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The Arkestry of the Cosmos: an Examination of Sun Ra and his connection to the Space Age, Free Jazz, and Afrofuturism

Sun Ra, born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham Alabama in the year 1914, was a jazz musician, leading a free jazz big band that he called his Arkestra. Both during his career and posthumously, he released well over a hundred full length albums, at least two dozen singles, and even more collections alongside being in multiple movies and documentaries and even teaching a course at UC Berkeley. Despite his long list of accolades and his even longer list of songs (sitting at over a thousand titles long), Sun Ra is not a name that many people have heard before. Despite his lack of mainstream success, however, Ra was still extremely important to not only the music industry but also the afrofuturist and free jazz movements as well. Ra combined egyptology, modern religion, space age idealism, technological advancements, afrofuturist ideals, cosmic worldbuilding, and his own philosophy, and spoke it all to the people of the contemporary world in the language of his own unique free jazz sound. Through his language of music, Ra hoped to transport the people of Earth, giving them a new and greater understanding of their place in the “Arkestry of the Cosmos”.

A large part of Ra’s image is the strange dichotomy between his space age influences and those from ancient african civilizations, specifically ancient egypt. Ra has taken inspiration from the Egyptians in many things, including his name, dress, and some of his ideology. Sun Ra’s name is taken from the Egyptian god Ra, the king of all egyptian deities with the power over the Sun. In some interpretations, Ra was even the sun itself, or the day. By taking the name of a god, Ra positions himself above humanity. He preaches his own form of gospel to them, urging them towards liberation, not only of the mind but the body. Ra even refers to himself as a “myth” living among the people of Earth. He is not only a myth in the sense of his incomprehensibility to people, but also in the sense that he is something old and far more powerful than his visage

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would have you believe. He is a myth not only in the sense of his unreality, but in the sense that he surpasses reality.

Ra also often wore clothes inspired by those of both ancient Egyptian pharaohs and science-fiction characters, including metal headpieces, shimmering cloaks, and bodysuits. Not only did the outfits grab attention, but they were also a physical connection of Sun Ra and his Arkestra to both the past and the future. They were a visual representation of the strange but unique philosophies Ra held, a piece of reality that belonged somewhere outside of linear time. Although Ra was certainly an Afrofuturist thinker, he never shied away from the importance of African ancestry and the past in his mission for a brighter black future. Furthermore, Ra did not only wear his costume during performances. His eclectic fashion followed him through his daily life too, wearing odd colored sunglasses, robes and togas, even his “moon shoes” on the daily. He was always “in character,” and it was a reminder to people that the reality within the cosmos that he speaks of in his music is still present. He “brought the cosmos to the streets,” and reminded people that “one does not have to subscribe to the status quo— musically, stylistically, politically, ideologically” (Bengal).

Despite his connection to the past, Ra also manages to interweave elements of modern christianity and the occult into his ideology. In his lecture at UC Berkeley, Ra references the bible extensively, though he insists that he “doesn’t regard it as sacred.” Rather, he decides to view it objectively as it relates to his own ideas. In his lecture, Ra uses teachings from the bible to help articulate some of the points of his ideology. For example, taking from the pages of Job, he speaks about abandoning righteousness, both for the white race and the Black race. In Ra’s opinion, righteousness and pride hold the Black man back from achieving, since the white man has already abandoned righteousness. In a similar vein, he says that the human race must

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reconnect with nature and their natural self to help restore balance and heal the Earth. The bible, however, is only a singular way of living and finding meaning, according to Ra. In fact, according to him, the bible was written for white people, without Black people in mind. His enlightened image of the Black race is incompatible with the bible. Therefore, although his space age philosophy gleans a few ideas from the bible, it reaches far past it as well.

