



The Feeling Of Space: How Sun Ra Integrated Sci-Fi in Music

By Geoffrey Himes October 12, 2015 Paste Magazine

“Some people call me Mr. Ra,” Sun Ra often told interviewers, “and some call me Mr. Ree.”

Sun Ra was a man of many mysteries, not the least of which was how much he believed his own story. He insisted that he wasn't born as Herman Blount on May 22, 1914, in Birmingham, Alabama, as official records had it, but was instead an angel from the planet Saturn who made his first appearance on this planet at that time and place.

Many people watched him closely for the wink or smile that would acknowledge that the tale was an extravagant joke or elaborate fiction. He never provided any such indication and stubbornly stuck to his story that he was a messenger from a superior race come to help troubled earthlings.

This left it up to each member of his far-flung audience to decide just how to take Sun Ra's claims. For most of us, the tale of his voyage from Saturn to Earth was clearly not reality but just as clearly no joke either. All of Sun Ra's work included sci-fi elements: his instrumental compositions boasted exotic, extraterrestrial sounds; his poems and song lyrics referenced interplanetary exploration; he and his band members were costumed in otherworldly attire. But in many ways his greatest science fiction was his own life.

In Robert Mugge's brilliant documentary film, *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, Sun Ra stands on the rooftop of a tall building in Philadelphia. He's dressed like an angel from Saturn: a rotund man in a gold mask, blue face paint, a purple caftan, Mardi Gras beads, a magenta wig and a maroon mesh cap bristling with silver wires.

“With all the churches you've got, all the schools you've got and all the governments you've got,” he proclaims, as if he were the inspector from an intergalactic accreditation agency, “you're supposed to have a better planet than this. Man has failed...He should be a good sport about it and say, 'I give up. I need help.' I'm here as a bridge for them to get help.”



Almost all science fiction is built around a “What if?” premise. Often those hypotheticals are technological, but the most interesting ones, such as Sun Ra’s, are cultural. The most interesting of all are not those that offer a vision of the future but rather an alternate vision of the present.

For African-Americans, who have good reason to dislike the present reality, science fiction offers a tempting way to reimagine the world. This movement is often called “Afrofuturism,” and while Sun Ra is the most vivid example, other examples are easy to cite: funksters George Clinton and Janelle Monae, authors Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler, and hip-hoppers Kool Keith and MF Doom. “This boy was definitely out to lunch,” Clinton said of Sun Ra. “The same place I eat at.”

But none of these others lived out that science fiction 24 hours a day the way Sun Ra did. None of them went strolling down the sidewalks of the Oakland and Philadelphia ghettos in the middle of the afternoon dressed like a pharaoh from the outer solar system.

You can see an example of this in John Coney’s 1974 movie, *Space is the Place*, which depicts Sun Ra’s spaceship, resembling a pair of giant yellow breasts, as it arrives from Saturn in a vacant lot in Oakland. He walks down the ramp dressed like an Egyptian king with a silver cosmic orb on his head and goes parading through the black neighborhood, flanked by acolytes with golden heads of eagles and bears, chased by kids on dirt bikes and taunted by their mothers.

Sun Ra is soon confronted by a flamboyant pimp in a white hat and suit named the Overseer (Ray Johnson). Like the chess-playing characters in Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, Sun Ra and the Overseer play a game

of tarot-card poker for the fate of the planet. The low-budget picture mixes sci-fi and blaxploitation elements as the two opponents face off in a brothel full of naked women, in a waterfront gun battle and on sidewalks full of winos and gamblers.

The best scene is a flashback to a 1930s club, where Sun Ra is the bowler-hatted pianist for dancing girls (in real life, he had played in Illinois strip clubs). When he goes off from the swinging blues tune into an avant-garde tangent, the dancers flee in terror, the audience riots and the nightclub collapses around them. It's a great fantasy of what new music can do. Last year the movie was saluted in *Space Is the Place: 40th Anniversary Edition*, a 124-page coffee-table book that included a DVD of the entire film and an audio CD of the soundtrack.

