SUN RA SUNDAYS
by Rodger Coleman

This is a compilation of blog entries about SUN RA authored by RODGER G. COLEMAN from 2008 to 2015 and posted at nuvoid.blogspot.com. Coleman's blog contains hundreds of posts on a myriad of music subjects; we've culled only the Ra content.

We have added no commentary, preferring to let this writing speak for itself. The vast Sun Ra knowledge base covered in Coleman's posts remains vital and historically valid. Identifiable historic inaccuracies (generally based on best-available sources at the time) are neither corrected nor footnoted. These are the posts and responses as they were published online at the time—the verbatim historic record. All copyrights belong to Coleman and the authors of the comments and quoted sources.

This chronicle was collected, formatted & edited by Irwin Chusid, with assistance from Kristen Pierce, in November 2018. It is sequenced chronologically. Some unintentional misspelling has been corrected; idiosyncratic spelling, abbreviations, and casual disregard of capitalization niceties (mostly in the comments) were left as written. Most dead links are omitted. Reader comments are highlighted in red (although salutations-only comments have been omitted). Graphic images and photos from the blog are not included. (For graphics, see SAM BYRD's complementary collection of Sun Ra Sundays posts; Byrd also arranged all entries in discographical order.)

This content has been collected for preservation, research, and circulation. In some cases, recent findings have amplified, clarified, or superseded particular details or assertions. It would be interesting to crowd-source updates with new information that's come to light since these posts were published. Such an undertaking would constitute yet a third version of this compilation.

The opinions herein are exhaustive, authoritative, and worth reading. They are a valuable addition to Ra scholarship—particularly as regards Sun Ra's massive recorded output—and should be preserved in case the www disappears. Thank you Mr. Coleman for your monumental journalistic commitment. This chronicle belongs between covers.

Irwin Chusid
Hoboken NJ
November 2018
irwin@SunRa.com
FOREWORD

I am happy to have this writing preserved and shared with the world to help bring Sun Ra's discography into focus.

After almost seven years, I eventually burned out on the Sun Ra Sundays project. There was too much going on my life and the posts had started to feel like an unwanted obligation. However, I am still proud of the writing. Looking back, it is astonishing to me that I had so much energy to devote to it.

At some point in all that blogging, I talked about what prompted the whole Sun Ra Sunday project. It was a combination of things. I was working in a high-pressure law office where I was doing tremendous amounts of research and writing which was so stressful that Sundays were unbelievably depressing. I found that listening to Sun Ra's music cheered me up. Yet his massive (and ever-growing) discography was difficult to wrap my head around. That sparked my curiosity to hear and write about every Sun Ra recording I could get my hands on (official and bootleg), a task for which my law-office research skills turned out to be immensely helpful. Also, while I especially loved the Choreographer's Workshop period (1962–65), it was scattered across myriad Saturn releases. Sun Ra Sunday became a way to gradually map that part of Ra's discography. Inevitably, of course, the research and writing explored deep into Sun Ra's recorded cosmos.

And therein lies the burnout. But it was quite a run while it lasted.

An alternate PDF of all the Sun Ra Sundays was compiled by my friend and musical colleague Sam Byrd, who arranged the posts in discographical order. I had thought about self-publishing, even in its incomplete form, but never got it together.

I'm happy for this work to be available to a wider, more interested audience. Thank you so much for your kind words in the introduction as well as for the all the work you've done formatting and correcting the text. I am honored.

Rodger Coleman
November 2018
INTRODUCTION

Rodger Coleman and I have a long history together, dating back to the late 1980s in Boston with our band UYA. I had been aware of Sun Ra for some time before that—I had a few LPs but was not yet attuned to them. Rodger set me straight, encouraging me to check out Ra again—and I'm so glad he did.

When he first started writing about Ra, Rodger often focused on the Choreographers Workshop era, but it soon became clear that his ambitions were much higher than that. Week after week, blog readers were treated to an incisive chronological romp through Ra's recordings, with Rodger doing a great job contextualizing them, leaning heavily on John Szwed's *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* for historical details but depending on his own finely attuned ear to provide a unique perspective on the music itself.

My humble involvement was only as a friend and a fan. I didn't comment nearly as much as I wanted to. It's a busy world. After Rodger ended the series, I occasionally tried to talk him into revitalizing the feature, but to no avail.

After it was apparent that there were to be no more Sun Ra Sundays, I took it on myself to grab all the postings and put them in a file. The version I compiled was both a labor of love and the fulfillment of a selfish practical need to have it all in chronological order for easy lookup in my ongoing journey of studying and learning about this music. I then printed it with Lulu and have a much-prized and well-thumbed copy of Sun Ra Sundays. I'm so glad Irwin has taken the initiative to put this compilation together and circulate it. Now you too can have it all in one place; after all, Saturn research continues.

Sam Byrd
December 2018
SUN RA SUNDAYS

September 1, 2008

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: Black Myth / Out In Space (MPS)
Recorded live Donaueschingen 10/17/70 & Berlin 11/7/70

It's after the end of the world! Don't you know that yet?!

September 28, 2008

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra: On Jupiter (Art Yard CD)
Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra: Sleeping Beauty (Art Yard CD)

These two 1979 Saturn sessions present Sun Ra at his most accessible – groovy, dreamy, spacey, and suitably cosmic while reigning in the full-blown freakouts that can make Sun Ra’s music difficult for some (or maybe not quite the right thing on a Sunday evening). That is not to say that these are lesser albums. Quite the contrary! This is simply beautiful music! Essential!

Note that these CDs are extremely limited editions and sparsely distributed. I got mine from Downtown Music Gallery. See also Lanquidity (Evidence).

October 26, 2008

Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra: Secrets of the Sun (Atavistic ALP266 CD)

Atavistic continues to make the rarest of the rare Saturn records available once again and to a mass audience all thanks to John Corbett’s “Unheard Music Series.” Rejoice!

In fact, Secrets of the Sun is so rare, that the CD had to be mastered from a vintage LP, with its occasional (but inevitable) pops and clicks. But don’t let that stop you! This is primo Sun Ra, recorded in rehearsal at the Choreographer’s Workshop in New York City, where the relaxed vibe (free rent!) and pleasant acoustics inspired an amazing run of albums from 1962-1964. Many of those titles were (thankfully) re-issued by Evidence in the 1990s but this nearly-lost 1962 session is a most welcome addition indeed.

Listened to chronologically, the Saturn LPs recorded during the Choreographer’s Workshop period exhaustively document the evolution of the Arkestra from the tightly arranged big-band material found on The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra (Savoy, 1962) to the adventurous and edgy avant-garde weirdness of Heliocentric Worlds, Vols.1-2 (ESP, 1965). As such, these Saturn records are some of the most intriguing (and downright pleasurable) albums in all of Sun Ra’s vast discography. Emerging from its decades-long obscurity, Secrets of the Sun presents a missing link in the history of this period.

The smallish ensembles are simply recorded (in mono) in a lushly reverberant ambient space which gives the recordings a suitably unearthly quality that epitomizes that “Saturn Sound” so unique to Sun Ra’s home-brewed record label. The opening track, “Friendly Galaxy,” is typical in how it constructs a whole other world in miniature: the unusual frontline instrumentation (bass clarinet, flute, flugelhorn, and the rarely-deployed electric guitar) creates beautifully floating
melodies and ethereal textures while the agile and propulsive rhythm section of Ronnie Boykins on bass and Tommy Hunter on drums combine with Sun Ra's off-kilter piano to provide a buoyant and supple ostinato accompaniment. Individual solos briefly take flight before returning to the theme and ends, appropriately, after a mere four minutes and fifty-three seconds. Brilliant!

“Solar Differentials” takes things a bit further out with “space bird sounds,” “space voice,” and primitive electronic echo and feedback (remember, this is 1962!), all of which is punctuated by Sun Ra’s percussive stabs on the piano. Ronnie Boykins once again shines with his rock solid bass anchoring the chaotic proceedings. “Space Aura” is slightly more conventional, beginning with a march-like processional before giving way to a relaxed swing, with everyone contributing pithy but exploratory solos – Pat Patrick’s honking and squealing baritone saxophone being a particular delight. The following track, “Love In Outer Space,” went on to become a standard in the Ra songbook but here is given a somewhat minimalist treatment: after a short allusion to the theme, John Gilmore moans and wails on bass clarinet over some percolating bass and percussion before the whole thing trails off inconclusively.

“Reflects Motion” points towards the future with its episodic construction: bass and drums duet and solo before Ra’s enervated piano figures enter, which presages the spiky, atonal melody that is taken up by the horns. This soon gives way to more bass/percussion grooving and the relatively succinct and swinging solo sections are interspersed with yet more percussion interludes. John Gilmore’s fleeting tenor saxophone solo demonstrates a breathtaking command of the instrument, from the growling lowest register to altissimo cries and multiphonic shrieks. John Coltrane acknowledged Gilmore’s influence on the music he would go on to make a couple years later beginning with A Love Supreme (Impulse!, 1964), and here you can hear that influence loud and clear. “Solar Symbols” closes out the album proper with a two-minute-forty-two-second spaceout, featuring echo-y sleigh-bells and pitter-pattering percussion with Sun Ra essaying on “sun harp” and gong. Very cool.

The bonus track, “Flight to Mars” was contemporaneously recorded for the B-side of an unreleased LP and is previously unheard. Opening with a crude tape collage which culminates in the vocal exhortation “all the way into space!” the rest of the piece is essentially a seventeen-minute blowing session punctuated with further percussion blowouts. Marshall Allen shines with a sparkling flute solo and, again, Ronnie Boykins demonstrates his extraordinary (and sadly unrecognized) genius with a bowed bass solo that inspires juicy interjections from Pat Patrick’s baritone saxophone and a little bit of bouncy Ra piano before the close. This is truly a bonus track that lives up to the name.

This lovingly produced reissue is a must for all Sun Ra fans and as good a place as any for the novice to begin the interplanetary journey. Essential.

COMMENTS:

Roddus said...
A good description that leaves me looking forward to hearing it sometime in the future when I get to it in my Sun Ra buying binge.

Sam said...
Hot damn, Rodger! You said better than I ever could. Yeah, this is a very special album and is a nice companion piece to “Art Forms.” That special Choreographers Workshop ambiance is in fine evidence here.
November 2, 2008

Sun Ra and his Astro Infinity Arkestra: Strange Strings (Atavistic ALP263 CD)
Recorded NYC 1966-1967

Strange Strings is one of the most obscure and downright weird recordings in all of Sun Ra’s immense (and weird) discography. By 1966, Ra had acquired a selection of odd stringed instruments – ukuleles, kotos, zithers, etc. – to be played exclusively here by members of the Arkestra. That the musicians did not how to play them was the whole point, it was, according to Ra, “a study in ignorance.” Structurally, the music builds on the kind of conducted-improvisation found on The Magic City (1965) (Evidence CD), but the unfamiliar instruments create a truly otherworldly din. Homemade metallic instruments clatter and thrum while strings are plucked, bowed, struck and scraped; sometimes drums and tympani pound ominously. Thick reverb saturates or, at other times, dries up the acoustic, creating shifting and distorted sonic perspectives. Sounding more like Iannis Xenakis than Fletcher Henderson, this stuff is definitely not for the faint of heart! The bonus track, “Door Squeak” features Sun Ra on, yes, a loudly squeaking door (which actually sounds very much like the MiniMoog, which he would take up years later) while more strange strings chatter in the background. Detailed liner notes by Hal Rammel and super deluxe packaging make this CD a must have for the connoisseur of Sun Ra’s furthest interplanetary journeys. Thank you, Atavistic, for another fine Sun Ra Sunday!

November 9, 2008

Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: My Brother the Wind Volume II (Evidence 22040)
Recorded NYC 1969-1970
Originally released as El Saturn LP 523

Tracks one through six consist of what discographer Robert L. Campbell aptly describes as “spaced out barbeque music” with Ra playing the warm and woody Hammond organ and featuring two exquisite vocal performances by June Tyson on “Somebody Else’s World” and “Walking On the Moon.” The remainder of the LP is something of a suite for solo MiniMoog synthesizer, wherein Ra conjures up apocalyptic clouds of cosmic noise. I’m reminded of this enlightening exchange with Sun Ra in Graham Lock’s wonderful book, Forces in Motion (Da Capo, p.17):

GRAHAM LOCK: Were there any particular sounds that first attracted you to the synthesizer?

SUN RA: I like all the sounds that upset people, because they’s too complacent. There are some sounds that really upset ‘em and I like to shock them out of their complacency ‘cause it’s a very bad world in a lot of aspects. They need to wake up to know how bad it is, then maybe they’ll do somethin’ about it.

GRAHAM LOCK: You think music can spur people into action?

SUN RA: Of course it can. It’s just…you have a lot of commercial folks on this planet who took the music and used it to make money, but now people have heard so much of that music they’ve been sated with sound. But the spirit, it gets very little food I’d say. And the spirit needs something too. It says, ‘What about me? I need some beautiful music or beautiful poetry.’ I think
the people on this planet are starving their spiritual selves. See, music is a spiritual language, ‘n’ that’s what I have to offer, so I’m gonna put it out there and maybe people will do somethin’ right. They may not want to, but they be compelled to (chuckles).

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
I have always wished Ra had recorded more on organ, in the same vein as this LP. "Somewhere Else" is one of my all-time favorite Ra tunes. Love it when he rides that low chord during the head. The mini-moog stuff is just beautiful, and says so much about Ra: as early in the moog's development as these recordings are, it sounds like the instrument was tailor-made for him.

November 23, 2008

I’m laid up with a nasty cold, so I’m resting and re-reading John F. Szwed’s masterful Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra (Pantheon, 1997). In his Introduction, Szwed makes a remarkable statement:

This is the biography of a musician who confronted the problems of creating music for an audience who expected nothing more than to be entertained, but who at the same time attempted to be a scholar and a teacher, and to take his audiences beyond the realm of the aesthetic to those of the ethical and the moral. (p. xviii)

The realm of the ethical and the moral is a realm that most music criticism tends to avoid, and for good reason I suppose. Szwed’s statement begs a host of questions: Can music be ethical or moral? Or does music rely upon the extra-musical (e.g. biography, texts, performance) to convey ethics and morality? What is an unethical or immoral music? Can ethical or moral music be produced by unethical or immoral persons? Who decides what constitutes ethical ethics and moral morality? These questions are not easy to answer, even in the case of Sun Ra, who explicitly espoused such ethical and moral concerns amidst the afro-cryptic, space-age show-biz trappings; he often stated that he was sent here from Saturn to help people.

In my re-reading, I will be looking closely to see whether Szwed merely asserts the moral and ethical components of Ra’s music or instead seeks to articulate how this realm is manifested in the music itself (beyond, of course, lyrical statements). Personally, I believe that, yes, there is an ethical and moral component that was central to what Sun Ra was attempting to accomplish through his music and that component is audible; to say exactly where and how is another matter altogether.

Or maybe it’s just the Sudafed® talking.

COMMENTS:

mrG said...
A key paper to investigate is David Stowe's "From Ephrata to Arkestra" wherein he draws distinct lines connecting others who similarly believed Man may be 'saved' by the intercession of particular sounds.
The same sentiment may be found in the music of John Cage, the tip-off being in his essay lamenting our losing the be-hear-now sense of medieval sacred music after spectacle hero-worship emerged from the Renaissance; John's work after that realization had an explicit intent to awaken his audience to a mindfulness in an earnest Buddhist hope this would lead directly to ethical and moral change.

This of course doesn't prove either of them were successful (tho' I believe they were, having repeatedly witnessed live both masters in action) or that their theories matched their actual practice, but it maybe lends credence to the possibility of success, no?

*Sam* said...
Finally getting around to commenting--I'll try not to feel so intimidated by the thoughtfulness and insight you bring to Ra's music (and Szwed's work). But, in my opinion: it's the Sudafed talking. In spite of Ra's dictum that "music can wash clothes," I don't think music can have a moral purpose just because one says it does. Don't get me wrong, I love that Ra, as a proper Tone Scientist, claimed that his music had healing powers and that he had peaceful purposes for using music to proclaim his message of hope and love for all humanity. But people don't get that message from the music, they get it from him talking about the music. Purely instrumental music, musical sounds, beautiful playing--these mean nothing on their own. They just exist. Any moral or ethical lesson supposedly going along with or coming from the music actually comes from words. The music alone doesn't do it. I don't know how much further you've gotten in Szwed, but as far as I recall, he doesn't address "how this realm is manifested in the music itself." Rather, he "merely asserts the moral and ethical components of Ra’s music"---in words, which is all anyone can do.

*Rodger* said...
Mr. G and *Sam* – thank you for your thoughtful comments.

I am contemplating a longer blog post about this, now that I have finished re-reading Szwed's book. On the one hand, I agree with *Sam* that, empirically, music cannot "mean" anything and therefore cannot be moral or immoral and that any deeper meanings can only be asserted by words. On the other hand, there is that vague concept of the "spirit" which I believe *can* be conveyed through sound. I feel that at least part of what makes Sun Ra's music so appealing and worth listening to is the "spirit" that is imbued in the sound itself. I firmly believe that, while middle-C as a pitch is value-neutral, the way that pitch is executed can convey the spirit of the performer. It is this "spirit" that allows the music to transcend any number of potential obstacles, from sometimes poor sound quality to sometimes sloppy performances.

I think, by contrast, one can point to music that is either "positive" or "negative." Take, for example, the Beatles. It is not merely knowing the facts and circumstances surrounding _Let It Be_ that conveys the pain, ill-will, cynicism, and overall "bad vibes" of the sessions, you can actually *hear* it in the music. Wouldn't you agree, *Sam*? Further, I would assert (and, if you grant the above premise, the *sound* of the music supports this assertion) that their earlier work was "positive" (i.e. it "helps" people) while _Let It Be_ is "negative" (i.e. it "hurts" people). Perhaps that is taking things too far, but it is an inescapable conclusion to my mind.

Anyway, just some half-formed thoughts on this topic.

*Sam* said...
Several things to say here! I definitely know what you mean about the "spirit," but context is everything. You say: "part of what makes Sun Ra's music so appealing and worth listening to is
the “spirit” that is imbued in the sound itself.” Tell that to my wife! She actively dislikes all the Ra she's heard (even something as innocuous as "Brainville")—how much of that is the baggage she brings to it, from her active dislike of post-'30s jazz to her distrust of Ra as a shaman? That spirit is not making itself known to her (as much as I've tried!).

Now, "Let It Be" is an extremely interesting album to bring up in this context. It's true that I have a hard time listening to this stuff now, knowing what I know about what was going on and how they were treating each other at the time. BUT... when the album first came out, we weren't aware of all that, and I have to say, no, I didn't hear it in the music. I loved the album, aware as I was at the time that it was no "Revolver" or White Album, but still enjoying the songs immensely, especially "Get Back," "Don't Let Me Down," and "I've Got a Feeling." I went to the movie twice in a row when it first came out and loved it. It was only later that the music became depressing. Although I have to say, "Two of Us" and "Long and Winding Road" would, for me, fall into the "positive" camp.

So, read this: http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2008/12/music_is_metadata.html
It's about music, metadata, and how that knowledge of the music changes our perception. Note that it's the titles of Bryn Jones's pieces that have the negative effect, NOT the music itself.

November 30, 2008

Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra: Other Planes of There (Evidence 22037 CD)
Recorded in New York City, 1964
Originally released as El Saturn LP 206 (1966)

"My music is the music of precision…Actually, I don't play free music, because there is no freedom in the universe. If you were to be free you could just play no matter what and it doesn’t come back to you. But you see, it always does come back to you. That’s why I warn my musicians to be careful what you play…every note, every beat, be aware that it comes back to you. And if you play something you yourself don’t understand, then that’s bad for you and for the people too.
-- Sun Ra (quoted in Szweed, John, Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra (Pantheon) (p. 235-236)

The title track to Other Planes of There marks the first recorded appearance of extended group improvisation by the Arkestra but, as indicated above, this is anything but “free jazz.” Sun Ra was deeply suspicious of the notion of freedom, remarking that the only free person was in the graveyard (id. p.309). In all of his work, he stressed the importance of discipline over freedom. At the height of the civil rights movement in 1968, he flatly stated: “Don’t be fooled, talking about revolutin’...what the white race got to revolute against? They got everything. That’s not for you. Not no revoluting for black people, no freedom, no peace. They need unity, precision and discipline” (id. p.100).

The twenty-two minute piece opens with a long, portentously held space chord declaimed by the entire ensemble but then immediately gives way to a series of small sub-group and solo episodes whose entrances and exits are cued by Ra at the piano; his own ruminations vary from lushly harmonic voicings that vaguely hint at some forgotten jazz standard to interlocking atonal arpeggios that foreshadow Cecil Taylor’s work a couple years later. At one point, a trombone choir improvises antiphonally amidst pealing trumpet and honking baritone sax. The next minute, Marshall Allen solos on his snake-charming oboe. Heat and energy levels increase as
John Gilmore’s squalling tenor saxophone rides waves of skittering percussion and roiling piano figures but then subsides, leaving a stuttering trombone to solo before the return of massed space chords that herald the climaxing ensemble improvisations. With a flourish, the piece decisively ends. While lacking any overt themes or chord progressions beyond the thickly voiced space chords, “Other Planes of There” is organically structured, contemplative, and at times sounds more like modern chamber music than the unrelenting “energy music” that was/is propagated by many proponents of “free jazz.” For Sun Ra, meaningful freedom meant the imposition of severe limits.

“Sound Spectra/Spec Sket” is another, less ambitious attempt at group improvisation. After establishing a chugging drum set groove over which Walter Miller’s trumpet lazily sings, Sun Ra’s piano abruptly enters with a contrary and agitated rhythm that is extended with the addition of bass and yet more percussion. Before anything else is able to happen, all the instruments drop out and a reverb-drenched drum solo pitter-pats thoughtfully until the piece comes to a sudden, inconclusive end.

“Sketch” brings us back to the world of straight-ahead, bop-influenced jazz with a small-group rhythm section backing John Gilmore’s throaty saxophone. But things are not quite what they seem, having returned from an interplanetary voyage. Artificial reverb ebbs and flows across the soundfield, giving the proceedings a constantly shifting, otherworldly sheen. Sun Ra’s first piano solo quickly turns disjointed and dissonant and Gilmore’s subtly explores the shrieks and howls of multiphonics over the rapidly modulating chord progression. Then, the almost hokey ching-ching-a-ching of the cymbal signals a conventionally old fashioned solo from Ra before the reverb retreats and the Arkestra finally enters to state the theme behind Gilmore’s lead. Fascinating.

“Pleasure” seems even more old-timey with Pat Patrick’s breathy baritone saxophone sounding as buttery smooth and romantic as Harry Carney. Yet an element of strangeness pervades. As Neil Tesser puts in his liner notes: “Very odd, very peaceful, the piece seems to have wafted out of some hip but unpretentious lounge on, say, Venus.” Quite so. Also quite beautiful.

“Spiral Galaxy” concludes the album with a loping space waltz, full of pounding percussion and braying horns, all slathered with a hefty helping of artificial reverberation. Solos come and go, sometimes forcefully, sometimes merely lurking in the background. At times, the distortion threatens to overwhelm the music altogether but then the reverb knob is suddenly dialed back, revealing the naked Arkestra, choogling along comfortably. So it goes for ten or so minutes, leaving the listener quietly unsettled. Of course, this kind of electronically driven disorientation would be taken up years later in the “dub” music of Jamaican reggae but, again, Sun Ra was truly ahead of his time – a man from the future.

*Other Planes of There* is a landmark album in Sun Ra’s considerable discography. For the first time, Sun Ra combined pure freedom with rigorous discipline while also maintaining a genuine connection to a deep tradition and thereby producing music of startling originality. *Essential.*

December 7, 2008

**Sun Ra: Spaceship Lullaby (Atavistic UMS/ALP243 CD)**

*The Vocal Groups Featuring Nu Sounds, The Lintels, & The Cosmic Rays*  
Recorded in Chicago, IL 1954-1960
When Evidence released *The Singles* (ECD 22164) in 1996, it came as something of shock (to me, anyway) to learn that Sun Ra had been actively involved with doo wop vocal groups prior to the establishment of the Arkestra. In fact, the very first release on the fledgling El Saturn label in 1955 was a 45RPM single featuring the Nu Sounds covering Gershwin’s “A Foggy Day” on the A-side and The Cosmic Rays contributing to a Sun Ra ditty entitled, “Daddy’s Gonna Tell You No Lie” on the flip. Amazingly, Ra continued to record scattered singles with vocal groups up until about 1960. Of course, vocal performance would go on to assume a significant part in the Arkestra’s Cosmo Drama, especially in group space chants and the incantations of June Tyson and Sun Ra himself. But this stuff is something different: an obvious attempt at commercial pop that some Ra aficionados will find downright hokey. But, Sonny would likely reply, “This hokey shit is somebody's hopes and dreams…don't be so hip!” (Szwed p.352). In any case, this being Sun Ra, any pop sensibility is decidedly skewed towards the *weird* and utterly lacking in the kind of vapid slickness that might have aided any entry into the marketplace.

Released in 2003 on *Atavistic, Spaceship Lullaby* shed more light on this mysterious period in Ra's discography, gathering together several never-before heard rehearsal tapes of some of the various vocal groups Ra worked with in the mid-to-late 1950s. The Nu Sounds and The Cosmic Rays were both (semi)professional groups and their repertoires are remarkably diverse: jazz standards, show tunes, pop numbers, and Ra compositions that range from the proto-space-chant, “Spaceship Lullaby” to the virtuosic “Chicago USA.” Apparently written for a contest to determine Chicago’s new theme song, it’s a tour de force of rich imagery and onomatopoeia. The Lintels, on the other hand, were clearly amateurs, probably just young kids taken in off the South Side streets and introduced to disciplined arrangements and enforced self-respect by intergalactic community organizer Sun Ra. You can hear Ra working with them, getting them to try some odd harmonies before calling it a day. Nothing else is known about the Lintels beyond this snippet of tape – not even their names. What remains is a tantalizing glimpse of the kind of street-corner doo wop culture that has been long lost.

Most of the tapes are home recordings with only Ra’s prodding accompaniment on the piano. Occasionally, some spare percussion joins in on the first Nu Sounds session (and Pat Patrick contributes some bari-sax train sounds on the second take of “Chicago USA”). However, a few tracks with The Cosmic Rays feature the entire Arkestra. “Africa” would appear in wordless form on *Nubians of Plutonia* (El Saturn 406/Evidence 22066 CD) and here is a mere fragment, suggesting an interesting alternate approach to this seminal Ra composition. The sound quality is rough overall, but somehow that only contributes to this record’s considerable charm. Perfect for a Sunday evening.

**December 14, 2008**

*Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Music From Tomorrow's World* (Atavistic UMS/ALP237)

The companion to last week’s disc, *Music from Tomorrow’s World* is another collection of never-before heard music from Sun Ra’s tenure in Chicago. The first thirty minutes of the disc consists of an amateur recording of a live set at the Wonder Inn, where the Arkestra, stripped down to a sextet, was in residency for much of 1960. The sound quality is remarkably good considering the era and the less-than-ideal circumstances. Certainly it is full of delightful ambience: the cash register clinks, folks are laughing and talking. But one woman is way into it, shouting encouragements like, “Play it, Sun Ra, play it like you want!” And he does. The repertoire is pretty adventurous for nightclub work, opening with three Ra originals: “Angels and Demons at Play,” a slinky 5/4 ostinato groove with some pretty flute playing by Marshall Allen;
“Spontaneous Simplicity” featuring more beautiful flute work over gently rolling rhythms (but who is the second flutist?); “Space Aura” swings hard and fast with a typically brilliant tenor saxophone solo by John Gilmore. Next up are some earnestly goofy vocal numbers, including a truly bent version of “It Ain’t Necessarily So.” It’s interesting to note that Sun Ra plays both acoustic and electric piano in a live setting, using the Wurlitzer for color, not convenience on the cramped stage. “How High The Moon” begins with a Sun Ra poem which leaves the audience puzzled, but things heat up with a cooking Gilmore solo and by that time the crowd is into it, calling out to the musicians, clapping hands, hooting and hollering. A spooky rendition of “China Gate” concludes the set with metallic percussion clattering ominously behind warbling, over-the-top vocals. Fascinating!

The remainder of the disc is given over to a forty-minute Majestic Hall studio session also recorded in 1960. Transcribed from a lowly cassette tape several generations away from the now-lost master recording, it’s pretty rough going sonically compared to the Wonder Inn stuff. Nevertheless, it’s a sparkling performance by an eight-piece Arkestra and includes three previously unheard original compositions by Ra. It’s well worth fighting through the murky sound quality to hear these intriguing bits of music. What’s striking about this session is how polished and well-rehearsed the Arkestra sounds, executing the variety of material with confidence and finesse, especially in the ensemble sections where the rich orchestrations require precision and balance. Too bad it’s so hard to discern amidst the noise and distortion. Still, it’s listenable if you can acclimate yourself to the rather gnarly sound.

Shortly after these recordings were made, Sun Ra and his most dedicated musicians would make their way to New York City (via Canada) and Philadelphia, never to return to Chicago for any extended period of time. With Music From Tomorrow’s World, Atavistic has provided us with another glimpse into Sonny’s working life prior to fulfilling his alter-destiny and is therefore a crucial historical document for Sun Ra fans.

December 21, 2008

[Posts cover of Rolling Stone magazine from April 19, 1968, featuring Sun Ra cover story]

December 28, 2008

Reader Mr. G commented on my post from a few weeks back regarding Sun Ra's music and morality and he suggested that I check out professor David W. Stowe's paper, From Ephrata (F-Ra-Ta) to Arkestra which draws a parallel between Sun Ra and early-eighteenth century mystic Conrad Beissel. Fascinating stuff, but I’m still skeptical that any ethical component inheres to music itself, rather than merely asserted by proclamation. Still, Dr. Stowe's paper is well worth reading and thinking about (if you think about such things).

January 4, 2009

Some more half-baked thoughts on music and morality:

Science tells us that all matter is vibrating atoms and that it is the frequencies at which these atoms vibrate that constitute all the various forms of matter, visible and invisible. The substance
of music consists of the audible spectrum of vibration (roughly 20Hz to 20kHz) and, as such, reflects the sublime order of the universe. Therefore, when we listen to music, we are (for lack of a better way of putting it) contemplating the divine.

So, does this make the musician a priest in some quasi-religion? Here, things get tricky. Like all human endeavors, music is made by imperfect beings and is therefore imperfect in practice. But the “stuff” of music is the ultimate abstraction of universal truths - a form of prayer - and it is this element that binds people to its endless, necessary, performance in all its variegated diversity of styles and genres. Some music is explicitly sacred, some is as nihilistic and offensive as possible; but its usefulness resides in that contemplation of “cosmic vibrations.” For some people (like me), Sun Ra’s music is most useful; for others it might be Kenny G. For some people it is the explicitly sacred music of their personal faith; for others it is the pop music of the day. The art music world has taken a near-scientific approach to examining the phenomena of music and its investigations have demonstrated that music’s possible manifestations are indeed infinite. Whatever our tastes (and tastes are, of course, nothing but a cultural construct - learned behavior), our need for music arises from its fundamental substance: it is the exact representation of the vibrating universe. This is why we listen to music.

From that we can conclude that all music is intrinsically “moral” in the sense that its essence is the audible manifestation of vibrating matter and our attention to it allows insight (even if unconscious) into profound truths. But to go further and suggest there is more-moral or, conversely, an immoral music is, while tempting, probably too divisive to be useful. Assertions of moral character - even Sun Ra’s - are merely words and, while useful to those who are susceptible to the message, are nevertheless unproveable claims and do not - cannot - inhere in the music itself, except as suggestion, as context. And, as Sam pointed out, “context is everything.” He helpfully pointed to an interesting article that suggests how meta-data influences our interpretation of music by contrasting the inflammatory titles utilized by Muslimgauze (Bryn Jones) to the rather anodyne music itself; any supposed “morality” or “immorality” is wrapped up in a title irrevocably tied to a piece of music in which such controversy or intent is patently absent. Obviously, music’s power can be harnessed as an effective propaganda tool, but human motivations are complex and often contradictory. Even so, we need music in order to comprehend our place in the cosmos, even if our understanding is fractured and incomplete.

So, for me, today, it is Sun Ra (tomorrow it will be someone else). For others, it may be Muslimgauze. Our susceptibility to the proclamations of composers (and others) may allow us to “hear” the morality (or immorality) of their musical creations, but words and their contexts can and do change and what remains are simply the vibrations, the sound itself which so easily expresses the inexpressible and exists beyond the words. The very concepts of morality and ethics are human constructs that music naturally resists when pressed. Music is what is, unconcerned with human frailties. When we experience music, we know more than we can ever say.