While Ra's work was revolutionary as a musician, he also incorporated elements of technology and science that helped give agency to black people in the sociotechnical field. Since Ra's ideology focused on space travel, there was an added element of science fiction which brought with it the incorporation of these technological and scientific elements. Spaceships, futuristic instruments, and strange otherworldly technologies featured in his repertoire, whether it be on album covers, in movies, or even on the sets of live performances. However, he was also credited for using futuristic sounds within his music. Electronic synthesizers combined with stuttering saxophone and wailing horns to create an otherworldly sound. Furthermore, instead of musicians, the members of Ra's Arkestra were "tone scientists" (Hsu). In a time where space travel was becoming less of a dream and more of a reality, Black people were often "socioeconomically excluded from high technology" (Kreiss). However, futurists who incorporated science fiction and technology into their works are able to create "material interventions" and "critique dominant analytical perspectives of sociotechnical change" (Kreiss). Ra's Space Age brand not only works as a critique of the lack of diversity within the scientific community but also becomes an encouragement towards Black people to expand their horizons past the boundaries of Earth. He not only embraced science and technology, but reimagined them in a way that was Black-Oriented, connecting them back in time to Black history, but also forward in time to an alternative Black future. Ra uses his music and ideology to "foster black

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technical agency as a path towards building alternative societies on outer-space landscapes” (Kreiss).

As a result of the futuristic tones of his music as well as the influence of the times, Ra’s ideology focused largely on the horizon of outer space. Though Ra was active as early as the 40s in other bands, he didn’t establish the Arkestra until the 50s, and he grew into his own eclectic free-jazz sound throughout the 50s and 60s, during which put the height of his career during the Space Age. Therefore, space became a premier setting for Ra’s ideology. Space was a place where Black people could be free from the limitations and troubles placed on them by the planet Earth. In space, discrimination, oppression, and violence did not exist. In his 1976 movie, entitled “Space is the Place”, Ra talks about establishing a utopian society in outer space, a colony without the Earth’s “improper” social order. It would be a place where “the music is different...the vibrations are different...Not like planet Earth.” A colony “on the other side of time” where Black people could “drink in the beauty” and “change their vibrations...for the better of course.” It would be a place where the needs and wants of Black people would be met rather than having to be fought for, where they would be real rather than the myths that white society thought of them as. “Everything you desire from this planet and never have received will be yours in outer space,” Ra stated to the people. Space is the place where people can become liberated from the ideologies that keep them trapped in an unequal and “unnatural” society and transcend the forces that oppress them on Earth. Space is not only a place of freedom, but it is a place of the future. On Earth, prospects are gloomy. Though progress has been made, inequality still runs rampant. In the eyes of Ra, Earth may not be able to be saved, but there is a much greater alternative for the people who live there. The stars are our hope for a better future, free of the darkness of the present day.

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In all, Ra's ideology is a combination of many different subjects that creates a dichotomy between the past, the present, and the future. He combines ancient egyptology with ideas of space travel and science fiction. He mixes music and mathematics and science and technology into a singular focus to convey his ideals. He preaches of the end of the world and a utopian society in the same sentence. Though his philosophy is confusing and full of contradictions at first glance, in actuality, all of this works together to convey a belief system that puts black freedom and joy above all else. It is "an empowering belief system in which the struggles of Black people were to be rewarded by the cosmic freedom promised in the outer space of the future." It is an "ever-expanding pan-African universe" where Black people can be fully in command of who they are (Cervera). In a similar way to Mark Rockey Moore's definition of Afrofuturism, Sun Ra's creative mind is a crucible where the past, the present, and the future all come together, and the result presents itself in the form of Ra's distinctive philosophy.

In his philosophy, Ra theorizes in terms of sound, music, and vibrations. Sound is essential to the universe, in the sense that nature and the universe were created to be in tune with each other. In fact, the universe is always in tune according to Ra. However, nature on this planet is not in tune. The issues facing the contemporary world – specifically anti-blackness, oppression, and the inability of people to live in harmony with one another – have caused these issues. In a more localized sense, Ra speaks of vibrations. These are the sounds that individual people give off, and they define who and what these people are. Just as sound is important for the harmony of the universe, vibrations are important for the harmony of people on earth with one another. Vibrations make people who they are, and who people are creates vibrations in turn.