"I've often thought about Sun Ra," the Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne wrote in the book's introduction. "My reasonable mind would always conclude, 'He thinks he's from outer space—he's crazy. And I would think, 'I'm not like him.' And yet some part of me really admired this way that he was.

"Suddenly one day you just stop being one person and you become another. You become a person that is your own creation. It is the truth of all creative people. Some change their name, like Bob Dylan, and some change everything but their name, like Miley Cyrus, and either way they become a brand new version of themselves. And for some reason this 'change into a made-up character' allows them to be more real and more true."

Sun Ra wasn't just the author of mythology; he was a character within that mythology. He lived onstage and off as a messenger from Saturn bringing new musical vibrations to transform Planet Earth.

"I had to learn all the different forms of music on this planet," Sun Ra told the *Hartford Advocate* in 1984, "to speak to people in a language that would be more than universal; [it would be] omniversal. When I went to Egypt I was able to connect the ancient, the present and the future. And all the future: we have to make another future..."

"This planet is not really self-sufficient; it depends on something else from outside. They called my music 'Black Music,' and I did try to do a lot of things to help black people. But now I call my music 'Dark Music,'" the dark side of jazz...the unknown part, the hidden part, the real roots, the part that now nothing about. I also could use the equation in the Bible which says, 'I will open my dark sayings upon the harp.' That's a piano, you know. So I can play things and reveal things that will enable people to be prepared for space."

If you had grown up as an African-American in Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1920s and '30s, amid a spate of lynchings and tightening Jim Crow laws, you too might have claimed another planet as your home. If you were confronting a power structure as hostile and implacable as the segregationist South, you too might have created an alternate universe where your talents were recognized and your hopes encouraged. But what kind of universe would you invent?

Sun Ra's story kept evolving. In his early years in Birmingham, this well read autodidact emphasized his ancestral roots in Ancient Egypt, which he claimed was ruled by a black super-race that pioneered breakthroughs in science and the arts. But then barbarians pushed them away from the Nile and into central Africa, where they were enslaved and brought to America.

Later in *A Joyful Noise*, Sun Ra wanders through the half-human/half-dog statues and the hieroglyphics from Ancient Egypt in the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Now wearing a gold chainmail skull cap and a rainbow-colored caftan, he intones, "They say history repeats itself, but history is only 'his story.' You haven't heard 'my story.' My story is different from his story. My story is not part of history, because history repeats itself, but my story is endless."

After he moved to Chicago in 1945, he began to describe that super-race as visitors from Saturn who had brought higher knowledge to Egypt—and who occasionally brought their descendants back to the ringed planet for schooling—including one Sonny Blount. After he moved to New York in 1961 and then to Philadelphia in 1968, the Saturnians expanded their message from black earthlings to all earthlings.

What is that message? Well, if you're a member of an oppressed community and your opponents control most of the money and weapons, you're not going to create a science fiction where the ultimate battle will be fought with guns and bombs. But you might invent an alternative universe where the fate of all sentient beings is decided by musical vibrations.

What did those vibrations sound like? Well, Sun Ra's music was clearly rooted in the jazz of his early heroes: Fletcher Henderson (for whom Blount worked as a pianist and arranger), Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Sun Ra's additions to that big-band tradition—all the saxophone squeals, synthesizer growls and percussion ensemble rumbles from outer space—helped usher in the free-jazz of John Coltrane (Sun Ra's frequent visitor), Cecil Taylor, and Ornette Coleman, as well as the jazz-rock fusion of Miles Davis, Weather Report, and Return to Forever.

"I can do things with synthesizers," Sun Ra told *Downbeat* in 1993. "If I want to get the sound of thunder, it's there. If I want the feeling of space, it's there. You could do it maybe with a piano too, but with a synthesizer I can not only play the melody but I can play the rhythm, and then I can pull something down that I never heard before."

As such, he was an important link in the evolution of jazz, but he existed so far outside the jazz mainstream (for years he only released his recordings in small batches on his own Saturn Records label—often in hand-decorated covers) that he might as well have been on another planet. It was only when he turned 58 in 1972, near the end of his peak artistic years, that his records got any real distribution and that he began to tour more widely. Only then did the press and broader jazz and pop audience take notice of what a major artist had been hiding in their midst.