January 11, 2009

Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra: Horizon (Art Yard CD08) (2008)

Recorded live at the Ballon Theatre, Cairo, Egypt 12/17/71

The Arkestra’s own Art Yard label continues to make some of the rarest Sun Ra material available with this expanded reissue of Horizon. Portions of this material were originally
released on El Saturn 1217718 in Philadelphia, El Saturn 849 in Chicago, and on Thoth Intergalactic 7771, all at various points in the early to mid-1970s and all nearly impossible to find. This CD gathers all the extant recordings from this historic performance at the Ballon Theatre, near the Great Pyramids in Cairo, a suitably cosmic venue for Sun Ra’s band of space travelers.

A trip to Egypt was unplanned, but at the end of the 1971 European tour, Ra decided to sell some concert tapes to Black Lion [FN1] to fund a pilgrimage to the land of the Pharaohs. Thanks to the efforts of Hartmut Geerken, a handful of performances were arranged and, even though the Arkestra’s instruments were held up in customs, loaners were provided by a most unlikely personage:

[Salah Ragab was] a brigadier general and the head of military music in the Egyptian army and himself a jazz drummer. Though he was later disciplined for the contact, he continued to meet with the band under various disguises, including once when he came with the son of [Egyptian President] Gamal Abdel Nasser, also a jazz musician. Musicians and dancers were jammed into the house with several dozen guests, but they still managed a light show and dancing, and a march throughout the house and into the garden (while the Egyptian secret police kept watch from outside). (Szwed p.292-293) [FN2]

This concert is typical for the period, although there’s a certain focus and solemnity to the Arkestra’s demeanor that seems appropriate given the auspicious location. Sun Ra himself is in especially good form with his propulsive piano, spooky “tiger organ,” and hair-raising rocket ship journeys on the Moog synthesizer. “The Shadow World” makes another mysterious appearance with its insanely complicated melodies. “Discipline #8” is especially beautiful with its slowly oscillating two-note riff that subtly anchors the freely dancing drums and powerfully energetic horn solos, duets, and trios. Sing-alongs like “Enlightenment,” “Space is the Place,” and “The Satellites Are Spinning” round things out and feature the angelic voice of June Tyson.

Premises considered, sound quality is pretty good, though not a hi-fi spectacular by any means. Probably recorded from the audience with a single microphone, there’s plenty of ambience but limited frequency response, dynamic range, or soundstage. Fans will, of course, be undeterred by low-fidelity recordings as it comes with the territory. After all, Sun Ra was a trail-blazing pioneer of DIY record production. In fact, that “Saturn Sound” is, for some of us, part of the charm. For others, however, Horizon may be rough going. But as a historical document and a key disc in Sun Ra’s vast discography, this is essential.

[FN1]: Campbell (1st ed.) says these tapes are unreleased. I’m not sure if they have been subsequently made available. Anybody know? (Yes, I need to get the second edition of Campbell’s discography, but it too is woefully out of date at this point).

[FN2]: Some of Salah Rageb’s music can be heard on The Sun Ra Arkestra Meets Salah Ragab in Egypt (Leo/Golden Years GY1, 1999).

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Question: how long is "The Shadow World" on this release? On the original LP it ends side 1 and sorta cuts off after a short drum solo. It's about 10 minutes long total. Is that the case on this CD?

I love everything from this Egyptian series of shows! The band is large and on fire. From this LP, I especially love "Third Planet," a great piece that would be resurrected in Italy in 1978, but overall not played that much by Ra over the years. It's interesting, also, to hear the early version of "Space is the place" with only the first half of the familiar melody (but with a blistering Marshall Allen sax solo!).

Paul w. said...
hi sam, i can answer your question regarding shadow world. on saturn vinyl lp shadow world is about 14:20 min. on art yard cd it is shown as 16:42 min. in length. as i don't have art yard cd yet - i cannot say if there is any additional music there - probably there is.

i fully agree with your opinion on horizon album. i also like very much "third planet" (one of the finest sun ra compositions)and the early version of "space is the place" with great organ and fiery alto sax solo by marshall allen.

i am waiting now to have opportunity to listen to horizon - extended version on art yard with cleaned and improved sound and 4 extra tracks.

January 18, 2009
No time to write today, but here's a one minute and twenty-three second clip of Sun Ra attacking his electric organ at some unknown venue in 1980. Wild stuff!

January 25, 2009

Sun Ra: Cosmos (Spalax 14561) (1999)
Recorded at Studio Hautefeuille, Paris, France, August 1976
Originally released as Cobra (France) COB 37001 (1976)

According to Robert L. Campbell’s discography (1st ed.), this LP was also issued on Musicdistribution 60005 and Inner City IC 1020 shortly after the original Cobra release. It was first re-issued on compact disc by the French Buda label (82479) but the original CD apparently suffers from a booming bass-heavy mix. This 1999 issue on Spalax purports to correct that deficiency - but I’m not so sure; it sounds lopsided still, with prominent electric bass and distant drums. Regardless, this is one of my very favorite Sun Ra records.

The sonic imbalances no doubt have to something to do with the cramped quarters of the recording studio. According to French horn player (!), Vincent Chauncey, the Arkestra was reduced to a core group of twelve musicians for this session due to the limited space (Campbell (1st ed.) p.73). Oh, but what a group! Along with Chauncey, Ra’s faithful stalwarts, John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Danny Davis, Danny Thompson, Elo Omoe, and Jac Jackson fill out the reed section while Ahmed Abdullah plays sensitive, tasteful trumpet and the incredible Craig Harris virtuosically holds down the trombone chair. The rhythm section consists of R. Anthony Bunn on (nice, but overloud) electric bass, Larry Bright on (barely audible) drums, and, of
course, Sun Ra himself on the electric Rocksichord. Caught in the midst of a European tour, the Arkestra sounds well-rehearsed, at the top of their game.

But as great as the band sounds on this date, it is Ra’s electric keyboard that makes this such a delightfully engaging record for me. Throughout the album, Ra’s Rocksichord has this weird, wire-thin, reedy sound quality, upon which he pours some molasses-thick phase-shifter that hisses away incessantly in the background. Now, in anyone else’s hands, this would be unbelievably cheesy, even amateurish. Yet Ra guilelessly tackles the wide variety material and, through his visionary technical abilities, miraculously balances the seemingly limited electronic keyboard textures with the expansive, acoustic Arkestra to create a decidedly strange, but appropriately otherworldly ambience. Ra’s ultra-spacey keyboard turns tracks like “Interstellar Low-Ways,” “Moonship Journey,” and “Journey Among the Stars” into dreamy, nearly narcotic reveries. Even the more straightforwardly big-band-ish tracks like “The Mystery of Two,” “Neo Project #2,” and the aptly-titled “Jazz From an Unknown Planet” are transformed by Ra’s swooshing, buzzing Rocksichord. The brief title track stands out as a vehicle for another classic John Gilmore solo on tenor saxophone atop an intense Arkestra arrangement, but overall the mood is pretty and mellow and perfect for a Sunday evening.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Rodger, another great review--you're much kinder to this record than I've been in the past; I need to go back and re-listen. Don't know what it is about it that has made me treat it in my mind as a "lesser" Ra album. It may be that the very thing that has drawn you to it--the rocksichord--is the thing that kept me away. It's a very monochromatic instrument, if that's the right word--it's kinda one-toned. And its predominance throughout this album gives it a one-dimensional feeling that the music doesn't overcome. At least that's what I've thought in the past. But it's certainly true that if anyone could make it more flexible and interesting, it would be Ra! So thanks for sending me back...

Rodger Coleman said...
Sam, I agree that in the grand scheme of things, this is a "lesser" Ra album. But there's a consistent mood to the record that I really enjoy, which is largely due to Ra's keyboard playing. The Rocksichord reminds me of the sound of my first electronic piano back in the late-70s...I wanted a Fender-Rhodes, but that was out of the question. So this thing had that thin, reedy sound that I felt like never fit...so what amazes me about this record is how Ra does SO MUCH with SO LITTLE. It really comes down to his note choices and articulation (and his Arkestration) and it just "fits" in a way that would seem impossible (to me, anyway). And, besides, Sundays can be, um, difficult, and I can't always handle the intensity of top-shelf Ra...

February 1, 2009

Sun Ra & His Myth Science Arkestra: Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy (Evidence ECD 2036)

Recorded at The Choreographer’s Workshop, NYC, late 1963
Originally released as Saturn 408 (1967) and Thoth Intergalactic KH 2272 (1969)

Of all the outlandish and evocative titles in Sun Ra’s discography, Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy stands out in its audacious, baldly prescriptive claim. But, to be sure, the title is no idle
put-on. In fact, Ra had presciently been involved in what would nowadays be known as "music therapy" back in the late-1950s:

[Manager] Alton Abraham arranged through his medical contacts for Sonny to play for a group of patients at a Chicago mental hospital...The group of patients assembled for this early experiment in musical therapy included catatronics and severe schizophrenics, but Sonny approached the job like any other, making no concessions in his music. While he was playing, a woman who it was said had not moved or spoken for years got up from the floor, walked directly to his piano, and cried out, ‘Do you call that music?’ Sonny was delighted with her response and told the story for years afterwards as evidence of the healing powers of music (Szwed, p.92-93).

While the term “music therapy” may conjure up some kind of dulcet, inoffensive, New-Age-y pabulum, the Cosmic Tones marshaled here are anything but easy-listening. Ra practices a kind of electro-shock treatment to the soul, seeking to, as with the catatonic mental patient, “touch the unknown part of the person, awaken the part of them that we’re not able to talk to, the spirit” (Szwed, p. 257). Ra did not consider the Arkestra to be musicians so much as “tone scientists” (Szwed, p. 112) whose investigations and manipulations of musical phenomena could help mankind in its earthly struggles. “People are disturbed and need your help 24 hours a day,” he would lecture the band (quoted in Szwed, p. 374).

People are just like receivers, they’re like speakers, too, like amplifiers. They’re also like instruments because they got a heart that beats and that’s a drum. They’ve got eardrums too, and they some strings in there, so they actually got harps on each side of their head. If you play certain harmonies, these strings will vibrate in people’s ears and touch different nerves in the body. When the proper things are played in each person, these strings will automatically tune themselves properly and then the person will be in tune. There will be no discord, they will be tuned up perfectly, just like each automobile have to be tuned according to what kind of automobile it is. My music does have a vibration somewhere within it that can reach every person in the audience through feeling (quoted in Szwed, p. 345).

Electro-shock treatment is also an appropriate metaphor in that electronic technology was always an important tool in Ra’s medic bag. On Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy, Ra eschews the piano altogether for the mewling whine of the Clavioline (an early keyboard synthesizer) and the swirly Hammond organ. Further, electronic echo is slathered onto the proceedings by recordist/percussionist Tommy “Bugs” Hunter, who had accidentally discovered the effect while fooling around with the Ampex 602 tape recorder he had purchased at a pawn shop in 1962. By plugging in a cable from the output jack into the input on the machine, massive reverberant echo was produced.

I wasn’t sure what Sun Ra would think of it...I thought he might be mad – but he loved it. It blew his mind! By working the volume of the output on the playback, I could control the effect, make it fast or slow, drop it out, or whatever (quoted in Szwed, p. 187).

Astonishingly, all of this proto-psychedelia was created years before Timothy Leary and the hippies discovered LSD and invented “acid rock.” While Ra sought the kind of change in consciousness that psychedelics promised (and, later, he certainly profited to some extent from the hippies’ taste for spacey freakouts), he abjured drugs and forbade his musicians from indulging themselves. And no matter how outrageous his music might sound, it was never merely a free-form “freakout.” No, the members of the Arkestra were sober, disciplined scientists conducting advanced research and revealing their findings.
Much of the music on *Cosmic Tones* appears to be in the form of brief conducted improvisations (a form that would later be refined and expanded on *Other Planes of There* (1964) (Evidence ECD 22037, 1992) and *The Magic City* (1965) (Evidence ECD 22069, 1993). Unusual instrumentation (and a conspicuous absence of brass instruments) predominates: besides Ra’s electronic keyboards, Marshall Allen concentrates on oboe and flute while John Gilmore plays bass clarinet and percussion exclusively. Known for his prowess as a tenor saxophonist, Gilmore’s brilliant solo on the quasi-rumba, “Adventure Equation” demonstrates his remarkable virtuosity and inventiveness on the notoriously recalcitrant bass clarinet. Interestingly, the Arkestra rarely plays all at once, giving the music a contemporary-classical, chamber music quality, albeit with that “Saturn Sound” that is so unique to Sun Ra.

“And Otherness” opens the album with middle-eastern-sounding oboe and clip-clopping log drums before throbbing, low-register “space chords” assert themselves amongst the horns and Clavioline. Pat Patrick enters with herky-jerky blasts on the baritone saxophone before gently flowing, antiphonal horn lines bring the piece to an open-ended close. “Thither and Yon” again features some snaky oboe, this time with echoey minimalist percussion tapping, scribbled flute ornamentation, and Ronnie Boykins’s forceful pizzicato and delightfully singing arco bass. “Moon Dance” stands out as an almost funky strut with its repetitive bass riff, lackadaisically propulsive drums and small percussion, and Ra’s occasionally soaring, soulful organ. “Voice of Space” is a kind of an improvised concerto for Ronnie Boykins’s bowed bass, accompanied by stabbing organ chords, clattering percussion, and thick, heaving echo. Danny Davis shines on alto saxophone, weaving wiggly filigrees in the background or more aggressively battling the hissing reverb feedback that always threatens to overwhelm. At one point, Boykins’s bass tremolos merge imperceptibly with Ra’s rumbling organ which then duets with Gilmore’s woody bass clarinet – a moment of group mind at its most sublime.

So does *Cosmic Tones For Mental Therapy* live up to its restorative claims? The usual disclaimers apply: any medication can affect people in different ways and the potential side effects are unpredictable. You may experience dizziness and disorientation, but this is normal. Thankfully, overdosage is rarely fatal. In any case, if you find yourself suffering from psychic imbalances, this can be an effective cure.

+++ This CD also contains *Art Forms Of Dimensions Tomorrow*, recorded in 1962 and tenuously connected to *Cosmic Tones* in venue and in the prevalence of Tommy Hunter’s echo machine. Otherwise, it is its own thing and worthy of close examination. But that will have to wait for another day.

**February 8, 2009**

**Mr. Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Bad and Beautiful** (Evidence ECD 22038)  
*Recorded at the Choreographer’s Workshop, NYC Nov.-Dec. 1961*  
*Originally released as Saturn 532 (1972)*

By 1961, Mr. Sun Ra and a diminished Arkestra had inadvertently relocated from Chicago to New York City and, although gig opportunities were slim, Tommy Hunter had rejoined the band on percussion. Hunter subsequently purchased an Ampex 601 reel-to-reel tape recorder at a pawn shop in order to record the Arkestra’s frequent rehearsals. Hunter was also fortuitously
employed, first at Columbus Rehearsal Studio on 8th Avenue between 57th and 58th Streets and later at the Choreographer’s Workshop at 414 West 51st Street. Thanks to Hunter, the Arkestra was able to rehearse and record rent-free on nights and weekends for the next three years (see Szwed, pp.186-187). Ra had frequently recorded rehearsals back in Chicago, but 1961 would mark the beginning of a particularly fruitful period.

**Bad and Beautiful** is the very first of a long series of wonderful Saturn records made at the Choreographer’s Workshop in the 1960s. This particular session was recorded in a room on the third or fourth floor where the acoustics and the piano were “not to Ra’s liking” (Campbell, 1st ed., p. 24). Sonny apparently preferred the basement where there was a good piano and better acoustics (Szwed, p.187). Indeed there is a noticeably hissy and tinny quality to the sound. But there is also that pleasantly reverberant atmosphere that characterizes all of the Choreographer’s Workshop records: They have that *Saturn Sound*. Along with Ra and Hunter, the sextet includes Marshall Allen on alto sax and flute, John Gilmore on tenor sax, Pat Patrick on baritone sax, Ronnie Boykins on bass. They sound supremely relaxed, languidly exploring hoary standards and show tunes along with some rather conventional Ra originals. Gilmore is in his usual fine form throughout but his oh-so-smooth solo on “Search Light Blues” is truly deep and soulful. Pat Patrick plays the unwieldy baritone saxophone with astounding grace on the riff-based “Ankh” and on the gently swinging “On the Blue Side.” But then “Exotic Two” points to the future with each Arkestra member banging away on percussion instruments in dense polyrhythms while Ra punches out stiff chord sequences on the piano. (Small percussion instruments can be heard chattering away on “Search Light Blues” as well.) The album closes with a languorous ensemble arrangement of “And This Is My Beloved.” In all, **Bad and Beautiful** is a transitional, historically important album and its subdued atmosphere and sophisticated musicianship also makes for a simply pleasant Sun Ra Sunday.

+++  
Evidence ECD 22038 also contains *We Travel the Spaceways* (**Saturn 409**), recorded at various places in Chicago during the late-1950s; it will be considered separately.

February 15, 2009

**Sun Ra & His Myth Science Arkestra: Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow** (Evidence ECD 22036) (1992)

*Recorded at the Choreographer’s Workshop, NYC, 1961-1962.  Originally released as Saturn 9956 (1965).*

**Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow** tacks on two leftover tracks from 1961’s **Bad & Beautiful** recording session but mostly consists of a 1962 rehearsal recorded in the basement of the Choreographer’s Workshop where there was a good piano and better acoustics. The sound quality is notably improved even if the source tape for this CD is significantly degraded. More importantly, Ra’s music is clearly moving in a new, exciting direction. Drummer/recordist Tommy Hunter had been recording rehearsals on his Apex reel-to-reel and accidentally discovered the feedback/echo effect that appears here for the first time. So while **Bad & Beautiful** was a somewhat traditional jazz combo album full of show tunes and semi-conventional Ra originals, **Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow** lives up to its title, moving forward into the kind of experimental avant garde music that would cement Ra’s reputation in the 1960s and 70s while also retaining a connection to the living tradition that would continue to
center the Arkestra’s aesthetic throughout its career. To paraphrase Michael Shore’s comment in the liner notes to this Evidence CD, if *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy* is a Rosetta Stone, then *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow* is Ra beginning to carve it in earnest.

“Cluster of Galaxies” is a brief but portentous opening with its spacey “thunder drums,” “sun harp,” and “spiral percussion gong” all drenched in thick cosmic echo and reverb. Afro-psychedelia starts right here – in 1962! P-Funk mastermind George Clinton once remarked, “[Sun Ra] was definitely out to lunch – the same place I eat at!” (quoted in Szwed, p. 264). Shifting gears, the next track is another remake of “Ankh” which originally appeared in a more florid arrangement in 1956 on the Delmark LP, *Sound of Joy* and more recently on *Bad & Beautiful*. This composition was obviously important to Ra and the various renditions are fascinatingly diverse. Here, baritone saxophonist Pat Patrick shares solo space with a rare appearance by Ali Hassan on trombone. The mood is brighter, less ominous than usual with some funky gospel handclaps supporting the lumbering riffs. “Solar Drums” is another brief space-out featuring echoing drums, small percussion, bells and faintly tinkling piano. The hissing feedback ebbs and flows across the sonic landscape, sometimes threatening to overwhelm everything until Tommy Hunter suddenly turns a knob, bringing things back into focus.

The next two tracks appear to be Ra’s earliest experiments with a new kind of form: loosely structured, non-idiomatic, conducted improvisation. This is a form that Ra would expand and perfect as the decade proceeded, resulting in such masterpieces as *Other Planes of There* and *The Magic City* (Evidence ECD 22069). With its total absence of drums, atonal piano, and knotty contrapuntal horn lines, “The Outer Heavens” sounds more like contemporary classical music than big band jazz and points the way to the later music of the AACM and Anthony Braxton. In contrast, a barrage of ceremonial drums and percussion dominates “Infinity of the Universe” with Ra agitatedly rumbling around in the piano’s lowest registers. Michael Shore points out in the liner notes that: “his repeated bass-clef piano runs mark the first appearance of what would, in a few years, turn into the launch pad for one of his greatest pieces, ‘The Shadow World.’” I think that’s correct and a fascinating insight into Ra’s working methods. Towards the end, the horns enter with fleeting and plaintive cries over the increasingly pounding percussion before the track quickly fades to silence.

The album closes with the two orphaned tracks from the *Bad & Beautiful* sessions and a return to its cool, swinging combo mode. “Lights on a Satellite” was originally recorded in Chicago in 1960 but unreleased until 1965 on *Fate in a Pleasant Mood* (Evidence ECD 22068). The version here eschews the ornamental flute obligato and becomes a soulful ballad vehicle for Ra’s Monkish piano. Unfortunately, the track fades out prematurely just as Gilmore begins to blow. “Kosmos in Blue” is a typical Ra blues, bouncy and maybe a little old fashioned rhythmically, but full of dissonant voicings and an unpredictable, disjointed harmonic structure. Gilmore’s tenor saxophone solo stands out for its stately reserve and concise eloquence.

+++ As we proceed to move chronologically through the Choreographer’s Workshop recordings, next up would be *Secrets of the Sun*, the first really mature work of the period. But from there to *Cosmic Tones*, the discography get a little murky – Sam, I think I’ll need your help sorting these out! Please drop me a line!

February 22, 2009
Sun Ra & His Arkestra: *Out There a Minute* (Restless/Blast First CD 71427)

Back in the early 1980s, when I was coming of age, hanging out with other weirdo musicians at the New England Conservatory, and discovering Sun Ra’s music for the first time, Ra’s records were extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find even in a big city like Boston. I managed to snag a couple of Saturn LPs while working at Strawberry’s Records circa. 1984 but they were totally unlabeled, extremely poor pressings, and contained a mish-mash of material recorded at various times and places. Or at least that’s how I remember them since I have no idea what the titles were; sadly, I later sold them in a fit of self-induced poverty and poor judgment. As the CD era dawned, contemporaneous recordings were issued on foreign labels like Black Saint (Italy), DIW (Japan), and Leo (France) while crummy-sounding bootlegs of the classic ESP recordings were also floating around the underground record shops. But for the most part Sun Ra’s vast body of work was shrouded in mystery. When the U.S. major label A&M released the crisply produced *Blue Delight* in 1988, Ra was suddenly something of a commodity and a steady stream of archival material began to flow to flow in the 1990s.

In today’s instantaneous-information and media-saturated age, it might be difficult to imagine what a revelation it was when *Out There a Minute* appeared in 1989. Billed as “Sun Ra’s personal selection of rare Arkestra recordings from the late 1960s,” this CD allowed a glimpse into the darkest recesses of Ra’s most obscure period. But in typical Saturnal fashion, the packaging was devoid of liner notes beyond some cryptic Ra poetry leaving any definitive information as to dates and personnel merely inferred or totally unknown. That is until the efforts of Prof. Robert L. Campbell to compile a definitive Sun Ra discography began to circulate on the nascent internet. Thanks to Prof. Campbell (and the small but avid cyber-community of Ra fanatics), one could in the coming years finally piece together the murky history of Sun Ra’s Arkestra and gain an understanding of the material that appears on *Out There a Minute*. The *Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra* was subsequently published by Cadence Jazz Books in 1994 and a greatly enlarged second edition (which I still need to purchase) was published in 2000.

So, it turns out that *Out There a Minute* contains several tracks that were later issued on CD in their proper album context on *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow, When Angels Speak of Love* (Evidence ECD 22216), and *Night of the Purple Moon* (Atavistic ALP 264) along with two tracks from the still-out-of-print *Continuation* LP from 1968. I will not consider any of these tracks here except to say that Atavistic needs to reissue *Continuation* pronto. The remainder of the CD consists of never released recordings, some of which derive from the Choreographer’s Workshop era and therefore fits chronologically into our discussion of these crucial early/mid-sixties sessions.

“Somewhere in Space,” “Dark Clouds with Silver Linings,” and “Journey Outward” were all recorded in 1962 and demonstrate Ra’s evolution from the more swing-based traditionalism of the Chicago era to the experimental, avant-garde music that first appeared on *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow* and was perfected on *Secrets of the Sun*. “Somewhere in Space” is a lumbering two-chord march featuring Art Jenkins on “space voice,” actually wordless, improvisatory singing through an inverted ram’s horn (see Szwed pp.192-193 for the whole story). After a while, the horns enter with a simple, but affecting batch of riffs before each picking up small percussion instruments in support of a string of rather meandering solos: Pat Patrick on baritone saxophone, John Gilmore on tenor, Marshall Allen on flute. “Dark Clouds With Silver Linings” is a more conventional Ra original with a mid-tempo blues structure but with some typically unexpected harmonic twists. Gilmore states the melody and his tenor solos glide effortlessly through the weirdly bop-ish changes. Meanwhile, Ra explores some interesting two-
handed counterpoint along with his stabbed comping. The ensemble sounds a little unsure of itself when it enters with the restatement of the theme, which yields some mild inadvertent dissonance before the close. “Journey Outwards” appears to be another early example of the conducted improvisations that would characterize this period’s most important work. It opens with Gilmore on mellifluous bass clarinet over softly mumbling drums. Then Gilmore drops out as the percussion builds into a polyrhythmic African groove. Al Evans enters with some mellow, richly melodic flugelhorn statements and Ra joins in with some angular piano figures before fading out. Very nice.

The title track, “Out There a Minute,” remains somewhat of a discographical mystery. According to Prof. Campbell, it could have been recorded at any time between 1962 and 1964, but to my ears it sounds very similar to the hissy, distant quality and subtly swinging combo feel of 1961’s Bad & Beautiful. In any event, it’s another patented off-kilter blues with some slippery piano work from Ra and a spirited Patrick solo on baritone saxophone. “Other Worlds” jumps ahead to the Magic City (Evidence ECD 22069) sessions of spring 1965, with a larger Arkestra and more aggressively avant-garde approach, but probably not recorded at the Choreographer’s Workshop (for one thing, it’s in stereo). Ra plays a quietly intense introduction on simultaneous piano and bell-like celeste before the Arkestra bursts in with a hard-driving atonal workout. Throughout the piece, Ra’s piano attack is every bit as ferocious as Cecil Taylor’s and the entire 11-piece Arkestra blows hot and heavy, tossing lines around with seemingly wild abandon. But repeated listens reveal a tightly controlled compositional integrity that packs the wallop of John Coltrane’s “Ascension” into a mere four minutes and forty-eight seconds. Incredible stuff. “Jazz and Romantic Sounds” probably dates from about 1969 given Ra’s electronic organ. Also, Gilmore is notably absent, but Marshall Allen and Danny Davis duke it out on alto saxophones while Ra conjures up the “space-age barbeque music” vibe similar to My Brother the Wind Vol. 2.

These never-before-released tracks make Out There a Minute a must-have proposition for the hardcore Sun Ra fan while the whole disc is full of prime cuts and a suitable introduction for the novice. Sadly, the CD is now out print although its widespread distribution means it’s readily available in the secondary market and well worth the effort to track it down. Essential.

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Big thank you to Sam Byrd for helping me sort this stuff out!

March 1, 2009

Sun Ra & His Arkestra Featuring Pat Patrick: “A Blue One” / “Orbitration in Blue” (Saturn SRA-999)  
Recorded at the Choreographer’s Workshop, New York City, early-1962.  
Originally released late-1964.

This super-obscure seven-inch 45-RPM single was discovered too late to appear on Evidence’s The Singles(ECD 22164) (1996) and that’s too bad because it’s a stunner and it remains sadly out of print. Note that Arkestra stalwart, Pat Patrick receives a rare co-billing on the disc’s label; well, his spectacular baritone saxophone playing on these two Choreographer’s Workshop tracks suitably justifies the honorific.
Laurdine "Pat" Patrick was born November 23, 1929 in East Moline, Illinois and was the first of several graduates of Captain Walter Dyett’s DuSable High School who would fall in with Sun Ra in Chicago after around 1950. (For more information on Captain Dyett, see Szwed, pp.87-89, 94 and George E. Lewis, A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music (Chicago, 2008).) Ra biographer John Szwed aptly sums up the importance Ra’s early association with the youthful Pat Patrick:

"Pat Patrick [was] a baritone saxophonist of enormous resources, a prodigy; a humorous but highly organized person, whose playing reflected both qualities: “He’d be playing and suddenly this note would come from nowhere, and sound wrong,” said bassoonist James Jacson, who played with Sonny many years later; “but as he went on you’d see how it was deceptive…it fit perfectly.” [...] Patrick was something special, a musician of the right spirit, intelligent, honest, serious. He saw to it that Sonny was protected, and was quick to help any other members of the band in trouble. Patrick was the best musician Sonny ever had in any of his bands. He got the point of ideas and music immediately (“You got it down, Pat,” Sonny always said). He had great hopes for him, and felt that with Pat he had the basis for a band capable of executing the music he had been working on for over ten years (pp. 87-88).

Patrick was a charter member of Sun Ra’s Space Trio, the Arkestra’s precursor, and a 1951 home recording entitled, “Treasure Hunt,” documents Patrick’s already full-bodied sound and smooth, thoughtful invention. Patrick would remain committed to Sun Ra until the end of his life in 1991, but he also worked with such luminaries as Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Mongo Santamaria, with whom he co-wrote the 1963 hit, “Yeh Yeh.”

The A-side of this little gem, “A Blue One,” is a rollicking mid-tempo Ra blues, with a simple pssh-tap-bang rhythm and stolid walking bass that sets up a subtly killing groove. Ra takes a brief turn on the piano before Patrick enters with a burbling bari-sax solo that ranges freely from the resonant growls of the lowest registers to high-register wails and cries, with astonishingly fleet passagework full of widely spaced intervals and intricate legato runs. Boykins takes the lead with some funky, stop-start bass before fading out. This should have been a hit! The B-side, “Orbitration in Blue,” is a bluesy, drummer-less ballad featuring another wild excursion on bari-sax. Incongruously opening with some honking low notes, Patrick’s playing is simultaneously suave and smooth and rough and edgy. At about 1:44, he blasts out one of those seemingly “wrong” notes that Jacson mentions, full of buzzing squeaks and harmonics that somehow manages to resolve itself beautifully as the piano and bass navigate the lush chord changes. Patrick concludes his solo with a flourish and the track quickly fades out. Far out!

Pat Patrick once said, “Sun Ra was another kind of being. He was educational, he helped you to grow and develop. He was a black self-help organization run on a shoe-string... If he could’ve had the resources, the planet would be a better place. That’s all he’s done: tried to make life better” (quoted in Szwed, p. 89). This single is brimming with high-spirited and uplifting swing and inspired improvisation. Listening to it does make the planet a better place -- for a few minutes anyway.

+++ Pat Patrick is also the father of Massachusetts’ Governor, Deval Patrick. The Governor discusses the complicated relationship with his largely absent father in this Boston Globe article from March, 2007:
March 8, 2009

My work life is seriously impinging on my home life these days, so my examination of the Choreographer’s Workshop recordings will have to be put off this week. In the meantime, here’s some cool silent footage (with dubbed music) of Sun Ra and the Arkestra in Egypt and Italy circa. 1971:

March 15, 2009

*The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra (2nd edition)*
*By Robert L. Campbell & Christopher Trent*

This is an example of “amateur” scholarship in the best sense of the word. In an attempt to get a handle on Ra’s vast (and vastly confusing) discography, Clemson psychology professor (and Sun Ra fan) Robert L. Campbell began compiling a list of all known recordings, building upon the work of Hartmut Geerken and Dr. Tilman Stahl in the 1980s. In 1992, Prof. Campbell shared his findings with the Saturn internet list-serv and the small but resourceful cyber-community of Sun Ra fans contributed a wealth of new information. Sun Ra was notoriously vague about dates and personnel and many Saturn LPs were issued in blank or hand-scrawled sleeves containing zero information – not even a title! Therefore, intensive forensic analysis was required to even attempt to ascertain essential discographical details. The end result of this communitarian effort was the publication of the first edition of *The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra* in 1994. Subsequently, further new discoveries were made and, with the help of co-author and fellow Ra-fanatic, Christopher Trent, this second, massively enlarged edition was published by Cadence Jazz Books in 2000.

Campbell and Trent strive to document not only all of Sun Ra’s officially released recordings, both as a sideman and a leader, but also all known live performances, unissued recordings, and rumored sessions. They also attempt to trace the Ra’s footsteps around the globe where recordings are unknown. Posthumous performances by the Marshall Allen-led Arkestra up through 1998 are also included. Did I mention the discography is massive? The first edition included 501 items across 218 pages while the second edition lists 788 items and totals 847 pages, including several handily cross-referenced indexes. The 6” x 8” paperbound book weighs in at over three pounds!