For Ra, his music is the way that he preaches his gospel to the masses, and in turn the way he intends to liberate the Black race. Music is the way that Ra conveys his message of Black

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power, culture, and imagination to the world, “This music is all a part of another tomorrow,” says Ra, “another kind of language, speaking things of nature, naturalness, the way it should be. Speaking things of blackness.” Ra states that music is not only a mode of expression, but a mode of “transportation,” a way to bring people to new understandings and new places, both physically and mentally. Music is a catalyst of change, and a pillar of the Earth itself; of society, and the people within it. Music is the people in and of themselves. “Why doesn’t earth fall?” Ra asks. “How can you walk upon it? It’s the music. It’s the music of the earth, the music of the sun and the stars, the music of yourself vibrating. Yes, you’re music too. You’re the instruments. Everyone is supposed to be playing their part, in this vast Arkestry of the cosmos.”

As a musician, there was no better way for Ra to express his beliefs than through the medium of avant-garde jazz. Though formally referred to as the avant-garde style, this free flowing and emotionally charged music was commonly talked about as Free Jazz by the larger public audience. This style was remarkable for its complete disregard of the traditional western rules of music. It abandons “traditional musical cornerstones [like] melody, rhythm, and harmonic progression,” and instead makes way for “a radical approach” based upon “shaping slabs of pure sound, instead of simply running the usual chord progressions or regurgitating standard note groupings” (Cervera). This new style of jazz became popular in the wake of the civil rights movement and the vietnam war because of its unparalleled power of raw expression. It is no wonder that Ra, whose ideas are often so hard to put into words, and whose philosophy touts music as the ultimate language and his mode of transportation, would turn to this psychedelic and raw form of expression to express himself and his beliefs.

One of the pioneer’s of the Free Jazz sound, Ra’s wide-ranging and unique style was the epitome of his beliefs. Free flowing and without boundaries, avant-garde jazz embodied Ra’s

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message of liberation from the shackles of the Earth's current society and ideologies. Though Ra's music style was wide ranging, free-jazz and absurdism was always within the foundation of his sound. It helped to encapsulate the sense of unreality that he wanted to embody in his preachings as a living myth. The lack of a concrete rhythm mirrored the way that he worked "on the other side of time", refusing the limitations of the hours and minutes on Earth, making music that would withstand the test of time. Just as free jazz throws out the traditional chord progressions, Ra has decided to abandon the status quo and create a utopia all on his own. Ra used music, a universal language, to preach his message to all people, regardless of their race or creed.

One may think that, because of his strong beliefs and his urging for the empowerment of the Black race, Ra would have had affiliations with one or multiple Civil Rights movements or other social, political, or artistic movements of the time. On the contrary, Ra's strong beliefs actually caused him to draw away from any specific group or movement. Neither the Nation of Islam nor the Black Panthers nor the Christian beliefs of the civil rights movement caught the eye or the interest of Sun Ra. Largely, this was because Ra's vision was one of enlightenment for all people, including those of any race or ethnicity. Though Ra often called for the liberation of Black society and warned of the looming destruction of the white led Earth, his vision was not a separatist one. Ra's philosophy certainly contained a "decidedly pan-racial vision of a techno-utopia premised on scientific knowledge, aesthetic energy, and expanded awareness" (Kreiss). In other words, rather than separating themselves from white people, Ra thought it was imperative for the freedom of Black society that white people were enlightened and freed from the chains of racism as well. Ra's ideology focused on the liberation of the mind for all those

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who would listen, not just Black people. This, in Ra's mind, was the way to move towards a truly utopian society; to create an Earth that was in tune with the melody of the Cosmos.