What made him a major artist was not the sci-fi sound effects he produced on his electric keyboards—though he could suggest the beeping controls and roaring exhaust of a spaceship as it swooshed through space. Nor was it the sing-song chants about space travel that he sang with his female dancers.

No, what made him an important figure was his ability to greatly expand the ingredients of jazz composition by adding squealing dissonance, harsh distortion, clashing chords and strange intervals to the mix of ingredients and then bring them into big-band harmony. It was as if he recognized that life on Planet Earth was growing more complicated and chaotic with each passing decade and needed music that could reflect that pandemonium. But it also needed an example of how those conflicting elements could be made coherent. As such, his 1950s recordings anticipated not only early-'60s free jazz but also late-'60s psychedelic rock.

It was this aspect of his music that explains how Sun Ra could convince some of the best musicians of his era—most notably saxophonists John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, and Pat Patrick—to not only join his band but also wear space-alien Halloween costumes on stage every night and to even live with him in his large communal houses in New York and Philadelphia. It explains why Coltrane so often visited Sun Ra and even sat in with the band several times. It explains why such noted jazz musicians as Pharoah Sanders, Von Freeman, Billy Higgins, Clifford Jarvis, Michael Ray, and Julian Priester passed through the band.

"He was the first one who introduced me into the higher forms of music," Gilmore says in *A Joyful Noise*, "past what you might say Bird, Monk, and the fellows were doing. I didn't think anybody was ahead of them until I met Sun Ra." During his first six months in the band Gilmore could play the notes, but he couldn't hear the purpose behind them.

“Then one night I heard it,” Gilmore added. “We were playing this number ‘Saturn,’ which I had been playing every night for six months. But that night I heard the intervals, and I said, ‘My gosh, this man is more stretched out than Monk. It’s unbelievable.’ I didn’t think anyone could write any meaner intervals than Monk and Mingus, but he did.”

I first encountered Sun Ra in person on January 16, 1977, at Baltimore’s Famous Ballroom. This home of the Left Bank Jazz Society, an African-American non-profit organization, was an old-fashioned dance hall with high ceilings and a long wooden floor filled with banquet tables. But the ceiling was painted with stars and clouds and the walls with portraits of famous black musicians.

Dressed in pyramid hats and black vests covered with metallic red dots, Sun Ra’s Myth Science Cosmos Swing Arkestra slowly filled the stage. One member plucked an African kora; the nine horn players churned up wild, ricocheting lines over a rumbling frenzy from the four percussionists. A female vocalist began chanting a poem about outer space. Three African dancers sprinted across the front of the stage.

“Most of the time the avant-garde looks so serious,” Sun Ra told *Musician Magazine* in 1986. “They don’t look like they’re having fun. People don’t want to see that. I want people to laugh at the costumes I have on. Why do they astronauts wear what they wear? Why do soldiers? Because it makes people notice them more. The musicians have a perfect right to join the crowd and say, ‘We’re going to wear this; this is how I feel.’”

Finally Sun Ra himself appeared in a blue metallic suit with a glittering silver cape and skull cap, carrying a vase full of silver rods. He began pawing at his electric organ, even turning his back on it and playing it with the backs of his fingers. The trill of his high notes and the dull roar of his low notes were reflected by more frantic horn playing.

One could tell that the more traditional jazz fans at the long tables were taken aback. One could hear annoyed whispers of “garbage” and “hoax.” A few people started gathering their coats and purses to leave. It was just at that point that Sun Ra sat down behind his organ and led his band through a ripping, flawless version of Duke Ellington’s “Take the A Train.” The people about to leave sat back down.

Sun Ra had made his point that his band could nail the classics of the jazz canon with impeccable precision when it wanted to. But most of the time it didn’t want to. Why? Because that had been done, and they were trying to create unprecedented music—and they often succeeded. When the Arkestra’s astonishing reed section toggling back and forth between tonality and atonality, one realized that a musical boundary was being blurred to the point of erasure, to the point where two musical nations had become one.