It is a shame, however, that such a thick, heavy tome is so poorly bound. The signatures have been brutally chopped off and the three-inch-thick text block is merely glued to a flimsy cardboard cover. With any prolonged use, the spine will surely fail and pages will begin to fall out. A somewhat expensive purchase, I would have preferred that this monumental reference work had been more sturdily constructed. Alas, *The Earthly Recordings* is a labor of love for a vanishingly small, specialized audience and no doubt a library bound edition would cost upwards of $100.00. Nevertheless, *The Earthly Recordings* is an essential resource for the
serious Sun Ra fan. Now almost a decade out of date, perhaps a hardbound, thousand-page third edition will be forthcoming.

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Another fabulous resource (that I forgot I even had) is Sun Ra Scores: The Library of Congress Endowment, another amazing bit of scholarship compiled by ethnomusicologist James Wolf. From the years 1956 to 1973, Ra deposited a couple hundred pages of sheet music to the Library of Congress for copyright purposes and Wolf managed to retrieve and photocopy the collection during the mid-1990s. Subsequently, the collection was made available to members of the Saturn internet community for a nominal copying fee. Predictably, most of the “scores” contain only the barest information: a melody, lyrics, and perhaps some chord symbols. However, as I was flipping through them today, I was surprised to find meticulously detailed scores for “And Otherness” and “Moon Dance,” two seemingly loosely structured pieces from Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy. These appear to be not mere transcriptions, but fully realized compositions with additional elements not found on the record. Fascinating!

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With these tools at hand, we will continue the examination of the Choreographer’s Workshop recordings next week (I hope).

COMMENTS:

Sam said... 
I hear what you're saying about the binding of the 2nd edition--the spine on mine is cracked, and I'm worried that pages are going to start falling out. Admittedly, I've used it a lot--a lot!--but it pretty much started falling apart as soon as I got it.

Until (if) a new edition ever comes out, for the record there's also the "Earthly Extension" at http://zxzy.narod.ru/extension.html which has some updates, some listings not in the 2nd ed. Also, I have been compiling a list of corrections and amplifications, not very extensive, maybe 10-15 entries.

March 22, 2009

Sun Ra: What's New (side A) (Saturn 539)

The discographical murkiness continues with this 1975 LP containing four swinging Choreographer's Workshop recordings from 1962 on the A-side and a contemporaneous concert fragment on side B. Confusingly, later pressings substitute side A of The Invisible Shield for the B-side (see below). In any case, the kind of hot jazz found here probably represents a taste of the Arkestra's working-gig repertoire during the lean early years in New York. Of course, Ra came out of the big-band tradition of the 1930s and 40s and had vast experience arranging standards and show tunes for various ensembles and his flair for instrumental color (check out Marshall Allen's flute!) and ornamental counterpoint are much in evidence on the title track -- even if the end result comes across as a mere blowing session. "What's New" was, after all, a staple of the Arkestra's live sets throughout their career.
Curiously, two original compositions by Arkestra newcomers Al Evans and Calvin Newborn were also recorded at this Choreographer’s Workshop rehearsal. Newborn’s “Wanderlust” is a rather nondescript jazz waltz but it elicits strong solos by John Gilmore on tenor saxophone, Al Evans on flugelhorn, Danny Davis on alto sax. The composer himself steps out with an aggressively electric guitar solo – a rarely heard timbre in the Arkestra’s recorded history. Ra then builds a solo around distant chordal substitutions before the head returns for the close. Evans brings out the funky side of the Arkestra with his honky-tonk strut aptly entitled “Jukin’.” Evans’s tone is warm and bluesy, while Newborn offers at times some near-psychedelic, noise-infused comping beneath the ever-riffing horns. These two tracks are perhaps a bit lightweight, but still a lot of fun. Evans continued his association with the Arkestra off and on throughout the 70s and 80s while Newborn moved on to moderate success in the blues world.

The Arkestra drops down to a quartet on the hoary old chestnut, “Autumn in New York.” But don’t be fooled! After a lushly romantic opening piano statement, Gilmore plays one of the most breathtakingly heart-rending solos of his long, brilliant career! He starts out by teasing the melancholy melody with spacious, wide-open phrasing, slowly building to register-spanning exclamations, delicate filigrees, and pathos-filled one and two-note worryings. Every note is just exactly the right note at the right place and at the right time. As if awestruck by the sheer beauty of Gilmore’s playing, the band drops out during the second chorus, leaving him to blow an acappella cadenza that miraculously holds the thread of the tune while overflowing with prodigious, risky invention. Suddenly, Ra enters with an (almost) incongruous double-tempo section that slows down just in time for Gilmore to re-state the theme with the kind of stately grace and tender emotion that marked his opening choruses. This track demonstrates that, despite his (well-deserved) reputation as an altissimo-fueled avant-garde noisemaker, John Gilmore was truly one of the great post-bop saxophonists of all time. This version of an over-familiar standard has to be heard to be believed. Incredible!

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Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: The Invisible Shield (side A) (Saturn 529)

Now things get even more confusing. This LP was originally released in 1974 with six 1962-63 Choreographer’s Workshop recordings on the A-side backed with some stray cuts from the late sixties and early seventies on the B-side. It has also been variously titled A Tonal View of Times Tomorrow, Vol. 2, Janus, and Satellites are Outerspace. As mentioned above, these tracks also appeared as the B-Side on most copies of What’s New (which is really where they belong given their similarly straight-ahead feel). Some (but not all) of these tracks were sold to Black Lion in 1971, but never issued. Finally, in 2000, some (but, bafflingly, not all) of those tracks were officially released on Standards (1201 Music 90192). Like I said: very confusing! It certainly would have been nice if all of these 1962-63 tracks were gathered in one place, but so it goes in Sun Ra’s Omniverse. That said, the Standards CD does boast superior sound quality and includes a rare 1955 home recording of Ra duetting with bassist Wilbur Ware on “Can This Be Love” and is therefore (grudgingly) recommended.

Anyway, “State Street” is a sprightly Ra original that is omitted from Standards on the grounds that it is, well, not a “standard.” Too bad since it’s a barn-burning big band outing with a full-blown brass section consisting of the aforementioned Al Evans on flugelhorn, Ra’s childhood friend Walter Miller on trumpet, and Ali Hassan on trombone. Michael White adds a gypsy element with some keening violin while the virtuoso drumming of Clifford Jarvis drives the Arkestra with an infectious, toe-tapping groove. The saxophones and brass exchange complex,
interlocking lines at the head and riff away happily during the string of brief solos, all of which culminates in a brilliant flourish by baritone saxophonist Pat Patrick before the final coda.

“Sometimes I’m Happy,” finds the Arkestra reduced to a quartet of Ra, Gilmore, Boykins, and the more subdued Lex Humphries on drums. This lightly swinging number is the perfect vehicle for another eloquent statement by Gilmore, punctuated by Ra’s rollicking piano and Boykins’s rock-solid bass. Jarvis and Miller then return for the remaining tracks. Two takes of “Time After Time” exist, but take one is inexplicably omitted on *Standards*. This familiar tune is taken at a briskly bebop-ish pace and showcases Miller’s immaculate technique and burnished tone atop Jarvis’s smooth yet hard-driving drums. On take two, Miller takes more chances, splitting tones into multi-phonic and allowing for more open, silent spaces between his phrases. “Easy to Love” is another hard bop vehicle for Gilmore with Jarvis’s hyperactive bass drum and overlapping polyrhythms relentlessly propelling the music forward. Boykins interjects with some sure-footed walking bass between Gilmore’s increasingly abstracted choruses until, finally, Ra enters with the trumpet to (somewhat raggedly) repeat the theme and end.

“Keep Your Sunny Side Up” is another uptempo number with Jarvis and Boykins swinging like mad and Gilmore once again demonstrating his prowess as a post-bop genius. Yes, it’s another brilliant Gilmore solo! But Miller reveals in one brief chorus what a formidable trumpet player he really was and how sympathetic he was to Sun Ra’s vision – especially as it applied to the living tradition and the so-called mainstream. While economic realities prevented Miller from committing full time to the Arkestra, he remained an always welcome visitor throughout their existence. Unfortunately, Ra’s brass sections would remain in flux during these early New York years.

Along with *What’s New*, this material reveals a part of the Arkestra’s history that was long concealed by the vagaries of the Saturn enterprise (not to mention a genuine desire to promote Ra’s original music over “standards”). Beyond the stellar musicianship on display, these tracks showcase Ra’s bountiful gifts as an arranger and his Herculean work ethic. While the times were penurious, Ra continued to compose, rehearse and record the Arkestra, and found paying work where he could. Arranging and playing standards was (and still is) the lingua franca of jazz and Sun Ra was a master. But he could also write a tune like “State Street” that sounded as if it had been composed during the golden age of the big bands. This music may not be as exhilaratingly modern and original as, say, *Secrets of the Sun* or *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy*, but it is ebullient and supremely well-crafted.

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Special thanks once again to Sam Byrd for his help with this post!

**COMMENTS:**

Sam said...
Another great Sun Ra Sunday! A couple of things to note:

-- I completely agree with you on the underrated Walter Miller. In addition to his affinity for the "standards" side of Ra’s vision, he also stood strong on the outside stuff, like "Magic City." He does pop up on concerts from time to time, even into the ’80s.
You'll find that soon enough you'll run out of ways to say "yet another brilliant John Gilmore solo!" His playing on "Autumn in New York" is truly sublime and is definitely in my top ten Gilmore solo pantheon.

I had another brilliant insight on this period of Ra's music, something to do with arranging, but it was so brilliant I forgot it :) Oh well, the Sun Ra Sundays continue to be inspiring, and continue to send me back to the music.

March 29, 2009

Sun Ra & His Myth Science Arkestra: *When Sun Comes Out* (Evidence ECD 22068)
*Recorded at the Choreographer’s Workshop, NYC, 1962-1963*
*Originally released as El Saturn 2066 (1963)*

*When Sun Comes Out* is truly a landmark record in Ra’s discography: it was the first New York recording to be released on Ra’s own El Saturn label and it contains some of Tommy Hunter’s first stereo recordings made at the Choreographer’s Workshop – quite technologically advanced accomplishments for a shoestring operation in 1963. Some years later, Sun Ra deposited a manuscript with the Library of Congress entitled, “When Sun Comes Out,” which contains a fairly detailed score for most the tracks on the album assembled into a kind of suite. Clearly, Ra considered this an important work – although it is impossible to tell from the score whether it was produced before or after the recording. As with many aspects of Sun Ra’s work, this document poses at least as many questions as it answers.

“Circe” opens the album with ominous, irregular strikes of a gong – loud and soft, ringing and choked, fast and slow. Bells and hand drums enter with a stuttering rhythm while a mysterious singer named Theda Barbara vocalizes wordlessly (and somewhat melodramatically) with a big, warbling vibrato. The mostly pentatonic melody is fully notated in the score with alternating measures of 5/4 and 9/4 over the gong’s droning G. Subsequently, the bells, gong, and hand drums coalesce into a steady rhythm before suddenly fading out. “The Nile” sets out with gently rolling percussion with Ra and Boykins engaging contrasting three-note ostinato patterns to support a beautiful, Arabic-sounding flute melody scored for Marshall Allen. Allen takes considerable liberties with the melody as it goes along, but always hits specified targets, indicating that the score might predate the recording. “Brazilian Sun” features suitably Latin-sounding hand drums and claves with Boykins holding down a circular riff on bass. Ra stabs out parallel chords to spell out a tense, unresolved melody. The sunny percussion contrasts with the tonally shiftless piano to create a definite atmospheric tension – a bit of spiritual unease despoiling the fantasy of tropical paradise perhaps?

The version of “We Travel the Spaceways” heard here is a bit more aggressive than on the eponymous LP (found on Evidence ECD 22038) – and it is also recorded in stereo. Teddy Nance and Bernard Pettaway sit in on trombones, giving the tune a darker, more menacing tone. After the opening space chant, the increasingly dissonant interplay between Gilmore’s energetic tenor solo and Ra’s percussive piano gives this rendition a decidedly *avant garde* feel. Ra slides in some dreamy celeste during the vocal sections, demonstrating his uniquely orchestral approach to keyboard accompaniment. “Calling Planet Earth” benefits as well from the more spacious stereo recording. A fully notated vocal ensemble urgently intones the title until Pat Patrick enters with some coruscating baritone saxophone which is reinforced by Ra’s furious two-handed piano attack. Adding to the tumultuous assault, both Lex Humphries and
John Gilmore are pounding away on drums. Yes, John Gilmore on trap drums! And Ra sounds more like Cecil Taylor than Cecil himself did in 1963! This is some wild stuff!

The other stereo recording is “Dancing Shadows,” cut at the same session that yielded several tracks on *The Invisible Shield*. It is a classic Ra-styled atonal bebop number full of strident tritones and breathtakingly wide interval leaps, all driven hard by Clifford Jarvis’s frenetic drumming. Ra spins a mesmerizing piano solo before giving way to yet another incredible Gilmore solo on tenor sax. Walter Miller again demonstrates his prodigious technique with a bristling, angular trumpet solo before the reprise. (Incidentally, the melody for “Dancing Shadows” is contained within the otherwise ultra-enigmatic “Twenty-First Century” suite in the Library of Congress manuscripts.) “The Rainmaker” is more dizzying, harmonically restless swing but with more polyphonic riffing throughout. Ra peels off another excellent piano solo and Jarvis is at his Jarviest, bass drum pumping away maniacally. Gilmore enters with yet another patented genius tenor sax solo culminating in hair-raising, multiphonic blasts at the end. Holy crap!

“When Sun Comes Out” replaces Jarvis with the comparatively more laconic Lex Humphries, who is bolstered with some busy hand percussion by the rest of the Arkestra. Ra plays slippery, chromatically descending fourths atop an oscillating, two-note bass which is doubled by Boykins. Marshall Allen and Danny Davis proceed to dance and duel on wailing alto saxophones with some pinched, emphatic Walter Miller trumpet interjected here and there. Meanwhile, the rhythm section explores a subtly shifting harmonic landscape. Interestingly, the manuscript barely outlines the opening piano figures which appear to be jumping off points for improvisation. Again, this makes me think that the score is something more than a transcription and possibly predates the recording. Who knows?

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When working with the master tape to prepare this CD in 1993, Evidence discovered an unreleased track running backwards in an unused stereo channel. On hearing the track for the first time in thirty years, John Gilmore gave it the title “Dimensions in Time” and it appears here as a bonus track. Echoing drums and tapping glass bottles underpin Gilmore’s seductively meandering bass clarinet. His tone is dark, rich and gorgeous as he weaves delightful melodies around the pitter-pattering percussion. Unfortunately, just as he reaches a climax, the track suddenly ends. As it turns out, the second part of this piece can be found on the 1974 Saturn LP entitled *Space Probe* (Saturn 14200A/142000B) (confusingly, some copies were titled *A Tonal View of Times Tomorrow Vol. 1*). Here entitled, “Primitive,” the track cuts in exactly where “Dimensions in Time” ends, with the last few notes of Gilmore’s bass clarinet statement after which the percussion vamp continues for another couple minutes before fading out. As discrete fragments, these two pieces are a bit frustrating to listen to (despite Gilmore brilliant playing); someday I’d like to digitally rejoin these tracks to hear the complete piece in all its original glory.

*Space Probe* also includes another Choreographer’s Workshop recording from this period curiously titled, “The Conversion of J.P.” Plopping drums create a feel similar to “The Nile” with Marshall Allen’s expansive flute melody rising and falling amidst long spells of trance-inducing percussion. Then, at about the eight-minute mark, Ra enters with some incongruously gospel-ish piano chords. I guess this is the conversion happening! Ra then moves through a whole hymnal’s worth of plain, protestant harmonies before a final, insistently repeating cadence. Hallelujah! Now, who exactly is J.P? And how are we to take all this apparent proselytizing given Ra’s complicated, if not downright contentious relationship with the Christian church? Indeed, the tension between the pagan percussion/Pan-flute and the holy-rolling piano never
quite comfortably resolves. Another curious thing about this track is that, at almost fourteen minutes, it is by far the longest stretch of continuous recorded music from this era. It makes me wonder if "When Sun Comes Out" was truly conceived and recorded as an extended suite (as in the manuscript), with only selected excerpts edited out for release on LP. Just another mystery of Mr. Ra to be infinitely pondered. Incidentally, the B-Side of Space Probe contains an eighteen-minute Moog freakout from 1970 a la My Brother the Wind Vol. 2 -- an odd pairing, to say the least!

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The Evidence CD of When Sun Comes Out also contains Fate in a Pleasant Mood (El Saturn 202) recorded in Chicago late-1960 to early-1961. I will examine it separately on another Sun Ra Sunday.

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Thanks once again to the indefatigable Sam Byrd for his help with this post!

COMMENTS:

Rodger Coleman said...
Of course, "Dancing Shadows" was a staple of UYA's latter-day repertoire and can be heard on the 1995 Sun Ra Tribute CD titled Wavelength Infinity (Rastascan BRD 018). Astonishingly, it's still in print – you can even stream a sample of the track at Amazon! I just listened to the CD for the first time in years. We were definitely onto something. (Too bad we let go of it.) Still, it amazes me that ours is the first track on the first disc – what an honor! I mean, there are some seriously heavy hitters on that CD including Thurston Moore, The Residents, Eugene Chadbourne, Elliot Sharp and Ken Vandermark -- not mention NRBQ! Big thanks to Gino Robair for including us!

Sam said...
1. I actually listened again to that track a few months ago, and I didn't cringe. My favorite part is the last 3-4 minutes where we really stretch it out. I'm definitely proud to be included on that disc!

2. "When Sun Comes Out" is a super-strong Ra LP. I am still just blown away by Clifford Jarvis's bass drum playing on "Dancing Shadows." Ra gave Jarvis way too much drum solo space on too many gigs, but when he's tight and in the pocket, like here, he really strengthens the groove. Although overall I prefer the looser, less virtuosic feel of most of Ra's drummers (like Luqman Ali, Lex Humphries, Bugs, and Roger Blank), it is nice sometimes to hear a real whiz like Jarvis lock in with Boykins and kick seriously hard jazz butt (how's that for trenchant analysis?). Besides "Dancing Shadows," my favorite track is "The Nile." I'd love to hear a connected version of "Dimensions in Time" with "Primitive" sometime.

April 12, 2009

Sun Ra & His Myth Science Arkestra:
When Angels Speak of Love (Evidence ECD 22216)
When Angels Speak of Love is one of the very rarest of the already exceedingly rare Saturn LPs. Prof. Campbell estimates that two lots of seventy-five were pressed for a grand total of 150 LPs circulated (p.108). Therefore, this music was virtually unheard by anyone but the most obsessed (and well-heeled) when Evidence released it as part of their final installment of Saturn reissues back in 2000. Recorded in full-blown, down-home Saturn Sound at the Choreographer’s Workshop in 1963, it is one of Ra’s most expansive, downright out-there recordings. Not surprisingly, it was not released until 1966, at the height of the free-jazz Afrocentric radicalism that was, for a time, willing to accept Ra’s most avant garde inclinations. Conceived way ahead of its time, When Angels Speak of Love points the way forward to Heliocentric Worlds and beyond.

John Szwed singles out this album in his biography of Ra, Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra (Pantheon, 1997):

It was considered a bizarre record when it was [released]…made more bizarre by extreme echo, horns straining for the shrillest notes possible, rhythms layered, their polyrhythmic effect exaggerated by massive reverberation (which was abruptly turned off and on). “Next Stop Mars” is the centerpiece of the album, a very long work which opens with a space chant, followed by Allen and Gilmore taking chances on their horns beyond what almost any other musician would dare at that time. Sun Ra played behind them, again relentlessly spinning around a single tonal center with two-handed independence, then rumbling thunderously at the bottom of the keyboard against Boykins’s bass, a clangor made heavier by electronic enhancement. (p. 199)

In the liner notes to this Evidence CD, the ever-astute John Corbett discusses how Tommy Hunter’s fortuitous feedback discovery was as radically prescient as Ra’s music itself:

Ra’s space…was alienated, de-naturalized, his use of echo more in common with pioneers of experimental electronic music, and he anticipated much later developments in interactivity ranging from dub reggae to the live-electronics and computer improvisation projects of George Lewis, Phil Wachsmann and Evan Parker. At that time, as a recording art, free jazz was still totally ensconced in the naturalizing concept (still really is), and the extreme use of echo on these tracks is a significant indicator of how far Ra was willing to push the sonic envelope (to make a bad resonance joke) in his own, unique electronic jazz maneuvers.

Szwed elaborates further on this aspect of Ra’s genius:

By the 1950s, commercial recording companies had developed a classical style of recording which assured that the recording process itself would be invisible, the machinery of recording being used like a picture window through which an illusion was created of “being there” with the musicians. But Sun Ra began to regularly violate this convention on the Saturn releases by recording live at strange sites, by using feedback, distortion, high delay or reverb, unusual microphone placement, abrupt fades or edits, and any number of other effects or noises which called attention to the recording process. On some recordings you could hear a phone ringing, or someone walking near the microphone. It was a rough style of production, an antistyle, a self-reflexive approach which anticipated both free jazz recording conventions and punk production to come. (p.188)
All of this is wholly correct, even though this is not the first appearance of Hunter’s reverb effect and, with the exception of “Celestial Fantasy” and “Next Stop Mars,” the rest of the album eschews the radical displacements of the echo-machine for a (somewhat more) “naturalistic” recorded space. But even where the echo and reverb effects are absent, this album is swathed with that charmingly de-centered “Saturn Sound” that epitomizes the period. Significantly, both Corbett and Szwed touch on the importance of Ra’s use of new technologies as musical instruments and Ra’s visionary engagement with the record-making process, despite near-zero budgets and ultra-limited distribution. Ra embraced mediation on its own terms and deliberately created sonic objects which transcend the mere representation of some ideal performance. Imbued with a do-it-yourself, hand-made authenticity, El Saturn LPs were works of art unto themselves.

“Celestial Fantasy” opens the album with gentle gongs and cymbals to introduce Walter Miller’s jarring, high-register trumpet squeals. Marshall Allen then commences with a densely echoing, wildly inventive oboe peroration while Boykins enters with plucked bass throbs. After Allen concludes his “fantasy,” Miller resumes his high-wire screeching before dropping down to the mellowest, lowest-registers to spar with the increasingly busy bass and drums, all of them echo-echo-echoing in the lushly reverberant space. Miller is sadly underrated; yet he was such a thoughtful and thoroughly “complete” trumpeter, putting him in the category of a very select few. Anyway, the instruments drift off to a pregnant moment of echoing near-silence before Miller and Allen return for further exploration of their highest tessituras to end. This is a very intense beginning to a very intense album! Thankfully, the next piece, “The Idea of it All,” is another patented Ra original: a crazy, atonal bebop number driven by the madly swinging Clifford Jarvis on drums and which provides for yet another killer Gilmore solo on tenor saxophone. What more needs to be said?

Things take a (re)turn for the strange on “Ecstasy of Being.” Opening with a meditation on the paradiddles of marching drums, Jarvis leads the Arkestra’s parade of joyously honking carryings-on. After a while, the instruments drop out to allow for a shift to more subtle, sensuous rhythms -- an erotic dance between bass and percussion. The horns return with more ecstatic wailing until about the nine minute mark when Ra signals a complexly-voiced, fortissimo “space chord” to end the piece. It would perhaps be too easy to interpret this piece as: ecstasy = being at war and being in love. Nonetheless, it is interesting to ponder the wealth of symbolism in Ra’s oeuvre.

“When Angels Speak of Love” is a quirky, slow-tempo ballad featuring Pat Patrick’s most romantic bari-sax crooning over Boykins’s half-time bass. Miller takes a graceful turn on trumpet, including some precariously high, yet perfectly pitched notes. Meanwhile, Ra’s piano meanders while click-clackety percussion outlines a shaky beat. Gilmore and Robert Cummings (on bass clarinet) take brief, somewhat tentative solos until Miller and Patrick return to restate the minimalist, dissonant theme. The album closes with the epic “Next Stop Mars.” At almost eighteen minutes, this is by far the longest recording of the Choreographer’s Workshop period. It is, as Szwed describes, full of extended horn techniques producing “the shrillest notes possible” with Ra “relentlessly spinning around a single tonal center with two-handed independence, then rumbling thunderously at the bottom of the keyboard.” Here and there, ticking and tapping percussion rise and fall but the texture is chamber-like: piano, bass and horns. As Gilmore, Allen and Davis shriek and honk, Robert Cummings weaves winding threads of virtuosic bass clarinet while Walter Miller punches holes in space and glides effortlessly on his silvery trumpet. Ra’s piano is uncharacteristically voluble and aggressive. At first listen, the piece appears to be an anarchic free-for-all -- but that is hardly the case. As Ra explains in the liner notes, “I can write something so chaotic you would say you know it’s not written. But the
reason it’s chaotic is because it’s written to be. It’s further out than anything they would be doing if they were just improvising.”

In fact, there is a two-page score entitled, “When Angels Speak of Love,” deposited in the Library of Congress that contains sketches for the title track, “Next Stop Mars” and “Ecstasy of Being.” They are, alas, but sketches – perhaps hasty transcriptions at that – and they tell us little about the final result as evidenced by the recording, although they are full of curious details (e.g. the cryptic instruction to “play celestially”). Even so, the presence of such a manuscript is indicative of Ra’s fierce control over the musical material, despite its surface aural appearance. Even though his music sometimes sounded “free,” it was not about freedom, it was about discipline.

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This concludes our examination of the known Choreographer’s Workshop recordings. In sequence, these albums include: Bad & Beautiful, Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow, Secrets of the Sun, Out There a Minute, “A Blue One (single), What’s New/The Invisible Shield, and When Sun Comes Out. After When Angels Speak of Love, Ra recorded Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy and, finally, Other Planes of There. We will continue moving forward chronologically up through Heliocentric Worlds and on into The Magic City in the coming weeks. But first we’ll take a listen to some other super-obscure recordings Ra and the Arkestra made as unlikely sidemen in 1962-1963. Until then, here’s a poem by Sun Ra found in the liner notes to When Angels Speak of Love:

WHEN ANGELS SPEAK

When angels speak
They speak of cosmic waves of sound
Wavelength infinity
Always touching planets
In opposition outward bound

When angels speak
They speak on wavelength infinity
Beam cosmos
Synchronizing the rays of darkness
Into visible being
Blackout!
Dark Living Myth-world of being

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
What else can be said about "The idea of it all"? How about: why doesn't this show up in all the fake books? This is what they ought to be teaching to all those crackerjack bebop kids in jazz camps, or wherever the heck it is they go to play all those "charts." What a killer quintet! Could this be from the same sessions as the first version of "Dancing shadows"?

Sharief said...
An interesting side-note regarding Ra's song title 'The Ecstasy of Being':
In Arabic the word for 'being' (wujuud) and 'ecstasy' (wajd) are derived from the same root 'w-j-d'; they are inextricably linked.

Not only this, but 'wajad', also from the same root, means 'to find'. What this all means in Islamic and Sufi metaphysics is that once you discover (wajad) and realise the miracle and mysteries of Being (wujuud) you find an ecstasy (wajd) which never leaves you (and which in fact increases \textit{ad eternum}). We were created to find this ecstasy!

Ra, being of pure heart and spirit, definitely had intuitive knowledge and perception of these types of spiritual realities, and of course we find this reflected in his music and poetry.

Let the intergalactic research continue!

By the way thanks for the good job you've been doing with all the Ra related posts!

Peace!

April 19, 2009

Roz Croney, Queen of the Limbo: \textit{How Low Can You Go?} (Dauntless DM 6309)
\textit{Recorded at Mastertone Studio, New York City, January or February, 1963.}
\textit{Released as Dauntless DM 4039 (mono) and 6309 (stereo) in 1963.}

While Sun Ra was extensively recording Arkestra rehearsals at the Choreographer’s Workshop and exploring the outer realms of (im)possible music, there was little actual paying work in New York. Fortunately, Ra had developed two important connections over the years: filmmaker/auteur Edward O. Bland and (soon to become) legendary producer Tom Wilson, both of whom had worked with Sonny in Chicago. As soon as Ra found himself stranded in the big city, Bland and Wilson helped him out, resulting in the Savoy LP, \textit{The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra} (1961). Often working in tandem, Bland and Wilson continued to throw commercial work the Arkestra’s way during this crucial period – like, for instance, this limbo fad cash-in attempt rush-released in 1963.

Upon graduating from Harvard in 1954, Tom Wilson borrowed $900.00 to start the Transition record label which was devoted exclusively to the most progressive jazz. In 1956, Wilson released Cecil Taylor’s first record, \textit{Jazz Advance} (CD on Blue Note 84462) along with Sun Ra’s first LP under his newly assumed name, \textit{Jazz by Sun Ra Vol. 1} (later titled \textit{Sun Song}) (Delmark DD-411). A second volume was also recorded and released as \textit{Sound of Joy} (Delmark DD-414). As the nineteen-sixties progressed, Wilson eventually abandoned jazz for rock music went on to produce landmark albums by Bob Dylan, Frank Zappa & the Mothers of Invention, Simon & Garfunkel, The Velvet Underground, Soft Machine and others. Wilson was one of the first and most successful African-American record producers but died tragically young at 47 in 1978.

Edward O. Bland was a radical young Chicago disc jockey and early supporter of Sun Ra who enlisted the Arkestra to participate in a short experimental film entitled, \textit{The Cry of Jazz} (Atavistic DVD). Bland shrewdly convinced the band to work for free in exchange for whatever publicity the film might generate. \textit{The Cry of Jazz} premiered at Roosevelt University in early 1959 and remains a crucial document of black cinema. By 1961, Bland had relocated to New
York City and was working as a journeyman composer and arranger, sometimes (as here) in association with Tom Wilson.

Honestly, *How Low Can You Go?* is an example of the kind of imminently disposable, fashion-driven product that would appear to be the antithesis of Ra’s own (mostly unheard) music of the time: it is simply work-for-hire without any artistic pretentions whatsoever. But what is remarkable about the Arkestra’s (unccredited) performance is the complete lack of irony or condescension; it is professional to the point of anonymity. And upon close listening, one can confirm Gilmore’s raspy bass clarinet on “It’s Limbo Time” and Ra’s slinky organ work on “Bossa Nova Limbo” and “Whole Lotta Shaking Going On.” Of course, the limbo originates from a Trinidadian funeral ritual where the dancer moves to the rhythm under a stick held up by two persons without knocking or touching the stick; if successful, the dancer repeats the maneuver again and again with the bar being lowered each time. The symbolism of this triumphant dance of life over death surely appealed to Ra’s sensibilities, even if this LP was ultimately destined for the trend-conscious cocktail parties of the “space-age bachelor pad.” Sadly, little else is known about Roz Croney, Queen of the Limbo, beyond this obscure recording and the limbo conceit is fleshed out to album-length proportions with some truly dreadful material, including a limbo-ized take on “How Much Is that Doggie In The Window?” Needless to say, *How Low Can You Go?* has never been (and never will be) released on CD and is not really worth seeking out unless you’re a totally committed Ra-fanatic.

+++ Again in 1963, Wilson and Bland hired the Arkestra for a pop/R&B session backing the (otherwise unknown) singer Richard “Popcorn” Wylie. “Marlene” b/w “Do You Still Care for Me” was released as a 45-RPM single on Epic Records (5-9663). According to Bland’s recollections at the Jazz Institute of Chicago:

*I was notified by his office only 24 hours before the session was scheduled to hit. I had to transcribe 4 lead sheets from Wylie (who was musically illiterate) arrange and copy the 4 charts, and contact the musicians.*

*While I was working with Wylie (who was drunk) trying to transcribe the lead sheets, he vomited on me in the apartment of the Jazz trombonist / arranger / composer Tom McIntosh (who came to additional fame with the Jazztet, James Moody and the Shaft [motion] pictures). [McIntosh (along with Bland and Wilson) was also involved with the infamous Batman & Robin LP in 1966.]*

Bland portrays Wylie as a helpless drunkard while Prof. Campbell describes Wylie as a “Sam Cooke wannabe” but the session isn’t quite as bad as all that. “Marlene” is a pleasant mid-tempo soul groove complete with crooning backup singers and Wylie’s own pleading vocals. Gilmore turns in an inimitably pithy solo on bass clarinet during the break making this worth a listen. On the other hand, “Do You Still Care For Me?” is a more pedestrian shuffle with some unremarkable horn parts honking away in the background. Someone (is it Popcorn?) whistles aimlessly at the end. Another curiosity in the discography!

+++ Finally, another single was recorded in 1962 and eventually released by El Saturn sometime in the mid-sixties. The label of El Saturn 144M reads: “Presenting Little Mack” with “Le Sun Ra: Music Director.” According to Gilmore, Little Mack was an R&B singer who liked the Arkestra.
and financed this recording session which can be found on *The Singles* (Evidence ECD 22164). “Tell Her to Come On Home” is a plaintive blues with an unsteady rumba beat. Gilmore and Ra conjure up some cool riffing in support of Little Mack’s quirky but sincere vocals. On the other side, “I’m Making Believe” is an old fashioned torch song full of maudlin emotion foreign to Ra’s usual vibe. Even so, it’s a touching performance with Ra leading the way with some ornate piano, Gilmore filling in orchestrally on saxophone. According to Ra, Little Mack was a virtuosic singer, who would sing in different keys depending on the acoustic properties of the concert hall; but nobody seems to know what happened to him. Too bad.

