spontaneous Simplicity" follows (out of sequence, according to Campbell), and although this version doesn't devolve into the kind of proto-No Wave skronk heard on the *Electric Circus* tape from 1968, this a fine performance with the massive ensemble sections sounding particularly powerful and precise. After the opening statement, Sun Ra leads the way with a buzzing Rocksichord solo as the rest of the Arkestra picks up percussion instruments to buoy the hypnotic one-note bassline. The music grooves along for a delirious eleven minutes, ending to some genuinely enthusiastic applause.

"The World of Lightning" picks up in the middle of some crashing gongs and cymbals, the audience clapping in slow rhythm until Ra takes over with one of his patented mad-scientist organ solos. Afterwards, Marshall Allen engages Alan Silva in a duel between alto saxophone and cello, with other horns joining in the fray at its screaming climax, the entire Arkestra wailing away with utter abandon until Sonny cues a cataclysmic ending that feels like the cosmos collapsing in on itself. The audience reacts with stunned silence which perfectly sets the stage for "Black Myth," a solemn bit of musical theater featuring June Tyson's dramatic and evocative vocals. Tyson intones two Sun Ra poems ("The Shadows Took

Shape" and "The Strange World") over spacey noises, fleeting flutes, and ominous percussion. Ra then launches into a typically apocalyptic organ/synthesizer blast that eventually crossfades to some overloud applause. The album ends with a fragmentary piece entitled "Sky," which starts off with some intertwined oboe (possibly James Jacson) and cello but is soon interrupted with an explosion of cacophonous horns and bashing drums that quickly subsides, only to fade out with some gentle percussion taps. Interesting.

What a great album! It is so nice to hear the Arkestra recorded in such high fidelity, and this is an especially riveting live performance. The band is well-rehearsed and everyone is more than happy to be feted by French cultural elites. *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol.* 1, which documents the August 5th concert, might be even better.

Recorded at the third and final concert on August 5, 1970, Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Volume 1 was originally released on the French Shandar label in 1971. Often bootlegged, it was also legitimately reissued on 12-inch 45RPM LP by the British label, Recommended Records, in 1981. (My copy sounds superb, but its plain black sleeve omits all relevant discographical information!) This CD issue on the Italian Universe label from 2005 is probably a "grey-market" bootleg as well, but it sounds fine and is packaged in a deluxe mini-gate-fold LP sleeve.

The album opens with a spirited performance of "Enlightenment," a composition co-written with trumpeter Hobart Dotson which dates all the way back to 1958's Jazz in Silhouette. But by 1969, Sun Ra had abandoned Dotson's counter-melodies and added typically Saturnalian lyrics. Here, Ra sets up the bouncy vamp on organ for John Gilmore and June Tyson, who chant in a call and response fashion, imploring humanity to join the Arkestra on its cosmic space voyage. This infectious little ditty elicits some enthusiastic applause and, not surprisingly, "Enlightenment" would become a fixture of the live repertoire in coming years.

Then, after a quick piano introduction, Gilmore and Tyson sing "The Star Gazers" in a lovely unison melody. After that plaintive vocal statement, Sonny launches into a gorgeous ad lib piano solo while small percussion instruments tinkle and clatter, with Alan Silva providing some complementary figures on bass. Gradually, Ra builds up the intensity with cascading waves of chords and then brings it back down to a gentle, quiet ending—until a crashing chord signals the beginning of the notorious "Shadow World." Right off, it is obvious that the band is a well-oiled machine: the insanely complex, hocketed melodies are performed flawlessly, setting the stage for Gilmore's utterly hair-raising solo on tenor saxophone, complete with a squealing and wailing a cappella cadenza. Ra then takes over with a skittering, swirling organ solo until

cueing the horns for a huge, pulsating space chord. The braying and howling horns eventually subside, leaving Ra to sketch out the dramatic chord sequence on organ to end. This is a truly stunning performance of one of Ra's most significant compositions and must be heard to be believed!

The album closes with an epic, twenty-minute-long Minimoog/organ solo entitled "The Cosmic Explorer," wherein Ra conjures up all kinds of incredible sounds from his electronic instruments: from spacey noodling to woozy portamentos, and blasts of white noise to apocalyptic torrents of dissonant tone-clusters. Meanwhile, cymbals, gongs, and percussion rumble ominously in the background while a few horns add spare punctuation. After about seventeen minutes, the full Arkestra enters with a few minutes of high-energy, New-Thing-styled free-jazz which comes to a satisfyingly resolute climax before quickly fading out. I only wish we could hear the music that followed...

Like its companion volume, *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Volume 1* is an essential item in the discography, notable for its exceptionally good sound quality and superlative performances. Certainly, those in attendance were suitably impressed: the Arkestra had barely arrived back in Philadelphia when a group of European promoters offered to bring them back for a full-fledged tour only two months later, in October of 1970. I will be examining the surviving recordings from this momentous tour next.

After the success of the Fondation Maeght performances in August, a hastily conceived "tour" of Europe was put together by Victor Schonfield and Joachim Berendt (among others) with support from radio station Südwestrundfunk (SWF) and record labels Black Lion in the UK and SABA/MPS in Germany. The "tour," which began in early October 1970, was something less than a total success. But at the time, Ra was excited to return to the Old World—there was even talk of going to Africa. The Arkestra was enlarged to twenty musicians and Ra rehearsed them extensively right up their departure time. To add to the spectacle, two more dancers and a fire-eater were added to the entourage soon after their arrival in Paris. Sonny packed up his entire arsenal of electronic keyboards and all manner of lighting equipment, slide and film projectors, and trunks of glittering costumes and stage props for the trip; Sun Ra and his Arkestra were embarking on the next great phase of the Cosmo Drama.

The Arkestra appeared without incident at the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre on October 9 and in Lyons on the 12th, but their Paris debut turned into a near riot. Szwed eloquently describes the precarious situation. The concert itself was apparently plagued with technical difficulties and a jittery and oppressive police presence, although the audience clearly appreciated Ra's charm and charisma and the theatrical, multimedia extravaganza of the Arkestra's performance. (Szwed 1997, 280-282).

On October 17, the Arkestra performed at the prestigious Donaueschingen Musik Festival, the home front of the stars of postwar European avant-garde composers, including Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, and others. This year, Joachim Berendt managed to integrate modern jazz into the festival's programming, and Sun Ra's three-hour set did not disappoint. Recorded for broadcast by SWF, some of this material originally appeared on the MPS release entitled *It's After the End of the World* in 1971, and the entire forty-eight-minute broadcast was issued on CD by

Motor Music in 1998. (The Motor City issue also contains a second disc recorded in Berlin later on in the tour, which we will consider separately.)

According to Berendt (via Hartmut Geerken's liner notes), Sun Ra composed "Black Forest Myth" especially for this concert, its title referring to the legendary forest which surrounds the small town of Donaueschingen. The piece was performed only on this one occasion and it is a tension-filled four minutes for piccolo, electronic keyboards, and scraping, clanging percussion which sounds just as abstract and forbidding as the "contemporary classical" music for which the Donaueschinger Musiktage was made (in)famous. Another rendition of "Friendly Galaxy No.2" immediately follows, but this version differs markedly from the massed flute choir and trumpets orchestration found on Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol. 2. Here, the rhythms are heavier and Ra plays much more aggressively on both piano and electric organ. In addition, Eloe Omoe (or possibly Danny Thompson) plays a riveting solo on the Neptunian libflecto (a bassoon with a trumpet mouthpiece), and the entire Arkestra enters toward the end with some spirited group improv before Ra closes the piece with some spacey synthesizer tones.

What follows is some of the most bracingly challenging music in Sun Ra's enormous discography. "Journey Through the Outer Darkness" pits various duos and trios against Ra's cataclysmic organ and battalions of drums and percussion in an unrelenting barrage of music until an astonishing solo bass clarinet (Pat Patrick?—or is the Neptunian libflecto again?) finds a way to end the piece to stunned applause. The "Strange Worlds-Black Myth-It's After the End of the World" sequence features the heavenly-voiced June Tyson declaiming Ra's poetry alongside constantly shifting instrumental combinations. These evolving concertinos create wildly differentiated textures and colors, from the keening wail of oboes, saxophones, and libflecto to the staccato brassiness of trumpets to the microtonal whine of Alan Silva's viola. After about eleven minutes, Sun Ra introduces a clangorous space chord on the piano which is picked up by the Arkestra. In its aftermath, Tyson and Gilmore exclaim: "It's after the end of the world! Don't you know that yet?!" The Arkestra then launches into some more ecstatic free-jazz skronk just as the track fades. What a shame! "We'll Wait for You" concludes the recording with a quick space chant followed by a long series of thoughtful solos over a deliberately murky and mumbling rhythm section, deftly conducted by Ra from behind his bank of keyboards. Ra summons up the whole panoply of electronic sounds from chiming bells to swooning synthesizer to chattering organ while each soloist explores both ensemble and a cappella territories, concluding with a brief but devastating Gilmore outing that brings down the house.

Szwed states that "[t]he audience received them well, but the German critics dismissed them" (Szwed 1997, 283), while Geerken's liner notes to this Motor Music CD allude to a review in *Der Spiegel* "that was abound with ignorance & rubbish" (Geerken 1998). Clearly Sun Ra was not immediately accepted into the rarified realm of the European cultural elite, despite his appearance at Donaueschingen. Nevertheless, the Arkestra's performance was a landmark event. Critics still debate the genuineness of Sun Ra's music, but the proof is in the listening. Listening to the Donaueschingen performance reveals a large band at the height of its powers, playing Sun Ra's most cutting-edge musical conceptions with razor-sharp precision and prodigious invention while Ra himself displays his unequaled mastery of electronic keyboards. I know I say it all the time, but this is another essential Sun Ra disc that belongs in every fan's collection.

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: Paradiso, Amsterdam, October 18, 1970 (FM CDR)

After the (semi) triumphant appearance at the Donaueschingen Musik Festival, the Arkestra traveled to Amsterdam to perform at the famed Paradiso on the following evening, October 18, 1970. The "Cosmic Relaxation Center Paradiso" was opened in a decommissioned church on March 30, 1968 as a publicly-sponsored cultural institution which, amazingly enough, continues to function in that capacity to this very day. The significance of this formerly-sacred-now-publicly-funded venue was no doubt meaningful to an exhausted Arkestra, who managed to deliver a ragged yet truly inspired performance. Campbell and Trent list a thirty-five minute audience recording, but ninety minutes of the original VPRO radio broadcast has recently surfaced in fairly decent sound quality and it is definitely worth seeking out.

The recording begins with the radio announcer introducing the musicians (in Dutch, of course) and a spirited rendition of the strutting "Watusi," including a long percussion segment featuring the booming "thunder drum." No doubt all of this accompanied dancers and parading musicians, film clips and slide projections—perhaps even some fire-eating as well. While not much seems to be happening musically, the audience is clearly enjoying the visual spectacle. Up next is perhaps the first (or rather a prototype) of what would later be called the "Discipline" series of compositions. Both Szwed and Campbell state that Sun Ra did not begin work on the "Discipline" series (which numbered over one-hundred compositions) until the Arkestra's brief move to California in early 1971, but this (as well as another two works performed at Paradiso) is conceptually similar enough to indicate that the idea was germinating at least as early as the fall of 1970. Szwed describes the "Discipline" series as "tightly conceived exercises using minimal material [...] built on hocketed horn lines, with each horn playing within a two- to three-note range, a cyclical melody developing out of the fragments, each person playing his parts scrupulously with no deviation whatsoever"

(Szwed 1997, 285). These pieces are completely through-composed, the epitome of the kind of freedom-through-discipline Sonny constantly espoused to his musicians and to anyone else who would listen. This particular example is slow and stately, building monumental edifices of strange and beautiful harmonies, reaching toward the heavens and ending with a tension-filled chord, straining at the limits of the instrumentalists' ranges.

After that arresting prelude, Ra introduces the bouncing bassline of "Enlightenment" on an ultra-distorted keyboard, and the whole group chants the lyrics with June Tyson providing her echoing response. Suddenly, there's a short outburst of free-jazz skronk before Ra and Tyson urgently announce to the audience that "It's After the End of the World!" This version is taken at a faster clip than at Donaueschingen, with the voices dropping down to a stagey whisper, the tempo maniacally accelerating until a final, dramatically slowed down exhortation of "don't you know that yet?!" This signals another blast of high-energy group improv which quickly segues into the lilting "We Travel the Spaceways," complete with clanging bells and gongs and some nice Xenakis-like portamento bowing from Alan Silva while the Arkestra moves about the audience, chanting the theme.

A wave of applause swells over the continued chanting while another Afro-percussion groove sets up a squealing, multiphonic tenor solo from John Gilmore - by now, the audience is way into it, whooping and hollering with pure delight! Trumpet and Neptunian libflecto spar over crazy polyrhythmic percussion and free drumset pummeling, until Ra enters with a dissonant organ chord, grinding over and over until moving direction into some two-handed polyphony. A wheezy synthesizer signals the band to drop out, leaving Ra to improvise a wandering, descending keyboard solo, full of white noise generators and melodramatic organ chords. Just as things start to get crazy, percussion enters along with some swooping trumpet. More horns enter the fray only to be interrupted by the radio DJ who once again introduces the band personnel. Obviously, things continued in this vein for some time; oh well! Applause fades up and Sun Ra has moved to the acoustic piano for a series of duets with Silva's cello, (possibly) Eloe Omoe on Neptunian libflecto and (probably) Akh Tal Ebah on trumpet. Sonny is at his most aggressively avant-garde at times, bringing to mind the ferocity of Cecil Taylor's piano attack, but with his own "old-timey" rhythmic sensibility and romantically rhapsodic lyricism. After about six minutes, this directed improvisation coalesces into what appears to be another "Discipline" series composition, with Ra leading the way with a series of harmonically ambiguous piano chords. The ensemble sounds a bit tentative, but the haunting beauty of the composition is affecting nonetheless.

The impossibly difficult "Shadow World" gets a rather perfunctory reading here (compared to the hair-raisingly intense performance the night before) but opens up for a series of exciting a cappella saxophone solos from Gilmore, Danny Davis, and Marshall Allen and some edgy, "Strange-Strings"-styled bowings from Silva. Ra interjects a crashing organ chord to introduce the infectiously swinging "Walking On the Moon," one of those "space-age barbeque" numbers first heard on My Brother the Wind Vol. II. Unfortunately, this song was only performed a handful of times in 1970 and 1971, presumably because the Apollo moon landings were still fresh in the cultural memory, and thereafter permanently dropped from the repertoire. Too bad, as it was clearly a fun tune live, full of joyous riffing by the Arkestra and, of course, June Tyson's soulful vocals. Ra brings it to an end with a rubato solo on the buzzing Rocksichord, concluding with a weirdly unresolved chord. The DJ then interjects a quick announcement over a smattering of applause.

After a tinkly Rocksichord introduction, another "Discipline"-type composition follows, a sequence of richly orchestrated, contrapuntally derived chords, sometimes sweet, sometimes sour, ending ambiguously with a dense block of widely-spaced pitches. A spacey, conducted improvisation arises within the harmonic space established by the composition, featuring a massed oboe choir, of all things. You don't hear much jazz oboe, but its pinched, exotic-sounding wail is an integral element of Sun Ra's Arkestra and this is great example of its surprising versatility. Later, Ra takes over with one of his lengthy "mad scientist" organ/synthesizer solos which is overlaid here and there with full-blown ensemble freak outs. Out of the murk, the Arkestra chants "The Second Stop is Jupiter!" in crazy antiphony, leading to further free-jazz skronk that is eventually reined in by Ra's sing-songy organ, prompting Gilmore and Tyson to sing the "Theme of the Star Gazers." After a quick recitation of the

song, another quiet, spacey improvisation follows with some more lovely arco playing from Silva. Sadly, the tape abruptly runs out.

This recording is clearly several generations from the master, so it's possible a better-sounding (and more complete) tape will surface in the future. It's also possible the original pre-FM reels still exist at VPRO and would make for a welcome official release some day. In the meantime, this will have to suffice.

The Arkestra returned to Paris but promised gigs in France never materialized due to the failure of French drummer Claude Delcloo to line them up. Adding insult to injury, a planned recording session for BYG/Actuel also fell through, leaving the Arkestra stranded without work (paying or not) for almost three weeks. The situation was so dire that Gilmore wound up playing his last session date as a sideman outside the Arkestra, recording with Dizzy Reece, Siegfried Kessler, Patrice Caratini, and Art Taylor on From In to Out (Campbell and Trent 2000, 166). The Arkestra barely managed to hang on until their next scheduled performance at the Berlin Jazz Festival on November 7th. We'll take a listen to that concert next.

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: Black Myth/Out in Space (Motor Music 2CD)

After a three-week layover in Paris, the Arkestra was well-rested (if hungry) when they appeared at the Berlin Jazz Festival at the Kongresshalle on November 7, 1970. Like the Donaueschingen concert on October 17th, it was recorded for broadcast by Südwestrundfunk (SWF), and some of the music appeared on *It's After the End of the World* in 1971. (See Campbell and Trent 2000, 168 for the gory details of how that album is cobbled together from the two concerts.) The extant eighty-minute broadcast reels were issued for the first time on this Motor Music CD, and it is another fantastic performance from this first European tour preserved in truly extraordinary sound quality. However, Szwed describes this concert as a tense confrontation with a dour and skeptical crowd (Szwed 1997, 283).

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While the particular altercation that Szwed describes is not documented on this recording (as far as I can tell), there is certainly a lot of the usual "sermonizing and call-and-response declamations," "kick-ass space chords," and New York-style "energy music" on display but presented with deep roots in pre-and-post-war American swing and Sun Ra's sense of high-camp sci-fi infused theatricality. This stuff is far from the "grimly serious" and Eurocentric approach of Globe Unity and their ilk. I like their music OK, but let's face it, Sun Ra's is a lot more fun! In time, the Europeans of all stripes would catch on in a big way and the Arkestra would tour the continent regularly for the remainder of Sonny's life, even if many critics continued to dismiss him as a charlatan, a fake.

The CD opens with Alan Silva playing some brooding bass over tinkling percussion. June Tyson sweetly sings, "Out in space is such a pleasant place...a place where you can be free, truly free, with me." After a while, Sun Ra signals a swelling space-chord and we're off on an almost forty-minute conducted improvisation, centered around a long, dramatic synthesizer solo, punctuated with frenzied group improv and ending with a series of unaccompanied solos by Silva (on cello), Eloe Omoe on Neptunian libflecto, and finally John

Gilmore on rip-roaring tenor sax. After this tumultuous journey into outer space, Ra moves to the piano to introduce another performance of one of the "Discipline" series compositions first heard on the Paradiso tape from October 18. The improved sonics of the Berlin recoding allows one to really hear the detailed orchestration of this beautiful, through-composed work. Utilizing a somber, quasi-ballad form, the piece moves through a series of richly voiced harmonies, sometimes sweet in an almost Guy Lombardo (or rather Duke Ellington) fashion, and at other times sour and dissonant, with a tonally vague conclusion. Very interesting. Ra moves to the twangy clavinet to introduce "Walking on the Moon," which features a honking bari sax solo by Pat Patrick and some additional (perhaps improvised?) lyrics by Tyson ("If you fall down, get up and walk some more; You're like a little a baby who never walked before; So take your first step into outer space..." etc.) The super hi-fi sonics make this rare live performance of this short-lived tune a real treat.

Sun Ra takes to the microphone to briefly talk about "Outer Space Where I Came From" before launching into the Afro-urban strut of "Watusa" which ends with some grafted-on applause. Ra and Tyson then recite "Myth Versus Realty," which poses the central questions: (1) if you are not reality, whose myth are you? and/or (2) if you are not a myth, whose reality are you? Sonny then elaborates his concerns amidst cued free-jazz freakouts.

Ra informs the audience: "this is Danny Thompson, to tell you how Jupiter looks" and "this is Danny Davis, who's going to tell you about my home planet, Saturn," each soloist unleashing a torrent of notes while the whole thing climaxes with a bashing group blowing blowout complete with Silva's wiry "Strange Strings" scraping and the furiously pounding Thunder Drum. Whew! Ra states the "Theme of the Stargazers" on the clavinet and Gilmore and Tyson sing the verse once before Ra signals the group space chant "The Second Stop is Jupiter," which quickly moves to some jaunty swing with "Why Go to the Moon?" suggesting a number of alternative destinations, including but not limited to the various planets—or alternatively, why not "just be your natural self?" This was certainly a pertinent question in 1970, as it is today. A quick edit moves us to the concluding "We Travel the Spaceways," sung by the Arkestra

and Tyson as they parade out through the audience to warm but less than totally enthusiastic applause.

The next day, the Arkestra would travel to the British Isles for concerts in London and Liverpool before returning to the United States.



Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Research Arkestra:

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London,
November 9, 1970 (AUD CDR)

Sun Ra and the Intergalactic Research Arkestra:
Live In London (Transparency)

Following their appearance at the Berlin Jazz Festival, the Arkestra traveled to London, arriving just in time for their scheduled performance on November 9, 1970. Unfortunately, the logistics of this concert were vexed from the beginning. Originally to be held at the glamorous Rainbow Theatre, the show was moved at the last minute to the much smaller Queen Elizabeth Hall, which again resulted in an angry mob of people outside the theater, unable to enter. Thankfully, a full scale riot did not erupt as in Paris. And although Black Lion intended to record the concert for release, the sound technicians arrived three hours late, resulting in unacceptably bad sound quality (even for Black Lion!). (See Szwed 1997, 283-284, and Campbell and Trent 2000, 169.)

Nevertheless, the performance itself was apparently a resounding success. David Toop wrote about this landmark concert in his thought-provoking book, *Oceans of Sound* (quoted at length in Szwed 1997, 284). Toop touches upon a profound truth regarding Ra's "unremitting alien identity," which was already fully evolved by 1970. The large scale Cosmo Drama he witnessed was perhaps the very peak of the Arkestra's gonzo, multi-media theatricality and cutting edge, out-jazz intensity. Too bad Black Lion blew it on the recording.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your tolerance for poor sound quality), a 118-minute audience recording of this concert circulates amongst Sun Ra fanatics. And believe me, this one is only for the irredeemably fanatical. During quiet passages, it is barely listenable—but when the music gets loud, it is nothing but a distorted roar of undifferentiated white noise. Maybe it's not quite that bad, and after a while, you do get used to it, yeah, yeah, yeah—but, sheesh! That said, our intrepid recordist did manage to preserve a nearly complete performance from this first European tour, and a little perseverance offers intermittent rewards. A blow-by-blow

description would be even more tedious than usual, but I want to point out a few highlights.

First of all, Ra seems to have been provided with a decent concert grand piano, upon which he spends more than his usual, obligatory amount of time, and he sounds truly inspired by the instrument throughout. The first set features one of the final performances of "Walking on the Moon," sporting a slightly different arrangement with more high-octane big-band riffing and fewer overt solos, further omitting Ra's usual wandering keyboard at the end and instead segueing immediately into the swinging space chant "Outer Spaceways Incorporated." "The Shadow World" is its usual, mysterious, shape-shifting self which breaks down into a lovely piano duet with Silva's arco bass, interrupted here and there by Kwame Hadi's daredevil high-wire trumpet act. This maneuver prods Ra and Silva to even more delirious flights of fancy before the full Arkestra lurches into another one of those dirgey, old-fashioned-sounding compositions that brings to mind the "Discipline" series to come. The first known performance of "Life is Splendid" opens with the massed flute choir effect similar to "Friendly Galaxy No.2," before the incantatory vocals by Tyson and Ra. Tyson then chants with the Arkestra about "somewhere in outer space" where "we'll wait for you... in tomorrow's world," until an eruption of free jazz skronk and a spacey synth drone brings things to a dramatic close.

The forty-six minute fragment of the second set is even more interesting, cutting in on what at first sounds like a conducted improvisation featuring Ra on piano and Silva on bowed cello. But upon closer listening, it sounds to me like Ra is outlining a pre-conceived harmonic structure that comes to a definite conclusion. After a brief pause, Ra launches into a piano solo that also sounds through-composed. Is this a suite? Or does the bewildered audience just not have the opportunity to react? Ra's playing becomes more rhythmically agitated, each hand playing in different keys, punctuated by the Arkestra's braying space-chords whose inner voices suggest the harmonic movements of the piano. After a cued stop, dueling alto saxophones take over amidst intermittent Arkestra blasting and churning percussion. The poor quality of the recording makes it difficult to hear what exactly is going on here, but it is certainly intense! A crashing gong introduces a chiming electric keyboard solo to end.

Next up is a medley of compositions that date back to the early years in Chicago: "Planet Earth" has by now gained lyrics for an ensemble of vocalists, and "El Is the Sound of Joy" gets an expansive arrangement featuring a swirling roller-rink organ solo by Ra. Despite the poor sound quality, you can still hear that the Arkestra is tight and well-rehearsed on both of these swinging big-band numbers. The first known performance of "Pleiades" begins with a brief statement of the theme on the reedy Rocksichord before a lengthy electric keyboard solo full of whooshing synthesizer and terrifying, pile-driving organ cluster-bombs that anticipate the industrial noise-making of Einstürzende Neubauten. Clearly, Sonny was very much ahead of his time. All of this builds up to a frenetic group improvisation featuring Silva's viola, Pat Patrick's bass clarinet, Eloe Omoe on Neptunian lipflecto, and (perhaps) Akh Tal Ebah on longbreathed trumpet. Finally, after almost twenty minutes, things quiet down and a flute choir plays the liltingly beautiful composition in its entirety, accompanied by some weirdo chords from Ra's piano. The tape cuts off just as Ra begins to solo, which is too bad since I was just starting to get used to the bad sound quality!

On November 11, the Arkestra performed at the Liverpool University Students' Union to a wildly enthusiastic, rock-star-like reception (Campbell and Trent 2000, 171). The Arkestra returned to London for the final concert of the tour at Seymour Hall, on a bill with Chris McGregor's Quintet from South Africa and Osibasa, a rock group from Ghana. In the end, promoter Victor Schonfield lost money on the Arkestra's first European tour, but as Szwed points out, "Sun Ra was now a world musician" (Szwed 1997, 285).

Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra: J.P. Widney Jr. High School, Los Angeles, CA, June 12, 1971 (AUD CDR)

After their (semi)triumphant tour of Europe, the Arkestra's return to the United States must have been something of a letdown, with paying work still somewhat hard to find and the musicians once again scattered between Phildelphia, New York, and Chicago. Szwed mentions a gig at the beginning of 1971 at the Village Vanguard as well as a concert at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's prestigious "Composers in Performance" series in February (Szwed 1997, 285). The Arkestra also played Sunday and Monday nights at the East Village Inn in March (and perhaps at other times later in the year). But the West Coast beckoned once again and in April, the Arkestra headed out for an extended stay in California, appearing at the first UC Jazz Festival at the Greek Theatre in Berkeley on April 23 and a two-night stand at San Francisco's Harding Theater on April 30 and May 1. Tommy Hunter had once again rejoined the group and remembers Sun Ra writing the "Discipline" series of compositions during this time, rehearsing a new one with the band every day (Campbell and Trent 2000, 170).

After a stint in Berkeley, the Arkestra accepted Bobby Seale's invitation to move into a house in Oakland owned by the controversial Black Panthers. Sonny had generally positive feelings about the Black Panthers' goals but was skeptical of their incendiary politics; not surprisingly, this move brought the Arkestra some unwanted attention from the authorities (Szwed, p.286).

On June 11, the Arkestra travelled down to Los Angeles where Danny Thompson's cousin, Alden Kimborough, had arranged a concert at the J.P. Widney Junior High School. A school for handicapped children, it was inauspiciously named after Joseph Pomeroy Widney (1841-1948), one of the first presidents of the University of California—and a virulent racist. In 1907, Widney published a two-volume manifesto entitled *Race Life of the Aryan People*, which predicted that Los Angeles would one day become the center of white supremacy. Widney's malevolent spirit seems to loom over

the proceedings, for while the concert was well-received by the audience, "things turned ugly when the custodial staff—not knowing Sun Ra's practice of playing without regard for time—interrupted the concert by turning off the lights. Sun Ra was furious and lectured the guard and the audience on injustice, race, leadership, and civil order, and ended by putting a curse on the City of Angels" (Szwed 1997, 285).

The whole thing (including Sun Ra's curse) was recorded on a reel-to-reel machine "that was set up right in the middle of the band" (Alden Kimbrough, quoted in Campbell and Trent 2000, 171), presumably by Dr. Reggie Scott, who provides some six minutes of embittered commentary at the end of the eighty-two minute tape. The sound quality is, unfortunately, predictably awful, with loud passages overloaded to the point of pure distortion (not to mention the serious wow-and-flutter issues throughout); but the microphone's position on the stage otherwise provides some immediacy to the music, making less-loud portions (almost) listenable. What is notable about this recording, besides the return of Hunter on drums, is that it marks the first appearance of bassist Ronnie Boykins since his defection for greener pastures in 1968. Somehow, Boykins was cajoled into joining the Arkestra on its California sojourn, perhaps after being informed of the band's enthusiastic reception in Europe. His distinctive and effortlessly virtuosic bass playing had been integral to the development of Sun Ra's music during its formative years and his return to the band was certainly most welcome. Boykins would continue to play off and on with the Arkestra through 1974 but Sonny was never able to find anyone else who could really fill his shoes except for perhaps Alan Silva, who had just recently left the band for good. Sadly, although Boykins's presence can be felt driving the rhythm section, his contributions to this concert are mostly inaudible.

The performance begins with an unidentified title featuring Sun Ra's portentous electronic keyboards, which summon forth a series of hectoring space chants. After a leisurely romp through "Enlightenment," the ensemble gradually comes together to build up a dense polyrhythmic groove on the lilting "Love in Outer Space," with Ra taking the lead on organ. As usual, "Watusi" explodes into an extended percussion jam, and "Second Stop is Jupiter" serves as a platform for some bluesy, gut-bucket group improvisation,

anchored by Boykins's rock-solid arco riffing. Suitably warmed up, the band launches into the infinitely challenging "Shadow World" at a cartoonishly fast tempo. Unfortunately, the recording is so distorted, it's impossible to tell what's going on musically aside from Ra's furious organ playing and some braying horns. Intermittently, the ensemble drops out, leaving a saxophone or trumpet to solo a cappella.

After about fifteen minutes, Ra enters with a dramatic organ chord to introduce the first known performance of "Discipline 15," a through-composed dirge, similar to the "prototypes" they were playing in Europe. Basically a sequence of sweet but wayward vertical harmonies orchestrated at the extremes of instrumental registers, it is all unresolved tension. This is immediately followed by a snaky improvisation by Marshall Allen on oboe, but he is soon overwhelmed by roaring bass and pounding percussion. June Tyson sings "They'll Come Back" with a sure-footed sense of pitch and timing over randomly tinkling bells, crashing gongs, clattering percussion, and what sounds like breaking glass(!), but when the full ensemble enters with the theme, the sound quality degenerates into horrific noise. Frankly, it sounds like a cable is loose, creating an electrical short-circuit. Egads! The sound clears up somewhat for the last known performance of "Walkin' on the Moon," but the tape quickly fades out after the first couple of minutes.

Apparently, the custodians shut off the lights a short time after, as the tape next picks up in the middle of "The Curse." And, wow, Sun Ra is pissed off! For more than five minutes, Sonny rains down sheets of radioactive organ and angrily rants about darkness and light, race and righteousness:

The darkness means nothing to you. It's my home. And my people are dark and black....there's nothing but darkness anyway and there's no escape for white, yellow, brown or black for what I represent. And you can believe it if you want to or not; I don't care! This planet needs me! I don't need it!...You cannot afford to take a chance. I'm not playing with anything, I'm not Christ, I'm not righteous, I'm so evil...I'll destroy the whole planet! I'm here to do something! I'm a product of nature! I don't care anything about the governments of man, I don't care anything about anyone who is not true and sincere. There is no excuse

for any man to mistreat another man. I will not tolerate it! I don't care if you're the strongest government on the face of the earth, you are a part of nature!...Do not ever turn the lights out on me! You may be ever so light, but you don't own anything! You are here by the grace of the god you say you worship!... You will wake up! Black people don't need to wake up, they got me—you don't have nothin'!

Sun Ra ends with an explicit threat: "The birds don't have to stop playing at one o'clock; why should I? You just had one earthquake... you might expect another!" Whoah. This followed by an eerie minute or so of the audience exiting the auditorium, muttering in stunned disbelief; meanwhile, some woman invites everyone to meet "at 4506 Southwest" for further consciousness-raising experiences. The tape concludes with Dr. Reggie Scott's monologue (over Sun Ra music), in which he recalls an "embarrassing evening for what could have been a perfect evening." In a coolly angry voice, Dr. Scott laments:

Sun Ra and his band never played better. The crowd never responded better. The people loved and begged for more. But it was ended; ended in another kind of tragic commentary on sensitivity, on responsibility, on man's—black man's—failure to share the artistic point of view, share the love of art with the artist...The crowd hungered for more, but was not permitted. It was embarrassing to people who love and worship the mighty Sun Ra. The band wanted to play. Sun Ra wanted to play. The audience wanted more...The crowd was at a feverish pitch to hear more Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra but it was brought to a halt by the powers that be.

Dr. Scott goes to on to describe the "furious" Sun Ra cursing the City of Los Angeles and concludes: "Sun Ra remains the myth. Sun Ra remains the puzzle. Sun Ra remains undisputed. Sun Ra can only be interpreted in one of two ways: You either go into the galaxy with him or stay left behind. It was that kind of evening. It was that kind of night…" *Indeed*.

Sun Ra would stay in Oakland until well into 1972, but events would soon overwhelm the Black Panthers when the powers that be turned the lights out on the black power movement (such as it was). And as Ra's international touring career grew, his political emphasis would necessarily soften into a more pan-racial, intergalactic ecumenicalism. This recording, although of extremely poor fidelity, is a rare document of Sun Ra at his most militant and is worth hearing for "The Curse" alone. Powerful stuff!



Sun Ra: The Creator of the Universe (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 1) (Transparency CD)

It is hard to believe, but in 1971 Sun Ra was briefly appointed lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley via the Regents' Program and the newly-formed Department of Afro-American Studies. As Szwed points out, such an outlandish appointment was "only conceivable in the early 1960s and early 1970s" (Szwed 1997, 294).

A tape recording of Ra's fifty-minute lecture on the afternoon of May 4, 1971 survives and can be found on disc two of Transparency's 2007 release, *The Creator of the Universe (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 1)*. The sound quality is exceptionally good, all things considered, and you can clearly hear the sound of chalk on blackboard and the disconcerted giggling of students. Sonny's voice is measured and calm, but there is an angry undertone to his discourses on race and black man's failure to embrace his "alter-destiny." While it would be easy to dismiss all this as the ravings of a lunatic (or pure charlatanism or fakery), that would, in my opinion, be a grave mistake. Sonny is witty and entertaining but also deadly serious; there is a method to his madness, for he believed that by breaking the bonds of logic and received wisdom and thereby "decoding" mystical texts, humans could realize their spiritual nature, transcend earthly existence (death), and do the impossible.

Sun Ra unequivocally claimed that, at least sometimes, he is able to successfully "deal with the impossible," and his guileless statement about how this makes him "feel good" indicates this is, in fact, more than just mere bullshit (Szwed 1997, 295). The truth of this assertion is evidenced by the music and structure of the Arkestra, where true freedom exists within the confines of extraordinary discipline and where a strictly hierarchical organization allows for genuine self-expression within a utopian society based upon the harmonious relations between people. Szwed devotes twenty-five pages to an extended paraphrase of Sun Ra's philosophy, drawing upon a vast bibliography of interviews and articles in which Sonny expanded upon his ideas, from the nature of God and spirit, good

and bad, angels and demons, life and death, truth, history and myth, racial relations, and music's innate ability to overcome the limitations of language (Szwed 1997, 294-319). Despite surface appearances, all that carrying on about "interplanetary music" was more than just kitschy, space-age theatricality; it was about creating "myths about the future" (Szwed 1997, 315).

On this recording of Sun Ra's Berkeley lecture, you can hear him practicing "wordology," constructing "cosmic equations" based upon "phonetic equivalence, as in homonyms and homophones, and recognizing euphemistic equivalence" (Szwed 1997, 305). Listening to it, one feels more like an initiate into an ancient mystery cult than a student at a major research university, and it is unsurprising that a permanent faculty appointment was not forthcoming. It is nonetheless a fascinating historical document which provides first-hand insight into Ra's complex metaphysics. Even if Sun Ra's cosmology is ultimately dubious, there can be no doubting the sincerity of his beliefs and the goodness of his works.

Disc one contains a forty-eight minute concert fragment recorded at the Warehouse in San Francisco on (supposedly) June 10, 1971. I am skeptical about this date as it would place it a mere two days before the Arkestra's concert at J.P. Widney Jr. High School in Los Angeles and the band appears to have different personnel. (This concert is not listed in Campbell and Trent—I think it's time for a third edition!) Specifically, the extended drum solo on track three sounds suspiciously like Clifford Jarvis, who does not appear on the June 12 show. Then again, Ronnie Boykins is definitely present on bass and Tommy Hunter, Lex Humphries, and Jarvis all traveled to Europe in the fall, so I suppose anything is possible. The sound quality is OK, probably recorded from the soundboard (vocals are way up front, drums way back), but it's degraded in a most unfortunate fashion: the original master probably sounds very good (wherever it might be), but this CD is clearly several generations removed and there was obviously a "Dolby mismatch" along the way, resulting in muffled and swishy upper frequencies, most noticeable in the sound of the cymbals. Oh well, so it goes with Sun Ra's "unofficial" discography.

The tape opens with an unknown number in the "Discipline" series of compositions, conceptually similar to "Discipline 15" but with differently unresolving harmonies. Spacey improvisational

sections follow statements of the slow, somber theme, featuring Boykins's inimitable thrumming and bowing and (I'm guessing) Eloe Omoe's growling and burbling bass clarinet. "Ra Declamation" is just that: a twenty-five minute mytho-poetic polemic full of cryptic admonishments and black-power sentiments, interspersed with moments of bashing free-jazz skronk. It is interesting to compare this to the U.C. Berkeley lecture and to his venomous "curse" on Los Angeles two days later as Sonny mines related material absent the scholarly affectations of the former and the abject fury of the latter. Next up is an unknown title for ominous percussion and brooding trumpet which gives way to a lengthy yet oddly compelling drum solo. If this is Jarvis (and that hyperactive bass drum sure sounds like him), he is not as blithely self-indulgent as usual, resulting in a musically satisfying prelude to Sun Ra's typically inventive synthesizer solo. Ra coaxes worlds of sounds from his Minimoog, once again demonstrating his quick mastery of that technologically sophisticated instrument over the past year. "Satellites Are Spinning" follows, with June Tyson and John Gilmore duetting on the loping sing-along. Sadly, the tape cuts off a mere two minutes into "Enlightenment." Ouch.

I must admit to having deep ethical qualms about the Transparency label since most of their Sun Ra releases consist of amateur recordings that have circulated amongst collectors for years. As such, these CDs can best be described as "bootlegs." I read someplace where Marshall Allen has granted Transparency the "moral right" to release these recordings and, in return, the Arkestra receives a percentage from their sales. That is all very well and good, but copyright law does not (as far as I know) recognize "moral rights" and, even if it did, it is questionable whether or not Allen retains those rights with regard to these recordings. Nevertheless, I have to admit that any effort to bring these tapes to light should be applauded by those of us who are fanatically obsessed with Sun Ra's music. For the merely curious, I would suggest staying away from the Transparency CDs and sticking to the myriad "official" releases on offer. If you already have all that stuff, then by all means, indulge yourself; these recordings are well worth hearing, despite their dodgy provenance. But, as always, caveat emptor!



Sun Ra: Intergalactic Research (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 2) (Transparency CD)

Campbell and Trent describe two performances at the Native Son in Berkeley, California on June 19 and July 14, 1971, which were recorded by Sun Ra and sold to Black Lion in the infamous tarmac transaction later that year, but never issued (Campbell and Trent 2000, 171-172). What's the deal there? Has anyone heard these? Our intrepid discographers list tantalizing titles such as "Sun-Earth Rock" and "Cosmic Africa." Huh?! If these tapes still exist, they need to be released! Come on, folks, let's get busy!

In the meantime, Transparency has released a twenty-five-minute fragment purportedly recorded at the Native Son around this time period on *Intergalactic Research* (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 2). The sound quality is actually quite good; in fact, it sounds to me like a low-generation soundboard tape. Which makes me wonder—could this be from that stash of unissued recordings sold to Black Lion? Who knows? The provenance of Transparency's releases is sketchy at best.

While mostly a continuous performance, it is cleverly edited, opening with the audience stamping and cheering, which is overlaid with music, fading in on an untitled improvisation. John Gilmore launches into a typically marvelous tenor saxophone solo, full of twisty scales and impossible stacks of harmonics and multiphonics. Wow, this is truly an astonishing tour de force. Incredible! It sounds to me like there are two bassists here, one of whom is unmistakably Ronnie Boykins. Perhaps Alzo Wright is playing cello? Whoever it is, he bows away with a maniacal, *Strange Strings*-like abandon. Oboes and flutes join in the fray, weaving webs of spindly counterpoint until June Tyson enters with mumbling glossolalia, chanting "Strange Worlds" over the reedy din. Gilmore quickly joins in to sing "It's After the End of the World" and the bumptious "Outer Spaceways Incorporated," which is anchored by Boykins's wildly inventive but rock-solid bass. Ra then asks the rhetorical question "Why Go to the Moon?" while chirpy oboes and a swooping slide-whistle (!) provide gently mocking commentary. An open improvisation follows with the bassists (or bass and cello) engaging in a throbbing duet until someone (perhaps James Jacson) enters with a blisteringly overblown solo on the Neptunian libflecto. This is greeted with a huge round of applause followed by two minutes of stamping and cheering...in fact this is the same stamping and cheering that begins the segment, creating a neat, infinite loop effect. I suspect this particular concert fragment was compiled by Sun Ra himself to be released as an album side. Which begs the question: What did the other side sound like? Will we ever know? Oh, the mysteries of Mr. Ra!

The rest of this CD is taken up with a thirty-two minute concert fragment recorded at an unknown venue on an unknown date ca. 1972. We'll listen more carefully in due course, but I will note here that it is another decent-sounding board tape containing some very adventurous music. Bootleg or not, this is a must-have disc for the hardcore Ra fanatic.





Sun Ra and His "Blue Universe Arkestra": Universe in Blue (Saturn)

Released on Saturn in 1972 (in mono), *Universe in Blue* was recorded live somewhere on the west coast presumably around August, 1971. However, the greatly reduced Arkestra suggests that it could have been recorded "somewhere on the road" in mid-1972, as they straggled across the country on their way back to Philadelphia for good (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 172-173). To further confuse the matter, "The Good Doctor" at ESP-Disk' provides a firm date of August 17, 1971 but insists the venue is Slug's Saloon in New York City (see below). Who knows? [Editor's note: In his liner notes for the Bandcamp release, Irwin Chusid states that the tracks "originated in the early 1970s at the rowdy Lower East Side jazz mecca Slug's Saloon" in New York City (Chusid 2014).] In any event, behind the striking, psychedelicized album cover awaits a tasty selection of smoky, blues-based compositions, dominated by Ra's patented "space-age barbeque" organ.

Sun Ra leads the way on the somnambulant title track, a dreamy, slowly smoldering blues, demonstrating his mastery of the tradition while summoning up swelling and percussive Hammond-like sounds from the otherwise cheesy Farfisa organ. After a blissful five minutes, Kwame Hadi enters on trumpet, only to be rudely cut off by the tape running out. Ouch! Some amount of music is missing, with part two picking up with the rhythm section reaching a low boil, with a sparse horn section offering swinging punctuation to Hadi's bravura trumpet statements. John Gilmore then takes over with his soulful growl for a chorus or two on tenor sax before Ra returns with a brief, understated solo on organ to end. "Blackman" sets up a moderately rocking groove for June Tyson, who evokes a time when "Pharaoh was sitting on his throne, when the Blackman ruled this land." Over and over she implores, her voice cracking with emotion, "I hope you understand!" When I hear her sing, I think I do understand.

"In a Blue Mood" is another slow burner featuring more fingerlickin' good organ from Mr. Ra. Campbell and Trent suggest Alzo Wright is playing cello on this gig, but I can't hear him at all. In this instance, Sonny is playing a wandering walking bass with his left hand, soloing all the while with his right. This is a truly superb solo performance by Sun Ra. "Another Shade of Blue" concludes the album with a mid-tempo swing number led by Gilmore's indomitable tenor. Sonny shifts gears seemingly at random with unexpected key modulations while adlibbed horn riffs pop in and out. Unfazed, Gilmore just keeps things cooking—and good lord, twelve minutes later, he's still wailing away like a madman as the track fades out. Dang! Yes folks, it's yet another incredible John Gilmore solo—what more can I say? It must be heard to be believed.

In the summer of 2008, "The Good Doctor" (Michael Anderson) at ESP-Disk' produced a six-part internet radio tribute to Sun Ra which included over two hours of music from this concert—recorded in stereo, amazingly enough. Even more surprising, "Universe in Blue Pts.1 & 2" is presented uncut and it sounds much better than my "needle-drop" of the LP. (Curiously, the rest of Universe in Blue is not found on the broadcast, adding further confusion about possible recording dates.) After some polite applause, a fifteen-minute "Intergalactic Universe" follows with another extended tenor workout from Gilmore. "Discipline 27" allows the full ensemble to shine on this sweetly harmonized swing number. The thirty-minute "Blackman" is very different from the LP version, beyond its extraordinary length. Without introduction, Tyson begins by singing a cappella with Marshall Allen soon joining in on some wiggly oboe. Allen then takes over with a thrilling solo as a roiling groove is built up in the rhythm section, Pat Patrick leading the band with the hypnotic three-note riff on baritone sax. Suddenly, a male voice (Eloe Omoe?) starts yodeling and carrying on hysterically, compelling Tyson to resume her incantatory singing. At the eleven-minute mark, Ra embarks on a lengthy declamation, assuming the role of the resurrected Pharaoh, who has returned from outer space to lead his people back to Egypt, away from "the path of destruction." "Destiny rules and fate decides and I command both of them!" he exclaims. After twenty minutes of feverish ranting, the piece ends quietly

with tick-tocking percussion and distant, muted trumpet. Another fifty-three minute segment, posthumously entitled "I Roam the Cosmos," starts out with a brief solo statement from Danny Davis followed by Tyson singing the newly composed "Astro Black" over a massively slowed-down "Love in Outer Space"-type groove. Soon after, Ra begins hectoring the audience about the usual subjects: race, outer space, and doing the impossible—"Give up your death for me!" he insists at one point, with Tyson echoing virtually every word of his tirade. Meanwhile, the Arkestra noodles around on the two-chord vamp with Hadi and Akh Tal Ebah providing running commentary on trumpet and flugelhorn, respectively. Overlong, it does get a bit tedious, but Ra's preaching is simultaneously terrifying and laugh-out-loud funny.

Universe in *Blue* is another one of those classic Saturn LPs which remains way out of print, originals commanding princely sums on the collector's market. That's a shame, since this is one of the warmest, most approachable albums in the discography. ESP-Disk' or Atavistic or Art Yard or some other perspicacious label should compile all this material together and reissue *Universe* in *Blue* in a deluxe, two-disc edition; I'm sure it would be a big hit.

In preparation for the Arkestra's second European tour scheduled to begin in October, 1971, Tommy "Bugs" Hunter recorded this sixty-minute rehearsal segment sometime in late September or early October—or possibly mere days before departure (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 173). This tape was subsequently broadcast by WK-CR-FM during their Sun Ra memorial event on May 22, 1995 and now circulates widely amongst collectors. The rather crude monophonic recording offers a window into the inner workings of the core Arkestra as Sun Ra pontificates on various subjects and works the band through a handful of compositions, three of which were never performed again. This was apparently common practice, where numerous compositions were vigorously rehearsed, but never performed.

The tape opens with Ra talking about new experimental synthesizers and a "secret" electronic instrument (sort of like a Theremin) which won't respond to a black person's skin. Of course, Sonny is bemused by the apparent racism of this "mean" technology and chortles: "You go talking about equal rights and here you got an instrument that won't play for you if you're black!" Even so, Ra is interested in the instrument's ability to play a "purple C" and a "red C" and play "sixteen pitches between C and C#." I have no idea what he's talking about, but he sure sounds convincing. Getting down to business, he leads the ten-member Arkestra through part of an unidentified title that sounds somewhat similar to the "Discipline" series, with lushly harmonized horns playing slowly interweaving parts over a repeating bass ostinato. After a couple of minutes, Ra cuts things off to enquire whether James Jacson has been reached on the telephone in New Jersey regarding travel arrangements to Europe. (He wasn't home. "He wasn't home last night, either," Ra complains.) A lackadaisical run-through of "Love in Outer Space" follows which prompts Sonny to chide the drummers and wax enthusiastically about Clifford Jarvis, who was apparently eager to get his old job back. Even so, Sonny does acknowledge Jarvis's propensity to overplay: "You can't just get a recording with nothing but drums, drums, drums, drums. That's what I used to try to tell Clifford Jarvis. Now, he took about a forty-minute solo on the thing...I told him, 'we're recording!' Made no difference, though... That's all his fault, boy, he don't know when to stop!" I agree!

Sonny then assumes the role of the stern taskmaster, devoting more than fifteen minutes to diligently work out the arrangement and subtle rhythmic nuances of the old standby, "Friendly Galaxy." First he tells Marshall Allen to play the melody on alto flute rather than piccolo, so the melody will "cut through." This seems counter-intuitive to me (the piccolo cuts through just fine) and indicative of his inexplicable ire towards Allen. Because then he starts to get angry and repeatedly reprimands Allen for playing "on the beat!" Sun Ra scolds him: "You been playing that number for ten years and can't play it yet!" Ra explains that he wants the melody played with "anticipatory rhythms"—a little bit ahead of the beat. "If you play it right on time, you're gonna be wrong! It's designed for sound," he says. Ra then demonstrates on the keyboard, playing the "intime" bassline and the "out-of-time" melody simultaneously. "See? I'm not asking you to do something I can't do. I'm doing it!" After a slightly more successful take, Sonny declares:

See, you almost played it that time because you wasn't counting and you wasn't thinking about it. You just have to do this like I'm talking. And I'm not measuring my words and saying, 'one-two-three'...I can't do that. Music is a language, so you not supposed be counting. I might hold a word a little bit longer than usual if I want to emphasize what I'm saying. That's the way music is.

Ra goes on to talk about playing behind the beat and makes his point more explicit: "That's hard to do too. So, it's either ahead or behind—and then there's some music that's right on the beat. Well, white people can do that! When it's right on the beat, they got you!" After another run-through, Ra really starts to preach it:

It's all about togetherness. The white race is together. Don't let 'em fool you what they talking about revoltin' and revolutin'. What they got to revolute against? They got everything! But that's for you! [...] Talkin' about revolution. I told the truth the other night when I said, 'No. Not gonna have no revolution of black folks. Not no more freedom, not no peace, they don't need nothing like that. They need unity, precision, discipline.' That's it. That's the only thing white folks gonna respect and get out of the way [...] They got their stuff together and I got mine together. And I'm not afraid of them. I ain't worried about them. Now, I'm telling 'em that. It's about unity, precision, discipline [...] That's what jazz is: it's precision, discipline.

After some discussion, Ra calls for "Intergalactic Universe," a gently floating space vamp in 5/4 meter. The piece was never performed live and was likely never finished as you can hear Ra interrupting the proceedings several times in order to tweak the arrangement. Despite almost eighteen minutes of rehearsal, the music never quite gets off the ground although the piece clearly had some potential. [Editor's note: There are actually at least four other known recordings extant: August 1971, the same show as Universe in Blue, broadcast on the ESP internet radio tribute to Sun Ra in 2008; November 11, 1971, in Delft; November, 1972, The Mystery Board; Spring? 1972, Intergalactic Research (mistitled there as "Intergalactic Research").]

Ra laments the lack of time for more rehearsal, but insists on working on another obscure composition, "Living Myth 7," a terrifically complicated melody in 7/4 which is through-composed in intricate, close harmony. The ensemble sounds tentative at best. After a lurching, half-time read-through, Ra calls for double-time, but the Arkestra once more hobbles its way through the thorny score until the tape cuts off. Never played again, this is another tantalizing "lost" work from Sun Ra's œuvre.

Although none of the musical performances really hang together, this rehearsal fragment offers an intimate glimpse into Ra's working methods ca. 1971 and his role as leader of the rag-tag Arkestra. At once genial storyteller, exacting schoolmarm, and political

firebrand, Sonny clearly commanded attention and elicited a fierce loyalty from his most devoted disciples. As "crazy" as Sun Ra might sound, he certainly got results. This tape recording allows a first-hand account of the fearsome charm by which Sun Ra achieved his ultimate aim: "Unity, precision, discipline. That's it."

Sun Ra: The Shadows Took Shape (Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 3) (Transparency CD)

Volume 3 of Transparency's Lost Reel Collection is another stumper. Although the liner notes (such as they are) posit 1972 as the approximate date of this live concert, close listening suggests it was recorded much earlier. For one thing, none of the "Discipline" pieces appear in the setlist, and they were constants by the beginning of 1972. Secondly, Ra does not play the Minimoog synthesizer, highly unlikely during this period. On the other hand, the presence of June Tyson's vocal on "Strange Worlds" implies a post-1970 date. So, my best guess is this was recorded in late-1970/early-1971, prior to the European tour in the fall. But who knows? It's another one of those Mysteries of Mr. Ra. Sound quality is rough—at times barely listenable—but there is a surprisingly wide stereo image suggesting onstage microphones and reminding me at times of some of Tommy Hunter's recordings. But to be sure, we're a long way away from the master (presumably lost) and there is plenty of generational distortion, including wow and flutter, oversaturation, and noise. Be forewarned, this is only for a hardcore Sun Ra nut like me.

The first thing that hits you (besides the horrific sound) is the presence of trombone on the opening "Outer Space," a rare instrument in the Arkestra during this period and providing another cryptic clue as to the possible date. Further, a distinctively hyperactive bass drum confirms Jarvis is on the drum stool. After a bit of skronk, Ra embarks on a long organ/Rocksichord solo, buoyed by murmuring percussion. But after about nine minutes, Jarvis can hardly contain himself and comes charging out of the gate. Ra counters with some dark funk before bringing things around to a mellow space-rhumba. The vocalists proceed to sing a wordless three-note figure while oboes and flutes play a long-toned counter-melody. Who knows what the name of this piece is or whether it was ever played again? While it doesn't really go anywhere, it establishes a pleasant mood and the instrumental texture is delightfully lush. *Interesting*. The old-timey "Stardust from Tomorrow"

follows, appearing in its full-vocal arrangement. Unfortunately, the words are impossible to discern. Yet Sonny turns in an insistently nattering solo atop the medium swing before the big reprise, which sounds suspiciously under-rehearsed. Too bad this version never got a proper recording.

