

'LOST IN THE STARS'

-HITCHING A LIFT DOWN SUN RA'S 'STRANGE CELESTIAL ROAD'

Band leader, composer and iconoclast Sun Ra was a remarkable and inspiring musician. After his apprenticeship with pioneering swing band leader Fletcher Henderson, Sun Ra went on to create some of the most innovative and all encompassing music of the twentieth Century. Claiming he came from Saturn, Sun Ra was immensely influential, both musically and spiritually, to the 60's generation that created free jazz, helping John Coltrane kick his drug habit and providing an early start to major musicians like Pharoah Sanders.

Long, long ago in my early teens, before the Thatcher witch had the country in her iron grip, record shops and departments held a strong fascination for me. It was not the records actual sounds, as I rarely brought anything, but the possibilities those thick card covers contained. The sleeves were icons evoking strange worlds and magical escapes. 'Mahavisnu Orchestra' albums in particular confused and bemused me. As I gradually became aware of jazz, and acquired a disposable income, a new mythology opened up for me in those record racks; the liberation theology of John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler strangely resonated with a white clergyman's son feeling trapped in gentle Cheltenham.

In amongst this confusion of new names and ideas one name especially stood out, Sun Ra. His record covers defied comprehension, full of bizarre, even frightening names, odd clumsy drawings and strange figures; just fingering them felt dangerous, and it took some time to summon up the courage to listen inside.

Twenty years later as a musician and pair of ears Sun Ra has been a vital spirit guide, what follows is a meditation on some of the reasons Sun Ra is important to me

1 "There's no limit to the things that you can do"

Sun Ra's universe was full of energy and possibilities, of the creative potential of music and humans, and its central metaphor was of the cosmic journey, the "strange Celestial Road that we're travelling". Trapped in a white dominated culture, he used the imagery of space travel and science fiction to place himself, his band and his music outside of the stifling conventions of mid twentieth century America, similarly invoking Ancient Egyptian traditions for historical

grounding. Against a deep pessimism for the material world he encouraged musical and personal adventure.

"Most musicians play earth things, *what they know*. I found out that they are mostly unhappy and frustrated and that *creeps over* into their music. But people they have dreams of *going other places* and *seeing other things*."

Sun Ra created his music from pushing boundaries. He pushed his musicians beyond conventional techniques, often creating a music shaped by gesture and the moment. He would endlessly rehearse complex pieces and then revel in the first recorded takes of music, full of surprise. New technology fascinated him and he was one of the first to try out new electronic instruments and sound recording techniques (he was using the new steel wire sound recording technology and electric keyboards in the 30's and was using the new synthesizers and electronic keyboards by the mid sixties).

"People have a lot more of the unknown than the known in their brains"

Every gig (and day) in the Ra universe was be an adventure, open to transformation and the pursuit of creative mistakes, not evolution but "evolution", driven by a trust in intuition and change. (Well I read that and thought, you pretentious bastard, but then that's ok, it is how we should live our lives, whether we do or not is not for us to say)

John F Szwed's 'Space is the Place', one of the best jazz books ever, places Sun Ra both within traditions of black radical leaders and also showmen and magicians. Ra's real name, Herman Poole Blount, was inspired by 'Black Herman', the most famous of early Twentieth Century black magicians and an associate of Marcus Garvey and Booker T Washington.

This complex of ideas, of the showman/leader and shaman/charlatan, contained even in his 'earth' name, prepares us for the riddles and paradoxes so central to the later 'Sun Ra'.

"I think of myself as a complete mystery. To myself."

One of his favourite words was 'mystery', 'My story'. His constant searching into alternative histories and myths, from Ufology to neo Platonism, radical black histories to the Cabala, allowed him to create his 'story', his 'history'. His trawling the past also developed his love of the ambiguous, of the possibilities of riddle and word play, of the necessity to create confusion to learn.

" My story is close to mystery"

Sun Ra asks us to do the same, asking, " **what's your story?**", sending us off to seek clues in confusion and contradiction, through the cracks and gaps in our lives and culture.

2.

Sun Ra's universe was a magical place. Szed places him in the context of the "Afro-American sacred cosmos". In a world dominated, defined and rationalised by the white race this magical approach offered freedoms and escape, but it also reminds us that the relationship between what is supposedly internal and external is a strange and elusive one. (One time opening the Sun Ra file on my computer there appeared a new file marked 'death', nervously I tried to open the file, failed, and the file never appeared again.) Szed relates Sun Ra's own learning back through alternative schools of knowledge back to the Pythagorean roots of esoteric tradition. Sun Ra's personal spiritual roots were in the Baptist Church, and he had a formidable grounding in the Bible, however he used it as the cabalists and some Protestants sects used it, as a magical or mythic resource, a book of possibilities.

My own grounding is in the Baptist Church and I have recently found myself going back to the Seventeenth Century roots of that church. There I discovered some of the wellsprings of socialism and 'alternative ' culture. This was a time of creating new myths from old, re-interpretations far more radical than any of today's Christianity. Writers such as Abezzier Coppe sound echoes of Ra's own raids on words, truth and vision,

**And yet I shew you a more excellent way
In a word, my plaguey, filthy,
nasty holiness hath been
confounded by base things. And then (behold I shew you a mystery,
and put forth a riddle to you)
by base things, base things have I been confounded into eternal
Majesty,
unspeakable glory, my life, my self.**

The word Pandaemonium itself came from the Seventeenth Century poet Milton:
Pandaemonium, the palace of the demons,

***"Anon out of the earth.....
Rose like an exultation "***

Sun Ra marks a point on a 'golden thread' of possibilities running from Pythagorus through the Neo-Platonists, Arabic alchemists, and William Blake. Like Blake, Sun Ra plays on ideas of 'good' and 'evil', deciding that if the god of

the Christians created this world then he would be of the devils party. It is a tradition of riddles, inversions and ambiguities, of 'angels and demons at play'.