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It’s hard to imagine that any of these records made much money for Ra or his musicians beyond a minimal payment upon performance. It was perhaps enough to buy some groceries. 1964 would be an especially difficult year with several key band members leaving the Arkestra (if only temporarily) for greener pastures. The Arkestra would continue to perform commercial work here and there through the nineteen-sixties in order to survive. But Sun Ra was also active within the short-lived but crucial Jazz Composers Guild. The Guild, which included Bill Dixon and Cecil Taylor among others, mounted a series high profile concerts in New York which planted the seed for the Arkestra’s future. Attorney Bernard Stollman was in the audience in 1964 and he would shortly thereafter sign Ra to his boutique label, *ESP-Disk*. Suddenly, things were looking up.

**COMMENTS:**

Anonymous said...
I work for the reissue labels Poppydisc and Rev-Ola records, we are about to embark on a vinyl reissue series of various album across many genres.

All of these albums will be remastered from the original tapes and are all licensed. However we need your help... One of our planned reissues is The Futuristic Sounds Of Sun Ra. (In the red bongo 'Harvey' sleeve) We cannot find a vinyl copy of this for love nor money. Can anyone here please give us high quality scans of the lp sleeve or high quality pics of this. Front and back covers please and a dpi of least 300. we shall give you a credit on the new reissue and send you a finished lp.

contact me at brianmcneill1972@hotmail.com

**THIS IS A GENUINE REQUEST**

hope someone can help us

Brian

*April 26, 2009*

Sun Ra Featuring Pharoah Sanders & Black Herald (ESP 4054)
Recorded live at Judson Hall in New York, NY on December 31, 1964.
 Portions originally released as Saturn JHNY-165 in 1976.
With little paying work for the Arkestra, John Gilmore quit the band in August 1964 to tour the world with Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers. This could have been a crushing blow to Sun Ra, if not for his involvement in the short-lived Jazz Composers Guild and its predecessors. Trumpeter/composer Bill Dixon had been putting on performances at the Cellar Café on West 91st Street and these efforts developed into the legendary “October Revolution in Jazz.” These concerts drew large crowds to hear the cream of the “New Thing,” including Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor, Paul Bley, Jimmy Giuffre, Andrew Hill, Steve Lacy, and others who would go on to define the cutting edge of avant garde jazz. Shortly thereafter, Dixon and Taylor decided to form a cooperative called the Jazz Composers Guild which would promote the new music while seeking an economic alternative to the exploitive nightclub system. Sun Ra and the Arkestra were quick to join and two months later, the Guild mounted series of concerts at Judson Hall called “Four Nights in December,” the last of which featured Sun Ra’s Arkestra. Portions of that concert are presented on this recently re-issued CD on ESP-Disk.

Sonny had known Farrell “Little Rock” Sanders since 1962, when Sanders was working as a waiter at the Gene Harris Playhouse (where the Arkestra was playing to miniscule audiences). Ra took him in and gave him some clothes and suggested he take on the name, “Pharoah.” By the time Gilmore split, Sanders was ready to join the band and you can hear that he’s already developed the blisteringly intense sound quality that would make him famous with John Coltrane’s band. Not much is known about Black Harold a/k/a Harold Murray a/k/a Sir Harold a/k/a Brother Atu a/k/a Atu Murray, etc. except that he played flute and a big, hand-carved drum with Sun Ra during this brief period. This recording is the only known document of Pharoah’s and Black Harold’s tenure with the Arkestra.

The rest of the personnel for this concert are kind of a mystery. The liner notes to this new CD give the following: Sun Ra: piano, celeste; Pharoah Sanders: tenor sax; Black Harold (Harold Murray): flute, log drum; Al Evans: trumpet; Teddy Nance: trombone; Marshall Allen: alto sax; Pat Patrick: baritone sax; Alan Silva: bass; Ronnie Boykins: bass; Cliff Jarvis: drums; Jimmhi Johnson: drums; and Art Jenkins: space voice. Prof. Campbell (2d ed.) adds Chris Capers on trumpet; Bernard Pettaway on trombone; Robert Northern on French horn; Danny Davis on alto sax, flute, and percussion; and Robert Cummings on bass clarinet but he omits Boykins. It is definitely a largish Arkestra, though they rarely all play at the same time, so it’s hard to tell. I do hear Cummings’s bass clarinet and, after repeated listening, I believe there are two bassists on this gig.

The CD starts out with nearly forty-five minutes of previously unissued material from this New Year’s Eve concert recorded in stereo. The brief “Cosmic Interpretation” opens the proceedings with some frenetic solo piano that outlines a vague tonal center. Ra then moves to the chiming celeste while the arco bass gets increasingly busy. Solo bass plays a jagged ostinato figure to introduce “The Other World” where Pharoah is well into his fire-breathing modus operandi. The first several minutes features some intense “New Thing” styled group improvisation. Pat Patrick takes brilliant accapella baritone sax solo, until trumpet joins in for a duet. After a less-than-convincing return to the pummeling free-jazz feel, things just sort of peter out at about the six minute mark yielding an incredibly lengthy, and rather pointless drum solo. At about the nineteen minute mark (!), trombone leads the horns back in for some honking and shrieking to introduce the space chant, “The Second Stop is Jupiter,” while the bass returns to the jagged ostinato figure. Someone emphatically declaims: “All out for Jupiter!” and the cacophonous horns return with trombone once again leading the way. After a while, all drop out for, yes, more drums! Thankfully, the track fades out after only another minute or so.
“The Now Tomorrow” begins with a lovely setting for piano and flutes in bittersweet harmony. Bowd bass enters and then things start to get weird when Marshall Allen takes a labyrinthine turn on oboe along with what sounds like a second oboe or soprano saxophone joining in along the way. And perhaps there are two basses sawing away here? I think so! Ra enters with rumbling piano to a smattering of applause. Ra plays intricate, contrasting figures on piano and celeste simultaneously until the horns (including bass clarinet) play fragments of the original harmonies to end. This is a very interesting piece of music.

On “Discipline 9,” Ra starts out with a twisty piano intro for some yearning horn figures that hover and glide over a stumbling ballad tempo. Two alts and bass clarinet twirl around the meandering rhythm while trombone interjects clipped statements here and there. Ra then establishes the brooding three-note vamp of “We Travel the Spaceways” which the rest of the band takes up in song. The horn break in this version is particularly loose, fragile, and hauntingly beautiful. The rhythm section settles into a comfortable groove while Art Jenkins does his “space voice” thing. The rest of the Arkestra takes up percussion instruments before the reprise of the singing and horn break. Someone blows ceremonially into a large conch shell while sleigh bells jingle…some applause…is it over? Then the bass riff returns and the applause dies down. Gentle percussion pitter-patters until a big conducted “space chord” charges in full of honking and wailing and pounding drums. Then the bass riff starts up again with flutes and trumpet dancing around. It sounds like they’re marching off the stage leaving only bass to end.

The original Saturn LP (recorded in mono) follows. “Gods on a Safari” showcases some furious two-handed piano action from Ra and some abstract ensemble figures all which quickly subsides leaving some slip-sliding arco bass(es?) and the quiet tinkling of bells. Ra takes over with some slyly dissonant piano solo that launches into the rolling up-tempo drive of “The World Shadow.” The piano and rhythm section build up the agitated feeling similar to “The Shadow World” with Pharoah approximating the knotty melody, but it sounds tenuous. Eventually, he glides into more of his leather-lunged multi-phonics and extreme over-blowing. Pealing trumpet takes over as the rhythm becomes ever more intense and abstract. Suddenly, there is a relaxation of tension, leaving some polyrhythmic percussion and a droning conch shell. More space voice warblings from Jenkins follow until Ra enters on the toy-like celeste. Bass then sets up the groove for “Rocket Number 9” and off they go. Ra and the bass(es?) outline the skittering chord sequence while the ensemble chants, “Rocket Number 9 take off for the planet Venus! Venus!” A brief drum solo follows until the horns enter in full polyphonic force, culminating a big, blasting “space chord.” Pharaoh then wails some more on tenor sax over the scattered, enervated rhythms, Ra stabbing out angular chords on piano. Pharaoh takes one last turn before giving way to some bass and drum grooving that quickly fades out.

A quick edit cuts into “The Voice of Pan.” As befitting the title, Black Harold’s breathy, vocalized flute soars over tippy-tapping percussion and subtle bass figures. This has a similar in feel to some of the Choreographers Workshop material and even shares some of that echo-y ambience – added, perhaps, after the fact. Harold’s schtick is pretty amusing and gets a rise out of the audience. Then, a widely-spaced ensemble chord introduces “Dawn Over Israel,” a lurching ensemble piece with sing-song-y bowed basses, fleeting horn figures and Ra’s convoluted piano. Ra suddenly takes over with a furiously pounding piano solo that eventually breaks up into some really nasty (unintended) distortion. Ra brings things down with some gentle chords to introduce “Space Mates.” Mellow flute melodies float over piano and celeste while bass(es) and percussion murmur in the background until the horns offer some supporting harmonies for a gentle close. Nice.
The Jazz Composers Guild shortly disintegrated due to the inevitable bitterness and acrimony that arises in such leaderless, ad hoc groupings of ambitious people. Dixon himself would be the first to leave and Ra abandoned ship shortly thereafter, complaining that the Arkestra was doing all the work. Despite its failings, the Guild’s efforts continued to resonate throughout the sixties and seventies with the Jazz Composers Orchestra, the Black Artists Group, the AACM and others. More immediately, Bernard Stollman, a local attorney who represented musicians, was inspired enough by the music he heard at these Guild-sponsored concerts to sign many of the performers, including Ra, to his ESP-Disk label. Stollman had previously established ESP-Disk to promote his other obsession, the “universal language” of Esperanto, so he knew how to make records with minimal expense. Stollman gave the musicians free reign (if limited budgets) to produce their music: “The artists alone decide what you will hear on their ESP-Disk” was the motto. These records became exemplary documents of the era and the label helped to establish Ra’s reputation as the cosmic messenger of out jazz. This expanded re-issue of an obscure Saturn LP is definitely a welcome addition to the Ra discography.

COMMENTS:

Brian Barker said...
Interesting comment about Bernard Stollman and Esperanto.

It's unfortunate that only a few people know that Esperanto has become a living language.

During a short period of 121 years Esperanto is now in the top 100 languages, out of 6,800 worldwide, according to the CIA World factbook. It is the 17th most used language in Wikipedia, and in use by Skype, Firefox and Facebook.

Native Esperanto speakers, (people who have used the language from birth), include George Soros, World Chess Champion Susan Polger, Ulrich Brandenberg the new German Ambassador to NATO and Nobel Laureate Daniel Bovet. According to the CIA Factbook the language is within the top 100 languages, out of all languages, worldwide.

Confirmation of this can be seen at http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8837438938991452670 A glimpse of the language can be seen at http://www.lernu.net

Sam said...
Nice write-up, Rodger! As if I didn't know it already, this reissue really sounds like a must-have. I was really sorry to read that Clifford Jarvis was given yet another long drum solo in the middle of an otherwise interesting long piece. 13 minutes! Arg. I love Jarvis’s playing with the rest of the group (his playing is especially understated and appropriate on "Strange Strings," of all things), but Ra gave him far too much solo space on live gigs. Ra must have liked it enough to continue to allow him to just wipe away whatever musical mood had been established by the band, with his grandstanding pyrotechnics that sound more like showing off than like making a meaningful musical contribution. To me, this was perhaps Ra's most serious aesthetic misstep throughout Jarvis's tenure in what was an otherwise brilliant span of composition, arrangement, and presentation.

This was indeed (other than a known recording of a rehearsal--one I've never heard) the first "official" recording of "The Shadow World," a signature Ra composition. It's rough and ready, and doesn't have the aggressive authority of the first released version on "The Magic City" (the Pharaoh LP didn't come out the '70s). I think this piece came into its own with Gilmore leading
By March of 1965, Gilmore was back in the fold and in April the Arkestra headed into RLA Studio to record their first LP for ESP-Disk'. Buoyed by the modest successes of the October Revolution and the prospect of wider recognition offered by the fledgling but ambitious record label, Ra expanded upon the experimentation of the Choreographer’s Workshop period to make *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1* a defining statement.

Consisting mostly of the kinds of conducted improvisations that Ra had been developing over the past year or so, *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1* retains a similarly ultra-modern chamber music feel throughout. Often the highest and lowest registers of the ensemble are emphasized with piercing trumpet and piccolo set off in stark relief against the rumbles of trombone, bass trombone, baritone saxophone, bass clarinet, tympani, bass, and Ra himself on bass marimba.
(!). At other times, Ra plays piano and electric celeste simultaneously with stunning two-handed polyphony or the horns improvise wildly swinging anti-bop figures. But the music is more about contrasting textures than solos and accompaniment and there is a remarkable diversity of material approaches in each piece: densely orchestrated “space chords” rise and fall, percussion pounds or falls back, horn solos come and go in an instant. The music is dissonant and intense one minute, serene and contemplative the next. Even so, the music sustains a consistently mysterious mood, an air of tense expectancy that makes the diverse strains of out-and-out weirdness cohere into a enormously compelling, vibrant whole.

While the music appears to be totally improvised, Ra is clearly in control. Regarding these sessions, Marshall Allen described Ra’s approach to conducted improvisation:

Sun Ra would go to the studio and he would play something, the bass would come in, and if he didn’t like it he’d stop it, and he’d give the drummer a particular rhythm, tell the bass he wanted not a “boom boom boom” but something else, and then he’d begin to try out the horns, we’re all standing there wondering what’s next…

I just picked up the piccolo and worked with what was going on, what moods they set, or what feeling they had. A lot of things we’d be rehearsing and we did the wrong things and Sun Ra stopped the arrangement and changed it. Or he would change the person who was playing the particular solo, so that changes the arrangement. So the one that was soloing would get another part given to him personally. ‘Cos he knew people. He could understand what you could do better so he would fit that with what he would tell you (quoted in Szwed, p. 216).

Despite Gilmore’s brief defection and return, the Arkestra executes Ra’s vision of disciplined freedom with dedication and astonishing precision. As Szwed points out, “[t]he Arkestra at this point had such confidence in what they were doing that the rest of the group could suddenly drop away in the moment to reveal a cymbal solo or a bass and tympani duo” (Id.). Horns resolutely enter and exit with succinct, emphatic statements that move the music inexorably forward (or outward) while the rhythm section ebbs and flows in natural reaction (or in deliberate opposition). Throughout it all, Ra provides deft direction, through his playing and by signaling his intentions to the musicians. No note is wasted. There are no empty gestures or tossed off clichés. The music is not merely episodic as Ra builds complex yet satisfyingly unified edifices upon the accretion of discrete, semi-autonomous events. As many times as I’ve listened to this record, it always sounds fresh, revealing deeper insights with each listen. All of my attempts at a track-by-track analysis have been woefully inadequate to elucidate the elusive magic of *The Heliocentric Worlds*. The music simply defies my meager descriptions and must be experienced to be even remotely (mis)understood.

*Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1* is rightfully considered a landmark recording and belongs in every serious record collection. It has remained pretty much consistently available (either legitimately or on bootleg editions) since the day it was released and its appearance transformed Sun Ra from the obscure Lower East Side eccentric into his rightful role as the globe-trotting emissary of interplanetary music. *Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 1* is, in a word, a masterpiece, but just one of a series of extraordinary recordings that Ra would make during this period.

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COSMIC EQUATION
Then another tomorrow
They never told me of
Came with the abruptness
Of a fiery dawn
And spoke of Cosmic Equations:
The equations of sight-similarity
The equations of sound-similarity
Subtle Living Equations
Clear only to those
Whose wish is to be attuned
To the vibrations
Of the Outer Cosmic Worlds.
Subtle living equations
Of the outer-realms
Dear only to those
Who wish fervently the greater life.

-- Sun Ra, 1965

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Yes! A strange, brooding masterpiece. I love this comment: "Horns resolutely enter and exit with succinct, emphatic statements that move the music inexorably forward (or outward) while the rhythm section ebbs and flows in natural reaction (or in deliberate opposition)"--like the universe expanding and contracting.

Here's what I wrote for the album-by-album thread: Yes, Heliocentric vol. 1 is particularly dark, brooding, and oblique, almost impenetrable in its foreboding mystery. It can be really hard to get a handle on just what you're listening to, and when it's over, you wonder where you've been. I think this is a major aspect of its beauty. It's a dark, ominous tone poem on the emptiness of outer space. The album as a whole is an excellent example of Ra's method of guided improvisation, and he takes full advantage of the studio setting to utilize the dark, low tones of the tympani, bass clarinet, and bowed bass, using those elements to evoke deepest space. A sea of darkness, where there is no sun. Abstraction taken to a new level.

Particular highlights for me include:

--John Gilmore's beautiful lonely space solo in "Outer Nothingness"
--Sun Ra's Cecil-mode piano playing in "Other Worlds"
--Gilmore's solo in the final short track, "Dancing in the Sun," as the album's journey ends as we enter our solar system again, and see the sun

May 10, 2009

Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra: The Magic City (Evidence ECD 22069)
Recorded somewhere in New York City, NY April/May/September 1965
Originally released as El Saturn LPB 711 in 1966
Sun Ra often claimed he was not from this planet but from Saturn, sent to Earth on a mission to help save humanity from itself. But in 1914, Herman “Sonny” Poole Blount was born in Birmingham, Alabama. Nicknamed “The Magic City” for its booming economic growth at the turn of the century, Birmingham was, of course, also the scene of harsh racial injustices which eventually erupted into violence and protest during the civil rights movement. Sonny left Birmingham for Chicago in 1946, legally changed his name to Sun Ra, and never looked back. Yet Sun Ra retained some affection for his hometown, composing such homages as “Magic City Blues,” “The Place of Five Points,” and “West End Side of Magic City” and regularly performed “Stars Fell on Alabama” and “Alabama” in concert. Sonny admitted to MTV’s Michael Shore that “The Magic City” was indeed about Birmingham and listening to it, one can sense Ra’s conflicted ambivalence towards his subject. At almost thirty minutes, it is Ra’s *magnum opus* and, while comparable in scope and ambition to Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* (Atlantic) (1960) and John Coltrane’s *Ascension* (Impulse!) (1965), “The Magic City” sounds nothing like either of them. Disavowing the churning rhythms and fire-breathing onslaugths typical of “The New Thing,” “The Magic City” maintains a chamber-music-like intimacy and reserve with horn duos and trios forming and dissolving around Boykins’s arco bass, Ra’s fleet piano work and the reedy whine of the Selmer Clavioline. Only near the end does the full ensemble briefly engage in some full-throated, high-energy group improvisation. Szwed astutely points out that “Sun Ra’s Music often attempts to completely integrate the soloists with the ensemble to make a single statement” (p. 214) and “The Magic City” is a perfect example of this attempt. Gilmore stated that the piece was never performed in concert because it was “unreproducible, a tapestry of sound” (Id.).

Ra had been working with the material that would become “The Shadow World” at least as far back as “The Outer Heavens” (on *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow*) and it appears in rough form on *Sun Ra Featuring Pharoah Sanders and Black Harold* (there titled, “The World Shadow”). Here, the fiendishly difficult composition gets its first complete performance. A complex unison melody for saxophones is set off against a 7/4 rhythm and Ra’s contrary, angular piano. After a brief series of solos, saxophones return with the melody while trumpet states the counter-melody originally intimated by the piano. Szwed writes: “Sun Ra took considerable pleasure from the agitated difficulty of the piece, and noted that once during a rehearsal for a French TV show the producer was so disturbed by it that he threatened to cancel the show if they insisted on playing it” (p. 215). “The Shadow World” would become a fixture of the Arkestra’s live sets going forward, often performed at impossibly fast tempos.

“Abstract Eye” and “Abstract I” appear to be different takes of the same piece and, according to the discography, there is a twelve-inch test-pressing from Variety Recording Services in existence where the pieces are entitled, “Abstract Experiment Take 1” and “Abstract Experiment Take 2” (Campbell, 2nd ed, p. 119). This reinforces my suspicion that these tracks might be rehearsals for what would become “Heliocentric” and “Outer Nothingness” on *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1*. They share the same, bottom-heavy instrumentation of bass, bass marimba, tympani, and braying trombones with piccolo and trumpet providing extreme high-register contrast. The feeling here is a little more extroverted with the saxophones taking a more prominent role in the proceedings, but they are notably similar in structure with flittering solo statements set against rumbling bass marimba, pounding tympani, and singing arco bass. Very interesting.

+++
Another track from these sessions entitled, “Other Worlds,” is available on the 1989 Blast First compilation, *Out There a Minute*.

**COMMENTS:**

Sam said...
The two "Abstract" pieces on the CD are definitely conceptually related to "Heliocentric." They both share the opaque, mysteriously dark quality of "Heliocentric" and "Outer nothingness." What really intrigues me about them is their relationship to each other. They are really hard pieces to write about, or even think about, because they're so abstract, and yet it's really fun to listen to them. There's a flute motif that seemingly appears in both versions. How much of a blueprint did Ra give the musicians before they started? And how could they tell when it was over? One piece is over a minute longer than the other, but both go through the same distinct passages--they just walk a little faster through one?

**May 17, 2009**

**Sun Ra & His Solar Arkestra: Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 2 (ESP-Disk’ 1017)**

*Recorded at RLA Sound Studios, New York, NY November 16, 1965*

*Originally released in 1966*

Less than seven months after recording *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1*, a smaller, eight-piece Arkestra returned to RLA Sound Studios to record *Volume 2.* "The Sun Myth" is another epic-length directed improvisation based upon a two-note figure that is freely extrapolated by the ensemble across eighteen highly variegated minutes. Anchored throughout by Boykins's sliding, microtonal bass, Ra starts out by banging on tuned bongos and a cymbal before moving to the piano/Clavioline combo. Energy and intensity levels rise and fall with brief horn solos, duets, and trios that come and go, always yielding to the buzzing Clavioline and singing arco bass.

According to Campbell, this track has been mastered three different ways:

1. The original release (mono and stereo) had African singing throughout the piece, mixed as loud as the instrumental parts […]
2. The original release was quickly withdrawn and replaced with a more common variant in which the African voices are mixed way down and can be faintly heard at the beginning and end […]
3. The final remastering removed the African voices entirely (2nd ed. p. 122).

*Interesting! *Were these vocals added in some kind of primitive overdub? After all, this album was recorded in a low-budget studio in 1965! I have only ever heard the final, instrumental version and I can’t even imagine what this track would sound like with “African vocals.”

“A House of Beauty” is a strangely beautiful piece. It opens with Marshall Allen on silvery piccolo and Ra on the monophonic Clavioline. Boykins enters with the bow while Ra adds a fourth voice on piano. Eventually, piano and pizzicato bass improvise a lushly tonal ballad form supported by some soft percussion. Clavioline and piccolo return with some busy free-tempo counterpoint until a held Clavioline tone and arco bass figures bring things to a gentle close. The album ends with the aptly-titled “Cosmic Chaos,” a fifteen-minute New Thing-styled group improv punctuated with virtuosic acappella turns by Pat Patrick on baritone saxophone, Gilmore on tenor saxophone and Robert Cummings on bass clarinet. Ra is back on tuned bongos and cymbal, generating complex polyrhythms against Roger Blank’s roiling trap drums while Walter Miller blows some exciting post-bop trumpet. Curiously, what sounds to me like electronically
processed bells peal in the background throughout. What is making that sound?! Is it Tommy Hunter’s echo-machine? The piece decisively ends with a grouping of obviously conducted “space chords.”

Ultimately, *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 2* is a bit less focused and not quite as compelling as either *Vol. 1* or *The Magic City*, but it still retains an air of mysterious discovery. The album cover, on the other hand, is a classic of the period with an antique illustration of the solar system perched above pictures of archaic scientists: Leonardo, Copernicus, Galileo, and Tycho Brahe. In the middle are portraits of Pythagoras and Sun Ra himself, “calling attention to Sun Ra’s links to the Greek astronomer-mathematician-musician who studied in Egypt, and who formed a brotherhood which attempted to purify their souls to allow the initiates to escape the ‘wheel of birth’ and to aid them in the transmigration of the soul after the death of the body” (Szwed p.217). *Perfect!*

**COMMENTS:**

Sam said...
Actually, when it comes down to it I think I prefer Vol. 2 to Vol. 1, precisely because of its higher level of energy and intensity. I love Boykins’ work on the opening of “The Sun Myth,” and Gilmore's solo about 5 minutes in is Gilmore at his spaciest—very abstract, and very beautiful. I've never heard either version with the African voices (were they actual Africans, or members of the Arkestra a la "Ancient Aethiopia"?) Overall, Boykins is the clear standout of both volumes, and his work here, along with "Astro Black," remains his finest playing.

I'll have to go back with the headphones for a closer listening to the bell sounds in "Cosmic Chaos"—not sure what you’re referring to.

**May 24, 2009**

I'm taking a little break for the holiday. In the meantime, check out this WILD performance of “The Shadow World” from West Berlin circa. 1986. The Arkestra literally tears up the stage. Any ideas of the exact date of this performance?

**May 31, 2009**

**Sun Ra: *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 3: The Lost Tapes* (ESP-Disk’ 4002)**

In 2005, ESP-Disk' released *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 3: The Lost Tapes*, purported to be unreleased material recorded at the November 16, 1965 session that produced *Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 2*. After some close listening, I am pretty certain this date is incorrect, although some of this material might have been recorded at the April 20th session for *Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 1* (but then again, maybe not). Confusing? Yes! But these are the eternal mysteries of Mr. Ra! Nevertheless, the discovery of previously unheard music from the nineteen-sixties makes this CD essential listening for the Ra-fanatic.

“Intercosmosis" is another expansive, 18-minute conducted improvisation wherein Gilmore establishes a terse melodic cell that is subsequently passed around the Arkestra in small
concertino groupings punctuated with acappella horn solos and cued “space chords.” Meanwhile, the rhythm section lays down a propulsive free-tempo groove that enters and exits on cue – but the percussion is mostly held in reserve so that the relentless motion is internalized and carried forward by the chamber-music-like instrumentation. Ra plays densely arpeggiated piano throughout and the piece climaxes with an extended alto saxophone duel between Marshall Allen and Danny Davis which gives way to an almost-pretty piano interlude, with Pat Patrick blowing beautiful, breathy baritone saxophone. The rest of the ensemble enters with an improvised coda before a conducted ending. Was this recorded on November 16th? Admittedly, the piece shares a conceptual similarity to “The Sun Myth,” but the unmistakable presence of Danny Davis is troubling since he is not audible on the other Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 2 material. Also conspicuously absent is the Selmer Clavioline, whose electronic whine defined the sound of that album. Finally, the presence of subtle reverb effects suggests the presence of Tommy Hunter, which would require an earlier recording date. Some have speculated this track was recorded at one of the When Angels Speak of Love sessions and, further, that When Angels Speak of Love was recorded later than 1963 as posited by Prof. Campbell. Who knows? Regardless, it is classic long-form Ra material.

It is plausible that the remainder of the CD was recorded at the April 20th session, with Ra on bass marimba, piano, and electric celeste and the prominence of trombones and tympani. The fragmentary “Mythology Metamorphosis” opens with tumultuous trap drums and hand percussion to which Boykins adds some thrumming bass. Ra enters on the bass marimba while Marshall Allen plays sinuous oboe. The instruments drop out leaving Ra to rumble around on the bass marimba until Boykins enters with an insistent bass figure to which Allen replies with a brief oboe phrase. At the four-minute mark, clattering percussion re-enters just before the track cuts off. “Heliocentric Worlds” is a showcase for Ra’s orchestral piano and electric celeste playing with only bass, trap drums and booming tympani to provide intermittently dramatic accompaniment. “World Worlds” is an interesting ballad form, obviously rigorously composed (if somewhat raggedly performed). After a piano/celeste introduction with bowed bass pedal, thick blocks of dissonant chords blare forth from the full ensemble, rich with trombones, saxophones, flute, and trumpet. Over a gently swinging pulse, brief solo statements hew closely to the weirdly shifting chord changes until the big, held ensemble chords return with a brassy trumpet lead to end. After repeated listenings, this piece sounds vaguely familiar – was it ever recorded again under a different title?

The final track, “Interplanetary Travelers” is actually an alternate take of “Other Worlds” from Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1 which first appeared on the 1989 Blast First compilation, Out There a Minute. However, Prof. Campbell dates this to the April-May 1965 session that yielded side-2 of The Magic City, creating yet more discographical confusion. In any event, this track is a stunner, a full-throttled New Thing-style blowout with lots of two-fisted piano/celeste action, intensely wailing horns, and hard-driving drums. Is it possible that Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1, side-2 of The Magic City and tracks 2-5 of Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 3 were all recorded at the same session on April 20, 1965? For that matter, is it possible that When Angels Speak of Love was also recorded during this time period? The stylistic resemblances are striking and, taken together, all of this music demonstrates how intently Ra was developing his composed improvisational approach in the mid-nineteen-sixties. Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 3 adds another fascinating piece to the puzzle, yet ultimately raises more questions than it answers.

June 7, 2009

Walt Dickerson Quartet: Impressions of “A Patch of Blue” (MGM/Verve CD)
While the record deal with ESP-Disk’ (and a concomitant flurry of releases on the El Saturn label) would eventually establish Sun Ra’s reputation within the burgeoning subculture, the nineteen-sixties would remain penurious times for the Arkestra. Even Sun Ra himself would find it necessary to take paying gigs here and there as a sideman – especially if his old friend, Tom Wilson, made the call. In late-1965, Wilson came up with the idea for quickie movie-tie-in LP to be led by vibraphonist Walt Dickerson and he summoned Ra and sometime Arkestra drummer Roger Blank to participate in the recording sessions. Impressions of “A Patch of Blue” was billed as an “interpretation” of Jerry Goldsmith’s soundtrack to “A Patch of Blue,” the Sidney Poitier film that boldly addressed miscegenation at a volatile moment in the Civil Rights period. Wilson had previously recorded Dickerson in a moderately successful jazz interpretation of the “Lawrence of Arabia” soundtrack for Audio Fidelity in 1963, so it probably made sense to try to repeat that formula – with the added benefit of timeliness and topicality. Unfortunately, Goldsmith’s score is unremarkable and the film itself overwrought. Although the movie enjoyed tremendous box office success, Impressions of “A Patch of Blue” sold poorly and was promptly deleted. It was finally reissued on CD by Verve in 1999, but only in an extremely limited edition that quickly disappeared.

Walt Dickerson was a phenomenal vibraphonist, but he never got his due as an important and innovative musician. He was a graduate of Morgan State College (and, according to the original liner notes, the Peabody Conservatory), made several records for Prestige and Audio Fidelity in the early nineteen-sixties, winning Down Beat’s “New Star” award in 1962 and “Innovator of the Year” award in 1963. Dickerson radically broke away from the Lionel Hampton/Milt Jackson tradition by playing the vibraphone with small, rubber-tipped mallets, gripping them near the head and using the motor and damper with the utmost restraint, resulting in a dry, clear, almost staccato articulation even at swift tempos. Sadly, and perhaps due to its commercial failure, Impressions of “A Patch of Blue” was the last record Dickerson made before withdrawing into a decade-long exile from music, thereby ceding the mantle of Great Modern Vibraphonist to Bobby Hutcherson virtually by default. Dickerson resurfaced in 1975 and made a number of records for the Danish Steeplechase label, including a lovely duet recording with Sun Ra (Visions) in 1978. Sadly, Dickerson once again dropped from sight in the early nineteen-eighties and died, unjustly un-famous, in 2008.