The hypnotic polyrhythms of "Exotic Forest" are taken at a brisk tempo, and two drumsets are clearly audible. With the addition of congas and other hand-percussion, a dense, churning groove in six is set in motion while a trombone lays down a repetitive, wide-interval riff. Marshall Allen leads off with some wailing oboe and Kwame Hadi follows with a long, thoughtful solo on trumpet as the rhythm section keeps the soup at a low boil. After some tricky lick-trading between Allen and Hadi, nothing much happens until Ra enters with a quietly contemplative clavinet solo that eventually segues to organ to introduce "The Shadow World." After a ragged ensemble section, John Gilmore enters with another one of his typically hair-raising tenor solos, with his super-humanly precise articulation of impossibly difficult multiphonic and altissimo effects. Yes, it's another incredible John Gilmore solo, this time even getting a rise out of the otherwise subdued audience. After some dissonant organ chords, Danny Davis takes over with some similarly adventuresome alto, but just as a slinky, slow groove is established (featuring what sounds like acoustic bass—could it be the great Ronnie Boykins?), the tape cuts off. Oh well.

Disc two opens in the middle of some fearsomely intense avant-jazz mayhem with atrociously bad sound. *Ugh*. You can still hear Ra throwing out some two-fisted organ blasts, but the pounding drums overwhelm just about everything. And when the horns return, some seem to intimate a reprise of "The Shadow World," but the headstrong drummers insist on their own frenetic freedom before finally coming to a full stop (no doubt at Ra's friendly but firm direction: there will be no twenty-minute Jarvis solo this evening, at least not yet). After some stunned applause, Sonny plays a pretty interlude on an acoustic piano way, way off in the distance while June Tyson starts chanting about those "Strange Worlds" in another room. He then moves to clavinet for an expansive, spidery etude, supplemented with thick washes of organ color. *Beautiful*. A jaunty chord sequence announces "Enlightenment," sung by Tyson and the boys, with a ticking hi-hat and clonking cowbells keeping easy

time. Nothing too unusual. Next up is the ecstatic chanting of "Outer Spaceways Incororporated" and "Prepare for the Journey to Outer Space," but the recording is woefully unbalanced with the vocals buried by the pummeling drumline. Even so, our unknown trombonist delivers a high-spirited, bluesy solo, exhibiting a huge tone that easily cuts through the din. Who is this quy?

Ra's spooky organ accompanies Tyson's recitation of "The Shadows Took Shape" and Gilmore paints a pointillist picture with a delicate concertino. Perfect. Suddenly, the motoric ostinato of "Friendly Galaxy" arises and the Arkestra launches into the work with gusto, the trombonist adding warmth to the cool flutes and trumpets. As the groove gets settled in, someone takes an extremely curious solo—but what instrument is this?? At times it sounds like Ra's Minimoog, but other times it sounds like Gilmore's saxophone amplified through an overdriven Twin Reverb; there's a soulful vibrato that seems to preclude a purely electronic source (ca. early-1970s). Whatever instrument, it's a fascinating solo, with tasteful note choices and endlessly evolving timbres that defy description. I think it's probably Sun Ra making these sounds, but I have no idea how he's doing it. After that, it's just the usual overlong dancing and percussion fest, interrupted by a quick spin through "Watusi" before the tape brutally cuts off.

The Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 3 is a frustrating listen: the fatally unbalanced and distorted sound quality requires a lot of work to penetrate—yet there are moments (however fleeting) of rare and sublime music that (sort of) reward the effort. As a historical document, it poses more questions than it answers, only adding to the overall sense of frustration. Accordingly, I cannot recommend this to anyone but the specialist or truly obsessive. For them, it is a tantalizingly inscrutable text worthy of monastic study. Most anyone else might be understandably repulsed. Caveat emptor.

Sun Ra and His Arkestra: Dramaten, Stockholm, Sweden, October 12, 1971 (FM CDR)

In the fall of 1971, the Arkestra embarked on their second European tour, this time enlarged to twenty-two musicians, two singers, and six dancers, along with Sun Ra himself. Once again, the itinerary was haphazardly arranged, with gigs spread far and wide, and lack of money would cause many of the newcomers to abandon the tour along the way (see Szwed 1997, 286-287). Curiously, while Ronnie Boykins had returned to the fold and is clearly present on the rehearsal tape recorded just days before their departure, he did not make the trip to Europe. In fact, there was no bass player at all on this tour, except when Pat Patrick would put down his baritone sax and pick up the Fender electric bass on a few tunes. Nevertheless, when a gargantuan Arkestra took the stage on October 12 at Sweden's prestigious Royal Dramatic Theatre (a.k.a. Dramaten) in Stockholm, they were clearly energized and inspired by the lavish surroundings. In another measure of how well Sun Ra was treated in Europe, the state-run radio station broadcast sixty minutes of the performance, a copy of which circulates amongst collectors. Thank you, Sweden! The stereo FM reception is a little hissy and there are occasional wow-and-flutter problems but overall, it is very nice recording for the period and truly an excellent performance.

There is, however, considerable confusion about some of the titles found on this tape. Campbell and Trent list the first track as "Discipline 2," but I don't think that is correct. If so, it is a radical rearrangement of the "official" version which was recorded just weeks later and released on *Horizon*. After careful listening, I am unconvinced. They are possibly playing an early version of "Sometimes the Universe Speaks," a composition which was recorded in 1977 and released on *The Soul Vibrations of Man*, although, again, the arrangement is very different, making direct comparisons difficult. The long-breathed melody for two flutes certainly shares a similar contour, but here they are accompanied by saxophone and trumpet harmonizations, and there is a swinging fanfare section

midway through that I do not hear on the LP version. In any event, it is a lovely composition that gives way to a very pretty duet with Ra on synthesizers and William Morrow on vibraphone before the coda. Afterwards, Sonny launches into a prototypical "mad-scientist"-style organ solo with the Arkestra contributing some free-jazz skronk here and there.

A dramatically dissonant organ chord signals another mysterious piece which Campbell and Trent identify only as some unknown number in the "Discipline" series. The label on my (weirdly indexed) CDR says "Discipline 5" but, after comparing it to the "official" version recorded in December 1971 (released on the Freedom CD Calling Planet Earth), I don't think that is correct either. Whatever its title, this composition is conceptually similar to others in the "Discipline" series with its through-composed horn-lines and sweet and sour harmonies, fading out to Ra's spacey, vibrating organ clusters. Whatever the actual titles, this thirteen-minute sequence conclusively demonstrates Sun Ra's prolific genius as a jazz composer.

Pat Patrick takes up the electric bass for a joyful romp through "Enlightenment" wherein the rest of the Arkestra sings along with June Tyson, except for Marshall Allen's lone flute obbligato. The ragged choir moves seamlessly into "It's After the End of the World" before all hell breaks loose with wild free-group-improv, finally yielding to Eloe Omoe's reedy bass clarinet and a typically fire-breathing solo from John Gilmore on tenor sax. The intensity level becomes almost unbearable as the Arkestra prods Gilmore to ever greater heights of outrageous invention until Ra cuts things off with quivering organ chords to introduce "Discipline 8." Another moody piece for intricately hocketed horn lines, this particular number eventually settles on a brooding, three-note riff, harmonized in modal parallels which repeat endlessly, undergoing subtle permutations of tone and timbre through shifting instrumentation. Meanwhile, the soloists, led by Gilmore's tempestuous tenor, take things totally out over the heaving, trance-inducing riff. Art Jenkins even contributes an evocative "space voice" solo accompanied by Marshall Allen's flutter-tongued flute, followed by a brilliantly flashy trumpet solo by Kwame Hadi and distantly clanging marimba.

Suddenly, Ra plays a brightly swinging chord change, William Morrow plays a bebop-ish melodic figure on vibes and, while Campbell and Trent list the ensuing composition as "The Rainmaker," I

think this fleeting piece is "Sketch," which only otherwise appeared on 1964's Other Planes of There. While the organ and vibes only hint at the composition, the horns enter with a surprisingly adept run through the entire head before the dissolving back into the three-note riff and a reprise of "Discipline 8." Fascinating! The tape closes with a long, rip-roaring rendition of "Rocket Number 9," over twelve minutes of ecstatic antiphonal vocals and wigged-out saxophone solos. "Zoom! Zoom! Zoom! Up in the Air!" Just as Ra cues a throbbing, screechy space chord, the radio announcer interrupts to conclude the broadcast. Argh!

Despite some minor technical problems, this is an exquisite artifact and well worth seeking out. If the original master reels still exist, it would make for a wonderful CD which I would certainly buy in a heartbeat. And perhaps more of this concert was recorded than was broadcast...? One can dream...



Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra:

Helsinki, Finland, October 14, 1971 (FM CDR)

Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra:

Helsinki 1971: The Complete Concert and Interview

(Transparency)

On October 14, 1971, the Arkestra performed in Helsinki, Finland and, lucky for us, the entire two-and-a-half-hour concert was broadcast by the Finnish Broadcasting Company, YLE. An off-the-air tape recording of the broadcast circulates amongst collectors, and Transparency has recently released a 2CD set which purports to be derived from the radio station's master reels, but I'm skeptical. (If anyone out there has heard this, I'd love to know your opinion!) The circulating tape is slightly hissy and probably more than a few generations away from the master, but it is recorded in stereo and sounds pretty good for the period.

The first set starts off with a bang: Sonny cues a mammoth space chord over which Kwame Hadi lays down some bravura trumpet over the throbbing mass of sound. Following a brief pause, the Arkestra launches into another unidentified number in the "Discipline" series of compositions, readily apparent by the dirgey blocks of harmonies in the reeds and brass floating over freely rubato drumming. At the conclusion, June Tyson and John Gilmore sing "Theme of the Stargazers," which leads to a lengthy and particularly inspired multi-keyboard solo from Ra, full of synthesized blips, whirrs and spaceship sounds, twistedly polyphonic synthesizer/ organ displays, and astonishingly aggressive organ attacks. As the drums get heavier, saxophones are drawn into the fray with Gilmore the clear victor. After some further keyboard ruminations, William Morrow enters with some tasteful vibraphone which is countered by Ra's wiry Clavioline-like sound, making for a hauntingly beautiful texture. "Discipline 8" follows in a much less expansive arrangement than we heard in Stockholm, although Gilmore's tenor saxophone solo is typically brilliant. Pat Patrick picks up the electric bass to propel an extended "Love in Outer Space" into a trance-inducing groove that just goes on and on and on, no doubt accompanying a parade of dancers and other shenanigans. Meanwhile, Sonny keeps up a frenetic, electrically chiming keyboard accompaniment right through to the big molto ritardando ending. "Watusi" is taken at a furious clip, and the long percussion jam that follows elicits all kinds of excited whoops and hollers from the audience, who burst into exuberant applause after the return of the theme and final, universe-shaking space chord. Ra introduces "Enlightenment" with his boing-boing-ing Rocksichord and Tyson and male chorus sing the joyful song while traipsing around the venue, inviting the audience to join them on their "space world." The set ends with "Next Stop Mars," another keyboard solo full of spacey synthesizer and apocalyptic organ clusters.

The second set opens with baleful organ chords before the antiphonal chanting of "Calling Planet Earth." This prompts a spasm of crazy free-jazz skronk that eventually yields to another glistening vibes and keyboard duet. I'm really enjoying Morrow's contributions on this tour! An unidentified title follows featuring a mellifluous flute choir in bright major key harmonies, over quietly burbling percussion (including distant timpani). This is another ingenious Ra composition that was apparently only performed once and discarded. What a shame! This piece is as pretty as a spring morning and is perhaps the highlight of the concert. A protracted "Space Is the Place" immediately follows, brimming with soulful crooning, sanctified wailing, and ecstatic carrying on from multiple vocalists over waves of roiling drums and percussion. Fun—but, truthfully, it goes on a bit too long. After a brief coda, Ra launches the band into "Angels and Demons at Play," which was last heard on the 1960 Saturn LP of the same name. Basically a groove in 5/4 anchored by Pat Patrick's endlessly repeating bassline, it's really just an excuse for another sprawling, chaotic percussion jam and more space-age theatrics. Oh well. Next, Tyson and a veritable Greek chorus sing the lilting "The Satellites Are Spinning" as they march around the theater before Ra signals a raucous version of "The Second Stop is Jupiter," full of swooping, screaming vocalizations and riotous organ vamping. The lurching, big-band number "Somewhere Else" follows, allowing Patrick to finally strap on the baritone saxophone and let it rip with a growling, blues-inflected solo. Up next is the genially swinging composition "To Nature's God." This tune first appeared as an instrumental on the 1969 Saturn LP My Brother the Wind, but here gains a set of lyrics in praise of "birds, lightning, sunshine, wind, rain, the leaves on the trees" and their prolific creator.

Curiously, this intricate re-arrangement would only be performed once more before being permanently dropped from the repertoire. The concert ends with a series of space chants, anchored by Patrick's remarkably fluent bass playing, beginning with "Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space" and "Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds," concluding with a reverent quotation of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child."

While it is certainly nice to have a complete concert from this vintage in decent sound quality, the overall performance is somewhat diffuse and lacking the ultra-adventuresome music making heard a couple of nights earlier. There is more of a "good time party" atmosphere at this concert which leads to some overlong and self-indulgent episodes which were no doubt visually entertaining at the time but do not translate well to audio tape. That said, Ra's own playing is outstanding and the lovely unidentified title for flute choir in the second set makes this tape worth seeking out for the duly obsessed fan.

Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra: Vejlby Risskov Hallen, Aarhus, Denmark, October 19, 1971 (AUD CDR)

Eighty-five minutes of the Arkestra's performance at the Vejlby Risskov Hallen in Aarhus, Denmark on October 19, 1971 was captured on an extremely bad-sounding audience recording which circulates amongst more fanatical Sun Ra collectors. How bad is it? It sounds to me like the recordist stuck the microphone in his shoe and shoved his foot into Sun Ra's amplifier. It is unbelievably boomy and woefully unbalanced, with every instrument aside from the jacked-up, distorted keyboards sounding distant and muffled, making it impossible to tell exactly what's going on with the music. Of course, the intrepid fan is to be commended for making the effort; there are no other known recordings of this concert. But, really, this tape borders on the unlistenable.

Which is a shame, since it would appear the Arkestra is in fine fettle, premiering the stately "Discipline 2" and tossing off a blindingly fast version of the insanely complicated "The Shadow World." There's also yet another unknown number in the "Discipline" series of compositions which leads to a spectacularly far-out synthesizer and organ solo from Ra. But the sound quality is so awful that I could hardly bring myself to listen to it more than once. Campbell and Trent point out that James Jacson's Ancient Egyptian Infinity Lightning with Thunder Drum can be heard for the first time at the beginning of this tape (Campbell and Trent 2000, 176). As the legend goes, Jacson made the enormous ceremonial Infinity drum while the band was living in Oakland out of a tree that had been struck and dried out by a bolt of lightning. After its naming by Ra, it would become a fixture of the Cosmo Drama for years to come (p.171). So, there is that.

As a true obsessive, I treasure this as a historical artifact, even if I might never listen to it again. Given the fact that there are several other better-sounding recordings from this tour, more reasonable persons would go out of their way to avoid ever hearing this tape in the first place. Brutal!

Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra: Technische Hogeschool, Nieuwe Aula, Delft, The Netherlands, November 11, 1971 (FM CDR)

Several weeks later, the Arkestra appeared at the Technische Hogeschool, Nieuwe Aula, in Delft, on November 11, 1971. Once again, the state-run radio station recorded the concert and broadcast it on November 14. According to Campbell and Trent, portions of this concert were also televised on Dutch TV on November 17, but the tape no longer exists in the VPRO archive (Campbell and Trent 2000, 176). The audio recordings do exist, however, and, fortunately for us fans, the entire three-hour concert was re-broadcast in 2001. The sound quality is exceptionally good and it's a wonderful performance to boot.

The first set starts off with glistening vibraphone arpeggios over roiling drums, each of the various percussion instruments nicely captured in a wide stereo image. After a brief pause, the Arkestra blasts into an explosive space chord that sets up a long electronic keyboard extravaganza, punctuated by intermittent ensemble freakouts. This is certainly an intense way to begin a concert! After about nine minutes, Ra launches into the bouncy vamping of "Enlightenment." This is a note-perfect rendition with everyone crystal clear in the mix, including the descending counter-melodies on flutes and trumpet and the multi-voiced chorus that accompanies June Tyson's melodic crooning. "Love in Outer Space" predictably follows, but this time it's taken at a more relaxed tempo than usual, settling into a sultry, slinky groove for almost twelve sensuous minutes, relentlessly driven forward by William Morrow's doubling of Pat Patrick's electric bass line on vibes. Not much happens musically until Ra enters to state the theme a few times on a wheezy electric organ at the end—but that's OK.

Sonny then signals the space-chant "Space Is the Place," which is full of soulful group vocalizations over the mellow groove. Until, that is, the saxophones enter with some dissonant squealing and the rhythm starts to disintegrate, with the vocalists going crazy with ecstatic wailing about "outer space," etc. Rather than wearing out its

welcome, all this nonsense quickly subsides to give way to a series of solos and various ensemble sections including Ra's "mad-scientist" organ, some saxophone duels, raging horn battles, and pounding kettle drums. Another unknown number in the "Discipline" series emerges from the ashes, where richly orchestrated horn parts wander through a thicket of chords while rubato drums rumble around underneath. A beautiful trumpet solo follows (probably Kwame Hadi) accompanied by some spacey vibraphone, which gets a nice response from the audience. Morrow then takes over with Ra joining in on marimba, while drums beat randomly and ominously. Out of the ether, June Tyson enters with a brief declamation: "Out of every nation they shall rise, with an invitation of the Sun to journey to the outer darkness, to the outer heavens of the intergalactic dawn!" Then the ensemble enters with a reprise or coda to the "Discipline" piece. As the work concludes, Eloe Omoe adds his wild bass clarinet scribbling which prods the ensemble into some full-blown skronky free-jazz, led by John Gilmore's indomitable tenor saxophone.

June Tyson interrupts the mayhem with the declamatory "We'll Wait for You" which is ticklingly echoed by the ensemble voices. Another wave of high-energy group improv follows, featuring Art Jenkins's ghostly "space voice" and another long segment of vibes and marimba noodling. Sonny then takes a rare turn on solo acoustic piano, interspersing luscious ballad chords with furious avant-garde attacks, later rhapsodically hinting around the "Theme of the Stargazers," which is taken up by Tyson and Gilmore in perfect unison. This gives rise to a long, quiet, very spacey improvisation with vocalized horns and gently tapping marimba and percussion. At times, an eerie, Strange Strings-like atmosphere arises only to move to other, equally compelling musical territory. Finally, Gilmore steps up with an anguished saxophone cry and takes over with a typically mind-blowing solo, which is greeted with wild applause. Wow.

An early version of "Discipline 27" follows right behind. These early performances are "pre-mitotic," Campbell and Trent point out, "combin[ing] a riff from the later '27' and one from the later '27-II,' along with a counter-theme for the saxes that was not used in later versions at all" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 177). Not surprisingly, the ensemble sounds a bit tentative on the interlocking horn parts, and the rhythm section never quite attains the stately grace the work requires. Hadi ventures first with an uncharacteristically modest but

tasteful solo while Morrow provides some rather aimless filling on vibes, mostly making for a not quite satisfying performance of this otherwise languid and dreamy composition. As the piece tapers off, the chorus enters with an a cappella rendition of "Outer Spaceways, Incorporated," ending the set with delirious chanting and clapping while the Arkestra parades off the stage.

The second set begins with another out improv led by Gilmore's titanic tenor, together with peals of squalling horns and energetic free drumming. The mix is a little weird until Tyson enters with a lovely solo rendition of "They'll Come Back," which elicits an enthusiastic response from the crowd. Another unknown number in the "Discipline" series follows, featuring slowly ascending, densely harmonized horn swells and a honking bass clarinet solo from Omoe. A free improvisation opens up for more vibes/marimba spaciness before the ensemble returns with the heaving chords of "Discipline," this time with hysterical vocalizations from (perhaps) Malik Ramadin. Interesting. The piece formally concludes, giving way to Danny Davis on wailing alto saxophone, later joined by Marshall Allen and some jittery percussion and vibraphone. The music rises and falls a number of times before Gilmore takes over with another spectacular tenor solo, bringing down the house to stunned applause. Ra then moves to acoustic piano for a rare performance of "Intergalactic Universe," a loping vamp in 5/4 featuring subtly inventive solo turns from Gilmore and Hadi. As the rhythm section starts to deconstruct, Ra embarks on a spaceship synthesizer solo punctuated by dissonant organ stabs, with an onomatopoeic whitenoise blast-off at the conclusion.

A held organ chord cues "The Satellites Are Spinning," its mellow groove supporting the soulful singing of Tyson and band. After a big ending and a brief percussion interlude, yet another number in the "Discipline" series is performed, this one orchestrated for thick stacks of low saxophones with a breathy flute on top. As Pat Patrick begins to play a counter-melody on baritone sax, more flutes and French horn enter, making for an impossibly lush texture. A sweetly improvised flute choir follows, with additional commentary from various percussion instruments and a reedy synthesizer—until Ra suddenly charges into "Watusi," taken at a brisk yet controlled tempo. After a tight rendition of the theme, the usual percussion fest follows, which benefits from the excellent stereo

sound; this sometimes-dull segment is actually quite mesmerizing! But, by the time Morrow's clanking vibraphone induces Ra to return to the vamp, the tempo has increased noticeably. Even so, the Arkestra returns with a jubilant restatement of the theme and a huge pulsating space chord to end. Sonny then taps out the tune "To Nature's God" on Rocksichord but drops out for Tyson and the guys to sing the song over a hypnotic two-chord vamp supplied by vibraphone and electric bass. "Sometimes you should appreciate the work of Nature's God! Give credit where credit is due!" they implore. While it's sort of understandable why this tune was dropped from the repertoire, it's still nice to have this rarely performed vocal arrangement in such good sound quality.

Next up is an extended performance of the mysterious "Shadow World." Ra outlines the weird chords at a breakneck tempo, but when the horns come in with their wickedly complicated, interlocking lines, they are almost completely overwhelmed by howling feedback. Yikes! The mix continues to suffer as the technicians attempt to cope with the barrage of instrumental attacks. Eventually, the rhythm section amiably falls apart, allowing for a series of solos, first a densely contrapuntal Rocksichord etude, then Gilmore with his screaming multiphonics and fleet-fingered runs of notes, which again elicits a round of applause from the audience. Pat Patrick honks out the "Shadow World's" enervating riff, while Gilmore continues to wail, building up to an almost unbearable level of intensity until he's all alone again on the stage, blowing his ever-living brains out. With a flourish, he stops and the stunned audience responds with another big hand. Geez, what can I say? It's another incredible John Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi gamely follows with a high-wire trumpet solo, full of rubber-lipped special effects, which is greeted with respectful applause. Ra furiously assaults the organ with remarkable ten-fingered dexterity, producing a richly textured, purely electronic sound. Then the Arkestra suddenly enters with a wobbly space chord, serving to introduce a brief untitled composition, perhaps from the "Discipline" series, scored for long-breathed flutes and alternately moaning and riffing horns. Very interesting! After a spacey vibraphone interlude, Ra returns with an extended synthesizer excursion, again demonstrating his mastery of electronic keyboards in the early 1970s. After a solemn conclusion, Ra deftly segues into the closing space chants. First, there's a short romp through "The Second Stop Is Jupiter," with Tyson and Gilmore gleefully chanting the line in weirdly antiphonal harmony. Tyson then moves into "Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds," which includes quotations from "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and a disconcertingly catchy refrain: "This world ain't gonna be here long—we got to go!" Meanwhile, the Arkestra embarks on its slow procession off the stage, banging and clanging, chanting and singing. Several minutes of clapping, cheering, and hollering from the audience is also included on the rebroadcast.

Whew! What a show! How delightful to have this recording of an expansive Cosmo Drama in such vivid high-fidelity sound! This one is a keeper, for sure! Unfortunately, the haphazard booking of the European tour was taking its toll on the Arkestra's finances, which led to an ugly scene back at the hotel after this concert, resulting in three members being fired and eleven more quitting (Szwed 1997, 287).

Campbell and Trent list no performances between the October 19 concert in Aarhus and this one on November 11, and the next documented performance wasn't until November 29 in Paris (which was supposed to be the last one of the tour). It's rumored, however, that the Arkestra also played in West Germany at some point, but no definitive information has been uncovered (Campbell and Trent 2000, 176). In any event, such a large ensemble of out-jazzers couldn't possibly survive in a foreign country while working only once every few weeks, so it was inevitable things would come to a head with the less-experienced Arkestrans. Fortunately, the core members of the band soldiered on, enthusiastically agreeing to a last-minute trip to Egypt, despite the impossible logistics, which included some hastily arranged gigs in Denmark in December which were intended to pay for the excursion. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. A fragment of the Paris concert and one "officially released" recording from Copenhagen still await us.

AND HIS MYTHE SCIENCE ARKESTRA

THE PARIS TAPES

LIVE AT LE THÉATRE DU CHATELET 1971

Sun Ra and His Mythic Science Arkestra:
The Paris Tapes: Live at Le Théâtre Du Châtelet 1971
(Art Yard/Kindred Spirits 2CD)
Sun Ra Arkestra:
Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, France,
November 29, 1971 (FM CDR)

Of all the European cities the Arkestra toured, Paris was apparently Sun Ra's favorite, reminding him of Montréal (Szwed 1997, 287). The Arkestra performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet on November 29, 1971, and the concert was broadcast over the radio. A very degraded sixty-minute recording of the radio broadcast circulates amongst the more fanatical collectors—and you really have to be a fanatic to get into this one. The first forty-five minutes borders on the unlistenable: hissy yet muffled, under-recorded yet boomy, woefully unbalanced, and just plain bad. The remaining fifteen-minute segment is from a different source, but only marginally better-sounding than the rest. Even so, buried within the murk is some remarkable music that is worth the effort—maybe.

The recording starts from the beginning of a set, with tribal drums setting up Ra's grand entrance on weird electric space keyboards. Without going on too long, Sonny cues up "Discipline 27" in its early, "pre-mitotic" arrangement. Gilmore takes a rip-snorting tenor solo while the Arkestra heaves and sighs around him, but it's difficult to hear exactly what is going on within the music. After a brief keyboard interlude, the band launches to "Enlightenment," only to have the sound quality deteriorate even further. *Ugh.* "Love in Outer Space" predictably follows, but this time Sun Ra keeps up an enervating, electro-metallic din over the polyrhythmic percussion jamming to unsettling effect. Despite the poor sound quality, you can tell this is a particularly intense version of this sometimes throw-away piece. There's a churning darkness to Sonny's organ playing that reminds me of textural effects found on Miles Davis's *On the Corner* album (which did not come out until 1972). *Interesting.*

Next up is the first known performance of "Third Planet," a twisted bit of big-band fun, with a jaunty, slightly old-timey rhythm and a riff-happy horn arrangement. Ra takes a nicely buzzing Rocksichord solo before the reprise. After a brief interruption from the radio announcer (in French), and piano introduction from Ra, Tyson

sings "Somebody Else's Idea," accompanied by hypnotic percussion, an ooh-ing and ah-ing male chorus, and, sometimes, Marshall Allen's ethereal flute. The announcer rudely interrupts again before an unknown number in the "Discipline" series composition fades up. It's amazing how many of these things there are! This one is really just a handful of densely through-composed ensemble chords, which quickly gives way to an a cappella Gilmore solo. Sadly, the tape cuts off just as things start to get cooking. Too bad, as I suspect there was much more music that followed. Finally, "Watusi" is from a different, slightly better source, more balanced and clear, but the fifteen-minute long percussion jam is still a distorted mess. The track fades just the horns start to take things out. *Oh well*.

Despite the interestingness of much of the music contained on this recording, it is inordinately difficult to listen to without squinting your ears. However, Art Yard (in collaboration with the Dutch label, Kindred Spirits) recently released *The Paris Tapes: Live at Le Théâtre Du Châtelet 1971*. This upgraded and expanded edition is a most welcome addition to the official discography. Even so, don't be throwing away that crummy-sounding bootleg just yet—some very interesting and unique music has been edited out of this otherwise excellent release! Mastered from what appear to be the pre-broadcast reels, the sound quality is superb, with spacious ambience and startling instrumental clarity. But according to producer Peter Dennett, about an hour of music was omitted due to technical problems with the tapes and to limit the release to a more economical two CDs. That is completely understandable, if unfortunate for us crazy completists, who would love to hear every note, sonic warts and all.

What we do get is very good indeed, with an extra-generous serving of Sun Ra's incredibly outrageous electronic keyboard playing. Right from the start, Sonny is shooting laser beams and cracking whips with his Minimoogs, summoning up torrential storms of noise and distortion, pounding out thundering low-register grumbles on the organ, or stringing delicate and wobbly portamentos against thick, dissonant tone clusters. That's just the "Introduction!" Then he turns in a groovy, blues-inflected electric piano solo on a "pre-mitotic" version of "Discipline 27" while the hypnotic, dark metallic funk of his organ comping dominates an extended version of "Love in Outer Space." The rarely-heard "Third Planet" also features a tasty, reedy Rocksichord excursion à la Night Of The

Purple Moon while Ra's space-age barbeque organ makes an appearance on "Discipline Number Unknown." And, finally, the album concludes with an astonishing tour de force of Sun Ra's patented, mad-scientist-style mayhem: fifteen minutes of spooky murmuring, shrieking sirens and bursting bombs, all culminating in the arrival and departure of the alien spaceship to take us back to Saturn. Wow! This is truly one of the all-time great Sun Ra epics! If there was ever any doubt of Ra's visionary genius and sheer instrumental prowess, this release should put that notion to rest for good.

In between, there's the usual thing—yet the vocal numbers such as "Somebody Else's Idea" and "Space Is the Place," as well as the dance/drums workout "Watusi," greatly benefit from the luxurious sound quality and tightly focused performances (notorious drummer Clifford Jarvis exhibits remarkable restraint throughout). A meandering "Angels and Demons At Play" is perhaps overlong, but Marshall Allen's evocative flute periodically adds interest to the percussion jamming. Particularly noteworthy is the discovery of yet another never-before-heard "Discipline" composition on disc two wherein characteristically interlocking horn riffs are cast upon an enchantingly off-kilter space-groove in seven. During a series of solos (Kwame Hadi on trumpet, Ra on BBQ organ and Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet), the arrangement gradually morphs into a wild group improvisation for massed saxophones and skittering, clattering polyrhythms. Pretty exciting stuff!

So, what's missing? The "Enlightenment" after the opening improvisation has been cut and while that in itself is no great loss, the following unknown "Discipline" piece has also been omitted. Now, that's a real shame as this is the only known performance of one of Ra's most strikingly beautiful compositions (and the bootleg tape appears to be incomplete). Moreover, there are no big John Gilmore solos on either of these two discs, which feels wrong given his usual prominence in the Arkestra—I suspect "The Shadow World" made an appearance at this concert and no doubt Gilmore did his thing there (and elsewhere). So, that's a little frustrating. Regardless of any technical anomalies, I, for one, would love to hear the rest of the tapes from this gig and would have gladly paid extra for a complete, three-CD set. Oh well. Perhaps, if this sells well, a volume two will be forthcoming.

But I quibble. Art Yard and Kindred Spirits have done a fabulous job with *The Paris Tapes* and it is an essential purchase for any self-respecting Sun Ra fan (if you can find it). Despite the absence of certain crucial material, Sun Ra's performance here more than makes up for the loss with amazing displays of keyboard pyrotechnics. And the overall sumptuous sound quality will gratify even the most casual of listeners, making this a most highly recommended release.

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The Paris concert was supposed to be the last of this ill-fated tour but at the last minute, Sun Ra decided to go to Egypt. Someone had tipped him off to cheap airfare from Copenhagen to Cairo, and a handful of gigs in Denmark were cobbled together to pay for a trip to the Land of the Pharaohs (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 178-179). Egypt was a place of obvious spiritual importance to Sun Ra, but half of the rapidly shrinking Arkestra bailed out and returned home. Nevertheless, the core musicians dutifully carried on with the shoe-string adventure. As it turned out, the Danish promoters failed to pay, and Sonny financed the trip by selling a batch of tapes to the Black Lion label, the desperate transaction taking place on the tarmac as the Cairo-bound plane awaited its departure (Szwed 1997, 292). Among those tapes was a recording from Odense on December 3, 1971 that was never issued (has anyone heard this?) and the December 5th concert from the Tivoli Theatre in Copenhagen, which was finally released by the Freedom label as Calling Planet Earth in 1998.

The homemade stereo recording was made from the stage (probably by Tommy Hunter), and while it sounds fine, there is some distortion during the loudest parts, and you can hear the seams of a hasty editing job. Hunter's voice (likely recorded in the hotel room afterwards) announces the date and venue before cutting into a brief turbulent percussion jam, which serves as an introduction to "Discipline 5." The through-composed sequence of sweet-n-sour harmonies rises and falls over the busy percussion section, yielding to an unaccompanied alto saxophone solo by Danny Davis, and returning for the reprise. Kwame Hadi remains as the only brass player, but the saxophone section is full and lush: besides Davis, mainstays Marshall Allen, John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, Danny Thompson, Eloe Omoe, and newcomers Larry Northington and Hakim Rahim are all present and help to flesh out the intricate arrangement. "Discipline 10" is more groove-oriented, propelled by Ra's barbequed organ comping over which the Arkestra riffs on a handful of big-voiced chords. Ra solos interestingly on organ while Patrick grinds out a stumbling bass line until Gilmore enters with a fiercely overblown solo on tenor sax. Unfortunately, he's way offmic and hard to hear. Even so, you can tell he's really blowing his ass off! After a return of the head, Ra steers the band into a nicely sung rendition of "Enlightenment." A severely truncated version of "Love in Outer Space" ends what would have been side A of the LP, fading out just as things start to come to a boil.

"Discipline 15" begins with a fugue-like organ solo, outlining the highly chromatic harmonic areas of the piece. Then the ensemble enters tentatively with the richly orchestrated rubato theme, dark, reedy saxophones contrasted with airy flute and trumpet. Ra takes a dramatic unaccompanied organ solo before suddenly shifting gears, launching into "The Satellites Are Spinning," which is taken up by June Tyson and Gilmore in a sung duet. After the urgent chanting of "Calling Planet Earth," the Arkestra slams into "The Outers," some high-energy free jazz skronk: the horns wail, the drums bash, and Sonny attacks his electronic keyboards with fists and elbows. This goes on for a while, until Sun Ra takes over for good with an agitated mad-scientist-style solo on organ. A deft edit drops us into the floating space-groove of "Adventures Outer Planes" (mis-titled "Adventures Outer Space" on the CD), a twochord vamp supporting a wandering melody for flute and trumpet that never quite seems to gel. Ra again leads the way with a genially meandering organ solo, while the Arkestra takes up small percussion instruments. A second time through, the composition sounds a bit more confident than before, although there are some weird (and possibly wrong) notes strewn about. The track fades out inconclusively. Hmm. According to Campbell and Trent, this piece was only performed this one time; too bad, as it definitely had potential. [Editor's note: The only other version of this piece has shown up on Sun Emabassy (Roaratoio, 2018), there titled "My Reality Is Real." It is astonishing to discover so many tantalizing but rarely performed works scattered throughout the discography!

While there is some interesting music here, the Arkestra sounds hesitant on the newer material, and some of the more exciting improvisational music has obviously been edited out from a much longer performance, making this album less than totally satisfying to me. Then again, I'm spoiled. Any good-sounding Ra music from this vintage should be heartily welcomed. Next stop: Egypt.

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra:

Horizon (Art Yard CD)

Sun Ra:

Egypt 1971 (Strut)

The Art Yard label continues to make some of the rarest Sun Ra material available with this expanded reissue of *Horizon*. Portions of this material were originally released on El Saturn 1217718 in Philadelphia, El Saturn 849 in Chicago, and Thoth Intergalactic 7771, all at various points in the early to mid-1970s and all nearly impossible to find. This CD gathers all the extant recordings from this historic performance at the Ballon Theatre, near the Great Pyramids in Cairo, a suitably cosmic venue for Sun Ra's band of space travelers.

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A trip to Egypt was unplanned, but at the end of the 1971 European tour, Ra decided to sell some concert tapes to Black Lion to fund a pilgrimage to the land of the Pharaohs. Thanks to the efforts of Hartmut Geerken, a German writer and free musician who was teaching at the Gœthe Institute in Cairo, a handful of performances were arranged and, even though the Arkestra's instruments were held up in customs, loaners were provided by a most unlikely personage: Salah Ragab, a brigadier general in the Egyptian army (Szwed 1997, 292-293).

The concert at the Ballon Theatre was recorded from the stage (in mono) by Tommy Hunter. It is a truly special performance: after the cold, grueling tour of Europe, the Arkestra sounds well-rested and inspired by the ancient, mystical—and warm—environment. There's a certain focus and solemnity to the Arkestra's demeanor that seems appropriate given the auspicious location. Sun Ra himself is in especially good form with his propulsive piano, spooky "tiger organ," and hair-raising rocket ship journeys on the Moog synthesizer.

He sets the stage with some ominous electronics before a brief "Theme of the Stargazers" and a howling a cappella solo from Danny Davis on alto sax. The band then launches into "Discipline 2," a moody and mysterious piece that begins with throbbing, densely harmonized horns which give way to a twittering flute choir before returning with a somber coda. Sonny then signals "The

Shadow World" and we're off to the races. This is a spectacular, seventeen-minute rendition, with Ra driving the band hard and the ensemble responding with near-perfect execution of the extraordinarily complicated melody lines. Ra takes the lead with a skittering organ solo before an energetic group improvisation section that yields to Gilmore's furiously wailing tenor sax. Yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi also takes a turn on trumpet and acquits himself well, ranging around from high-wire acrobatics to smeared, low-register noodling before Ra signals the reprise. After a brief pause, Ra lightens the mood by moving into "Enlightenment," which is joyfully taken up by June Tyson and her male choir. "Love in Outer Space" predictably follows, and while this version lacks the menacing darkness heard in Paris, there's plenty of exciting organ work and another tasty solo from Hadi.

The neo-big-band swing of "Third Planet" follows with the Arkestra again nailing the ensemble sections and supporting Hadi's bebop-ish solo with swelling riffs. Hadi's really in the spotlight at this concert! Ra takes a bumptious, barbequed organ solo as the rhythm section starts to really heat up, only settling down again for the return of the head. Sonny then lurches into some dissonant organ clusters to introduce "Space Is the Place." Pat Patrick grinds out the repetitive bassline, percussion sets up a quasi-Latin groove, the singers chant, clap, and dance, and meanwhile Marshall Allen squeals and moans on alto saxophone. It was likely quite a spectacle. "Horizon" begins with Ra blasting off with his Moog synthesizer, punctuated with a searing space chord at the end. An eerie organ swell signals "Discipline 8," with its oscillating ensemble chords over rumbling, rubato drumming. Eloe Omoe emerges from the thicket of harmony to blow some honking bass clarinet until Gilmore takes over with a blistering display of high-pitched harmonics, howling multiphonics, and low-register growls, joined at the end by the altos in an all-out saxophone battle. After reaching a feverish pitch, the saxophones subside, leaving Hadi to brood. All the while, the Arkestra's riffing continues to heave and sigh, rising and falling with contours of the soloists' excursions. After a cued ending, June Tyson chants "We'll Wait for You" with the Arkestra echoing her lines antiphonally. While Sonny outlines a narrow harmonic area, the Arkestra briefly engages in some free-jazz freakouts before Ra signals "The Satellites Are Spinning," which closes the CD with its

optimistic chanting about the "great tomorrow," accompanied by some bitingly skronky saxophone solos and supported by a propulsive groove laid down by Clifford Jarvis's skillful drumming and Pat Patrick's workmanlike bass playing. You can hear the Egyptian audience starting to get into it, whooping and hollering as the Arkestra parades off the stage. While the set list is typical of the period, the performance is particularly focused and intense.

Premises considered, sound quality is pretty good, though not a hi-fi spectacular by any means. Probably recorded from the audience with a single microphone, there's plenty of ambience but limited frequency response, dynamic range, or soundstage. Fans will, of course, be undeterred by low-fidelity recordings, as it comes with the territory. After all, Sun Ra was a trail-blazing pioneer of DIY record production. In fact, that "Saturn Sound" is, for some of us, part of the charm. For others, however, *Horizon* may be rough going. But as a historical document and a key disc in Sun Ra's vast discography, this is essential. In 2009, Art Yard released *Nidhamu* + *Dark Myth Equation Visitation*, which contains three more tracks from this concert, along with portions of the Heliopolis performance and a TV appearance taped on December 16. We'll have a listen to that one next.



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Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra:
Nidhamu + Dark Myth Equation Visitation
(Art Yard CD)
Sun Ra:
Egypt 1971 (Strut)

In 2009, Art Yard gathered together the remaining Egypt material on a CD entitled Nidhamu + Dark Myth Equation Visitation. Most of this music was previously released on impossible to find Saturn and Thoth Intergalactic LPs over the years, making this an essential companion to the magnificent Horizon CD. The CD opens with three additional tracks recorded at the Ballon Theatre on December 17, 1971: "Space Loneliness #2" begins with an unusual ensemble of saxophones, flutes, and oboe with a detuned synthesizer obbligato. The yearning, dissonantly harmonized melody and rubato drums feels conceptually similar to the Discipline series of compositions and may be a completely different piece. Ra then takes an unaccompanied solo on dual synthesizers which focuses more on pitch and rhythm than spaceship noises for a change. After moving to Rocksichord and outlining a bluesy set of changes, the ensemble returns with a lushly orchestrated coda that echoes the big-band riffing of the original "Space Loneliness." After some polite applause, Ra introduces "Discipline 11" with a spacey organ solo until trumpet, flutes, and saxophones enter with the dirge-like composition. After some more organ chording, Marshall Allen takes a mellifluous, heavily reverbed solo on flute until Sonny interrupts with more scary electronic mayhem. A glorious rendition of the stately "Discipline 15" follows with John Gilmore adding his inimitable tenor sax improvisations over the top. Unfortunately, after a short percussion interlude, the track quickly fades out. Even so, it's a wonderful performance of this rarely played composition.

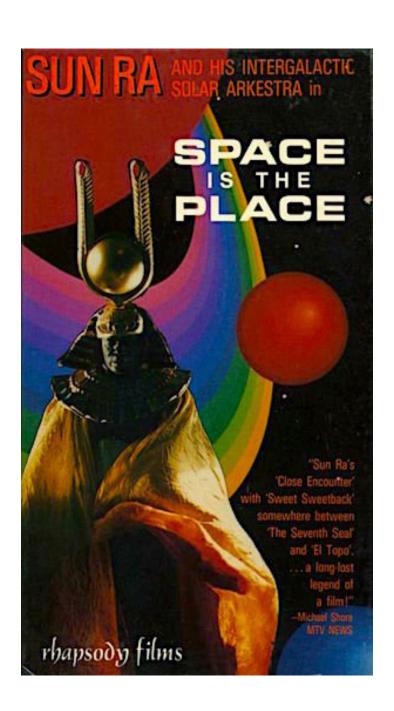
"Nidhamu" is a long (thirteen minute) double-synthesizer solo recorded at an invitation-only concert at Hartmut Geerken's house in Heliopolis on December 12, 1971. Ra again demonstrates his mastery of the then new technology, exploring the vast range of sounds available: from space age bleeps and blorps, to sweeping portamentos; pure sine waves to tsunamis of white noise—all the while maintaining a loose internal structure built around a jittery

four-note figure that appears and disappears in various permutations throughout the piece. On December 16, Ra appeared on Egyptian television, and the next four tracks document that event, which was, sadly, not preserved in the station's archives (Campbell and Trent 2000, 181). "Discipline 27" fades into Kwame Hadi's trumpet solo while Tommy Hunter's voice (probably dubbed later) announces the date and venue. Hadi plays nicely, as usual, supported by a swelling Arkestral accompaniment that gradually resumes the brightly riffing composition before fading out too soon. "Solar Ship Voyage" consists of a brief synthesizer solo in Ra's rocket-ship style, punctuated with skittering runs of notes and piercing, highpitched whines. "Cosmo Darkness" is a short group improvisation with squealing horns pitted against Ra's rumbling electronic organ. Ra wins. "The Light Thereof" opens with an enervated organ solo before the ensemble takes up the mournful, densely arranged composition, which was apparently performed only this one time. Another lost masterpiece! An ensemble of saxophones, flutes, and trumpet improvise simultaneously while Gilmore takes the lead with a display of tenor pyrotechnics until Ra points the finger and the piece stops on a dime, eliciting enthusiastic applause from the small studio audience. Quite a display of avant-garde weirdness for Egyptian television!

The disc concludes with three more tracks recorded on December 12. Ra has been provided an acoustic piano, which he uses to push the band through a ragged but still effective performance of "Friendly Galaxy #2," featuring a twittering flute choir over the insistently repeating trumpet note. Ra then takes a meditative solo, slowing the tempo to a full stop before launching into the sing-along arrangement of "To Nature's God," which is taken up by June Tyson and Gilmore with gusto. Sonny quickly drops out and everyone takes up percussion instruments to bang along with Pat Patrick's electric bass vamp, while Tyson and Gilmore sing, dance, chant, and parade around the room. Despite the band's enthusiasm, this was apparently the last performance of this quirky little ditty. Finally, the disc closes with the bouncy space chant "Why Go to the Moon," which, unfortunately, fades out after about two and half minutes. Supposedly, the entire three and a half hour Heliopolis concert was recorded by Tommy Hunter, but it is unknown whether the rest of the tape survives. Given that none of it appears on this Art Yard CD, it seems unlikely. But you never know what might surface... [Editor's note: The Strut/Art Yard 4-CD set Egypt 1971 contains 2 CDs of additional material from the Heliopolis concert on December 12 as well as more from the TV show on December 15 and the Ballon Theatre show on December 17.]

The Egyptian sojourn was supposed to last only a few days, but the Arkestra wound staying two weeks. They even ventured into the great pyramids, where the lights dramatically went out as soon as they entered the mystical King's Chamber. As they made their way back out in pitch darkness, Sonny calmly remarked, "Why do we need light, Sun Ra, the sun is here" (Szwed 1997, 293). All this was no doubt great fun, but the trip was taking its toll on the Arkestra's already precarious finances.

1972 would turn out to be another lean year for the Arkestra, and they would not return to Europe again until the fall of 1973. They did, however, make a movie, the pseudo-Blaxploitation classic, *Space Is the Place*, and sign a recording contract with a major label, ABC/Impulse!



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Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Arkestra: Space Is the Place (Rhapsody Films VHS) Sun Ra:

Space Is the Place: 40th Anniversary Edition (Harte Recordings)

After his return to California, Sun Ra was approached by film producer Jim Newman about a possible thirty-minute documentary about the Arkestra to be aired on PBS. While that idea never panned out. with the help of director John Coney, a different kind of film was envisioned: Space Is the Place, "part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic" (Szwed 1997, 330).

Sun Ra was actively engaged in the film-making process—to the point of editing out several scenes, including two "sexual situations," a scene where a junkie responds to Ra's music by quitting drugs and getting on the spaceship, and one in which Sun Ra saves some white people (!) (Szwed 1997, 332). In the end, the movie was cut from ninety minutes to just over an hour and while it's fun to watch, it's really not a very good film (we fell asleep watching it last night). My favorite scene is the flashback to 1943, and it is apparently based upon a real event back when Sonny was playing piano in a strip joint during his early days in Chicago: after being threatened by the Overseer, Ra plays an increasingly cacophonous piano solo which literally blows everyone out of the bar in a cloud of smoke and atonal fury, thereby vanguishing the evil gangsters. Hilarious!

The film finally opened in 1974 and enjoyed a few screenings in San Francisco and New York, but soon sank without a trace. Over the years, the Arkestra would sometimes project pieces of the movie during concerts and it eventually earned some status as a "cult classic." Sonny had high hopes for the movie and was bitterly disappointed in its failure. He later (rather implausibly) claimed that some of his ideas were stolen from him in Star Wars and Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Szwed 1997, 333). Rhapsody Films issued it on VHS cassette in 1993 and Plexifilm released an expanded version on DVD in 2003—both of which are now long out of print. [Editor's note: The 40th Anniversary Edition contains original and uncut versions of the film.]

The Arkestra also entered a real recording studio for the first time since leaving New York to record the soundtrack to the film, which was released by Evidence in 1993. We'll have a listen to that next.





Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Arkestra: Soundtrack to the Film Space Is the Place (Evidence CD)

In early 1972, the Arkestra entered a real recording studio for the first time since their relocation to California in order to record the soundtrack and to be filmed for inclusion in the movie. Space Is the Place. The name of the studio is unknown and, in any case, it is long gone by now; but according to producer Jim Newman, it was "on Connecticut Avenue at the foot of Potero Hill" in San Francisco, and the crew was borrowed from the legendary Different Fur Trading Company (Campbell and Trent 2000, 185). While an accompanying album to be released on Blue Thumb is alluded to in the movie, most of the music recorded at these sessions was finally issued for the first time by Evidence in 1993. The material was heavily edited for the film and mostly drawn from the working repertoire of the period, including such live stalwarts as "Watusa," "Satellites Are Spinning," "Outer Spaceways Incorporated," "We Travel the Spaceways," "Love in Outer Space," and, of course, "Space Is the Place." While the performances are rather abbreviated on the CD, the sound quality is excellent and, despite the fact that John Gilmore is heard primarily on drums rather than saxophone, there are several interesting bits of music which make this well worth hearing.

For example: "Under Different Stars" is an intense conducted improvisation featuring trumpeters Kwame Hadi and Wayne Harris bathed in thick reverb while Sonny makes burbling noises on electronic keyboards. And while "Discipline 33" is mistitled, according to Ben Opie (Campbell and Trent 2000, 185), it is definitely from the Discipline series of compositions with its intricately interweaving horn riffs, and Hadi again turns in a tasteful solo; sadly, it fades out too soon, never to be played again. [Editor's note: This piece also appears, uncredited, on Live at Slug's Saloon as part of the second track on Disc 4.] "The Overseer" is another free-jazz freakout, tautly reined in by Ra's orchestral organ sprays, while "Mysterious Crystal" evokes the futuristic exotica of Strange Strings, featuring a typically brilliant oboe solo by Marshall Allen. Finally, Sun Ra takes a

thoughtful Minimoog solo on "Cosmic Forces" and launches into some portentous declamations on "I Am the Alter-Destiny" and "I Am the Brother of the Wind," the latter allowing Eloe Omoe to shine on raspy bass clarinet while the ensemble rages in the background.

According to Campbell and Trent, edited versions of "We're Living in the Space Age" and "The Unknown Factor" were used in the film but not included on the Evidence CD (Campbell and Trent 2000, 185). Furthermore, the wonderfully atonal piano solo from the hilarious strip club scene is also absent. It seems likely all this music was recorded at a later date as work continued on the film well into 1974, but these have not turned up to date. [*Editor's note*: The 40th anniversary DVD edition of the film comes with the soundtrack CD, which includes two bonus tracks: "Jimmy Fey Interviews Sun Ra," which is the 7/4 vamp from the scene of Ra riding through the streets of Oakland, and "Sonny Ra at Nightclub."] Additionally, the 2001 ESP Radio Tribute broadcast included extended versions of "Outer Spaceways Incorporated" and "We'll Wait for You," which segues into "Strange Worlds" and ends with another spaced-out synthesizer solo. Unfortunately, these tracks are in mono and suffer from slightly degraded sound quality. Even so, completists will want to search them out.

Space Is the Place may have been something of a cinematic failure, but the soundtrack CD is enormously satisfying and makes for an excellent overview of the Arkestra's music during this period. For casual and fanatical Sun Ra fans alike, it is absolutely essential.

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Sun Ra: Intergalactic Research (The Lost Reels Collection, Vol. 2) (Transparency CD)

By the spring of 1972, the Arkestra's living situation was becoming increasingly precarious. Sun Ra had returned to the University of California in Berkeley hoping to teach another class in black aesthetics, but soon quit after not being paid. He claimed the university targeted him due to the controversial subject matter of his lectures, but for whatever reason, his academic career (such as it was) was now over. Moreover, the Black Panthers evicted the Arkestra out of their house in Oakland due to "ideological" differences"—likely regarding the Panthers' recent rhetorical turn toward violent revolution. As Sun Ra predicted, this move would doom the Panthers as a legitimate political party or progressive social movement. And so, with little paying work and no place to live, the decision was made to leave California in May, 1972 and move back to Marshall Allen's house on Morton Street in Philadelphia—this time for good (Szwed 1997, 330).

Naturally, some band members took off immediately for points elsewhere but, as usual, the core musicians hung in and slowly made their way with Sonny across the country, hustling gigs as they could. Sadly, very little documentary evidence exists of this period. However, a thirty-two minute concert fragment from an unknown venue was issued as part of Transparency's *Lost Reels Collection*, Vol. 2 and it just might be possible this was recorded in the spring of 1972, prior to the band's arrival back east. On the other hand, the presence of Pat Patrick on baritone sax and electric bass is suspicious for a later date (he does not appear in the film *Space Is the Place* or on the soundtrack). So, who knows when exactly this was recorded? In any event, I'm sticking it here for the time being. [*Editor's note*: See the earlier entry for the remainder of this CD.]

While all too brief, it is a remarkably good sounding tape, recorded in mono with on-stage microphones or, perhaps, from the soundboard. It is also a fantastic performance, starting out with a surprisingly subdued Minimoog solo, full of gentle, swooshing

noises and lazy portamentos. This serves as a prelude to an outrageous rendition of "Outer Space" with Sun Ra cueing thunderous space chords to punctuate his mad-scientist-style organ solo before giving way to a powerful tenor sax blowout by John Gilmore. Yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo! This leads into a conducted improvisation which begins with some noodling electric bass over a smattering of percussion; but as things start to heat up, Kwame Hadi comes in with some high-register trumpet acrobatics, his rich tone full-bodied and warm. Suddenly, Ra cues the ensemble in an energetic group improvisation which is abruptly silenced by a gigantic blast of organ, the piece ending with some quietly hissing chords. Interesting! Finally, a rare performance of "Intergalactic Universe" concludes the tape with its long, loping jam built upon an endlessly repeating two-note figure which is passed around the Arkestra in various instrumental combinations. (Interestingly, Ra is heard on acoustic piano on this track.) Eloe Omoe takes a snaky bass clarinet solo, but he's off mic and hard to hear, but Hadi provides another virtuoso turn on trumpet. After fifteen minutes of groovy vamping, the ensemble returns with the theme only to have the tape fade out. Argh! Too bad the rest of this concert (whenever it was recorded) was not preserved!

It wasn't all bad news for the Arkestra: producer Ed Michel had recently offered Sun Ra and Alton Abraham a potentially lucrative contract with ABC/Impulse! to reissue most of the Saturn LPs and to go into the studio to make a bunch of new albums. ABC/Impulse! was, of course, the home of John Coltrane's late recordings, which had spawned "The New Thing" and a stream of semi-popular albums by such Coltrane acolytes as Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp. At the time, it probably seemed like Sun Ra would fit right in. Ultimately, the deal didn't quite turn out as well Sonny had hoped, but for a brief while, Sun Ra records were widely available in stores and helped take the band to the next level. The Arkestra would make its first recording for the label, the classic Astro Black, while in Chicago on May 7, 1972.

Sun Ra: Astro Black (ABC/Impulse! LP)

According to the jacket of Astro Black, Sun Ra's first new recording for ABC/Impulse! was made at "El Saturn Studio" in Chicago on May 7, 1972, but that date is questionable since the Arkestra was just leaving California in May-and the studio name is "strictly mythic" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 186). Whatever the date or actual location, it was clearly made in a professional recording studio as the sound quality is exceptionally good. Sun Ra was obviously determined to take advantage of the mass exposure a major label could bring, producing one his finest albums. Notably, Ronnie Boykins makes a welcome return on bass after a long absence and he is prominently featured here, driving the band to great heights. The Arkestra is augmented with both Akh Tal Ebah and Kwame Hadi on trumpets, Charles Stephens on trombone, and Alzo Wright on violin and viola, along with several conga players, who give much of this record its avant-exotica feel. But Boykins clearly inspires Sonny, and his fluent explorations on organ and synthesizer throughout the album demonstrate a consummate mastery of electronic instruments. Astro Black is, in my opinion, one of Sun Ra's crowning recorded achievements.

