

Sun Ra

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Sun Ra (born Herman Poole Blount, legal name Le Sony'r Ra^[1]; May 22, 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama – May 30, 1993 in Birmingham, Alabama) was a jazz composer, bandleader, piano and synthesizer player, poet and philosopher known for his "cosmic philosophy", musical compositions and performances.

"Of all the jazz musicians, Sun Ra was probably the most controversial," critic Scott Yanow said,^[2] due to Sun Ra's eclectic music and unorthodox lifestyle. Claiming that he was of the "Angel Race" and not from Earth, but from Saturn, Sun Ra developed a complex persona of "cosmic" philosophies and lyrical poetry that made him a pioneer of afrofuturism as he preached awareness and peace above all. He abandoned his birth name and took on the name and persona of Sun Ra (Ra being the ancient Egyptian god of the sun), and used several other names throughout his career, including Le Sonra and Sonny Lee.^[3] Blount denied any connection with birth name, saying "That's an imaginary person, never existed ... Any name that I use other than Ra is a pseudonym."^[4]

From the mid-1950s to his death, Sun Ra led "The Arkestra" (a deliberate re-spelling of "orchestra"), an ensemble with an ever-changing lineup and name (it was also called "The Solar Myth Arkestra", "His Cosmo Discipline Arkestra", the "Blue Universe Arkestra", "The Jet Set Omniverse Arkestra", and many other permutations; Sun Ra asserted that the ever-changing name of his ensemble reflected the ever-changing nature of his music.) His mainstream success was limited, but Sun Ra was a prolific recording artist and frequent live performer, Sun Ra's music ranged from keyboard solos to big bands of over 30 musicians; his music touched on virtually the entire history of jazz, from ragtime to swing music, from bebop to free jazz; he was also a pioneer of electronic music, space music,^[5] and free improvisation, and was one of the first musicians, regardless of genre, to make extensive use of electronic keyboards.



Sun Ra at the New England Conservatory of Music, February 27, 1992

Biography

Early life

For decades, very little was known about Sun Ra's early life; much of it was obscured by Sun Ra himself: he routinely gave evasive, contradictory or seemingly nonsensical answers to personal questions and even went so far as to deny his birth name. Even his birthday was unknown, with years ranging from 1910 to 1918 being

claimed for his birth. Only a few years before his death, the date of Sun Ra's birth remained a mystery: Jim Macnie's notes for *Blue Delight* (1989) could only state that Sun Ra was believed to be about 75 years old. However, Ra's biographer John F. Szwed was able to uncover a wealth of information about Ra's early life,

including confirming a May 22, 1914 birth date. Named after the popular vaudeville stage magician Black Herman, who had deeply impressed his mother, Sun Ra would speculate, only half in jest, that he was distantly related to Elijah Poole, later famous as Elijah Muhammed, leader of the Nation of Islam. He was nicknamed "Sonny" from his childhood, had an older sister and half-brother, and was doted upon by his mother and grandmother.

Sun Ra was a skilled pianist as a child. By 11 or 12 years old he was writing original songs,[6] and was able to sight read sheet music. Birmingham was an important stop for touring musicians, and he saw famous musicians like Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, along with less-famous performers who were often just as talented as their better-known peers, with Sun Ra once stating "the world let down a lot of good musicians".[7] In his teenage years, Sun Ra demonstrated prodigious musical talent: many times, according to acquaintances, he would see big band performances and produce full transcriptions of the bands' songs from memory. By his mid-teens Sun Ra was performing semi-professionally as a solo pianist, or as a member of various

ad hoc jazz and R&B groups. He attended Birmingham's Industrial High School where he studied under famed music teacher John T. "Fess" Whatley, a demanding disciplinarian who was widely respected and whose classes produced many professional musicians.

At ten years old Sun Ra joined the Knights of Pythias, and remained a member until he graduated from high school. His family was deeply religious but was not formally associated with any Christian church or sect. Ra had few or no close friends in high school but was remembered as kind-natured and quiet, an honor roll student, and a voracious reader. The Black Masonic Lodge was one of the few places in Birmingham where African-Americans had essentially unlimited access to books, and the Lodge's many books on Freemasonry and other esoteric concepts made a large impression on him.

Also by his teens, Sun Ra suffered from cryptorchidism,[8] a chronic testicular hernia that left him with a nearly constant discomfort that sometimes flared into severe pain. The condition also left him with a sense of shame and increased his sense of isolation.

Early professional career and college

In 1934 Blount was offered his first full-time musical job when Industrial High School English teacher Ethel Harper organized a band and decided to pursue a career as a singer. Blount joined a musicians' trade union and Harper's group toured through the US southeast and Midwest. Harper left the group mid-tour to move to New York (she later was a member of the modestly successful singing group the Ginger Snaps), and Blount took over leadership of the group, renaming it the Sonny Blount Orchestra.

They continued touring for several months before dissolving the unprofitable group. Though the first edition of the Sonny Blount Orchestra was not financially successful, they earned positive notice from fans and other musicians, and Blount afterwards found steady employment in Birmingham.

