

## ***THE MAGIC SUN***

**Sun Ra**

**Music Video Distributors,  
2005**



***Review by: Christopher Thelen***

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While I have been developing a healthy taste for jazz over the last few years, I freely admit that some artists' work continues to confound and frustrate me - John Coltrane being a prime example. While I've made sincere efforts to discover the magic that so many others have seen in his music, I haven't seen that magical spark yet, though I keep trying.

In a way, the same could be said for Sun Ra, an artist whose work I admit I am mostly unfamiliar with. To be fair, though, his style of music is very much an acquired taste; refusing to accept even the most basic rules of music, Ra constantly pushed the envelope of both modern music and free-form jazz by pushing his music far past any established limits, taking the listener on an often extremely bumpy ride. As Ra says in "Statement," one of the audio tracks included on the recently-released DVD *The Magic Sun*, his audience is taken on a trip with his music, whether they want to go or not.

The crux of this DVD is a 17-minute film by Phill Niblock, which was shot in the mid-'60s, a period when Ra and his Arkestra were centralized in New York. Music as extreme as Ra's called for as extreme of a film style; Niblock shoots this as a negative, focusing on close-ups of the musicians' faces and

hands as the music unfolds.

When I first heard of this disc, I e-mailed my friend at MVD and said, "This has to be a typo, right? A 17-minute film?" I was assured that the timing was correct - and, I'll be honest, the music and visuals are so extreme that the first time I tried to watch this DVD, I didn't make it through even three minutes' worth.

Make no doubt about it: the music featured on *The Magic Sun* starts out seeming like so much atonal noise corresponding to some bizarre visuals. Yet, as the music dissolves into a percussive rhythm that the other instruments seem to envelop while following their own unique beats, the visuals tend to explode into their own cataclymic take on what is happening musically. In a sense, it is as if the music represents the solar flares and eruptions that occur, while the visuals suggest there is some order behind the confusion. After a while, Niblock's movie becomes less about the actions and views of the musicians, but more becoming almost visual portraits of the music. And, while I admit this isn't a disc I'm going to be putting into the DVD player for repeated viewings, it does deliver the message fairly well.

Of course, this is assuming one is able to get through the early cacophony of *The Magic Sun*. I freely admit this will be challenging for even the most devout free-form jazz fan - but, in a sense, I felt that what I was listening to was akin to the birth cry of the style of music that Miles Davis would find himself exploring in a few short years. It's almost as if *The Magic Sun* and its lesser-known composer was the precursor to Davis and *Bitches Brew*. Think about it: both feature styles of music that seem like they're on the verge of implosion, yet they somehow come together and form a sphere of music that, while very much challenging the listener and their views of just what jazz is, are able to convege into something both unique and recognizable, albeit a little uncomfortable.

By no means is *The Magic Sun* a DVD that all jazz fans will enjoy, and even the die-hards will find themselves perplexed at times. Yet something about this disc feels right, despite the near anarchy that it seems to threaten to spawn. Ra may never have become as famous as Davis, but I'd venture to say that without Ra, Davis's music might not have developed in the manner it did.

**RATING: C+**

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