A radical re-arrangement of the title piece opens the album with June Tyson's lugubrious singing supported by Sun Ra's swooshing synthesizers, a pointillist horn chart, and Boykins's stuttering bass groove. After the vocals subside, a thoughtful improvisation follows featuring a woozy synth duetting with Boykins on the bow, the horns eventually entering with some energetic episodes of free jazz blowing. After a few minutes of controlled chaos, Tyson reprises the lyrics and Sonny ends the piece with more spacey synthesizer noises while Boykins continues to saw away in the uppermost registers of his instrument. *Nice.* A brief rendition of "Discipline 99" again demonstrates Boykins's ability to provide a rock-solid rhythmic and harmonic foundation on this obliquely swinging composition. Ra provides some glistening, tremulous vibraphone and the ensemble sounds tight and well-rehearsed, with individual soloing kept to a

minimum, thereby turning in a note-perfect reading. Boykins again leads the way on "Hidden Spheres," spinning endlessly inventive variations on the hypnotic three-note ostinato over the percussionists' simmering, semi-exotic groove. On top of all this, John Gilmore contributes a pithy but harmonically adventurous statement on tenor saxophone before Hadi's wide-ranging trumpet solo and Eloe Omoe's honking bass clarinet which concludes the piece.

All of side B is taken up with a nearly twenty-minute conducted improvisation entitled "The Cosmo Fire," which ranks up there with the other great long-form pieces in the discography such as "Other Planes of There," "The Magic City," and "Atlantis." While only loosely structured, Ra is totally in control, directing the band from behind his bank of "mad scientist" keyboards, signaling space chords and drawing out various sub-ensembles that come together and mutate while soloists enter and exit at his command. This extended piece is not as overtly episodic as the aforementioned previous experiments, and instead builds up a cumulative momentum with Marshall Allen's delightfully quacking and squealing oboe an almost constant presence within the restlessly shifting instrumental textures. The oboe is not an instrument you hear much in jazz except for Marshall Allen, and here he distantly evokes the ancient Middle Eastern nay amidst all the cosmic Afro-futurism and "out jazz" blowing. Allen is an underappreciated virtuoso on this difficult, rarely heard instrument. And again, Ronnie Boykins's inimitable bass anchors the proceedings with an effortless élan which allows the rest of the band to freely take flight. Really, Boykins's playing on this album is quite remarkable—even for him—and his unifying effect on the band is obvious and thrilling. Too bad he could not commit himself full time to Sun Ra.

It's also too bad that, within three years, the purportedly "lucrative" deal with ABC/Impulse! went sour and the label unceremoniously dropped Sun Ra from the roster and promptly deleted all the albums (which included a number of reissued Saturn titles). To add insult to injury, Astro Black has never been re-issued on CD or otherwise, despite the label's continued exploitation of other perhaps less-worthy "New Thing" titles in its catalog. It boggles the mind that this classic album is still out of print. Accordingly, original copies in good condition are extremely hard to find and fetch astronomical sums from collectors. That is really a shame as it truly is one of the finest records in Sun Ra's discography. [Editor's note: Astro Black was released on CD in 2018 by Modern Harmonic and is also available on Bandcamp.]

Sun Ra and His Arkestra:

071

Slug's Saloon, New York, NY, June 7, 1972 (AUD CDR) Sun Ra: Live at Slug's Saloon (Transparency)

When Sun Ra & his Arkestra returned to the east coast in May of 1972, they were welcomed back to Slug's Saloon, the legendary Lower East Side nightclub where the Arkestra regularly held court from 1966 until their departure to California in 1970. But things were not the same: On February 19, trumpet star Lee Morgan was shot to death at the club by his enraged girlfriend, further scaring audiences away from what was already well known as a rough neighborhood. By the summer, the club was on its last legs and would shut its doors for good shortly thereafter (Szwed 1997, 218-220). So the Arkestra's residencies at Slug's during the summer of 1972 were both festive homecoming and sad farewell to an unusually supportive New York City venue. Fortunately for us, most of a complete set from their appearance on June 7 was recorded from the audience and circulates amongst devoted collectors. The mono tape-recording sounds pretty decent for the period although it suffers from all the usual sorts of problems: generational loss, assorted glitches and drop-outs, general muddiness and, sometimes, outright distortion. If you're willing to tolerate such anomalies, then it is well worth seeking out this spectacular performance.

While the core musicians remained faithful to Sun Ra's vision, the Arkestra's extended membership was, as usual, in flux. Once again left without a bassist, Alzo Wright steps in with some barely audible cello while Akh Tal Ebah replaces mainstay Kwame Hadi on trumpet, giving him an opportunity to step out from the shadow of Hadi's showy virtuosity. For all that, the band sounds well-rehearsed, and they tackle a bunch of new Ra compositions and re-arrangements with gusto. After an opening improvisation for arco cello and oboe followed by a long percussion work out, another unknown number in the "Discipline" series arises, this one fulminating with regal pomp. Moments later, another unknown title gets its first (and perhaps only) hearing: an agitated ostinato in 7/4 held together by Danny Ray Thompson's relentless riffing on baritone sax.

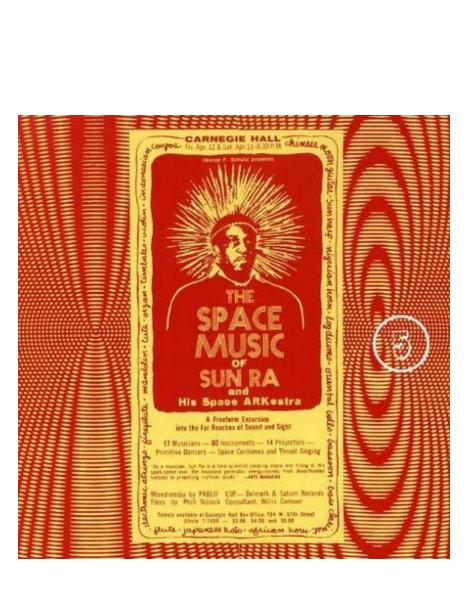
[Editor's note: The 7/4 vamp also makes an appearance on the CD accompanying the 40th anniversary edition of the film Space Is the Place, there titled "Jimmy Fey Interviews Sun Ra."] "They'll Come Back" gets a dramatic vocal performance from June Tyson and ends with a brief but exquisite moment of "Strange Strings"-style orientalism. Ebah's smeared tonality contrasts nicely with the churning skronk on "Calling Planet Earth" and, after a short statement of "Theme of the Stargazers," "Discipline 11" is given a gospel-ish reading via spirited drumming from Lex Humphries with Ra's aggressive organ solo pushing the band to ecstatic heights of electrofree-jazz intensity. Wow. This is a superb version of this rarely heard composition.

Another under-performed piece, "Somewhere Else," gets an interesting (if somewhat tentative) reading here, with John Gilmore staking out the harmonic areas a cappella before the Arkestra enters with the oddly swinging, interlocking riffage. Ra takes one of his patented barbequed organ solos before Ebah attempts his own high-register acrobatic act, showing he was Hadi's equal in terms of brilliant ideas, if not in their flawless execution. Personally, I love Ebah's warm, mellow tone and find his blurry articulation endearingly expressive. A quick run through "Enlightenment" is followed by a typically grooving "Love in Outer Space" with Sonny rapturously vamping away on the organ throughout. Yet another unknown "Discipline" number follows, this one in the swinging big-band mold with multiple riffs colliding over swelling chords. Sadly, the tape is marred by numerous drop-outs, obscuring the composition's subtle intricacies.

As the drums devolve into more tribal sorts of rhythms, Gilmore takes a truly incendiary solo on tenor sax that gradually but insistently pushes the band towards its ultimate destination: "The Shadow World!" As the sound quality of the tape begins to improve, Sun Ra lays down the enervating chord sequence at a blindingly fast tempo. Astonishingly, the Arkestra erupts with a note-perfect rendition of this fantastically complicated composition. This inspires a tense, "mad-scientist-style" organ solo, Sun Ra spraying cluster-bombs of notes about the room with wild abandon, much to the crowd's obvious delight. Not to be outdone, Gilmore returns with another blistering solo before the band returns with a tight reprise. Outstanding! Shifting gears, Sonny plays a pretty organ interlude

over a set of melancholically descending chords which serves as an introduction to another unknown "Discipline" number. This one sets a pair of repeating, minimalist horn figures to balance atop the polyrhythmic rhythm section while Ebah blows a long-breathed, minor-key melody on top. *Interesting*. Danny Davis (or is it Marshall Allen?) takes flight on alto sax before a relatively brief drum solo which introduces a rare performance of "Angels and Demons at Play" in its recent bare-bones rearrangement. Unfortunately, the band still sounds unsure of itself and, after failing to coalesce, Sonny cues up "Watusi" which eschews the head for another tumultuous tenor solo from Gilmore before the extended percussion jam—although Ebah can be heard wailing away in the background throughout. The tape cuts off shortly thereafter.

The Arkestra appeared once more at Slug's a month later and was again surreptitiously recorded from the audience (we'll take a listen to that one soon). Both of these gigs have been compiled into a six-disc box set by the Transparency label, purportedly with improved sound and approximately thirty minutes of additional material, but I have not heard it.



072

Sun Ra: The Universe Sent Me (Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 5) (Transparency CD)

Between the Arkestra's appearances at Slug's Saloon in June and August, they also performed outside at the South Street Seaport Museum in lower Manhattan on July 9, 1972. Twenty minutes of this concert was recorded from the audience and the tape was recently exhumed and released on Transparency's Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 5 CD. What's most notable about this recording is that it is in stereo (still a rarity in 1972) and the outdoor ambience makes for very enjoyable sound quality indeed—for as long as it lasts anyway. The tape picks up mid-set with a smattering of applause and Sun Ra's organ introduction to "Outer Spaceways Incorporated." Tyson and the guys chant the song a handful of times while Gilmore adds some scribbly saxophone obbligato. Then Sonny cues a big blasting space chord that launches the pummeling free-jazz group improvisation led by Jarvis's hyperkinetic drums and the two high-wire trumpeters, Hadi and Ebah. After a few minutes of this sort of thing, Sun Ra cues a break and takes over with low-register synth and organ squiggles with Gilmore providing out-cat commentary. Eventually, Gilmore is left alone a cappella to deftly wield his knife's edge tone and execute massive, teeth-rattling multiphonics on his ostensibly monophonic horn. Classic Gilmore solo! After another quick organ interlude and reed-splitting libflecto outing from Thompson, we get another early performance of "Discipline 27-II." Basically consisting of the main riff from "Discipline 27" slowed down to a dreamy sway, the ensembles gradually metastasize through endless repetition. Usually this was accompanied by a hortatory declamation from Ra (e.g. "What Planet Is This?" and/or "Life is Splendid"), but here we have a purely instrumental rendition, and the spacious stereo recording allows one to really hear the subtle shape-shifting of the instrumental textures. Unfortunately, after about seven minutes of bliss, our recordist experiences technical difficulties and the sound quality deteriorates markedly, with suddenly distant sound and intermittently violent tape warbles. It could be the venue itself was experiencing electrical problems as someone right up next to the microphone says, "He ain't got no power either! The music—." A few seconds later the tape cuts off. Not sure what happened there, but oh well. So it goes with Sun Ra's "unofficial" discography! The remainder of the *Lost Reel Collection*, Vol. 5 is redeemed by a fifty-minute audience recording from Paris on September 8, 1973. It sounds pretty good, but we'll get to that one in due course.

Sun Ra and His Arkestra:

Slug's Saloon, New York NY, August 19, 1972 (AUD CDR)
Sun Ra:

073

Live at Slug's Saloon (Transparency)

The Arkestra returned to Slug's Saloon a month later, and the August 19, 1972 performance was captured (almost) in full on a 180-minute mono tape recorded from the audience. The sound quality is both better and worse than the June 7 tape. There's a bit less generational loss and more presence to the sound—but perhaps a bit too much presence, as when things get loud, the tape overloads and distorts badly, making for a sometimes difficult listen. Too bad, as it's another excellent performance. The Arkestra is further enlarged with the return of Pat Patrick to the bari sax, Kwame Hadi re-joining Akh Tal Ebah on trumpet, and a gifted trombonist (either Charles Stephens or, possibly, Tyrone Hill) fleshing out the horn section and contributing several outstanding solos. Clifford Jarvis is unmistakably back on the drum stool, which makes for a driving rhythm section (but also lengthy and pointless drum solos) while the addition of a (barely audible) bassist (possibly Bill Davis) adds some bottom end to the ensemble. Finally, June Tyson is joined by the Space Ethnic Voices (Ruth Wright, Cheryl Banks, and Judith Holton) on the big vocal numbers, making for (at least) eighteen musicians and singers crowding the tiny stage on this summer evening.

Sonny gets things started with a thoughtful Moog/organ solo that sets the stage for the first known performance of "Stardust from Tomorrow," a jaunty swing number featuring glowing vocals and propelled by Ra's up-front organ comping. From there, we're immediately in "The Shadow World," and it's a rip-snorting version with bracing solos from John Gilmore, Omoe, and Hadi, but Danny Ray Thompson brings down the house with a thunderous libflecto outing. The group-improv section features a big saxophone battle with some aggressive organ playing from Ra and a nicely articulated trombone solo thrown in before the first overlong drum solo of the evening. Without bothering a full reprise of the hyper-complicated tune, the band moves quickly into "Why Go to the Moon?", a chance for Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices to strut their stuff.

The rhythm section settles into a slinky groove, only to have Jarvis ruin the mood with another tedious drum solo. Why did Sonny put up with this? Because he was so good? Because good drummers are so hard to find? It's a mystery. Tyson enters with a brief but nicely sung "Strange Worlds" while horns flitter and flutes twitter about. As the drums start to get heavy, Patrick cues up a composition last heard on the CD Soundtrack to the Film Space Is the Place (mistitled there as "Discipline 33"). It is classic Ra with its cleverly interlocking horn parts set against that patented space age barbeque groove with a long-breathed, vaguely Arabian-sounding melody on top. Perfect. (But what is the correct title? And why did they stop playing it? Who knows!) While the Akrestra is busy riffing and vamping, Ra enters with a quasi-Biblical declamation: "At First There Was Nothing." It goes on and on, punctuated with crazy-sounding stage-laughter and it's hard to hear exactly what's going on, but it sounds like some kind of crypto-cosmic theater piece. The Arkestra starts taking liberties, playing around with their parts, trading places, while chaos rages around them. Hadi and Ebah play high register games and what is it? A soprano saxophone? Who is that? Gilmore? Anyway, Ra returns to the organ bench to launch into "Angels and Demons at Play," which churns and grinds with almost Milesian, dystopian darkness. Unfortunately, the intense volume levels cause the tape to distort badly until finally cutting off abruptly just as the audience starts to whoop and holler.

The tape picks up again at the beginning of the second set with a squiggly synth solo full of spacey bloops and whirrs like alien Morse Code broadcast from Mars—"Calling Planet Earth!" Everyone joins in the antiphonal chanting as the drums swell and an insistent one-note horn figure develops, only to devolve into free-jazz bashing and group improvisation, high trumpet on top. Sonny cues up "Watusi" and it's the usual percussion fest, although with a heavy Afro-urban feel quite different from the lighter, celebratory groove found previously and with Ra's organ taking on a more menacing tone than usual. Of course, this also means another Jarvis solo. Oh well. When the rest of the band takes up hand percussion, it gets a little more compelling and then someone starts up with the space-vocalizing, declaiming, preaching, and politicking. Good lord! Who is that? It's almost impossible to make out what he's saying, but I suspect we're not missing much. After a statement of the theme, Tyson is left

alone to chant about outer space before another avant-jazz blowout that leads to an awesomely distorted and electro-fied libflecto solo (Thompson again, I presume) that leaves the audience in stunned silence. One person claps. After some more group improvisation, they move effortlessly into "Discipline 27," a joyous big-band number full of classy riffs, close-cropped harmonies, and a swinging middle section for Hadi to play with. Patrick smoothly reintroduces the theme so that the ensemble can finish with an elegant reprise. "Discipline 27" would become a fixture in the Arkestra's setlists for the rest of its career.

Tyson and the chorus inform the audience: "We'll Wait for You," and after some skronky madness, Gilmore takes over with a short but intense solo on tenor. This acts as a prelude to another unknown (but extremely interesting) composition for contrasting concertinos: low reeds and brass. This is contrasted with conducted improvisations for pairs of instruments: bass clarinet and trumpet; tenor saxophone and trombone; oboe and trumpet. Jarvis turns up the heat and the intensity level rises as more and more instrumentalists join in the fray—and the tape distorts so badly it's impossible to really hear what's going on. But then Ra cues a ghostly, suspended chord that allows space for a hair-raisingly aggressive a cappella tenor solo from Gilmore. Whew! After a brief pause, the Arkestra introduces "Discipline 27-II," a variation on the central two-chord theme of "Discipline 27" that would also become a concert staple, its floating harmonies supporting a mellifluous alto sax solo from Marshall Allen and a long declamation from Sun Ra about life and death, Tyson echoing his every line in tandem. They conclude that "Life is Splendid." Meanwhile the band holds it all together by continuing to play around with the oscillating riffs of "Discipline 27-II" throughout the entire twenty-three minute duration. In fact, the tape cuts out before they're even finished. The Arkestra is obviously well-rehearsed and into it.

Tyson and Gilmore sing through "Theme of the Stargazers" before a breezy rendition of "Space Is the Place" full of over-the-top vocalizing and a hilariously caricatured trombone solo. It's all a bit silly, but Jarvis and a second drummer (possibly Gilmore) establish an almost Mardi Gras/Bo Diddley beat that makes you (well, me) want to get up and dance. Even so, at almost fifteen minutes, it gets a little boring. I guess you hadda been there. Indeed the audience loves the

swirling synth/organ solo that emerges from "Calling Planet Earth," but the sound is totally overdriven and distorted on the tape—especially when the drums start really pounding—making it hard to appreciate as much as they obviously do. You can tell it's a good one, though. The volume level drops for a quick version of "Enlightenment" notable for its flute choir accompaniment but picks up again for "Love in Outer Space" which is its usual perky organ jam over percussion exotica. The tape ends with the first known performance of "Discipline 33," one of the most fascinating compositions in Ra's catalog. Ostensibly jazzy, it is thickly scored for grouped reeds and brass with piccolo, flute, and oboe on top, but the trombone stomps off while the horns wander around in various time signatures. Meanwhile, ensembles come together and fall apart between short improvisational statements. Finally, a coda consisting of impossibly beautiful harmonies floating above Ra's wispy organ chords ends the piece with a contented sigh. Just lovely.

074

Sun Ra & His Solar Myth Arkestra: Life Is Splendid (Alive!/Total Energy CD) Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra: Wake Up Angels (Live at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival 1972-73-74) (Art Yard)

On September 9, 1972, Sun Ra and His Solar Myth Arkestra performed for more than 12,000 people at the First Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, conceived and produced by the 1960s counter-cultural icon, John Sinclair. The suitably eclectic bill included, among others, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Junior Walker & the All Stars, and the legendary Howlin' Wolf. The proceedings were recorded by Atlantic Records and a 2-LP sampler of the festival (including an edited version of Sun Ra's "Life Is Splendid") was released in 1973. I have not heard this record, but it should be noted here that the Art Ensemble's set was also released by Atlantic, entitled Bap-Tizum—it is excellent.

Sadly, the original 16-track masters were lost in a fire, leaving only this two-track reference tape of Sun Ra's performance, which was finally released on CD by Sinclair's Alive!/Total Energy label in 1999. The sound quality is not great, but it's not terrible either—certainly way more listenable than many of the audience recordings we've been listening to lately! Unfortunately, the tape is incomplete. According to Sinclair's liner notes, the first several minutes of the set are missing because "a proper mix could not be achieved." Given the 20+ member size of the Arkestra, I'm sure it was a challenge! It's a pity since we're apparently missing the usual opening improvisation and the (possibly) more exploratory material performed that evening. The Arkestra's sets had by this point become somewhat routinized, with the latter half of the set devoted to cosmical space-chants, singalongs, and dance/percussion workouts. Quite a spectacle, I'm sure—but not always compelling listening (or maybe I'm getting tired of this project).

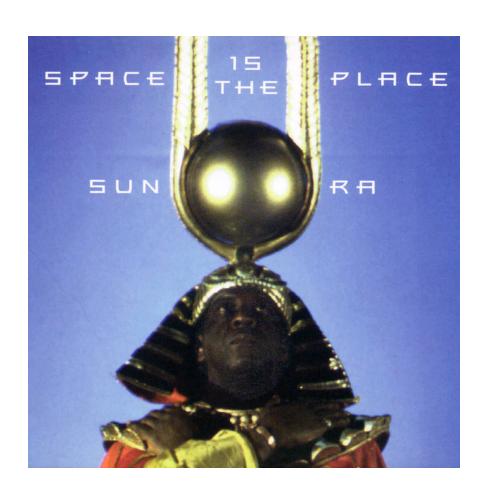
Anyway, another annoying thing about this CD is the total absence of indexing; it's just one thirty-seven-minute long track, making it impossible to isolate the individual compositions. Put it on and you're committed. Oh well, so it goes with Mr. Ra's records. The tape picks up with the usual "Enlightenment," complete with

flute choir and muted trumpets accompanying June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices. Despite the unbalanced sound, you can tell the Arkestra is luxuriating on a spacious stage in front of a large, receptive audience. But Ra keeps an accordingly tight leash on the band, making sure they deliver a carefully choreographed version of the "Cosmo Drama" for mass consumption. This is probably to be expected given the heightened circumstances (and after all, Ra's music was about discipline), but it results in a less than totally satisfying recording.

Sonny's gritty organ self-propels the Afro-space-groove of "Love in Outer Space," but it doesn't go on long enough to get airborne. "Space Is the Place," on the other hand, is much more expansive, exuberantly sung with lots of squealing horns and Ra's spacey barbeque sauce holding it all together. The conducted improvisation that follows contains everything you could want from a Sun Ra jam: roiling drums, battling altos, a jaw-dropping Gilmore blow-out, and some super-freaky electronics from Sun Ra—but hyper-compressed into a handful of minutes. "Discipline 27-II" supports a series of pontifical declamations, including "What Planet Is This?", "Life Is Splendid," and "Immeasurable," delivered with a stagey theatricality. The full-bodied Arkestra sounds supremely confident on the languid, flowing arrangement, improvising laughing riffs here and there in response to the hysterically antiphonal vocals. But again, Sonny cuts things short with a dissonant organ cluster to signal the inevitable "Watusi." The Arkestra swings right into a full-throated statement of the head but then it's the standard percussion workout led by Lex Humphreys and (mysterious multi-instrumentalist) Azlo Wright on drums (Jarvis is notable for his absence at this high-profile gig.) The clattering and banging, dancing, and carrying on is allowed to build up a good head of steam but Ra suddenly cues up another bit of out-there improv before a cursory verse of "Outer Spaceways Incorporated," sung by Tyson. Some rocket ship synthesizer noise ends the set amidst shouts of "Space Is the Place" and thoroughly enraptured cheering and applause.

Despite its flaws, *Life Is Splendid* is a welcome (if fragmentary) document of Sun Ra's historic appearance at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival. The sound quality is decent and there are several fleeting moments of truly inspired music-making to be found here. Who knows, it might even be a great introduction for

the novice, with its concise and flawless executions of Ra's working repertoire of the time. But to me it sounds almost too restrained, too self-consciously playing to the crowd, never letting things get too "out." Then again, maybe I'm just getting tired of this project, or at least tired of the rather repetitious and bad-sounding live recordings we've been listening to recently. Fortunately, dear reader, Sun Ra returned to the recording studio in the fall of 1972 and dropped two LPs of amazing material. The deal with Impulse! was starting to bear fruit and some of the most outrageous music of Ra's career would be forthcoming. So, I can't stop now—in fact, I can't wait to get into it. Stay tuned.



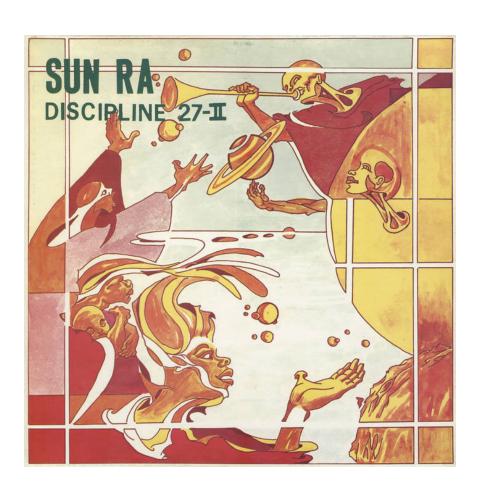
Hoping to capitalize on the impending release of the movie *Space Is the Place*, producer Ed Michel brought Sun Ra and his Arkestra to Chicago's Streeterville Studios to record an eponymous album for the Blue Thumb label on October 19 and 20, 1972. In all, enough material for four albums was cut on these dates, although only two were ever issued (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 189-192). The Blue Thumb LP was released in 1973 and reissued on CD by Impulse! in February 1998. Why Impulse! chose to release this instead of their own (arguably superior) *Astro Black* remains a mystery to this day. Still, *Space Is the Place* is an (almost) great album, cunningly compiled to represent the panoply of Sun Ra's music from swing to bop to free-jazz to outer-space chanting and beyond.

By 1972, sixteen-track recording was becoming more common, and it is apparent from the side-long title track that Ra (and/or producer Michel) was keen to take advantage of this new technology by the use of overdubbing and elaborate stereo mixing strategies. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work, as the whole album was no doubt hastily completed during these two marathon sessions. One can picture Sun Ra and his crew manning the board, turning the mix into another performance, track faders flying. Sonny wields an array of electronic keyboards, including squiggly organ, buzzing Rocksichord, and uncharacteristically cheesy Moog portamentos. Danny Ray Thompson holds down the bari-sax riff while Pat Patrick dons the electric bass to support June Tyson and a full complement of Space Ethnic Voices on this signature anthem. To keep things interesting, the rhythm section brings things to an intermittent boil and the horns occasionally wail with wild abandon. But after about fourteen minutes, the mix begins to lose focus and the incessantly weird vocalizing just gets annoying, finally coming to an end with some inconclusive keyboard noises. Sure, it's fun in that sort-of-psychedelic way, but not altogether satisfying compared to other iterations in the discography.

Side B is more compelling, beginning with the revival of "Images," a Sun Ra original dating back to 1959's Jazz in Silhouette. This joyful swing number (with Ra on acoustic piano!) provides an opportunity for Kwame Hadi and John Gilmore to show off their fluent dexterity navigating the highly chromatic chord changes. Ra himself even turns in a tastefully understated chorus at the end. The reappearance of this tune signals the broadening of the Arkestra's stylistic palette that was beginning to occur to encompass pre-war jazz amidst all the trappings of pan-African-futurism. "Images" would thenceforth become a regular feature of the live set. "Discipline 33" follows in an intricate arrangement for low reeds, flutes, and trumpets, with a meandering melody that floats above the tonally ambiguous harmonies and languid rhythm. It's just lovely—and a perfect example of Ra's sophisticated and adventurous approach to structure and orchestration.

"Sea of Sounds" is one of those frantically hare-brained bigband rave-ups taken at an impossibly fast tempo that a well-oiled Arkestra manages to nail with unflagging energy and precision. As the rhythm section continues to cook, Akh Tal Ebah contributes a mellifluous flugelhorn solo surrounded by rude libflecto grunts and crazy alto saxophone scribbles. Meanwhile, Ra's gurgling and wheezing organ drives the band into super-intense, out-jazz territory. All this chaos gives way to a neatly choreographed saxophone battle, with Gilmore emerging on top of the start-stop rhythm section. A somewhat awkward edit cuts into Ra's patented "mad-scientist-style" organ solo before Hadi's high-register fireworks heralds the reprise of the taut and twisted theme. A splash of smeared harmonies brings things to a decisive close. Awesome. The album concludes with a quick romp through an old standby, "Rocket Number Nine." Sonny obviously saw some latent commercial potential in this song as he recorded it several times, first back in 1960 and then even releasing a small-group version on a Saturn single around 1967 or '68. Now presented with the opportunity to reach a (potentially) large audience, Ra was sure to end the album with a tight rendition of this enervating space-chant. Taking advantage of the multi-track environment, this version is densely layered with overdubbed vocalizing, clattering percussion, and swooping synthesizers. Much too strange for radio play, it is still an appropriately entertaining conclusion to a typically quirky Sun Ra album.

Ultimately, *Space Is the Place* is a mixed bag with the overlong title track unable to sustain interest across its twenty-one and a half minutes. But side B contains outstanding performances of some of Sun Ra's more interesting compositions, which, combined with the hi-fi stereo sonics of the recording, make this is a must-have album for the hardcore fan. Others who are curious about what this Sun Ra obsession is all about may find it a useful and easily obtainable introduction and a pathway to unknown worlds. Space is, indeed, the place—and Sun Ra can take you there.



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Another album was hurriedly compiled for the newly re-constituted Saturn Records from the sessions produced by Ed Michel at Streeterville Studios in Chicago on October 19-20, 1972. Discipline 27-II was released as a Saturn LP in 1973 and, in a sign of the times, it is the only quadraphonic Saturn LP ever released. The album was ultimately obscured by a deluge of records that came to market that year, including the Blue Thumb movie tie-in, Space Is the Place (also recorded at these sessions), the magisterial Astro Black, and a slew of classic Saturn LPs re-issued en masse as a part of Sun Ra's recent deal with Impulse!. Unsurprisingly, Discipline 27-II remains out of print and nearly impossible to find, although bootlegs and fan-created "needle-drops" are readily available to the intrepid fan. [Editor's note: A remastered version was released on LP by Strut and, with a bonus track, on CD by Corbett vs. Dempsey, both in 2017.] Apparently, enough material was recorded at these marathon sessions to produce four full albums: a second Blue Thumb release was planned but never issued and another Saturn LP was proposed to Impulse! for distribution but ultimately rejected. Campbell and Trent list a number of tantalizing titles in their discography, including "East" parts 1-3 (!) and "Piano of Never," but the master tapes have supposedly disappeared (Campbell and Trent 2000, 190-192). What remains are a pair of uneven yet utterly revelatory records that belong in every Sun Ra collection.

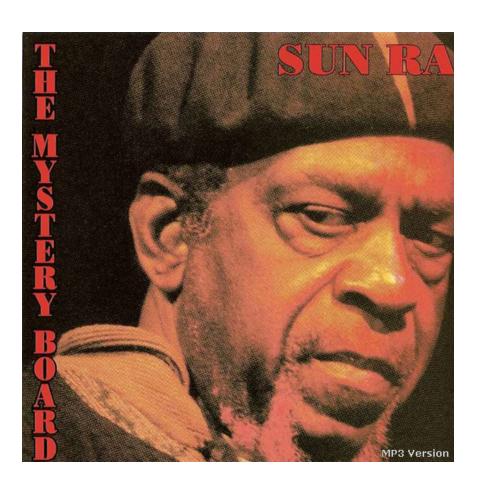
Side A is just about perfect, opening with a casual one-off composition entitled "Pan Afro," serving up one of those quintessentially off-kilter, modal grooves in six that only Sun Ra could come up with. John Gilmore delivers a sure-footed and soulful solo with the kind of deeply penetrating tone that rivals Coltrane at his most intensely spiritual. Of course, Coltrane acknowledged his debt to Gilmore, and it is safe to say that Coltrane would likely not have become the iconic figure he did if not for Gilmore's early example and the oracular influence of Sun Ra's presence in New York in the early

1960s (see Szwed 1997, 76-78 and 189-190). While Gilmore briefly flirted with a solo career, he returned to the Arkestra full-time by 1966 and willingly allowed his talents to be subsumed (some might say constricted) by Sun Ra's peculiar vision. Accordingly, his reputation as a superlative saxophonist has been greatly diminished if not completely overshadowed by Coltrane and others much less gifted who went on to make a name for themselves playing "The New Thing" in the early 1970s. Gilmore's all-too brief solo on the otherwise unremarkable "Pan Afro" is just one example among many of his staggering brilliance. Yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi, Sun Ra, and Eloe Omoe take turns on trumpet, Rocksichord, and bass clarinet respectively, but they are unable to top Gilmore's tour de force opening. That's OK, no one could. The band sounds relieved to return to the head although Sonny wants to keep on going. The track ends with a long fade out on Ra's smoky comping.

"Discipline 8" is given a definitive reading by the Arkestra; the heaving and moaning harmonies flow through various instrumental combinations while soloists, duos, and trios flitter around in the wide open spaces. This is a fine example of Ra's genius as a composer and orchestrator. "Discipline 8" is not built on the usual soloist-with-accompaniment model, but rather seeks a new synthesis: "free" improvisation seamlessly interwoven through a tightly arranged composition, conducted by Ra at the keyboards. Good stuff. "Neptune" closes the side with another nice medium swing number with plenty of Sonny's tasty space-age barbeque sauce ladled on with his crude electric organ. A wild group improv erupts in the reeds section over some super-funky dual-bari-sax riffage and when June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices enter, Gilmore starts really wailing. Holy moly! Then Danny Ray Thompson's window-rattling libflecto takes over amidst the pealing trumpets of Hadi and Ebah and all hell breaks loose in the rhythm section. But Sonny deftly reins it all in with some expectant vamping before Tyson alone chants: "Have you heard the latest news from Neptune?" Yes, we have—and it is good news indeed.

Side B, on the other hand, suffers from the same kind of aimless self-indulgence that mars the title track to *Space Is the Place*. Consisting of a side-long rendition of "Discipline 27-II," with a full complement of the usual space-chants and hortatory declamations,

it further lacks the adventurous mix-down techniques of the latter (probably due to time constraints) that might have added some much needed auditory interest—or at least made the densely layered recording sound marginally coherent. It is a sprawling, twenty-five-minute mess, with the dream-like, subtly shape-shifting ensembles buried under innumerable wacked-out vocal tracks, which are also murkily mixed and hard to understand, making for an agonizingly frustrating listen (maybe it sounds better in quad!). A lost opportunity, perhaps, or maybe this kind of thing only worked well in a live setting (and even then, it can get a little tedious). Maybe I'm being too harsh, and project-fatigue is no doubt starting to set in, but this recording of "Discipline 27-II" is assuredly one of Sun Ra's least successful studio efforts. Whatever; the magnificence of side A more than compensates for the obvious deficiencies of side B and makes this half-great album well worth seeking out. One can also hope that the lost masters from these October 1972 sessions will someday resurface so as to provide some additional insight into these erratically fascinating records. You never know with Sun Ra...



A bootleg CD entitled *The Mystery Board* appeared on the mythic Thumbs Up! label some time ago purporting to have been recorded November 2nd or 3rd 1972 "for a possible Saturn release." As with any bootleg, all this needs to be taken with an enormous grain of salt. Yet the 1972 date seems reasonable considering the repertoire and personnel, and, given Sun Ra's aptitude with a razor blade and splicing tape, it's certainly possible he could have crafted a satisfactory LP out of this mess, had he so desired. Such as it is, *The Mystery Board* is a rough listen, with the mix suffering from the usual deficiencies of a soundboard tape made in a small venue: the vocals and soloists are way up front, with the drums and everything else (with the notable exception of Ra himself) almost entirely inaudible. Accordingly, all the ensemble sections are woefully unbalanced, but some of the less instrumentally dense material actually sounds pretty decent, believe it or not.

Disc one begins with an intensely confrontational "Cosmo Drama" regarding "The First Man." Ra viciously hectors the audience about their "black ignorance" for wanting "to be number one" and implores them to "go home and read your Bible—'cuz the Second Man is you!" With the June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices echoing his every threatening word, at times it sounds like a riot is about to break out. Sometimes the Arkestra plays some halting swing but for the most part Sonny is just furiously preaching it. Thankfully, after about five minutes, Ra segues into a brief, previously unheard composition with a descending minor key melody over a gentle swing groove. What is this??! I swear, if I were really serious about this project, I'd create a spreadsheet to try and keep track of all these fleeting, unknown titles just in case they turn up again elsewhere. This composition is a great little bluesy number that ends before it even begins. Sonny then plays a spacey organ interlude to introduce "Neptune." Tyson and Ebah share vocal duties while the band intermittently erupts into bouts of free-jazz skronk. Gilmore takes a typically brilliant tenor sax solo, but as he wanders on and off mic, the effect is considerably lessened. In fact, the mix is so murky that the remainder of this track is hardly worth bothering with.

The next thirty-minute segment, on the other hand, is quite interesting, featuring three somewhat rarely heard compositions. "Spontaneous Simplicity" finds Sun Ra on acoustic piano for a change, accompanying Marshall Allen on this relaxed, dreamy tune. Allen's airy flute sounds quite lovely, and Sonny even takes a gently floating solo of his own. The mix is much clearer on this quiet chamber piece, and it sure sounds like the inimitable Ronnie Boykins on bass during this entire sequence. Danny Davis joins Allen for "Friendly Galaxy No. 2," a minor mode waltz led by the piano, bass, and drums, with the flute choir playing long-breathed, dissonant melodies above and around a moderately propulsive rhythm. Again, Ra takes a sweetly singing solo, clearly relishing the opportunity to play a decent piano. *Just gorgeous!* "Intergalactic Universe" follows with its modal groove in five providing a backdrop for an extended John Gilmore outing, wherein he shows off his mastery of post-bop saxophone techniques, moving from small motivic figures to complex "sheets of sound" and culminating in a squalling climax of piercing multiphonics and rapid-fire glissandos. Yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi gamely follows with his typically fluent articulation in all registers, but when the Neptunian libflecto enters (Thompson?), the tape abruptly cuts off. Too bad; things were really starting to cook.

Disc two opens with a percussive and atonal piano to introduce "Angels and Demons at Play," which is taken at leisurely tempo. Boykins's (?) bass and Pat Patrick's baritone saxophone double the enervating 5/4 ostinato while Allen plays the lead on alto saxophone rather than the usual flute. This provides a relatively rare opportunity to appreciate Allen's brilliance on that instrument as he takes a long, labyrinthine solo exhibiting a vast range of timbral variety and expressionistic melodic invention—so good it elicits a round of polite applause from the audience. Next up is the usual group improvisation, featuring a set piece for John Gilmore's pyrotechnics, long experimental keyboard outings from Ra, and tightly controlled moments of screaming free jazz mayhem. Unfortunately, the tape cuts in and out with the mix utterly atrocious in parts: drums and bass completely buried and the solo instruments over-mic'd

and horrifically distorted. Nevertheless, Ra's extended solo segments are a delight, with kaleidoscopic tone colors courtesy of his "space organ," Moog synthesizer, and a battery of electronic effects, including repeaters, tremolos, phasers, and some deliberately nasty distortion. Excellent. "Space Is the Place" arises from the ashes with Akh Tal Ebah joining June Tyson and the Ethnic Space Voices on this signature anthem. Sadly, the mix is again abysmal, with the histrionic singing much too prominent and the rhythm section almost non-existent. Interestingly, what sounds like electric bass is clearly audible, casting some doubt on whether or not Boykins is really present on this recording, or if this segment is possibly from a different concert altogether. After about seven minutes of carrying on, the track quickly fades.

The disc closes with an unknown number in the "Discipline" series, the one which was tragically mis-titled "Discipline 33" on the soundtrack to Space Is the Place. This misnomer has caused all kinds of consternation because this piece (whatever its proper title) was played fairly regularly during this period—and it is definitely not "Discipline 33!" It is hard enough to try and keep up with all these unknown "Discipline" pieces without having to contend with further discographical confusion! (Like I said, I really need to create that spreadsheet.) This version is incomplete, picking up at the beginning of the "Cosmo Drama" segment. Ebah provides some tasty flugelhorn obbligato over the easy swing of the piece, but when Ra announces, "It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?" the band drops out for some full-throated declamations: "A cosmic equation was sent to you, men of Earth, and you couldn't solve the problem! Therefore, the universe sent me to converse with you!" Wow. The Arkestra later revives the repeatedly descending theme behind the declamations, but it's all rather distant-sounding and hard to hear. And again, it is clearly an electric bass anchoring things a bit too proficiently to be Pat Patrick, and I'm not sure Boykins ever played the instrument at all. So who is playing? No idea. After a little over seventeen minutes, the tape abruptly cuts off, leaving us pretty much in the dark.

It has been suggested that the order of the discs in this set is reversed: that is to say, disc two is actually disc one and vice versa. After listening to them in this order, I think this might be right: the music seems to flow better with the "Cosmo Drama" dividing the

two discs. Then again, I also suspect this material might actually be from two different concerts, with Boykins on some of it and an unknown electric bass player on the rest. But, who knows? This is truly a "Mystery Board" and while much of it borders on the unlistenable, there's enough compelling music here to make it worth seeking out. Caveat emptor!

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Here's another mysterious concert fragment recorded (in mono) from the audience at an unknown location sometime in 1972. The sound quality is typically awful: warbly, hissy, and distorted. Only about thirty-seven minutes long, there's hardly enough here to even consider. What's remarkable is how many more audience recordings were being made during this period. Portable recording devices were still primitive, bulky, and very expensive in the early-1970s, requiring serious devotion on the part of the intrepid recordist. So, we should be thankful for their work, even if the results are sometimes, as here, virtually unlistenable. There are, as usual, some moments of brilliance buried in the noise.

The tape picks up in the middle of the set, cutting in on an improvisation already in progress, Eloe Omoe squealing and squawking on the bass clarinet. After some group skronk, John Gilmore takes off a cappella; it's the usual tour de force, but the sound is so distorted it's hard to appreciate. But then some eerie, otherworldly vocalizing follows, similar to what was heard at the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival in September. Presumably one of the Space Ethnic Voices, this is singing so extreme it makes Yoko Ono's screech seem like a lullaby. At times sounding like a Theremin's electric whine, or at other times spitting out guttural woofs, whoever this is, she has a superhumanly extended vocal technique. Despite the poor sound quality, this brief segment is still quite impressive. A jaunty "Enlightenment" emerges from stunned applause with "Space Is the Place" right behind. It's the usual stuff with Akh Tal Ebah sharing the vocal duties with June Tyson, and Marshall Allen delivering a tasteful solo on alto. "Love in Outer Space" quickly descends into an extended percussion workout which is rendered as an impenetrable wall of noise on tape. As the audience starts to get restless, you can hear people talking in the background—and when a man close to the microphone says, "Hey, what's happening brother?" it's startling and funny like some kind of homemade musique concrète. As the Arkestra settles into the heavenly quietude of "Lights on a Satellite," the sound quality improves considerably. After an organ intro, Ra moves to acoustic piano to support the delicate arrangement of flutes and trumpets, with Gilmore taking the lead on low-register tenor sax. "Lights on a Satellite" is one of my favorite Ra compositions, and this performance is nearly perfect, the interlaced ensemble floating peacefully above a gentle space-rhumba groove. The audience likes it and responds with a sincere round of applause. "The Shadow World" starts up from a dead stop with Sonny banging out the angular rhythmic figure on piano and it sounds like it's going to be a good one as the ensemble begins to execute the hocketed melodies with terrific precision. Sadly, the tape cuts off after only a minute and a half. Oh well.

While this is a typically fine performance by the Arkestra, the tape doesn't really have a whole lot to recommend it considering the bad sound quality and constricted running time. The outrageous glossolalia segment and the always beatific "Lights on a Satellite" are worth hearing, but I wouldn't go out of my way to seek this one out. Nevertheless, I thank our anonymous recordist for making the effort.

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Sun Ra: The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums: Cymbals & Crystal Spears (Evidence CD)

The deal with ABC/Impulse! was slowly bearing fruit: Astro Black was finally released in early 1973, along with a batch of Saturn reissues, pushing Sun Ra's music into the mainstream marketplace for the first time ever. And there were even bigger plans in store: as many as thirty reissues, and a sampler LP to be entitled Welcome to Saturn. Then there was a proposed trilogy of new recordings made at Variety Recording Studio in New York and prepared for release in the then-trendy (and now horribly obsolete) Sansui QS-encoded Quadrophonic LP format: Cymbals, Crystal Spears, and Pathways to Unknown Worlds. Of these, only Pathways was ever released, in a vanishingly small pressing, just before the label pulled the plug in 1975 (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 193-196 and Szwed 1997, 333-334). The remaining titles remained the subject of intense conjecture until Evidence finally reissued them in 2000 (remixed to stereo from the original four-track masters) as The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums.

While Ra expressed some bitterness when the deal with Impulse! went sour, according to producer Ed Michel's liner notes, it turned out to be fairly lucrative for the Arkestra, at least in the short term. Furthermore, Michel points out that the contract was the result of some highly unorthodox negotiation techniques on the part of Alton Abraham, resulting in a licensing deal for several Saturn albums (Michel 2000).

Newly made recordings were also subject to this licensing agreement, with ownership reverting to Sun Ra and Alton Abraham after the deal went south. This was actually fairly shrewd (and, at the time, extremely rare), although Sonny was unable to really capitalize on this cache of intellectual property during his lifetime. This was exacerbated by a dispute with Abraham over ownership of the masters that briefly split Saturn into two opposing companies (see Szwed 1997, 338-339). Meanwhile, Sun Ra continued on his own way and would not make another record for a major label until 1988,

when A&M offered him a two-record deal. Similarly, those records also went out of print almost immediately after their initial release. The Arkestra would remain an underground phenomenon, for the most part, right up to the end.

Curiously, three tracks meant for Cymbals were later issued on an obscure, hodgepodge Saturn LP entitled Deep Purple, but their connection to the unreleased Impulse! albums was unknown until Prof. Robert Campbell began research for his discography. As originally conceived, Cymbals was to have been another in a line of great blues-based records à la My Brother The Wind, Vol. II and Universe In Blue, with Ra leading a small-group Arkestra from his patented "space-age barbeque" organ. Significantly, Ronnie Boykins is back in the band with his huge-toned bass adding heft to these five loosely structured pieces. "The World of the Invisible" opens the album with some portentous spookiness, ghostly organ chords, and a herky-jerky rhythm section supporting a serpentine bass clarinet solo by Eloe Omoe. Sun Ra hints at a descending figure on Minimoog which is then taken up by Boykins in an extended bass solo, accompanied by Ra's skittering organ. "Thoughts Under a Dark Blue Light" is a slow-burning blues, with a simple harmonized horn riff setting things in motion across its seventeen-minute duration. John Gilmore starts off with some authentically soulful roadhouse wailing on tenor saxophone, slowly building up to an astonishing climax of blurred multiphonics and low-register honks, before effortlessly returning with a bluesy coda. Yes, it's another incredible John Gilmore solo! Ra then turns in some typically hermetic organ while Boykins steadily walks, and drummer Harry Richards and conga-player Derek Morris lackadaisically shuffle alongside. Alone in the trumpet chair for a change, Akh Tal Ebah delivers a long and thoughtful solo, his warm tone and smeared articulation offering a nice contrast to Kwame Hadi's usual showy virtuosity. Sadly, the track fades out before being allowed to finish.

"The Order of Pharaonic Jesters" [sic] is another mid-tempo blues, dominated by Sun Ra's multihued electronic keyboards, alternating between sweet-and-sour organ tones, shimmering vibraphone sounds, and the reedy Rocksichord. Really just a meandering jam, Ra keeps things interesting with his restlessly shifting timbres and sophisticated harmonic sensibility, Boykins following him every step of the way. The tempo picks up a bit for "The Mystery of

Two," a minor-key bebop confection that once again lets the spot-light shine on the underappreciated Ebah, whose introverted, melancholy sound and careful note choices yield an understated elegance. The album closes with "Land of the Day Star," a quirky, stutter-step groove supported by Boykins's awkward, bowed bass, Ra's burbling keyboards, and some herky-jerky drums. This time, Danny Davis gets a rare solo spot on alto saxophone, coming out from behind the shadow of Marshall Allen, who was apparently absent at this session. Again, the track fades just as the soloist starts to get going, which is a little frustrating. Nonetheless, this track—and the album as a whole—is really all about Sun Ra's interaction with the masterful bass playing of Boykins and the almost amateurish drumming of Richards. It is this dynamic but unstable rhythm section that provides the cool, elusive mood of this fine record.

Crystal Spears (originally titled Crystal Clear) is something else altogether. If Cymbals is relatively earthbound, Crystal Spears is a rocketship ride to the planet Saturn, showcasing Sun Ra's more experimental compositional techniques and radical orchestral strategies. A full contingent of Arkestrans is present, although Boykins is notably absent and no one steps in to play bass. It doesn't really matter, as Sonny is by now well used to this arrangement and fills out the space with his electronic keyboards and the addition of marimbas and multiple percussionists, while Clifford Jarvis's return to the drum stool allows for a steadier, more intuitive rhythm section. The title track opens with piercing blasts of distorted wah-wah organ, indicating from the first moment that this is going to be one of those Sun Ra records that will fry your tweeters and blow your mind. Oh yeah. After sketching out a quasi-twelve-tone row, drums and congas enter with complex, overlapping rhythms while Marshall Allen plaintively reiterates the theme. Prof. Campbell states in his liner notes that Sun Ra subsequently moves to marimba at this point, but I believe it must be someone else, as, moments later, Sonny can plainly be heard playing Minimoog and organ while marimbas continue to skitter in the background. In any event, a rich texture is created and sustained, similar to what was heard back in 1965 on Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 1, thickened by an enlarged arsenal of electric keyboards.

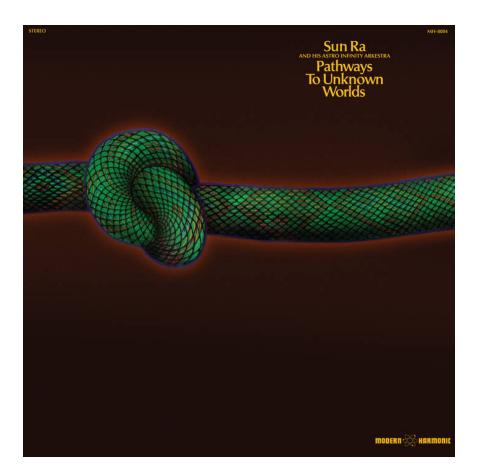
Having reached a sub-orbital plateau, the Arkestra relaxes the tension a bit with "The Eternal Sphynx" [sic]. Prof. Campbell

suggests in his liner notes that this piece "continues the interlocking riff constructions found in Ra's numbered 'Discipline' series of compositions" (Campbell 2000), and the theme sounds vaguely familiar. Is it possible we've heard this before on one the many poorly documented tapes from this period? Perhaps (I really should create that spreadsheet—someone want to give me a grant?). In any event, it is similar to the "Discipline" series in its stately demeanor and expressive orchestration, the instruments playing at their most extreme registers, trumpets flatulently low, saxophones squealingly high, creating a lush yet unsettled ensemble sound. Danny Davis steps out once again with a soulful alto sax solo, followed by Ra on organ before a brief reprise, this time with Marshall Allen doubling on flute. Things start to get strange again with "The Embassy of the Living God." Sun Ra's woozy organ chords and Moog bass notes establish a creepy, dissonant soundworld, while the entire horn section, led by Danny Thompson's honking baritone sax, execute the tricky composition, with both trumpets (distressingly off-mic) playing complex counter-melodies. The piece evolves organically from there, with solos, duos, and trios from Allen on oboe, Omoe on bass clarinet, Gilmore on falsetto tenor sax, and Hadi in his usual highwire fashion. Percussion comes and goes along with Ra's sea-sick organ, which takes the lead unaccompanied just before the horns return. Foregoing a restatement of the theme, the track fades out on some full-on group improvisation. Very interesting.

"Sunrise in the Western Sky" was intended to take up all of side B and essentially consists of a twenty-minute tenor saxophone solo by John Gilmore over the kind of gently floating, Afro-exotica percussion jam that Sun Ra was so fond of. That description makes it sound like it would be boring and self-indulgent, but in actuality, it is a monument to Sun Ra's genius as a composer and Gilmore's unheralded greatness as soloist. Opening with a magisterial statement from Allen's yearning oboe, Ra's chiming keyboards, mumbling marimbas, and burbling percussion establish an unsettled environment for Gilmore's entrance. It appears that the saxophone part is at least partly written out as Sonny's organ follows closely along the tonally ambiguous melodies. At about the eight-minute mark, Ra's shapeshifting organ begins to coax the rhythm section into a duple-meter reverie while Gilmore follows along with more written material intermingled with extemporaneous improvisation. At

the eleven-minute mark, Marshall Allen's flute enters with a counter-melody and the texture subsequently thins out, leaving only percussion and saxophone. At this point, Gilmore loosens his grip on the theme(s) and begins to elaborate, weaving inquisitive lines, concluding with question marks rather than periods and finally disappearing into the hypnotic percussion ensemble. A crash cymbal is ceremonially struck seven times to end the album with a solemn finality.

Cymbals and Crystal Spears are indeed The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums and we should be grateful to the folks at Evidence for locating the tapes and finally issuing them on CD. The Evidence label also rescued Pathways to Unknown Worlds from the dustbin of history, and we'll have a listen to that one next time. It's a doozy!



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Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Pathways to Unknown Worlds + Friendly Love (Evidence CD)

Pathways to Unknown Worlds was released by Impulse! in 1975 but was soon deleted along with the rest of the catalog licensed from El Saturn Records. That meant literally cutting off the corners of the jackets and dumping the remaining stock below wholesale, thereby cutting off Sun Ra from any royalties that would have otherwise been due. For a brief period in the mid-1970s, Sun Ra records could be found in the sale bins of mom-and-pop record stores across America, but they quickly disappeared for good and, by the end of the decade, had become rare, expensive collectables. It wasn't until the Evidence label began reissuing Sun Ra's music on compact disc in the early-1990s that Ra's most obscure discography was again readily available. In 2000, Evidence concluded their reissue campaign with the resurrection of The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums recorded for Impulse! which were originally conceived as part of a proposed trilogy that would have progressed from the earthy blues of Cymbals through the hyper-modern jazz of Crystal Spears and on to the improvised outer-space music of Pathways to Unknown Worlds.

Shorn from its intended context, *Pathways to Unknown Worlds* must have appeared a puzzling artifact for the very few people who heard it back in 1975. Mixed to primitive Quadrophonic Sound, almost no one owned the expensive Sansui QS decoder and extra pair of speakers required—and those who did probably wondered why it was being deployed for a mere twenty-seven minutes of skronky free-jazz-noise (even so, I would be very interested in hearing these original "surround sound" mixes!). In 2000, Evidence remixed the album to stereo from the multitrack tapes and, in the process, discovered an additional (untitled) track that was omitted from the original LP, expanding it to a (slightly) more reasonable thirty-four minutes of music.