Despite its apparent status as a (failed) cash-in attempt, Impressions of “A Patch of Blue” is a very fine album and well worth hearing – even beyond the novelty of Sun Ra’s presence. According to session bassist Bob Cunningham, any connection to Goldsmith’s actual score was tenuous at best: “I don’t think there was any music there to refer to. Or if there was, we didn’t necessarily follow it” (quoted in the CD liner notes). The resulting music has a loose, late-night feel, but this is not the kind of cheese-ball commercial pabulum you might expect in such a work-for-hire situation; there is some adventurous musicianhip on display within these mellow grooves. In fact, the musicians approached their work with a solemn dignity appropriate to the film’s subject. Francis Davis writes in the liner notes for the Verve CD:

Along with Dickerson’s genuine admiration for the movie, the philosophical underpinning of Impressions of “A Patch of Blue” was provided by the lengthy discussions about race and other matters he had with Sun Ra. “Our conversations were not the norm,” Dickerson told me. “Sometimes it was a conversation without periods or commas, and we would extend that into the musical realm, with no musical composition as such. Music was part of our extended conversation.”
This conversational tone is part of the record's relaxed, yet scintillating presence. On four of the eight tracks, Ra spins gossamer spiderwebs of notes on a tinkling harpsichord (of all things) while his piano playing is deftly virtuosic, with a particularly daring solo on “A Patch of Blue – Part 2.” Ra also lays down some tasty, bluesy funk on “Bacon and Eggs” and, sometimes, he plays piano and harpsichord simultaneously, creating a delicate, weirdly polyphonic texture. Dickerson himself displays his innovative technique at the bars, especially on the expansive “Alone in the Park – Parts 1 and 2” and his quadruple-time swinging on “Selina’s Fantasy” is truly astonishing, yet far from mere empty showboating. Cunningham and Blank make for a sensitive rhythm section, with Cunningham’s solid pizzicato and arco bass complementing Blank’s singularly impressionistic (rather than overtly propulsive) trap drums. Blank also plays some darkly Arkestral tympani on the spooky set-piece, “High Hopes.” Impressions of “A Patch of Blue” is not just an obscure historical document, of interest only to obsessive record collectors; it is a transcendentally beautiful work of art in its own right, an overlooked gem.

June 14, 2009

The Sensational Guitars of Dan & Dale: Batman and Robin (Universe UV016 CD)  
Originally released as Tifton S-78002 LP (1966)

In a discography defined by indefinable strangeness, this has to be, on the surface anyway, the weirdest record of them all. In January, 1966, producer Tom Wilson cooked up yet another quickie cash-in attempt, this time based on the campy hit television show and aimed squarely at the children's market. Wilson again enlisted Edward O. Bland to churn out some slapdash arrangements to be played here by the Greenwich Village-based acid-rock band, The Blues Project (billed as “The Sensational Guitars of Dan & Dale”), plus Sun Ra on occasional Hammond organ, John Gilmore on tenor sax, and Pat Patrick on baritone sax. The band is filled out with studio session stalwarts, Jimmy Owens on trumpet, Tom McIntosh on trombone along with some anonymous female vocalists. Sounds like a sure thing, right? What do you mean, “No?”

The Blues Project consisted of Danny Kalb on lead guitar and harmonica, Steve Katz on rhythm guitar, Andy Kulberg on bass, and Roy Blumenfeld on drums. They were hailed as New York’s answer to The Grateful Dead, after picking up organist Al Kooper during their short-lived stint on Columbia Records. Kooper, of course, was originally a guitarist, but became better known as an organist after his impromptu appearance on Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” – a session, not coincidentally, produced by Tom Wilson in 1965. The Blues Project made a couple records for Verve before disbanding in 1967. But in 1966, they were at the height of their powers and hungry enough to take a gig making a pseudonymous, one-off kiddie record.

It is puzzling why Wilson felt the need to add Sun Ra and his core musicians to the mix – on first listen you would never know it’s them. On the other hand, they do provide a certain big-band, jazzy élan that The Blues Project could never have pulled off on their own. Ra can be heard playing some bumptious organ on four of the twelve tracks, his “space-age barbecue” style contrasting with Al Kooper’s more conventionally rock-ish approach. Gilmore and Patrick are clearly audible in the ensemble passages and Gilmore even takes an appropriately glib solo on “The Riddler’s Retreat.” (It is unclear who is playing the loopy slide-whistle on “Flight of the Batman” or the boing-boing-ing jaw harp on “Joker is Wild.”) Kalb peels off a number of stinging electric guitar solos that might have seemed pretty groovy in a different context but, despite the musical firepower at Wilson’s disposal, Bland’s “compositions” are nothing but laughable
arrangements of material lifted wholesale from the public domain (and elsewhere). As Prof. Campbell explains:

Except for the Batman theme [composed by Neil Hefti], nearly all of the music on this album was plundered from various sources. “Batman’s Batmorang” uses the slow movement of Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony, “Penguin’s Umbrella” takes over Chopin’s A-flat Polonaise; “Batman and Robin Swing” is based on the love theme from Tchaikovsky’s Romeo and Juliet; and “Batmobile Wheels” makes do with Bach’s Minuet in G, already recycled as “I Hear a Symphony” by the Toys. “The Riddler’s Retreat” lifts its guitar licks from “She Loves You” by the Beatles. (Campbell & Trent, p. 125)

One can only imagine a child’s disappointment when, after begging his parents for the Batman and Robin record, he discovers only a raggedy, ersatz rendition of his favorite TV theme and a bunch of hokey tunes punctuated with incongruously psychedelic guitar solos. Needless to say, the record sold poorly and only became a pricy collector’s item due to Sun Ra’s (uncredited) involvement and the connection to The Blues Project and Al Kooper. In 2001, the Italian label, Comet/Universe, issued the album on CD, complete with deluxe, gatefold mini-LP packaging, along with several other gray-market Ra reissues. While Batman and Robin is a fun bit of commercial ephemera of interest to hard-core Sun Ra fanatics, Blues Project aficionados (and, I suppose, comic book geeks), it is pretty much worthless musically beyond its value as pure sixties kitsch, a strange and curious artifact from a far-gone era.

June 21, 2009

No time for me to write today; so I’m going to let Sun Ra speak for himself. This fascinating five-minute interview aired on VH1’s “New Visions” program circa. 1990:

June 28, 2009

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Nothing Is (ESP-Disk’ 4024 CD)

In May of 1966, the fledgling ESP-Disk’ managed to book a package tour for some of its artists under the auspices of Bernard Stollman’s Esperanto Foundation, who had somehow finagled financial support from the New York Council for the Arts to spread the ESP musico-philosophy to the denizens of various New York State public colleges and universities. The musicians included Sun Ra and the Arkestra, Ran Blake, Patty Waters, Giusseppi Logan and Burton Greene and much of the music was recorded and later released on ESP-Disk’. Nothing Is, released in 1969, captures the large-format Arkestra at the top of its game during this tour, bravely navigating conducted improvisations while also swinging hard on the jazzier numbers and otherwise bursting into space-chanting and polyrhythmic percussion freakouts ¬ it is the perfect soundtrack for the inspirational but imminently doomed counter-cultural revolution then at its peak in the wake of the Summer of Love, Woodstock, and widespread demonstrations of dissent. On the surface, Sun Ra’s music seems to fit right in with the outrageous sounds of the psychedelic era, but as has been noted, Ra’s politics were more complicated and quasi-authoritarian than might be expected. Ra’s ideal was not freedom, but discipline. Even John Sinclair had to admit: “We knew he was a dictator, but at least he was a benign dictator” (quoted in Szwed, p. 245).
Perhaps that is why, unlike much of the music of this period, **Nothing Is** still sounds fresh and not like a hopelessly nostalgic curio from a distant past. In fact, it still sounds like music from the future. One can only imagine what those college students thought about it at the time; surely many minds were blown. **Nothing Is** became a defining album for Sun Ra and, as with the **Heliocentric Worlds** albums, **Nothing Is** was widely bootlegged after ESP-Disk’s dissolution. I’ve owned various versions of this record: an Italian boot CD in the late eighties; the heavily No-Noised German ZYX CD circa. 1990; the better-sounding Dutch Calibre CD released in 2000; and now, the expanded 2005 edition on the resurrected ESP-Disk’. While the 2005 reissue includes almost thirty minutes of bonus material (and improved sonics), the tracks are disconcertingly rearranged. This album is indelibly etched into my brain through decades of repeated listening, so it was something of a shock the first time I heard the new CD. Upon reflection, it does seem likely that this rearrangement better reflects the running order of Ra’s sets of the time, but somehow the intensely visceral impact of the original is slightly diffused. Ra took great care in the construction of his albums and while additional, previously unreleased music is always welcome, I will probably keep my older CD containing the record as it was originally released, just for reference.

Be that as it may, **Nothing Is** is definitely one of the all-time great Sun Ra records and an essential document of the period. Highlights include a jaw-droppingly stunning Gilmore solo on the twisty post-bop composition, “Dancing Shadows,” the definitive performance of the insanely complicated “Shadow World,” and an evocative rendition of “Exotic Forest” featuring Marshall Allen’s serpentine oboe over that menacing 5/4 ostinato. Interspersed are brief space chants and songs ("Theme of the Stargazers," “Outer Spaceways Incorporated,” “Next Stop Mars” and “Second Stop is Jupiter”), enormous, universe-engulfing space chords, and terse, densely compacted group improvisations. As for the bonus tracks, “Velvet” is an old-timey swing vehicle for Pat Patrick’s honking, squealing, and growling baritone saxophone, with pithy trombone and piano solos snuck in before the closing reprise. “Outer Nothingness” is fifteen-minutes of delirious, “New Thing” styled free jazz, marred only by an overlong drum solo by the irrepressible (and overindulged) Clifford Jarvis. (N.B. In a lazy bit of titling, this track bears little to no relationship to “Outer Nothingness” as found on **Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 1**.) A truncated “We Travel the Spaceways” ends the disc with a premature fadeout that feels somewhat anticlimactic. With or without the bonus material, **Nothing Is** is a must-have album for any Sun Ra fan and, truthfully, it belongs in any serious collection of post-war jazz.

July 5, 2009

**Sun Ra: Monorails and Satellites** (Evidence ECD 22013-2)
*Recorded at Sun Studio, New York, NY prob. 1966*  
*Originally released as El Saturn SR 509 in 1968*

While Sun Ra is highly regarded as a pioneer of electric keyboards in jazz, his prodigious gifts as a pianist have largely been overlooked, obscured by and subsumed within the Arkestra’s overall musical activities. **Monorails and Satellites** is one of the very few solo piano recordings Ra ever made and it is a fascinating document of his instrumental technique and singular musical thinking. Ra does not possess a dazzling virtuosity, but he approaches the piano as an immense orchestra, full of vibrant colors and contrasting timbres. Like a child at play, Ra delights in the resonant rumbling of the lowest octaves and the plinking, chattering chimes of the highest notes above. But Ra’s two-hand independence is sometimes truly astonishing: each hand in a different meter, in a different key, ten fingers layering multiple outer and inner melodies to create complex rhythmic/harmonic webs. Ra’s touch is aggressive yet supple,
achieving illusionistic “bent” note effects. In a 1991 interview with Keyboard magazine, Ra was asked if he could hear quarter tones, the notes “between the notes” on a piano:

“... I'm using these intervals. You see, the way you attack a note can create those effects. Depending on how hard you hit the key, you can hear the third or the fourth or the fifth – those sounds in the cracks – coming out. So the touch, the attack, is very important. When I hit a note, the undertones also sound. With the undertones and overtones blended, I can get quarter-tones. Not too many piano players have that touch. [...] I sing that way too, dividing the octave into 24 or 36 steps, just like the Indian singers do. I'm doing world music (quoted in Szwed, p.240).

Aside from the delightfully swinging standard, “Easy Street,” all the compositions are Ra’s and you can hear him using the piano as a sketchbook for the Arkestra’s larger canvas. “Space Towers” pits an agitated bass ostinato against jumping chords and horn-like riffing. “Cogitation” spills out tumbling blocks of clashing harmonies. “Skylight” is a beautiful ballad form spiced with intensely pungent dissonances. “The Alter Destiny” begins with an ominous roar and builds up a brittle, herky-jerky rhythm only to melt into sentimental tunefulness. “Blue Differentials” is a classic Ra blues, bright, uptempo, maybe a little old fashioned. The rhapsodic “Monorails and Satellites” contrasts gently rolling arpeggios and glissandos with enervated, multivoiced counterpoint. Finally, “The Galaxy Way” sounds more through-composed than wholly improvised as it maps the entire compass of the instrument through a sequence of descending chords and fleeting melodies. In the end, this is far from your usual jazz piano album but it offers a rare glimpse into Ra’s most intimate music-making.

+++ It’s too bad Evidence was unable to secure the rights to reissue Monorails and Satellites Vol. 2 (released as El Saturn SR 519 in 1969), which contains additional solo piano music recorded at the same session (and would have easily fit on CD). Interestingly, “Astro Vision” opens with a bit of musique concrete with Ra’s sprightly piano set against sheets of howling electronic noise, generated by contact microphones and overdriven, distorted reverb (Boykins and Hunter are the likely suspects). It sounds to me like the effect was overdubbed after the fact, since Ra does not interact with it in any way and the noise eventually subsides some time before he finishes. Curious. The remainder of the album consists of four piano solos that are more expansive than on Vol. 1, but also more diffuse. Several of the longer pieces reply upon an improvised, episodic construction that moves from ambiguous chordal statements through gentle ballad forms until finally evolving into furiously dissonant two-fisted attacks. “Solar Boats” is a little different and sounds more pre-arranged: Ra’s left hand sets up an off-kilter 5/4 groove while his right hand tosses off pan-tonal melodies and strident, widely-spaced chords. Vol. 2 contains a great deal of dynamic pianism, but lacks Vol. 1’s compact cohesiveness. Even so, it is well worth seeking out, if only for another opportunity to hear Sun Ra alone at the piano with his musical thoughts.+++

The radically experimental Strange Strings was also recorded around this time period; I wrote about Atavistic’s excellent reissue of this bizarre masterpiece here. Ra’s discography gets very confusing at this point, with various albums containing material recorded at different times and places, with a slew of singles thrown in to boot. This sort of confusion continues until well into the nineteen-seventies! I would like to continue my chronological examination of Sun Ra’s albums, but I fear that a weekly schedule will be almost impossible to maintain. Just sorting out
what is where will take some time. So expect some more YouTube videos in lieu of writing as I sort things out!

July 12, 2009

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Spaceways (Freedom CD741047)

This record certainly has a tortured discographical history! In December, 1971, Sun Ra sold a cache of tapes to the Black Lion label so as to pay the Arkestra’s traveling expenses from Denmark to Egypt. Sadly, much of this music was never released. In 1974, El Saturn released this album as Outer Spaceways Incorporated (143000A+B) – although it was sometimes entitled A Tonal View of Times Tomorrow, Vol. 3. Inexplicably, some of this music also appeared on numerous hybrid pressings of later Saturn albums such as Primitone and Invisible Shield among others. Finally, in 1998, the German DA Music label released a three-CD box set entitled Calling Planet Earth (Freedom 7612), containing some (but not all) the Black Lion holdings, wherein this album is stupidly re-titled Spaceways. I say stupidly because another disc in this otherwise fine box set is inanely titled Outer Spaceways Incorporated, making an already confusing discography needlessly opaque. This is the kind of thing that makes Campbell and Trent’s Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra so absolutely necessary!

In any event, Spaceways (or whatever you want to call it) is a great companion piece to the classic Nothing Is. Most of the music appears to have been recorded around 1966, given the presence of the trombonist Teddy Nance (who died in 1967) and Ra’s distinctive piano/Clavioline combo. Recorded in stereo, it offers remarkably good sound quality for the period. The first track, “Prelude and Shadow-Light World” (originally titled “Chromatic Shadows” on the El Saturn LP), opens with a long, dramatic piano introduction which prepares the way for the ensemble chant, “Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space.” Then comes the notorious “Shadow World,” which is marked by a slightly more relaxed tempo than usual and a honking, wailing bari sax solo from Pat Patrick. Ra takes a solo turn before giving way to burbling percussion. Finally, Ra conjures up a mammoth space chord to bring things to a close. The second track, “The Wind Speaks,” appears to be from the same concert and is another beautiful Ra ballad featuring a choir of flutes and piccolo. Eventually, Boykins takes a solo turn with the bow and Ra enters to duet on the electric Clavioline. Ra then returns to the piano for some frenetic variations on the theme before an elegiac, full ensemble re-statement. This composition was later re-titled “Somebody Else’s World” after acquiring lyrics.

June Tyson’s unmistakable voice singing the end of “Satellites Are Spinning” opens “We Sing This Song,” indicating a probable 1968 recording date (the sound quality is also noticeably inferior to the rest of the album). Her singing gradually trails off leaving the stage to Sun Ra’s rhapsodic, thunderous piano. “Outer Space Incorporated” [sic] returns to the previous concert, with the bouncy space chant setting the stage for a swinging piano solo. Ra suddenly holds down a deep bass tremolo causing the rhythm section to die down, leaving Nance and Bernard Pettaway to engage in a friendly trombone duel, sometimes joined by Ra’s Clavioline or some jib-jabbering percussion. Ra then lays down a heavy piano chord which signals another lengthy drum solo from Clifford Jarvis. Now, Jarvis is a technically brilliant drummer (check out that bass drum!), but drum solos are almost never a good idea, in my opinion. Thankfully, after a few minutes, the rest of the Arkestra takes up various hand-percussion, giving things are more interestingly pan-African, poly-rhythmic feel (despite Jarvis’s continued show-boating). Ra shuts things down with a startling piano entry, signaling another heaving space chord. Some deft editing surreptitiously launches us into “We Travel the Spaceways,” which is clearly taken from
a different concert, given the subtle change in soundstage (Boykins is suddenly stage left!). This version retains the original arrangement, featuring the prominent metallic clanging on the fours but, unfortunately, the Arkestra only sings the refrain a few times before the track fades out. Despite the anomalous titling on this reissue, *Spaceways* is a delightful album and an important live document of the *Heliocentric*-era Arkestra. The *Calling Planet Earth* box set is currently out of print, but can be found on the secondary market for a modest premium. It is definitely worth seeking out, even with its myriad documentary flaws.

July 19, 2009

**Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Atlantis** (Evidence ECD 22067)

After a flurry of recording activity that began with the Arkestra’s arrival in New York City in 1961 and culminated with the ESP-era recordings of 1965-1966, the following years (until about 1970) are, by comparison, sparsely documented with individual tracks spread across various compilations, singles, and only a very few self-contained albums. So it seems to make sense to continue our chronological investigation with the albums proper (along with contemporaneous singles) before doubling back with the miscellaneous compilations that fill in the blanks. In other words, I’m putting off dealing with *The Solar Myth Approach Vols.1 & 2* until all else has been examined from this time period!

Which means we jump ahead a year to *Atlantis*, recorded in 1967 and originally released as Saturn ESR 507 in 1969. There are changes afoot in the band’s sound: always an early adopter of technology, Ra can be heard on side one playing exclusively a Hohner Clavinet, a recently released electronic keyboard that was later popularized by Stevie Wonder (see e.g. “Superstition” in 1972). Ra renames it the “Solar Sound Instrument” and plays it in his own inimitable fashion. Recorded in rehearsal at the Sun Studio (the Arkestra’s rented townhouse located at 48 East Third Street in Manhattan’s Lower East Side), these tracks feature a bare-bones Arkestra: Gilmore can be heard from time to time on tenor saxophone, but these pieces mostly feature Ra’s clavinet over beds of percussion and sound more like sonic experiments than full-fledged compositions. But what interesting experiments!

“Mu” is a slow, 5/4 clavinet vamp with Gilmore tentatively outlining an up and down melody. “Lemuria” is another 5/4 boogie with Gilmore laying down some heavy duty riffing on top of Ra’s extra-funky clavinet. “Yucatan” is a dreamy, modal ballad wherein Ra demonstrates his remarkably sensitive touch on the primitive electronic keyboard. Hartmut Geerken points out in the discography that what sounds like electric bass is actually “two tightly interlaced African drum patterns!” (2nd ed., p.136). “Bimini” consists of roiling polyrhythmic percussion with Ra interjecting some jabbing chords on the clavinet. The Evidence CD also includes an alternate version of “Yucatan” that mistakenly appeared on the 1973 reissue of *Atlantis* on Impulse! Actually, this track has nothing to do with the other composition of the same name, but is rather another noisy percussion-fest interspersed with Ra’s distinctive clavinet chording. A telephone rings signaling a quick cadence to end.

The side-long title track was recorded live at the Olatunji Center of African Culture sometime after May, 1967 and is essentially one long Ra solo on the other new keyboard in his arsenal: a Gibson Kalamazoo organ. The Kalamazoo was a lower-priced copy of the Farfisa portable organ made famous by rock musicians of the time (think “96 Tears”). Ra attacks the instrument with unrelenting, two-fisted zeal, summoning forth a tsunami of sound that duly evokes the mythical flooding of Atlantis. It is a hair-raisingly terrifying performance and as menacingly
psychedelic as any music of the period. After about fifteen assaultive minutes, an eerie calm sets in and the Arkestra plays an aching, moaning, richly voiced ensemble passage while Ra’s screeching organ threatens to overwhelm. The tension continues to mount until it is almost unbearable – then suddenly Ra cues the space chant: “Sun Ra and his band from outer space have entertained you here…” Holy moly! As Michael Shore puts it in his liner notes on the Evidence CD, “Atlantis” is “frightening, fascinating, enthralling, and finally overpowering music…[It] is one of the most monumental achievements of an artist who was always working in super-colossal terms.” Essential.

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The Sun Studio session(s) also yielded a single (Saturn 911-AR) released in 1969 and is available on The Singles (Evidence ECD 22164). “Blues on Planet Mars” is a typically spaced out blues, this time scored for the boing-ing clavinet and some lurching, cross-rhythmic percussion. The B-side, “Saturn Moon,” is something else entirely: Ra sets up some droning, guitaristic accompaniment on the clavinet for the Arkestra’s quietly majestic, harmonized humming while drums tap away ominously in the background. Interesting! Neither of these tracks would have conceptually fit on Atlantis, but are intriguing works in themselves and I can understand why Ra thought them worthy of release as a single.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
A couple of quick comments:

--the band entrance at the end of "Atlantis" has always reminded me of Guy Lombardo (and that's not a criticism).

--I agree that side 1 sounds more like undeveloped studies than finished pieces; perhaps for that reason, I haven't warmed to it as much as other stuff from this period. But of course when I'm in the right mood, the music suits me just fine.

July 26, 2009

Released in 1968, Saturn 3066 is a seven-inch 45rpm single consisting of two tracks recorded at Sun Studio in 1967 and is available on The Singles (Evidence ECD 22164). “The Bridge” is an accompanied recitation of Sun Ra’s poem, “The Fire and the Dry Weeds,” which was later published in the 1972 edition of The Immeasurable Equation. Ra begins with spindly, echoing chords on electric organ and tremulous Clavioline until the horns and percussion enter with squalling, distorted space chords, tautly controlled by Ra’s conducting. Mobarak Mahmoud (an aspiring actor then residing with the Arkestra) dramatically declaims the poem, his voice swathed in claustrophobic, bathroom reverb. At the climactic line, “They must walk the bridge of the cosmic age!” the rest of the band joins in staggered, variously impassioned exclamations of “They must walk the bridge! They must walk the bridge!” Hmm. Some more keyboard noodling and a final, blasting space chord wraps things up in suitably enigmatic fashion. Curiously, “The Bridge” was reissued as a one-sided single in 1982, indicating that Ra considered the work to be of some inscrutable, talismanic importance. The flip-side, “Rocket #9,” finds the Arkestra re-tooling the all-purpose space chant with a radically slowed tempo, transforming it into a kind of funky march from the boiling, big-band swing of the original version heard on Interstellar Low Ways (Saturn 203/Evidence ECD 22039). Ra leads the Arkestra from the delicate electronic
celeste, spelling out melodic figures to be taken up by the horns. Unfortunately, the track abruptly cuts off before the bridge or solo sections. Incidentally, Terry Adams claims that he was given a copy of this single by Sun Ra himself and it is this riff-happy arrangement of “Rocket #9” that was adapted by NRBQ on their debut album in 1968.

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**Song of the Stargazers** (Saturn 487 or sometimes 6161) was released in 1979 and is mostly a hodgepodge of various live recordings from the nineteen-seventies. But one track was obviously recorded much earlier, probably in 1967 or 1968, according to Prof. Campbell. Performed in a large, reverberant space in front of a sizable and enthusiastic audience, “Cosmo Dance” is an interesting quasi-modal composition featuring some evocative flute and oboe. Clacking wooden sticks set up a simple, repetitious rhythm with Boykins's bass and Pat Patrick’s “space lute” plucking out a droning three-note groove. Low horns and bowed bass enter with convulsively heaving whole-note fourths while flute and oboe and bass clarinet dance a medieval round. Flute and then oboe embark on expansive, Middle-Eastern sounding solos over the clacking sticks and throbbing bass-space lute, the audience bursting into spirited applause after each. Finally, the low horn/bowed bass whole-note fourths return, repeating several times before ending to more justifiably hearty ovation. Ra himself is not heard playing on this track, but the murky sound quality makes it hard to clearly make out who is doing what. Campbell says Marshall Allen is playing both flute and oboe, but that is impossible since both instruments are heard simultaneously during the ensemble section. So, is it Danny Davis on flute? It certainly sounds like him. There is also some talking barely audible throughout – is that Sun Ra lecturing the crowd or just random audience noise? In any event, this is a beautiful, prototypical Sun Ra composition of the period, perfectly realized by his Arkestra.

**August 2, 2009**

**Amiri Baraka/Sun Ra & His Myth Science Arkestra: A Black Mass (Son Boy 1 CD)**

The controversial writer/activist LeRoi Jones was a fellow denizen of Greenwich Village and an early, influential supporter of Sun Ra’s music in New York. After the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, Jones changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka, moved to Harlem and founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS). Sun Ra remained downtown, but he was intensely active in the short-lived institution, making the trip to the Harlem office “almost daily” (Szwed, p. 210). However, BARTS quickly disintegrated and Baraka decamped to his hometown in Newark, New Jersey where he established The Spirit House in a rented one-family dwelling. The first floor’s interior walls were removed to create performance/work space that would also come to house a book store and a record label, provocatively named Jihad.

**A Black Mass** was written in 1965 and published in *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966). It was first performed at Procter’s Theater in Newark in May, 1966 with Sun Ra’s Myth Science Arkestra supplying incidental music. The Arkestra shared the stage with the actors and improvised its parts by following cues in the script such as “Sun-Ra music of shattering dimension” or by interjecting music or percussion amidst the actors’ speaking lines. For Jihad’s first LP in 1968, Baraka enlisted members of the Black Arts troupe and the Arkestra to record the play, loosely based upon the Muslim myth of Yacub, wherein an evil white monster is accidentally created by an overly curious black magician. Despite the overt (reverse) racism inherent in the work, Szwed helpfully points out that, “in Baraka’s re-telling, it is the aesthetic impulse gone astray which is at center, … a violation of the spirit of the black aesthetic” (p. 211).
Baraka reinforces this message in the liner notes to this CD reissue: “Art is creation and … we must oppose the ‘creation of what does not need to be created.'” Even so, the play presents a number of problems for white listeners such as me!

The work begins with a brief guided improvisation by the Arkestra which introduces the actors, who enter humming and singing the melody to “Satellites Are Spinning,” a theme which runs throughout the play as a kind of leitmotiv. Unfortunately, the recording is crude and the acting is stagy and way melodramatic. Here is a representative declamation: “What we do not know does not exist. We know beyond knowing. Knowing there is nothing to know. Everything is everything." A chorus of women screeches and screams when the while devil is unleashed. Meanwhile, the Arkestra keeps a running commentary varying from splattery percussion and the plinking of “strange strings” to alternatively aggressive and spacey organ/clavinet workouts or dissonant, massed space chords. Occasionally, horns make succinct solo statements or engage in vocalized call and response with the actors. Despite the ponderous, heavy-handed rhetoric, Baraka’s play surely appealed to Sun Ra’s own black sci-fi mythology, even if Ra’s music-philosophy was more ecumenical than insurgent. Interestingly, Szwed takes pains to demonstrate Ra’s influence on Baraka’s thinking during this period: “[Ra] is there in [Baraka’s] historical allusions, in the tone and pitches of his reading, in his sense of the importance of language, and in his consciousness of the possibilities of playing the spoken word against the written, unleashing the phonetics buried in the printed word” (p. 209). Baraka would continue to be an important advocate for Sun Ra and his music. In Eulogies (1996), Baraka wrote: “Ra was so far out because he had the true self-consciousness of the Afro American intellectual artist revolutionary…” (quoted in Szwed, p. 209). Yes, but A Black Mass seems to me a dangerously incendiary piece of sixties countercultural history and a difficult, painful listen, despite the sometimes interesting music.

August 9, 2009

Sun Ra & His Astro-Infinity Arkestra: Continuation (Saturn ESR 520)

Originally released in 1970, Continuation contains a handful of experimental small group tracks recorded at the Sun Studio in 1968 along with two tracks with the full Arkestra recorded live at The East in Brooklyn, New York in 1969.

Side A begins with “Biosphere Blues,” a typically spaced-out blues, taken at a relaxed, almost somnambulant tempo. Interestingly, John Gilmore is probably playing drums on this home recording. After Ra’s piano introduction, Wayne Harris takes a nice solo on trumpet, his tone is warm and mellow, his note choices exquisite. Next up, Ali Hassan takes a single tasteful chorus on trombone. Then, Pat Patrick jumps in with an incongruously aggressive solo on baritone saxophone before giving way to Ra’s jaunty piano. A swelling space chord ends the piece with an odd dissonance. “Intergalactic Research” sounds as every bit as alien and forbidding as its title. Robert Barry plays the booming “lightning drum” with James Jacson on log drum and other unidentified percussionists who construct throbbing, asymmetrical cross-rhythms while Art Jenkins does his bit on space voice. Ra twiddles with his space organ and clavinet like a mad scientist, emitting random blasts of noisy timbres, dense, lurching chords, or rapidly spinning constellations of notes. This is a wonderfully strange piece.

The presence of Tommy Hunter and his echo-echo-echo machine on “Earth Primitive Earth” and “New Planet” makes me think these tracks were recorded prior to 1968. In fact, the overall ambience (and massively increased hiss) sounds like some of the Choreographer’s Workshop...
recordings (but this might just be wishful thinking). Both pieces pit Ra’s echoing piano against a skittering flute choir. On “Earth Primitive Earth,” Hunter plays some kind of metal scrapper quite near the microphone, making for an unsettling, spooky atmosphere. “New Planet” takes the echo thing to a whole other level and Robert Cummings turns in another spectacular solo on bass clarinet (I am really starting to appreciate what a great player Cummings is on that most difficult and unwieldy instrument). Incidentally, both of these tracks appeared on the 1989 compilation CD, Out There a Minute (Blast First), although “Earth Primitive Earth” was slightly edited and re-titled “Cosmo Enticement” and “New Planet” was re-titled “Song of Tree and Forest,” presumably at the request of Sun Ra himself.

Side B contains the nearly continuous nineteen-minute live concert segment from 1969, and it’s a corker. “Continuation To” opens with the Arkestra already in full flight over sultry African percussion but Ra soon takes over with a roiling piano solo, full of booming left hand chords and scampering right hand clusters. After bringing things back down a bit, Akh Tal Ebah extemporizes on trumpet while Ra hints at ballad forms and hand percussion gurgles nervously in the background. Suddenly Ra produces a bouncy, repetitive figure and bass and drums join in for some good, old fashioned swinging. Ebah, a newcomer to the band since Sun Ra’s relocation to Philadelphia in the fall of 1968, manages to hold his own amidst the shifting musical landscapes and things really start to heat up when the Arkestra enters with big angular space chords, full of wiry clarinets and blatting trombones. But just as Boykins begins to solo, the track cuts off. “Jupiter Festival” picks up with the end of Boykins’s bass solo and he quickly moves to the fast walking to introduce “Second Stop is Jupiter.” Ra joins in and the Arkestra chants, climaxing with “all out for Jupiter!” A massive space chord erupts which melts into manic group improvisation. Gilmore emerges from the din with a lengthy, super-intense tenor saxophone solo, full of “sheets-of-sound” flurries of notes, heroically over-blown honks and squeals, and impossible multi-register leaps. Sun Ra prods things along with more furious piano, conducting brief entrances and exits of musicians while Gilmore continues to wail. The music finally simmers down a bit with the various horns exhaustedly sighing and moaning but with Boykins agitatedly scraping away with the bow. At one point, there is a tense, held note before the return of the busy piano figures after which screaming clarinets provide contrast against some sweetly melodic alto sax and rippling brass, with Jarvis propulsively pounding away in free rhythm. This deliciously complex texture continues on for some minutes before abruptly cutting off. Argh!

Nevertheless, Continuation is another fascinating album from a fertile, if spottily documented, period in Ra’s career and well worth hearing.

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Good news! According to Amazon, Atavistic will be reissuing Continuation on October 6, 2009 as part of John Corbett’s Unheard Music Series. Rejoice!

