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Preview: Brian Harnetty spins Sun Ra's recordings into kaleidoscopic collage



By Joel Oliphint

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Columbus musician Brian Harnetty tends to work in solitude, but his music is anything but insular. Harnetty dialogues with the past and contextualizes it with his own contributions for the present, bringing dusty archives back to life.

For the 2007 album *American Winter*, Harnetty immersed himself in the Appalachian Sound Archives at Berea College in Kentucky, selecting choice bits of found sound and interweaving his own instrumentation. For the 2009 release *Silent City*, he used more Berea material and enlisted the help of Will Oldham, aka Bonnie “Prince” Billy, to add vocals.

Harnetty’s just-released album on Atavistic, *The Star-Faced One*, draws from an entirely different source. In 2010, Chicago’s Experimental Sound Studio commissioned him to make a sound installation from the archive of Sun Ra, an avant-garde jazz artist who mythologized himself as an

angelic being from Saturn.

“You can’t divorce [the myth] from his upbringing in Alabama during the Jim Crow era under segregation,” Harnetty said. “Alabama was probably a stranger place than Saturn — more alien and alienating.”

The Star-Faced One condenses the sound installation into a captivating 22-track album.

The Sun Ra/EI Saturn archive is vast and sometimes inscrutable. It includes everything from rehearsal tapes to audio of Sun Ra’s television set. Harnetty, who’s also a Ph.D. candidate at Ohio University, spent more than six months listening to about 700 recordings before ever reaching for his own instruments.

“Part of what I’ve been doing for school is to study archives, and what does it mean to reinterpret it,” Harnetty said. “It’s not a real collaboration. It’s like a posthumous duet. The person who made the original recordings isn’t there. He doesn’t have any say. So there are a lot of ethical concerns to go along with that.”

Instead of trying to become a Sun Ra completist, Harnetty became a curatorial medium, sampling the audio scraps he found most compelling and adding his own musical voice, along with the voices of other musician friends, to create something kaleidoscopic and interpretive.

Harnetty admits he’s not a jazz musician, but he said it’s better that way.

“If I try to mimic it,” he said, “then I’ve totally failed.”

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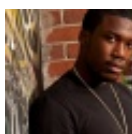
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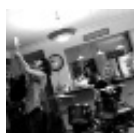
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