The pieces on *Pathways to Unknown Worlds* are all "guided improvisations," with Sun Ra directing the flow of music from his bank of electric keyboards. Ronnie Boykins is back, anchoring the

proceedings with his rock-solid bass, accompanied by the indomitable Clifford Jarvis on drums, who plays with admirable restraint here. This was by far the most fluent and supple rhythm section Ra would ever enjoy (sadly, it was intermittent at best and ultimately short lived). Joined by a full complement of horn players, this was an Arkestra particularly sensitized to Ra's vision and well suited to realize his most exploratory music. A blow-by-blow description seems rather pointless; I can only say that the music is a model of tightly controlled chaos and this album stands with the best of that lineage of long form improvisations, like The Magic City and Other Planes of There. Sun Ra disdained the excesses of the "free jazz" scene, and his group improvisations are as thoughtfully constructed as any of his written compositions, full of startling dynamic contrasts and unusual instrumental textures, fueled by his own endlessly inventive approach to electronic keyboards. Kwame Hadi is present on trumpet, joined by Akh Tal Ebah on mellophone (a cross between a trumpet and a French horn), making it possible to really compare them side-by-side. Sometimes, Ebah shoves a contrabassoon reed into the mouthpiece to create the "Space dimension mellophone," rendering an earth-shattering blast of sound akin to the Neputunian libflecto (a bassoon with either a French horn or alto saxophone mouthpiece attached).

Eloe Omoe is given especially prominent solo space throughout the album, allowing an opportunity to fully appreciate his richly expressionist bass clarinet in a variety of settings. Omoe's story is interesting: born Leroy Taylor (1949-1989), he was a member of a Chicago street gang until 1970, when Sun Ra took him in and changed his name (Szwed 1997, 280). While his frantic overblowing shtick was a constant feature of the Arkestra's live gigs during this period, he was, in fact, a gifted autodidact, and his playing here shows a remarkable versatility.

John Gilmore comes through with one of his typically mind-melting tenor saxophone solos on "Cosmo Media," but this album isn't about individual soloists or group freakouts. The Arkestra is literally Sun Ra's living instrument, their highly individualistic voices subordinated to his stringent yet benevolent command. Accordingly, this music cannot be said to be freely improvised; it is rather composed by Sun Ra in the moment of its realization. If anything, Boykins is the star of the show, the glue that holds it all

together; there is hardly a moment where he is not furiously thrumming or bowing away with astounding facility and invention. Yet *Pathways to Unknown Worlds* is also not merely a concerto for bass; it is a thoroughly ensemble conception, with the whole being much more than the sum of its parts—hence the pointlessness of a detailed description. Together with *The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums*, these are some of the crowning achievements of Sun Ra's long recording career and need to be heard to be believed.

Four more LPs were recorded by Saturn and offered to Impulse! as part of the proposed licensing deal but were rejected. Across the Border of Time, Flight to Mars, and Tone Poem were never released, although Prof. Campbell has speculated that tracks from some of these records were cannibalized for later Saturn releases, such as the ultra-rare Song of the Stargazers (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 196, 270-271). However, while preparing these Evidence CDs, the two-track reel-to-reel tapes containing the long-lost Friendly Love were found in a box and issued for the first time, appended to Pathways to Unknown Worlds.

Unfortunately, Boykins is once again absent, but the laconic Harry Richards returns on drums along with Atakatune (Stanley Morgan) on congas, and they provide a relaxed, contemplative rhythmic feel throughout. Lacking formal titles, the album is presented as a suite in four parts, and while Prof. Campbell suggests in his liner notes that these are all guided improvisations, I'm not so sure: Sonny's organ often seems to be outlining pre-ordained chord sequences and parts one and four settle into the kind of dreamy, modal grooves that were a hallmark of Sun Ra's compositions during this period—in fact, the horns play a repeating five-note figure towards the end of the suite that was obviously written out and harmonized. It may be possible the Arkestra was merely "jamming out" on this date, but I kind of doubt it. In any event, the soloists are exceptional: Hadi and Ebah each deliver delightfully contrasting brass excursions and Danny Davis is featured throughout on alto saxophone. Danny Ray Thompson even coaxes some surprisingly tender melodies from the unwieldy Neptunian libflecto. But Gilmore's tenor sax solo on part four is the real standout, an especially soulful, bluesy meditation seasoned with astonishing extended techniques and punctuated with pregnant silences. Yes, it's another incredible John Gilmore solo. Get used to it!

Exact dates and locations for all these recordings are unknown, but Prof. Campbell's research indicates they were likely made in earlyto-mid-1973 at Variety Recording Studios in New York City (and I have no reason to doubt him). Clearly, Sonny had high hopes for the Impulse! deal and spent much of 1973 in the studio, going so far as to prepare a handful of seven-inch singles for the El Saturn label. Indeed, with the release and widespread distribution of the brilliant Astro Black and the reissue of a number of classic Saturn LPs. Sun Ra's fortunes were looking up: the Arkestra would make its triumphant return to Carnegie Hall in July, in a concert recorded and broadcast by Voice of America, and the fall tour of Europe was, by any measure, an unqualified success. It wasn't until 1975 that things fell apart with Impulse! and Sun Ra returned to the "sub-underground." Nevertheless, his reputation was firmly established amongst the hip-jazz cognoscenti, and new records would continue to pour forth from Saturn and various independent labels, like breadcrumbs on an intergalactic space trail. His music was treated with near-reverential respect abroad, and foreign sojourns would become constants of the Arkestra's life, grueling itineraries that barely managed to provide a modicum of financial security for the band.

Meanwhile, back home, the "New Thing" fad gave way to slick, commercial fusion by the late-1970s and the band worked where and when it could, crisscrossing the country playing dingy night-clubs, outdoor jazz festivals, and any colleges or universities that would have them. For the most part, Sun Ra's music was met with indifference or, at best, a bemused skepticism—and in some quarters, he provoked outright hostility, summarily dismissed as charlatan, a fake. By the 1980s, with much of the discography long out of print and/or impossible to find, Sun Ra's music was shrouded in mystery, his live show an anachronistic circus act, wildly out of step with the neo-conservative times exemplified by Wynton Marsalis and his ilk.

Thankfully, the invention of the compact disc has since allowed Sonny's vast output of incredibly obscure recordings to be heard once again. Moreover, the rediscovery of these "lost" albums offer

profound insight into Sun Ra's unique musical genius in its full flowering, at its most ambitious. Hopeful of a better world realizable in sound, Sun Ra sincerely thought he could change the world, and in some not-so-small ways, he did. These albums are essential documents of one of the twentieth century's most widely misunderstood and underappreciated masters.



Sun Ra:

"I'm Gonna Unmask the Batman" / "The Perfect Man" (Saturn)
Sun Ra and His Astro-Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra:
"Journey to Saturn" / "Enlightenment" (Saturn)

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Sun Ra:

The Singles (Evidence CD)

Sun Ra:

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991 (Strut/Art Yard)

In 1974, at the height of the Impulse! deal, the resurrected Saturn label released two seven-inch 45-RPM singles, in an effort, perhaps, to capitalize on the major label's support and media exposure. Crudely manufactured in small batches, they were sold from the bandstand or to certain favored record stores for cash on the barrelhead, making them extremely rare and highly-prized collector's items today. Thankfully, the Evidence label has collected all the known Saturn singles onto two CDs, making these weird and wonderful sides available to all. As usual, the discographical details are sketchy, but we can rely on Prof. Campbell's research and speculations to fit them into the chronology.

"I'm Gonna Unmask the Batman" / "The Perfect Man"

Continuing Sun Ra's odd infatuation with Batman and Robin, the A-side is a remake of the Lacy Gibson/Alton Abraham ditty first recorded for Repeto in 1968 (without Sun Ra's involvement). This version of "I'm Gonna Unmask the Batman" was probably taken from a live broadcast at WXPN-FM in Philadelphia on July 4, 1974 under the auspices of Hal Wilner (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 209-210). The vocalist is Sam Bankhead (who appeared in the *Space Is the Place* movie) and there's a small complement of riffing horns while Sonny provides the bass-line on his reedy RMI Rocksichord. Despite the silliness of the tune, Sun Ra would return to it again and again in concert, making this, I suppose, the definitive version.

The flip side is something else altogether: In his liner notes to *The Singles* collection, Prof. Campbell suggests that "The Perfect Man" may be Sun Ra's "most perfectly realized synthesizer performance." A particularly captivating space-rock-boogaloo driven by Sonny's boing-ing Minimoogs, the head is tightly arranged for the

tangy ensemble of Marshall Allen's oboe and John Gilmore's tenor sax. Probably recorded at Variety in May 24, 1973, the "Micro-Ensemble Unit" actually sounds surprisingly well rehearsed and polished on this almost-pop-worthy confection (despite the amateurish drumming of Danny Davis). Very interesting. [Editor's note: According to Irwin Chusid, this was actually recorded at Gershon Kingsley's studio in New York on November 12, 1969, as part of the My Brother the Wind Vol. 1 sessions. The single version and several alternate takes appear on the 2017 Cosmic Myth release of that album.]

"Journey to Saturn" / "Enlightenment"

This single focuses on two of the common space-chants from the repertoire. "Journey to Saturn" is taken from an unknown live performance ca. 1972-74, as indicated by the unbalanced and overamplified sound. Clifford Jarvis swings hard on drums and Gilmore and June Tyson duet while Sonny churns out some gritty organ accompaniment. After a bluesy solo from Ra that veers off into distant keys, Tyson returns briefly a cappella. The B-side is yet another remake of "Enlightenment," a song that obviously meant a lot to Ra. Recorded at the House of Ra in Philadelphia sometime between 1970 and 1974, this stripped-down version is really quite affecting. The tempo is slow and deliberate, held together by Gilmore's remarkably supple drumming and Sonny's orchestral clavinet playing. Gilmore and Tyson sing with full-throated sincerity and, even though Gilmore drops his sticks at one point, he never loses a beat. The lo-fi, homemade quality of the recording only adds to the charm—this one has that inimitable "Saturn Sound." A nice rendition of this sometimes-overplayed song.

Although it can be assumed that the Arkestra performed as frequently as ever, live concerts in 1973 are rather sparsely documented, at least as compared to the previous couple of years. Prof. Campbell mentions a 214-minute audience tape recorded at the Village Gate on February 26 (possibly part of a multi-night stand at the legendary New York nightclub), but this artifact does not circulate amongst collectors and Campbell offers no details whatsoever (Campbell and Trent 2000, 192). Meanwhile, work continued on the *Space Is the Place* movie, with Sonny and Tommy Hunter flying to California in late June to film the hilarious nightclub scene.

This July 4 performance was part of a memorial tribute to Louis Armstrong (who died on July 6, 1971) at Flushing Meadow Park, in the borough of Queens, New York. It was recorded by Voice of America but never broadcast, the tapes deposited into the Library of Congress and promptly forgotten (Campbell and Trent 2000, 199). It's a curious fragment, about six minutes of music played by a small band consisting of Ra on electric piano, John Gilmore on tenor sax, Ronnie Boykins on bass, and Beaver Harris on drums, in his only known appearance with the Arkestra. The whole thing has a very impromptu, ad hoc feel to it, as if it had been organized at the last possible minute. The announcer is harried and clueless, first introducing the bassist as Reggie Workman and then, after the band corrects him, calling him "Ronnie Barkin" (and, later, "Ronnie Bodkin"). Sheesh! Sonny gingerly fingers a Fender Rhodes piano, an instrument he was not associated with at this time, and its politely chiming, bell-like tone clearly displeases him. So, he starts to work it, cranking up the gain, making it distort, adding skittering, polyphonic voices while Boykins and Harris set up a churning, freejazz groove. Now Ra is really going for it, attacking the keyboard with two-fisted fury—but the engineer freaks out and turns down Sonny's volume, greatly reducing the effect. Argh! Gilmore enters with what sounds like a pre-composed, modal theme and a set of full-throated, late-Coltrane-style variations. Despite the wonky sound, this is pretty exciting stuff! Harris gets maybe a little too excited and starts to overplay while Boykins tries his best to rein him in. Suddenly, Harris gets the message and drops out altogether, leaving Gilmore to solo a cappella, continuing in an atonal, postbop vein, peppered with bluesy call and response effects and concluding with a dramatic flourish. Although brief, this is yet another incredible Gilmore solo!

In the aftermath of Gilmore's stunning display, piano filigrees float up from the stillness and Boykins picks up the bow, accompanied by softly tinkling cymbals. Ra sets the mood with celeste-like chording to surround the pleading, arco bass solo while Harris starts to turn up the heat. Then Boykins plays alone for a minute before the full band returns with a bashing storm of dissonant wailing. Sadly, the mix is horribly unbalanced by this point, with Ra's dense figurations appearing way off in the distance while the tumultuous drums and squealing saxophone are way up front. The intended texture is obviously thick and rich but is rendered thin and incoherent on tape (maybe it sounded better in person). Eventually, even Gilmore wanders off-mic, leaving Ra to bring it all to an end with a huge, harsh tone cluster. Our hapless M.C. rushes back to the microphone to defend this outburst of avant-garde mayhem to an audience that was perhaps expecting to hear a more traditional-sounding tribute to "Satchmo:" "I know a lot of you are thinking...well, you know...but it's the energy that Louis had and all musicians have which comes out in a little bit different form, and yet a very valid thing as far as these men are concerned." Well, he gets that right!

Too bad Leo declined to include this track on What Planet Is This? since it would have easily fit (and dodgy sound quality has never prevented them from releasing stuff in the past). It's an interesting if not altogether successful piece, marred somewhat by Harris, who, while a fine drummer, does not quite fit into Sun Ra's cosmic equation here. And it's really a shame Sun Ra's Fender Rhodes assault is mixed so far back, as a more balanced recording would have made this a much more powerful and effective listening experience. Even so, the diminutive, four-piece Arkestra packs a lot of music into a short amount of time, Boykins holding it all together with his sure-footed bass playing while Gilmore is his typically brilliant self. Not essential by any means, but if you're a Sun Ra fan, this little artifact is definitely worth seeking out—and holding onto.

On July 6, 1973, the Arkestra performed at the "Newport In New York Festival" in a marathon concert at Carnegie Hall, which included an opening set by Cab Calloway. This billing must have seemed completely incongruous to those in attendance, but, in later years, Sonny's connection to Calloway's brand of pre-war swing and proto-R&B would become increasingly clear. Ra's entire two-hour set was again recorded by Voice of America but, for some unknown reason, never broadcast. The tapes languished in the Library of Congress until their discovery by researcher Larry Applebaum in the mid-1990s (Campbell and Trent 2000, 199-200) and were the subject of rampant speculation in the ensuing years. The small but enterprising British label, Leo Records, finally released these recordings on their Golden Years imprint in 2006, somehow exploiting the grey areas of international copyright law and carefully avoiding any mention of the concert's venue or the tape's unusual provenance. Despite its rather nondescript packaging (and potential ethical/legal quibbles), What Planet Is This? is, for any Sun Ra fan, a most welcome release indeed as the sound quality is (for the most part) first-rate and the maximum-strength Arkestra was well-rehearsed and in top form for this prestigious concert.

Opening with the usual processional/improvisation, the first thing you notice is a full contingent of low brass, including two trombones and tuba (likely played by Charles Stevens, Dick Griffin, and Hakim Jami, respectively). Sonny often had to make do without the rich, warm sonorities of the trombone in his working ensembles, but he would usually recruit players for high-profile gigs such as this, re-tooling the arrangements to accommodate an expanded sonic palette. The second thing you notice is the presence of Ronnie Boykins, who brings his sure-footed authority on the double bass, anchoring the proceedings in his own inimitable fashion. Curiously, Clifford Jarvis is absent, replaced by Lex Humphries on trap drums. While Humphries's laconic style may lack the fiery,

propulsive drive of Jarvis, we are also spared the interminable drum solos that would have inevitably resulted—and that is a good thing, as far as I'm concerned.

Once the twenty-five-member Arkestra has assembled on stage (including an array of percussionists and the Space Ethnic Voices), June Tyson solemnly intones "Astro Black," accompanied by delicate bass thrumming but ending with an explosive, full-band space chord and free-form freak-out. Whew! Then, just as suddenly, the chaos melts into the big-band swing of "Discipline 27," led by Pat Patrick's baritone sax riffing. The Arkestra sounds great, with the trombones and tuba prominently featured amidst the reeds and trumpets. But Ra is playing a different kind of organ than usual (or perhaps he's just poorly miked)—it sounds oddly muffled and distant here. Fortunately, he was provided a decent grand piano and, in the long improvisation which follows, he makes excellent use of it, throwing off astonishingly dexterous runs and thick, dissonant harmonies à la Cecil Taylor. Then he moves to the Minimoog synthesizer to create pulsating walls of industrial noise against which the horns spatter notes like graffiti. And again, the organ sound is... strange, kind of like "The Mighty Wurlitzer" at a baseball park. Is there a theater organ at Carnegie Hall? Is that what he's playing? Who knows! This remarkably compelling improvisation goes on for almost thirty minutes, dominated by the shifting hues of Ra's keyboards and held together by Boykins's macroscopic sense of structure and groove (not to mention the thrilling crescendos of tympani). Various solos and ensembles are queued by Ra, giving shape to an improvised construction of remarkable cohesiveness and expressive beauty. Despite the seemingly excessive length, it's actually over before you know it, and the band launches smoothly into "Space Is the Place." Wow! One of the Space Ethnic Voices (who?) does some of her insane, post-Ono vocal acrobatics before the band eases into lush and dreamy versions of "Enlightenment" and "Love in Outer Space." These arguably over-played numbers could sometimes sound glib and tossed-off in performance, but here they sound poised and purposeful, aided, in part, by the relaxed drumming of Humphries and the rock-solid bass of Boykins.

But Humphries shows he's no slouch on "The Shadow World," kicking up furious polyrhythms in tandem with Aye Aton (Robert

Underwood) and a host of burbling congas. Starting from a dead stop, the Arkestra executes the dauntingly difficult composition with startling precision, the hi-fi recording allowing us to hear deep into the densely orchestrated ensemble. The improvisation that follows is another perfect example of Ra's disciplined freedom at its most cogent—even Gilmore's unaccompanied solo (often a show-stopping tour de force) is ultimately curtailed and subsumed within the evolving group dynamic, just a part of the intricately woven musical fabric. After about fifteen minutes, the band settles into a quiet, Afro-Asian feel, with Alzo Wright's cello providing some "Strange Strings"-style bowings and Marshall Allen wailing away on a plangent oboe—both of which elicit surprisingly respectful applause from the audience, given how weird and otherworldly the sounds. It is a magical moment. By this point, the audience has been transported, if not into outer space, then into Sun Ra's alternative reality, where such sounds are as natural and nutritive as the air we breathe. This is truly an exemplary rendition of "The Shadow World" and needs to be heard to be believed. "Watusa" and "Discipline 27-II" conclude the set in the usual fashion, with a percussion/ dance workout and a seventeen-minute sermon of cosmic declamations. Yet the ultra-spacious sound quality and the richly textured Arkestra's near-definitive performances make them worth listening to—even if, like me, you think you've heard these routines too many times already.

So, yeah, this one is a keeper. No doubt the incendiary rhetoric found at the conclusion of this concert scared the pants off the bureaucrats at the Voice of America, who, upon hearing the tapes, shipped them off to some remote storage facility of the Library of Congress, never, they hoped, to be heard by anyone else ever again. I'm speculating about all this, of course—and I have no idea about the legal ramifications of this CD (I am NOT a lawyer)—but the tangled history of this tape is certainly intriguing. All I care about is having the opportunity to hear this music after all these years, by whatever means. Please don't get me wrong: Leo is a well-established label with impeccable bona fides—their loving devotion to Anthony Braxton's most ambitious music is to be wholeheartedly supported—and I do not mean to impugn the label's business ethics in the slightest. For all I know, everything is kosher, the

rights-holders are paid, and everyone is happy. Whatever, I don't really care (my only complaint is that the Flushing Meadow Park fragment was not included). Hey, this is the record business—the shadiest business ever. As a fan, I only rejoice at its current availability and recommend to others they grab a copy before it goes out of print forever, as these things often do. *Carpe diem!*

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Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Arkestra:
Outer Space Employment Agency (Alive!/Total Energy CD)
Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra:
Wake Up Angels (Live at the Ann Arbor Blues &
Jazz Festival 1972-73-74) (Art Yard)

On September 10, 1973, the Arkestra returned to play John Sinclair's fifth annual Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, a huge outdoor concert held at Otis Spann Memorial Field. This was a rare opportunity for Sun Ra to play in front of a large audience, appearing on the final night of the festival on a bill with Luther Allison, Hound Dog Taylor, and Otis Rush. The entire concert was broadcast over the radio, including most of Sun Ra's seventy-three-minute set, and a tape of this broadcast apparently circulates amongst collectors, but I haven't heard it. Finally, in 1999, Sinclair released a fifty-two minute fragment (omitting "Discipline 27" and "Astro Black") on his Alive!/Total Energy label on a CD entitled Outer Space Employment Agency. To be honest, it's a mixed bag.

Sinclair certainly means well—but as Prof. Campbell points out, he "continues the tradition of incorrect titling that has afflicted so many commercial releases of Arkestra concerts" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 202). That's putting it politely! The first track is actually an untitled improvisation (mistitled "Discipline 99"), opening with a bit of "mad scientist" keyboard noodling before a brutal splice takes us into the middle of a howling space chord—what's that about? Whatever, the group improv that follows is a real corker—and you can plainly hear the sizable crowd rapturously whooping it up in the background. The great Ronnie Boykins is once again present on bass and right away he starts bowing away, widely ranging from rich, low-register double stops to bristly sul ponticello scraping. Lex Humphries returns on drums, joined by Tommy Hunter, and (along with a battery of conga players) they kick up a suitable din for a series of solos and duos, climaxing with some barn-burning saxophone from John Gilmore on tenor and Danny Davis on alto. After a brief organ interlude, "Discipline 99" (mistitled "Love in Outer Space") follows, and it's a treat to hear this rarely performed number in such exquisite high fidelity. A languid, almost melancholic ballad, the Arkestra sounds well-rehearsed on this lush, intricate arrangement, with Gilmore briefly taking the lead with a soulful, bluesy solo before giving way to Akh Tal Ebah's mellow, burnished flugelhorn. *Just lovely*.

After that, the rest of the disc is something of a letdown. Kwame Hadi's fiery trumpet enlivens an otherwise desultory "Love in Outer Space," but the following "Watusi" is the usual percussion jam (featuring about fifteen clanking cowbells) accompanying some hysterical chanting and the pharaonic dancing (this segment is mistitled "Watusa/Discipline 27-II" on the CD). No doubt this was a mesmerizing visual spectacle in person, but it comes across as diffuse and a little dull on disc—nothing new there, I guess. A medium tempo "Discipline 27-II" concludes the set in the usual fashion, with Sun Ra furiously preaching the Cosmo Drama, his rhetorical—sometimes downright inflammatory—declamations echoed by June Tyson, a crooning Ebah, and various Space Ethnic Voices. It's the usual stuff and the ultra-spacious sound quality lets us clearly hear the subtly morphing orchestration of "Discipline 27-II" beneath all that vocal carrying-on. Even so, at over twenty minutes, it's more than a little much. Again, I think you had to have been there.

Still, there's a lot to like about this CD. The sound quality is much improved over the 1972 set (released as *Life Is Splendid*), and the crackling opening improvisation and beautiful rendition of "Discipline 99" make it a necessary acquisition for the hardcore Sun Ra fan. But the shoddy documentation, meandering percussion jams, and endless, inscrutable chanting will likely leave novices scratching their heads. With a choice of live recordings available from this period, I cannot wholeheartedly recommend this one. Yet be aware that all three of the Alive!/Total Energy releases are now out of print; if you're interested, better grab them now before they disappear for good.

085

Sun Ra: The Universe Sent Me: Lost Reel Collection, Vol.5 (Transparency CD)

There is some confusion as to when exactly the Arkestra's third European tour began. The last four tracks on Transparency's Lost Reel Collection Vol. 5 were purportedly recorded in Paris on September 8, 1973, while Szwed says the first concert was on September 9 at the Fête de l'Humanité (Szwed 1997, 335). Neither date is possible since the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival performance (Outer Space Employment Agency) definitely occurred on September 10. Prof. Campbell (via Julian Vein) suggests the Fête de l'Humanité took place on either September 18 or 28, with another concert at the Olympia in Paris on September 30 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 202). These later dates make more sense, with September 28 being the most likely.

In any case, I believe this fifty-minute fragment was probably recorded on that date at the Fête de l'Humanité, an event sponsored by the Communist Party and which almost turned into a full-scale riot. Recorded from the stage (presumably by drummer Tommy Hunter), you can hear a sizable audience in the background and, more tellingly, "Discipline 27-II" makes an unusually early appearance in the set, allowing Sonny an opportunity to cast his spell upon the surly crowd. We pick up in the middle of "Discipline 27-II," and while the vocals are distant, the horns are upfront and reasonably clear. The accompanying declamations can get a little tiresome, but it's always worth paying attention to how the arrangement changes from night to night: it's never quite the same, the instrumentation subtly shifting with each repetition of the theme. Ronnie Boykins is present holding down the rhythm section, joined by Hunter and the usual gang of percussionists. After about ten minutes, John Gilmore signals a free, bashing, group improvisation which quickly gives way to Sun Ra's scary sci-fi electronics. Four measures of stately organ chords introduce "Discipline 99" in yet another rearrangement: the tempo is a little faster than we heard in Ann Arbor while flutes and piccolos take the lead amidst some added horn riffing. This is one of Sun Ra's more interesting compositions, with a wistful, slightly melancholy mood evoked by the descending minor-mode melodies. But, apparently, he was dissatisfied with it as it was performed only a handful of times during this period before being briefly resurrected in the early-1980s and then abandoned. Sonny takes a short but dramatic solo before Gilmore lays down some deeply penetrating soul-blues and the rhythm starts to loosen up the backbeat. Akh Tal Ebah essays on flugelhorn while Sonny's organ grinds away and horns circle and dodge. Marshall Allen finally takes over with a delightful flute solo and the texture starts to thin. Rather than recapitulating the theme, it just sort of dissipates, which is kind of disappointing, given the fact that "Watusi" is up next. It's the same old thing: after a quick run through the head, drums and percussion, whooping and hollering, and dancing and chanting go on and on for ten tedious minutes. I'm sure it was quite the spectacle!

But then something happens: Kwame Hadi starts into a pealing high-register thing, and the rhythm shifts into high gear, Boykins setting down an insistently throbbing bass line. Swirling organ and quicksilver horns enter the fray and now we're into a ferocious group improv—only to have Sonny suddenly signal the reprise of "Watusi." Wow! This gets a big hand from the audience and Hunter boldly steps up with a (relatively rare) drum solo. Unlike Clifford Jarvis, he keeps it short and tasteful, establishing a tribal beat on the tom-toms appropriate for Eloe Omoe's bass clarinet rumblings which follow. Sun Ra cues a harrowing space chord, but it quickly dissolves into flickering, pointillist horn figures. Boykins gets out the bow for a mysterioso bass solo and is later joined by Marshall Allen's oboe and Ebah's flugelhorn, a rare and beautiful sonority. Sonny is out front hectoring the audience about "The Impossible Equation," but it's hard to hear. That's OK because the Arkestra is in deep space exotica mode, all orbiting horns and solar drums. As things heat up, Gilmore blasts off with some hair-raising altissimo runs, and someone (Ra?) starts honking what sounds like a car horn (?). Just as the intensity level becomes almost unbearable, the tape cuts off. Argh! Surely there was a lot more to this set...

It's pure speculation on my part that this recording is from the Fête de l'Humanité debacle, but, after listening to other documents from this tour, it makes sense. Regardless of exactly when or where it was recorded, this volume of the *Lost Reel Collection* (which also

includes a fragment from the Southport Seaport Museum on July 9, 1972) is of definite historical interest to all Sun Ra fanatics. Be forewarned: as usual with Transparency, the sound quality is not great—clearly several generations away from the master (presumably, um, lost)—but it's certainly listenable, as these things go. Musically, the Arkestra is at its best, bringing a fresh enthusiasm to even the most overplayed repertoire and improvising with an almost telepathic cohesion. The rarely heard "Discipline 99" and the (truncated) closing improvisation are particularly satisfying, despite the bootleg sound quality. Newbies should start elsewhere, but Sun Ra aficionados who know what to expect will be amply rewarded by The Lost Reel Collection Vol. 5.

SUNRA live in Paris at the "GIBUS"

Sun Ra: Live in Paris at the "Gibus" (Atlantic-France/Universe CD)

086

Unlike the previous European tour (an extended sojourn which ranged widely across the continent, culminating in an impromptu trip to Egypt), the 1973 visit seems to have consisted of barely a handful of gigs in and around Paris. Also, unlike the well-documented 1971 excursion, there were no high-profile radio broadcasts and very few amateur recordings survive. The tour likely began with the ill-fated Fête de l'Humanité at the end of September (possibly found on Transparency's Lost Reel Collection Vol. 5), and while Prof. Campbell mentions a 180-minute audience tape from the Nancy Jazz Festival on October 14, that's about it (and I haven't heard this tape). Otherwise, it seems the Arkestra settled into a multi-night stand at the famed Gibus Discotèque in Paris until their return to the states sometime in mid-to-late-October. Fortunately, the French division of Atlantic Records recorded a portion of this gig and released it as Live in Paris at the "Gibus" in 1975—but only in France. It remained an obscure collector's item until 2003, when the Italian Comet label reissued it on CD on their Universe imprint in a deluxe, gatefold mini-LP package with excellent sound quality. Finally! This is one of the essential Sun Ra albums: an impeccable performance, well-recorded, documenting a crucial period in the Arkestra's development.

It helps that the repertoire and sequencing is particularly inspired, possibly assembled by Sonny himself from several night's recordings (he was, after all, a master of the razor blade and splicing tape). Who knows?—the liner notes are deliberately vague. The album begins with two of Ra's most whimsically captivating compositions, both of which had been out of the setlists for a while and are now radically rearranged. "Spontaneous Simplicity" dispenses with the horn statements altogether and becomes a feature for Ra's chiming organ, and the "space-rhumba" groove is a bit looser, with Boykins leaning heavily on the riff. Suddenly, Ra goes into a frenetic double-time feel but the rhythm section keeps right with

him to the end. An interesting re-imagining of this piece. The beautiful and tranquil "Lights on a Satellite" which follows is intricately through-composed, from the flute and trumpet harmonizations right down to the arco bass pedals and pitter-pattering percussion figures—and it is taken at a glacially slow tempo. The Arkestra sounds a little restrained but they deliver a note-perfect performance of this chamber-jazz masterpiece, one of my very favorite Sun Ra compositions.

A deft edit (indicative of Sun Ra's hand) puts us smack in the middle of "The Shadow World" (mysteriously re-titled "Ombre Monde #2"), with Danny Ray Thompson's baritone sax riffing just tailing off. John Gilmore comes in with another spine-tingling tenor solo, made all the more intense by Sun Ra's insistently busy organ figuration. Kwame Hadi then solos on trumpet, easily holding his own against the rumbling thunderclouds and lightning flashes of electric organ, but Sonny finally takes over with an apocalyptic fury before another surgically precise edit dramatically brings the track to an end. Wow! It would be nice to have the whole thing, but this is a powerfully edited fragment that stands alone as a coherent piece of music. Whether constructed by Ra or unknown French engineers, this is a bravura bit of record making.

Then we have something completely different: the Arkestra busts out a freewheeling arrangement of Jelly Roll Morton's "King Porter Stomp," a proto-jazz number dating back to 1923. This signals a brash new direction for the Arkestra: resurrecting the old (if not old-fashioned) practices of the swing-era big bands within their futuristic space music and re-connecting the so-called avant-garde to the deepest roots of early jazz. This kind of stuff was always an element of Sun Ra's music, with its old-timey shuffle rhythms and prebop formalism, but here it becomes explicit. Of course, at age 59. Sonny was older than almost everyone else in the band by a number of years and had worked with Fletcher Henderson in Chicago back in 1946. Henderson was Herman Poole Blount's childhood idol in 1930s, and it is one of Henderson's arrangements the Arkestra plays here. By 1973, "[t]he recent deaths of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong had him reflecting about the forgotten masterworks of that era" and he began to introduce "mini-concerts of swing classics" at every performance (Szwed 1997, 338).

Ra's musico-philosophy was about discipline, not freedom, and this little swing revival within the Arkestra was in keeping with a living tradition that was perhaps obscured by the "out-there" music and space-age trappings. The Arkestra's exuberant performances of these old chestnuts are anything but polite re-creations made for nostalgic, easy listening. No, the music is as sweaty and funky as a roadside saloon, a room full of crazed jitterbuggers ecstatically dancing the night away. The music is alive! Thence forward, every concert would feature a number of swing tunes from the 1920s and 1930s, done up with rousing enthusiasm. It's over before you know it and now we're blasting off into outer space. "Salutations From The Universe" is a group improvisation which opens with some jittery space chords and a brief declamation from Ra, but he soon embarks on a long synthesizer/organ solo full of scary spaceship sounds, hieroglyphic counterpoint, weird, microtonal effects, and hair-raisingly aggressive, two-fisted noise attacks. The howling space chords return and Sonny sounds the air-raid sirens as bombs boom forth from his speaker cabinets. Finally, a repeated organ note cues "Calling Planet Earth" and everyone joins in the chanting (including someone with a policeman's bull-horn), all of them gleefully hectoring the crowd while Ra continues his sonic onslaught. Another perfectly timed edit ends the album with a dramatic silence. Whew!

Live in Paris at the "Gibus" is one of the great live Sun Ra albums, not only because of the interesting song selection and excellent sound quality. The Arkestra is at its disciplined best, and Sonny is the star of the show—not only as master composer and bandleader, but also as virtuoso instrumentalist. His electronic keyboard solos on this record are truly out of this world. Sun Ra was a visionary player; no one even tried to sound like him on synthesizer or organ! He is sui generis! This record also shows the band in transition: swing numbers are coming to the fore, and the Cosmo Drama is being reinvented and routinized. But the routine was paying dividends, both commercially and artistically, and within that structure, Ra could continue to work his magic. Pushing sixty, he was well aware of the transient nature of fads and fashion and was positioning himself, as always, for the long haul. Live in Paris at the "Gibus" documents the Arkestra at a mid-career peak and showcases Sun Ra's outrageous musicianship to stunning effect. An absolute must-have record.

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Sun Ra: The Road To Destiny: Lost Reel Collection Vol. 6 (Transparency CD)

The latest volume in Transparency's Lost Reel Collection is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. First and foremost, it offers further documentation of the Arkestra's stand at the Gibus Discotèque in 1973. Secondly, it comes from the collection of Tommy "Bugs" Hunter, who often served as recordist for the band when he was available (he even provides a spoken introduction to the CD, wherein he states the tape was recorded "around midnight" on Thursday, October 18th or 19th). It features remarkably good sound quality, likely recorded from the stage, and since it is mastered from the original tape, it does not suffer from the kind of gross distortion and generational loss that plagues most of the volumes in this series. All this makes it of interest to Sun Ra fans, but the music is not particularly revelatory. If the Atlantic-France LP, Live in Paris at the "Gibus," indicated a change in direction, this CD demonstrates that Sun Ra was still up to his old tricks.

The disc starts off strong with a spacey version of "Astro Black." A smattering of horns precedes June Tyson's entrance, who sweetly sings to Ronnie Boykins's spare bass accompaniment. Drums are heard faintly in the background, but soon become more prominent as the song comes to a conclusion and a blaring space chord signals a brief group improvisation. The music quiets, and one of the Space Ethnic Voices does her crazy, super-high-pitched vocalese trick along with some twisty trumpet obbligato from Kwame Hadi. Impressive, but very strange! This goes on for barely a minute or so before Danny Ray Thompson's baritone sax riff introduces "Discipline 27," which is taken at a relaxed, easy-going tempo, buoyed by Boykins's sure-footed bass-playing. This is a cheerfully pleasant version of the big-band swing number, with Hadi and Akh Tal Ebah providing dual trumpet lead and Sonny soloing fluidly on "vibra-organ" before the reprise. Nothing special, but a solid performance nonetheless.

Then the Arkestra drops the tempo and smoothly segues into an extended "Discipline 27-II," complete with its full complement of chanted declamations. The recording foregrounds the instruments at the expense of the vocals, which sound distant and hard to hear, as if coming from monitors at the other end of the stage. That's OK since, as is usual, the endlessly morphing horn arrangement is what keeps the piece interesting to listen to, while Sun Ra's space-preacher shtick can get a little tedious, to say the least. But don't worry, when he and June raise their voices (which happens often enough), you can hear them loud and clear. After nearly twenty-seven minutes (!), the Arkestra finally abandons the composition and descends into a chaotic group improvisation with terrifying saxophone battles, bashing drums, and throbbing bass. Sadly, the tape fades out just as things get going. Oh well—I would love to hear what came next! Instead, the disc ends with a series of space chants, cutting in on Tyson's lead on "Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds." Others join in for "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and "Why Go to the Moon?," but the vocals are swamped by layers of distortion and feedback—yet you can still hear our unknown Space Ethnic Voice doing her screeching thing amidst all the mayhem, so that's something to listen for. Just as Gilmore starts to wail on tenor saxophone, the tape brutally cuts off. Argh!

Lost Reel Collection Vol. 6 is a mixed bag: good sound and excellent playing (especially from the ever-inventive Ronnie Boykins), but the song selection is rather mundane. We've heard all this stuff many times before, and this CD offers very little in the way of fresh insights. The most interesting thing here is the weird, post-Yoko vocalizing of the anonymous Space Ethnic Voice on "Astro Black" and during the closing chants, but that's not saying a whole lot. Fanatics and completists will be happy to have this as an adjunct to Live in Paris at the "Gibus," but others will wonder what all the fuss is about. Nice, but non-essential.

It's unclear when exactly the Arkestra returned to the states, or what they did (if anything) until the end of the year, when ESP-Disk' mounted an ambitious Concert for Comet Kohoutek at New York City's prestigious Town Hall on December 22, 1973. Given the supposedly cosmic significance of this astronomical event, Sun Ra was asked to headline a marathon concert featuring other ESP-affiliated artists such as the Miamis, Randy Burns, Amanda, Buddy Hughes, Donald Raphael Garrett, and Paul Thornton (of the Godz). Like the eponymous comet, the concert was something of a bust. I'm old enough to remember the hype surrounding Kohoutek and the deep sense of disappointment that followed its weak display. In retrospect, the deflation of naïve idealism that accompanied Kohoutek's passage by our planet seems to fittingly symbolize the end of "The Age of Aquarius." It's not surprising to learn the Town Hall concert was "rather poorly attended" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 204) or that the tapes of Sun Ra's set would become a source of bitter contention, unreleased until 1993, a year after Sonny's death and twenty years after its recording. The times had indeed a-changed but not for the better.

Originally released via the licensing deal with German ZYX label, that disc was marred by poor sound, random indexing and woefully incorrect titling. Concert For Comet Kohoutek was eventually reissued in a slightly expanded and remastered edition by the re-formed ESP-Disk' in 2006, although the graphics are noticeably fuzzier and it dispenses with the thick booklet of text and photographs which accompanied the ZYX version. Instead, we get a bizarre, two-page essay by ESP-Disk' founder Bernard Stollman, wherein he accuses Sun Ra of stealing the original (presumably stereo) master tapes from his apartment, which necessitated the use of a mono reference copy for the CD. Stollman further insinuates that Sun Ra extorted a royalty advance from him shortly after this concert and, later, breached a contract regarding concert recordings to

be made on the upcoming Mexican tour. Well, whatever the veracity of these allegations, the tone of cynicism and bad faith is certainly in keeping with the post-1960s malaise the Comet Kohoutek seemed to auger. Indeed, this posthumously released album presents the end of an era in Sun Ra's music: the outrageous experimentalism would thereafter be tempered by an increasingly regimented formalism and the space-age cosmo-philosophy would be subsumed into more a more calculated sense of showmanship. Sure, he continued to make interesting music, but it inevitably changed with the times.

A profound sense of anticlimax pervades the opening remarks by the hapless M.C., who earnestly attempts to narrate a slideshow of NASA space photographs. The Arkestra can be heard noodling around and tuning up in the background and as he begins to expound upon the drug-addled fantasies of Timothy Leary, the audience becomes audibly restless. "Somebody has asked me to get the fuck off [the stage]," he announces with a nervous chuckle. "Is there anybody here that wants to hear more about [Leary's] *Terra* 2? Otherwise, I'll get the fuck off." The audience responds with resounding cheers. "By popular demand, I will get the fuck off." This little exchange (omitted on the ZYX CD) neatly summarizes the cultural zeitgeist of the mid-1970s.

Then the Arkestra goes at it, opening with an earth-shattering space chord and "Astro Black." June Tyson sings a cappella, then with quiet accompaniment from bass and drums, ringing cymbals, and cowbell. Beautiful! Then John Gilmore leads some assaultive group improvisation which quickly melts into the melodious strains of "Discipline 27," but the tempo is oddly plodding and off-centered. After a brief but intriguingly out-there solo from Gilmore, they lurch into what Prof. Campbell calls "Journey Through the Outer Darkness" but I believe is another "Discipline" piece, a heaving minor key vamp in five. But again, while Boykins tries to anchor the rhythm section, the multiple drummers and percussionists fail to coalesce, even during Hadi's otherwise fluid trumpet solo. As if sensing defeat, Sonny starts interjecting weird synthesizer squiggles, eventually taking over with a long keyboard solo, occasionally punctuated with conducted blasts of high-energy group improvisation, climaxing with a typically mind-blowing tenor solo from Gilmore. *Good stuff!* After some more scary electronics,

Sonny launches into "Enlightenment" and it's the usual, with Tyson and Gilmore singing in harmony along with the Space Ethnic Voices and host of clanking percussion. Unfortunately, Marshall Allen's flute obbligato is off-mic and hard to hear, but it's still a nice version of this concert staple.

"Love in Outer Space" is one of those wonderfully heavy, organ-driven versions with Danny Davis joining Allen in a dual alto saxophone display towards the end. This elicits some hearty applause after which Ra begins playing "Discipline 15" (mistitled "Kohoutek" on this CD). A mournful, rubato ballad, this composition was rarely performed, yet the Arkestra sounds remarkably well-rehearsed, unfazed by Ra's weird and increasingly frenetic organ plinking. After its solemn conclusion, Sonny takes charge with another display of electric pyrotechnics, full of thunderous, low-register rumbling; two-handed, staccato runs; and dissonant organ clusters. A cued space chord signals the entrance of bass and drums and then things get really crazy, with Ra building up forbidding walls of synthesizer/organ noise while horns chirp and squeal in the background. Just as the texture becomes impossibly dense, a trombone makes a dramatic entrance (probably Dick Griffin or Charles Stephens) and more mayhem arises in its wake. Wow!

Finally, Sonny guides the band into "Discipline 27-II," taken at a moderately fast clip, and the keyboard attack continues for several minutes before he takes to the microphone to ask, "What planet is this?" The usual series of declamations follow, echoed by Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices while the ensemble arranges and re-arranges the endlessly malleable composition, all held together by Boykins's endlessly creative bass playing. Thankfully, it doesn't go on too long, and everyone quiets down for some of that post-Yoko screeching and screaming from one of the Space Ethnic Voices. Nice! Then Tyson announces, "We're openin' up the doors of the Outer Space Employment Agency!" and a short but super-funky version follows. Only forty-seven seconds long, I would have liked to hear a bit more of this killer groove, but before things are allowed to get going, it's interrupted by Ra's insistence on "Space Is the Place." After an overamped organ introduction, the singing, dancing, and chanting begins in earnest, with Akh Tal Ebah doing his soul-man thing along with Tyson's more reserved crooning. Eventually, the percussion drops out leaving the vocalists supported only by Boykins, who is riding the wave, in the pocket and he doesn't want to stop! Sun Ra steps up to say, "There's no place for you to go except for in or out... try the out!" This gets a big hand from the audience. Saxophones scribble, the Space Ethnic Voice shrieks and screams, while Boykins just keeps on rockin' until finally bringing it to a close with a big cadence. The small but enthusiastic audience claps and hollers its appreciation while the musicians exit the stage.

The actual Concert For Comet Kohoutek was, like its namesake, something of a letdown for its promoters. But the music preserved on this CD is a stunning reminder of Sun Ra's prowess as instrumentalist and bandleader during this period. His keyboard solos are some of the most hair-raisingly intense to be found on record and his control over the Arkestra's resources is complete, deftly steering the music in contrasting directions as it unfolds. Despite the acrimonious history surrounding the tapes and the less-than-perfect sound quality, this is still a worthy addition to the official canon. If the original stereo masters still exist somewhere, let's hear 'em! Until then, Concert For Comet Kohoutek (particularly the expanded and remastered edition) is highly recommended.

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Sun Ra Arkestra with Wilbur Ware: House of Ra, Philadelphia, PA, 1973 (CDR) Sun Ra:

Untitled Recordings (Transparency)

In 1987, Columbia University's WKCR-FM embarked on a "Sun Ra Festival," broadcasting 116 straight hours of music and interviews with members of the Arkestra, including the man himself, who brought with him several never-before-heard recordings for the occasion. A tape of this broadcast circulates widely amongst collectors and contains a wealth of interesting material, including this twelve-and-a-half minute piece recorded at the House of Ra in 1973 with bassist Wilbur Ware. Born in 1923, Ware had worked with Sonny briefly back in Chicago and can be heard on one of Ra's earliest known recordings as a leader. Ware was well-regarded for his bebop skills, playing with folks like Stuff Smith, Sonny Stitt, Roy Eldridge, and Art Blakey, but he was probably best known for his work with Thelonious Monk in the late-1950s. By 1973, however, his career was at a standstill due to a combination of health issues and drug abuse and he had relocated to Philadelphia, where he hooked up with the Arkestra for this impromptu jam. "It's quite different, you know, to hear him play what you might call avant-garde," Sonny remarks during the interview. "It sounds very nice."

Actually, it's more than just a jam, and, while it would appear that Ware is leading the way, it is actually Sun Ra who guides the Arkestra through the improvisation, cueing entrances and exits and various changes in feel in his own inimitable way. Despite Ware's personal difficulties during this time, he sounds great here, playing with supreme confidence and big-eared sensitivity, exploring the entire compass of the instrument and even pulling out the bow for a short interlude. Rarely do all eight musicians play at the same time, giving this piece an austere, modern chamber music quality, while Ra moves from slippery synthesizer to a wobbly, wahwah organ, emphasizing a rising portamento which is echoed by the bass throughout. Soloists include John Gilmore, who introduces a long-breathed melody and multiphonic variations on tenor saxophone; blurry trumpet from Akh Tal Ebah (later joined by Marshall

Allen and Danny Davis on alto saxophones); and Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet. Sometimes the horns drop out altogether, leaving Ware to duet with Sun Ra's keyboards; at other times they engage in fleeting bouts of group improv. Drummer Lex Humphries makes only a brief appearance mid-way through only to conclude the piece with a solo of his own. Amazingly, Ware keeps things going with strong yet supple support, no matter what's going on around him.

It's tempting to speculate this was a sort of audition for Ware, since the bass chair was often empty due to the comings and goings of the brilliant Ronnie Boykins (who would leave the band for good after 1974). From the evidence, it seems like Ware would have been a good fit for the Arkestra. Although he was rooted in the language of bop, Ware was obviously a good listener. As Sonny points out in his interview, the ability to listen is the most valuable skill a musician can possess and is a key part of his cosmo-philosophy. Sadly, Ware withdrew from the music scene altogether and died of emphysema in 1979. This tape presents an opportunity to hear this underappreciated musician in an unusual context and, for that reason alone, is worth checking out.

By 1974, the Impulse! deal was starting to bear fruit, with almost a dozen LPs coming out during the course of the year, including several reissues from the old Saturn catalog. In addition, the Saturn label had been resurrected and new releases were being pressed in tiny editions for sale at gigs and at select record stores. Given the fact that all this product was suddenly flooding the marketplace, it is not surprising very few new recordings were made during the year. Much like 1973, 1974 is rather sparsely documented (relatively speaking), but most of what's there is worth a listen.

In Feburary, shortly before Sonny's sixtieth birthday, the Arkestra travelled to Mexico for an extended tour at the invitation of the Ministry of Culture—an invitation which dated back to the Fête de l'Humanité fiasco in September 1973, where Sun Ra's music quelled a near riot and allowed for a triumphant performance of Ballet Folklórico de Mexico. The Arkestra stayed in Mexico two or three months (Szwed 1997, 336, 338). They also appeared on TV in Mexico City on the variety show Siempre en Domingo. According to Francisco "Ali" Mora, a Mexican drummer who joined the band during the tour, concert tapes probably exist, but no recordings have surfaced to date (Campbell and Trent 2000, 206). [Editor's note: A thirty-minute excerpt from a 1974 performance at the Palacio de Bella Artes in Mexico City recorded for radio surfaced in 2020.]

On June 16, the Arkestra performed at Hunter College in New York City and the concert was recorded, possibly by the college itself (the sound quality is remarkably good). Portions were compiled by Ra for release as Out Beyond the Kingdom Of later in the year (although some copies are titled Discipline 99). The first thing you notice is the school has provided Sonny with a decent grand piano, and he relishes in the opportunity to tickle the ivories. "Discipline 99" is given a stately, confident reading by the band and features a long piano solo, alternating pretty harmonies with flurries of dissonant tone clusters. The following medley of old standards (an impossibly

romantic ballad, "How Am I To Know?" and the up-tempo "(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up" allows Ra to show off his inimitable, inside/outside comping skills behind John Gilmore's big-hearted, languorously swinging tenor solos. "How Am I To Know?" is a thing of rare beauty and the presence of Ronnie Boykins on bass and Clifford Jarvis on trap drums gives new life and humor to the old-fashioned rhythms of "(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up." Good stuff!—and a harbinger of things to come: a mini-set of jazz standards would increasingly become a fixture of the Arkestra's live sets as the 1970s rolled on.

Side B shifts gears, with an emphasis on space chants and ensemble freak-outs and is, frankly, a lot less interesting to my jaded ears. But to be fair, this record must be considered in context, as a historical artifact. An obsessive collector in the year 2011 will have heard these routines many times before, but in 1974, live recordings were scarce. Sonny was shrewdly filling the gap, documenting the Arkestra's current show for eager fans. Considered in that light, Out Beyond the Kingdom Of was exactly what it needed to be: a souvenir you could take home with you from the Cosmo Drama. As such, side B is fun, with June Tyson and Akh Tal Ebah at their soulful, hortatory best, and Boykins and Jarvis keep things grooving nicely. The highlight is "Cosmos Synthesis," a wild group improvisation for horns and free-bashing rhythm section which stays heavy longer than usual. But Sun Ra himself is inaudible for most of the side until the very end of "Journey To Saturn," when some spooky organ chords fade up and fade down.

For me, Out Beyond the Kingdom Of is a half-great album, with side A being of particular interest to Rafficianadoes. Unfortunately, it is way out of print and the "needle-drop" which circulates is a less-than-perfect transfer (though I'm certainly glad to have it). I wonder if other tapes from this concert exist? If so, it would be a good candidate for an expanded CD edition (see below). In any event, it deserves an official release, despite my antipathy to side B.

Prof. Campbell describes two different audience recordings made at this concert. One is ninety-five minutes long and contains most of the first set and the end of the second. The other tape is purported to be over a hundred minutes long and more complete (Campbell and Trent 2000, 206-209). I have a copy of "Tape 1," and it's a typical bootleg and suffers from the usual sonic defects: veils of hiss, a boomy and distant acoustic, plenty of extraneous noise

and distortion, etc. Nevertheless, it's not completely unlistenable and contains some interesting music. Any opportunity to hear the Boykins/Jarvis rhythm section is worth the effort.

After the brief opening improvisation and a series of space chants, "Tapestry From An Asteroid" sets the stage for a full-scale freak-out from the Arkestra, culminating in an outrageous alto sax solo from Marshall Allen. Despite the clouded sound, this is still very impressive. A strutting "Discipline 27" is marred by a typically overlong drum solo from Jarvis, made worse by the noise and distortion on the tape. *Ugh*. With that out of the way, Boykins then picks up the bow for a beautiful unaccompanied solo joined later by Ra on Rocksichord before moving into a long, spacey synthesizer outing. Sadly, as the texture thickens and the Arkestra joins in, the wretched sound quality almost completely obscures the details of what's going on. Well, the audience liked it and they offer a nice round of applause before the band launches into "Enlightenment." It's the usual thing, but with Allen's flute counter-melodies coming through sharp and clear for a change. The percussion barrage of "Love in Outer Space" is reduced to a dull roar on the tape, with Sonny's metallic organ comping occasionally peeking through the din. It's tough going, but when Kwame Hadi comes in just at the right time with the aching, long-toned melody, it almost makes it worth the while. Almost.

The tape then picks up in the middle of "The Satellites Are Spinning," June Tyson with her all-male chorus soulfully singing it and Boykins laying down some heavy-duty bass riffs. Ra then interjects some "mad-scientist" keyboard inventions before they venture off into "The Shadow World." It's a fractured, abstract version: the insistent ostinato is only hinted at while the full ensemble sections are not actually stated. Instead, John Gilmore erupts into a ferocious tenor sax solo as if he'd been waiting all night for this moment. He is ready to play! Yes, ladies and gentlemen: it's another incredible Gilmore solo! Too bad the sound is so funky. Then Danny Davis does his thing on the Neptunian libflecto and it gets a big rise out of the audience. Just as Hadi starts to play, the tape cuts off. Then we pick up with "Angels And Demons At Play," which, like "Love in Outer Space," suffers from exceptionally bad sound. Finally, we have "How Am I To Know" and "(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up" as heard on Out Beyond the Kingdom Of (but in significantly worse sound quality).

I have a second disc which supposedly contains part two of "Tape 1," but since it consists of overlapping music recorded from a different (inferior) source, I am confused. Is this part of "Tape 2" or is it something else? Whatever it is, it sounds atrocious, like the microphone was stuffed down the recordist's pants. We get "How Am I To Know" and "(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up" again, only this one is more complete with solos from Hadi, Pat Patrick on baritone sax, Ra on piano, and Boykins playing arco before the reprise of "Sunnyside." Or at least I think that's what's happening; it's kind of hard to tell. An unidentified title has all the earmarks of a "Discipline" number: densely arranged horn figures in sweet and sour harmony over interlocking bass and baritone sax riffs. Very interesting—yet another lost Ra composition (and a nice flugelhorn solo from Ebah)—too bad the recording sucks. "Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space" ends the tape (and the set) with a thud.

I can't really recommend these bootleg recordings to anyone except the most obsessed Sun Ra fanatic. There is some fascinating music here, but it only makes me want to hear an expanded, remastered Out Beyond the Kingdom Of. Here's hoping those tapes still exist and some intrepid label will make it happen.

On August 9, 1974, Richard M. Nixon resigned as President of the United States. I imagine this extraordinary event was on Sun Ra's mind when, a week later, he assembled a small Arkestra for a live radio broadcast at Temple University in Philadelphia on August 17. While not making any direct references to Nixon, Ra took the opportunity to sermonize at length and he felt strongly enough about the performance to edit the recording for an LP entitled The Antique Blacks, released on his own Saturn label later in the year. Ra clearly felt he had to get his message out. In actuality, this record was pressed in vanishingly small editions, sometimes re-titled Interplanetary Concepts or There Is Change in the Air and with various covers, including a generic "Acropolis" sleeve (Campbell and Trent 2000, 212-213). Like the mystical texts in his personal library, The Antique Blacks was probably made available to only initiates or persons Ra felt could decode his deeper, spiritual meanings. The ever-resourceful Art Yard label has reissued the album on CD with a bonus track recorded at the same session—but beware: Ra's philosophizing is as inscrutable as ever, making this a strange and difficult listen for the casual fan. Keep in mind: it was a different era.