3. "play all the things you don't know "

Sun Ra's universe can also seem utterly ridiculous, but then he found the planet ridiculous,

" you could call me the jester of the creator. The whole world, all the disease and misery, it's all ridiculous"

He pushed through contradictory categories with an omnivorous intent into areas of apparent pomposity, clumsiness and absurdity, but then he wouldn't have given a shit what anyone else would have thought and neither should we. Pianist Brad Mehldou asserts that the greatest limitation on any improviser is worrying whether they sound any good, and that applies to all situations.

The greatest magic in Ra's magical universe was of course sound. The idea of 'sound healing' is now synonymous with new age tranquilities, with a kind of musical Valium, but with Sun Ra that healing was visceral and alive. Charles Ives's father George used to preside over great outdoor hymn singings declaring that "you won't get to heaven on pretty little sounds". Some one compared Albert Aylers' sound on the tenor saxophone to shouting 'fuck' in a cathedral, but like all good sex that was a sacred 'fuck'. So too the Arkestra's sound is a maelstrom of creativity where notions of the sacred and the profane become meaningless. Sun Ra wanted to wake us up, not put us to sleep, and created his sonic magic through his sense of joy in sound, a joy that could approach both senses of the word apocalyptic, as the psalmist said
*"praise him with a joyful noise...make a loud noise....
Let the sea roar and the floods clap their hand
and the hills be joyful together".*

There are no false dichotomies in Sun Ra's approach to sound. One of jazz's strengths is in denying any opposition between the sophisticated and visceral. The Arkestra took this to the logical conclusion that the abstract is also the concrete, reveling in a love of possibilities of sound, in an "energy that is eternal delight". Sun Ra revelled in mistakes, and in the first takes of even the most 'difficult' and arcane recorded pieces, takes full of energy, surprise and exploration, perfection was the process of change and growth, of stepping into the unknown.

" I teach my musicians not to know"

The all-embracing carnival of an Arkestra gig is legendary, sun Ra's music could not be limited by received notions of what a concert was or what categories his music could be put in. Again Szed places this in the context of "Black performance values alien to white experience, conventions drawn from the church, the black cabaret, bar life and community picnic".

But those vernacular traditions of celebration are here in 'my culture'. Categories can help understanding but also create artificial barriers, and I find similar traditions, ultimately springing from the same sources; seasonal celebrations, circus, the village music for church, dance and pub.

I saw Sun Ra and the Arkestra three times, the first time, at the Venue, was probably the best gig of my life, full of sonic adventure, madness and space chants, but the last time, at Brecon Jazz Festival, revealed the last of the great big bands. The gig emphasised Sun Ra's apprenticeship with the founder of swing, Fletcher Henderson, and a horn section that had worked with Ellington, Monk and Art Blakey. But this was not a respect for the past shrink wrapped in a respectful halo, as with Sun Ra's other raids on tradition, this love of jazz history was liberating not limiting.

This total approach to sound was matched by the total dedication of Sun Ra and the band to their music. The discipline and demands made by Sun Ra are legendary, way beyond most people. As the Arkestra demonstrates, a band should be than just a group of people playing together; to play this creative music well calls for shared ideals, humour, and approaches to sound; to a commitment to a music that will never make you rich. Many of Britains most inspiring musicians have been marginalised and ignored, just as hidden traditions of inspiration and liberation run through our culture so there has been a hidden tradition of musicians committed to experimentation and improvisation. Ra 's music was people based, " you can't have harmony unless you have two or more sounds, and you have to have two or more people to have harmony", dedicated to the idea that people should "throw their energy into a pool".

"But people, they have dreams of going other places and seeing other things"

Sun Ra hated this planet Earth, sharing with the Gnostics the belief that if anyone did create this planet, then they must have been a miserable and mean bastard. His path, his "Strange Celestial Road " was above all else a way out of this world.

**"In some far place, light years in space
I'll wait for you, I'll wait for you.
I'll build a world of abstract dreams,
Where human eyes have never seen.
I'll Wait for you"**

I've recently been listening to some 'Shaker' songs, simple chants, 'newly created', some even sent by 'spirits' and literally in gibberish, all full of this desire for new worlds. You can hear the same yearnings in the American shape note traditions, both black and white, their strange harmonies, intense timbres and deep desires with roots not just in Afro-American music but in the West Gallery traditions of English country churches.

But it's a desire for escape expressed just as much in trash 'sci fi' novels and films, remember a young Jimmy Hendrix escaping into the world of Buck Rogers (I'm also reminded for no particular reason of the stories of a later Hendrix obsessed with the goon shows). Sun Ra's achievement was creating a charged space where these energies could play and where the systems that categorize and 'value' 'high' and 'low' culture, 'Black' and 'White' History, noise and melody no longer held sway.

One of the best times I played the song 'Strange Celestial Road' was at a collective fortieth birthday party, leading a mass of people, falling over in the dark, and staggering gloriously around a huge bonfire. Three days of rain and winds the sky had cleared for a full moon and a night full of magical possibilities. Sun Ra's dance weaves through the past and present and onwards, tripping you up and whirling you around, until you don't know who or what you are, and often that's the best place to be.

quotes from;

'The Man from Outer Space' A Discussion with Sun Ra in 1989 by Robert Franza on WUSB-FM and published in the *Stony Brook Press*, (Vol. 10 No. 9) and available on ' Saturn', the Sun Ra and Arkestra website

Interview with Sun Ra by Jennifer Rycenga, in San Francisco. Transcribed and edited by Dan Plonsey. Again available on Internet

'As Serious As Your Life' by Val Wilmer. Alison and Busby. 1977

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