Abstract slides and film footage of African game preserves provided a backdrop for the band and its dancers. Sun Ra delivered a chanting sermon, explaining that he was the representative of other worlds, whose spaceships were circling overhead. What might have seemed a silly joke became a powerful fiction, because the band created the sound of what might have been the ships’ broadcasts.

I was a convert and began attending every Sun Ra show I could. When the Arkestra returned to the Famous Ballroom on July 23, 1978, Mugge’s crew was on hand to film Sun Ra, now wearing a cap of golden metal strips and a robe of shimmering rainbow colors, and his band, now wearing black-sequin Rasta caps and bright red shirts.

The highlight of the show—and of the film—was Sun Ra’s long blues piano solo, which bounced along to a rollicking tempo until it suddenly drove off the road into the bushes of outer-space dissonance before it just as suddenly regained the pavement. It was as if he were trying to prove that the past and future of jazz were inextricably linked—as were his home planet and his adopted planet.

“It’s like a journey,” Sun Ra told *Downbeat* in 1993. “You’re on the road, and you have to do what you have to do for the changes of scenery, changes of feelings. You have to be ready for those potholes in the road.”

I began collecting as many of his albums as I could find. Some were better than others, but the best ranked with the best jazz of their era. For the uninitiated wading into a catalogue of more than 100 titles, the best places to start are *Jazz in Silhouette*, ***The Nubians of Plutonia***, ***Nothing Is...***, ***Live at Montreux***, ***The Magic City***, *Other Planes of There*, and *Outer Spaceways Incorporated*.

The Arkestra’s concerts in the ‘80s always had moments that matched the high quality of those recordings from the ‘50s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, but also long stretches devoted to synth noodling and sing-song chanting. They regained some focus when Sun Ra returned to his biggest influences from this planet: Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Art Tatum, and the like, giving their material both reverent readings and an interplanetary twist. Something similar happened when he began playing songs from Disney movies.

The last time I saw Sun Ra was at the 1989 New Orleans Jazz Festival. The Arkestra, shut out at the muddy, closed Fairgrounds, set up shop in the playground of Marie Convent Elementary School. The bandleader wore a shiny gold cape and a silver-sequin fez. Alto saxophonist Noel Scott wore a gold-sequin cap with Mouseketeer ears. Mixed in with songs such as “Space Is the Place” and “Rocket #9” were Disney numbers such as “The Forest of No Return,” “Heigh Ho,” and “Whistle While You Work.”

It worked beautifully, for Sun Ra and Walt Disney were two of the 20th century’s master fantasists. One asked us to wish upon a star; the other asked us to believe he was born on one. The songs from *Snow White* and *Pinocchio*, the two sources Arkestra emphasized, were full of both a childlike sense of wonder and an adult sense of yearning that fit the joyful freedom of Sun Ra’s Arkestra perfectly.

In 1990s, a series of strokes slowed Sun Ra down, but he continued to tour and even opened several shows for his admirers in Sonic Youth. But finally on May 30, 1993, he died in pneumonia in his hometown. His musicians claimed he had merely “left the planet,” but his family had a grave dug for him in Birmingham’s Elmwood Cemetery.

Sun Ra’s departure did not stop the Arkestra, however. In the mid ‘90s, Evidence Records released most of the Saturn albums plus some unreleased albums and singles on CD. In 1997 John F. Szwed published his definitive biography, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, carefully balancing the reality and the mythology.

Two of Sun Ra’s most talented and most loyal lieutenants, tenor saxophonist John Gilmore (who died in 1995) and alto saxophonist Marshall Allen, pushed the band to keep touring and recording. This September, in fact, the “Sun Ra Arkestra under the Direction of Marshall Allen” released *Babylon: Live*, which documented a 2014 concert in Istanbul, Turkey, as both an audio CD and DVD.

The light of the departed leader—eerily blue from its source in Alabama, or perhaps Saturn—shines through it all. That was Sun Ra’s genius: his ability to illuminate the unreal until it seemed real. If we were willing to accept his fiction of life on Saturn, maybe we could accept his vision of a more harmonious Planet Earth. “Did you ever see *Star Wars*? he once asked music critic Francis Davis. “It was very accurate.”