The record starts out easy enough with "Song No. 1," a gently rollicking space groove propelled by burbling percussion (including Clifford Jarvis on trap drums and Atakatune on congas) and Sonny's reedy Rocksichord comping. This is one of my favorite "genres" of Sun Ra's music (think "Love in Outer Space"), and this is a particularly fine example. John Gilmore is up first with a terse but beautifully melodic tenor sax solo: starting with burnished low-register figures and then flying into the highest registers, he gracefully returns to earth with a variation on the theme he'd extemporaneously established. Yes, it's another brilliant Gilmore solo! Ra is up next and then—what's this?—who's playing the screaming electric guitar? That's a good question. The liner notes to the Art Yard CD say it's the mysterious "Sly" while Campbell and Trent insist it's a

15-year-old Dale Williams (Campbell and Trent 2000, 213). Whoever it is plays with a rocked-out, psychedelicized abandon which works well enough in this setting, despite a severe intonation problem. Then Akh Tal Ebah enters with one of his smeared, expressionistic trumpet solos. Kwame Hadi is absent at this session, giving Ebah a rare opportunity to stretch out. While Ebah doesn't hit every note with refined precision (like Hadi), his melodic ideas are unique and interesting. Gilmore enters with a tasteful counter-melody and, after some more buzzy comping from Ra, "Song No. 1" comes to an end. Very nice.

Much of the rest of the album appears to be taken from a long, continuous piece, but chopped up and re-arranged for release. Ra outlines a simple ascending bassline in waltz-time then pauses to make his declamations, the Arkestra periodically entering with pulsating space chords, ensemble freakouts, or out-jazz solos. Gilmore is joined by Marshall Allen and Danny Davis for a full-blown saxophone battle on "There Is Change in the Air" and Williams sounds a little like Sonny Sharrock with his gonzo, metallic attack. On "The Ridiculous 'I' and the Cosmos Me," Gilmore delivers one of his trademarked a cappella blowouts and James Jacson takes a positively ripping solo on the otherwise unwieldy bassoon. For the most part, Ra sticks to Rocksichording incongruous harmonies and skittering runs, except at the end where we get some spaceship synthesizer. But, most of the time, Sonny is preaching it, hot and heavy.

So, what is he on about? "There is a change in the air!" (Nixon has resigned!) "Do you not hear the heavy silence there?" Then he warns: "Some people are on the right road, but they're going in the wrong direction. They need to turn around. The arrow points to pointlessness." And it goes on from there with exhortations to "the Antique Blacks" ("they belong to me!"); a disquisition on "so-called equality;" the summoning of "dark spirit" Lucifer; and, of course, an invitation to join him in outer space. It might be interesting to transcribe the declamations and do some sort of exegesis, but I'm afraid I'm not the man for the job. And it is also tempting to dismiss this stuff as the rantings of a crank and accuse him of blatant charlatanism. But that would be unfair—and completely misses the point (whatever it is). Sun Ra is speaking in code, and I lack the esoteric knowledge required to decipher his true meaning—or call his bluff. As a white guy in the 21st century, I also suspect I am not the

intended audience for his message, an audience who might have taken false hope in Nixon's ignoble departure in the summer of 1974. Indeed, he makes it clear that while "there is a change in the air," it is not necessarily for the better.

Thankfully, all this heaviness is leavened by a bit of frivolity: "This Song Is Dedicated To Nature's God" is joyous and bouncy, a major-key singalong, with everyone chanting the title again and again over burbling percussion and herky-jerky Rocksichord. It's a fun little number, although the guitar is woefully out of tune and whoever is playing seems to be struggling with the irregularly repeating chord progression. The album concludes with a small-group arrangement of "Space Is the Place," with Jarvis whipping up a swinging groove on his reduced kit and Ebah doing his "soul-man" thing. June Tyson is regrettably absent, but it does sound like a female vocalist is scatting away in the background—who is it? One of the band members singing falsetto? I suppose it's possible. In any event, the record ends on a high note, with the band exclaiming, "Sun Ra and his Band from Outer Space have entertained you here!"

Art Yard adds a bonus track, "You Thought You Could Build A World Without Us," another long declamation with instrumental punctuation, but with Sonny playing synthesizer in "mad scientist" mode. Campbell and Trent list this ten-minute track separately, as it was unheard until broadcast on WKCR's Sun Ra festival in 1987, and they suggest it was material cut from the Space Is the Place movie, which was still unfinished in the summer of 1974 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 209). The Art Yard CD states it was recorded on August 17 and while the sound quality is reduced, it is almost certainly from the same session. The reverb-drenched electric guitar meshes well with squiggly synthesizer and Ra is at his most messianic: "If you refuse to recognize me, I refuse to recognize you!...I am The Magic Lie! Greater than your truth!" Meanwhile, the Arkestra titters in the background and spare horns and ominous percussion ebb and flow while Ra continuously demonstrates his mastery of the Minimoog, keeping things interesting and intense, even as he's sermonizing away at the microphone. It's an interesting track and fits in perfectly with the rest of the album.

Ultimately, *The Antique Blacks* is a difficult album for me to fully appreciate. I don't enjoy being preached at, even if it's Sun Ra up in the pulpit. At the same time, I cannot dismiss this stuff out of hand.

Ra's philosophy (such as it is) may be shrouded in hokum and show-biz and fail to cohere into a plausible cosmology, but it is interesting to note how well it served him. Herman "Sonny" Blount conjured up an elaborate persona, Sun Ra, and lived it—fully and completely—to the end of a long life, surrounded by a core of musicians who were as devoted to him as the followers of any guru. So it obviously worked—for him. The Antique Blacks is prime source material regarding Sun Ra's psyche but it is musically less than completely satisfying. That said, the eight-minute "Song No.1," is one of Sun Ra's most delightful "space grooves" ever and makes this essential for the truly obsessed fan. As usual with Art Yard, the sound quality and packaging are first rate, so if you want this, rest assured you get your money's worth (and some of that money goes to the surviving Arkestra). But I wouldn't recommend The Antique Blacks to novices.

092

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Arkestra:
At the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in Exile 1974:
It Is Forbidden (Alive!/Total Energy CD)
Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra:
Wake Up Angels (Live at the Ann Arbor Blues &
Jazz Festival 1972-73-74) (Art Yard)

The Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival had enjoyed increasing commercial success in its first three years, and promoter John Sinclair made sure to prominently feature Sun Ra's Arkestra ever since their triumphant appearances in 1972 and 1973. So, by all appearances, 1974 was looking to be more of the same—only better—with a lineup including such heavyweights as B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, and Cecil Taylor(!), along with the Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown, headlining the event. Ra's Impulse! albums had started hitting the stores earlier in the year, garnering favorable press. Moreover, there were plans for a sixteen-track recording and a film documentary of the festival; this was going to be a big opportunity for the band.

However, it was not to be. A mere six weeks before opening night, the Ann Arbor City Council denied Sinclair's Rainbow Multimedia organization the requisite permit, citing their failure to clean up the festival site in 1973. But there was more to it than that: political machinations were actively seeking to undermine his plans. Sinclair's Rainbow People's Party, itself an outgrowth of the notorious White Panthers, was splintering into competing factions and its influence (modest as it was) had precipitously declined in the municipal power struggle. "The Establishment" was fighting back against the hippies and, as a result, the 1974 Blues & Jazz Festival was simply not going to be allowed to happen—at least not in Ann Arbor. Instead, the festival location was moved to St. Clair College in Windsor, Ontario.

Not surprisingly, it was a bust—literally. Ticket sales were thin while crowds of would-be festival goers were turned back at the border—including Sinclair himself, who was detained while escorting the Arkestra through Canadian customs. Ultimately, he was deported on the basis of his 1969 marijuana conviction (he was also the subject of John Lennon's eponymous song, which really didn't help things). "This marked a major turning point in my life," according to Sinclair:

I went back to my room in the Shelby Hotel Friday afternoon and watched myself talk to a television news reporter who had covered the impromptu deportation proceedings. As I witnessed the farthest-out group of characters I had ever seen in America being allowed entry into Canada while I was turned back as "too far out," I was struck hard with the realization that my public persona as dope fiend, ex-convict and virulent revolutionary agitator had now cut me off from participating in the most important event in my career as a music promoter (Sinclair 2001).

Needless to say, the festival lost untold amounts of money, and the planned record and feature film never materialized when the master tapes were withheld by their recordists after payment was not forthcoming. Sadly, these tapes seem to have disappeared for good. Nevertheless, Sun Ra's sixty-four minute set on Friday, September 6, was preserved on a cassette tape recorded from the soundboard and was released on Sinclair's Alive!/Total Energy label as *It Is Forbidden* in 2001. Accustomed, perhaps, to their sub-underground status, Sonny and the band were not dissuaded by the small crowd or the tense backstage atmosphere and deliver a typically committed performance.

The opening improvisation is particularly intense, with pummeling percussion, pealing trumpets, skronky blasts of saxophone and Nepunian libflecto-and some crazed, psycho-delic guitar from Dale Williams, whose nastily distorted, wah-wah-infused tone brings to mind the sort of dark, metallic funk Miles Davis was brewing up with Pete Cosey during this period. Wild! After about thirteen minutes, the strutting baritone sax riffs of "Discipline 27" emerge from the chaos. But while bassist Reginald "Shoo-Be-Doo" Fields tries his best to hold down the odd-metered groove, Clifford Jarvis is his usual hyperactive self, overplaying the drums and nearly derailing the tune. Oh well; with no one quite able to navigate an effective solo, they quickly give way to one of Sun Ra's jaw-droppingly awesome "mad scientist" synthesizer and organ displays. A throbbing space chord yields more group improvisation (led by Hadi's trumpet) before Sonny signals "Love in Outer Space." and it's the usual groovy thing, but marred by a wonky, drum-heavy mix. Still, it's a pleasant romp. After a brief, spooky organ intro, the band launches into "The Shadow World" at maximum velocity, yet they

perfectly execute the tricky, interlocking melodies—even as the rhythm section suddenly drops out. Wow! Then Gilmore takes over with a fearsome tenor sax solo, accompanied by chattering electronics and bashing drums, followed by Hadi's high-wire acrobatics and a brief arco segment from Fields, all of which receives a round of polite applause from the intrepid crowd.

Ra abruptly changes gears, cueing up the chanting and carrying on of "Space Is the Place." By now, Jarvis is tremendously overexcited, just chomping at the bit, but Sonny keeps him on a short leash. As June Tyson exclaims "The Second Stop Is Jupiter!," all hell breaks loose, with one of the Space Ethnic Vocalists (either Judith Holton or Cheryl Banks) doing her terrifying, Yoko-styled shrieking. Yikes! Even so, Jarvis is denied his usual overlong drum solo as the heaving chords of "Discipline 27-II" set the stage for Ra's rhetorical question: "What Planet Is This?" Fortunately, the declamations last only a few minutes before he moves to acoustic piano for a lovely rendition of "Images," Fields and Jarvis locking into the jaunty, slightly old-fashioned rhythms and the Arkestra delivering a full-throated rendition of the tune. Excellent! Ebah finally gets an extended turn at the mic, his mellow, slightly smeared sound a nice contrast to Hadi's forthright virtuosity. Gilmore follows, picking up on Ebah's staggered phrasing and gradually builds up to a thrilling climax of impossibly fast runs, multiphonic glossolalia, and heart-stopping altissimo squealing. Yes, folks, it's another mind-blowingly incredible John Gilmore solo! Truly, what more (or less) can I say? Just stunning.

Then the Arkestra premieres a new composition, "It Is Forbidden," possibly written in honor of the doomed festival (and likely never performed again, that is until its posthumous resurrection in 1996). As Ra pounds out a repetitive diatonic chord sequence, the band gleefully sings their heads off: "It is forbidden, it's strictly forbidden to touch on the tree of the knowledge of the good and evil!" It's tempting to hear this as a gentle rebuke to Sinclair and his muddle-headed politics, but I could just be projecting. "Watusi" follows and Jarvis is finally given his opportunity to wail, though tempered by myriad other percussionists and the spectacle of dancers. And again, Sonny keeps things short, calling for the reprise of the head after only a few minutes. "Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space" happily concludes the set with a quick chant and some outer spaceship synthesizer noise. What few people who were able to attend

the ill-fated festival certainly sound appreciative; they erupt into loud cheering and clapping after it is all over. Or perhaps they were just excited about James Brown.

This was the last Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival for twenty years, until the City Council finally relented, and the festival was reborn in 1992—and without Sinclair's involvement. With his organization in tatters at the end of 1974, Sinclair abandoned political activism and artist management for "less grueling pursuits," such as journalism, poetry, and grant writing (Sinclair 2001). Undoubtedly, Sonny lamented the loss of a rare high-profile performance opportunity here in North America, but, in the end, it was just another gig. Two nights later, the Arkestra appeared at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago on September 8, 1974, playing a very different sort of set.

It Is Forbidden is perhaps the most musically satisfying of the three CDs released on Sinclair's Alive/Total Energy label and, seeing as they are all now out of print, it is the one most worth seeking out, in my opinion. [Editor's note: All three performances were reissued as a 2-CD set by Art Yard in 2011, entitled Wake Up Angels: Live At The Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival 1972-73-74.] The sound quality is decent and the performance, while somewhat truncated, is mostly first-rate. Heck, "Images" alone makes this one worth the cost of admission! But it should be noted that all three feature extensive (if self-congratulatory) liner notes from Sinclair and wonderful photographs of the concerts by his wife, Leni; so, all are well worth having as historical documents. But, this is the one I'm more likely to pull off the shelf. My only quibble is their continued failure to index any of the titles on the disc, requiring an hour-long commitment from the listener. Well, maybe that's the way it should be heard: with commitment, with Ra-like discipline, as it happened in real time. Highly recommended.

093

Sun Ra and His Arkestra: Jazz Showcase, Chicago, IL, September 8, 1974 (AUD CDR)

The Arkestra was apparently quite active in the fall of 1974, including a two-week stand at the "new" Five Spot in New York. Four-hour sets were the norm and, according to witnesses, "the band books carried by the musicians were thick as two phone books; except for a few numbers like 'Watusi,' many otherwise unknown compositions were played, along with some 1950s pieces, and few were repeated" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 215). Sadly, there are no known tapes from this legendary engagement. However, we do have this sixty-minute audience recording from Chicago's Jazz Showcase on September 8, which hints at the Arkestra's expanding repertoire during this period. The (mono) sound quality is typically awful—but it is by no means the worst sounding tape we've had to suffer through during this project. Despite the obvious sonic flaws, it's a terrific performance well worth hearing.

"Images" dates back to 1958 and Sun Ra's first Saturn LP, Jazz In Silhouette, and is here given an extended reading, including a dramatic piano intro which moves from ominous rumblings to skittering dissonances before settling into the slightly old-fashioned swing rhythms and chord changes of the piece itself. The Arkestra enters with the subtly off-center big-band arrangement, the saxes and trumpets filled out with flutes and piccolo. Kwame Hadi solos first, but John Gilmore steals the show with a series of increasingly expressionistic choruses, demonstrating his mastery of both preand post-bop tenor stylings. Just gorgeous. Then Ra takes a weirdly "inside-out" solo before the band returns with the oblong coda.

"Somewhere Else" is similarly structured, with another lengthy piano introduction before the band comes out and struts its stuff. Besides Akh Tal Ebah and Hadi, a mysterious third trumpet player can be heard. Chicagoan Phil Cohran seems a likely candidate, but Prof. Campbell says it's not him. There's also a bassist present—his big tone and fleet soloing almost brings to mind the inimitable Ronnie Boykins, but it's obviously someone else, most likely Reginald

"Shoo-be-Doo" Fields, who played bass at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in Exile two night earlier, documented on *It Is Forbidden*. At almost twenty minutes, just about everyone gets a chance in the spotlight on this medium groover, including all three trumpeters, Marshall Allen and Danny Davis on alto sax, Gilmore on tenor, our unidentified bassist (who earns a nice ovation), and, of course, Ra himself.

"Discipline 27" is given a focused reading—with some jazzy electric guitar from Dale Williams audible. Ebah acquits himself admirably, but again, Gilmore upstages him with another incredibly inventive and precisely articulated tenor outing. Ra moves to organ for "Outer Spaceways Incorporated," almost drowning out June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices with its electronic roar. But he eventually drops back, and the sound clears up considerably. Of course, it's the usual thing, if a little restrained—until Allen (or is it Davis? I have a hard time telling them apart sometimes) steps up with a blistering solo on alto sax before the reprise. Ra's groaning organ chords also threaten to overwhelm the delicate "Lights on a Satellite," mostly obscuring the intricate counterpoint of flutes, trumpets, and saxophones. Regardless, you can tell the Arkestra is tight and well-rehearsed: it's a note-perfect performance, short and to the point; beautiful, in spite of the dreadful sound quality.

Sonny introduces "Barbizon" as an original piece he wrote "in France, near Fontainebleau, an artists' colony" and it's another brief but elaborately orchestrated, through-composed work, devoid of any opportunity for improvisation. The dirgey, sweet'n'sour harmonies and tense voicings remind me of the early "Discipline" numbers and, like those works, "Barbizon" was only sporadically performed. That seems a shame, as it is another fascinating composition demonstrating Ra's mastery of unusual forms and creative arrangement. Then again, the audience doesn't quite know what to make of it. Is this "jazz?" No—it's something else altogether.

Ra again steps up to the microphone to introduce "The Shadow World," offering a clue to its meaning:

The next song is entitled, "Shadow World." To me, the Earth is a place of shadows and dreams and not the reality of the cosmos. This "shadow world" concerns the potential of humanity and not the reality, which I have to reject.

He hammers out the organ ostinato at a fast clip and the horns rip through the complexly hocketed melodies with fearsome intensity. Hadi solos over boiling percussion but quickly drops out. Then Gilmore takes over and—well, yes, it's another a cappella blowout, but a particularly inspired one. Ra attempts to steer him back to the head, but Gilmore will have nothing of it. He continues to blow his brains out, ranging across the entire register of the horn (and beyond), capping it off with an astonishing display of multiphonic pyrotechnics. Wow! Gilmore is on fire! This elicits several outbursts of whooping and hollering and stunned applause when he finally finishes. Not even five minutes long, this is probably one of the shortest performances of "The Shadow World" ever, but boy is it ever potent! "Space Is the Place" follows, but, unfortunately, the tape cuts off after only a minute and a half. Oh well.

Aside from Gilmore's outstanding soloing (will he ever get the credit he deserves?), what's interesting about this set is how tightly controlled it is. Foregoing the usual long, open improvisations, freewheeling medleys, and cosmic pageantry, the Arkestra is on a fairly short leash. Sonny's straight-faced spoken intros are also highly unusual. Whether it was the venue's posh ambience or simply a measure of Sun Ra's developing professionalism, these discrete performances are taut, lean, and immediately appealing. Of course, it's quite possible the rest of the set was completely off the hook. But it is clear Sun Ra was continuing to refine his vision and, next time, we'll listen in on a lengthy rehearsal session from later in the year, which provides some insight into his peculiarly effective working methods.



094

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Sub Underground (Saturn) Sun Ra and His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Cosmo Earth Fantasy: Sub Underground Series Vol. 1-2 (Art Yard CD)

The appropriately titled *Sub Underground* (also known as *Cosmo-Earth Fantasy* or *Temple U.*) is another super-rare artifact. Originally released in late 1974, Prof. Campbell posits side A was recorded at Variety Recording Studio in New York City sometime in September while side B was recorded live at Temple University in Philadelphia, possibly on September 20 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 214-215). Yet, as usual with Sun Ra, there is much confusion and uncertainty regarding the details of this recording and, after careful listening, I'm not sure I agree with our discographer in all respects. Despite (or perhaps because of) its difficulties, *Sub Underground* is a fascinating record.

The Art Yard 2012 reissue, Cosmo Earth Fantasy: Sub Underground Series Vols. 1 & 2, gathers together various tracks that were scattered across a couple of different Saturn LPs, including Sub Underground and What's New? (and some versions of The Invisible Shield). None of this material (recorded from 1962-1975) has ever been officially released on CD, making this Art Yard edition a most welcome release. Hooray!

Side A of Sub Underground is taken up with "Cosmo-Earth Fantasy," an epic, twenty-two minute improvisation, obviously recorded in the studio. It begins with the Arkestra scrubbing, scraping, and plucking a variety of zithers, harps, guitars, and other "Strange Strings" while Ra strums the interior of a piano. I love it! Enervated bass octaves come and go. Is this electric bass? (Prof. Campbell thinks so.) Or is it Ra on some sort of keyboard? Maybe—it's hard to tell. Detailed liner notes by Paul Griffiths on the CD attempt to clear up some of the considerable discographical confusion surrounding this music. The original reel-to-reel tape of "Cosmo Earth Fantasy" was recovered in 2011, and while information on the label is "scant," Griffiths points out that two handwritten words appear: "strings bandura." Indeed, the opening portion of the track has a distinct "Strange Strings" sound, making the previously assumed

date of 1974 highly unlikely. Given that most of the exotic stringed instruments were destroyed in an automobile accident in 1969 and the "Space Harp" (bandura) was given away in 1971, Griffiths posits "Cosmo Earth Fantasy" was "likely...recorded in 1967 or possibly early 1968, before the Arkestra moved to Philadelphia" (Griffiths 2012). I agree.

Anyway, the spacey exotica goes on for about seven minutes before Ra fingers an ominous chord sequence on clavinet, signaling Marshall Allen to pick up the oboe and echo Ra's insistently repeated figures. Sonny continues to hold down a pedal point and outline upper-register harmonies while Allen keenly elaborates on the simple theme. *Just lovely*. Then the oboe drops out and there's more "bass," with what sounds like a melodica wheezing around the corner. At the half-way mark, a high-pitched marimba (Ra?) starts clattering away, Chinese-style, eventually joined by Allen on flute. Then the texture starts to thicken (possibly through the use of overdubbing) as multiple flutes, "bass," clavinet, and percussion build up a spiky, Messiaenic din. Wild! After some slow, held chords, the piece comes to a definite, satisfying conclusion. Prof. Campbell lists additional instrumentalists, including John Gilmore on tenor sax, Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet and (possibly) Dale Williams on guitar, but I just don't hear them on this track. Griffiths does not list these instruments. Regardless, "Cosmo-Earth Fantasy" is a classic.

Sadly, the tapes from the Temple University concert on September 20, 1974 are apparently still missing, so "Love is for Always" and "The Song of Drums" (and, I believe, the rest of the CD) are taken from clean LP pressings and digitally restored. Side B of Sub Underground begins with "Love Is For Always," another impossibly romantic piano ballad featuring Gilmore's creamy and delicious tenor saxophone—yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo! This beautiful Ra composition was, apparently, only performed one time. What a shame! The distant and boomy drums indicate it was indeed recorded live, although, curiously, any applause has been deftly edited from the end of the track. "The Song of The Drums" shares the same reverberant acoustic, and the eponymous drums are almost impossible to hear. Eddie Thomas vocalizes in an absurdly eccentric patois, later joined by another male vocalist (possibly Akh Tal Ebah—but it doesn't really sound like him) while Ra alternates between

bright, major-key comping and ominous Morse code messaging on Rocksichord. It's sort of interesting but ends inconclusively.

Finally, the album concludes with "The World Of Africa," which sounds to me like it was recorded in the studio (possibly at the same session as "Cosmo-Earth Fantasy"), with its comparatively clear and dry ambience (but who knows?). Griffiths points out that it is "clearly not from the same concert...and takes us back to 1968 when vocalist June Tyson first joined the band." Again, I think he is correct. June Tyson and Cheryl Banks wordlessly intone a repeating melody over a two-chord Clavinet vamp and percussion, and while the hypnotic 6/8 groove is suitably enchanting, it fades out after only a few minutes, breaking the spell too soon. Oh well.

Of course, the What's New? material on the CD is from the magical Choreographer's Workshop period, ca. 1962—the stuff that made me start Sun Ra Sunday to begin with—so it's wonderful to have this stuff in such good quality on an "official" release. [Editor's note: See separate entry, above.] Finally, the concluding "Space Is the Place>We Roam the Cosmos" remains a mystery, although the liner notes suggest a possible recording date of May 23, 1975, at an unknown venue. It's another shouty, distorted "cosmo drama," so who really cares where it's from? Ha ha—just kidding (sort of).

Sub Underground is a weird and wonderful record. Certainly, "Cosmo Earth Fantasy" is one of the great long-form improvs, notable for its unusual instrumentation, and "Love Is For Always" is also beautiful and unique. While the other tracks are perhaps less essential, they are interesting vocal experiments well worth hearing.



095

Dance Of The Living Image: Lost Reel Collection Vol. 4 (Transparency CD)

Sun Ra:

In October 1974, the Arkestra traveled to California for an extended sojourn, playing gigs at the Keystone Korner and Off Plaza in San Francisco and the One World Family Center in Berkeley, where they moved into a rented house on Baker Street. They stayed on the West Coast until the end of the year, performing in venues large and small, including an impromptu small group appearance at the San Jose State University Student Union on December 9, at the cavernous Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium on December 11, and a New Year's Eve show at the Afro-American Historical Society in San Francisco. Of these known performances, only the Santa Cruz concert is documented (in a typically grungy-sounding audience recording), although Peter Hinds asserts that a tape exists of the New Year's gig (Campbell and Trent 2000, 215-217). However, in 2009 the Transparency label unearthed a hundred-minute rehearsal tape purportedly recorded in San Francisco in December, 1974 and released it as Dance Of The Living Image, volume 4 of The Lost Reel Collection. I say "purportedly" because, as usual with Transparency, the documentation is spotty (if not outright wrong) but I guess we have to take some things at face value while trying to correct errors where we can. That's what I'm here for. Being a rehearsal, it's not a completely satisfying musical experience, but it gives some insight into Ra's working methods and reveals a surprisingly bawdy sense of humor. It also corroborates the musicians' accounts of rigorous rehearsals of material that was never actually played in concert.

The first disc opens with two takes of "Dance Of The Living Image," the first a mere fragment and the second (also incomplete) misidentified as an "unknown title." Originally recorded in early 1970 and released on the classic album Night Of The Purple Moon, this tune was apparently never performed live. That's too bad, as it's a groovy modal number driven by Ra's reedy Rocksichord. But the deceptively simple construction is actually a lot harder to play than it would seem. On the first track, Ra demonstrates the vamp and

appropriate scales as the band sets up in the background. But then on the second take, the arrangement keeps breaking down and you can hear Sonny stopping to instruct the band on the tricky ostinato. It is probably newcomer (and Bay Area resident) Damon Choice on vibes, and he seems to have difficulty getting the hang of it. In fact, the band never really comes together, and they eventually give it up. Too bad. The next track is an unknown title (misidentified on the disc as "Sometimes I'm Happy"), possibly a number in the "Discipline" series. The background riffing is similar to "Discipline 27," but embellished with additional sax and trumpet lines and some jazzy electric guitar from Dave Williams. Another mystery.

Track four (mistitled "Astro Nation") is actually "Sometimes I'm Happy," a hoary old standard originally recorded by Ra in 1962 or 1963 and released on The Invisible Shield, which, incidentally, had just come out on the newly rejuvenated Saturn label. While it was performed at the Red Garter in 1970 (and perhaps elsewhere), the song didn't become a fixture of the Arkestra's live sets until the 1980s. And this is a particularly weird take on this ridiculous piece of schmaltz: the horns heave and sigh while Williams hits a dissonant, wah-wah'd clank on the one...Then Ra gets right up to the microphone and mumbles/croons the song in an unexpectedly woozy, almost drunken manner while the band takes it further and further out behind him. Choice runs away on the vibes, Williams turns up the volume and reverb, the horns' swaying structure on the verge of collapse. Whoah! "Astro Nation" (misidentified as an "unknown title") is another vocal number, an odd-metered space chant precariously set against a bumping rhumba. Despite its seeming simplicity, it requires several minutes of unsteady repetition before the band starts to gel. Despite this inauspicious beginning, the song quickly became a live staple, at least through the end of the 1970s.

Disc one concludes with two tracks wherein two (or three?) previously unknown titles are heard for the first and only time. This twenty-minute sequence is really quite fascinating. Track six shows the band sight-reading a chart, Danny Ray Thompson honking out a slowly repeating bari-sax note, accompanied by off-centered guitar arpeggios. Meanwhile, the horns play a twisty, asymmetrical melody. The sparse, lurching drumming (Jarvis?) makes the band sound twitchy and unbalanced, though the trumpets (Hadi and Ebah) sound confident on the fanfare-like bridge. But just as it seems

they're building up a head of steam, Sonny calls a halt (though Williams and Jarvis continue to play around with their parts). There's a discussion in the background about what tune they just played, and it sounds like Ra calls it "Opus No." Hmm. "Let's play the San Francisco tune," he says. OK. Track seven (not even listed on the disc!) picks up with the band again reading through a complicated chart. Ra counts aloud in five and stops the band repeatedly to make corrections. The piece sounds something like the previous track, only sped up and with more saxophones, but it's hard to tell what exactly is going on. After about five minutes, the tape cuts off and picks up on some noodling and talking—until Danny Ray Thompson starts in on a snaky bari-sax riff and the band falls in behind him with what sounds like an already well-rehearsed arrangement. The composition has been identified as "Sun Procession," which would not appear officially until 1993, when it showed up on Pleiades (recorded live in 1990). It's one of those regal, Pharaonic themes, richly orchestrated for saxophones, flutes, and trumpets, supplemented with Ra's tinkling electronic keyboard—only Williams's Superfly guitar antics seem out of place. Interestingly, nobody solos (except for maybe Ra, who never lets up), yet the composition continues to subtly evolve across its ten-minute length before coming to a precise end. Wonderful!

Most of disc two is taken up with "Hard Hearted Hannah," a Tin Pan Alley hit from 1924, revived here by the Arkestra for (apparently) the first and only time. Actually, it's more of a jam, led by Ra from the Rocksichord, calling out the chord changes and sometimes providing some (inaudible) instructions. Unfortunately, the twenty-two minute instrumental version never really goes anywhere and Jarvis's jittery drumming fails to provide a satisfactory groove (he sounds bored, frankly). Another attempt is made, only this time with vocals, but it's impossible to hear. Then the tape cuts and Ra has now enlisted the entire Arkestra into singing the full lyrics about "the vamp from Savannah, G.A."—and he gets a big kick out of it (you can hear him cracking up in the background). Sonny comps away while Choice does a Lionel Hampton thing on the vibes. It's not really happening, but you can tell they're having fun. The band can hardly believe it when Ra suggests they play it at the gig! (I don't think they ever did.) The tape cuts in again on more shenanigans: riotous laughter and a song about...farting! "When you eat, don't eat too fast or you'll make music with your ass—passin' gas!" Well, it's good to know it wasn't always super-serious Astrometaphysics 24/7 with Ra. *Hilarious!*

Continuing the old-timey, pre-War vibe, Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady" follows. During this period, Ra was trying to integrate historical material into the Arkestra's repertoire, but it's unclear whether this particular tune had entered into the set at this point. The band sounds like they're familiar with the arrangement, but Sonny periodically stops to lecture them on the finer points of the rhythmic feel required. Hadi takes an exquisite solo, punctuated with daring, high-register squeals, followed by Gilmore, who is, unfortunately, way off-mic; nevertheless, it is typically brilliant. Finally, the rehearsal concludes with something that is definitely not "Watusi," despite what the liner notes say. Another unknown composition, the Arkestra struggles with the intricately interlocking melodies. "Are you playing the two or the one?" Ra asks. After some indecipherable discussion, the band tentatively starts again. The effect is hypnotic but the band sounds completely unsure of itself. Then Gilmore and Davis trade licks while Allen plays a longtoned counter-melody on flute, offering further possibilities—but, sadly, the tape cuts off. Oh well—there goes another lost Sun Ra composition.

Like others in the series, Volume 4 of the Lost Reel Collection is for hardcore Sun Ra fanatics only. Being a rehearsal, nothing here really coheres musically (with the exception of the "hidden" track seven and the absurdly amusing "Passin' Gas"). However, all the previously unknown titles are interesting in their own right, even if incomplete or badly played. Well, for me, the whole thing is essential listening—if only to peek behind the veil, to hear the master at work. Good stuff.

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Civic Center, Santa Cruz, CA, December 11, 1974 (AUD CDR)

Of all the gigs the Arkestra played on the west coast at the end of 1974, only this set from the Civic Center in Santa Cruz, California from December 11 was documented (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 215-217). Surprisingly, the 100-minute audience tape was recorded in stereo—but the sound quality is pretty horrific: boomy, distorted, and indistinct (not surprising given the cavernous venue). Nevertheless, it's a fine performance and a little patience on the listener's part is periodically rewarded with some great music.

The tape cuts in on the opening improvisation, free-jazz skronk featuring a snippet of Marshall Allen's oboe, Kwame Hadi's highwire trumpet act, and some pscyho-delic guitar from Dave Williams. The Arkestra is on fire! "Discipline 27," "Enlightenment," and "Love in Outer Space" are the usual thing and well-played but the fifteen-minute "Shadow World" is something special, indeed. After a near-perfect run through of the ridiculously complicated head, John Gilmore delivers one of his typically amazing, high-energy solos, inspiring excellent contributions from Danny Ray Thompson on libflecto, Hadi on trumpet, Williams on wah-wah guitar, and Allen on alto sax. It's an epic tour de force guided by Ra's scumbling keyboards; after a series of ever-greater climaxes, Ra signals the reprise to end, leaving the audience clearly stunned. Wow! Despite the poor sound, this version of "The Shadow World" is well worth hearing.

The set continues with "Theme Of The Stargazers" and "Calling Planet Earth," with some outrageous synthesizer and organ work from Ra eventually giving way to "Space Is the Place," in a full horn arrangement. "Images" makes another welcome appearance, but the tape cuts in and out and the levels go up and down, making it impossible to tell what's really going on. Yet about halfway through, the band has settled into a sultry groove, the audience clapping along, when all of a sudden, Gilmore comes in with a rip-snorting, gut-bucket, blues-drenched solo. He's blowing his

lungs out, "walking the bar"—but also spinning off complex chromatic runs punctuated with keening, multiphonic wails, chasing the rhythm section in spiraling circles—on and on, coming back again and again to a three-note flourish and ending with a bang. Whew! Yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo! And again, while the sound quality is dreadful, this performance needs to be heard to be believed.

As usual, "Discipline 27-II" devolves into a series of space chants, including "Life Is Splendid" and "Destination Unknown," with June Tyson and Akh Tal Ebah taking the lead but, after a swelling space chord, "Astro Nation" follows in its first known performance. It's come a long way from the rehearsal tape we previously heard, yet while the rhythm section is more solid, only Sonny seems able to recite the off-meter syllables on top of the up-and-down disco beat. (It would take a while for the band to get this odd little tune together.) Soon, Hadi pierces the din, and the saxophones begin to take it out and things really start to get interesting—but as Sonny tries to bring the vocals back around, it falls apart and just sort of dissolves. Then a super-intense improvisation rises up over Ra's droning organ, with loud, distorted guitar, pealing trumpets and squalling saxophones, but, sadly, the tape fades out after only a couple of minutes. *Argh!*

"We Travel The Spaceways" is given an relaxed reading, evolving into a lovely doo-wop-style medley, incorporating elements of "Journey To Saturn" and "Rocket Number 9," sung in luscious harmonies and anchored by Ebah's (?) rich baritone. Just lovely! After a quick statement of "Planet Earth," "Watusi" follows, with the flutes weirdly dominant. Fortunately, Clifford Jarvis's over-excited drumming is countered by some weird, metallic counter-rhythms, adding interest to the usual percussion-fest, but the sound quality is particularly grim at this point, overloaded and distorted. Things quiet down for "Friendly Galaxy No. 2," although the mix is still wonky. Flutes and bass clarinet play the serpentine melody while the bleating trumpet figure is passed around the rest of the band and, as the flutes begin to improvise, an eerie calm is established then Ra steps up to recite "I, Pharoah," with June Tyson and others emphasizing each declamation. Sonny's on a roll: "I could have enjoyed myself on this planet" he shouts, "if the people had been alive!" The band joins in on some swing/rap silliness, repeating the refrain accompanied by the Yoko-esque shrieking from one of the Ethnic Space Vocalists—is this impromptu or pre-conceived? It's hard to tell. The craziness subsides, replaced by the tranquility of "Pleiades," pretty flutes and rubato percussion, with Damon Choice's glistening vibraphone faintly audible in the background. Very nice—but Ra continues with the tirade: "The universe spoke to me!" Etc. Finally, the set concludes with "Face The Music," taken at a slow-ish tempo as the Arkestra sings, chants, and saunters off the stage.

I was ready to write this one off as yet another dismal sounding bootleg, but I kept listening—and my ears became more and more used to the sound. And each time through, I found interesting little nuggets, diamonds buried in a dung-pile of noise. So I kept listening...well, this is how it seems to go. Is it worth it? I suppose so; there is some extraordinary music here (Gilmore is in particularly good form), even if it's a struggle to discern. It may not be the worst-sounding bootleg out there—like I said, my ears got used to it—but this one is strictly for hardcore fans only. Frankly, I'm looking forward to moving on to 1975...



Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Smiling Dog Saloon, Cleveland, OH, January 30, 1975 (FM CDR) Sun Ra: Live in Cleveland (Leo)

A month later, the Arkestra found itself far removed from the mild and mellow California climate, shivering in the brutal cold of a midwestern winter. A gig at the Smiling Dog Saloon in Cleveland, OH on January 30, 1975 was broadcast by WMMS-FM and preserved on this sixty-minute recording, but the band sounds a bit ragged, exhausted, perhaps, by the long-distance travel and inclement weather. Sadly, they never quite seem to get warmed up. But somewhere along the way, Sonny has picked up a hotshot bass-player, whose identity is unknown. [Editor's note: Trent lists the bass player as probably Dale Williams (Geerken and Trent 2015, 199).] Whoever it is, he provides an unusually funky bottom-end to the proceedings. The Arkestra had to make do without a bassist at many shows during this period (particularly after the final departure of the inimitable Ronnie Boykins in mid-1974), making the rhythm section sound thin and incomplete, so the presence of the bass is always a welcome addition during this period (even if it isn't the best show ever). Audio quality is pretty good (especially compared to other "bootlegs" we've been listening to recently), suffering more from careless microphone placement and poor balance than subsequent generational loss (my copy indicates the original broadcast was recorded to reel-to-reel, with only one cassette generation prior to being converted to digital). For better or worse, our anonymous bassist is certainly mixed front and center throughout!

After an introduction from the resident DJ, Ra fingers a dissonant organ chord before launching into "Astro Nation." Loud electric bass anchors the groove and though he tends to overplay, he never loses the beat. The whole band joins in on the weirdly assymetrical chant, clapping and singing as they traipse around the nightclub with vocalist/dancer Eddie Thomas adding some soulful yelps and moans. But it goes on for far too long without anything happening, ending with a desultory space chord. I'm sure it was a visual spectacle if nothing else. Sonny teases "Love in Outer Space"

before changing his mind and queuing up "Enlightenment" in a new, rhythmically clipped vocal arrangement, ending a cappella. Sort of interesting, but nothing special. Then "Love in Outer Space" follows, propelled by Ra's BBQ organ comping. Curiously, the theme is never played, and after a few minutes, Ra drops out completely, leaving spacey African percussion and handclaps. Eventually, the organ vamp returns, accompanied by some bleating horns, but it ends inconclusively.

"Theme of the Stargazers" and "The Satellites Are Spinning" are presented as a brisk medley and is nicely sung by the band—but the audience doesn't quite know what to make of it. When it ends, there's total silence, not even a smattering of applause! Undeterred, Sonny brings up the pulsing drone of "Friendly Galaxy No. 2," joined by the electric bass and, later, by pealing trumpets. The mellifluous flutes are woefully off-mic but a ringing vibraphone is crystal clear (presumably Damon Choice). But then Sonny steps up to pontificate, riffing on "I Am The Brother The Wind" and "I, Pharaoh." Here we go again! The unbalanced recording combined with an uncharacteristically subdued performance is disappointing: rather than hypnotic, it is merely boring. Oh well. Next up is a long keyboard solo which also seems to be less than totally inspired. It's the usual spaceship synthesizer noises and dissonant organ clusters, and the fact that the tape repeatedly fades up and down (and cuts in and out) doesn't really help matters very much. However, after about seven minutes, Sonny speeds up the cheesy "rhythm machine" on his organ and plays along briefly, a hint of Disco 3000 to come!

Finally, we get a very strange rendition of Duke Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady." Opening with a skronky free-improv (led by Kwame Hadi's trumpet), Ra quickly moves to (distant-sounding) acoustic piano for a rhapsodic intro, sprinkling thunderous pounding with pretty, impressionistic harmonies. Then he goes into the slightly-old fashioned rhythms of the tune, taken at a lugubrious tempo and accompanied by walking (well, plodding) bass. The Arkestra comes in, sounding slightly shaky on the arrangement led by John Gilmore's tenor saxophone, whose breathy tone evokes Ben Webster in his prime. Akh Tal Ebah takes a nice, smeary solo on trumpet accompanied by riffing saxophones before giving way to Gilmore. Unfortunately, this is not one of Gilmore's better efforts, with halting, incoherent phrasing and wobbly intonation. Well, it

just goes to show the guy was not superhuman. But then Sonny and Thomas start mumbling and crooning the rarely-heard lyrics about the seemingly "sophisticated lady" who cries alone at home. But their mocking attitude is somewhat shocking as they cruelly taunt: "boo-hoo, boo-hoo for you!" After fourteen tedious minutes, the arrangement collapses into a clumsy ritardando and, mercifully, sputters to an end. Huh. Revivals of big-band classics were to become a regular feature of Arkestra concerts from here on out, but there was never another performance of "Sophisticated Lady" quite like this—and that's a good thing.

Interestingly, the circulating CDR contains two additional tracks not listed in the discography, but they are most certainly from another (unknown) performance: the ambience is completely different, in front of a large audience, possibly outdoors. Also, there's considerable hiss and distortion—and the presence of trombones on the bandstand. Probably recorded in the mid-1970s sometime, I have no idea where this is from. Anyone know? "Calling Planet Earth" features some intense group improvisation, but the recording is so overloaded, it's hard to hear what's going on, and "Space Is the Place" is the typical chanting, dancing, and carrying on that rarely translates well to tape. Whatever the provenance, this ten-minute fragment is hardly worth mentioning, but there it is. These "mystery tracks" are not really much of a bonus.

So the Smiling Dog Saloon gig was an off night for the Arkestra; too bad, since it's a decent-sounding recording for the period. Hardcore fanatics and completists will want this but everyone else would be better off looking elsewhere for that Sun Ra magic.



Sun Ra:

What's New (side B) (Saturn)

Sun Ra and His Astro Infinity Arkestra:

Cosmo Earth Fantasy: Sub Underground Series Vol. 1-2

(Art Yard CD)

098

Sun Ra Arkestra:

"I'm Gonna Unmask the Batman" Live, 1974 or 1975

(CDR)

Sun Ra:

"Love in Outer Space" / "Mayan Temple" (Saturn)

Sun Ra:

The Singles (Evidence CD)

Sun Ra:

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991 (Strut/Art Yard)

Although the Arkestra was fairly active in 1975, with several known performances up and down the East Coast and extended sojourns to the Midwest, it is one of the most sparsely documented years in the discography (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 217-221). The Impulse! deal had pretty much run its course, with all the albums dumped into the cut-out bins and summarily deleted—so I suppose there was little incentive to make any more records during this period. Sadly, there are also very few "bootlegs" available to fill in the gaps.

Sun Ra: What's New (side B)

Nevertheless, a live concert (possibly recorded on May 23) yielded a ten-minute track which was (briefly) issued as side B of What's New, a hodgepodge record with a tortured discographical history. According to Prof. Campbell, matrix numbers and label texts vary and, in any event, most copies replace the original side B with side A of The Invisible Shield. Confusing? Yes. Well, don't worry about it. The track fades up on the end of "Space Is the Place" and segues immediately into a hectoring Cosmo Drama (sometimes titled, "We Roam the Cosmos"). There are some amusing raps about Sun Ra bounding across the universe "using the planets as stepping stones," but the sound quality is extremely noisy and distorted, rendering it virtually unlistenable. Since there's really not a whole lot going on musically, I see no real reason to go out of your way to locate this impossibly rare pressing (an amateur "needle-drop" can be found on CDR,

if you're really interested). [Editor's note: This track ended up being released on the Art Yard CD Cosmo Earth Fantasy, covered above in the entry for Sub Underground.]

Sun Ra Arkestra: "I'm Gonna Unmask the Batman"

More intriguing are a bunch of unreleased Saturn singles, including "Things Ain't Going To Be Like They Used To Be," "Make Another Mistake," and a seven-minute version of "I'm Gonna Unmask the Batman." None of these tracks were included on the Evidence CD set, but "Batman" circulates amongst collectors, albeit in the lossy MP3 format. Recorded live (possibly at the same concert as "We Roam The Cosmos"), it also suffers from grossly distorted sound as Ahk Tal Ebah (?) sings, shouts and screams into the microphone while the horns riff in the background. John Gilmore takes a loopy solo on tenor saxophone followed by-could it be? Walter Miller on trumpet! Maybe Prof. Campbell is wrong about Kwame Hadi's presence on this, since the vocalist calls Miller out by name. It certainly sounds like him! Regardless, the super-funky drumming (by someone named "Freddie") is the highlight of the track and he takes a killer drum break, ripe for the hip-hopper's sampler. Ra's fascination with "The Caped Crusader" is somewhat inexplicable—maybe it was the campy costume—but this odd little ditty (written by Lacy Gibson and Alton Abraham) would be performed fairly regularly during the 1980s.

Sun Ra: "Love in Outer Space" / "Mayan Temple"

Finally, a typically quirky seven-inch single was released at the end of the year. The A-side features newly overdubbed vocals on the 1970 recording of "Love in Outer Space" (found on Night Of The Purple Moon). David Henderson croons the surprisingly sentimental lyrics about "love everlasting...love for everybody...love for everything"—and amazingly enough, it works! This is, of course, a classic track from one of the all-time great Ra albums, and the vocals manage to add a touching sweetness that is truly unique. The flipside, "Mayan Temple," was probably recorded June 27, 1975 at Variety Recording Studios in New York and it's an early version of what would later become known as "The Mayan Temples." Ra plays the

loping, minor-mode bass line on Minimoog, while scattering tinkly notes on the Rocksichord; meanwhile, Marshall Allen blows wildly keening oboe. What it lacks in melody and harmony is more than compensated for in spacey atmosphere, making for a subtly evocative record. Unfortunately, it fades out much too soon. Still, it's the perfect single and belongs in every hipster's jukebox.

Sun Ra and His Arkestra: The "New" Five Spot, New York, NY, June 11, 1975 (AUD CDR)

Over the past couple of years, Sun Ra had introduced a few swing era jazz standards into the Arkestra's live sets but, for the most part, they were loosely arranged and casually executed. By 1975, this repertoire would suddenly become an integral part of every live performance, with "mini-sets" of historical big-band numbers, expertly re-orchestrated and performed with astounding authenticity. Szwed suggests that this was a shrewd business maneuver as much as anything: "It was a move both oppositional and prescient: he had seen the limits of the avant-garde, and sensing a shift beginning in American sensibilities, he was unwilling to give up the large audiences he had drawn" (Szwed 1997, 338).

Indeed, the free jazz scene had virtually disintegrated, at least in the United States. While it might have seemed like a good idea for Impulse! to sign Sun Ra to a multi-album deal back in 1972, by 1975 it was a bust and the records were deleted and sold off as "cut-outs," thereby depriving Ra of any royalties otherwise due him. Accordingly, Ra's revival of the standard jazz repertoire might seem to anticipate the rise of 1980s conservatism and the shallow, "well-dressed jazz" of Wynton Marsalis and his ilk. But Sun Ra was deeply affected by the recent deaths of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, and it must be remembered he was also of that era. Ra was by now in his sixties, much older than most of the members of the Arkestra and his growing audience of college students and urban hipsters. Moreover, I'm not sure this old-timey music had much commercial appeal at the time—it certainly took me a while to come around to liking it, much preferring the wild spacey stuff. Instead, I believe Sun Ra's intention was mostly pedagogical, to teach his musicians and audience about this beautiful, highly disciplined music that was in danger of disappearing into the past (or coopted and smoothed over for contemporary, postmodern tastes).

This monophonic audience recording from the "New" Five Spot in New York City on June 11, 1975 opens with a fully-developed "mini-set" of big-band-era classics and, unlike the loosey-goosey renditions previously heard, the Arkestra sounds super-tight and thoroughly well-rehearsed. When they tear through this old repertoire, they sound rough-and-ready and totally into it! This is probably how this stuff actually sounded on roadside bandstands during its glory years of the 1920s and '30s—it is more than just "authentic," it's real. The recording's primitive sound quality simultaneously enhances and detracts from the listening experience. On the one hand, the hissy mono recording sounds like it's from a distant timezone, an intergalactic transmission faintly audible on our humble earthbound receiver units. Nevertheless, it sure would be nice to hear this in high fidelity! Well, we take what can get and this one is a keeper, despite its sonic flaws. Sonny rhapsodizes on "Yesterdays" at the piano for a few minutes before Gilmore solemnly announces: "And now, Duke Ellington's 'Lightnin'!'"—and they're totally smoking, with Ra turning in a rollicking piano solo. Ellington's "Slippery Horn" from 1932 is presented in an unusual arrangement with Robert Northern taking the lead on French horn (!) and Gilmore making a rare appearance on clarinet. Just lovely! Finally, the "mini-set" ends with a romantic piano interlude and a rip-snorting "King Porter Stomp." Gilmore helpfully informs the crowd it was "composed by Jelly Roll Morton and arranged by Fletcher Henderson." Taken at a slightly more relaxed tempo than later versions, the performance is confident and assured with newcomer Ahmed Abdullah coming through with a weirdly swinging trumpet solo. In all, a scintillating ten-minute history lesson from Sun Ra and his Arkestra.

The rest is more typical of the era but played at an extremely high level. Notable is the presence of a very fine bassist, whose identity is, sadly, unknown. Although Prof. Campbell suggests Ronnie Boykins or John Ore played during this run at the Five Spot, he does not list a bassist for this show, and I'm not so sure it's either one of them (Campbell and Trent 2000, 219-220). Whoever it is, he confidently holds down the groove without ever losing a beat on a lengthy jam on "Moonship Journey," which moves through a series of space chants/songs including "Third Heaven," "Journey to Saturn," and "Outer Space Employment Agency." A dramatic synthesizer solo leads into "The Shadow World," always a welcome occurrence. After blazing through the hyper-complicated head, everyone gets a chance to solo—including Northern on French horn—but

Gilmore steals the show with a ferocious outburst of saxophone pyrotechnics. Yes, it's another amazing Gilmore solo! After a quick reprise, the set concludes with "Space Is the Place," but cuts off just as it starts to get going. Oh well. Interestingly, my copy tacks on "Space Is the Place/We Roam The Cosmos" from side B of What's New. Aside from a slight change in sound quality and volume level, the ambience and energy of the performance fits right in with the rest of the "New" Five Spot show—the unknown bass player certainly sounds the same. Could this be from the same gig? Is this "bootleg" actually an on-stage recording copied from Sonny's stash, another "Lost Reel?" Who knows? In any event, this track works better in the context of an entire set than as a stand-alone (and far too brief) album side, making it a satisfying bit of filler. [Editor's note: This track ended up being released on the Art Yard CD Cosmo Earth Fantasy, covered above in the entry for Sub Underground.]

Despite the less-than-perfect sound quality, this "bootleg" recording is worth hearing, if only for the expertly performed "miniset" of obscure jazz classics and spectacular version of "The Shadow World." That it may also contain the missing material from *What's New* just makes it all the more tantalizing.

Ah, the New England Conservatory of Music, NEC, my alma mater (of sorts), otherwise known by my cohorts at the time as "The Disturbatory" or "Not Exactly College" (among other amusing epithets). It's frankly hard to imagine Sun Ra and his spaced-out, ragtag Arkestra gracing the stage at Jordan Hall in December 1975. But although NEC was (and always will be) a bastion of stuffed-shirted classical music snobbery, its president at the time was Gunther Schuller, who was hip enough to allow Ran Blake to start the "Third Stream" department (where weirdoes like me were admitted), and who encouraged the development of a "jazz" curriculum to compete with the Berklee College of Music down the street. So, I guess it's not so surprising that Sonny was invited to perform in one of the most acoustically perfect concert halls in the country—not that you would know it from the sound of this primitive audience recording. Gosh, it sounds awful! Hissy, warbly, distorted, unbalanced, and, to make matters worse, most tracks cut off with a loud pop. Ugh! Upon close listening, it seems the original master might have sounded decent, but generational loss has obliterated what fidelity there was. Still, you can still hear Ra on his best behavior in this prestigious venue, introducing some well-rehearsed new material and keeping the polemical excesses in check.

The seventy-one minute tape (unlisted in Campbell and Trent) contains almost a complete set, cutting in on the opening improvisation, which features Marshall Allen's keening oboe over ominous percussion. Suddenly, Ra queues "Love in Outer Space" with some blasting organ chords—but the taper apparently didn't care for this tune (or experienced technical difficulties) as the recording cuts off just as it gets going. Oh well. Eddie Thomas announces "Images," and, after a moody organ introduction, the tune takes off at brisk tempo. Kwame Hadi was out of the band at this point, so the high-trumpet part has been assumed by Ahmed Abdullah, and he takes a long, winding solo over several choruses. The hotshot bass

player we heard at the "New" Five Spot is still present, holding down the swinging rhythm section and closely following Abdullah as he takes it increasingly "out" and deftly leading the band through the reprise of the head. A stellar tour de force from Abdullah and Mr. Anonymous! Not to be outdone, John Gilmore takes over—a cappella at that—doing his best post-Coltrane tenor thing. Without missing a beat, the rhythm section slips in behind him and, supported by Ra's piano, he really starts to fly! Yep—another incredible Gilmore solo! Get used to it! Ra follows with some impressionistic piano, showing off his underappreciated keyboard skills before the Arkestra returns with the finale. A superb rendition of this classic tune—too bad it sounds so crappy!

Sonny then moves to the Rocksichord, to which he's attached a whooshing phase-shifter—a sound that would dominate the Cosmos album the following summer (one of my favorite Ra albums of all time). This unknown title would have fit right in on that record, opening with a long introduction from Ra that moves from pretty, modal chords to roiling, industrial dissonances and back again before the band comes in with a stately melody. With its lumbering rhythms and sweet'n'sour harmonies, the piece brings to mind the Discipline series of compositions but with the relaxed, languid feel of Ra's hypnotically grooving space ballads. A short bass clarinet solo almost sounds like Gilmore but Abdullah soon takes the reins with some more high-wire trumpet. Mostly, though, it's Sun Ra's creamy Rocksichording that keeps things interesting. Again, it's a terrible shame the sound quality on the tape is so poor since the gently floating, interlocking bass and percussion parts are just about impossible to make out. Well, it's a rare and beautiful composition, badly recorded.