August 16, 2009

Sun Ra & His Astro-Solar Infinity Arkestra: My Brother the Wind (Saturn 521)

The advent of the transistor enabled Robert Moog (1934-2005) to develop the first modular synthesizer in the early nineteen-sixties and by late-1969, a truly portable synthesizer, the now legendary Minimoog, was already in development. Sun Ra was naturally intrigued by the instrument, with its cutting edge technology and ability to make truly otherworldly sounds. But in
a 1970 Down Beat interview, Ra emphasized that synthesizers were not just weird noise machines or souped-up organs:

_The Moog synthesizer in its potential and application to and for the future is tremendous in scope, particularly for those who are creative naturals. It most certainly is worthy of a place in music. There are many effects on it which at present are not upon any other instrument. On one of my compositions, “My Brother the Wind,” the Moog is a perfect projective voice. Of course, like other electronic keyboard instruments, it will require a different technical approach, touch and otherwise in most efforts of behavior. It is a challenge to the music scene…The main point concerning the synthesizer is the same as in all other instruments, that is, its capacity for the projection of feeling. This will not be determined in a large degree just by the instrument itself, but as always in music, by the musician who plays the instrument_ (quoted in Szwed, p.277)

Indeed, Ra’s approach to the Moog synthesizer was altogether different than the instrument’s later popularizers. In late 1969, and with the financial support of T.S. Mims, Jr., Ra obtained two prototype models (in order to achieve two-voice polyphony from the monophonic instruments) and booked time at Variety Recording Studio in New York City. He brought along only Gilmore (who mostly plays drums), Marshall Allen, and Danny Davis for the occasion. In addition, pianist/synthesist, Gershon Kingsley, was hired to program the synthesizer according to Ra’s wishes. According to Mims, “It was a duel between Kingsley programming and Sun Ra playing” (quoted in Campbell, 2nd ed., p.152).

The title track consists of two wildly contrasting Moog voices: a breathy whistle in the high register and a thick, reedy interval in the bass with Gilmore supplying some credible free drums. Ra’s two-hand independence and control of the highly differentiated textures is really quite remarkable. “Intergalactic II” pits the boing-boing-ing Moogs against braying horns. Gilmore turns in another typically riveting solo before hopping back on the drums to propel a dual alto sax extravaganza. Hypnotic synthesizer interludes set up some misty textures for the horns at the end. “To Nature’s God” features resonant, bell-like sounds on one Moog while the other rumbles around with a rounded, woody bass tone. Meanwhile, Allen and Davis twirl around on piccolo and flute and Gilmore lays down lurching, asymmetrical funk beats.

While the preceding pieces sound a bit like interesting but tentative experiments, “The Code of Interdependence” is more fully realized; a well-considered, conducted improvisation. Clocking in at a near-epic sixteen minutes, Ra explores the outer limits of the Moogs’ expressive ability while Gilmore’s drumming provides a remarkably supple, shape-shifting drive. Gilmore is not only a tenor saxophone colossus but a better-than-serviceable drummer as well! Davis sounds great on the rarely heard alto clarinet as he interweaves the sinewy horn with Ra’s spiraling synthesizers. Later on, Davis takes up the alto saxophone and again duets with Allen. Amazingly, Ra’s Moog textures subtly evolve over the course of the piece – whether by his own knob twiddling or Kingsley’s, who knows? He builds up the variegated intensities until Allen breaks through with a taut but assertive solo on alto sax. As the pressure subsides, Ra spins delicate webs of unearthly tones to end. According to Campbell, this piece was deliberately speeded up and mastered out of phase, lending it a sort of humanly-impossible quality that only adds to its considerable mystique. _My Brother the Wind_ is essential Sun Ra and a great example of his innovative artistry on early electronic keyboards. The Minimoog would remain a staple of Ra’s arsenal for the next decade and beyond.

_August 23, 2009_
Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: My Brother the Wind Vol. II (Evidence CD)

In early 1970, Sun Ra returned to Variety Recording Studio with an enlarged Arkestra, including vocalist June Tyson. Tyson (b. 1936) had begun working with the band in 1968 at the recommendation of Sonny’s part-time manager, Lem Roebuck, but this is her first appearance on record. While Tyson was an integral feature of the Arkestra’s live concerts, with her lush singing voice and flowing dance movements, a woman’s full-time presence in the band posed some problems. Sonny considered her family since she was married to the Arkestra’s lighting designer, Richard Wilkinson, but Ra was patriarchal, if not downright chauvinistic in his attitudes: “I can’t create with women in my environment” (quoted in Szwed, p.250). Nevertheless, Tyson became a close confidant to Ra and remained a steadfast member of the Arkestra until her death in 1992.

She sings beautifully on the lilting space chant, “Somebody Else’s World” and on the slinky, jazz-funk number, “Walking on the Moon,” obviously written in response to Apollo moon landing in July, 1969. Ra also has another new keyboard in tow, a mellow-toned Farfisa organ (not a Hammond as I previously thought) which gives these tracks that “space-age barbeque” sound. “Otherness Blue” is another mid-tempo, off-kilter blues, featuring some tasty trumpet work from Kwame Hadi. “Pleasant Twilight” starts out as bright, swinging big-band tune, but a rubato section opens up space for Gilmore to blow sweetly on tenor saxophone before the melody returns at half-tempo to end. “Somewhere Else” begins with a fat, lurching riff over a stiff rhythm section, which eventually launches into some medium swing. Short solos come and go while the Arkestra tosses around variations on the opening riff. “Contrast” opens with some squeaking, honking baritone saxophone from Pat Patrick with Alejandro Blake jumping in with furiously plucked bass. Then Ra enters with some sustained, suspended chords and Marshall Allen wails away on oboe, the sound wrapped in think reverb (was Tommy Hunter present?) until fading out.

The remainder of the album is taken up with five brief synthesizer experiments, Ra having purchased a brand new Minimoog of his own. “The Wind Speaks” explores white noise and fluttering filter effects while “Sun Thoughts” focuses on sour intervals and swooping, sea-sick portamentos. “Journey to the Stars” uses the ADSR envelope filter to create wah-wah-ing attacks and swelling sustained notes while “World of Myth I” consists of knob-turning pitch-shifting. Finally, “The Design – Cosmos II” conjures up some resonant, bell-tone sounds, with increasingly busy atonal melodies scattered over a repeating bass note. While these tracks may sound a bit tentative, the Minimoog would become a fixture of Ra’s keyboard arsenal in the nineteen-seventies and most concerts would feature a lengthy synthesizer solo full of apocalyptic bombast. Unfortunately, My Brother the Wind, Vol. II comes across as kind of schizophrenic: some of this material is the most toe-tappingly accessible in all of the discography, but the Moog experiments are tough-going for even the most committed fan. Even so, this is an essential album and a necessary companion to Vol. I.

+++ UPDATE: I neglected to mention another track found on Out There a Minute (Blast First CD) which was likely recorded at this session (or shortly thereafter). Entitled, “Jazz and Romantic Sounds,” it fits right in, with Ra’s bluesy, juke-joint organ, Marshall Allen’s impassioned solo and Patrick interjecting a honking riff here and there. It unexpectedly ends with a weird cadence and minute or so of spaced-out bliss before fading out. Nice.
August 30, 2009

I need some more time to work up the next installment of our chronological slog through the discography; so this week, I hereby present two scenes from *Space is the Place* (1974):

September 6, 2009

**Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra: The Night of the Purple Moon (Atavistic CD)**

In mid-1970, Sun Ra reentered Variety Recording Studio, this time with a bare-bone Arkestra and yet another new electronic keyboard in tow, the RMI Rocksichord. In his perceptive liner notes to this CD, John Corbett describes the sound of the Rocksichord as an “unforgettable nasal quack,” and that’s a pretty accurate description of this primitive, transistorized electric piano. In another person’s hands, this would sound cheesy and (now) hopelessly out of date. But Ra builds solid, evocative compositions around the instrument and it is, inexplicably, just exactly perfect. Unfortunately, the original tapes were unsalvageable, so this reissue had to be sourced from a clean LP. There’s plenty of surface noise present, so at least we can be thankful the producers didn’t get carried away with the noise reduction and de-clicking, which can often just make things worse. Although Impulse! was prepared to reissue this album in late-seventies, it has remained an ultra-rare artifact until Atavistic released this CD in 2007. Despite the less-than-perfect sound-quality, *The Night of the Purple Moon* is one of the great Sun Ra albums — and one of my favorite albums of all time.

Gilmore plays mostly drums throughout, only pulling out the tenor saxophone for “Impromptu Festival,” where Danny Davis sits in on the drum stool. While neither were virtuoso drummers, they were more than adequate and, most importantly, well understood the unique rhythmic feel of Ra’s music. Stafford James produces a beautiful, rounded tone on the electric bass, at times almost sounding like an upright acoustic. Sadly, this was James’s only recorded appearance with the Arkestra. “Sun Earth Rock” sets the tone with the quacking Rocksichord changes over a medium groove and a simple, bluesy head. After a bouncy keyboard interlude, Davis peals off a brief, but astonishingly fluent alto sax solo. “The All of Everything” is a pretty ballad with Davis adding some mellifluous flute to Ra’s gently rippling chords. Gilmore’s tenor solo on “Impromptu Festival” is another example of his sheer genius: opening with a sort of fanfare, he bends and twists the two-note melody and massages the stiff, pre-bop rhythms to construct a trenchant, incisive statement.

The next three tracks feature Sonny alone with two Minimoogs and the Rocksichord, but unlike the experimental improvisations found of *My Brother the Wind Vol. 2*, the pieces are tautly controlled compositions orchestrated for electronic keyboards. “Blue Soul” is a typically moody, down-tempo blues while “Narrative” sets a loping, asymmetrical bass line on synthesizer against stabbing chords and busy melodic figures on the Rocksichord. “Outside the Time Zone” takes a rubato ballad form and puts the melody in the bass synthesizer, embellished with buzzing, quivering Rocksichord.

The ensemble returns with “The Night of the Purple Moon,” which sets up a blues-rock vamp for bass and drums while Ra noodles around in a quasi-Egyptian mode. A tremolo effect gives the Rocksichord a fluttering, psychedelic tinge. “A Bird’s Eye View of Man’s World” pits lurching bass and Rocksichord unisons against Davis’s squealing alto, while Gilmore drifts in and out of time with free abandon. “21st Century Romance” is another lilting ballad with James holding
down a throbbing pedal point with Gilmore’s simple, but effective drumming. Meanwhile, Davis extemporizes on the richly woody alto clarinet along with Ra’s thrumming Rocksichord. “Dance of the Living Image” choogles along with a repeating ostinato and Davis tapping away on bongos. The album closes with a relaxed performance of “Love in Outer Space,” a tune which was by now a staple in the Arkestra’s songbook. Davis alternates between alto clarinet and bongos, leaving most of the musical space to Ra’s percolating Rocksichord.

For this CD reissue, Atavistic has conveniently added the alternate version of “Love in Outer Space” that was previously issued on Out There a Minute. Taken a slightly faster tempo, this version follows a similar contour, but is perhaps a more satisfying performance due to Ra’s interestingly varied electronic timbres. Three additional bonus tracks are also included, derived from a 1964 home recording of Sonny soloing on Wurlitzer electric piano and electric celesta. The Wurlitzer sounds a little worse for wear, but the damaged instrument creates interesting percussive, overtone-laden effects which mesh nicely with the ringing, bell-like celesta. While these tracks are mostly inconsequential, they are conceptually similar to the Minimoog and Rocksichord solos found on the album proper, and serve to further demonstrate Ra’s brilliantly coloristic approach to electronics. An appropriate appendix to a near-perfect album.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Another brilliant write-up, Rodger. "Purple Moon" is also one of my all-time favorite Ra albums, although it's hard for me to say why. I love Gilmore's drumming, loose and flexible, fitting just perfectly. I love the relaxed feel of the performances, and the album as a whole sustains this mood. One small question: check the discography (don't have it with me now) but I'm fairly sure this may have been, if not the first, then a relatively early, appearance of "Love in Outer Space." It had not yet become a staple in Ra's repertoire, although it certainly would after this. It sort of evolved into a more aggressively waltzy percussion feature, also acquiring vocals along the way, but he never returned to the placid peacefulness of these versions.

Rodger Coleman said...
Sam, I agree that it is difficult to convey what makes this album so special. But I think you hit on it: relaxed feel, consistent mood of peacefulness..."Love in Outer Space" first appeared on SECRETS OF THE SUN in 1962, so I kind of assumed it was part of the repertoire by 1970, although, as you know, the discography is spotty from 1967-1970. I need to dig out what I have from the period. Thanks for commenting!

September 13, 2009

Interlude: 1967-1970

Although the Arkestra was finding an increasing amount of paying work during the late nineteen-sixties, maintaining a residence in Manhattan was becoming untenable. Szwed describes the situation:

As New York City became aware of the shift in demographics taking place in the East Village, the police began to pay more attention to the area, and the Arkestra was regularly warned about the noise at rehearsals. So when the landlord decided to put the house up for sale Sun Ra saw that it was time for a move. Marshall Allen’s father owned
some property in Philadelphia and offered to rent them a row house at 5626 Morton Street in Germantown. So in the fall of 1968 Sun Ra moved to what he called ‘the city Brotherly shove,’ the ‘worst place in America,’ ‘the headquarters of the devil in disguise.’ (p.266)

Philadelphia was perhaps not quite as bad as all that; the Morton Street house remained Ra’s headquarters for the rest of his life and, to this day, Marshall Allen still lives there where he continues to conduct the posthumous Arkestra’s business. Szwed goes on to inform us:

Rehearsals created a few complaints from their new neighbors, but when the police arrived, Sonny told them they were merely making a joyous noise to the Lord in the city as the Good Book required. And gradually they became known as good neighbors, especially liked by the kids. Within a year there was a record by the Arkestra on the juke box in the neighborhood Lauromat and Sonny was listed in the Philadelphia phone book as ‘Ra, Sun.’ (the phone was sometimes answered by an ominous voice which proclaimed, ‘You have reached Outer Space…’) (p.267-268)

Nevertheless, the move to Philadelphia was disruptive. In 1968, Ra’s music was still virtually unknown outside of New York (and perhaps Chicago) so recruiting competent musicians was more difficult and, with much of the Arkestra scattered across the eastern seaboard, the more intricate ensemble pieces and swing-era showpieces of the old repertoire suffered from inadequate rehearsal time. Philadelphia also lacked a thriving jazz scene so any paying work would entail travelling back and forth to New York City. Soon, relentless travelling would come to define the Arkestra’s existence: first out to California, then to Europe and beyond.

By mid-1970, everything was in place for the next phase of Sun Ra’s earthly journey, a great adventure that would take him around the planet as the intergalactic cosmic messenger of space-age jazz. Always an early-adopter of new technology, Sonny had acquired the latest electronic keyboards: a Hohner Clavinet, a Gibson Kalamazoo organ, a more deluxe Farfisa, the RMI Rocksichord electric piano, and a Moog Minimoog monophonic synthesizer. Along with the acoustic piano, these instruments would comprise his arsenal throughout the nineteen-seventies. On stage, Ra appeared to be piloting a spaceship from behind his cockpit of keyboards with their myriad knobs, switches and twinkling lights. The core members of the Arkestra were by now wholly committed to Ra’s expansive vision; brass players and rhythm section members would come and go, but these musicians would remain stalwart accomplices to the end. Sonny was refining his compositional approach, writing specifically for these core musicians and incorporating conducted improvisations into the structure of his compositions. Soon he would embark on his ambitious “Discipline” series (which eventually numbered well over one hundred titles) each of which builds insanely complex structures out of the simplest materials. With the addition of June Tyson and other singer/dancers along with a full-blown light show, Sun Ra was transforming live performances into a ritualized “cosmo drama” full of theatrical choreography, sanctified exhortations, elaborate space chants, and maniacal percussion workouts — perfect for the psychedelic-ized audiences of the time. But at the same time, Ra could now rely on his “micro-Arkestra” consisting of John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, and Danny Davis to realize any new music, as The Night of the Purple Moon so ably demonstrates.

Aside from the handful of albums we’ve just discussed, this transformative period from 1967 to 1970 is (relatively speaking) sparsely documented and various and sundry tracks only appear on a handful of compilations which were issued in later years. Interestingly, a decent-quality audience recording from the Electric Circus in 1968 also circulates amongst collectors, giving
some crude indication of the state of the “cosmo drama” during this period. Sorting all of this material out will be the focus of the next several Sun Ra Sundays.

September 20, 2009

Sun Ra & His Solar-Myth Arkestra: *The Solar Myth Approach, Vols.1&2* (Charly 2CD)

The French record label BYG/Actuel was founded in March 1967 by Fernand Boruso, Jean-Luc Young, and Jean Georgakarakos (a/k/a “Karakos”) as an outgrowth of Actuel magazine, an underground arts journal active in the student protest movements of the time. In July, 1969, the Pan-African Arts Festival attracted a number of American musicians to Algiers and photographer and hardcore jazz fan, Jacques Bisceglia was enlisted to attract some of the expatriate Americans to Paris with a promise of paying work and the opportunity to record. A number of studio recordings were made that summer by such luminaries as Don Cherry, Archie Shepp, Anthony Braxton, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, and Dave Burrell. The label also planned an Actuel Festival to be held in Paris, but the French government denied them permission given their (tenuous) connection to the riots of 1968. The festival finally occurred in October, 1969 in the Belgian town of Amougies and while it was an economic disaster, the music was excellent and provided further material for the fledgling label. By 1972, BYG/Actuel had released almost fifty LPs documenting the cream of American and European free jazz and experimental musicians, but financial difficulties caused the partnership to disintegrate into acrimonious litigation and eventual bankruptcy. The original albums, with their striking graphic design by Claude Caudron, quickly fell out of print and remain valuable collector’s items today. Accusations of impropriety have tainted the label ever since its dissolution and bootlegged editions of certain titles (including this one) have been widely available over the years, lending credence to these allegations. Georgakarakos went on to found Celluloid while Young started Charly, small record labels with their own reputations for questionable business practices. Nevertheless, in 2002, Charly commissioned Sonic Youth’s Thurston Moore and journalist Byron Coley to curate *Jazzactuel*, a three-CD box set of highlights from the BYG era and, for a few years thereafter, legitimate (and, later, not-so-legitimate) reissues of the catalog started appearing on the market. (Currently, the BYG/Actuel label has been seemingly resurrected and is re-releasing titles on LP only, but I haven’t heard any of them.) Ethical issues aside, the music is uniformly wonderful and well worth seeking out.

Sun Ra himself was unable to personally attend the festivities in Europe, but instead compiled two LPs worth of music for the label entitled *Solar Myth Approach Volumes 1 and 2*, which were released as BYG/Actuel 529.340 and 629.341 in 1972, toward the end of the label’s existence. Consisting of various recordings made between 1967 and 1970, each volume is carefully sequenced to highlight the most avant garde, experimental and downright trippy elements of the Arkestra’s music while remaining a satisfyingly coherent pair of albums.

“Spectrum” sets the mood, opening Volume 1 with thick, dissonant chords that rise and fall over the ominous heartbeat of Ra’s clavinet. Meanwhile, Gilmore blows tightly controlled overtones on tenor with Patrick asserting angular counter-figures on baritone sax. The drummer-less texture sounds more like contemporary classical music than any kind of “jazz” but the following track, “Realm of Lightening,” features clattering clouds of trash-can percussion and blatting trombones over a hypnotic, repeated bass line. Things briefly settle down with a lovely rendition of “The Satellites Are Spinning,” taken at a lugubrious tempo with June Tyson and Gilmore singing in unison over Ra’s rhapsodic clavinet and some softly supportive hand drums. “Legend” is the centerpiece of the album, an astounding ten-minute excursion for straining trombones and frenzied oboes, with Gilmore and Ra engaged in pitched battle, Sonny attacking the clavinet
with an unusually Cecil Taylor-ian aggression. “Seen III, Took 4” is another inventive Minimoog solo from 1970. By de-tuning the oscillators and with a call and response form, Ra simulates polyphony on the monophonic instrument, adding creative volume swells, filter and ring modulator effects, and ending with swooning pitch bends. “They’ll Come Back” is a short but tantalizing composition that calls to mind both Béla Bartók and Duke Ellington with its interlude of fiercely rumbling piano and ringing, childlike celeste before a dramatic full stop and beautifully rendered coda. Volume 1 closes with “Adventures of Bugs Hunter,” which starts out as a groovily choogling number for Ra’s funky clavinet and Boykin’s rock-solid bass. But then Marshall Allen intercedes with some ear-piercing piccolo, in a deliberately contrary key and rhythm, all of which is swathed in Hunter’s patented echo/reverb effect. Far out, man! A perfect ending to an adventurous LP.

Volume 2 is perhaps even more intense, opening with “The Utter Nots,” another minimalist composition for maximalist Arkestra, consisting of an insistently one-note figure interspersed with blasting space chords, Jarvis pounding away on drums. A series of energetic, wide ranging solos (buttressed by Ra’s crazy, out-of-tune piano) builds up cresting waves of tension and release across the track’s eleven minutes, culminating in Danny Davis’s achingly overblown alto clarinet. The lilting space chant, “Outer Spaceways, Inc.,” offers a bare minute of repose, with droning trombone and bassoon combined with Ra’s twanging clavinet while Tyson and Gilmore enticingly sing: If you find Earth boring, just the same old same thing/Come on sign up with Outer Spaceways, Incorporated. “Scene 1, Take 1” is another epic Minimoog solo, over eight minutes of thoughtful knob-twisting, wah-wah-ing filter effects, buzzing noise, and farting, sustained pitches. The piece ends with an almost Vangelis-like swirling fade-out. Ra turns to clavinet solo on “Pyramids,” at times sounding more like a harpsichord or Spanish guitar on this moody, harmonically shiftless set-piece. “Interpretation” presents another delightful Strange Strings session, recorded in spacious and spacey stereo. Sadly, the fragile instruments were destroyed when the Arkestra’s van careened off the road on the way back from their second trip to California in 1969, making this the last known recording of Ra’s own “scratch orchestra.” Up next is a ponderous re-make of “Ancient Ethiopia” (originally titled “Ancient Aiethiopia” on the 1959 Saturn LP, Jazz in Silhouette), with Allen musing on low-register flute and Ra scattering chords around the piano’s tinkling, uppermost range. Volume 2 ends with “Strange Worlds,” a live recording from around 1969 or 1970. Ra’s organ and Akh Tal Ebah’s “space dimension mellophone” conjures up a spooky atmosphere and the music moves through various moods and feelings leading up to Tyson’s solemn declamations regarding the strangeness of the world. Suddenly, big, high-tension space chords unleash torrents of squalling horn solos, Ra furiously assaulting the Gibson Kalamazoo with his fists and elbows. Then, everything stops cold. Is it live or a deft edit? Either way, it’s a powerful conclusion to another mind-blowing album. Essential.

September 27, 2009

Sun Ra: Outer Spaceways Incorporated [sic] (Freedom CD741085)

This is yet another record with a horribly tortured history. In 1971, Sun Ra sold a stash of tapes to Alan Bates of the German label, Black Lion, who shortly thereafter issued this album under the title, Pictures of Infinity. A 1994 CD reissue added a previously unreleased bonus track (“Intergalactic Motion”) and all cuts were again reissued in 1998 on the three-CD box set, Calling Planet Earth (Freedom 7612), but there the album is stupidly re-titled Outer Spaceways Incorporated. I say stupidly because a 1974 album originally titled Outer Spaceways Incorporated (Saturn 14300A+B) was also re-issued in the same box set and
inexplicably re-titled *Spaceways*, thereby creating all kinds of unnecessary discographical confusion. Be that as it may, this album (whatever its title) is drawn from an excellent stereo recording of a live performance in New York City circa. 1968 and provides a rare, hi-fi glimpse of the newly evolving “cosmo drama.”

The Arkestra declaims, “Somewhere There!” and immediately blasts off into full-blown, New Thing-styled energy music, Gilmore taking the lead with an astonishingly fleet tenor solo. Unfortunately, a good half of the track’s fifteen minute duration is taken up with more pointless drum solos by Clifford Jarvis and his hyperactive bass-drum pedal. When the Arkestra finally interjects some aimless space chords and free-jazz squealing and honking, it all seems a bit anticlimactic. Maybe you just had to be there. “Outer Space Incorporated” [sic] opens with some rubato free improv until Ra introduces the bouncy chord progression, taken at a bright tempo. The Arkestra chants the words in increasingly dissonant harmony before brief, quiet solos from piano and bass. The free rubato section returns with braying horns, busy percussion, and cacophonous piano before quickly fading out to modest applause. “Intergalactic Motion,” whose correct title is actually “Ankhnaton,” is a jaunty big-band number that dates back to the 1960 album, *Fate in a Pleasant Mood* (Saturn 202/Evidence ECD 22068). The composition alternates a hugely catchy riff with a swinging bridge section. Bernard Pettaway and Ali Hassan dominate with dueling trombone solos before giving way to Ra’s nimble piano, where he explores the nooks and crannies of odd harmonic inversions. Boykins and Jarvis provide a solid foundation of joyous swing and Boykins eventually takes over with a typically virtuosic bass solo before the horns return for a ragged reprise to end. “Saturn” is another classic Ra composition dating all the way back to 1956. The A-section sets a serpentine, atonal melody atop an agitated up-and-down rhythm while the B-section suddenly unleashes contrastingly fast and furious swing changes. It is the perfect vehicle for Gilmore’s prodigious talents and he does not disappoint here. Ra adds a pointed statement on piano before Gilmore leads the ensemble through the complex head to end. Some pitter-patter percussion segues directly into “Song of the Sparer,” a slow modal ballad introduced by Ra’s piano. Held notes on saxophones, piccolo, flute, and trumpet outline subtly shifting, suspended harmonies over Ra’s restless chord progression. It’s an interesting piece, somewhat tentatively performed (apparently only this one time). The final track, “Spontaneous Simplicity,” is possibly from an earlier concert (perhaps 1967), given the slightly different ambience and a noticeably smaller Arkestra. Prof. Campbell also suggests this is Gilmore on drums rather than Jarvis and, after close listening, I think that might be right. (If it’s Jarvis, he is playing with uncharacteristic restraint!) In any event, Marshall Allen plays scumptiously delicious flute along with Ra’s delicate piano filigrees while Boykins holds down the two-note bass-line over a bed of gently percolating percussion. A beautiful example of one of Ra’s patented “space ballads.”

Despite the anomalous titling and sometimes ragged ensembles, this album is definitely worth hearing for the opportunity to hear the Arkestra in a live setting during this crucial (yet sparsely documented) period of transition.

**October 4, 2009**

**Sun Ra: *Janus* (1201 Music CD)**

*Janus* was apparently conceived by Sun Ra as a self-contained album around 1970, but it was never issued. In 1971, the tapes were sold (along with a bunch of other recordings) to Alan Bates, but Black Lion also failed to release any of this material. Eventually, some of these tracks were scattered across various obscure Saturn LPs of the seventies and eighties, such as
Invisible Shield and Space Probe and only on exceptionally hard to find, hybridized pressings at that. Thankfully, 1201 Music rescued this long neglected album, releasing it essentially as Ra originally conceived it on this 1999 CD, complete with insightful liner notes from Prof. Robert L. Campbell himself. The music was mostly recorded around 1967 to 1970, although there is a tantalizing expanse of music from the magical Choreographer’s Workshop period tacked onto the title track – a precocious bit of editing that demonstrates Ra’s skills with a razor blade and splicing tape. Despite their variable sound quality and sometimes haphazard packaging, Sun Ra constructed his albums with great care and considered the LP as something more than mere documentation of his work, but as works of art in and of themselves. Janus is an excellent example of his craftsmanship.

In his liner notes, Campbell aptly describes “Island in the Sun” as “one of those relaxed, flowing compositions with mildly exotic rhythms that are much beloved by Ra fans.” Indeed, it is beautiful example of what I call Ra’s “space ballads.” Marshall Allen’s flute harmonizes so nicely with Danny Davis’s alto clarinet on the lilting, sing-song-ing melody while Ronnie Boykins lays down a loping bass line atop the cheerfully pitter-pattering hand drums. Sonny enters with a sparse solo consisting of floating piano chords before Allen returns to lead into the final, peaceful refrain. What a lovely way to begin the album.

Despite the label text, the CD combines “The Invisible Shield” and “Janus” into one thirteen-minute-long track, which makes sense in a way, since these two tracks are constructed from three different performances and the one segues directly into the other. (Still, I’d rather have each title separately indexed and the label is misleading.) Recorded live in 1970, “The Invisible Shield” opens with an outrageous alto saxophone solo by Marshall Allen, accompanied by Danny Ray Thompson on the ghostly Neptunian Libflecto (a bassoon with French Horn mouthpiece) but Ra soon takes over with a two-fisted organ/synthesizer solo that sounds like a mad scientist conjuring up doomsday. Right at the apocalyptic climax, a tape edit slams us into “Janus,” the first thirty-five seconds of which are from a Sun Studio recording circa. 1967 or ’68 with Ra on clavinet or gongs (or both), heavily amplified and distorted, creating ominous thunderclouds and sonic lightning. Then another quick edit splices in a very spacey improvisation recorded at the Choreographer’s Workshop circa. 1963, full of Tommy Hunter’s over-the-top reverb and echo effects along with Allen’s piccolo and Art Jenkins’s eerie “space voice.” A final edit ends the piece with quietly chiming bell sounds. Ra’s sequencing of this wildly disparate material into a satisfying whole is a perfect example of his visionary, DIY approach to record-making.

The album closes with two live recordings from early 1968. “Velvet” is a swinging, big-band bop number that dates back to 1959’s Jazz in Silhouette (Saturn 5786/Evidence ECD 22014). The ensemble sections are a little shaky, but Pat Patrick turns in an exemplary performance with his rumbling baritone sax solo, Robert Northern provides a couple of choruses on the rarely heard French horn, and Ra delivers a typically terse statement on piano before the reprise. “Joy” is a conducted improvisation that begins with dissonant, braying horns over Ra’s cascading piano clusters and pounding drums and percussion. The ensemble eventually drops out leaving Danny Davis to extemporize a cappella on the alto sax before the rhythm sections returns to provide frenzied support. After a while, the full ensemble resumes its scattering of contrary lines, honks, and squeals and Ra plays rippling, romantic chords on piano along with pure-toned whines on the Clavioline. The music gets slowly quieter while Jarvis takes over with a typically manic drum solo that abruptly cuts off after a minute or so. Did the tape run out? Or is this another deliberate edit? Either way, I’m grateful; there is no doubt Jarvis went on and on for several more minutes! Certainly, it is an odd ending to an otherwise very interesting piece of music.
Janus not only contains precious documentation of a crucial period in Sun Ra's music, but it is also a supremely well-crafted album in its own right. Covering a wide range of material in a mere thirty-five minutes, it would make an excellent introduction to Ra's sixties era music for the novice; for the connoisseur, it is absolutely essential.

October 18, 2009

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: The Electric Circus, New York, NY, April 1968 (AUD 2CDR)

I do not intend to write very much about the myriad audience or soundboard tapes, FM broadcasts, videos or other bootleg-type material which circulates amongst Ra collectors because, for one thing, I do not have it all and, for another, I do not really want it all! Let’s face it, I’m already feeling overwhelmed by Ra’s official discography! And so while such recordings (and I do have quite a few) are sometimes of extremely high quality, they are simply outside the scope of what I’m trying to do with Sun Ra Sunday. Be that as it may, this ninety-minute concert fragment is worth a mention here.

The Electric Circus was a hippie hang-out located on St. Mark’s Place in New York City and the Arkestra’s appearance at this venue (and the fact that some unknown fan decided to make this audience recording) demonstrates how Ra’s music and its audience were changing during this period. Recorded in mono, likely with a single microphone to a reel-to-reel machine, the sound quality is not too bad, all things considered, and it provides a singular glimpse into an Arkestra in transition circa. April 1968.

The tape fades in with “Lights on a Satellite,” already in progress. Horns and flute choir play the sing-song-ing melody a few times over the sensuous rhumba rhythms before giving way to a frenetically twanging and clanging clavinet solo by Ra — his attack is so ferocious, the instrument's delicate tines quickly drift out of tune. Nevertheless, Ra charges into the bouncing ostinato of “Friendly Galaxy.” The largish Arkestra sounds a bit tentative on the twisting, asymmetrical ensemble section, but once a solid groove is established, a lengthy sequence of solos and percussion jams is absolutely mesmerizing with Alan Silva’s cello giving this section an eerie, almost “Strange Strings” feeling. After bringing things to a full boil, Ra reintroduces the up-and-down bassline while the Arkestra gracefully elides the slip-sliding melodies ending with an exquisite, extended ritardando. After some polite applause, Ra introduces “The Satellites Are Spinning” and the Arkestra takes up the chant over a slinky groove. Sadly, it fades out after only a couple of minutes.