Ra's artistry was extremely influential in the avant-garde and free jazz movement. He is often touted as one of the first to truly embody the free jazz sound and embellish it with the Afrofuturist notes that it would express going forwards. However, he has also inspired many different artists across genres and generations with his work. John Coltrane, a Free Jazz Musician largely active in the 60s, took notes from Sun Ra's music and ideology of Black freedom. Though Coltrane's sound and ideology is different to Ra's, focusing more on individualism within faith towards the Christian God, he still uses the free jazz style and preaches messages of Black empowerment (Cervera). David Bowie, also known as "The Starman" or "Ziggy Stardust", also centered space in his art and wore eccentric clothing during his performances, making himself a character for the sake of conveying his own story and ideology (Lewis). Parliament-Funkadelic took a note from Sun Ra's book with their distinctive combination of psychedelic culture, science fiction, and a collective mythology that lent itself to Afrofuturist ideals (Lewis). Earth, Wind, & Fire also takes inspiration from Sun Ra, calling back to both ancient Egypt and Afrofuturism in their album art and music videos (Cervera).

Sun Ra's influence on Music and Afrofuturism echoes even now, with artists like Janelle Monáe and Kendrick Lamar. Monáe released their album "Dirty Computer" in 2018, which centered around blackness in a futuristic dystopian world. Alongside her album, she also released a 46 minute short film that explored Monáe's character as she tried to assert her individuality and freedom in a totalitarian world (Lewis). There's also music like the soundtrack for Black Panther, which created a distinctly Black and Afrofuturistic mix of modern hip-hop and authentic African elements. Kendrick Lamar, the executive producer of the album, was challenged to "imagine

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hip-hop in the context of the Black Panther's utopian Afrofuturist nation of Wakanda," and he delivered a soundtrack that won Best Original Score at both the Academy Awards and the Grammy awards (Lewis). Despite his lack of major mainstream success, Sun Ra's music has set off reverberations that can still be felt in music to this day.

Though he never became a household name, Ra still made a deep impact on the Afrofuturist movement as a whole. He encouraged Afrofuturist thinkers to incorporate the fields of science and technology into their research and also was one of the first to incorporate elements of science fiction into Afrofuturism. Though Afrofuturism isn't entirely about science fiction—it's a philosophy that also incorporates many elements of the past and African religious imagination—science-fiction has become a large part of Afrofuturism. Since science-fiction is often how people imagine the future, incorporating elements of blackness into science-fiction becomes a way of making room for Black people in the future as well. In the Afrofuturist sense, it is a way of imagining a greater future for Black people, beyond the boundaries of Earth, which was what Sun Ra has been using his music to preach to the masses since the late 1950s. Ra wasn't the first modern Afrofuturist, but his music and ideology surely helped to shape the ideas of modern Afrofuturism.

Sun Ra is and was a groundbreaking Afrofuturist mind. His music, though eclectic, was revolutionary in its sound. Ra was able to use a style that already existed and create a sound that was so unique and his own that even other artists who played in the same sub-genre cannot match it. His otherworldly appearance and his confident and assured demeanor both added to his otherworldly image. His ability to embody his character and his ideals both on and off stage was in and of itself amazing. If his music and his appearance were revolutionary, though, then his Afrofuturist ideals were even more so. Ra was a true Afrofuturist, combining elements of the past

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and the future to bring light and innovation to the present. His contributions to the legacy of afrofuturism as a philosophy were indispensable as well, centering blackness in science fiction in a way that hadn't been done before. Though Sun Ra never became as popular as some of his less radically thinking contemporaries, his legacy lives on in his impacts on modern music and afrofuturist ideologies. Ra was a man who encouraged people to reach for something more than the present, who reached for a greater future, and freedom among the stars, but most importantly for Black joy and happiness. Perhaps he has not achieved his utopian society yet, but as he writes in one of his published booklets, "eventually I will succeed" (Hsu).

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