"Space Is the Place" follows but is presented as a hyperactive rhumba, with Eddie Thomas and June Tyson deliriously singing the lead. Predictably, it descends into cheerful chaos soon enough, but the audience gets a big kick out of the spectacle, whooping, hollering, and clapping along. "Journey To Saturn" is more of the same, climaxing with a honking alto solo from Danny Davis and ending with weird portamento organ effects from Ra. "Discipline 27-II" slows things down for a series of space chants, Eddie Thomas doing the substitute preaching—interestingly, Sonny keeps his mouth shut throughout and the pontificating is kept mercifully brief. The

following "mini-set" of old jazz chestnuts is just two tunes, but they're perfectly executed: "How Am I to Know" is a maudlin torch song made famous by Billie Holiday (and, later, Frank Sinatra), and here it showcases some of the most goopily romantic playing of Ra's career, incongruously performed on his swelling, roller-rink organ. Meanwhile, Gilmore plays smoky tenor. It shouldn't work, but it does—just lovely! Up next is the jump swing standard, "Rose Room," with more full-throated Gilmore and pealing trumpet from Abdullah, all punctuated by Ra's relentlessly stabbing organ chords. Finally, the concert concludes with a vanishingly quick "Calling Planet Earth" and a fast-paced romp through "We Travel the Spaceways," as the band marches off the stage to wild cheering and hearty applause. From the sound of it, the swells at NEC were surprisingly welcoming to Ra and his space men! Sun Ra's star was finally starting to rise.

It's a strong show, but the tempos are generally too fast and there's no real opportunity for wild improvisation, as if time constraints required Ra to truncate his usual set. Yet, despite the atrocious sound quality, there's enough interesting music here to make it worthwhile to fanatical collectors. "Images," "How Am I To Know?" and especially the unidentified *Cosmos*-like piece are obvious highlights. Ordinary people, however, will be suitably repulsed by the noise and distortion; you are hereby dutifully warned.



Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Live At Montreux (Inner City LP, CD)

Not much is known about the Arkestra's activities in the first half of 1976, but according to Douglass Walker and John Szwed, they performed at an event sponsored by the so-called People's Revolutionary Convention on July 4 and, predictably, clashes between police and demonstrators flared up outside the church during the concert (see Campbell and Trent 2000, 222). The "revolution" was on its last legs.

Immediately thereafter, the Arkestra headed to Europe for the first time since 1973. It was, as usual, both boom and bust. While very little documentation survives of this tour, Live At Montreux was to become a watershed album for Ra. Recorded for a state television broadcast at the legendary Swiss jazz festival on July 9, 1976, it was first issued as a two-LP set on Saturn and reissued by Inner City in 1978 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 222-224). Live At Montreux would be one the few Sun Ra records to be widely available in the late 1970s and early 1980s and it was, for many people my age, their first (and perhaps only) exposure to his music. But what a great record it is! Ra was provided a decent piano and he makes good use of it (along with his battery of electronic keyboards), guiding the Arkestra through a remarkably inventive setlist. The enormous band includes many returning alumni, including Pat Patrick on baritone sax and flute, Chris Capers on trumpet, and Craig Harris on trombone, and their performance is uniformly first rate. Moreover, the sound quality is excellent—a blessed relief after all the grungy bootlegs we've been listening to lately. In fact, it might be one of the best-sounding releases in Ra's enormous discography. In many ways, Live At Montreux is the definitive Sun Ra album.

Unfortunately, its history in the digital age is somewhat spotty: It did not appear on CD at all until 2003 when the Italian Universe label reissued it in a handsome gatefold mini-LP-style package, but they reversed the labels on the discs and inexplicably omitted four minutes of "On Sound Infinity Spheres." [Editor's note: Actually, as

Trent makes clear in his updated discography, on the Inner City LP, "On Sound Infinity Spheres" is only listed on the jacket, not the label, and on the record itself, the piece is contained in one track with the preceding piece, "From Out Where Others Dwell." The Universe CD treats these as two separate tracks, but no music is omitted (Geerken and Trent 2015, 200).] To make matters worse, the track numbers do not line up correctly with the music. Sheesh! The Japanese edition on P-Vine corrected these errors, but it was horribly expensive and just about impossible to find in the U.S. For a recording that was formerly ubiquitous, it was frustrating to find it suffering from such callous neglect in the CD era (thankfully, I kept my old LP). Finally, in 2008, Inner City reissued Live At Montreux domestically in its complete form, remastered from the original tapes and available at a reasonable price. Although the pedestrian jewel box packaging is not as deluxe as the Universe or Japanese editions, this is the one to have. The LP has that warm, analog sound and an extended top-end (including a fair amount of tape hiss), but I prefer the CD, which lets the music seamlessly unfold, rather than being interrupted by having to flip and change the records every twenty minutes.

As many times as I've listened to this record over the years and repeatedly over the last several weeks—I still am at a loss for words for how to describe it. Any attempts at rote description miserably fail to convey what makes this album so special, even beyond its significance in the Sun Ra canon. While there are long periods of intensely skronky improvisation where it seems like everyone gets to solo, it all magically holds together from beginning to end. Everyone plays at such a high level that no one soloist—not even Gilmore!—stands out above the others. The Arkestra is truly speaking with one voice: Sun Ra's. There's even some weird new compositions ("From Out Where Others Dwell" and "On Sound Infinity Spheres"), a couple of rarely-played oldies ("Lights on A Satellite" and "El Is The Sound Of Joy") and a monumental rendition of the Strayhorn/Ellington classic "Take The 'A' Train" which needs to be heard to be believed—not even Jarvis's drum solo can derail it! Throughout it all, Sonny's piano playing is just spectacular, with his introduction to "'A' Train" being one of his most impressive solos on record, a history lesson tracing the development of the instrument from ragtime to avant-garde and on into outer space. If there is one Sun Ra album I would take to the proverbial "desert island," it would probably be this one. *Live At Montreux* is just about exactly perfect.

I would assume that if you're bothering to read this, you already own *Live At Montreux*, so there's really no need for me to go into further detail. If you are reading this and don't own it, well, what are you waiting for?



While on their fourth tour of Europe in August 1976, the Arkestra (a portion of it, anyway) entered Studio Hautefeuille in Paris to record an album for the French Cobra label. This LP was also issued on Musicdistribution and Inner City shortly after the original Cobra release. It was first re-issued on compact disc by the French Buda label, but the original CD apparently suffers from a boomingly bass-heavy mix (Campbell and Trent 2000, 225). This 1999 issue on Spalax purports to correct that deficiency—but I'm not so sure; it sounds lopsided still, with prominent electric bass and distant drums. Regardless, this is one of my very favorite Sun Ra records.

The sonic imbalances no doubt have to something to do with the cramped quarters of the recording studio. According to French horn player Vincent Chauncey, the Arkestra was reduced to a core group of twelve musicians for this session due to the limited space (Campbell and Trent 2000, 225). Oh, but what a group! Along with Chauncey, Ra's faithful stalwarts, John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Danny Davis, Danny Thompson, Elo Omoe, and James Jacson fill out the reed section while Ahmed Abdullah plays sensitive, tasteful trumpet and the incredible Craig Harris virtuosically holds down the trombone chair. The rhythm section consists of R. Anthony Bunn on (nice, but overloud) electric bass, Larry Bright on (barely audible) drums, and, of course, Sun Ra himself on the electric Rocksichord. Caught in the midst of a European tour, the Arkestra sounds well-rehearsed, at the top of their game.

But as great as the band sounds on this date, it is Ra's electric keyboard that makes this such a delightfully engaging record for me. Throughout the album, Ra's Rocksichord has this weird, wirethin, reedy sound quality, upon which he pours some molasses-thick phase-shifter that hisses away incessantly in the background. Now, in anyone else's hands, this would be unbelievably cheesy, even amateurish. Yet Ra guilelessly tackles the wide variety of material and, through his visionary technical abilities, miraculously balances the

seemingly limited electronic keyboard textures with the expansive, acoustic Arkestra to create a decidedly strange but appropriately otherworldly ambience. Ra's ultra-spacey keyboard turns tracks like "Interstellar Low-Ways," "Moonship Journey," and "Journey Among the Stars" into dreamy, nearly narcotic reveries. Even the more straightforwardly big-band-ish tracks like "The Mystery of Two," "Neo Project #2," and the aptly-titled "Jazz From an Unknown Planet" are transformed by Ra's swooshing, buzzing Rocksichord. The brief title track stands out as a vehicle for another classic John Gilmore solo on tenor saxophone atop an intense Arkestra arrangement, but overall the mood is pretty and mellow and perfect for a Sunday evening.

I originally wrote about this album way back in 2009, soon after I first started posting Sun Ra Sunday (and before I started the chronological assessment). It is a curious feeling coming back to this record after three years (!) of listening to what came before. While it is like visiting an old friend, I now hear Cosmos as clearly a minor effort compared to many of the classic albums of this period. It's an odd mixture of remakes of older material combined with newer, swing-oriented compositions that is less than totally satisfying, like a slightly off gig. But it remains a favorite record of mine, if only for Sonny's blissfully phased-out Rocksichord sound. The "narcotic reveries" of "Interstellar Low Ways," "Moonship Journey," and "Journey Among The Stars" are the standout tracks in that regard, and are essential listening, in my opinion. Cosmos is worth seeking out for those tracks alone; everything else is just a bonus.

The Arkestra stayed in Europe almost two months during the summer of 1976, opening the tour at Mutualité in Paris on July 8 and immediately traveling to Switzerland to record Live At Montreux on the 9th. On July 10, the band was in Pescara, Italy, where an eighteen-minute portion of their performance was broadcast on RAI (Italian state television), but I have not seen this (I do not believe a recording circulates). From there, the tour crisscrossed the continent: July 11 in Nîmes, France; July 18 at the North Sea Jazz Festival in Gravenhage, Netherlands; July 20 at Giornate del Jazz in Ravenna, Italy (an audience recording is purported to exist, but I don't have it); July 25 at La Pinède, Juan les Pins, France; back to Montreux on August 6; Arles, France on August 7; and, after recording Cosmos at Studio Hautefeuille in Paris, the tour concluded with two shows at Châteauvallon on August 24 and 25. (See Campbell and Trent 2000, 222-227.) These last two concerts were recorded from the audience (probably by the same person) and are widely traded amongst Sun Ra collectors. The sets are mostly complete and while the sound quality is not very good (hissy, boomy, distorted, etc.), they are certainly listenable, as these things go (a little tweaking of the EQ helps tremendously).

At only about 100 minutes, the concert on the 24th is considerably shorter than on the 25th and is notable for the absence of June Tyson (leaving John Gilmore to lead the way on most of the singalongs). Perhaps this was an impromptu appearance by the Arkestra, with the "official" gig being the 25th? Moreover, Sonny has not been provided a piano, meaning the old-timey numbers have a souped-up, electrified feel quite different from the Montreux arrangements. In any event, they would play a more conventional set the following night.

The opening improvisation has a wonderfully exotic "Strange Strings" sound that goes on for a few minutes until Gilmore starts chanting "For The Sunrise" and Sun Ra enters the stage to

enthusiastic applause. After a world-shattering space chord, "Discipline 27" follows. The band sounds big and full-bodied (if dimly recorded), the baritone saxophones heading the charge while Ahmed Abdullah delivers a tasty trumpet solo. Then Sonny charges into "The Shadow World" and we're off! Despite the dodgy sound quality, this seventeen-plus minute version is extraordinary. We get the usual freakouts from Gilmore on tenor sax and Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet, followed by a mad-scientist organ solo from Ra—but then there's a long, spacey group improvisation featuring colorfully smeared trumpet (Chris Capers?) and James Jacson's throaty bassoon (!), and it goes about as far out there as the I've ever heard the Arkestra go! Astounding! After Ra signals a quick reprise of the fanatically complicated head, the sudden ending is met with stunned silence from the crowd. Seriously, all you can hear is tape hiss!

Undeterred, Ra takes Duke Ellington's "Lightnin'" at a rollicking tempo, but the ensembles sound a little shaky, and Ra's phasey Rocksichord sound is just plain strange. Meanwhile "Watusi" is the usual (including an overlong drum solo from Clifford Jarvis), but it has an unusually skronky improv in the middle that makes it worthwhile. The old Noble Sissle/Fletcher Henderson stomper, "Yeah Man!" is even better, with Gilmore on clarinet for the surrealistically authentic-sounding ensemble sections and switching to tenor sax for a rip-snorting solo. *Incredible!* But then an awkward version of "Taking a Chance on Chancey" follows, Ra duetting with Vincent Chancey's wobbly French horn, sometimes accompanied by eerie drum taps and a distant flute. Very weird—and not in a good way. The new composition "Jazz From An Unknown Planet" is given one last performance and yields a nice trombone solo from Craig Harris. Too bad this tune was apparently dropped from the repertoire; it definitely had some promise. Next up, Ra's swirling organ gives "Take The 'A' Train" a circus-like feel, and although Gilmore tries his best during his solo, he never quite builds up a full head of steam and the overall effect is muted by the incongruously maudlin organ swells. Oh well; it is a noble effort, nonetheless.

"Space Is the Place" is given a surprisingly energetic reading, led by Gilmore's vocals and augmented by a howling alto solo from Danny Davis. Or, rather, I'm guessing it's Davis. Honestly, I have a hard time telling him apart from Marshall Allen. Based on his flute and oboe playing, I think Allen's playing is slightly more lyrical and

brilliantly virtuosic than Davis—but I could be wrong. Anyway, it's a ragingly great solo, whoever it is. The tempo slows as they effortlessly segue into "Lights on a Satellite," which features a gorgeous tenor solo from Gilmore atop a delicate arrangement of swooshing Rocksichord and twittering flutes. Although the woefully unbalanced recording is difficult to hear through, it is a lovely rendition of one of my favorite Ra compositions. A hypnotic "Love in Outer Space" is driven by Sonny's furious comping on the Rocksichord and a tasty solo from Abdullah. For some reason, "Images" is less successful: although Abdullah and Gilmore deliver the goods, the band never really takes flight. Well, they certainly make up for it during the lengthy "space chant" segment that opens with "Theme of the Stargazers" and moves through "Next Stop Mars," "Second Stop Is Jupiter," and concludes with "Calling Planet Earth." The singing and chanting is ultimately overwhelmed by waves of freestyle group improvisation which gets crazier and more intense as it goes along: buzzing trombones, screaming saxophones, bashing drums, and impressionistic, almost rock-ish chording from Ra—until, finally, Sonny goes completely nuts on the electronic keyboards, driving the crowd into a spaced-out frenzy. Just when you can't take it anymore, Ra eases the band into "We Travel The Spaceways" to end the set. Wowza!

This show is a decidedly mixed bag with iffy sound and inconsistent performances—yet the group improvisations are particularly strong, and "The Shadow World" is just about as good as it gets. Accordingly, it's definitely worth seeking out if you're a hardcore fan—but I wouldn't recommend it to a novice. We'll take a listen to the second Châteauvallon show next time on *Sun Ra Sunday*. See you then!

At a little over three hours, the second concert in Châteauvallon on August 25, 1976 is almost twice as long as the previous night's performance and was again recorded from the audience, possibly by the same person. Unfortunately, the copy which circulates contains several glaring errors in the text file and it took me several listens just to sort it all out. So, here is the actual running order and timings for all three discs:

Disc 1 (70:57): 1. Opening improvisation (12:12); 2. From Out Where Others Dwell (5:57) > 3. Images (piano intro) (3:10) > 4. Images (9:48); 5. Spontaneous Simplicity (13:34); 6. The Satellites Are Spinning (7:27); 7. Rose Room (9:30); 8. Velvet (9:18).

Disc 2 (75:07): 1. Angels & Demons at Play>Watusi (24:24); 2. Unknown title (7:43); 3. King Porter Stomp (3:46); 4. Slippery Horn (3:45); 5. Opus in Springtime (10:21); 6. El Is a Sound of Joy (7:11); 7. Taking a Chance on Chancey (5:19); 8. Face The Music (7:48)> 9. Don't Blame Me (4:47).

Disc 3 (48:24): 1. The Shadow World (23:33); 2. Enlightenment (2:17); 3. Astro Nation>We Travel the Spaceways>Second Stop Is Jupiter (22:33).

As you can see, that is a lot of music! Sound quality is marginally better than the previous show, with more defined bass and drums and slightly less hiss and distortion—but it's still pretty rough going. And, although you can hear female singers in the background, I do not think June Tyson is present since John Gilmore once again leads the choir. Nevertheless, this is a fantastic performance from start to finish, from the opening improvisation (featuring Marshall Allen's keening oboe) to the closing space chants. The ensembles are spirited and tightly disciplined while all the soloists are in fine

form, especially Gilmore, who simply plays his ass off all night long. Take "Velvet," for instance: this is an outstanding example of Gilmore at his absolute best. I know I'm always saying this or that solo is "incredible," but that's not just hyperbole—it's true! Gilmore was one of the finest tenor saxophonists of his generation and nowhere is this more apparent than here. More mind-blowing Gilmore can be heard on "Images," "The Satellites Are Spinning," "Spontaneous Simplicity," and "Face The Music"—not to mention his usual antics on "The Shadow World" or the big-band classics "Rose Room," "King Porter Stomp," and "Slippery Horn," where he again plays clarinet. This is Gilmore at the peak of his powers, no doubt about it, and Sonny has given him free reign to blow his brains out on this night. "Incredible" is simply the only best word to describe John Gilmore.

Ra is provided a piano and plays a romantic yet aggressive, Cecil Taylor-ish intro to "Images," but abandons it later on for organ and Rocksichord (both with and without the whooshing phase-shifter). Perhaps there were technical problems with the acoustic instrument, but it sounds fine to me. Oh well. Regardless, his playing is inspired throughout, with his buzzing and whirring electric keyboards giving the old-timey numbers a modern edge while propelling tracks like "The Shadow World," "Angels & Demons At Play," and "Watusi" into the stratosphere. These last two tunes could sometimes drag on a bit—but not here! On "Angels," Ra whips up a "mad-scientist" organ blast to accompany Gilmore's solo and he gets the tenor saxophonist barking like a dog through his horn. Totally outrageous! There is one mystery tune that is particularly intriguing (disc 2, track 2). Is this a composition or an improvisation or both? It starts out with modal arpeggios on the Rocksichord and Gilmore hazily outlining a descending melody amidst disorienting flurries of notes, false harmonics, and altissimo squeals. Ra takes over for a bit, the harmony wandering further and further afield until Vincent Chancey comes in on his precariously intonated French horn. Then Ra pushes a button, thinning the electronic texture and starts comping a swinging vamp—and the rhythm section comes in with a cha-cha! Huh? Chancey continues his balancing act until Ra brings the piece to a close with a dissonant false cadence. Very beautiful, but what exactly is this? Who knows?! Another wonderful Ra moment comes after "Face The Music," when Sonny launches

into the 1933 McHugh/Fields pop song "Don't Blame Me," on solo organ. *Just lovely.*

A five-thousand word blow-by-blow of this epic show seems like a pointless exercise (or maybe it's beyond the limited number of words in my vocabulary). It's a stunningly great performance; just take my word for it. If you can tolerate the less-than-great sound quality, it is a richly rewarding listen—if only to hear Gilmore at his finest. According to Prof. Campbell, "Rose Room" and "The Satellites Are Spinning" appear on the 1978 double-LP *Unity* on Horo (see below). Frankly, I'm not so sure about that—we'll have to try and figure it out when we get there. But, if true, it means a high-quality recording of this concert is possibly stashed away in the Sun Ra archives somewhere. An official release of this complete show (or whatever is extant) would certainly be a worthy addition to the discography—are you listening, Art Yard? Ah well, one can dream, anyway, right? In the meantime, this "bootleg" recording will have to do.

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Rehearsal, Unknown Location, September 1976 (SBD? CDR)

This thirty-minute rehearsal tape, recorded at an unknown location in September 1976, was played on WKCR-FM's Sun Ra memorial broadcast in 1995 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 227-228) and circulates widely amongst collectors. There is a small audience present, indicating this was actually a soundcheck at a venue, rather than a rehearsal proper, and, accordingly, there is neither in-depth working out of arrangements nor any verbal instruction whatsoever from Ra, unlike what we've heard in other rehearsal tapes. Instead, we get a miniature three-song set, presented as a contiguous performance, just as it would have been in concert. Sound quality is pretty good, with a strikingly close-up perspective, possibly recorded from the stage but more likely from the soundboard (bass and vocals are notably way up front while drums sound distant and indistinct). Perhaps this comes from Sonny's personal stash of tapes? Who knows?

After a bit of hand percussion, June Tyson briefly leads the singalong on "(The World Is Waiting) For The Sunrise" before Danny Ray Thompson charges into the bari-sax riff of "Discipline 27." The ensemble sounds a bit shaky and out of tune, eventually devolving into some skronky group improvisation and culminating in an a cappella tenor solo from John Gilmore—nothing special so far. After a quick space chord, Sonny enters with "The Shadow World" ostinato on organ but soon drops out as the head commences. Meanwhile, everyone gets to take a solo (both with and without accompaniment) across its twenty-three-minute duration: Marshall Allen and Danny Davis on alto saxophones, Elo Omoe on bass clarinet, Ra on "mad scientist" organ, and Abdullah on trumpet. Even Tony Bunn gets a turn on fuzz bass followed by Dale Williams on distorted electric guitar, giving this a particularly rocked-out feel. While that might look good on paper, this is not the most compelling version of this showpiece, with the soloists sounding a bit listless (aside from Ra himself, who plays brilliantly as usual) and the ensembles failing to cohere. Well, it is a rehearsal and/or soundcheck after all. While the unusually decent sound quality makes this an enjoyable listen, it is ultimately not very satisfying; a curious bit of filler that will be of interest only to the most committed Sun Ra completists.

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA, November 1976 (AUD CDR)

According to Prof. Campbell, the Arkestra appeared at York University in Toronto on October 7, 1976 and at the Famous Ballroom in Baltimore on October 10, but no recordings are known to exist of these performances (Campbell and Trent 2000, 228). The Arkestra returned to the New England Conservatory of Music for another concert at Jordan Hall sometime in November, and the first forty minutes or so was recorded from the audience. This tape surfaced sometime after the second edition of the discography, so dates and personnel are sketchy at best. However, the sound quality is actually quite good for the period, with the stereophonic image roughly capturing the warm, resonant acoustic of this prestigious venue.

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The concert begins with June Tyson intoning "Tapestry From An Asteroid" mostly a cappella, followed by a blast of horns and a brief rendition of "Astro Black." Then the rest of the band joins with Tyson in singing "(The World Is Waiting) For the Sunrise," with the audience heartily applauding Sonny's entrance on stage. Baritone saxophones lead the way into "Discipline 27" and it's the usual thing but with a particularly exuberant trumpet solo from Ahmed Adullah. However, the piece quickly descends into a long group improvisation consisting of various solos and duets punctuated with splashy space chords and bashing percussion. Interestingly, there appear to be two bass players here, one playing arco and one pizzicato. There is some nice soloing from Ra on piano and "mad-scientist-styled" electric organ (not to mention an out-there trombone solo from Craig Harris), but nothing is really allowed to fully develop despite the fifteen-minute duration. Sonny seems to be keeping the band on a pretty short leash. Two classic big-band numbers follow: "Yeah Man!" and "Lightnin'," which are taken at absurdly fast tempos—yet the band is super-tight and, of course, John Gilmore rips it up on tenor sax. Although Ra has been provided a piano, he sticks to the buzzing Rocksichord and roller-rink organ, giving these old-timey numbers a weirdly modernized sound. Good stuff!

Then an unsual thing happens. Sun Ra speaks: "Not all of America is disintegrated, there are some things that are unified. With me tonight, I have two members of the band who have been with me for about twenty years, Robert Barry and John Gilmore... [who will] improvise some outer space stuff for you." Never mind that Barry the drummer had been absent from the band since 1968; he and Gilmore duet in a groovy, post-Coltrane style, but condensed down to a riveting four minutes. Then Ra introduces Tommy Hunter and Marshall Allen, who duet in a more aggressively avant-garde manner, but, again, all too briefly. Finally, Ra sets Danny Davis's alto sax against James Jacson's bassoon for a quickie two-minute honkfest before the tape ends. I'm not sure what Sonny was up to here. He seems to be trying to school these Conservatory kids on the art of instant composition—I only wish these duos were allowed to go on a bit longer.

As for the last track on my CD, I do not think it is actually taken from this same gig—the ambience is very different, obviously recorded in a bigger venue in front of a much larger audience. In fact, I do not think this is Sun Ra at all, but rather the Grateful Dead ca. 1974, when bassist Phil Lesh would duet with synthesizer player Ned Lagin between sets in the manner of their weird and woolly Seastones album. At first listen, you might think it is Sun Ra at his spaciest—but I am almost positive it is the Dead. A couple of minutes in, you can hear someone in the audience yell out "St. Stephen!"—a dead giveaway, if you will.

So, even though this concert fragment is less than completely satisfying, the better-than-usual sound quality and the brief but powerful duo segments make it worth the effort to track down. There is some excellent playing here—I just wish we could hear the rest of the concert!

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Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Jazz Showcase, Chicago, IL, November 27, 1976 (AUD CDR)

Paging through The Earthly Recordings, it is apparent that, beginning with the Châteauvallon tapes (August 24 and 25, 1976), we have entered a new era of audience recordings. With portable compact cassette recorders becoming widely available in the late-1970s, "bootleg" tapes would start to proliferate, resulting in a flood of generally high-quality tapes by the 1980s as the technology matured. When I first dipped my toe into reviewing these types of recordings, I hesitated, knowing full well what I was in for: variable sound quality, repetitive setlists and occasionally uninspired performances. In many ways, I wanted to avoid these things altogether and concentrate on the officially released albums—there are certainly enough of those to deal with! Yet, since my goal has been as much to discover Sun Ra's music as to memorialize it, it made sense to dive into the world of "bootleg" recordings and see for myself just what was out there. But, honestly, it can be something of a chore to sit through some of this stuff, and my antipathy towards the exercise is no doubt reflected in my sometimes hastily concocted judgments. I try to be fair: I listen to everything several times (which is partly why this project is taking so long) and there is almost always something worth hearing, even on the worse-sounding tape. But I must apologize for the lack of enthusiasm I often demonstrate when confronted with yet another dodgy "bootleg."

This ninety-minute recording from the Jazz Showcase in Chicago from November 27, 1976 is a case in point and presents the usual sorts of challenges. Sound quality is actually pretty decent—so vivid, in fact, it sounds like it was recorded from the stage (right next to Sonny's amplifier!)—but the set is dominated by an overlong declamation segments and interminable percussion jams that might have been highly amusing in concert but are almost intolerable to listen to on tape. Moreover, the CDR dispenses with any index markers, meaning you can't skip to the good parts. I quibble, but there you go (it's my blog, and I can cry if I want to). Nevertheless,

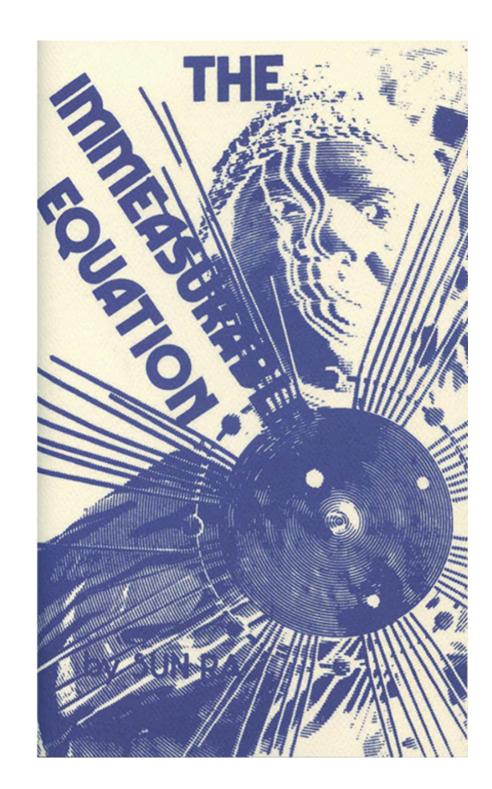
there is some interesting music here and there, if you have the patience to sit through the rest of it.

The set begins with processional drums to introduce June Tyson, who sings "Astro Black" accompanied by pitter-pattering percussion. Then a throbbing space chord sets up "Along Came Ra," a weirdly dissonant fanfare with vocals led by John Gilmore—an evocative opening, for sure. But Sun Ra enters the stage and immediately starts lecturing: "I have many names!" "You're on the right road, going in the wrong direction!" Etc. Meanwhile the dual bassists (probably Tony Bunn and Richard "Radu" Williams) hack and saw away with their fingers and bows and the horns interject skronky improvisations. Well, OK then! Ra moves to organ, and we get a bouncy, slightly up-tempo "Friendly Galaxy No. 2" but, unfortunately, the delicate flute arrangement is buried under his thick electronic chords and brassy solos from Ahmed Abdullah on trumpet, Craig Harris on trombone, and Vincent Chancey on French horn. Even so, it's an enjoyable (if somewhat meandering) rendition, held aloft by Tommy "Bugs" Hunter's laconic groove on trap drums. Then Ra starts declaiming "I, Pharaoh" over it all and things start to get a bit tedious. The ensemble tries to maintain interest by displacing and elaborating upon the hypnotic tattoos of "Friendly Galaxy" but Ra is intent on hectoring the audience: "Who's gonna save you now?" he demands. Moving back to the organ, Sonny brings the proceedings to a close and introduces "The Satellites Are Spinning," which is also played at a faster than usual clip. After a brief sing-along, "Calling Planet Earth" signals more bashing outjazz improv, culminating in a frenzied, "mad-scientist-style" organ solo from Ra. Sadly, the tape cuts off in mid-flight. Oh well.

Disc two picks up in the middle of "The Shadow World," taken at an impossibly quick tempo, with Ra's skittering, pulsating organ driving the band to the breaking point. Gilmore tries to do his thing on tenor, but he seems overwhelmed by Ra's violent keyboard attack and is left sputtering and honking in desperation. Eloe Omoe is similarly overtaken, but space finally opens up a bit for Abdullah and, afterwards, Gilmore comes charging in for another shot—and he does not disappoint, offering up a ferocious a cappella solo before the reprise. A shrill organ cluster sets up "Watusi," which has a less frenetic feel than usual courtesy of Hunter's laid-back drumming style, although it still goes on for far too long. This was

undoubtedly a visual spectacle, what with the dancing and carrying on that accompanied the percussion workout, but that stuff just doesn't come across on tape. "Rose Room" starts with a romantic organ intro before moving into the jaunty swing arrangement, led by Gilmore's tenor. He wails for several choruses but is again nearly subsumed by the grinding organ chords and thrumming basses. Abdullah's piercing trumpet is easier to hear (and nicely executed), but Chancey's three-note solo seems perversely out-of-place amidst the continuously cycling pre-Bop chord changes. Frankly, it is not the most satisfying version of this big-band classic. "What's New" begins with another rhapsodic organ solo before the head arrangement—but then the bottom drops out and it's just Gilmore and drums. Gilmore gamely keeps the tune's structure intact during his lengthy improvisation but he ultimately sounds restrained by the absence of accompaniment. Interestingly, Ra ditches the organ and returns on acoustic piano—which sounds so nice!—but the tape cuts off just as he begins to solo. Argh!

So, here we have another semi-frustrating "bootleg." The sound quality is decent, but the instrumental balance is woefully off-kilter, with Sonny's organ and booming basses dominating the sonic space. The ensembles sound fresh and inspired yet the soloing is merely OK—aside from his second blow-out on "The Shadow World," Gilmore sounds tentative and subdued here, at least compared to his usual mind-blowing displays. Then again, perhaps my opinion is colored by the technical flaws which make this recording difficult to listen to, despite the reasonably good sound quality. But that's how it goes with "bootlegs:" I'm happy to have them as historical documents, but I don't necessarily enjoy listening to them. Your mileage may vary.



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Sun Ra: WXPN-FM, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, December 25, 1976 (FM CDR)

Sun Ra celebrated Christmas Day, 1976 by appearing on the University of Pennsylvania radio station WXPN-FM to read a selection of his poetry over musical selections, and the thirty-minute broadcast circulates widely amongst collectors. Prof. Campbell speculates that the apocryphal Saturn LP, Celebrations For Dial Tunes, originated from this session, but no copies are known to exist (Campbell and Trent 2000, 205, 229). I don't recognize the music quietly playing in the background, but it is obviously pre-recorded: there's some Arkestra stuff featuring Marshall Allen's keening oboe, but it's mostly spooky synthesizer solos and tinkling Rocksichord. Sonny brings his own kind of Christmas message, permutating Bible stories into space-age mythologies, sometimes treated with dramatic space echo. As kooky as it sounds, he is deadly serious, and the two halves play like two sides of an album. This session sounds so deliberately thought-out; it very well could have been intended for commercial release.

Poetry was always an important part of Sun Ra's radically reinvented persona. He wrote poems as a child, he handed out polemical broadsides on the streets of Chicago in the 1950s, and his space poetry was often prominently displayed on record jackets. After arriving in New York, he hooked up with Amiri Baraka (né Leroy Jones) and Larry Neal, who included Ra's poetry in their mammoth 680-page Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing in 1968. That same year, *Umbra Anthology* 1967-1968 published some of Ra's poems alongside such hip luminaries as Langston Hughes and Allen Ginsburg, cementing Ra's reputation as an underground poet of note. After a deal with Doubleday fell through, Sonny and Alton Abraham self-published The Immeasurable Equation and Extensions Out—The Immeasurable Equation Vol. II in 1972 through Ihnfinity, Inc./Saturn Research (Szwed 1997, 320). These pamphlets were printed in vanishingly small numbers and almost impossible to find until Abraham's son, Adam, compiled 260 of Ra's poems in Collected Works Vol. I: The Immeasurable Equation, published by Phaelos Books & Mediawerks in 2005. (Another collection of poems, This Planet Is Doomed, came out on Kicks Books last year.) [Editor's note: Another prominent collection of Ra's poetry is The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose, edited by Hartmut Geerken and James L. Wolf, originally published by Waitawhile in 2005.]

Whatever their literary worth, working with words was clearly part of Sun Ra's Earthly mission: as Szwed points out: "Poetry offered him a chance to compose with language as he did with music" (Szwed 1997, 319). Sonny himself described his poems as scientific equations. Regarding this Christmas broadcast, Szwed writes: "The choice of poems and their sequencing offers a sense of what Sun Ra thought was most important in his writing...The poems were read softly, with little expression, the music punctuating the words, with heavy echo and delay in the studio sometimes reducing the words to pure sound without meaning" (Szwed 1997, 320-321).

Another fifteen minutes of Sonny reading his poetry over pre-recorded music appeared on the eleven-hour ESP Radio Tribute back in 2005, and while no dates are provided, it sounds very similar to this 1976 session, complete with low-key vocal delivery and spacey echo effects. The Norton Records label has issued three CDs of Ra reading his poetry on Strange Worlds in My Mind (Space Poetry Vol. 1); The Sub-Dwellers (Space Poetry Vol. 2); and The Outer Darkness (Space Poetry Vol. 3). [Editor's note: There is also My Way Is the Spaceways (Space Poetry Vol. 4).] I haven't heard these, but they apparently contain all this stuff and a whole lot more, compiled by "The Good Doctor" (Michael Anderson, director of the Sun Ra Archive). The completist in me says I need to have them—and maybe someday I will—but until then, these CDRs of the original broadcasts will have to do. Not for everyone, but a crucial piece of the Sun Ra puzzle.

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This one is a stumper. Half of the music was originally released in 1987 as filler on Leo as A Night In East Berlin (one of the very first Sun Ra CDs ever made), but in 1994 it was re-released in complete form as A Quiet Place In The Universe. It's unclear when this material was recorded since, according to Chris Trent's liner notes, the original tape provided to the record company merely contains a handwritten label identifying some (but not all) of the track titles. However, it's obvious that all of the tracks are taken from a single concert, probably recorded in 1976 or 1977, based on personnel and repertoire. Prof. Campbell's "best guess" is "early 1977" but there are some anomalies (such as Pat Patrick's presence on alto saxophone) which make a certain date impossible to determine (Campbell and Trent 2000, 235). In any event, it is a terrifically full-bodied stereo recording, well-balanced, with a warm, dry acoustic and a worthy addition to the official discography, despite its mysterious provenance.

The disc starts off with the title track, a rare Sun Ra composition in its only known recording. After an announcement from John Gilmore, it starts off as a conventional big-band ballad à la Sun Ra but as it goes along, the yearning harmonies get progressively more dissonant and strange, eventually wandering far away from the initial key center as it slowly builds to a harrowing climax. Moreover, the horns play at the extreme ranges of their instruments, raising the intensity level even further as the volume increases, similar to the earlier "Discipline" series of compositions. Interestingly, Vincent Chancey takes the only solo, his French horn being an odd choice for such a challenging composition; nevertheless, he acquits himself admirably on the unwieldy instrument. What Chancey lacks in technique he makes up for in enthusiasm for the music! After an elongated reprise, the piece ends with a flourish from Gilmore and another announcement: "'A Quiet Place In the Universe,' a composition by Sun Ra!" And what a great composition it is!

"I, Pharaoh" picks up at the end of "Friendly Galaxy No. 2," with Sun Ra eventually taking up the microphone for a lengthy declamation. At over eighteen minutes, this sort of thing could be tedious (to say the least), but the recording manages to minimize the distorted vocals and enhance the delicate flute arrangement, making for a surprisingly enjoyable listening experience. Although the next track was labeled "Images" on the original tape, that's not what was played. Instead, we essentially get a duet improvisation between Ra's electric organ and Chancey's French horn, with the rhythm section supplying some subtle swing changes about half-way through. Very nice. "Love in Outer Space" follows, featuring a rather overlong conga workout from (possibly) Atakatune—nothing special, but the sound quality is superb.

Then we have the hoary chestnut, "I'll Never Be the Same." The instrumental version by "Matty" Malneck and Frank Signorelli was originally titled "Little Buttercup" when it was recorded by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, but with lyrics (and a new title) courtesy of Gus Kahn, the song was a hit for Mildred Bailey in 1932. The tune would become a regular in Sun Ra's live sets in the years to come but this version is unusual in that Pat Patrick takes the lead on alto saxophone. This suggests a later date than 1977, but then again, who knows? Patrick was in and out of the band during this period and would eventually abandon the baritone sax with which he made his name for the lighter, more flexible alto. Not surprisingly, he gets the same gruff, expressionistic sound out of the smaller horn, making his playing instantly recognizable. This version is a delight, with Ra's organ swells adding an appropriately romantic nostalgia to the proceedings. Finally, "Space Is the Place" concludes the disc, but fades out after a few minutes. No great loss there, I suppose.

As is befitting the title, A Quiet Place In The Universe is a somewhat subdued affair lacking any wild, skronky improvisations, rip-snorting big-band numbers, or even a single Gilmore solo. Nevertheless, it is a uniquely satisfying album with the title track worth the price of admission for its rarity alone. It also helps that the sound quality is excellent throughout. Leo CDs can be a little hit-or-miss, but this one is a keeper.

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1977 was a busy year for Sonny.

On January 6, the Arkestra appeared at the Famous Ballroom in Baltimore, Maryland. No recording exists, but "[a]ccording to a review by Ken Buford, reprinted in Baltimore Jazz Scene 1977, the program included 'Along Came Ra,' 'Calling Planet Earth,' 'When There Is No Sun,' and 'Space Is the Place,' along with blues, swing numbers, an 'outer space dirge,' and a flute duet" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 230). Then, at the last possible minute, Sun Ra was asked to participate in FASTEC 77, a four-week-long "World Black and African Festival of the Arts and Culture" in Lagos, Nigeria scheduled to begin at the beginning of February. Performers from sixty-two different countries were invited, all representative of the Pan-African diaspora, with Sun Ra's Arkestra representing black Americans. According to Szwed, it was contentious from the outset (Szwed 1997, 341-432). According to Tommy Hunter, tapes exist from the African sojourn (Campbell and Trent 2000, 231).

By February 26, the Arkestra was back in the states, and an audience recording from their performance in East Lansing, Michigan apparently circulates but I have not heard it. Additionally, live performances of two old-timey numbers, the Dixon-Henderson standard "Bye Bye Blackbird" and George Gershwin's "Embraceable You," were recorded around this time for a Saturn single that was never released. These tapes were later broadcast by WKCR-FM during their 1987 Sun Ra Festival, but I don't have a copy of this either. According to Prof. Campbell, the rendition of "Bye Bye Blackbird" is "slow and dozy and, if one does not listen carefully, sounds like a straggler from Ra's Discipline series" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 231).

At this point, as pointed out earlier, concert "bootlegs" begin to proliferate as Sun Ra's reputation as a spectacular live performer became more widely known and miniaturized recording technology (slowly) improved. And it is at this point where I had to take a break from the poor sound quality and somewhat repetitive setlists and give *Sun Ra Sunday* a rest for a little while. But the fact remains: Ra made a bunch of good-to-great albums in 1977, including several rare solo piano recitals, the classic *Some Blues But Not The Kind That's Blue*, and the first of the legendary Horo LPs. I'm actually very excited to get to these; so, having rested my ears, I'm ready to tackle the dodgy "bootlegs" in order to get to the good stuff. Not that there isn't "good stuff" to be found on these amateur concert recordings—it just takes a whole lot more effort to discern.

Up next: a sprawling, two-and-half hour set recorded (badly) at the Showboat Lounge in Silver Spring, Maryland on March 18, 1977. I'll take a listen so you don't have to!

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Sun Ra and His Arkestra: Showboat Lounge, Silver Spring, MD, March 18, 1977 (AUD CDR)

On March 18, 1977, the Arkestra appeared at the Showboat Lounge in Silver Spring Maryland, and a 150-minute audience tape circulates amongst the most fanatical Sun Ra collectors. Interestingly, this venue would quickly become one of Ra's favorites; "according to John Gilmore, Ra wrote several compositions meant to be played only at that location, including one titled 'Silver Spring' which was revived by the Arkestra in 1996" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 233). It would appear that at least one of the things Sonny liked about the Showboat was that he was given free rein to play as long as he wanted. Take a look at the setlist:

Disc 1: 1. //The Shadow World (5:15); 2. [unidentified title] (6:06); 3. Space Is the Place (12:12); 4. I'll Never Be the Same (3:36); 5. Yeah, Man! (3:17); 6. King Porter Stomp (3:51); 7. The Mayan Temples (9:03); 8. Images (9:40); 9. Face The Music (5:06); 10. The Mystery Of Two (6:42).

Disc 2: 1. Bye Bye Blackbird (2:36); 2. Watusi (21:31); 3. [unidentified title//] (3:24); 4. [//unidentified title]// (percussion only) (:33); 5. // Destination Unknown (1:25); 6. Journey To Saturn (9:26); 7. [unidentified title] (Rocksichord & French horn) (6:59); 8. The Satellites Are Spinning (2:04); 9. On Sound Infinity Spheres (4:30); 10. Embraceable You (6:33); 11. Greetings from the 21st Century/We Travel the Spaceways (2:53); 12. Love in Outer Space (8:58); 13. The Shadow World// (3:41).

This constitutes part of the first set and a mere fragment of the second—it sure looks juicy, doesn't it? Well, be forewarned: the sound quality of this amateur recording is truly abysmal. To be fair, the circulating copy is probably pretty close to the original (mono) master tape since there is very little hiss or wow-and-flutter and, occasionally, it sounds...okay. So, it has that going for it. The problem

is that the (decidedly lo-fi) microphone has been placed right up next to Sonny's amplifier so the organ is much, *much* louder than anything else on stage—and when he steps on the gas and that amp starts to distort, you will think your own speakers are being shredded right before your very ears. It is *most* unpleasant to listen to, despite the otherwise high quality of the performance.

Indeed, there is some incredible music buried under the noise: the old-timey big-band numbers are given relaxed, authoritative readings, and Gilmore does his inimitable thing on "The Shadow World," "Images," "The Mystery of Two," and, most impressively, on "Embraceable You." Pat Patrick takes the lead on baritone sax on a truly bizarre ballad composition (disc 1, track 2) and picks up the alto for a gorgeous rendition of "I'll Never Be the Same." But what's most interesting are all those unknown titles such as the above ballad, the tangy "Discipline"-styled piece (disc 2, track 3), or the phaseshifty Rocksichord and French horn duet (disc 2, track 7), with Vincent Chancey sounding more assured than ever on that unwieldy instrument. It is always fascinating to hear "new" Sun Ra compositions, even if the sound quality sucks.

And, boy howdy, does the sound quality suck. Only the most hardcore Sun Ra fan will want to sit through this in order to mine any nuggets of musical gold that can be found. Even so, I keep coming back to those "unheard" compositions and find myself wishing the rest of the second set had been recorded; no doubt there were more "new" Sun Ra works to be found there, perhaps written especially for the venue. I guess that makes me hardcore. The rest of you should stay far, far away.

A month later, we find the Arkestra back in New York, appearing at Smuckers on April 17, 1977 and, at least compared to the Showboat Lounge tape, this amateur recording is a hi-fi sonic spectacular! Recorded in stereo (still something of a rarity at the time), it has a pleasing ambience and excellent instrumental balance, with the drums and cymbals coming through crisp and clear but without being overwhelming. But this tape has its share of problems: the recording levels go up and down; there is considerable distortion when things get loud; and, about halfway through, the surreptitious recordist panics and tries to hide the microphone, causing the sound quality to deteriorate significantly. Oh well; that's just the way it is with "bootlegs" from this era. Also, unlike the more accommodating Showboat Lounge, the economics of Manhattan nightclubs dictated a short, hour-long set with few surprises. All that said, this is a half-decent recording of the band on a pretty good night—plus there's a special guest sitting in at this show, vibraphonist Walk Dickerson. Well, perhaps not that special (see below).

The set opens with a brief but ominous "Strange Strings"-styled improvisation before June Tyson comes in singing "(The World Is Waiting) For the Sunrise." As the guys in the band join in the chorus, the words slowly morph into "The world is waiting for...Sun Ra" for Sonny's grand entrance. A massive space chord signals Danny Ray Thompson to take up the big bari-sax riff of "Discipline 27" and it's a barn-burner. Unfortunately, Ahmed Abdullah's trumpet solo is so ear-piercingly loud it causes the recordist to fiddle with the input levels for a couple of minutes while the rest of the Arkestra moves into a deliciously skronky group improvisation, capped by Marshall Allen's a cappella alto saxophone. This is a great version of this sometimes overplayed tune, albeit marred by severe technical problems with the recording. And so it goes...

Thankfully, the sound clears up a bit for "The Shadow World," and it's another high-energy blowout with gobs of "mad scientist"

organ work and a string of outrageous solos from Allen and Danny Davis on altos, Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet, James Jacson on bassoon, and, finally, John Gilmore on tenor. The music moves through a variety of feels across its eighteen-minute duration, from the frenetic opening ostinatos to a deep, dark funk jam to wild, free-jazz bashing. Jacson's bassoon solo is perhaps his longest on record and an amazing display of virtuosity on this terribly awkward instrument and he gets a hearty round of applause from the audience. Who knew Jacson could play like that? The always impressive Gilmore is at his very best here, building an epic statement out of tiny cells of notes, effortlessly incorporating the entire range of extended techniques from impossible-sounding multiphonics to keening altissimo cries, all the while maintaining a coherent structure with a lyrical melodicism all his own. Yes, folks: it's another incredible Gilmore solo! After the Akrestra returns with a super-tight reprise of the insanely complicated head, the audience is left in stunned disbelief. This is another fantastic rendition of a composition which could never be "overplayed" in my book—the highlight of the set, for sure.

"Enlightenment" cuts off after about thirty-five seconds—no great loss, I guess—and then we pick up in the middle of "Love in Outer Space," the organ vamping away over a bed of percussion. Just as Sonny returns with the melody, it sounds to me like the microphone gets shoved under the table in an effort to avoid detection by the band or nightclub staff; in any event, the sound quality takes a severe nosedive from here on. "When There Is No Sun" is spiritedly sung, but suffers from muffled sound, as does "Lights on a Satellite," which struggles to get into a groove, the tempo fluctuating wildly and, at one point, moving into a heavy-ish rock feel—but Sonny puts the kibosh on that pretty quick! Next up is an unknown title, possibly one of the "Discipline" series of compositions, and it sounds vaguely familiar: strained, broken harmonies; braying horns; abstract drumming; dissonant, dramatic organ chords—but with weird, murmuring vocals. Very interesting. Then Walt Dickerson takes over with a long vibraphone solo—too long, if you ask me. Dickerson is a fine player, but he's just noodling around here. It's impossible to tell what else is happening on stage but sometimes it seems as if Dickerson just wants to stop playing—and Sonny won't let him! It just goes on and on and, frankly, it gets to be

quite boring—not something you can usually say about an Arkestra performance (aside from the drum solos). It doesn't help that the sharp, metallic attack of the vibraphone causes painful amounts of distortion in the recording when he hits it hard—which is all too often. "Space Is the Place" ends the set with the typical carrying on, although notable for the inclusion of the baritone counter-melody in the head arrangement, a subtle but welcome variation to this concert mainstay. After an extended vocal segment, the Arkestra marches off the stage and that's it.

No doubt there was a lot more music played on this night, but this is all we have: a flawed yet mostly listenable recording of one (almost) complete set, which starts off strong and then goes downhill. Committed Sun Ra fanatics will find this worthwhile for "The Shadow World" alone, but for others it is probably inessential.

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Sun Ra & His Arkestra: The Empty Foxhole Café, Philadelphia, PA, April 29, 1977 (AUD CDR)

Taking its name from the 1967 album by Ornette Coleman, the Empty Foxhole Café was a student-run venue at the University of Pennsylvania, located in the basement of St. Mary's Church at 39th & Locust Streets, at the time a particularly run-down area of Philadelphia. It housed an actual theater with a large stage, nice acoustics, and student volunteers serving natural foods between sets—hey, it was the Seventies! Weekends were mostly reserved for avant-garde artists such as Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who are all known to have performed there. The Arkestra made an appearance at the Empty Foxhole on April 29, 1977, and a two-hour audience recording circulates amongst collectors (Campbell and Trent 2000, 234).

As usual with these things, sound quality is problematic, to say the least. Once again, Sun Ra's searing electric organ dominates all the other instruments—but however good (or bad) the original (monophonic) tape might have sounded, what we have here is many cassette generations removed, with severe wow and flutter issues and, most egregiously, a Dolby mismatch or two, resulting in elevated hiss and distortion that was clearly not present on the original recording. To make matters worse, this horribly degraded tape was then sloppily transferred to digital, evidenced by audible clicks and digital distortion present throughout, getting progressively worse and worse as it goes along. *Ouch!* That said, there is, as usual, some great (and not so great) music buried beneath all the noise—you just have to struggle to hear it.

The set opens with another "Strange Strings"-styled improvisation with kora, thumb-pianos, log drums, and other myriad percussion instruments rattling away, but it's sadly impossible to make out exactly what's going on. And it goes on for quite a while, moving through a variety of rhythmic feels while Vincent Chancey provides some lugubrious French horn and someone (probably Richard "Radu" Williams) taking a rare bass solo. Just as the crowd

becomes audibly restless, the horns split the sonic universe with a raucous space chord and one of the Space Ethnic Voices starts singing, "Make Way for the Sunshine." But then June Tyson comes in with "(The World Is Waiting) For the Sunrise" and the two songs are sung at the same time in weird, polytonal counterpoint—very interesting! After Sonny's big entrance, Danny Ray Thompson takes up the bari-sax riff for "Discipline 27" and it's another hot rendition with an extended freakout section, Marshall Allen and Danny Davis duking it out on altos and Craig Harris going his own way on trombone. So far, so good.

Then Sonny moves to the Rocksichord for "How Am I To Know?" but his stomp-box phase-shifter is shorting out: it crackles, pops, and cuts off and on of its own accord. The Arkestra carries on, though, with Rusty Morgan singing lead and Gilmore taking a splendidly idiomatic solo that gets a nice round of applause. But, Ra is clearly frustrated with the Rocksichord and abandons it altogether to join in the singing, only to let the song sort of peter out. Oh well. "Love in Outer Space" is the usual thing: a bit tedious at over fourteen minutes, but no doubt a delightful visual spectacle. The next thirty minutes are devoted to the big-band classics, "Lightnin'," "Yeah Man!," "Take The 'A' Train," "Honeysuckle Rose," and "Rose Room," and it's an oddly uneven performance. John Gilmore displays his stunning virtuosity on the B-flat clarinet (a.k.a. "The Misery Stick") on "Yeah Man!" and delivers a typically rousing tenor saxophone solo on Fats Waller's "Honeysuckle Rose"—yet he seems bored with "Take The 'A' Train" and unusually breathless on "Rose Room." We do get to hear the laconic Akh Tal Ebah take a rare trumpet solo on "Take The 'A' Train" while Ahmed Abdullah is elsewhere his usual showy self. But by and large, this is not the Arkestra at its best: the ensembles are ragged and the band sounds unsure of the arrangements at times. It doesn't help matters much that the sound quality is so terrible, no doubt clouding my opinion of the music your mileage may vary.

Moving on: Allen and Ra duet on an untitled ballad, possibly through-composed: similar in feel to "Taking a Chance on Chancey" and other French horn duets we've heard, Sonny is outlining definite harmonies while Allen freely extrapolates on alto saxophone—whatever it is, it's just lovely. "King Porter Stomp" brings us back to the swing era, and Gilmore sounds more inspired here, taking

a small motivic figure introduced by Harris's trombone solo and running with it. "The Mayan Temples" settles into a gentle, spacey groove with flutes on top and Ra taking a pleasantly ruminative electronic solo—but the recording is marred by numerous technical difficulties, including an inconvenient tape flip and a faulty microphone cable. And so it goes... "Outer Spaceways Incorporated" is resurrected and reimagined as a weirdly asymmetric, mid-tempo swinger with a complexly hocketed vocal arrangement and Sonny pontificating amidst an increasingly enervating din. Whoah! I'm not sure if we've heard this arrangement before (or if we'll hear it again), but it is an unusually refreshing take on this sometimes overdone singalong.

Finally, we get "The Shadow World," which is always welcome. And, as usual, it's a barn-burner: fast and tight with frenzied horns and pummeling percussion. Ra takes one of his patented "mad scientist" organ solos where he sounds like he has three hands, summoning up an astonishing variety of otherworldly textures, from percussive, high-pitched tinkling to swooning portamentos to roaring whirlwinds of low-register noise—all at the same time. This is Ra at his most outrageous—yet he is firmly in control of every nuance possible from his crude electronic keyboards. A string of horn solos follows, both accompanied and a cappella, with James Jacson delivering another lengthy and impressive display of instrumental facility on the difficult and unwieldy bassoon—but then Harris destroys the mood with an overly cute, bluesy pastiche on trombone. He manages to elicit some bemused chuckles from the audience, but our recordist is clearly not impressed; running short on tape, he shuts off the machine until mid-way through Gilmore's solo. Although Gilmore sounds great, the effect is ruined and—to add insult to injury—horrific digital distortion starts to creep in, completely overwhelming everything by the return of the head. Ugh. The tape mercifully ends there.

So, here we have another crummy "bootleg" with enough tidbits of interesting music to be worthwhile only to the most fanatical Sun Ra collector. One wishes the original master tape would resurface and be given a fresh transfer, as it would sound a lot better than this inferior facsimile. Given what we currently have, most listeners will find the sound quality utterly repellent and should not even bother hunting it down—the rest of you know who you are.