An untitled improvisation follows, fading up mid-ooboe solo, sailing over throbbing African percussion, Silva’s cello singing along with Ronnie Boykins’s bowed bass. The piece moves through various moods and instrumental groupings (notably more oboes and French horn, of all things), climaxing with an aggressively apocalyptic organ solo by Ra. As the sonic fallout subsides, a child’s wailing and screaming perfectly blends with the moaning and sighing horns. Unfortunately, the tape cuts off just as things start to heat up again. With a hearty chant of “Calling Planet Earth!,” the Arkestra rips into some full-bore group-improv energy-music which, unfortunately, gives way to an overlono drum solo from Clifford Jarvis. Oh well. Next up, an early version of “Somebody Else’s Idea” is chanted rather than sung by an unidentified female vocalist — definitely not June Tyson. This is very interesting as it suggests that Ra was looking to add a female vocalist to the Arkestra prior to Tyson’s appearance on the scene later that summer/fall. After choogling along for several minutes, Ra signals the ending with some
emphatic, churchy organ chords that lead into the gentle “space ballad,” “Spontaneous Simplicity,” a vehicle for Marshall Allen’s mellifluous flute. But as the percussion gets heavier and Ra’s organ gets more dissonant and distorted, the music verges on the kind of dark funk Miles Davis would get to later on the nineteen-seventies. And from there it disintegrates into a caustic noise fest that brings to mind primal Sonic Youth before returning to the burbling exotica of the theme. Incredible! Then Ra’s quivering organ tones introduce the whacked-out big-band number, “Space Aura” wherein John Gilmore is finally given an opportunity to shine on tenor saxophone, engaging in a fiery duo with Jarvis a la Interstellar Space before launching into an astonishingly virtuosic a cappella solo which elicits some enthusiastic cheering from the audience. Ra then re-enters with the theme just as the tape begins to fade out.

Despite the sometimes rough sound quality and some unfortunate edits, this “bootleg” tape is definitely worth seeking out for the opportunity to hear an expanded Arkestra performing at one of New York’s grooviest nightclubs at the height of the psychedelic sixties. Here is the blueprint for the wildly expansive “Cosmo Drama” that would expand and evolve throughout the nineteen-seventies. Fascinating stuff!

October 25, 2009

I’m still conducting research for the next installment of Sun Ra Sunday, so I’ll have to be brief.

The news is that Atavistic’s reissue of the classic Saturn album, Continuation, is scheduled to be released on Tuesday, November 6th. Mark your calendars!

In the meantime, here is a cool two-part documentary courtesy of ESP-Disk:

November 1, 2009

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Newport Jazz Festival, Newport, RI 7-3-69 (AUD CDR)

The Arkestra’s transformation from obscure, local oddballs into the restlessly world-touring juggernaut it eventually became was a long time coming. From the mid-fifties until 1961, Sun Ra was known (if at all) only in around Chicago and a doomed excursion to Montreal left the Arkestra stranded in New York City, impoverished and almost virtually unknown. Yet Sonny persevered with the small group of musicians that remained, rehearsing, recording, and picking up gigs here and there around the city, barely eking out a precarious existence. It really wasn’t until ESP-Disk released Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 1 in 1965 that Ra’s reputation slowly began to spread beyond the confines of New York (and Chicago) and allowed for larger ensembles and the growth of his homegrown Saturn record label, which would proceed to document a lot of previously unheard music. Heliocentric Worlds Vol. 2 appeared in 1966, followed by a brief tour of New York State colleges (which yielded Nothing Is, released in 1969). Significantly, the Arkestra began a long-term Monday night residency at Slug’s Saloon in 1966 and the regular paying work attracted fresh young musicians to Sun Ra’s interplanetary big-band concept. With an enlarged band of more or less dedicated musicians with which to work, Ra began to develop his unique stage show, which he dubbed, “The Cosmo Drama” or “Myth-Ritual.”

Ra believed music could change the people of Earth and that myth was “something greater than truth” (quoted in Szwed, p.256). The truth is something too horrible to contemplate; but through myths about the future told with music, Ra hoped to demonstrate that the impossible could
become possible. Szwed sums up Ra’s musico-philosophy thusly: “The future that people talk about is no good; we need to do the impossible, for everything possible has been tried and failed. Truth (the possible) equals death; myth (the impossible) equals immortality…Music could be used to coordinate minds. It could touch the unknown part of the person, awaken the part of them that we’re not able to talk to, the spirit” (Id.) The Cosmo Drama would often begin with the “thunder drum” alone with the staggered entry of the ensemble, dancing and banging on percussion instruments, leading into a group improvisation before Ra himself would make his dramatic appearance. Various original compositions, conducted improvisations, big-band raves, solos and duos, space chants and oracular proclamations would proceed across sometimes vast expanses of time, ending with an extended, dancing exit, everyone joyfully singing “We Travel the Spaceways.” While the overall structure of the Cosmo Drama would remain relatively fixed, the sequence of events was finely tailored to the venue and audience vibe: according to Danny Thompson, the Arkestra had “as many as fifteen different arrangements of the same piece – such as “El is the Sound of Joy” – and any one might be used. It was adjusted to the time, the city, to what people need to hear” (quoted in Szwed, p.259). The astounding, wide-ranging music, the musician’s outrageous theatricality and fanciful costumes, combined with colorful stage lights, films, and slideshows could make for an over-stimulated, multisensory “happening” that suited the times.

By 1968, the United States found itself suffering from violent convulsions as the civil rights and anti-war movements gathered momentum and self-styled intellectuals, college students, Black Nationalists, hippies, and Yippies alike were all drawn to Ra’s spaced-out mysticism, the Arkestra’s high-spirited musicianship, and the accompanying quasi-psychedelic spectacle, although the mainstream “jazz” community remained mystified and dismissive. Sun Ra made his Carnegie Hall debut in April and The New Yorker dismissed it out of hand: “It wasn’t a good movie, and it wasn’t a good concert, and it wasn’t good Dadaism. It wasn’t even adept put-on” (quoted in Szwed, p.254). Despite such withering condescension, Sonny was finding his audience. In June, the activist/agitator John Sinclair brought the Arkestra to Detroit to open for the radical, proto-punk rock band, MC5, at Wayne State University. The MC5 so revered Sun Ra, they co-credited “Starship” with him on their debut album, Kick Out the Jams (Elektra). In August, the Arkestra was invited to Washington, D.C. to perform in the atrium of the Corcoran Gallery where The Washington Post ambivalently described Sun Ra as “a kind of black John Cage” but not “pitiful and dull” (quoted in Szwed, p.255).

Singer/dancer June Tyson had joined the Arkestra by the fall of 1968 and in December, the Arkestra made its first trip to California, playing concerts at the College of Marin, San Jose State College, the Oakland Auditorium Theatre, and the San Francisco Art Institute. They made a second, more successful, journey to west coast in April, 1969 where they appeared at the University of Santa Clara, two nights at Dorsey High School in Los Angeles, UC Davis, and the suspiciously named Maryjane Coffeehouse in Sacramento. However, on their way back east the Arkestra’s van overturned on Route 80 between Fernely and Lovelock, Nevada. Thankfully no one was injured, but most of the fragile Strange Strings instruments were completely destroyed. Sinclair again hosted the Arkestra for the Detroit Rock and Roll Revival at the Michigan State Fairgrounds in May, where they shared a bill with MC-5, The Stooges, Ted Nugent, The Amboy Dukes, and Chuck Berry.

In a measure of the Arkestra’s new-found prestige, they were invited to appear before four thousand people at the famed Newport Jazz Festival on July 3, 1969. However, the Arkestra’s interplanetary extravaganza must have seemed comically out of place amidst the staid conventionality of Phil Woods and Kenny Burrell, with whom they shared the bill. It also didn’t help that it rained all day at the outdoor festival and the audience’s reaction to Ra’s performance
was lukewarm at best. However, a thirty-six minute audience tape survives and shows the Arkestra in full flight, making no concessions whatsoever to the elitist, patrician atmosphere. To be sure, the sound quality is pretty dreadful, but an approximation of the music can be discerned amidst the murk.

The tape opens in the middle of one of those roiling dark funk jams with piercing shards of dissonant organ and braying horns. Suddenly, the ensemble plays a sweet-sounding sectional right out of the nineteen-forties — until the ending fermatas swell into universe-shattering space chords. This is a very interesting composition (whose title is presently unknown); perhaps it is a precursor to the famous “Discipline” series of compositions Ra would begin in the nineteen-seventies (see Campbell & Trent, p.151). Ra then wrestles the band into a blistering rendition of the fiendishly complicated “Shadow World” which quickly segues into a gospellish space chant, “Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds,” which quotes liberally from “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” A crazed keyboard intro summons up a quick rendition of “Velvet,” with Ra’s distorted organ sound adding a grating, industrial texture to this otherwise swinging, big-band number, which elicits some rather tepid applause at the end. June Tyson then sings “Outer Space (Is a Pleasant Place)” in a pure, soulful tone over a skittering, atonal accompaniment. Soon, however, the instruments take over with some raging sonic chaos which gives way to a mad-scientist organ solo. Ra then introduces the loping groove of “Exotic Forest,” a vehicle for Marshall Allen’s intensely scurrying oboe and Ra’s apocalyptic organ. A quick blast through the fanfare and percussion fest of “Watusi” leads to the cartoony group sing-along, “Enlightenment” and the Tyson-led space chant, “Somebody Else’s Idea,” which cuts off after a minute and forty-eight seconds. This tape is a fascinating glimpse of one of the Arkestra’s first high-profile gigs, but the atrocious sound quality will repel everyone but the most committed fan.

Besides their continued intermittent residency at Slug’s, a few gigs at the Red Garter, and their infamous Carnegie Hall debut, the Arkestra played some of the more luxurious New York venues in 1968 and 1969, including a month-long run at the Garrick Theatre, a stint at the Squat Theater, and even a performance at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Opera House. No matter what the establishment critics and jazz traditionalists thought about Sun Ra, it was becoming apparent that he knew how to put on a show and could draw a paying audience. The Arkestra would be on the road constantly from this time forward and would make their first trip to Europe in 1970, beginning an era of non-stop traveling of the world, bringing the Cosmo Drama and Myth Rituals to the people of the Earth. After a period of scant documentation, the discography begins to overflow with live albums, radio broadcasts, and, yes, audience recordings. Sorting out the seventies is the task ahead here on Sun Ra Sun Day.

November 8, 2009


According to photographer Lee Santa, Sun Ra’s Arkestra played a three-night engagement at The Red Garter (now known as The Bottom Line) in Greenwich Village in early July, 1970. The nightclub’s “obtrusive Gay ‘90s décor” can be seen in Santa’s photograph (above) which appeared on the original cover of The Solar Myth Approach, Vol. 1. Santa recalled that “the first night featured six hours of continuous music; the second and third nights slacked off to a mere five hours, without a break” (see Campbell & Trent, p.161-162). It must have been something to behold.
Fortunately, an intrepid fan surreptitiously recorded a seventy-five minute segment one night utilizing a very primitive recording device and, while the sound quality is typically horrid, the music itself is terrific. How bad does it sound? Well, the volume levels fluctuate wildly while consistently retaining a significant amount of distortion; there’s some serious wow and flutter issues; and the monophonic, single-microphone recording is boomy, muddy, and generally indistinct. It doesn’t sound quite as bad as the 1969 Newport Jazz Festival recording, but it also doesn’t sound nearly as good as the 1968 Electric Circus tape. Let’s face it: your cell phone could make a far better-sounding recording. Nevertheless, the large-ish ensemble sounds particularly well-rehearsed (perhaps in preparation for their upcoming trip to France) and the free-wheeling performance goes to some very interesting places. For the hardcore Ra fanatic, this is well worth hearing as a rare historical document but most people will be understandably repulsed.

Caveats aside, the performance captured on this amateur recording is really quite stunning, beginning with a long unidentified title that alternates between a spacey, mellow groove and full-blast assaults of New Thing-styled energy music. Solos by John Gilmore on tenor sax and Ra on mad-scientist organ keep things interesting, ending with Danny Davis’s woody alto clarinet interweaving with the Arkestra’s antiphonal calls and responses. “Love in Outer Space” follows: a loping bassline holds down the jaunty groove while the entire Arkestra gleefully bangs on myriad percussion instruments, with Ra stating the simple, joyful melody and soloing on electric organ. After a brief pause, Ra segues into a quiet, spooky organ improvisation accompanied by Alan Silva’s distinctive cello. About after five minutes, the horns enter with a curiously old fashioned, rubato ballad composition (title unknown) that eventually settles into a gentle swing. Kwame Hadi takes an adventurous turn on trumpet, with Ra rumbling away on organ. Pat Patrick follows with a typically ferocious bari-sax solo while the rhythm heats up and shifting horn sections provide riffing punctuation. After settling back down, the horns return with the old-timey ballad to end. Interesting.

What follows is one of the strangest bits of musical-theater in all of Ra’s discography. John Gilmore recalled the title as “Ladies and Gentlemules” (Id. p.162) and, while the recording is incomplete, the piece appears to be structured like a sanctified church service, with Ra fervently imploring the “gentlemules” to heed his message. The Arkestra plays some bluesy swing and ecstatically chants, but much of the preaching and carrying on is difficult to hear. However, the loud, unison refrain of “another jackass is going to take your place” is clear enough to get the point across. After about six minutes of holy-rolling chaos, the tape abruptly cuts off. Up next is “Somewhere Else,” a then-recent composition which would appear on the studio recording, My Brother the Wind Vol. II, in 1971. Not much happens beyond several repetitions of the lurching, block-chord melody over a gospel-ish vamp, but the effect is hypnotizing. After a brief organ and synthesizer solo (with some barely audible spoken incantations), Ra launches into the nineteen-twenties-era chestnut, “Sometimes I’m Happy.” The Arkestra sounds a little tentative in the ensembles, but Gilmore’s sure-footed tenor solo demonstrates his unique synthesis of pre-war swing, hard bop grit, and avant-garde extended techniques.

The tape concludes with a spectacular, thirteen-minute rendition of another My Brother the Wind Vol. II composition, “Pleasant Twilight,” According to Campbell and Trent, there are no other known live performances of this piece, which is unsurprising given its subtle complexity. Ra begins with a rhapsodic, rubato introduction on organ before the Arkestra enters with the brightly swinging composition. The tempo then slows down by half and, while the ensemble gently rocks back and forth between two lushly sustained chords, Gilmore peels off a starkly contrasting, barn-burner of a solo on tenor sax. Holy smokes! The Arkestra plays their parts with incredible restraint while Gilmore wails away with a terrifying fury. After a honking, emphatic
conclusion, Gilmore leads the Arkestra through a half-time run through of the head before returning the original tempo for a high-spirited trumpet solo from Akh Tal Ebah. The Arkestra adds complementary horn riffs and, as the intensity builds, the tempo speeds up again for an enervated reprise and a big finish. Whew! The much abbreviated studio recording, while sparkingly polished, ultimately sounds downright staid compared to this expansive and inspired live performance. It's a shame this tune fell out of the repertoire.

Given the atrocious sound quality, I cannot recommend that anyone but the most fanatical seek this recording out. But given the exceptionally high quality of the performance and the sheer rarity of tracks like “Pleasant Twilight,” it is nevertheless worth hearing. As the seventies wore on, live recordings would become more and more plentiful and one might pick and choose without missing too much. But given the paucity of material from this particular time period, this one is worth having for that reason alone.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Wow--I didn't think the sound was that bad! I think I have a high tolerance for bootiness. At any rate, I love this set--I certainly wish more had been recorded. Who knows what will turn up from this era? I'm sure there's more out there. "Pleasant Twilight" is easily the highlight. You think that's Ebah at the end? I would have guessed Kwame Hadi. I'll go back and listen again with that in mind.

Rodger Coleman said...
I only assumed it was Ebah at the end since Hadi solos on the opening piece and this second solo sounds like a different person to me. Keeping up with the trumpet players is difficult!

November 22, 2009

Sun Ra: *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol. 2* (Universe UV081 CD)

While Sun Ra was struggling to find an audience stateside, Willis Conover had enlisted Sonny (amongst others) into Uncle Sam's Cold War cultural army, broadcasting the Arkestra's records regularly on Voice of America and, by 1970, Europe had become a more welcoming environment for American jazz musicians than their native country. Conover and his wife had been instrumental in securing Sonny's Carnegie Hall debut in 1968 and had been urging him to travel to Europe ever since. When they offered to arrange for the Arkestra to appear at the prestigious *Fondation Maeght* in the south of France for three concerts in August 1970, Ra eagerly accepted.

The only problem was: how does Sun Ra, a being from the planet Saturn, go about obtaining a passport? Szwed describes the impossible scene:

> When they filled out the forms at the passport office in New York City, the clerk at the desk said to Sun Ra, “Sir, you’re going to have to give us better information that this. We need your parents’ names, your birth date...” [Dancer] Verta Mae Grosvenor recalled that Sun Ra said, “‘That *is* the correct information.’ After a few minutes, the clerk went back to speak with her supervisor. The supervisor was no-nonsense, but after talking to Sun Ra she said, ‘Sir, why don’t you come back in a few hours.’ When we came back
there was another person there and he knew about it, and he said, ‘We’ll just give you the passport.’ It just got so out that they just gave it to him!”

That passport gained talismanic force over the years, and musicians shook their heads when they saw it. Talvin Singh, an English tabla player, said: “His philosophy was that either you be part of the society or you don’t. And he wasn’t part of it. He created his own. I mean, I actually saw his passport and there was some weird shit on it. It had some different stuff.” (p.278)

Passport in hand, Ra and a nineteen-member Arkestra traveled to St. Paul de Vence and performed three concerts on August 3, 4, and 5, 1970. The Fondation Maeght is one of the finest small museums in the world and, with its focus on blue-chip modernism, Ra’s appearance in such a venue indicated a certain acceptance into the privileged domain of the European avant garde. The concerts were professionally recorded for broadcast by the state-sponsored radio station and portions were later released on LP as Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Volumes 1 and 2 by the French Shandar label in 1971. These records have been widely bootlegged ever since and my CDs on the Italian Universe label are probably “gray market” bootlegs as well, but they sound fine and are sumptuously packaged in heavyweight, gatefold mini-LP sleeves. As of this writing, they remain in print and are well worth seeking out.

Campbell (p.162) insists that Volume 2 comes from the August 3rd concert (Volume 1 is from August 5th) and having no reason to disagree, we will begin with Volume 2. Campbell also lists a number of tracks contained on the original radio broadcast and an audience tape, but I have not heard this material. Again, Szwed provides a vivid description of Sun Ra’s outrageous presentation and the decidedly mixed reaction it generated:

The audience had little or no knowledge of Sun Ra’s music, since his records weren’t widely distributed in France, and when they arrived they saw the Arkestra spread out before them like elaborate décor: musicians in red tunics, seated in a forest of instruments on stage, dancers in red dresses. On a screen behind them was projected a sky full of stars, then planets, children in Harlem, Indians on hunting trips, and newsreel footage of protests; a ball of “magic fire” rose slowly up to the ceiling; saxophonists began to battle like Samurai, then came together like brothers; and in the still center of it all, Sun Ra sat behind the Moog, creating the sounds of gales, storms, and waves crashing. From the very first note, an agitated woman stood up and cried out, “What is this?” Afterwards, she came up and insisted on seeing the written music. Europeans seemed to want to know whether there was music behind what they were hearing, as if it would assure them that this was rational activity, and Sonny was always happy to show them the scores. A man once blurted out that his “five-year-old daughter could play that!” Sun Ra readily agreed: “She could play it, but could she write it?” (p.279)

The album opens with “Friendly Galaxy No.2,” a fascinating piece only tangentially related to the first “Friendly Galaxy,” which originally appeared on Secrets of the Sun in 1965. After a burbling organ introduction, the composition moves to a choir of flutes improvising over Ra’s languid piano, Alan Silva’s whining cello, and with a simple but rhythmically insistent trumpet motif recurring throughout. Meanwhile, the rest of the band establishes an exotic space-groove on bass, drums, tympani, and hand percussion. The effect is otherworldly and quite mesmerizing. In an interview with Jazz magazine in November 1970, Sun Ra described how he tailored this piece to the unique qualities of the venue:
One of the things which most impressed listeners at the Fondation Maeght is the passage for six flutes ad lib, six flutes playing in harmony. I could say improvising in harmony. I’m inspired by it to do something else which would be totally different. I believe it’s a musical idea which would be totally different. I believe it’s a new way of using flutes. It’s at once both very melodic and harmonious and at the same time so distant, as if the music was heard in the distance through a sort of mist. It’s so “out of this world.”

Curious thing, the flutes had never played this passage with the piano, but because of the peculiar acoustics in the room I knew that it would be absolutely necessary that I play at the same time because the flutes would be bothered by an echo that the audience fortunately wouldn’t hear at all. So above this the trumpets entered in, played a sort of ad lib riff because this light echo didn’t allow them to understand the rhythm. (quoted in Szwed pp.279-280)

“Friendly Galaxy No.2” would be performed several times over the next couple of years only to disappear from the repertoire. Too bad as it is truly a unique work, with the massed flutes and brass technique demonstrating Ra’s audacious genius at orchestration. “Spontaneous Simplicity” follows (out of sequence, according to Campbell) and although this version doesn’t devolve into the kind of proto-No Wave skronk heard on the Electric Circus tape from 1968, this a fine performance with the massive ensemble sections sounding particularly powerful and precise. After the opening statement, Sun Ra leads the way with a buzzing Rocksichord solo as the rest of the Arkestra picks up percussion instruments to buoy the hypnotic, one-note bassline. The music grooves along for a delirious eleven minutes, ending to some genuinely enthusiastic applause.

“The World of Lightning” picks up in the middle of some crashing gongs and cymbals, the audience clapping in slow rhythm until Ra takes over with one of his patented mad-scientist organ solos. Afterwards, Marshall Allen engages Alan Silva in a duel between alto saxophone and cello, with other horns joining in the fray at its screaming climax, the entire Arkestra wailing away with utter abandon until Sonny cues a cataclysmic ending that feels like the cosmos collapsing in on itself. The audience reacts with stunned silence which perfectly sets the stage for “Black Myth,” a solemn bit of musical theater featuring June Tyson’s dramatic and evocative vocals. Tyson intones two Sun Ra poems (“The Shadows Took Shape” and “The Strange World”) over spacey noises, fleeting flutes, and ominous percussion. Ra then launches into a typically apocalyptic organ/synthesizer blast that eventually crossfades to some overloud applause. The album ends with a fragmentary piece entitled, “Key,” which starts off with some intertwined oboe (possibly James Jacson) and cello but is soon interrupted with an explosion of cacophonous horns and bashing drums that quickly subsides, only to fade out with some gentle percussion taps. Interesting.

What a great album! It is so nice to hear the Arkestra recorded in such high fidelity and this is an especially riveting live performance. The band is well-rehearsed and everyone is more than happy to be feted by French cultural elites. Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol. 1, which documents the August 5th concert, might be even better. We’ll take a listen next week.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Excellent analysis, Rodger! Judging by the intermittent whoops and hollers, I suspect the long percussion sequence in "Spontaneous Simplicity" was the background for an extended dance
sequence. Funny enough, that very song came on my shuffle this morning on the way to work. Like some extended parts of "Watusi" or "Love in Outer Space," the long percussion section didn't do too much for me. Maybe if I were dancing myself...

November 29, 2009

Sun Ra: *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol. 1* ( Universe UV080 CD)

Recorded at the third and final concert on August 5, 1970, *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Volume 1* was originally released on the French Shandar label in 1971. Often bootlegged, it was also legitimately reissued on 12-inch 45RPM LP by the British label, *Recommended Records*, in 1981. (My copy sounds superb, but it's plain black sleeve omits all relevant discographical information!) This CD issue on the Italian Universe label from 2005 is probably a "grey-market" bootleg as well, but it sounds fine and is packaged in a deluxe mini-gatefold LP sleeve. As of this writing, these Universe editions are in print and readily available.

The album opens with a spirited performance of "Enlightenment," a composition co-written with trumpeter Hobart Dotson which dates all the way back to 1958's *Jazz in Silhouette*. But by 1969, Sun Ra had abandoned Dotson's counter-melodies and added typically Saturnalian lyrics. Here, Ra sets up the bouncy vamp on organ for John Gilmore and June Tyson, who chant in a call and response fashion, imploring humanity to join the Arkestra on its cosmic space voyage:

*The Sound of Joy is Enlightenment*
*Space, Fire, Truth is Enlightenment*
*Space Fire*
*Somedtimes it's Music*
*Strange Mathematics*
*Rhythmic Equations*
*The Sound of Thought is Enlightenment*
*The Magic Light of Tomorrow*
*Backwards are those of Sadness*
*Forward and Onward Are those of Gladness*
*Enlightenment Is my Tomorrow*
*It has no planes of Sorrow*
*Hereby, my Invitation*
*I do invite you be of my Space World*
*This Song is Sound of Enlightenment*
*The Fiery Truth of Enlightenment*
*Vibrations come from the Space World*
*Is of the Cosmic Starry Dimension*
*Enlightenment is my Tomorrow*
*It has no planes of Sorrow*
*Hereby, our Invitation*
*We do invite you to be of our Space World.*

This infectious little ditty elicits some enthusiastic applause and, not surprisingly, "Enlightenment" would become a fixture of the live repertoire in coming years. Then, after a quick piano introduction, Gilmore and Tyson sing "The Star Gazers" in a lovely unison melody:

*This is the Theme of the Star Gazers*
Star Gazers in the Sky
This is the Theme of the Star Gazers
Star Gazers in the Sky
This is the Song of Tomorrow’s World
Of Cosmic Paradise.

After that plaintive vocal statement, Sonny launches into a gorgeous ad lib piano solo while small percussion instruments tinkle and clatter and Alan Silva provides some complementary figures on bass. Gradually, Ra builds up the intensity with cascading waves of chords and then bringing it back down to a gentle, quiet ending — until a crashing chord signals the beginning of the notorious “Shadow World.” Right off, it is obvious that the band is a well-oiled machine: the insanely complex, hocketed melodies are performed flawlessly, setting the stage for Gilmore’s utterly hair-raising solo on tenor saxophone, complete with a squealing and wailing a cappella cadenza. Ra then takes over with a skittering, swirling organ solo until cueing the horns for a huge, pulsating space chord. The braying and howling horns eventually subside, leaving Ra to sketch out the dramatic chord sequence on organ to end. This is a truly stunning performance of one of Ra’s most significant compositions and must be heard to be believed!

The album closes with an epic, twenty-minute-long MiniMoog/organ solo entitled, “The Cosmic Explorer” wherein Ra conjures up all kinds of incredible sounds from his electronic instruments: from spacy noodling to woozy portamentos, and blasts of white noise to apocalyptic torrents of dissonant tone-clusters. Meanwhile, cymbals, gongs and percussion rumble ominously in the background while a few horns add spare punctuation. After about seventeen minutes, the full Arkestra enters with a few minutes of high-energy, New-Thing-styled free-jazz which comes to a satisfyingly resolute climax before quickly fading out. I only wish we could hear the music that followed…

Like its companion volume, Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Volume 1 is an essential item in the discography, notable for its exceptionally good sound quality and superlative performances. Certainly, those in attendance were suitably impressed: the Arkestra had barely arrived back in Philadelphia when a group of European promoters offered to bring them back for a full-fledged tour only two months later, in October of 1970. I will be examining the surviving recordings from this momentous tour over the next few weeks here on Sun Ra Sunday.

December 6, 2009

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: Black Myth/Out in Space (Motor Music 2CD)

After the success of the Fondation Maeght performances in August, a hastily conceived “tour” of Europe was put together by Victor Schoenfield and Joachim Berendt (among others) with support from radio station Südwestrundfunk (SWF) and record labels Black Lion in the UK and SABA/MPS in Germany. The “tour,” which began in early October 1970, was something less than a total success. But at the time, Ra was excited to return to the Old World -- there was even talk of going to Africa. The Arkestra was enlarged to twenty musicians and Ra rehearsed them extensively right up their departure time. To add to the spectacle, two more dancers and a fire-eater were added to the entourage soon after their arrival in Paris. Sonny packed up his entire arsenal of electronic keyboards and all manner of lighting equipment, slide and film projectors, and trunks of glittering costumes and stage props for the trip; Sun Ra and his Arkestra were embarking on the next great phase of the Cosmo Drama.
The Arkestra appeared without incident at the Théâtre des Amandiers in Nanterre on October 9th and in Lyons on the 12th, but their Paris debut turned into a near riot. Just days prior to their scheduled appearance at Les Halles, a nightclub fire had killed a number of people and at the last possible minute, the police mandated that only half of the 4,000 ticket-holders for Sun Ra’s performance would be allowed into the venue. As tempers began to flare, riot squads were positioned between the crowd and the theatre entrance. The mob began chanting “Libérez Sun Ra” and demanding that Sun Ra join his embattled comrades outside the theater. Szwed eloquently describes the precarious situation:

Sun Ra considered the situation, then grabbed the sign of the Sun, held it above his head, and started toward the exit, the Arkestra and the audience following the leader.

Out of the theater they came, shedding heat as they walked, banners streaming, Sun Ra, the Solar Arkestra, and the chosen few, marching straight through the police phalanx and down the street. And the crowds followed as they all circled around the block. When the procession returned to the front of the theater the police officials gave Sun Ra a salute as he passed their shattered ranks and marched into the theater, this time with the Les Halles 4,000 (now plus fellow travelers and cops), and the Arkestra mounted the stage once again (p.282).

The concert itself was apparently plagued with technical difficulties and a jittery and oppressive police presence, although the audience clearly appreciated Ra’s charm and charisma and the theatrical, multimedia extravaganza of the Arkestra’s performance.

On the 17th, the Arkestra performed at the prestigious Donaueschingen Musik Festival, the home front of the stars of post-war European avant-garde composers including Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, and others. This year, Joachim Berendt managed to integrate modern jazz into the festival’s programming and Sun Ra’s three hour set did not disappoint. Recorded for broadcast by SWF, some of this material originally appeared on the MPS release entitled, *It’s After the End of the World* in 1971 and the entire forty-eight minute broadcast was issued on CD by Motor Music in 1998. (The Motor City issue also contains a second disc recorded in Berlin later on in the tour, which we will consider separately.)

According to Berendt (via Hartmut Geerken’s liner notes), Sun Ra composed “Black Forest Myth” especially for this concert, its title referring to the legendary forest which surrounds the small town of Donaueschingen. The piece was performed only on this one occasion and it is a tension-filled four minutes for piccolo, electronic keyboards, and scraping, clanging percussion which sounds just as abstract and forbidding as the “contemporary classical” music for which the Donaueschinger Musiktage was made (in)famous. Another rendition of “Friendly Galaxy No.2” immediately follows, but this version differs markedly from the massed flute choir and trumpets orchestration found on *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght Vol. 2*. Here, the rhythms are heavier and Ra plays much more aggressively on both piano and electric organ. In addition, Eloe Omoe (or possibly Danny Thompson) plays a riveting solo on the Neptunian libflecto (a bassoon with a trumpet mouthpiece) and the entire Arkestra enters toward the end with some spirited group improv before Ra closes the piece with some spacey synthesizer tones.

What follows is some of the most bracingly challenging music in Sun Ra’s enormous discography. “Journey Through the Outer Darkness” pits various duos and trios against Ra’s cataclysmic organ and battalions of drums and percussion in an unrelenting barrage of music until an astonishing solo bass clarinet (Pat Patrick? – or is the Neptunian libflecto again?) finds
a way to end the piece to stunned applause. The “Strange Worlds – Black Myth – It’s After the End of the World” sequence features the heavenly-voiced June Tyson declaiming Ra’s poetry alongside constantly shifting instrumental combinations. These evolving concertinos create wildly differentiated textures and colors, from the keening wail of oboes, saxophones and libflecto to the staccato brassiness of trumpets to the microtonal whine of Alan Silva’s viola. After about eleven minutes, Sun Ra introduces a clangorous space chord on the piano which is picked up by the Arkestra. In its aftermath, Tyson and Gilmore exclaim: “It’s after the end of the world! Don’t you know that yet?!” The Arkestra then launches into some more ecstatic free-jazz skronk just as the track fades. What a shame! “We’ll Wait for You” concludes the recording with a quick space chant followed by a long series of thoughtful solos over a deliberately murky and mumbling rhythm section, deftly conducted by Ra from behind his bank of keyboards. Ra summons up the whole panoply of electronic sounds from chiming bells to swooning synthesizer to chattering organ while each soloist explores both ensemble and a cappella territories, concluding with a brief but devastating Gilmore outing that brings down the house.

Szwed states that “[t]he audience received them well, but the German critics dismissed them” (p.283) while Geerken’s liner notes to this Motor Music CD allude to a review in Der Spiegel “that was abound with ignorance and rubbish.” Clearly Sun Ra was not immediately accepted into the rarified realm of the European cultural elite despite his appearance at Donaueschingen. Nevertheless, the Arkestra’s performance was a landmark event. Critics still debate the genuineness of Sun Ra’s music, but the proof is in the listening. Listening to the Donaueschingen performance reveals a large band at the height of its powers, playing Sun Ra’s most cutting edge musical conceptions with razor-sharp precision and prodigious invention while Ra himself displays his unequaled mastery of electronic keyboards. I know I say it all the time, but this is another essential Sun Ra disc that belongs in every fan’s collection.

