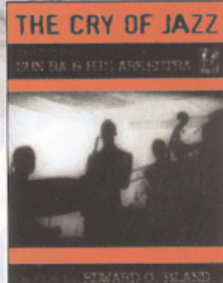




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The influential jazz bandleader and pianist Sun Ra was a visually spectacular performer, so it's no surprise he'd be drawn to film. Edward O. Bland's 1959 *The Cry of Jazz*, a long-unavailable half-hour mix of extremely early performance clips and discussions about race, has historical significance: it predates the black-power movement. But the music is minimal, and its argument that jazz is dead is dated—Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane were, in fact, already beginning to reinvigorate the music.

Sun Ra
The Cry of Jazz
Music Video
Distributors

Space Is the Place
Plexifilm

Space Is the Place, too, includes only brief performance clips of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, but it offers a fuller and much more entertaining look at this mystical underground-music pioneer. Though the blaxploitation films that influenced it were built around soul music and violence, this 1974 vehicle for Ra's strange philosophies incorporates everything from science fiction to conspiracy theories to soft-core porn. Ra's mixture of big-band swing, celestial musings and free-jazz chaos makes up the soundtrack of the film, which stars Ra himself as a gentle extraterrestrial come to earth to battle the evil con man Overseer in cosmic games of chance and save the black race. Initially made for public television (which ultimately passed on it), it received a limited theatrical release (which most moviegoers shunned). But with its lo-fi special effects and ancient Egyptian costumes, it's a fair bet George Clinton's space-age P-Funk outfit took notice of this wonderfully peculiar film.

—Jason Gross