Better known for his electronic experiments, Sun Ra never really got his due as a pianist, even though he was an obviously gifted player with deep roots in the jazz tradition. Prior to 1977, the only solo piano albums Sonny had ever recorded were the impossibly obscure El Saturn LPs Monorails and Satellites and Monorails and Satellites Volume 2, released in minuscule editions a decade earlier—but the recondite material and low-fi sound offered a mere glimpse into Sonny's wide-ranging keyboard technique. As we've seen, however, extended piano breaks were cropping up during live performances in the late-1970s, if an instrument was available to him. (For an excellent example, take a listen to the brilliantly virtuosic introduction to "Take The 'A' Train" found on Live At Montreux). Of course. insiders knew what Sun Ra was capable of: "... Paul Bley, one of the two or three leading pianists of free jazz, believed Sonny was a great piano player, so great that he didn't need a band. If anything, he felt, the band was a cover for his insecurity (Szwed 1997, 343)."

On May 20, 1977, Sonny entered Manhattan's Generation Sound Studios to record *Solo Piano Volume* 1, which would be released later in the year on Bley's label Improvising Artists Inc. It was eventually reissued on compact disc in 1992 but is now out of print. [*Editor's note*: It is currently available on Bandcamp.] The first in a series of solo piano recordings made during the year, *Volume* 1 is also the most satisfying.

Alone in the studio, Sonny is in a reflective mood, ruminating on a handful of original compositions and choice covers. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" is given a hauntingly abstract reading, alternating between enervated, polytonal passagework and serene, floating chords. The following "Cosmo Rhythmatic" continues this rhapsodic, orchestral approach, while "Yesterdays" is played mostly straight, with an occasionally bubbly ragtime feel that fittingly evokes Sun Ra's early days on the south side of Chicago. On "Romance of Two Planets," Ra stacks up unstable blocks

of vertical harmonies amidst flurries of repeated melodic figures, rumbling bass notes, and sharply dissonant tone clusters—the most "out-there" piece on the album. Meanwhile, the impressionistic "Irregular Galaxy" sounds like a sketch for a potential Arkestra number with its weirdly swinging chord progression and intricately intertwined counter-melodies. Finally, "To A Friend" demonstrates Sun Ra's peculiarly inventive take on the blues: a two-chord vamp over which he elaborates in seemingly endless variation, sometimes in several keys simultaneously. As Szwed points out, "those who had known him for years understood that his origins were in the blues and assumed that side of his playing: 'Sun Ra could play the blues for twenty-four hours without repeating a phrase,' they claimed" (Szwed 1997, 343). Even at seven-plus minutes, "To A Friend" is but a brief example of Sun Ra's genius in this regard.

A flurry of solo concerts followed in the wake of *Solo Piano Volume 1*, some of which were documented. And while the live audiences obviously energized Sonny, making for some exciting performances, the introspective, meditative quality of *Volume 1* is special, a truly unique—and therefore essential—item in Sun Ra's immense discography.

St. Louis Blues: Solo Piano (Improvising Artists CD)

On July 3, 1977, Sun Ra shared a bill with Paul Bley at Axis-In-Soho as part of the Newport in New York Festival, which was recorded by Bley's Improvising Artists label. A portion of Sun Ra's set was released on LP in 1978 as St. Louis Blues: Solo Piano and reissued on CD in 1993. Solo Piano Volume 1 was an introspective studio album, but Sun Ra is in an expansive, playful mood in front of a live audience. As Szwed points out in his biography, "Bley was surprised to see that once he was alone on stage, 'Sonny was a ham who liked to clown and surprise the audience'" (Szwed 1997, 343), and there is a bit of that to be found here.

Ra's passagework is startlingly virtuosic, displaying an astonishing independence of fingers and hands and extreme sensitivity of touch, although it sometimes comes across a bit empty and showy. "Ohosnisixaeht" is a rhapsodic blues with impressively fleet soloing, but the music wanders rather than gets anywhere. W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" is better, updated with a complex, polytonal arrangement. The simple "Three Little Words," a 1930s showtune by Harry Ruby and Bert Kalmar, is given an over-the-top reinterpretation that borders on corny, full of melodramatic glissandos and skittering block chords but always returning to that sweet, sweet swing. Side A closes with a short, romantic rendition of "Honeysuckle Rose" that alternates between rubato schmaltz and breezy ragtime.

Side B is more interesting, containing three originals that show off Sun Ra's compositional skills as well as his brilliant keyboard work. "Sky and Sun" is onomatopoeic: drifting chords represent the sky and twinkling figures in the uppermost register represent the sun. This track is really quite evocative and it sounds he could do this sort of stuff all day long. Ra summons up an entire Arkestra on "I Am We Are," from rumbling bass notes, scraping "strange strings" and exquisitely voiced harmonies to outrageous, free-jazz scree, with moments of two-fisted aggression à la Cecil Taylor—a

tour de force and probably the best thing on the record. "Thoughts On Thoth" ends the album with a slow space groove, articulated with remarkably fluid right-hand flourishes. It's a brilliant display but feels a little perfunctory to me.

Apparently, Improvising Artists released a 40-minute video of this concert, which replaces "Ohosnisixaeht" with another rendition of "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child" (the studio version can be heard on *Solo Piano Volume 1*) and contains some other minor editing differences from the LP. This video was only sporadically available in the 1980s and while "bootleg" versions circulate, I have not seen a copy. And here is a tantalizing rumor: "According to Fred Conrad, the concert ended with 'When There Is No Sun,' on which Ra was joined by June Tyson (voc) and John Gilmore (voc). It is not known whether this piece was recorded" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 237).

This forty-minute videotape was recorded live at Axis-In-Soho in downtown New York, sometime in early July 1977 and was briefly available from Improvising Artists Inc. in 1981 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 237-238). The concert includes some solo piano pieces as well as some small ensembles with John Gilmore on tenor saxophone, Danny Davis on flute, Ahmed Abdullah on trumpet, and June Tyson and Eddie Thomas on vocals. The trippy colorization effects not only look dated and cheesy, they nearly obliterate the raw footage, making it almost unwatchable today. Still, there is some nice music here, including a way-out duet with Gilmore and casual, concise takes of "When There Is No Sun," "Gone With The Wind," and "The Mystery Of Two," as well as a preview of "A Different Kind Of Blues," beautifully sung by Tyson.



We continue with the summer of 1977. After Sonny's solo piano adventures, some of my very favorite Sun Ra records (the introspective studio LP Solo Piano Volume 1 and the more flamboyant live recording St. Louis Blues), there was also one more solo piano set that summer: a radio appearance on July 8 at WKCR, the left-of-the-dial FM station at Columbia University in New York City (which seemed to have an open-door policy whenever Ra was in town). A 36-minute tape of the broadcast circulates widely amongst collectors. Actually. I discovered there are at least two different versions of this broadcast to be found, which caused me considerable confusion when I started to write this up. My first version appears to contain two additional tracks, but, as it turns out, the DJ proceeded to play side A of Monorails and Satellites after Ra's set. Moreover, that first tape was plagued by loads of FM interference and other extraneous noises, sounding like it was recorded with a microphone held up to a speaker. It was rough, but listenable. The second (and more common) version of this broadcast sounds much, much better (more like a proper line recording) and does not contain the confusing album tracks (although the sequence is slightly different). It's one of the better "bootlegs" out there and, despite this flurry of activity in 1977, solo piano performances were exceedingly rare, making this an indispensable addition to the collection.

Starting off with bluesy improvisation, it's sadly apparent that the radio station's piano had seen better days: it's out of tune, some of the keys are sticky, and the voicing is wildly inconsistent, dull and indistinct at one moment, shrill and piercing at another. But Ra makes the best of it, actively exploiting the weird resonances and at times making it sound like a funky clavinet or electronic Rocksichord. Although apparently improvised, there is an elegant structure, with a contrasting, "classical"-sounding middle section, complete with delicate trills and impressionistic arpeggios. Is this an unknown composition? Or is it just another example of Ra's off-the-cuff genius? Who knows? The old stand-by, "St. Louis Blues," is

up next and it's another barn-burning performance: three, four, five independent voices ringing out simultaneously in wildly swinging counterpoint. If there were ever any doubts about Sonny's piano playing abilities, just listen to this! Another standard, "Sophisticated Lady," follows and it's given an oblique, fractured reading, with radical, pantonal reharmonizations and some astonishingly intricate passage work—check out Sonny's ultra-dexterous left hand! Another blues improv once again brings out Ra's brilliantly orchestral pianism with nimble bass riffs and thrilling horn lines, his two hands amiably wandering through distant keys.

After that virtuosic display, things get really interesting. It seems Sonny is just getting warmed up! An untitled original pits an agitated ostinato in seven against skittering right-hand flourishes and beautiful block-chord harmonies. The stuttering bass line almost sounds familiar, but I can't quite place it—another one for the "unknown" file, I guess. "Take the 'A' Train" is given the same treatment as "Sophisticated Lady," a ruminative extrapolation on an old favorite, blithely dispensing with all the clichéd familiarity and nostalgic sentimentality associated with this well-worn warhorse. His enervated explorations of low-register tone clusters and fiery single-note runs easily rival the intensity of Cecil Taylor at his most bombastic—but no matter how "out there" it might sound at times, Ra deftly brings it all back around to the ragtime and swing which forms the basis of jazz. The vast expanse of African American musical history, from emancipation through the avant-garde, is seemingly encapsulated in this four-and-half minute version of "Take the 'A' Train." Incredible.

Another unknown title follows: a two-chord vamp with pretty right-hand melodies, a space-rhumba feel that gradually morphs into straight-ahead swing before going out. Although dreamy and imminently enjoyable, it feels more like a sketch for a potential Arkestra arrangement than a fully-fleshed out composition. The next track, however, was deemed good enough to appear on a Saturn single titled "Quest," in 1982. However, the Evidence two-CD compilation misattributes this track to a later date. [Editor's note: The date is correctly given on the Strut singles set.] Even more confusing, my first version of this tape has "Quest" occurring at the very end of the set, making my correlation even more difficult. In any event, "Quest" is a short but intriguing tone poem, with jagged, irregular

melodies, Morse code rhythms and brittle, uneasy silences. Incidentally, the sound quality of the single is considerably better than the off-air recordings we have here, indicating the possibility that a pre-broadcast master exists in the Sun Ra archives. Well, we can hope so, anyway.

The final track (at least on my second iteration of this tape) is "Trying to Put the Blame on Me," a doleful, two-chord vamp over which Sonny starts to sing. Of course, there is no microphone near his mouth, so you can barely make out what he's saying at first. But there are other voices in the background, faintly echoing Ra's declamations: June Tyson and John Gilmore, who have been quietly sitting in the studio, apparently waiting for this very moment. The station engineers frantically move mic stands around and the song eventually starts to coalesce, a darkly paranoid indictment of those who would blame Sonny for...what? I'm not sure. "What's the name of this game?" he asks. "Cuz if I'm the cause of it all, then that makes me the boss." Whatever it is, he sounds eager to assume the role. According to Campbell and Trent, "Trying to Put the Blame on Me" would only reappear almost ten years later, at a concert in Cambridge, Massachusetts on June 10, 1986 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 491-492). Surely, this song was performed at some point in the intervening years—or perhaps not? Maybe the subject of this diatribe was so specific, it only needed performing once in a while. Again, who knows? These are the sorts of tantalizing tidbits that keep me interested in this project: the mysteries of Mr. Ra.

As you all know, I have complained vociferously about the dismal sound quality of most of the "bootlegs" we've surveyed so far—but this one (especially the more common, correct version) sounds very nice indeed, despite the hiss and crackle inevitably associated with low-watt radio broadcasts of the era. More importantly, Sonny's performance is extraordinary, combining the contemplative meditations of a studio session with the dazzling technical displays of a live concert. It is, in many ways, my favorite of the solo piano recordings from 1977. Definitely worth seeking out, even for the most casual Sun Ra fan—or any devotee of jazz piano. Sun Ra was not just a great composer and bandleader, he was a fluent pianist and the living embodiment of a deep-rooted tradition dating back generations, a fact that sometimes gets lost in all the big-band hoopla and space-age gobbledygook. Here's proof.



Later that month, it was back to business as usual for the Arkestra as a contingent of musicians, singers, and dancers traveled to the Midwest for an appearance at the Bluebird in Bloomington, Indiana on or about July 18, 1977. According to Prof. Campbell (who cites Michael Weiss), Sun Ra performed two nights at the Bluebird, each consisting of two three-hour sets (!) (Campbell and Trent 2000, 239-240). At least one of these concerts was recorded by Tommy Hunter, and selections were released shortly thereafter on Saturn as Somewhere Over the Rainbow. Some copies, however, are confusingly titled We Live To Be. Currently out of print in any format under either title, a copy of the vinyl LP circulates amongst Sun Ra obsessives as a "needledrop" CDR made from a rather crackly original. Oh well, we take what we can get and are thankful for it. [Editor's note: It is now available on Bandcamp.]

Side A opens with "We Live To Be," a gorgeous original Ra ballad which was apparently performed just this once. How is that possible? John Gilmore is up first with a brief but astonishingly fluent solo on tenor saxophone, followed by Ra on an extended, romantic organ solo. Gilmore is in top form here, blowing his ass off in that intense, late-Coltrane fashion he inconspicuously inspired, melding avant-garde shrieks and squawks with the deepest jazz historical traditions. Rather than providing a conventional ending, Sonny cues a throbbing space chord to close, eliciting some stunned applause from the audience. The old standard "Gone with the Wind" is rendered in a soapy, melodramatic organ mode, veering towards holy-rolling gospel at times. The rhythm section (ShooBee Doo [Reginald J. Fields] on bass, Tommy Hunter and Lugman Ali on drums, and Atakatune on percussion) sounds like they're chomping at the bit, ready to explode as the music starts to climax. But who knows what happened next, since the track abruptly cuts off.

Ra then leads a chant: "You made a mistake/You did something wrong/Make another mistake/And do something right!" It's all

good fun at first but gets kind of boring as it goes on. The crowd liked it, anyway, with someone crying out, "bravissimo!" at the end. Moving to piano, Ra plays a pretty, rhapsodic intro to "Take the 'A' Train" before the band comes in with the arrangement. Ensemble passages are a little ragged but the solos make up for it. First, Akh Tal Ebah gets a rare turn at the mic. I love his mellow, loose-lipped sound compared to the blaring pyrotechnics of most trumpet players. Too bad his time with the Arkestra was about to come to an end. Next up is Gilmore and—what can I say?—it's another incredible John Gilmore solo! A prime example of his ingenious harmonic logic, flawless technique, and singular passion.

Side B begins with a curious title, "Amen, Amen (Amen, Meni, Many Amens)," an original composition which was also performed just this one time). Starting out with a funky organ thang, it soon settles into an easy swing, Ahmed Abdullah's trumpet on top. Confident and self-assured on the high-note runs, he follows Ra's meandering chord progression every step of the way until the organ drops out, leaving him to blow freely over bass and drums. When the organ returns, the guys in the band start chanting "Amen" over and over while ShooBee Doo locks into the groove. Sonny appears to be leading a church choir in elaborately hocketed repetitions of "Amen" while Danny Davis solos outrageously on alto saxophone. This goes on for quite a while until a loud, dissonant space chord brings things to a close. "Amen," Gilmore intones solemnly one last time. Very interesting.

The next track fades up on June Tyson singing "The next stop Mars," with Ra interjecting odd chords before finally taking over with a (mostly) unaccompanied piano rendition of "Over the Rainbow." This is another tour de force performance, with aggressive dissonances interspersed with joyfully melodic fragments, with bits of ragtime mixed with flurries of dense passagework, gleefully abstracting and dissecting this hoary old chestnut and serving it up anew. Clearly, Sun Ra was inspired by the solo piano work earlier in the month, and solo segments like this one would turn up with increasing frequency in Arkestra concerts, at least when a piano was provided to him.

The album ends with "I'll Wait for You," quickly fading up on the chanting and percussion jam. The burbling bass and disco hihats sets up an enervated pulse reminiscent of Miles Davis's On The *Corner*, with Marshall Allen and Danny Davis flittering around on flutes while Eloe Omoe hints at a melody on bass clarinet. A dark, dense texture is established, with the hectoring vocals thankfully mixed way back, but fades out after only a few minutes.

Obviously, this album was quickly assembled to be sold off the bandstand while on the road, so it's not surprising to find it kind of a mixed bag. But despite some ham-fisted editing, the sound quality is very nice (as was usually the case when Tommy Hunter was involved) and there is plenty of interesting and unique music to be found here. It may be a minor Sun Ra album in the grand scheme of things, but *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* is imminently enjoyable. If the original tapes of this concert still exist, an expanded reissue could be something special indeed. Well, obsessives like me can dream, can't we?

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Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Fort Dupont, Washington, D.C., August 14, 1977 (AUD CDR)

On July 22, 1977, the Arkestra played at the Michigan Union Ballroom in Ann Arbor and, supposedly, an audience recording exists. However, I've never heard it, and Prof. Campbell offers no details (Campbell and Trent 2000, 240). A few weeks later, they appeared in Fort Dupont in Washington, D.C. on August 14, and a sixty-minute tape of the complete set circulates widely—but be forewarned: recorded from the audience on primitive, monophonic gear, the sound quality is simply atrocious. It's the usual set of problems we find with bootlegs of the era: poor instrumental balance, with volume levels bobbing up down seemingly at random. Moreover, the sound is muffled and distorted yet oddly distant, with a Dolby mismatch or two somewhere in the genealogy, making a bad-sounding tape even worse. The original master tape might have sounded okay but the available copy is a miserable facsimile. *Yuck*.

Nevertheless, this is an interesting set, opening with an extended improvisation featuring Marshall Allen on oboe, which is always a treat. After a couple of sing-alongs led by June Tyson ("Astro Black" and the Sun Ra processional "(The World Is Waiting) For the Sunrise," the band slips into the old favorite "Discipline 27" before quickly launching into some bashing free jazz skronk. "Lightnin" and "Yeah Man!" are taken at almost cartoonishly fast tempos, with John Gilmore wailing away like a madman on the latter. And while the band sounds remarkably tight, it is impossible to make out any details since the recording quality is so horrific. Oh well. A compact but typically intense version of "The Shadow World" follows, featuring plenty of crazy keyboard work from Sonny but, again, the murky sound obscures what appears to be an inspired rendition. "How Am I to Know" swings romantically, with Tyson and Ra singing sweetly to each other and fine solos from Danny Davis and Gilmore (I think—it's impossible to really hear what's going on). Next there's a relatively rare performance of "Planet Earth" (complete with lyrics) before the usual percussion jam on "Watusi" and a long medley of space chants and free blowing to end the set ("Outer Spaceways Incorporated," "Second Stop Is Jupiter," "Space Is the Place" (in its new rearrangement), "Neptune," "Journey to Saturn," "We Travel the Spaceways," "Greetings from the 21st Century," and "Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space"). In the midst of all this carrying on, abstracted versions of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," and "Stranger in Paradise" make fleeting appearances. Blink and you'll miss them.

Frankly, this one is for hardcore fanatics only. If you can tolerate the abysmal sound quality, then you might enjoy this short but action-packed set; everyone else should stay far, far away.

On October 14, 1977 the Arkestra entered Variety Recording Studio for their first studio recordings in over two years. With their increasingly busy touring schedule and tenuous finances, most Saturn records from here on out would be made live rather than in a studio, even one as low-budget as Variety. These sessions yielded the obscure LP Some Blues but Not the Kind That's Blue, released on the Chicago Saturn label in 1978. Alternative titles include My Favorite Things and Nature Boy and may display alternate serial numbers (Campbell and Trent 2000, 241-242). In any event, this is one of the rarest of rare Saturn LPs, with very few copies known to exist. Thankfully, Atavistic reissued Some Blues but Not the Kind That's Blue on CD as part of their "Unheard Music Series" in 2008, remastered from the original tapes and filled out with a bunch of bonus tracks. As with the rest of the Sun Ra albums in this series, this one is a classic.

All that said, Christopher Trent suggests the title track was not recorded at Variety at all and is possibly a live recording. I agree. It has a totally different ambience than the rest of the album with a crude, microphone-on-the-bandstand sound quality. It's a decent recording—and Variety was no high-tech studio—so it's actually hardly noticeable (in fact, the whole record appears to be mono). The structure of "Some Blues but Not the Kind That's Blue" also suggests a live recording, starting out with a skronky group improvisation, with John Gilmore seeming to state some sort of theme but then Sonny suddenly moves from space organ to the piano and now it's a slow blues. After a quick chorus from Gilmore, Ra does his thing on piano, taking it just to the edge of the stratosphere before bringing it back to the slow, grinding blues progression. A series of horn solos follows (some of them way off-mic) as Lugman Ali attempts to get funky on the drums, Sonny shuts it down, calling for a big, squalling space chord (and pretty piano notes) to end. Yeah, this is a live recording.

On "I'll Get By," you can tell it's a studio recording; the sound is more immediate—and also hissier. This torch song from Billie Holiday (written by Roy Turk and Fred E. Ahlert) was only played a few times in the Arkestra's history (but see the 1973 bonus tracks below), and the sparse, bass-less rhythm section lurches rather than swings. Even so, Gilmore is great as usual, even if he seems a little hemmed in by the unsettled groove. A ruminative take on "My Favorite Things" is better, with Sonny providing the rhythmic drive on piano—check out that left hand! This is another Gilmore tour de force, offering his highly personal take on this tune which was so closely associated with John Coltrane. Exquisite! The Atavistic CD inserts an untitled bonus track at this point: Ra's agitated piano ostinatos and the frenetic, out-there horns lend this a "Shadow World" feel. Interesting; but given the more subdued tone of the rest of the album, it is understandable why Sonny left it off.

"Nature Boy" is another hoary old chestnut given the inimitable Sun Ra treatment, starting out with exotic percussion and Marshall Allen's snaky, split-tone oboe, Sonny providing pretty piano chords in the background. After a more traditional piano intro, Gilmore comes in with the melody, surrounded by an ornate arrangement for saxophones and flutes. Ra's solo is slyly romantic, changing keys on a whim while Gilmore gets to do his thing a cappella. A dissonant, pulsating space chord lets loose some mellifluous flute solos before Sonny brings it to a close. "Tenderly" seems to pick up where "Nature Boy" left off, with a similar high-register riff and another rhapsodic piano outing. It's nice and all but feels sort of ad hoc. The solo activity of the summer had clearly given Sonny the confidence to go on and on like this on whatever tune struck his fancy. According to Campbell and Trent, this is only known performance of "Tenderly," and is worth hearing for that reason alone. The album ends with another one-off deconstruction of an old standard, this time the Mercer/Arlen classic "Black Magic." Sonny pushes and pulls at the rhythm, sometimes swinging, sometimes moving to a space rumba feel, sometimes hinting at ragtime. After a very loosely stated melody, Akh Tal Ebah gets a rare turn on trumpet and although he is a little sloppy (and maybe even a little unsure of himself harmonically), I love his warm, loose-lipped tone. Sadly, this would be one of his last appearances with the Arkestra. Danny

Davis follows on alto before a big, loud off-color ending, Ra providing the final punctuation with a low, rumbling chord. Very strange, very beautiful.

The Atavistic CD adds two additional bonus tracks, two more takes of "I'll Get By" recorded at the House of Ra in Philadelphia on May 3, 1973. Ra is on organ with Ebah on flugelhorn and Ronnie Boykins on bass—no drums. The rock-solid Boykins holds this together like superglue, and Ebah's playing is mellow and elegantly understated. Unfortunately, there are some weird sonic anomalies. As John Corbett puts it in his liner notes, "In the distance, the muffled remnant of a previous track appears, taped over on this home recording, the almost in-sync backwards drums providing a low-key element of surreality (Corbett, 2007b)." Yeah, like that. On the second take, Gilmore takes the lead before giving way to a tasty bass solo from Boykins. These tracks demonstrate that the appearance of "I'll Get By" on *Some Blues...* was not just a spur-of-the-moment thing; the song had some previously unknown history.

Some Blues but Not the Kind That's Blue is a typically quirky Saturn release from the 1970s, somewhat unusual for its (mostly) studio setting. Its extreme rarity as an original artifact makes the Atavistic CD a godsend to Sun Ra fans, with the bonus tracks being icing on the cake. But these relaxed, easy-going takes on the standard repertoire should be approachable to any open-eared jazz fan, making it one of those extraordinary "gateway" albums to Sun Ra's outer space music. In a discography numbering hundreds of albums, it can be difficult to know where to start; Some Blues... is as good a place as any.

UNITY



Sun Ra & His Arkestra

Live at Storyville, New York, October 1977

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During the last week of October, 1977, Sun Ra and his Arkestra headlined a week-long engagement at the prestigious Storyville jazz club in New York City, and portions of the concerts on the 24th and 29th were recorded (probably by Tommy Hunter) and released on a double-LP entitled *Unity* by the Italian Horo label in 1978. It was also briefly reissued in Japan on RCA 1979 (Campbell and Trent 2000, 242-243). Horo was founded in 1972 by Aldo Sinesio in order to record local musicians and others in the international avant-garde jazz scene, including Giorgio Gaslini, Enrico Rava, Giancarlo Schiaffini, Steve Lacy, Archie Shepp, Lester Bowie, and, of course, Sun Ra. Unity was one of three double-albums Sonny made for the label in 1978. However, with limited distribution in the United States. Horo records were always hard to find and are, of course, long out of print. A CD reissue program was announced back in 2009, to be released through Atomic Records, but nothing much came of it (and Atomic is now defunct), leaving these essential Sun Ra albums out of reach to all but the most fanatical (and well-heeled) collectors. My copy is a crackly needledrop CDR—but I'd sure love to hear a clean original pressing. It's an excellent live document from the period.

The Arkestra is at full strength for this appearance, with the usual cast supplemented with Craig Harris and Charles Stephens on trombones, Emmett McDonald on bass horn, and Richard "Radu" Williams on bass. This also marks the final appearance of Akh Tal Ebah on trumpet and, unfortunately, he gets no solo space here. Along with Ahmed Abdullah there's a new trumpeter on board, Michael Ray, who would go on to become a key member of the Arkestra in the coming years. Ray had a background in jazz but made a name for himself on the R&B circuit, playing with Patti Labelle, the Delfonics, the Stylistics and, later, with Kool & the Gang. Ray's hard-driving soloing was by far the most forceful trumpet voice in the Arkestra since Kwame Hadi had left the band in 1975. Besides a tendency to overplay, Ray also liked to mimic an echo effect during

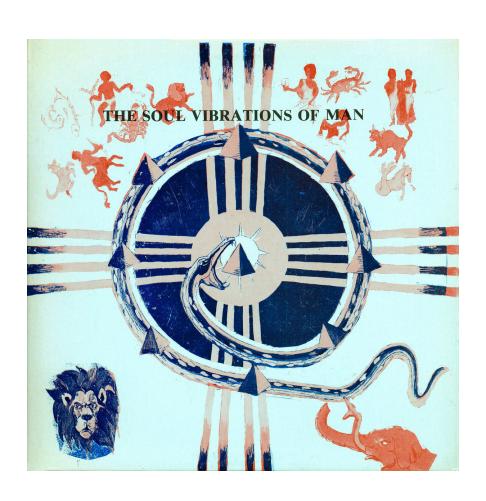
his solos, a demonstration of superlative embouchure control but, over time, an annoying tic. He only pulls this stunt once on *Unity* (on "Lady Bird/Half Nelson"), but soon it will become a fixture in just about every solo. Obviously, Ray brought something to the band Sonny appreciated—otherwise this behavior would not have been tolerated in the "Ra jail." As with Clifford Jarvis's interminable, masturbatory drum solos, Sonny could be over-indulgent with some of his pet musicians, for reasons that remain inscrutable.

The album starts out in the middle of a set, with Sun Ra essaying "Yesterdays" on organ, some wild, dissonant horns coming in only at the very end. After a formal announcement from John Gilmore, Duke Ellington's "Lightnin'" is up next. Taken at a slightly more relaxed tempo than usual, the band sounds tight and full-bodied, with Gilmore handling the slippery clarinet part with ease. "How Am I To Know?" is presented in its full vocal arrangement, with Gilmore moving to the tenor saxophone. With a breathy, wide vibrato, he evokes both the lush pre-War swing of Ben Webster and the bluesy hard bop of Hank Mobley. Somewhat atypical for Gilmore, he plays in a deceptively simple, straightforward manner, staying well inside the harmonic sequence—but it is so deeply soulful and flawlessly executed that the effect is utterly mesmerizing. Yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo—just one of many on this album! A peaceful version of "Lights on a Satellite" surrounds Gilmore's saxophone with fluttering flutes before another couple of classic big-band numbers, "Yeah, Man!" (with Gilmore again shining on clarinet) and Jelly Roll Morton's "King Porter Stomp."

"Images" offers Ray his first opportunity to solo at length, alone with the drums. He has impressive technique but he's a blaster, always playing full-bore with a big, blatty sound. He also knows how to take it progressively out—but Gilmore comes in and shows him how it should be done. The music gets almost unbearably intense as the tenor solo goes on and on and on. Ra tries to rein him in, but nothing doing; he just keeps going. Damn! Gilmore is on fire! Sonny cools things down with "Penthouse Serenade," a lazy swing number for solo organ, and there's more organ balladry on Tadd Dameron's "Lady Bird." This then segues into "Half Nelson," which features barn-burning solos from Gilmore and Ray (who introduces his echoecho-echo trick at the end). Ra announces "Halloween in Harlem" and slams down on a dissonant organ cluster before the ensemble

comes in with the tense, lurching march. "My Favorite Things" again features Gilmore, and what can I say? It's yet another amazing Gilmore solo! Curiously, "Rose Room" and "Satellites Are Spinning" are taken from a concert in Châteauvallon, France on August 24, 1976 (see separate entry above). While a bootleg of this concert circulates, the sound here is quite a bit better. Ra is on Rocksichord rather than organ and the ambience is clearly outdoors rather than inside a small nightclub. Even so, a crossfade puts "Enlightenment," recorded at Storyville in 1977, in between—a rather odd way to end an otherwise remarkably consistent album.

While there are no outrageous, improvised freak-outs or mad-scientist keyboard experiments (nor are there tediously overlong percussion jams or space chants), *Unity* is a classic Sun Ra record—and home to some of Gilmore's finest playing ever committed to vinyl. Despite the rough and ready sound quality, the accessible repertoire and stellar performances makes this another ideal introduction to Sun Ra's music for the newcomer. Too bad it's so hard to find.



122 Notes on Vinyl

Thanks to a reader, I was reminded of a vinyl-only reissue of The Soul Vibrations of Man, which happens to be the next item in the discography. Since this record had never been officially released on CD (and my "needledrop" of an original pressing is a crackly mess), I decided to check it out. I had seen some of these Saturn LPs floating around the record bins, but was unsure of their provenance—were they merely bootlegs of the Evidence CDs? However, it appears that El Saturn Research is now owned by Universal Music Group and these vinyl reissues are legit—almost two dozen so far, three titles (My Brother The Wind Volume 1, Universe in Blue, and The Soul Vibrations of Man) of which have been out of print for decades in any format. Additionally, there's a recent vinyl-only reissue of Of Mythic Worlds, a super-scarce LP originally released by Philly Jazz in 1978. All are pressed on 180-gram vinyl, housed in sturdy cardboard jackets and very reasonably priced—a no-brainer for the turntable-enabled Sun Ra fan.

Intrigued, I decided to investigate some of the other Saturn titles in order to compare them to the Evidence CDs, which suffer from some rather heavy-handed noise reduction and compression. Other Planes of There, one of my favorite recordings from the magical Choreographer's Workshop era, sounds quite a bit more open and dynamic than the CD, leading me to believe it was taken from the original, un-futzed-with tapes. That was all I needed to know: I'm going to have to get the rest of them while they are still available. The problem is: where will I put them? Well, there are far worse problems to have.

Incidentally, I wound up spending some time on eBay trying to track some of this stuff down and was amazed to see a large collection of incredibly rare, mint condition Saturn LPs up for auction in the UK. I knew albums like *Invisible Shield* and A *Fireside Chat with Lucifer* would attract a lot of bids, but I was not prepared to see these dozens of titles finally sell for such astonishing sums of money:

from \$600 to over \$1300 a piece! Apparently, two collectors got into a bidding war at the last minute, with the victor spending many thousands of dollars to obtain these obscure Sun Ra records. Obviously, there is a market for these things—so, how about it, Universal? Why not reissue the rest of the El Saturn catalog? Of course, the schism that developed between Sun Ra and Alton Abraham during the 1970s means that the Philadelphia Saturns are not owned by Universal and are likely stuck in perpetual legal limbo along with the rest of Sonny's estate. Even so, there are still plenty of Chicago Saturns left behind—like *Continuation*. And, speaking of Universal, they also own the Impulse! catalog, which includes Astro Black, another classic Sun Ra album that is impossible to find in decent condition for a reasonable price. Come on, folks! Let's go!

I'll be back with a detailed examination of *The Soul Vibrations of Man* next week. In the meantime, go out and grab yourself a copy—it's a good one.

If Unity presents the more approachable, trad-jazz side of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, the next item in the discography shows they were still capable of getting mighty strange during this period. Live recordings from the Jazz Showcase in Chicago in November 1977 were edited down and quickly released as this Saturn LP, portentously titled The Soul Vibrations of Man. While original copies are extremely rare, it was reissued a couple of years ago on 180-gram vinyl by El Saturn Research, which is now, apparently, a part of Universal Music. It's one of those weird and wonderful Saturn LPs, with a cryptically symbolic cover and a metaphysical disquisition on the back, presumably by Ra, regarding numerology, astrology, and "The Dead Past." In keeping with all that, no titles are given for the five tracks, instead, Side A is titled "The Soul Vibrations of Man Part I Volume VII" and Side B, "The Soul Vibrations of Man Part II Volume VII". Okeydokey! Thanks to Prof. Campbell, Christopher Trent and Ahmed Abdullah, the individual tracks have been identified (Campbell and Trent 2000, 243-244)—and it is an unusual set to say the least.

Side A opens with "Sometimes the Universe Speaks," in its first known performance. Two flutes (Marshall Allen and Danny Davis) play a long, slow, folk-like melody, sometimes in unison and sometimes harmonized but mostly a cappella. After a couple of minutes, the melodies get freer while still coming together on pre-determined chords as the pitter-patter of percussion builds up underneath. Eventually, the melody ends and the drums take over, eliciting cheers from the audience. Suddenly, Ra interrupts with a homily: "Sometimes the universe speaks/And all is silence/Haven't you heard how loud the silence has become lately?" This might have gone on for a while longer, but instead it quickly fades out. More unaccompanied flutes (possibly three or four) lead the way on the pretty "Pleiades." According to Prof. Campbell, Danny Ray Thompson, Eloe Omoe, and James Jacson all doubled on flute, so it's possible they are all playing on these tracks. The side ends with

"Third Heaven," picking up in mid-sermon, Ra preaching about how "Uranus is the Seventh Heaven," while the boys in the band echo his every word. Joking aside, this is actually one of the more enjoyable space chants to listen to, with less shouting and a more musical presentation. After a few minutes, Sonny moves to the organ and fingers some chords to introduce "When There is No Sun," which June Tyson and the guys sing in splendid harmony.

"Halloween in Harlem" opens Side B, a lumbering march that lurches rather than swings, its dissonant harmonies and strained, wide-interval melodies giving off a campy, horror movie air. Michael Ray takes the first solo, his trumpet blatty and smeared, with Sonny following up with a brief organ solo before the return of the theme. Next is an untitled improvisation, with Ra's organ outlining a ballad form while Ray solos. As the rhythm section quietly joins in, it almost sounds like Ra is playing definite chord changes—is this really an improvisation? Who knows? In some ways, this reminds me of "Taking a Chance on Chancey," the improvised duet Ra would often play with Vincent Chancey on French horn. Of course, Ray is a very different player—brash and forceful—and he indulges a bit in his trademark echo-echo effect at the close, which gets the desired rise out of the audience. After a blaring space chord, the band launches right into "The Shadow World" and here's where things get heavy. A series of outrageously intense, high-energy solos follow, with Allen and Davis on alto sax, Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet, and, finally, John Gilmore, who shows them how it's supposed to be done. An incredible display of multiphonic split-tones, altissimo squeals and other impossibly extended techniques; yes, it's another amazing Gilmore solo! Then Sonny follows up with some wild, mad-scientist keyboards before the side abruptly ends.

Admittedly, the homemade sound quality is not that great, the edits are crude, and the pressing is less than perfect—but *The Soul Vibrations of Man* is still a classic Sun Ra LP. The whole thing, from the crazy cover to the music contained in the grooves, has a deep, mystical vibe which neatly encapsulates Ra's "mythic equations." I say get it while you can.

On November 24, 1977, Sun Ra returned to Europe to perform a solo piano concert at Teatro La Fenice in Venice, Italy, a portion of which was broadcast in color over RAI (Italian television). According to Francesco Martinelli, "the videos in circulation are 45 minutes long, [but] the first and second unidentified titles are repeated, and there are only about 25 minutes of music. It is possible that 'Cocktails for Two' (which is heard in the background during footage of Ra walking in Venice, etc.) is from a rehearsal and not the concert itself." Additionally, an audio tape apparently circulates which is from a different source but also repeats the first two titles while omitting "Over the Rainbow." The audio tape, however, "includes an extra unidentified title (which develops into a blues) not on the videos in circulation" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 245). I have neither seen nor heard either of these supposedly circulating tapes and, given the sketchy information provided in their discography (with only "Cocktails for Two" and "Over the Rainbow" being identified), it would appear Campbell and Trent hadn't either.

Then, in 2003, Leo released *Piano Recital, Teatro La Fenice, Venezia* on their Golden Years imprint in a limited edition of 1500 CDs—but it is not sourced from these alleged RAI tapes. Moreover, neither "Cocktails for Two" nor "Over the Rainbow" make an appearance in the setlist, indicating they were not played at this concert and were probably recorded elsewhere. Although seemingly complete, the hour-long Golden Years CD is taken from an amateur audience recording—a "bootleg"—and the sound quality leaves a lot to be desired. The tape was clearly made in the back of the hall, and while the acoustics in the 1790 opera house (which burned down in 1996) were obviously superb, the piano sounds distant and washed out on this primitive stereo recording. To make matters worse, low-frequency rumbles, bumps, and thumps repeatedly intrude as the recordist manhandles the microphone. It's not the worst-sounding bootleg we've heard (far from it!) but a bootleg just the same.

Even so, Sun Ra's performance is extraordinary: a summation of the year's flurry of solo piano activity—and the last such appearance for several years. As such, the Leo CD is an important (if flawed) historical document of Ra's brilliantly idiosyncratic pianism.

Sonny begins his recital with a rhapsodic improvisation, effortlessly moving from lush romanticism to furious atonality to bluesy noodling to impressionistic washes of harmony. In keeping with the ornate, classical music surroundings, Ra has been provided a fine piano, expertly tuned, with sensitive touch and a rich, resonant presence. At times he seems completely absorbed in its lush soundworld. An untitled blues follows. Is this an original composition? Some obscure cover? An extemporaneous improvisation? It's hard to tell, as it sounds like a tune that's been around forever. In any event, Ra sounds like he is having fun and the large, enthusiastic crowd bursts into loud and long applause at its conclusion. Loosely orchestrated renditions of "Love in Outer Space" and "Outer Spaceways, Inc." are little more than jams, but Ra's unerring internal rhythm and innate sense of structure holds things together, delighting the audience with his effortless aplomb. "Take the 'A' Train" and "St. Louis Blues" are given relaxed, carefully considered performances with astonishingly subtle dynamic shadings and fleet passagework. Ra is totally in his element here—and he's just getting warmed up.

After a brief intro to "Penthouse Serenade," Sonny attacks the piano in three-handed fashion, sounding like a slightly more mild-mannered Cecil Taylor, with fragments of the tune interjecting themselves into the furious outpouring of notes. This is Ra as virtuoso pianist, and when he suddenly shifts back to the theme, the enraptured audience bursts into stunned applause as Sonny moves to a loping rag-time feel. At its conclusion, the crowd can barely contain their enthusiasm, hooting, hollering, cheering, clapping; Sun Ra was finally being given his due in one of Europe's preeminent art-music capitals. A short take on "Angel Race" returns to jamming mode with Sun Ra singing the verse. There's not much to it, but the audience eats it up. "I want to invite you to attend a party," Ra tells them. "1980, on Jupiter." Then he launches into an intense improvisation built around stabbing, Morse code-like rhythmic figures and towering block chords reminiscent of "Quest" (which

appeared on the WKCR radio broadcast on July 8, 1977 [see above] and was later released as a single on the Saturn label).

"Honeysuckle Rose" starts off with a slightly off-kilter take on the melody before Sonny moves into a "mad-scientist" keyboard assault. The independence of the hands and fingers is quite remarkable, and his voicing of the thick, dissonant tone clusters strongly accents the consonant notes—meaning the functional harmony still functions. Ra knows exactly what he's doing! No matter how "out" it gets, the music is still deeply rooted in the old-time jazz tradition and this tour-de-force performance is rapturously received by the audience, who vociferously demand an encore. "Friendly Galaxy/Spontaneous Simplicity" is another genially tossed off jamming vehicle (and somewhat overlong at almost eight minutes), but the audience loves it just the same.

Of the four solo piano recordings in 1977, Piano Recital, Teatro La Fenice is probably my least favorite. Although Ra's performance is riveting, the fuzzy sound quality makes it hard for me to fully enjoy. However, given the rarity of such solo outings, it remains essential for the hardcore Sun Ra fan. Personally, I'd love to get my hands on a copy of the video.



Also recorded at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago sometime in November 1977, Taking a Chance on Chances was released on Saturn, the companion volume to The Soul Vibrations of Man. Being the final release on the Chicago-based Saturn label, it is exceedingly rare: there are only a hundred or so copies known to exist—but, unfortunately, all of them have a defective pressing on Side A (Campbell and Trent 2000, 243-244). That fact (along with the somewhat mundane repertoire) makes this one a rather difficult and, ultimately, frustrating listen. The pressing defect manifests itself in a woefully unbalanced stereo presentation and a near-constant overlay of scratchy noises and horrifically ugly distortion which only begins to clear up towards the end of the side. Ugh. Pressing the mono button helps a little (if you have one), but not much. As listeners to The Soul Vibrations already know, these are not great-sounding recordings to begin with; the pressing flaw renders them almost unlistenable.

In any event, the title track opens the album; but, of course, the correct name is "Taking a Chance on Chancey," since it is the usual improvised duet between Ra (on organ) and Vincent Chancey on French horn. Regardless, Chancey sounds remarkably self-assured on that notoriously unwieldy instrument, confidently navigating Ra's twisty chord changes. About four minutes in, Michael Ray comes in with some blaring trumpet while the rhythm section starts to heat up and saxophones ad lib swinging background figures. Interesting. The "Lady Bird"/"Half Nelson" medley follows—but the sound quality takes an even more disastrous turn for the worse, making even John Gilmore's wonderful tenor sax solo hard to enjoy. Fortunately, the sound cleans up a bit for Sonny's solo piano rhapsody, "Over the Rainbow." This tune had become a near-permanent fixture in the setlists during this period, but it is beautifully played and warmly received by the audience.

Side B sounds much better (though still decidedly lo-fi), starting off with a hard-driving take of "St. Louis Blues," led by Sun Ra's

fleet-fingered piano work and supported by Richard "Radu" Williams on bass with Tommy Hunter and Lugman Ali on trap drums. Ra moves back to the electric organ for an extended take on "What's New?" wherein Gilmore takes one of those monumental solos that only reconfirms his stature as one the all-time great post-bop tenor saxophonists. While hewing close to the labyrinthine harmonic sequence, he takes it further and further out as first the organ and then the rhythm section drop out from under him, leaving him naked and alone on the stage. Despite considerable microphone distortion, his tone is still earthshakingly huge, with brilliant ideas spinning out in endless permutations. It seems like Gilmore could go on like this forever, but Ra eventually puts a stop to it with an emphatic organ stab, inviting Ahmed Abdullah to take over on trumpet. While nice enough (and a welcome contrast to Ray's cloying extroversion), it seems a little anticlimactic after Gilmore's astonishingly virtuosic display. The album ends with yet another rendition of "Take the 'A' Train," notable for yet another incredible Gilmore solo. Sadly, my "needledrop" CDR starts to develop a horrible digital clicking sound about halfway through and becomes completely overwhelming by the end. Oh well; I take what I can get.

Obviously, the ever-amazing Gilmore solos are what make the generally bad sound quality worth suffering through on this one—particularly his tour-de-force outing on "What's New?" But with several other, much better-sounding albums available featuring this sort of material, I can't really recommend *Taking a Chance on Chances* to anyone but the most devoted Sun Ra freak (or slavishly devoted Gilmore fan). Perhaps a proper reissue (à la *The Soul Vibrations of Man* LP) would change my mind. [*Editor's note*: Bandcamp's 2018 reissue rectifies the problem with the help of a tape discovered by Michael D. Anderson used for restoration.]

It's unclear whether Sun Ra remained in Europe after the November 24 Piano Recital in Venice or returned to the United States before heading back to Italy in January 1978. There are no entries in The Earthly Recordings regarding the entire month of December and, in an interview with Keyboard Magazine, Sonny spoke of the solo performance and the January 1978 quartet concerts as if they were part of the same tour (Campbell and Trent 2000, 245). In addition, trumpeter Michael Ray states in his liner notes to the 2009 reissue of Disco 3000 that, following the week-long run at the Jazz Showcase (which produced the albums The Soul Vibrations of Man and Taking a Chance on Chances), "The very next phone call from Sun Ra was from Rome Italy. He asked if I was able to come to Rome to record an album" (Ray 2007). This seems to indicate that Sonny had stayed behind to negotiate the Horo Records deal and set up last-minute concert dates for the New Year—and without even knowing who else might be joining him.

But, then, in the summer of 2008, two previously unheard Arkestra tracks were broadcast by Sun Ra archivist Michael D. Anderson on the ESP internet radio tribute, both of which were purportedly recorded at the Bottom Line in New York on December 13, 1977. While I have no real reason to doubt "The Good Doctor" (and it would make sense, in a way, that Sonny would be back in the states during the holidays), upon close listening (and considering the information above), I'm not totally convinced that date is correct.

In any event, the contiguous 16-minute concert sequence is certainly unusual, beginning with (apparently) Ra's only known performance of "I Cover the Waterfront," the 1933 hit song by Johnny Green and Edward Heyman, popularized by Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald. As with other old-timey numbers in this vein, it is mostly a vehicle for one of John Gilmore's extended flights on tenor saxophone, punctuated by harmonized riffing from the rest of the band and a short organ solo from Ra. Of course, it

is always delightful to hear Gilmore playing in this sort of straight-ahead, post-bop fashion but, honestly, it's not one of those jaw-droppingly amazing displays he was routinely capable of. Instead, it's merely great: tasteful, inventive, and swinging. "Theme of the Stargazers" appears here in a radically re-arranged version, with an odd major/minor tonality, angular herky-jerky rhythms, and lyrics that are antiphonally chanted by the band rather than sung. Even weirder, Sonny adds some cryptic declamations towards the end. Interestingly, I don't hear June Tyson or any trumpets whatsoever, but Vincent Chauncey sounds especially strong on the French horn and is later joined by someone (possibly Craig Harris) on a warm and brassy trombone. Frankly, the abject strangeness of this rendition makes me suspect a different date—but then again, who knows?

Ultimately, this snippet of tape poses more questions than it answers, particularly when it comes to nailing down the chronology. Perhaps there is more from this concert in the El Saturn archive, which might provide some more clues as to its origin. Regardless, the unusual repertoire and excellent sound quality make it a highly enjoyable listen. There is a lot of other rare material to be found on the ESP internet radio tribute, and it is well worth tracking down—even if the discographical info is a little sketchy. So it goes with Sun Ra!

While it's possible Sun Ra returned to the states in December 1977 to appear with the Arkestra at the Bottom Line in New York, it seems more likely he stayed in Italy, where he worked out a deal to release a series of albums for the Horo Records label: *Unity* (recorded by Ra earlier in the year) and two new studio recordings, *New Steps*, and *Other Voices Other Blues*, all of them double-LP sets. According to Gianni Morelenbaum Gualberto, who produced the sessions, "the Horo albums were made in a small studio [Horo Voice Studio] that specialized in jingles, because none of the other studios in Rome were available at the time...[They] were recorded in such haste because Sun Ra was about leave Italy. But after they were completed, Sunny changed his mind and extended his stay for another two weeks" (Campbell and Trent 2000, 245-246). Although the Venice gig took place back in November, this is further evidence that Ra remained in Italy through the end of 1977.

Regardless, there was good reason for Ra to want to do something with Horo. The Italian jazz label was founded by Aldo Sinesio in 1972, and had released albums by local artists like Gianni Basso, Giorgio Gaslini, Enrico Rava, and Giancarlo Schiaffini, as well as American luminaries such as Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Gil Evans, Don Pullen, Ran Blake, and Lester Bowie. Yet, however prestigious and critically acclaimed, Horo records were unfortunately issued in vanishingly small quantities and were poorly distributed beyond Western Europe, making them extremely rare today (especially in the U.S.). Rumors of the label's resurrection have come and gone for years but nothing really has come of it and these classic Sun Ra records remain frustratingly out of print. As with Unity, my copies are merely OK-sounding "needledrops," but I'd sure love to have clean originals. Needless to say, they go for big bucks on the secondary market. The Mystery of Being (Klimt), which crams the two studio sessions into a three-LP box set of dubious provenance, will be dealt with separately.

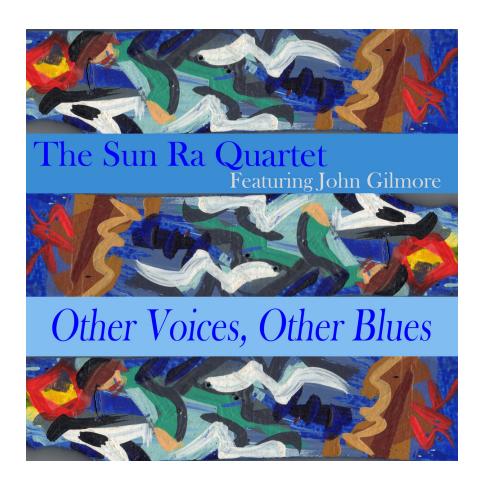
The Horo studio recordings are not only obscure and nearly impossible to find, but they are also some of the most unusual of all the (already unusual) discography. The hastily gathered ensemble consists of a mere quartet with Sun Ra on piano, organ, and synthesizer, John Gilmore on tenor sax and percussion, newcomer Michael Ray on trumpet and percussion, and Lugman Ali on drums. This is a rare opportunity to hear Sun Ra in a small group setting. Moreover, the skeletal ensemble prompted him to do something he didn't often do: record overdubs on additional tracks. According to Gualberto, Sonny found "a small cheap keyboard" in the studio, a Crumar Mainman, and used it to program overdubbed bass lines and other effects while the rest of the group provided additional percussion and drums (Campbell and Trent 2000, 245). This gives many of the loosely constructed tracks an impossible, otherworldly quality that is truly unique. Nothing else Ra ever did (before or since) sounds quite like this.

New Steps was recorded first, on January 2 and 7 and released as a two-LP set in 1978, and the opening take of "My Favorite Things" signals the difference in the quartet's approach. While the tune had appeared before on Some Blues But Not The Kind That's Blue and Unity, here it is simultaneously stripped-down and souped-up. The ultra-laconic Luqman Ali makes Tommy Hunter sound like Clifford Jarvis while Ra's nimble piano figuration and bizarre, overdubbed bass lines create a stuttering, bubbling counterpoint. This is a primo vehicle for Gilmore, who naturally plays his ass off, referencing John Coltrane's famous remake while doing his own inimitable thing on tenor. Ray holds his own throughout these sessions, playing with admirable taste and restraint (especially for such a young kid), but Gilmore is clearly the star soloist here. It is altogether fitting that these albums were billed as the "Sun Ra Quartet Featuring John Gilmore."

Aside from such familiar fare as "My Favorite Things," the old standard, "Exactly Like You" (in its premiere performance), and "When There Is No Sun" (complete with group vocals), these Horo sessions are all markedly experimental, with loosely structured head arrangements and an inspired, playful approach to multitrack technology. Sun Ra and his men are clearly enjoying themselves in the tiny, cramped studio, and that sense of pleasure and adventure comes through in the music. "Moon People" and "Rome

in Twilight" flirt with funk/rock grooves (a harbinger of what's to come later in the year), while "Friend and Friendship" takes on a more somber, introspective tone. Interestingly, the longest tracks, "Sun Steps" (twelve minutes) and "The Horo" (more than fifteen), eschew studio trickery altogether and present the quartet naked and unadorned, improvising in an abstract but not-quite-free manner. Chord progressions and melodies appear and recede in a dreamlike reverie, spontaneous composition and guided improvisation at its most sensitive and refined, a synchronized group mind at work.

New Steps is yet another neglected masterpiece in the Sun Ra canon – and the follow-up, *Other Voices*, *Other Blues*, is perhaps even better. We'll take a listen to that next time on *Sun Ra Sunday*.



The second Horo studio recording, *Other Voices*, *Other Blues*, was recorded at Horo Voice Studio in Rome, Italy on January 8 and 13, 1978 and released later in the year as a two-LP set. As with the other Horo titles, *Unity* and *New Steps*, distribution was poor (especially stateside) and it has never been officially reissued, making it one of the rarer albums in the already obscure Sun Ra discography. What a crime! While all of the Horos are fascinating records, *Other Voices*, *Other Blues* is by far my favorite of the two Italian studio sessions.

Unlike New Steps, there are overdubs on every single track (an unusual practice for Ra, even into the 1980s and 1990s), with Sonny adding synthesized bass lines (or other stuff) while John Gilmore, Michael Ray, and Lugman Ali contribute additional percussion to the mix of keyboards, saxophone, trumpet, and drums. This greatly thickens the sound of the quartet and lends a consistently funky and experimental flavor to the album. It's easy to picture the four men crowded into the tiny studio, earphones on their heads, gleefully constructing these oddly captivating tracks. Any tentativeness heard on New Steps is gone on this second day in the studio—they are going for it! Gilmore is again the star of the show, delivering an endless stream of gloriously inventive solos, while Ray more than holds his own amidst Sun Ra's burbling, wheezing keyboards and rollicking acoustic piano, only occasionally resorting to his patented (and often annoying) echo-echo trick. In fact, it appears that the young upstart may have gotten under Gilmore's skin, inspiring some of his most fiery and intensely brilliant playing on record.

Yet, despite all these aural pleasures, there is something slightly dissatisfying for me about these quartet sessions. It's not just the absence of bass, since Ra is adequately providing the bottom end on synthesizer (at least most of the time), so I can only point the finger at the laconic—if not downright sleepy—drumming of Luqman Ali. To be fair, his subtle, sensitive touch contributes to the relaxed, dreamy quality of the albums. But I find myself wanting more from

him on the longer, weirder tracks like "Bridge to the 9th Dimension" or "Constellation," where his boom-chick rhythms remain stubbornly earthbound, only taking off with the addition of Gilmore's overdubbed drums and percussion. I realize that it is totally unreasonable to expect Ronnie Boykins and Clifford Jarvis to be in the rhythm section, but I can't help but imagine what that might have sounded like.