The clubs of Birmingham often featured exotic trappings such as vivid lighting and murals with tropical or oasis scenes that were believed to have

influenced Sun Ra's later stage shows. The big bands also imparted a sense of pride and togetherness to black musicians: musicians were highly regarded in the black community, and were expected to be disciplined and presentable, and in the segregated south, black musicians arguably had the most acceptance in white society, often performing for white high society audiences (though they were typically

"Trip to Saturn"

Finances and his increasing sense of isolation are believed to have been a factor in Sun Ra's leaving college, but perhaps more importantly, he claimed a visionary experience as a college student, a strange event that was to have a major long-term influence on the young pianist. In 1936 or 1937, in the midst of deep religious concentration, Sun Ra claimed that a bright light appeared around him, and, as he later stated, ... my whole body changed into something else. I could see through myself. And I went up ... I wasn't in human form ... I landed on a planet that I identified as Saturn ... they teleported me and I was down on [a] stage with them. They wanted to talk with me. They had one little antenna on each ear. A little antenna over each eye. They talked to me. They told me to stop [attending college] because there was going to be great trouble in schools ... the world was going into complete chaos ... I would speak [through music], and the world

forbidden from associating with the audiences).

In 1936 Parker's intercession led to Blount being awarded a scholarship at Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University. He was a music education major, studying composition, orchestration, and music theory, but after a year, he dropped out and then attended some other musical college.

would listen. That's what they told me.[9]Sun Ra said that this experience occurred in 1936 or 1937, but according to Swzed, even his closest associates cannot date the story any earlier than 1952 (Sun Ra also stated that it occurred when he was living in Chicago, a town he did not regularly inhabit until the late 1940s). With no substantial variations, Sun Ra discussed the vision to the end of his life. The trip to Saturn allegedly happened a full decade before flying saucers entered public consciousness, about 15 years before the contactees and their stories of benevolent Space Brothers were publicized, and almost 20 years before sinister UFO abductions were a public concept. Szwed states that "even if this story is revisionist autobiography ... Sonny was pulling together several strains of his life. He was both prophesying his future and explaining his past with a single act of personal mythology.[10]

Discography

- 1957 Super-Sonic Jazz by Sun Ra and his Arkestra
- 1957 Jazz By Sun Ra by Sun Ra and his Arkestra
- 1958 Jazz in Silhouette by Sun Ra and his Arkestra
- 1958 The Nubians of Plutonia by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra
- 1960 Fate in a Pleasant Mood by Sun Ra and His Myth Science Arkestra
- 1961 The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra by Sun Ra and his Arkestra
- 1962 When Sun Comes Out by Sun Ra and his Astro-Infinty Arkestra
- 1963 Angels and Demons at Play by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra
- 1963 When Sun Comes Out by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra
- 1965 The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra Volumes One and Two by Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra
- 1965 Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow by Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra
- 1965 Fate in a Pleasant Mood by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra
- 1965 Secrets of the Sun by Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra
- 1966 Visits Planet Earth by Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra
- 1966 Other Planes Of There by Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra
- 1966 The Magic City by Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra
- 1966 When Angels Speak of Love by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra
- 1967 Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra
- 1968 Sound of Joy by Sun Ra and the Arkestra (recorded 1957)
- 1969 Atlantis by Sun Ra and his Astro Infinity Arkestra
- 1970 Holiday for Soul Dance by Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Arkestra
- 1970 Nothing Is by Sun Ra
- 1970 Sound Sun Pleasure!! by Sun Ra and his Astro Infinity Arkestra
- 1971 Nidhamu by Sun Ra and his Astro Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra
- 1971 Live in Egypt 1 by Sun Ra and his Astro Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra
- 1972 Bad and Beautiful by Mr. Sun Ra and his Arkestra
- 1973 Space is the Place by Sun Ra
- 1973 Concert for the Comet Kohoutek by Sun Ra
- 1973 Deep Purple by Sun Ra and his Arkestra featuring Stuff Smith on violin
- 1974 The Invisible Shield by Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Research Arkestra
- 1975 What's New? by Sun Ra
- 1976 Cosmos by Sun Ra
- 1976 Strange Strings by Sun Ra and his Astro Infinity Orchestra
- 1978 Lanquidity by Sun Ra

- 1978 Disco 3000 by Sun Ra and his Arkestra
- 1982 Strange Celestial Road by Sun Ra
- 1984 Nuclear War by Sun Ra Arkestra
- 1984 Cosmo Sun Connection by Sun Ra and his Arkestra
- 1986 A Night in East Berlin by Sun Ra and his Cosmo Discipline Arkestra
- 1989 Blue Delight by Sun Ra
- 1990 Purple Night by Sun Ra
- 1991 At the Village Vanguard by Sun Ra Sextet
- 1991 Friendly Galaxy by Sun Ra Arkestra
- 1992 Destination Unknown by Sun Ra & his Omniverse Arkestra