Nevertheless, there is an undeniably magical quality to the Horos-and especially Other Voices, Other Blues-which makes them uniquely special, with a loose, exploratory feel reminiscent of the classic Choreographer's Workshop recordings. Beyond Gilmore's phenomenal soloing and the ear-tickling studio wizardry, it is Sun Ra's uncanny ability to transform the cheesiest, most primitive electronic keyboards (and beat-up pianos) into powerfully expressive instruments that is most impressive here. Turning these humble tools into a virtual orchestra of tones, timbres, and effects, Ra demonstrates his mastery of electronic (and electrified) music while his compositions—mostly thrown together in the studio show his effectiveness as an arranger and bandleader, with the simple but flexible heads allowing the small ensemble to wander far and wide. Curiously, Ra did not bother to provide proper titles to these new works, leaving them to Horo to invent. "Springtime and Summer Idyll," "One Day in Rome," and "Along the Tiber" (and New Steps titles like "Friend and Friendship") are probably not what Sonny had in mind and are embarrassingly incongruous to the music. However, I suspect he signed away his publishing in order to make these records, so he didn't (or couldn't) care what they were called. Whatever, these are inimitably Sun Ra compositions, however slight they may appear on the surface.

Quibbles aside, the Horo quartet records are an essential piece of the Sun Ra puzzle, with *Other Voices*, *Other Blues* being a near-masterwork. And Sonny was clearly inspired by this ad hoc, small group setting: he booked at least two concerts for the band while they were in Italy, which were recorded for release on his own Saturn label. We'll take a listen to those coming up on *Sun Ra Sunday*.

There have been several dodgy, grey-market reissues of the Horo records over the years, and the latest is a vinyl-only box set, *The Mystery of Being*, released back in 2011 on the tiny French label, Klimt, which crams the two January 1978 double albums onto three LPs. Sound quality is actually pretty good—certainly better than my crackly needledrops—but at the same time, I suspect these are taken from vinyl sources and then (aggressively) de-noised. Moreover, the sides are excessively long, resulting in diminished dynamic range and susceptibility to noise. Sadly, one side of my copy has a nasty pressing flaw, which causes the stylus to skip—and they are now out-of-print, so it is not so easily replaceable. *Bummer*.

Although there are neither mastering credits nor any liner notes whatsoever, this set purports to present the music in chronological order, providing recording dates on the labels. According to them, the sessions occurred as follows:

Side A: January 2: My Favorite Things, Moon People, Rome at Twilight, When There is No Sun

Side B: January 7: Sun Steps, Exactly Like You, Friend and Friendship

Side C: January 8: The Horo, Sun Sky and Wind

Side D: January 13: Springtime and Summer Idyll, Constellation

Sides E and F: January 2, 7, 8, 13: One Day in Rome, Bridge to the Ninth Dimension, Along the Tiber, Rebellion, The Mystery of Being

That makes some sort of sense until you get to the last disc, which could have been recorded on any one of those dates. *Huh?* This is less than helpful and just another indication of this set's dubious provenance. I would guess that basic tracks for *New Steps* were recorded on January 2, with overdubbing taking place on January 7. Similarly, basic tracks for *Other Voices*, *Other Blues* likely took place on January 8, with overdubbing happening on January 13.

That's just a guess, but that would mirror the usual progression in a multi-track environment. Then again, it was such was a highly unusual practice for Sonny, so who knows how it went down? As with so much in the Sun Ra discography, not much can be known with certainty except that the music is fantastic.

I cannot whole-heartedly recommend *The Mystery of Being*, although if you can find one for a decent price, it might be worth it. Otherwise, I'd recommend ponying up for the rare originals. Me? I'm still waiting for a proper reissue of these classic Sun Ra albums. May I live so long...!

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Sun Ra: Media Dreams (Saturn/Art Yard 2CD) Sun Ra:

Sound Mirror (Side B) (Saturn LP>CDR)

Obviously pleased with the Horo Voice Studio recordings, Sun Ra lined up some live gigs for the quartet, touring Italy until at least January 23, 1978, where they performed at Teatro Cilak in Milan and recorded Disco 3000. There were other concerts during the intervening weeks, as documented on two other Saturn LPs, Media Dream and Side B of Sound Mirror, but the actual dates and locations for these recordings are unknown. Originally issued in miniscule numbers, these three albums are some of the rarest and most desirable El Saturn LPs in existence. Thankfully, the intrepid Art Yard label came to the rescue. In 2007, they released The Complete Disco 3000 Concert on two CDs, with the original LP edit also reissued as a single CD. Then, in 2008, they put out another two-disc set entitled Media Dreams, which presents the original Media Dream album on one CD and a 50-minute concert fragment on another. Taken together, these Art Yard reissues present an almost-complete picture of this highly unusual (and haphazardly documented) tour of Italy. In his liner notes for Media Dreams, Trent points out that while the discovery of some (but not all) of the original tapes from this 1978 sojourn "clarifies some questions, establishing long suspected links between various Saturn albums," it also "raises as many questions as it answers" (Trent 2007). Aside from the Teatro Cilak concert, actual dates and locations remain a mystery. And so it goes with Mr. Ra...

In fact, most of the tracks on the original *Media Dream* are not to be found on the concert recording contained in the Art Yard reissue, and those tracks were significantly edited for the official release. Was it all taken from the same concert? Judging from the overall ambience, it could be—or it could be from more than one—but the sound quality on the second disc is significantly degraded, making a direct comparison impossible. According to Trent: "This particular tape is no longer in audiophile condition. It does appear to be the original master, rather than a copy, but is now in a poor state. Art

Yard have rescued it in the nick of time and have gone to considerable lengths to improve its quality" (Trent 2008). They did the best with what they had and, while it sounds pretty good, the tape has dearly suffered the ravages of time.

What is most notable about these live quartet recordings is how they transferred the Horo studio experiments to the stage. While he has been provided with decent pianos at these gigs, Sonny spends the bulk of his time with a variety of electronic keyboards, including a Moog synthesizer and a Crumar Mainman organ. Media Dream opens up with "Saturn Research," a three-minute blast of ominous, dissonant organ and synth, accompanied by dramatic drums and percussion—and Sonny is only just getting started. On "Constellation" (confusingly not the same composition found on Other Voices, Other Blues), Ra switches on the Mainman's crude rhythm box, which plays a slowed-down cha-cha beat supplemented with a simple, synthesized bass line. Now, in anyone else's hands, this would be unforgivably cheesy-yet Sonny somehow makes it work, and the primitive Mainman organ gives these recordings a uniquely retro-futuristic feel. After a scribbly "Yera of the Sun" (whose Morse Code rhythms vaguely recall "Quest"), the Mainman gets another workout on "Media Dreams," a thirteen-minute tour de force. Starting out as a weirdly beautiful ballad form, with twittering organ, legato synth chords and all sorts of electronica effects, Michael Ray takes a long, warm-toned solo on trumpet, ably following Ra's harmonic twists and turns. Then it devolves into Ra's wild, mad scientist display. At the ten-minute mark, John Gilmore comes in with a folk-like melody on tenor saxophone but just as Ra starts to heat things up again, the track quickly fades out. It sounds to me like this could have gone on forever.

Only the last two tracks on *Media Dream* are taken from the concert recording found on disc two of Art Yard's reissue, and they both feature Ra on acoustic piano. The curiously (mis)titled "Twigs at Twilight" is actually "Images," but brutally edited, picking up about half-way through and beginning with Gilmore's tenor solo. Although Gilmore takes many liberties with the tune, in retrospect, it is immediately recognizable as "Images." Anyway, this is definitely another one of the all-time great Gilmore solos, not overly extended but still sublime. After a brief piano excursion and drum break, the track fades out before the return of the head, further obscuring its

origins. Finally, "An Unbeknowneth Love" begins with rhapsodic piano and boom-chick trap-drumming from Luqman Ali—but someone (Gilmore?) is playing tympani, adding slippery and dramatic percussion effects: BOING! BOING! Ra gets into an aggressively dissonant, avant-garde mode before the drum solo, which fades out to end the album. Very interesting.

The second disc contains seven pieces, picking up with "Friendly Galaxy," which is quite different from the version found on The Complete Disco 3000 Concert, where it was combined with "Third Planet." Ra starts out on piano but quickly moves to organ, eventually getting the Mainman's drumbox/bassline thing happening. Unfortunately, Ali drops in and out, unable to find the groove. Ra is going crazy with his ragbag arsenal of electronic keyboards but this is not a wholly satisfying group performance. "An Unbeknowneth Love" follows, with the drum solo leading immediately into "Of Other Tomorrows Never Known." This track appeared in slightly edited form on the Sound Mirror LP and it is another virtuoso performance from Sonny. Woozy string ensemble chords and bubbly bass synthesizer seem to outline a basic structure from which Ra builds his quirkily original electronic music, full of astonishingly variegated textures and intertwined melodic lines. Meanwhile, light-handed drums scrape and murmur in the background. About six minutes in, you can hear Ra barking out instructions—though you can't quite make out what he says. Soon thereafter, Gilmore plays an extended cadenza as Ra hints at the chord changes to "Images."

Despite Ra's commands and a fluid introduction, the horn players fluff their entrance—and while Ray and Ra solo admirably, it really isn't until Gilmore comes in that things really take off. No wonder this version of "Images" was edited (and retitled) for official release! Next up is one of the earliest known performances of "The Truth About Planet Earth" (a.k.a. "Bad Truth"), one of Sun Ra's patently hectoring space chants. When he accompanies himself with a soulfully swinging piano vamp, this has an almost-commercial pop-song feel—but Ra eventually abandons the instrument and everyone takes turns at the microphone, a spacey echo effect added to the voices at the soundboard. At nearly seven minutes, it goes on a bit too long for casual listening (although I'm sure it was thoroughly entertaining live). A brief rendition of "Space Is the Place" offers an intriguing rearrangement of this concert staple, with new lyrics

and alternative countermelodies, which immediately segues into "The Shadow World." Don't get too excited, though! It cuts off after only a couple of minutes.

That leaves the humorously titled "Jazzisticology" as the remaining track from Sound Mirror that was recorded on this Italian tour but is not found on either Media Dreams or The Complete Disco 3000 Concert. It is impossible tell if it belongs with its companion, "Of Other Tomorrows Never Known." or if it is from a different concert altogether. The sound of Gilmore's microphone sounds more gritty and immediate than elsewhere but it doesn't help matters that my "needledrop" of Sound Mirror is a crackly mess. In any event, "Jazzisticology" is another improvised post-bop number similar to what was done in the Horo Voice Studio, with Sonny cueing the arrangement and telepathically communicating the chord changes to Gilmore with his sparse piano comping. Then Ray solos over Ali's drums before the sax and piano return rubato, only to fade out too soon. An inconsequential track, perhaps, but there are other reasons to seek out Sound Mirror (which we'll get to anon). [Editor's note: Unfortunately, Rodger stopped before covering this LP. "Jazzisticology" has subsequently been released on Bandcamp, as part of Disco 3000 (Expanded).]

Needless to say, Art Yard's *Media Dreams* is an essential, if still discographically mysterious, release. *The Complete Disco 3000 Concert* may be even better—we'll take a listen to that one next time on *Sun Ra Sunday*.

The quartet of Sun Ra, John Gilmore, Michael Ray, and Luqman Ali performed at Teatro Cilak in Milan on January 23, 1978, apparently at the very end of their extended stay in Italy. While their exact movements are poorly documented during this period, they were certainly back in the states on or before January 29, where the Arkestra appeared at the Famous Ballroom in Baltimore. The Teatro Cilak concert was recorded, and portions were released later in the year on Saturn as Disco 3000 and reissued by Art Yard in 2009. Prior to this, though, Art Yard released the entire Milan performance on two compact discs as The Complete Disco 3000 Concert in 2007. As with Media Dreams, these welcome reissues not only make available some of the rarest of all Saturn LPs, but also provide additional material that puts these weird and wonderful recordings into a wider context.

The concert opens with "Disco 3000" and, right away, you can tell the small band has really started to gel after several weeks working together. While Media Dreams is dominated by Ra's electronica (wonderful as it is), Disco 3000 is much more of a cohesive group effort. There's still plenty of mad-scientist keyboard extravaganzas, with the Crumar Mainman organ and cheesy rhythm box establishing an uneasy, mutant disco vamp—but here, Ali locks in comfortably with the beat and the horns are given plenty of space across its epic twenty-six minutes. About five minutes in, they suddenly launch into "Space Is the Place," but, curiously, not in the re-arrangement found on Media Dreams. After a couple of minutes of chanting, things take off again, with some absolutely killer tenor saxophone from Gilmore and hypnotic, quasi-ambient keyboard effects from Ra. It's tempting to just say "Disco 3000" is the crowning achievement of the quartet's brief existence and leave it at that. A classic Sun Ra track.

Not that there isn't more great music on these discs! After a short drum solo, "Sun of the Cosmos" continues in the guided improvisation vein, including more crazed keyboard work from Sonny and another outrageous tenor solo from Gilmore, where he explores the entire range of extended techniques from altissimo screams to impossible split-tone multiphonics. Whew! Ra then moves to the piano for "Echos [sic] of the World," a pretty ballad with Gilmore in the lead. "Geminiology" picks up the tempo with some jaunty swing and a riff-based head arrangement, but Ra takes it way out: thunderous low-register tone clusters and furious parallel runs, just a total assault on the piano. Then it's suddenly back to the cheery jazz feel for Ray's extended solo on warm-toned trumpet. "Sky Blues" is exactly as the title suggests, a swinging blues riff, with Gilmore delivering the sermon. Lord have mercy! This is another incredible Gilmore solo, a blues history lesson: from honking, hokey gutbucket to dizzying post-bop harmonic labyrinths to the most out-there avant-garde wailing—all without losing the thread of tradition and ending with an emphatic flourish. Dammnnn.

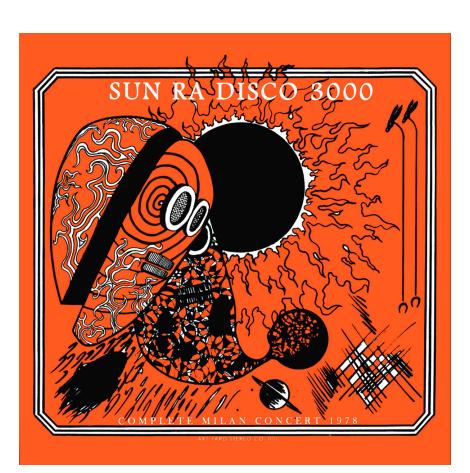
Disc one concludes with six minutes of "Friendly Galaxy," given an angular and dissonant rearrangement, fading out on Ray's muted trumpet solo. Disc two then fades up some time later (the reel flip evidenced by the increased wow-and-flutter at the beginning of the track) and, after about a minute of noodling on "Friendly Galaxy," Ra signals "Third Planet." The two horns sound super-tight and Gilmore once again plays a mind-bendingly great tenor solo, this time accompanied only by the drums. Ali is uncharacteristically aggressive here, swinging like a mofo while Gilmore blows the doors down. No wonder Sonny picked this track for release on the original Disco 3000 LP! "Dance of the Cosmo Aliens" was also included on the original LP and it's another spaced-out electronica-fest, with Gilmore and Ray putting down the horns and picking up percussion instruments. The expanded rhythm section struggles a bit trying to follow along with the crude electric drum box. Even so, Ra's keyboard playing is otherworldly and the crowd eats it up, bursting into rapturous applause at the end.

"Spontaneous Simplicity" is given an electrified rearrangement with lots of wild keyboard effects and some blasting trumpet work from Ray but is perhaps overlong at fourteen-some minutes. This segues into "Images," which is given a tighter reading than on

Media Dreams. While Gilmore's solo is probably not the equal of "Twigs at Twilight," it's still pretty freaking awesome. Although the packaging says this includes "Over the Rainbow," it actually appears on the following track, "When There Is No Sun," which is given a gentle, gospelized feel, with Gilmore and Ray sweetly singing and Ra accompanying them on churchy organ. Then Sonny erupts into another electronic frenzy before slipping over to the piano for a brief sketch of "Over the Rainbow." Finally, the concert ends with a reprise of "Space Is the Place," with Ra vamping on piano for a while before joining in on the chant. Interestingly, this rendition shares the quickened phrasing of the unique rearrangement heard on Media Dreams but lacks the horn parts and countermelodies.

Sonny obviously thought highly of this concert, releasing not only the *Disco 3000* LP but editing the title track and "Sky Blues" down for release on a seven-inch 45RPM single, which can be found on the two-CD set *The Singles* (Evidence). Retitled "Disco 2100," the sprawling original is reduced to two minutes and 43 seconds of Ra's swirling, primitive electronica while the flip side focuses on the first two-and-a-half minutes of boogie-woogie. I don't expect it got a lot of airplay.

While all of the Art Yard releases are essential in my opinion, The Complete Disco 3000 Concert is really something special, presenting Sun Ra in this unusual quartet situation where everything just comes together. You not only get Sonny at his most adventurous, demonstrating his inimitable mastery of electronic keyboards (as well as some virtuosic piano playing), but you also get the young newcomer, Michael Ray, playing with admirable taste and restraint while Luqman Ali more than holds his own as the lone member of the rhythm section. And Gilmore—well, what more can be said? Incredible! Get it before it goes out of print forever.





Although *The Complete Disco 3000 Concert* (recorded at the Teatro Cilak in Milan, Italy) contains all of the music found on the original LP, Art Yard also released *Disco 3000* as a straight reissue (with alternative artwork) in 2009. I'm glad they did because it is a classic—and very strange—Sun Ra album that deserves to be heard in its original form. Moreover, listening to the entire two-hour concert is a considerable time commitment, which, in some ways, dilutes the impact of the original *Disco 3000* LP, in my opinion.

The first side consists of the twenty-six minute title track while side B contains "Third Planet," "Friendly Galaxy," and "Dance of the Cosmo Aliens." While you can read my descriptions on my review of *The Complete Disco* 3000 Concert, what is interesting to me is how much more effective "Dance of the Cosmo Aliens" is when it is shorn from its original context, the twisted electronica bookending the album with "Disco 3000." Or maybe my ears got tired by the time it was played, over an hour into the original concert. Hardcore fans will want both, but Disco 3000 is essential.

In typically Saturnal fashion, Michael Ray's liner notes (penned in 2007 and contained on both Art Yard CDs) are both enlightening and confusing. He writes:

The Winter of '78, I headed to Rome not knowing what to expect...Sun Ra would get up every day at dawn. We would then drive over to Media Dreams, a small studio run by Andreas and Alfie, very good friends of the band. Andreas was credited with the development of the Walkman, which he sold to Sony Company. (Ray, 2007)

Huh? "Andreas" is presumably Andreas Pavel, inventor of a proto-Walkman, which was (according to Wikipedia) patented in Italy in 1977. So, it is certainly possible that he was in Rome in January of 1978—but, as far as I can tell, he had nothing to do with the Horo

Records label or the "Horo Voice Studio," where *New Steps* and *Other Voices*, *Other Blues* were (presumably) recorded. Ray makes no mention of Horo—is he referring to those albums or were there *other* studio recordings made in Italy in January 1978? If so, where are they?

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra: On Jupiter (Art Yard CD) Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra: Sleeping Beauty (Art Yard CD)

These two 1979 Saturn sessions present Sun Ra at his most accessible—groovy, dreamy, spacey, and suitably cosmic while reigning in the full-blown freakouts that can make Sun Ra's music difficult for some (or maybe not quite the right thing on a Sunday evening). That is not to say that these are lesser albums. Quite the contrary! This is simply beautiful music! Essential! Note that these CDs are extremely limited editions and sparsely distributed.



134 Sun Ra Literature

Sun Ra: Collected Works, Vol. 1: Immeasurable Equation was published by Phaelos Books & Mediawerks in 2005. It collects 260 of Sun Ra's poems and a 1968 prose piece entitled "Music Is My Words" in a handsome 226-page volume, along with a handful of black and white photographs. Edited by Alton Abraham's son, Adam, the book provides a comprehensive selection of Ra's literary works, including numerous side-by-side alternates and revisions along with introductory essays by James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken which seek to contextualize these idiosyncratic writings within the otherworldly, messianic persona Sun Ra constructed. As Wolf points out, "I know of no other poet who uses fewer concrete nouns than does Sun Ra...there are almost no moments in his entire written corpus that could be called "images" which suggest visual, sonic, or tactile scenes or experiences" (Wolf 2005, xiv).

Geerken focuses on the mutable materiality of Ra's poetic language and, drawing upon ancient mythology and western metaphysics, suggests that he achieves "a kind of cosmic formula about life and the world which can be employed to harmonize the individual, society, science, politics and art...Sun Ra did not write because he wanted to communicate thoughts but because he cultivated particular vibrations and frequencies from which the texts emerged more or less automatically and spontaneously" (Geerken 2005, xxv-xxvi).

Sun Ra may have been a shaman or he may have been a charlatan—or likely he was a little of both. He was a man born Herman Poole "Sonny" Blount, who reinvented himself as Sun Ra from the planet Saturn. The transformation was total: he legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra and disavowed his earthly mortality. This was decades before Prince! Sun Ra created his own reality—at least while he was alive—and his written works are keys to his mind. These *Collected Works* make for fascinating reading and will be a great resource for future *Sun Ra Sundays*.

The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra (2nd edition) is an example of "amateur" scholarship in the best sense of the word. In an attempt to get a handle on Ra's vast (and vastly confusing) discography, Clemson psychology professor (and Sun Ra fan) Robert L. Campbell began compiling a list of all known recordings, building upon the work of Hartmut Geerken and Dr. Tilman Stahl in the 1980s. In 1992, Prof. Campbell shared his findings with the Saturn internet listsery, and the small but resourceful cyber-community of Sun Ra fans contributed a wealth of new information. Sun Ra was notoriously vague about dates and personnel, and many Saturn LPs were issued in blank or hand-scrawled sleeves containing zero information—not even a title! Therefore, intensive forensic analysis was required to even attempt to ascertain essential discographical details. The end result of this communitarian effort was the publication of the first edition of The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra in 1994. Subsequently, further new discoveries were made and, with the help of co-author and fellow Ra-fanatic, Christopher Trent, this second, massively enlarged edition was published by Cadence Jazz Books in 2000.

Campbell and Trent strive to document not only all of Sun Ra's officially released recordings, both as a sideman and a leader, but also all known live performances, unissued recordings, and rumored sessions. They also attempt to trace the Ra's footsteps around the globe where recordings are unknown. Posthumous performances by the Marshall Allen-led Arkestra up through 1998 are also included. Did I mention the discography is massive? The first edition included 501 items across 218 pages while the second edition lists 788 items and totals 847 pages, including several handily cross-referenced indexes. The 6" x 8" paperbound book weighs in at over three pounds!

It is a shame, however, that such a thick, heavy tome is so poorly bound. The signatures have been brutally chopped off and the three-inch-thick text block is merely glued to a flimsy cardboard cover. With any prolonged use, the spine will surely fail and pages will begin to fall out. A somewhat expensive purchase, I would have preferred that this monumental reference work had been more sturdily constructed. Alas, *The Earthly Recordings* is a labor of love for a vanishingly small, specialized audience, and no doubt a library bound edition would cost upwards of \$100.00. Nevertheless, *The Earthly Recordings* is an essential resource for the serious Sun Ra

fan. Now almost a decade out of date, perhaps a hardbound, thousand-page third edition will be forthcoming.

Another fabulous resource is *Sun Ra Scores*, another amazing bit of scholarship compiled by ethnomusicologist James Wolf. From the years 1956 to 1973, Ra deposited a couple hundred pages of sheet music to the Library of Congress for copyright purposes. Wolf managed to retrieve and photocopy the collection during the mid-1990s. Subsequently, the collection was made available to members of the Saturn internet community for a nominal copying fee. Predictably, most of the "scores" contain only the barest information: a melody, lyrics, and perhaps some chord symbols. However, as I was flipping through them today, I was surprised to find meticulously detailed scores for "And Otherness" and "Moon Dance," two seemingly loosely structured pieces from *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy*. These appear to be not mere transcriptions, but fully realized compositions with additional elements not found on the record. Fascinating!

I'm laid up with a nasty cold, so I'm resting and re-reading John F. Szwed's masterful *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. In his Introduction, Szwed makes a remarkable statement:

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. (Szwed 1997, xviii)

The realm of the ethical and the moral is a realm that most music criticism tends to avoid, and for good reason I suppose. Szwed's statement begs a host of questions: *Can* music be ethical or moral? Or does music rely upon the extra-musical (e.g. biography, texts, performance) to convey ethics and morality? What is an unethical or immoral music? Can ethical or moral music be produced by unethical or immoral persons? Who decides what constitutes ethical ethics and moral morality? These questions are not easy to answer,

even in the case of Sun Ra, who explicitly espoused such ethical and moral concerns amidst the Afro-cryptic, space-age show-biz trappings; he often stated that he was sent here from Saturn to *help people*.

In my re-reading, I will be looking closely to see whether Szwed merely asserts the moral and ethical components of Ra's music or instead seeks to articulate how this realm is manifested in the music itself (beyond, of course, lyrical statements). Personally, I believe that, yes, there is an ethical and moral component that was central to what Sun Ra was attempting to accomplish through his music and that component is audible; to say exactly where and how is another matter altogether.

Or maybe it's just the Sudafed talking.

After a long delay, the third and final volume documenting the spectacular 2006 exhibition "Pathways To Unknown Worlds" was published last year by Whitewalls. Curated by John Corbett, Anthony Elms and Terri Kapsalis, the first volume in the series, The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra's Polemical Broadsheets and Streetcorner Leaflets, collects facsimiles (and transcriptions) of Ra's earliest writings, while the second volume, Pathways to Unknown Worlds: Sun Ra, El Saturn and Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground 1954-68, serves as a catalog for the exhibition with high-quality reproductions of album art and other business ephemera along with essays by Corbett, Glenn Ligon, Adam Abraham, and Camille Norment. Finally, Traveling the Spaceways: Sun Ra, the Astro Black and Other Space Myths compiles presentations from a two-day symposium held at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago in November 2006. I haven't read the whole thing yet, but our own Prof. Campbell offers his research on Sonny's earliest years in Chicago, and there are essays by all the curators as well as notable critics Kevin Whitehead and Graham Lock. Like others in the series, it is a slender but lovingly produced volume and, taken together, they make a wonderful reference source regarding Sun Ra's Chicago years.

Additionally, good old John Sinclair has put together a book for Headpress simply titled *Sun Ra: Interviews & Essays* and it looks pretty interesting. Collecting journalism from various sources, the book makes available writings that would otherwise be impossible

to find—like an interview Sinclair conducted with Ra in 1966 for the *Detroit Sun*, or a 1994 interview with trumpeter Michael Ray published in *Offbeat*. Again, I haven't had a chance to read much of it yet, but I'm grateful to have it. Saturn Research continues!

In 2013, Corbett vs. Dempsey released a slender monograph, Sun Ra + Ayé Aton: Space, Interiors and Exteriors, 1972, a collection of color photographs of Ra taken on the set of the Space Is the Place movie along with Polaroids of Aton's futuristic house murals painted under the influence and direction of Sun Ra during the late-1960s and early-1970s. Unfortunately, brief essays by Glenn Ligon and John Corbett are marred by poor copy-editing, with the latter's essay riddled with blank spaces where additional information was clearly meant to be inserted. Oh well. Even so, the photos are nicely reproduced, and Corbett should be applauded for continuing to make available such printed materials and other ephemera from the Saturn Research archives. Certainly, Space, Interiors and Exteriors 1972 should elevate Aton's position in the pantheon of radical African-American visual artists.

Epilogue

So, with Rodger's short take on two 1979 masterpieces, we come to the end of his coverage of the recordings of Sun Ra. Rodger began writing Sun Ra Sunday as a way to help himself sort out the tangled web of Choreographers' Workshop recordings, one of the most challenging pieces of Ra's discography. Gradually he took off from there and began analyzing the work in rough chronological order from 1961 on, also dealing with earlier recordings as they became available. Whatever his original intentions, though, he never did go back and systematically write about the earliest records. On the other end, when he stopped, there was still over a decade's worth of music to write about.

This epilogue, then, is a brief opinionated survey of the best of what Rodger didn't write about. I am not about to attempt to supply in-depth analyses or historical and biographical context for these recordings; nor am I going try to make this coverage complete (there's not enough time or space in this continuum!). These are just short selective snippets meant to point the interested listener in the right direction, with the implied recognition that, as the interested listener becomes the avid one, the avid listener will probably want it all.

These listings include the original label and, unless otherwise indicated, the year of recording (not of release). I also list the Bandcamp URL if there is one; otherwise, I have made no attempt to supply extensive discographical details. Additionally, as in the main body of this book, I have designated which recordings I think should be part of any core collection of Sun Ra. These also appear in the list that follows of all essential recordings.

One broad, simplistic way to look at Ra's musical career is to divide it into eras roughly corresponding to his home base: Birmingham, Chicago, Montréal, New York, Philadelphia. There are no recordings extant from either Birmingham (Ra's hometown—on this planet, anyway) or Montréal (where the band spent a short sojourn

of a few months in the fall of 1961). Sun Ra Sundays, with a couple of exceptions, primarily focuses on all of the New York years and some of the Philly ones. So we begin with Chicago.

The Chicago Years (1946 to 1961)

All of Sun Ra's Saturn and Delmark recordings from Chicago have something to recommend them. During this era, Ra developed and solidified his big band leadership skills very much in the Ellington mode of composing and arranging to fit the Arkestra's skills and personalities, while exploring sonorities and experimenting with unique mixtures of swing, hard bop, rhythm and blues, Afro-Cuban percussion outings, exotica, Mingus-infused jump, space chants, show tunes, standards, and blues—all suffused with Ra's left-of-center space sensibility and imaginative piano chops. And appearing on most of these records were Ra stalwarts John Gilmore on tenor sax, Marshall Allen on flute and alto sax, Pat Patrick on baritone sax, and Ronnie Boykins on bass: a truly formidable foundation for an amazing series of albums.

Despite the occasional duplication of some tracks from album to album, as well as the appearance of different versions of several compositions on these records, most of the albums are coherently sequenced and thematically and stylistically consistent. Irwin Chusid's clear and thoughtful liner notes on Bandcamp are extremely helpful in sorting out the discographical oddities and overlaps.

The Eternal Myth Revealed Vol. 1 (Transparency, 1933-1976)

This massive 14-CD box set is a treasure chest of rare early Sun Ra. Compiler Michael D. Anderson presents the set in the form of a long radio show, with the music broken up periodically by his own spoken narration (which is repeated in the text of the accompanying booklet) and commentary from bandmates and contemporaries. At least the narration is always separately tracked; thankfully, there are no voiceovers. There's also a lot of music from other artists of the time, meant to illuminate the milieu in which Ra got started and to emphasize some of his key influences. But there's plenty of original early music from Ra himself that cannot easily be obtained else-

where. Among the highlights are Ra's first recorded composition ("Chocolate Avenue" by Clarence Williams, 1933); his first professional recording (four tracks with Wynonie Harris from Nashville in 1946); early organ and Hammond Solovox experiments; numerous examples of Ra's arrangements for big band leader Red Saunders; tracks from a session with Coleman Hawkins; early recordings with Pat Patrick...and so much more. Robert L. Campbell's website "From Sonny Blount to Sun Ra: The Chicago Years" (see bibliography) is an indispensable companion to this set. It contains more details about Ra's musical activities in Chicago, and provides several corrections and updates to the discographical information given by Anderson.

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991 (Strut/Art Yard, 1952-1991)

not dealt with above.)

Encompassing a period of about 40 years, *Singles* is a great way to obtain a broad overview of the "Ark" of Ra's musical output. This 3-CD version is preferred over the original 2-CD collection on Evidence because...well, there's more. It contains several examples of Ra's work with vocalists, with forays into doo-wop, rhythm and blues, and even rock and roll. It's also a formidable sampling of the Chicago Saturn records. (Rodger reviewed several of the later singles, but there's at least a disc's worth of music from the Chicago era

Supersonic Jazz (Saturn, 1956) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/supersonic-jazz

This was the first Sun Ra LP on Saturn. In addition to including early electric piano explorations on the exotica-tinged "India" and "Advice to Medics" (an early relative of "Friendly Galaxy"), there's the first appearance of "El Is a Sound of Joy." The album shows just how versatile Ra's approach already was by this stage, and also how great a pianist he was; his stupendous piano accompaniment throughout is always supportive and engaging.

We Travel the Spaceways (Saturn, 1956/1960/1961) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/we-travel-the-spaceways

Spaceways gets the nod for its haunting otherworldly songs "Interplanetary Music" and the title track. "Space Loneliness" features Ra's adventurous piano over a relaxed Ellingtonian groove.

Angels and Demons at Play (Saturn, 1956/1960)
https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/angels-demons-at-play

Side A (1960) mines the mysterious realm of percussion-heavy exotica with "Tiny Pyramids" and the title track, while "Between Two Worlds" and "Music from the World Tomorrow" explore other territories, the latter pointing toward the sound world of *Strange Strings*. Side B (1956) presents a strong contrast with post-bop compositions more in the "jazz" vein. (Note that all of Side B also appears on the 3-CD *Singles*.)

Jazz by Sun Ra Vol. 1 (Delmark, 1956) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/jazz-by-sun-ra

Produced by Tom Wilson for the Transition label and later reissued on Delmark under the title *Sun Song*, this studio gem is chock full of bliss. From the hard-swinging TV theme-like "Brainville" and the splendid lush Strayhorn-esque arrangement of "Possession" (with a killer Gilmore solo) to the sophisticated romp "Fall off the Log," this is one of Ra's most consistently strong albums from this era. The sublime organ-drenched space ballad "Sun Song" would have not sounded out of place ten years later.

Sound of Joy (Delmark, 1956) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/sound-of-joy

More tracks from the Transition session, with four of them repeated on *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth* and different arrangements of other familiar pieces.

Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth (Saturn, 1956/1957 or 1958) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/sun-ra-visits-planetearth

Even though heavy on the low end, with prominent features for tympani and baritone sax, this album jumps.

The Nubians of Plutonia (Saturn, 1958/1959) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-nubians-of-plutonia

Originally titled *Lady with the Golden Stockings*, the album starts off with "Plutonian Nights," one of Ra's greatest early compositions. Side B focuses on Africa, with the earliest version of "Watusa" (a.k.a. "Watusi"), which would soon become a concert staple after having its second theme omitted in favor of extended percussion bouts for dance features.

Jazz in Silhouette (Saturn, 1958/1959) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/jazz-in-silhouette

This universally acclaimed masterpiece is the pinnacle of Ra's Chicago era, at once totally typical of his output of the 1950s and also the most original and avant-garde manifestation of it. With major contributions from trumpeter Hobart Dotson, the album has definitive versions of "Enlightenment" and "Saturn," two signature tunes that would morph into showcases of live performances in the coming decades. The hard-driving "Horoscope" and the swinging "Images" stand in stark yet fitting contrast to the African soundscape of "Ancient Aiethiopia."

Sound Sun Pleasure!! (Saturn, 1959) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/sound-sun-pleasure

This pleasant album focuses on show tunes and jazz standards, with vocals from Hattie Randolph. There's also some Ra cha-cha-cha, led by Hobart Dotson, with "I Could Have Danced All Night." The Evidence CD also includes one side of a later Saturn LP, *Deep Purple*, featuring Ra's 1948 duet with violinist Stuff Smith on the title track as well as more standards from 1955 and 1957.

Interstellar Low Ways (Saturn, 1959/1960) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/interstellar-low-ways

Low Ways is loaded with space classics, from the John Gilmore-dominated "Somewhere in Space" and the moody "Space Loneliness" to the hard-driving "Space Aura" (with more great Gilmore!), climaxing with the extraordinary first version of "Rocket Number Nine Take off for the Planet Venus," with yet another genre-blasting tenor sax solo from Gilmore.

Holiday for Soul Dance (Saturn, 1960)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/holiday-for-soul-dance

A menu of standards, many with transcendent Gilmore solos, and a key rendition of "Holiday for Strings."

Fate in a Pleasant Mood (Saturn, 1960)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/fate-in-a-pleasant-mood

Fate boasts the first version of the classic "Lights on a Satellite," this time led by the trumpet of Phil Cohran; the mini-suite "Space Mates;" and the angular post-bop "Distant Stars," with brilliant solo turns from George Hudson, John Gilmore, and Ra himself.

The New York Years (1961 to 1968)

Rodger dealt with the primary records from this era, with one exception:

The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra (Savoy, 1961)

Recorded shortly after the Arkestra's arrival in the Big Apple, this studio album, produced once again by Tom Wilson, is still steeped in the Chicago aesthetic.

The Philadelphia Years (1968 to 1993)

Rodger's writing covers this period up to 1979. The appearance of new Saturn LPs began to taper off as the 1980s progressed, with Ra's sporadic studio activity best represented by the albums for Black Saint and A&M. Although most new ground had already been broken by Ra in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, all of the late studio albums of the 1980s are interesting: they almost all have at least one long-form guided improvisation, they are without exception well-recorded, there are several nice Ra vocals, and every solo from John Gilmore is golden. The makeup of the Arkestra fluctuated a bit through these years, although the reed section stayed pretty consistent. Marshall Allen began to be featured more on alto sax on such songs as Ellington's "Prelude to a Kiss." And you can always count on Gilmore's soloing to be exemplary. The role of the bass never recovered from the departure of Ronnie Boykins, except for the addition of Monk bassist (and returning Arkestra member) John Ore on and off throughout the 1980s.

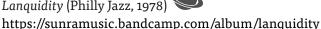
Egypt 1971 (Strut/Art Yard, 1971)

In addition to the three Saturn LPs to come out of Ra's first appearances in Egypt, reviewed by Rodger in the main text, the CD set includes two discs of unreleased material.

Untitled Recordings (Transparency, 1973/1978/1985)

Numerous rehearsal recordings have come to light over the last few years. All of them have something to recommend them, but this one may be the strongest, featuring a 1978 rehearsal with two fantastic Gilmore solos, in addition to the Wilbur Ware session covered by Rodger and a short excerpt from a 1985 Brooklyn show with Milford Graves and Andrew Cyrille.

Lanquidity (Philly Jazz, 1978)



More than ever before, with this album Ra nods in the direction of then-current soul jazz as well as Miles Davis's "In a Silent Way"-era fusion. But Languidity is much deeper and stranger than you might think, once you get past the Fender Rhodes. A special edition of this album with alternate mixes came out in 2021.

The Other Side of the Sun (Sweet Earth, 1978/1979) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-other-side-of-the-sun

This album is a sleeper; it includes the funkiest version of "Space Is the Place" Ra ever did, as well as "Space Fling," one of his most appealing big-band swingers.

Strange Celestial Road (Rounder, 1979) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/strange-celestial-road

A nice companion to *Sleeping Beauty* from the same sessions, sharing its languorous spacey pace. The highlight is the epic 16-minute "I'll Wait for You."

God Is More than Love Can Ever Be! (Saturn, 1979) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/god-is-more-than-love-can-ever-be-cd-lp-digital

This is Sun Ra's only piano trio album, and he knocks it out of the park. One of the best (and best-recorded) albums to feature his gorgeous piano playing.

Omniverse (Saturn, 1979)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/omniverse-expanded

Omniverse is stylistically related to the trio record; every track features piano, and two of the five tracks are trio pieces, the others with sparse horns.

Sunrise in Different Dimensions (Hat Hut, 1980) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/sunrise-in-different-dimensions

Live at Montreux with a nine-piece group (ten if you count June Tyson, who only appears on one song), playing a mix of Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington covers and some meaty improvisations, marred only by the absence of bass (which doesn't help the covers).

Voice of the Eternal Tomorrow (Saturn, 1980)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/voice-of-the-eternal-tomorrow

Recorded live at the Squat Theater in New York City, *Voice* features three long composition/improvisations with ample room for solo synthesizer, vibes, and high-register Gilmore events.

Aurora Borealis (Saturn, 1980)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/aurora-borealis

A short but sweet solo piano album.

Dance of Innocent Passion (Saturn, 1980)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/dance-of-innocent-passion

A companion to *Voice*, this is another live album from the Squat with all-new material, with the title track more organ groove-oriented, similar in spirit to *Antique Black*'s "Song No. 1." "Intensity" features another, yes, intense Gilmore solo.

The Complete Detroit Jazz Center Residency (Transparency, 1980/1981)

An amazing document—six nights of soundboard recordings from a residency in Detroit, spread over 28 CDs, with not as much title duplication as you'd expect.

A Fireside Chat with Lucifer (Saturn, 1982)
https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/a-fireside-chat-with-lucifer

The title track is the best of the later long-form guided improvisations, ranking with "Other Planes of There" and "The Magic City."

Milan, Zurich, West Berlin, Paris (Transparency, 1983)

In 1983, Ra toured with a group he called the Sun Ra All Stars. In addition to Arkestra members John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, and Clifford Jarvis, he was joined by Don Cherry, Lester Bowie, Archie Shepp, Richard Davis, Philly Joe Jones, and Famoudou Don Moye. This box set features four concerts from the tour. With fine playing

from all the strong personalities involved, the proceedings are still dominated by Ra and Gilmore.

Hiroshima (Saturn, 1983/1984 or 1985)

More from the All Stars on one side, and an amazing sidelong pipe organ solo on the other.

Live at Praxis '84 (Leo/Golden Years of New Jazz, 1984)

A better-than-average representation of Ra's live shows from this era, if a little distantly recorded.

Reflections in Blue (Black Saint, 1986)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/reflections-in-blue

Standards and mainstream originals, with great keyboards and great Gilmore.

Hours After (Black Saint, 1986)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/hours-after

A nice mixture of standards and spacier fare, the strongest track being the free jazz workout "Dance of the Extra Terrestrians."

Hidden Fire 1 & 2 (Saturn, 1988)

The last Saturn releases with all-new material. Recorded live at the Knitting Factory in New York City, these are notable for the presence of Billy Bang on violin.

Live at Pit-Inn, Tokyo, Japan (DIW, 1988)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-pit-inn-8-8-88

Excellent late live album, with one of the most strongly swinging versions of "Discipline 27-II" ever.

Blue Delight (A&M, 1988)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/blue-delight

Sumptuously recorded album that definitely lives up to its name.

Somewhere Else (Rounder, 1988/1989) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/somewhere-else

A compilation of tracks that didn't make the cut for either of the A&M records that is in many ways stronger than either of them.

Purple Night (A&M, 1989) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/purple-night

Guest star Don Cherry fits right in, sounding like he's been playing with Ra for years.

Mayan Temples (Black Saint, 1990) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/mayan-temples

The last Arkestra studio album, with some of Gilmore's best post-Horo work and the only known instance of "Discipline No. 1."

The 1980s and 1990s were marked primarily by incessant touring; most of the hundreds of entries listed in *The Earthly Recordings* for these decades are non-commercial recordings of live performances. Of the ones I've heard, many of them are rough going. In addition to variable recording quality, the setlists for the shows had settled into a fairly steady routine: an opening band improvisation, a few Fletcher Henderson arrangements, a few Ra classics (usually including "Discipline 27-II" and "Space Is the Place," and maybe "The Shadow World"), a lengthy cosmo-drama piece, maybe some other standards ("East of the Sun," "I Dream Too Much"), and an ending medley of space chants. There were some detours, of course: most notably the All Stars tour of 1983 and the incorporation of several Disney-related songs into the repertoire after Ra's contribution to the Hal Willner compilation *Stay Awake* in 1988.

Of the hundreds of unreleased live shows out there from this era, here are a few to watch out for:

Whitney Museum, NYC, January 7, 1981 ("Omniverse World Premiere")

Mannheim, West Germany, June 24, 1982

Temple to Music, Roger Williams Park, Providence, RI, August 11, 1985

Kuumbwa Jazz Center, Santa Cruz, CA, May 10, 1987 Nightstage, Cambridge, MA, September 30, 1988 Nightstage, Cambridge, MA, August 11, 1989

There have been several interesting posthumous anthologies, many of them organized around an arbitrary theme, several with unreleased tracks. Hidden gems continue to pop up all over the place. Among the most notable collections are:

In the Orbit of Ra (Strut/Art Yard, released 2014) Curated by Marshall Allen

Sun Ra Exotica (Modern Harmonic, released 2017) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/sun-ra-exotica

Kosmos In Blue: A John Gilmore Anthology, Vol. 1 (Bandcamp, released 2017)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/kosmos-in-blue-a-john-gilmore-anthology-vol-1

Blues At Midnight: A John Gilmore Anthology, Vol. 2 (Bandcamp, released 2017)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/blues-at-midnight-a-john-gilmore-anthology-vol-2

June Tyson: Saturnian Queen Of The Sun Ra Arkestra (Modern Harmonic, released 2019)

https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/june-tyson-saturnian-queen-of-the-sun-ra-arkestra

Swirling (Strut/Art Yard, 2020)

John Gilmore directed the Sun Ra Arkestra after Ra's death in 1993 until his own in 1995. Since then, the Arkestra has thrived under the leadership of Marshall Allen, getting stronger and stronger over the years. The live albums they have released have much to offer, but *Swirling* is a marvelous Ra masterpiece. Farid Barron's brilliant piano playing manages to capture and embody the Ra spirit while extending it into the 21st century and beyond—much the way the album as a whole does.

Core Recordings

I have compiled this list of essential Sun Ra recordings in the hopes of defining which ones should be in any serious jazz collection. These recordings are indicated in the main text by the Saturn symbol. Only titles are listed here, in roughly chronological order. Lists like this are notorious for being overly subjective: guilty as charged. I take full responsibility for this one, which is based on Rodger's contextual rankings, tempered by a sense of the limited value of the act of ranking. Rodger would be the first to agree that he may have used the word "essential" more than necessary, but it's easy to understand. When you're actively listening to these recordings, it all sounds crucial. Any dedicated Sun Ra fan will say that it quickly becomes difficult to deny the essentiality of almost any of his recordings. At a certain point, keen listeners will discover that, in fact, they do have to have it all. Indeed, in the world of Sun Ra, more is more.

Other lists which proliferate on the web (and, to a lesser degree these days, in print) have been compiled to answer the question "Where do I start with Sun Ra?" This list, however, presumes that listeners are already "there," and want to dig deeper, making sure they don't miss anything. More than a place to start, then, think of this as a destination—one that will assuredly change as the journey progresses.

Singles: The Definitive 45s Collection 1952-1991
Angels and Demons at Play
Jazz by Sun Ra Vol. 1 [Sun Song]
Jazz in Silhouette
Interstellar Low Ways
Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow
Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy
When Angels Speak of Love
Other Planes of There
The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra Vol. 1

The Magic City

Nothing Is

Atlantis

The Night of the Purple Moon

Universe in Blue

Horizon

Soundtrack to the Film Space Is the Place

Astro Black

Live At Montreux

Disco 3000

On Jupiter

Sleeping Beauty

Lanquidity

The Other Side of the Sun

Strange Celestial Road

God Is More Than Love Can Ever Be!

A Fireside Chat with Lucifer

Hyperlinks

- 003. Mr. Sun Ra and His Arkestra: *Bad and Beautiful* (Evidence CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/bad-and-beautiful
- 004. Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra: Art Forms of Dimensions
 Tomorrow (Evidence CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/art-forms-ofdimensions-tomorrow
- oo6. Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra: Secrets of the Sun (Atavistic CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/secrets-of-the-sun
- Oo9. Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Research Arkestra:

 The Invisible Shield (side A) (Saturn)

 Sun Ra: Standards (1201 Music CD)"

 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-invisible-shield
- 010. Sun Ra and His Myth Science Arkestra: When Sun Comes Out (Evidence CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/when-sun-comesout
- o11. Sun Ra: Continuation (Corbett vs. Dempsey CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/continuationvol-1
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/continuationvol-2
- 014. Sun Ra: Janus (1201 Music CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-invisible-shield
- 015. Sun Ra and His Myth Science Arkestra: Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy (Evidence CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/cosmic-tones-formental-therapy

- 018. Sun Ra and His Myth Science Arkestra: When Angels Speak of Love (Evidence CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/when-angels-speak-of-love-1
- O19. Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra: Other Planes of There (Evidence CD)

 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/other-planes-of-there
- O2O. Sun Ra: Featuring Pharoah Sanders & Black Harold (ESP-Disk' CD)

 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/sun-ra-with-pharoah-sanders-black-harold
- 021. Sun Ra: The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra Vol. 1 (ESP-Disk') https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-heliocentric-worlds-of-sun-ra-vol-1
- o22. Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra: *The Magic City* (Evidence CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-magic-city-cd-lp-digital
- O24. Sun Ra and His Solar Arkestra: Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 2 (ESP-Disk')
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-heliocentric-worlds-of-sun-ra-vol-2
- o26. Sun Ra and His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Strange Strings
 (Atavistic CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/strange-strings
- o28. The Sensational Guitars of Dan & Dale: Batman and Robin (Universe CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/batman-and-robin
- 029. Sun Ra: Nothing Is (ESP-Disk' CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/st-lawrenceuniversity-1966

- O30. Sun Ra: College Tour Vol. 1: The Complete Nothing Is... (ESP-Disk' CD)

 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/st-lawrence-university-1966
- o31. Sun Ra: Monorails and Satellites (Evidence CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/monorails-andsatellites-vols-1-2-and-3-cd-lp-digital
- o32. Sun Ra: Monorails and Satellites Vol. 2 (Saturn)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/monorails-and-satellites-vols-1-2-and-3-cd-lp-digital
- o34. Sun Ra: Outer Spaceways Incorporated (Freedom CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/pictures-ofinfinity
- o34. Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Atlantis (Evidence CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/atlantis
- o38. Sun Ra & His Solar-Myth Arkestra: The Solar Myth Approach, Vols. 1 & 2 (Charly 2CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-solar-myth-approach-vol-1
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-solar-myth-approach-vol-2
- 042. Sun Ra and His Astro-Solar Infinity Arkestra: My Brother the Wind (Saturn)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/my-brother-the-wind-vol-1-cd-lp-digital
- 043. Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra: The Night of the Purple Moon (Atavistic CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-night-of-the-purple-moon
- 044. Sun Ra and His Astro Infinity Arkestra: My Brother the Wind Vol. II (Evidence CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/my-brother-the-wind-vol-2

- 047. Sun Ra: Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol. 2 (Universe CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/nuits-de-la-fondation-maeght-vol-2
- 048. Sun Ra: Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol. 1 (Universe CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/nuits-de-la-fondation-maeght-vol-1
- 056. Sun Ra and His "Blue Universe Arkestra": *Universe in Blue* (Saturn) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/universe-in-blue
- o68. Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Arkestra: Soundtrack to the Film Space Is the Place (Evidence CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/space-is-the-place-music-for-the-film
- o70. Sun Ra: Astro Black (ABC/Impulse! LP)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/astro-black-remastered-2018
- 075. Sun Ra: *Space Is the Place* (Blue Thumb/Impulse! CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/space-is-the-place
- 076. Sun Ra: Discipline 27-II (Saturn)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/discipline-27-ii-remastered
- 079. Sun Ra: The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums: Cymbals & Crystal Spears (Evidence CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-cymbals-symbols-sessions-new-york-1973
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/crystal-spears-remastered
- 080. Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Pathways to Unknown
 Worlds + Friendly Love (Evidence CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/pathways-tounknown-worlds-remastered-2019

- 090. Sun Ra: Out Beyond the Kingdom Of (Saturn LP) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/discipline-99-outbeyond-the-kingdom-of
- 091. Sun Ra & His Myth Science Solar Arkestra: *The Antique Blacks* (Saturn/Art Yard CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-antique-blacks
- 102. Sun Ra: Cosmos (Spalax) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/cosmosremastered
- 114. Sun Ra: Solo Piano Volume 1 (Improvising Artists CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/solo-piano-vol-1
- 115. Sun Ra: St. Louis Blues: Solo Piano (Improvising Artists, Inc. CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/st-louis-blues
- 117. Sun Ra: WKCR Studios, Columbia University, New York, NY, July 8, 1977 (FM CDR)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/solo-piano-at-wkcr-1977
- 118. Sun Ra and His Arkestra: Somewhere Over the Rainbow (Saturn LP>CDR)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/somewhere-over-the-rainbow
- 120. Sun Ra: Some Blues but Not the Kind That's Blue (Saturn/Atavistic CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/some-blues-but-not-the-kind-thats-blue
- 121. Sun Ra Arkestra: *Unity* (Horo LP) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/unity-live-atstoryville-nyc-oct-1977
- 123. Sun Ra: The Soul Vibrations of Man (Saturn LP)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/the-soulvibrations-of-man

- 124. Sun Ra: Piano Recital, Teatro La Fenice, Venezia (Leo CD) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/solo-pianovenice-1977
- 125. Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Taking a Chance on Chances (Saturn LP>CDR)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/taking-a-chance-on-chances
- 127. Sun Ra Quartet featuring John Gilmore: New Steps (Horo LP) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/new-steps
- 128. Sun Ra Quartet featuring John Gilmore: Other Voices, Other Blues (Horo LP)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/other-voices-other-blues
- 129. Sun Ra Quartet: *The Mystery of Being* (Horo/Klimt LP) https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/new-steps https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/other-voices-other-blues
- 131. Sun Ra: Disco 3000 (Expanded) (Art Yard CD)
 https://sunramusic.bandcamp.com/album/disco-3000-expanded
- 133. Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra: On Jupiter (Art Yard CD)
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The Authors

Rodger Coleman began piano lessons at the age of seven, eventually studying for eight years with Dr. Allen Brings, composer and professor of music at Queens College of the City University of New York. In public school, he studied clarinet and other woodwinds under the direction of Gary Sousa and studied music theory, and sang in the choir under William Fletcher. Moving on to the New England Conservatory of Music, Coleman studied "Third Stream" music with Ran Blake, Hankus Netsky, and Bob Moses amongst others.

After falling in love with punk rock in the mid-eighties, Coleman picked up the electric guitar, taking lessons with Mick Goodrick and experimenting with fellow NEC students in a punk/jazz hybrid that would eventually become UYA (a/k/a Upstanding Young Americans).

With the addition of drummer Sam Byrd, UYA recorded their self-titled CD in 1990, which was nominated for a Boston Music Award in 1991. The band performed regularly around the Boston area as well as in New York City, including several gigs at the original Knitting Factory and a shared bill with the nascent Medeski Martin & Wood at The Cooler (now defunct). While a follow up album failed to materialize, UYA's punk/jazz rendition of Sun Ra's "Dancing Shadows" appears on Wavelength Infinity: A Tribute To Sun Ra and is still available on Rastascan Records.

After the band split apart, Coleman and his wife moved to Nashville, Tennessee where he re-discovered the piano and continued to make occasional music with Sam Byrd, who had relocated to Richmond, Virginia. The duo has since released a limited edition vinyl LP (Cosmologies, 2012) as well as a number of critically acclaimed CD and digital-only releases via Bandcamp. As Coleman's home studio has gradually been filled with various synthesizers and gadgets, their music moved in a more abstract, electronic direction and prompted a number of solo releases from Coleman over the past few years.

Jazzwise Magazine has described the Coleman/Byrd duo as "a weaponized version of The Necks or The Dead C sieving through the wreckage of Jack Vance's post-apocalyptic dystopias" while aptly comparing Coleman's recent solo work to sonic compatriots, Common Objects and Supersilent. Though he rarely gigs these days, Coleman has sporadically performed around Nashville both with Sam Byrd and solo shows on processed electric guitar and modular electronics.

In 2006, Coleman started the *NuVoid* blog as an outlet for various writings about music "and other good stuff." After ten years of blogging, Coleman pulled the plug in November, 2016, though the site remains available on blogspot.com.

Sam Byrd is Scholarly Publishing Librarian at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Va. He has played drums in the bands Tad Thaddock, the Office Ladies, UYA, New Ting, the Subtle Body Transmission Orchestra, Boris Bobby, and Layers of Memory. He has recorded extensively with Rodger Coleman and has performed (twice!) with Marshall Allen. He writes about Sun Ra on his blog *World of Abstract Dreams*.

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