December 13, 2009

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: Paradiso, Amsterdam 10-18-70 (FM 2CDR)

After the (semi) triumphant appearance at the Donaueschingen Musik Festival, the Arkestra traveled to Amsterdam to perform at the famed Paradiso on the following evening, October 18, 1970. The “Cosmic Relaxation Center Paradiso” was opened in a decommissioned church on March 30, 1968 as a publicly-sponsored cultural institution which, amazingly enough, continues to function in that capacity to this very day. The significance of this formerly-sacred now publicly-funded venue was no doubt meaningful to an exhausted Arkestra who managed to deliver a ragged yet truly inspired performance. Campbell lists a thirty-five minute audience recording (p.166), but ninety minutes of the original VPRO radio broadcast has recently surfaced in fairly decent sound quality and it is definitely worth seeking out.

The recording begins with the radio announcer introducing the musicians (in Dutch, of course) and a spirited rendition of the strutting “Watusi,” including a long percussion segment featuring the booming “thunder drum.” No doubt all of this accompanied dancers and parading musicians, film clips and slide projections -- perhaps even some fire-eating as well. While not much seems to be happening musically, the audience is clearly enjoying the visual spectacle. Up next is perhaps the first (or rather a prototype) of what would later be called the “Discipline” series of compositions. Both Szwed (p.285) and Campbell (p.170) state that Sun Ra did not begin work on the “Discipline” series (which numbered over one-hundred compositions) until the Arkestra’s brief move to California in early 1971; but this (and another two works performed at Paradiso) is conceptually similar enough to indicate that the idea was germinating at least as early as the fall
of 1970. Szwed describes the “Discipline” series as “tightly conceived exercises using minimal material […] built on hocketed horn lines, with each horn playing within a two- to three-note range, a cyclical melody developing out of the fragments, each person playing his parts scrupulously with no deviation whatsoever” (p.285). Sun Ra told journalist Robert Palmer in 1974 that “the slightest variation would destroy the whole thing” (Id.), emphasizing that these pieces are completely through-composed, the epitome of the kind of freedom-through-discipline Sonny constantly espoused to his musicians and to anyone else who would listen. This particular example is slow and stately, building monumental edifices of strange and beautiful harmonies, reaching toward the heavens and ending with a tension-filled chord, straining at the limits of the instrumentalists’ ranges.

After that arresting prelude, Ra introduces the bouncing bassline of “Enlightenment” on an ultra-distorted keyboard and the whole group chants the lyrics with June Tyson providing her echoing response. Suddenly, there’s a short outburst of free-jazz skronk before Ra and Tyson urgently announce to the audience that “It’s After the End of the World!” This version is taken at a faster clip than at Donaueschingen, with the voices dropping down to a stagey whisper, the tempo maniacally accelerating until a final, dramatically slowed down exhortation of “don’t you know that yet?!” This signals another blast of high-energy group improv which quickly segues into the lilting “We Travel the Spaceways,” complete with clanging bells and gongs and some nice Xenakis-like portamento bowing from Alan Silva while the Arkestra moves about the audience, chanting the theme.

A wave of applause swells over the continued chanting while another Afro-percussion groove sets up a squealing, multiphonic tenor solo from John Gilmore – by now, the audience is way into it, whooping and hollering with pure delight! Trumpet and Neptunian libflecto spar over crazy polyrhythmic percussion and free drum set pummeling, until Ra enters with a dissonant organ chord, grinding over and over until moving direction into some two-handed polyphony. A wheezy synthesizer signals the band to drop out, leaving Ra to improvise a wandering, descending keyboard solo, full of white noise generators and melodramatic organ chords. Just as things start to get crazy, percussion enters along with some swooping trumpet. More horns enter the fray only to be interrupted by the radio DJ who once again introduces the band personnel. Obviously, things continued in this vein for some time; oh well! Applause fades up and Sun Ra has moved to the acoustic piano for a series of duets with Silva’s cello, (possibly) Eloé Omoe on Neptunian libflecto and (probably) Akh Tal Ebah on trumpet. Sonny is at his most aggressively avant-garde at times, bringing to mind the ferocity of Cecil Taylor’s piano attack, but with his own “old-timey” rhythmic sensibility and romantically rhapsodic lyricism. After about six minutes, this directed improvisation coalesces into what appears to be another “Discipline” series composition, with Ra leading the way with a series of harmonically ambiguous piano chords. The ensemble sounds a bit tentative, but the haunting beauty of the composition is affecting nonetheless.

The impossibly difficult “Shadow World” gets a rather perfunctory reading here (compared to the hair-raisingly intense performance the night before), but opens up for a series of exciting a cappella saxophone solos from Gilmore, Danny Davis and Marshall Allen and some edgy, “Strange-Strings”-styled bowings from Silva. Ra interjects a crashing organ chord to introduce the infectiously swinging, “Walking On the Moon,” one of those “space-age barbeque” numbers first heard on My Brother the Wind, Vol. II. Unfortunately, this song was only performed a handful of times in 1970 and 1971, presumably because the Apollo moon landings were still fresh in the cultural memory, and thereafter permanently dropped from the repertoire. Too bad, as it was clearly a fun tune live, full of joyous riffing by the Arkestra and, of course, June Tyson’s soulful vocals. Ra brings it to an end with a rubato solo on the buzzing Rocksichord, concluding
with a weirdly unresolved chord. The DJ then interjects a quick announcement over a smattering of applause.

After a tinkly Rocksichord introduction, another “Discipline”-type composition follows, a sequence of richly orchestrated, contrapuntally derived chords, sometimes sweet, sometimes sour, ending ambiguously with a dense block of widely-spaced pitches. A spacey, conducted improvisation arises within the harmonic space established by the composition, featuring a massed oboe choir, of all things. You don’t hear much jazz oboe, but its pinched, exotic-sounding wail is an integral element of Sun Ra’s Arkestra and this is great example of its surprising versatility. Later, Ra takes over with one of his lengthy, “mad scientist” organ/synthesizer solos which is overlaid here and there with full-blown ensemble freak outs. Out of the murk, the Arkestra chants, “The Second Stop is Jupiter!” in crazy antiphony, leading to further free-jazz skronk that is eventually reined in by Ra’s sing-songy organ, prompting Gilmore and Tyson to sing the “Theme of the Star Gazers.” After a quick recitation of the song, another quiet, spacey improvisation follows with some more lovely arco playing from Silva. Sadly, the tape abruptly runs out.

This recording is clearly several generations from the master, so it’s possible a better-sounding (and more complete) tape will surface in the future. It’s also possible the original pre-FM reels still exist at VPRO and would make for a welcome official release some day. In the meantime, this will have to suffice.

+++ The Arkestra returned to Paris but promised gigs in France never materialized due to the failure of French drummer Claude Delcloo to line them up. Adding insult to injury, a planned recording session for BYG/Actuel also fell through, leaving the Arkestra stranded without work (paying or not) for almost three weeks. The situation was so dire that Gilmore wound up playing his last session date as a sideman outside the Arkestra, recording with Dizzy Reece, Siegfried Kessler, Patrice Caratini and Art Taylor on Futura LP 23 (Campbell p.166). The Arkestra barely managed to hang on until their next scheduled performance at the Berlin Jazz Festival on November 7th (see Szwed p.283). We’ll take a listen to that concert next week.

December 20, 2009

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra: Black Myth/Out in Space (Motor Music 2CD)

After a three-week layover in Paris, the Arkestra was well-rested (if hungry) when they appeared at the Berlin Jazz Festival at the Kongresshalle on November 7, 1970. Like the Donaueschigen concert on October 17th, it was recorded for broadcast by Südwestrundfunk (SWF) and some of the music appeared on It’s After the End of the World (MPS 2120746) in 1971. (See Campbell & Trent, p.168 for the gory details of how that album is cobbled together from the two concerts.) The extant eighty-minute broadcast reels were issued for the first time on this Motor Music CD and it is another fantastic performance from this first European tour preserved in truly extraordinary sound quality. However, Szwed describes this concert as a tense confrontation with a dour and skeptical crowd:

The audience on November 7 at Berlin Jazz Days at the Kongresshalle in West Berlin was not ready for what they saw. The Arkestra opened for the premier European-based free jazz big
band Globe Unity Orchestra, led by Alexander von Schlippenbach, a German pianist. Globe Unity had established itself as a grimly serious representative of the new jazz, but one which also owed less to American musical tradition than European groups of the past. The audience was not sure that what they were witnessing with the Arkestra wasn’t a parody. The sermonizing and call-and-response declamations on outer space were unsettling to begin with, but the final blow came when Sun Ra peered through a telescope aimed at the roof of the hall, and claimed he could see his native Saturn. When some of the crowd began to boo, Sonny stunned them into silence when he told them that the noise they were making was the sound of the “subhumans” (the English equivalent of the word used by the Nazis to describe the Jews): “I don’t see any subhumans in the hall, but I hear them.” Then he turned back to the band “with fire in his eyes and signaled for a kick-ass space chord,” said [James] Jacon. “And he hit the same chord on the organ. Blam!” Then he called out to Pat Patrick, and baritone screams echoed through the theater, growing wilder with each chorus, producing the essence of what New York musicians were calling “energy music,” until the audience was subdued, if not entirely overcome (p.283).

That particular altercation is not documented on this recording (as far as I can tell), but there is certainly a lot of the usual “sermonizing and call-and-response declamations,” “kick-ass space chords” and New York-style “energy music” on display, but presented with deep roots in pre-and-post-war American swing and his sense of high-camp sci-fi infused theatricality. This stuff is far from the “grimly serious” and Eurocentric approach of Globe Unity and their ilk. I like their music OK, but let’s face it, Sun Ra’s is a lot more fun! In time, the Europeans of all stripes would catch on in a big way and the Arkestra would tour The Continent regularly for the remainder of Sonny’s life, even if many critics continue to dismiss him as a charlatan, a fake.

The CD opens with Alan Silva playing some brooding bass over tinkling percussion. June Tyson sweetly sings, “Out in space is such a pleasant place… a place where you can be free, truly free, with me.” After a while, Sun Ra signals a swelling space-chord and we’re off on an almost forty-minute conducted improvisation, centered around a long, dramatic synthesizer solo, punctuated with frenzied group improv, and ending with a series of unaccompanied solos by Silva (on cello), Eloe Omoe on Neptunian libflecto and finally John Gilmore on rip-roaring tenor sax. After this tumultuous journey into outer space, Ra moves to the piano to introduce another performance of one of the “Discipline” series compositions first heard on the Paradiso tape from October 18. The improved sonics of the Berlin recoding allows one to really hear the detailed orchestration of this beautiful, through-composed work. Utilizing a somber, quasi-ballad form, the piece moves through a series of richly voiced harmonies, sometimes sweet in an almost Guy Lombardo (or rather Duke Ellington) fashion, other times sour and dissonant, with a tonally vague conclusion. Very interesting. Ra moves to the twangy clavinet to introduce “Walking on the Moon,” which features a honking baritone solo by Pat Patrick and some additional (perhaps improvised?) lyrics by Tyson (“If you fall down, get up and walk some more; You’re like a little a baby who never walked before; So take your first step into outer space…” etc.) The super hi-fi sonics make this rare live performance of this short-lived tune a real treat.

Sun Ra takes to the microphone to briefly talk about “Outer Space Where I Came From” before launching into the Afro-urban strut of “Watusa” which ends with some grafted on applause. Ra and Tyson then recite “Myth Versus Realty,” which poses the central questions: (1) if you are not reality, whose myth are you? and/or (2) if you are not a myth, whose reality are you? Sonny then elaborates his concerns amidst cued free-jazz freakouts:

_I don’t expect to be a citizen of this planet._
It takes too long.
So I hereby proclaim you citizens of my greater universe!
In my greater universe there is no equality.
It's according to what you are.
That is why we don't have walls in our universe.
Because everyone is allowed to be themselves,
But on this planet you don't have time to be yourself.
Hence, what you are & what you do!

Ra informs the audience: “this is Danny Thompson to tell you how Jupiter looks” and “this is Danny Davis, who’s going to tell you about my home planet, Saturn,” each soloist unleashing a torrent of notes while the whole thing climaxes with a bashing group blowing blowout complete with Silva’s wiry “Strange Strings” scraping and the furiously pounding Thunder Drum. Whew! Ra states the “Theme of the Stargazers” on the clavinet and Gilmore and Tyson sing the verse once before Ra signals the group space chant “The Second Stop is Jupiter” which quickly moves to some jaunty swing with “Why Go to the Moon?” which suggests a number of alternative destinations, including but not limited to the various planets -- or alternatively, why not “just be your natural self?” This was certainly a pertinent question in 1970, as it is today. A quick edit moves us to the concluding “We Travel the Spaceways,” sung by the Arkestra and Tyson as they parade out through the audience to warm but less than totally enthusiastic applause.

The next day, the Arkestra would travel to the British Isles for concerts in London and Liverpool before returning to the United States.

December 27, 2009

I’m taking the holidays off and so should you! I’ll continue with Sun Ra Sunday in 2010. (Thanks to Lizzy for making my idea of Sun Ra in a Santa hat a reality!)

January 3, 2009

We’ll continue where we left off next week, but in the meantime, here are two televised excerpts from the Arkestra’s performance at the Chicago Jazz Festival on September 2, 1981:

January 10, 2009

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Research Arkestra:
Queen Elizabeth Hall, London 11-9-70 (AUD 2CDR)

Following their appearance at the Berlin Jazz Festival, the Arkestra traveled to London, arriving just in time for their scheduled performance on November 9, 1970. Unfortunately, the logistics of this concert were vexed from the beginning. Originally to be held at the glamorous Rainbow Theatre, the show was moved at the last minute to the much smaller Queen Elizabeth Hall, which again resulted in an angry mob of people outside the theater, unable to enter. Thankfully, a full scale riot did not erupt as in Paris. And although Black Lion intended to record the concert for release, the sound technicians arrived three hours late, resulting in unacceptably bad sound quality (even for Black Lion!). (See Szwed p.283-284 and Campbell & Trent p.169.)
Nevertheless, the performance itself was apparently a resounding success. David Toop wrote about this landmark concert in his thought-provoking book, *Oceans of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpents Tail, 1995):

“[Sun Ra’s] first UK performance…was one of the most spectacular concerts ever held in this country. Not spectacular so much in terms of effects, which were low on budget but high on strange atmosphere, spectacular in terms of presenting a complete world view, so occult, so other, to all of us in the audience that the only possible responses were outright dismissal or complete intuitive empathy with a man who had chosen to discard all the possibilities of a normal life, even a normal jazz life, in favour of an unremitting alien identity. Fire-eaters, a golden-robed dancer carrying a sun symbol, tornadoes of percussion, eerie cello glissandi, ferocious blasts and tendrils of electronic sound from Sun Ra on Farfisa organ and Moog synthesizer, futuristic lyrics of the advertising age sung by June Tyson – “If you find earth boring, just the same old thing, come on sign up for Outer Spaceways Incorporated” – saxophone riffs repeated over and over by Pat Patrick and Danny Thompson as they moved down the seating aisles towards the stage while John Gilmore shredded and blistered a ribbon of multiphonics from his tenor, film images of Africa and outer space… As depictions of archaic futures, shamanistic theatre, imaged of divined worlds, these devices of cumulative sensory overload were regarded at the time as distractions from the music. But those who concentrated solely on the music ignored Ra’s role as political messenger. (pp.23-24; quoted in Szwed p.284.)

What exactly Sun Ra’s political message might be is a topic I’d rather not delve into at the moment except to say that Toop touches upon a profound truth regarding Ra’s “unremitting alien identity,” which was already fully evolved by 1970. The large scale Cosmo Drama he witnessed was perhaps the very peak of the Arkestra’s gonzo, multi-media theatricality and cutting edge, out-jazz intensity. Too bad Black Lion blew it on the recording.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your tolerance for poor sound quality), a 118-minute audience recording of this concert circulates amongst Sun Ra fanatics. And believe me, this one is only for the irredeemably fanatical. During quiet passages, it is barely listenable; but when the music gets loud, it is nothing but a distorted roar of undifferentiated white noise. Maybe it’s not quite that bad, and after a while, you do get used to it, yeah, yeah, yeah – but, sheesh! That said, our intrepid recordist did manage to preserve a nearly complete performance from this first European tour and a little perseverance offers intermittent rewards. A blow-by-blow description would be even more tedious than usual, but I want to point out a few highlights. First of all, Ra seems to have been provided with a decent concert grand piano, upon which he spends more than his usual, obligatory amount of time and he sounds truly inspired by the instrument throughout. The first set features one of the final performances of “Walking on the Moon,” sporting a slightly different arrangement with more high-octane big-band riffing and fewer overt solos, further omitting Ra’s usual wandering keyboard at the end and instead segueing immediately into the swinging space chant, “Outer Spaceways Incorporated.” “The Shadow World” is its usual, mysterious, shape-shifting self which breaks down into a lovely piano duet with Silva’s arco bass, interrupted here and there by Kwame Hadi’s daredevil high-wire trumpet act. This maneuver prods Ra and Silva to even more delirious flights of fancy before the full Arkestra lurches into another one of those dirgey, old-fashioned-sounding compositions that brings to mind the “Discipline” series to come. The first known performance of “Life is Splendid” opens with the massed flute choir effect similar to “Friendly Galaxy No.2,” before the incantatory vocals by Tyson and Ra. Tyson then chants with the Arkestra about “somewhere in outer
“we’ll wait for you… in tomorrow’s world” until an eruption of free jazz skronk and a spacey synth drone brings things to a dramatic close.

The forty-six minute fragment of the second set is even more interesting, cutting in on what at first sounds like a conducted improvisation featuring Ra on piano and Silva on bowed cello. But upon closer listening, it sounds to me like Ra is outlining a pre-conceived harmonic structure that comes to a definite conclusion. After a brief pause, Ra launches into a piano solo that also sounds through-composed. Is this a suite? Or does the bewildered audience just not have the opportunity to react? Ra’s playing becomes more rhythmically agitated, each hand playing in different keys, punctuated by the Arkestra’s braying space-chords whose inner voices suggest the harmonic movements of the piano. After a cued stop, dueling alto saxophones take over amidst intermittent Arkestra blasting and churning percussion. The poor quality of the recording makes it difficult to hear what exactly is going on here, but it is certainly intense! A crashing gong introduces a chiming electric keyboard solo to end. Next up is a medley of compositions that date back to the early years in Chicago: “Planet Earth” has by now gained lyrics for an ensemble of vocalists and “El is the Sound of Joy” gets an expansive arrangement featuring a swirling, roller-rink organ solo by Ra. Despite the poor sound quality, you can still hear that the Arkestra is tight and well-rehearsed on both of these swinging big-band numbers. The first known performance of “Pleiades” begins with a brief statement of the theme on the reedy Rocksichord before a lengthy electric keyboard solo full of whooshing synthesizer and terrifying, pile-driving organ cluster-bombs that anticipate the industrial noise-making of Einstürzende Neubauten. Clearly, Sonny was very much ahead of his time. All of this builds up to a frenetic group improvisation featuring Silva’s viola, Pat Patrick bass clarinet, Eloe Omoe on Neptunian libflecto, and (perhaps) Akh Tal Ebah on long-breathed trumpet. Finally, after almost twenty minutes, things quiet down and a flute choir plays the lilttily beautiful composition in its entirety, accompanied by some weirdo chords from Ra’s piano. The tape cuts off just as Ra begins to solo, which is too bad since I was just starting to get used to the bad sound quality!

On November 11, the Arkestra performed at the Liverpool University Students’ Union to a wildly enthusiastic, rock-star-like reception:

Toward the end of this concert, a greater part of the audience simply abandoned the seating and danced in front of the stage, chanting “Ra, Ra, Ra.” This mass movement was catalyzed by one guy in a business suit, who leapt to his feet waving an umbrella, totally involved in the music. On this night, fire-eaters performed on stage during the concert, and the light show featured projected photos, ciné film of Sun Ra in the Sun Studio, starry backdrops, and rock-style lighting effects – a truly multimedia performance. The music ranged from percussion ensembles in which the whole Arkestra seemed to participate, to unaccompanied solos by John Gilmore and Sun Ra, Alan Silva cello features, space chants, and Dukish themes. There was plenty of all-in ensemble playing, too. During the second set many of the horn players, who had gone offstage, made a coordinated reappearance at various doorways at the back of the auditorium and drifted forward through the audience to rejoin the Arkestra, playing as they went. An old Melody Maker advertisement indicates that Tyrannosaurus Rex appeared there the week before, and in subsequent weeks the hall featured Fleetwood Mac, Charles Mingus, Frank Zappa, and Colosseum (Campbell & Trent p.171).

The Arkestra returned to London for the final concert of the tour at Seymour Hall, on a bill with Chris McGregor’s Quintet from South Africa and Osibisa, a rock group from Ghana. In the end,
promoter Victor Schonfield lost money on the Arkestra’s first European tour, but as Szwed points out, “Sun Ra was now a world musician” (p.285).

January 17, 2009

Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra:
J.P. Widney Jr. High School, Los Angeles, CA 6-12-71 (AUD 2CDR)

After their (semi)triumphant tour of Europe, the Arkestra’s return to the United States must have been something of a letdown, with paying work still somewhat hard to find and the musicians once again scattered between Philadelphia, New York and Chicago. Szwed mentions a gig at the beginning of 1971 at the Village Vanguard as well as a concert at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s prestigious “Composers in Performance” series in February (p.285). According to Campbell and Trent, the Arkestra also played Sunday and Monday nights at The East Village Inn in March (and perhaps at other times later in the year) (p.170). But the West Coast beckoned once again and in April, the Arkestra headed out for an extended stay in California appearing at the first UC Jazz Festival at the Greek Theatre in Berkeley on April 23 and a two-night stand at San Francisco’s Harding Theater on April 30 and May 1 (ld.). Tommy Hunter had once again rejoined the group and remembers Sun Ra writing the "Discipline" series of compositions during this time, rehearsing a new one with the band every day (ld. and see also Szwed, p.285).

After a stint in Berkeley, the Arkestra accepted Bobby Seale’s invitation to move into a house in Oakland owned by the controversial Black Panthers. Sonny had generally positive feelings about the Black Panthers’ goals but was skeptical of their incendiary politics; not surprisingly, this move brought the Arkestra some unwanted attention from the authorities:

Sonny was impressed by the practical side of the Panthers -- their ideas for schools, a breakfast program for children, providing groceries for the needy, building a community -- and though he did not share their theoretical underpinnings and their violent implications, he thought they had the best program he had heard of for black people. The Arkestra was now at least remotely connected to the group that J. Edgar Hoover declared the biggest threat to American internal security. So as benign as the Arkestra’s activities were -- they played a local mental hospital, performed at the wedding at the Rosicrucian Museum in San Jose, worked at clubs like the Native Son, and gave free concerts in the parks -- they found themselves under surveillance by both the FBI and the Oakland police (Szwed, p.286).

On June 11, the Arkestra travelled down to Los Angeles where Danny Thompson’s cousin, Alden Kimborough, had arranged a concert at the J.P. Widney Junior High School. A school for handicapped children, it was inauspiciously named after Joseph Pomeroy Widney (1841-1948), one of the first presidents of the University of California -- and a virulent racist. In 1907, Widney published a two-volume manifesto entitled, Race Life of the Aryan People (Funk & Wagnall), which predicted that Los Angeles would someday become the center of white supremacy (ld.). Widney’s malevolent spirit seems to loom over the proceedings: For while the concert was well-received by the audience, “things turned ugly when the custodial staff -- not knowing Sun Ra’s practice of playing without regard for time -- interrupted the concert by turning off the lights. Sun Ra was furious and lectured the guard and the audience on injustice, race, leadership, and civil order, and ended by putting a curse on the City of Angels” (p.285).
The whole thing (including Sun Ra’s curse) was recorded on a reel-to-reel machine “that was set up right in the middle of the band” (Campbell & Trent, p.171), presumably by Dr. Reggie Scott, who provides some six minutes of embittered commentary at the end of the eighty-two minute tape. The sound quality is, unfortunately, predictably awful, with loud passages overloaded to the point of pure distortion (not to mention the serious wow-and-flutter issues throughout); but the microphone’s position on the stage otherwise provides some immediacy to the music, making less-loud portions (almost) listenable. What is notable about this recording, besides the return of Hunter on drums, is that it marks the first appearance of bassist Ronnie Boykins since his defection for greener pastures in 1968. Somehow, Boykins was cajoled into joining the Arkestra on its California sojourn, perhaps after being informed of the band’s enthusiastic reception in Europe. His distinctive and effortlessly virtuosic bass playing had been integral to the development of Sun Ra’s music during its formative years and his return to the band was certainly most welcome. Boykins would continue to play off and on with the Arkestra through 1974 but Sonny was never able to find anyone else who could really fill his shoes except for perhaps Alan Silva, who had just recently left the band for good. Sadly, although Boykins’s presence can be felt driving the rhythm section, his contributions to this concert are mostly inaudible.

The performance begins with an unidentified title featuring Sun Ra’s portentous electronic keyboards which summon forth a series of hectoring space chants. After a leisurely romp through “Enlightenment,” the ensemble gradually comes together to build up a dense polyrhythmic groove on the lilting “Love in Outer Space,” with Ra taking the lead on organ. As usual, “Watusi” explodes into an extended percussion jam and “Second Stop is Jupiter” serves as a platform for some bluesy, gut-bucket group improvisation, anchored by Boykins’s rock-solid arco riffing. Suitably warmed up, the band launches into the infinitely challenging “Shadow World” at a cartoonishly fast tempo. Unfortunately, the recording is so distorted, it’s impossible to tell what’s going on musically aside from Ra’s furious organ playing and some braying horns. Intermittently, the ensemble drops out, leaving a saxophone or trumpet to solo a cappella. After about fifteen minutes, Ra enters with a dramatic organ chord to introduce the first known performance of “Discipline 15,” a through-composed dirge, similar to the “prototypes” they were playing in Europe. Basically a sequence of sweet but wayward vertical harmonies orchestrated at the extremes of instrumental registers, it is all unresolved tension. This is immediately followed by a snaky improvisation by Marshall Allen on oboe, but he is soon overwhelmed by roaring bass and pounding percussion. June Tyson sings “They’ll Come Back” with a sure-footed sense of pitch and timing over randomly tinkling bells, crashing gongs, clattering percussion, and what sounds like breaking glass (!); but when the full ensemble enters with the theme, the sound quality degenerates into horrific noise. Frankly, it sounds like a cable is loose, creating an electrical short-circuit. Egads! The sound clears up somewhat for the last known performance of “Walkin’ on the Moon,” but the tape quickly fades out after the first couple of minutes.

Apparently, the custodians shut off the lights a short time after, as the tape next picks up in the middle of “The Curse.” And, wow, Sun Ra is pissed off! For more than five minutes, Sonny rains down sheets of radioactive organ and angrily rants about darkness and light, race and righteousness:

The darkness means nothing to you. It’s my home. And my people are dark and black….there’s nothing but darkness anyway and there’s no escape for white, yellow, brown or black for what I represent. And you can believe it if you want to or not; I don’t care! This planet needs me! I don’t need it!…You cannot afford to take a chance. I’m not playing with anything, I’m not Christ, I’m not righteous, I’m so evil….I’ll destroy the whole
planet! I’m here to do something! I’m a product of nature! I don’t care anything about the
governments of man, I don’t care anything about anyone who is not true and sincere.
There is no excuse for any man to mistreat another man. I will not tolerate it! I don’t care
if you’re the strongest government on the face of the earth, you are a part of nature!...Do
not ever turn the lights out on me! You may be ever so light, but you don’t own anything!
You are here by the grace of the god you say you worship!... You will wake up! Black
people don’t need to wake up, they got me -- you don’t have nothin’!

Sun Ra ends with an explicit threat: “The birds don’t have to stop playing at one o’clock; why
should I? You just had one earthquake...you might expect another!” Whoah. This followed by an
eerie minute or so of the audience exiting the auditorium, muttering in stunned disbelief;
meanwhile some woman invites everyone to meet “at 4506 Southwest” for further
consciousness-raising experiences. The tape concludes with Dr. Reggie Scott’s monologue
(over Sun Ra music), in which he recalls an “embarrassing evening for what could have been a
perfect evening.” In a coolly angry voice, Dr. Scott laments:

Sun Ra and his band never played better. The crowd never responded better. The
people loved and begged for more. But it was ended; ended in another kind of tragic
commentary on sensitivity, on responsibility, on man’s -- black man’s -- failure to share
the artistic point of view, share the love of art with the artist...The crowd hungered for
more, but was not permitted. It was embarrassing to people who love and worship the
mighty Sun Ra. The band wanted to play. Sun Ra wanted to play. The audience wanted
more...The crowd was at a feverish pitch to hear more Sun Ra and his Intergalactic
Infinity Arkestra but it was brought to a halt by the powers that be.

Dr. Scott goes on to describe the “furious” Sun Ra cursing the City of Los Angeles and
concludes: “Sun Ra remains the myth. Sun Ra remains the puzzle. Sun Ra remains undisputed.
Sun Ra can only be interpreted in one of two ways: You either go into the galaxy with him or
stay left behind. It was that kind of evening. It was that kind of night...” Indeed.

Sun Ra would stay in Oakland until well into 1972, but events would soon overwhelm the Black
Panthers when the powers that be turned the lights out on the black power movement (such as
it was). And as Ra’s international touring career grew, his political emphasis would necessarily
soften into a more pan-racial, intergalactic ecumenicalism. This recording, although of extremely
poor fidelity, is a rare document of Sun Ra at his most militant and is worth hearing for “The
Curse” alone. Powerful stuff!

COMMENTS:

WOO DOPS said...
I found a copy of this concert after I read your post. don't mess with the Ra! The tape distortion
is unfortunate but I can handle that, even quite like it. Sun Ra could always make the best noise
anyway. Great blog and keep you the terrific work.

January 24, 2010

Sun Ra: The Creator of the Universe (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 1) (Transparency
2CD)
It is hard to believe, but in 1971 Sun Ra was briefly appointed lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley via the Regents’ Program and the newly-formed Department of Afro-American Studies. As Szwed points out, such an outlandish appointment was “only conceivable in the early 1960s and early 1970s”:

Every week during the spring quarter of 1971 he met his class, Afro-American Studies 198: “The Black Man in the Cosmos,” in a large room in the music department building. Although a respectable number of students signed up, after a couple of classes it was down to a handful (“What could you expect with a course named like that,” Sun Ra once chortled). But a large number of local black folks regularly attended, always distinguishable from the students by their party dress. The classes ran like rehearsals: first came the lecture, followed by a half hour of solo keyboard or Arkestra performance. But it was a proper course -- Sun Ra after all trained to be a teacher in college [for one year at Alabama State A&M circa. 1935 (see pp.25-32)] -- with class handouts, assignments, and a reading list which made even the most au courant sixties professors’ courses pale. There was The Egyptian Book of the Dead; Bill Looney’s, Radiix, a book of astrology; Alexander Hislip’s Two Babylons; the theosophical works of Madame Blavatsky; spiritually channeled tomes like The Book of Oahspe; Henry Dumas’s, Ark of Bones and Poetry for My People; LeRoi Jones’s and Larry Neal’s, Black Fire; David Livingston’s, Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa; Theodore P. Ford’s, God Wills the Negro; Archibald Rutledge’s, God’s Children; the Spring 1971 issue of Stylus, the literary magazine of the black students of Temple University (which contained poetry by Sun Ra): John S. Wilson’s, Jazz: Where It Came From, Where It’s At(published by the United States Information Agency); Yosef A. A. Ben-Jochannan’s, Black Man of the Nile and His Family; Count Volney’s, Ruins of Empire; the King James version of the Bible (listed on the syllabus only as “The Source Book of Man’s Life and Death”); P.D. Ouspensky’s, A New Model of the Universe; Frederick Bodmer’s, The Loom of Language; Blackies Etymology; and other books on hieroglyphics, color therapy, the Rosicrucians, Afro-American folklore, and ex-slaves’ writings. When students returned after the first class to tell Sun Ra that the books were not available in the bookstores and were either missing from the library or had never been there in the first place, he merely smiled knowingly.

His list of suggested topics for student term papers summed up his interests at the time, but it also showed an astute sense of what universities expect their student’s papers to deal with: “The Striving of the Black Bourgeoisie,” “Negritude,” “Planning for the Future,” “The Role of Technology in Music,” and “Developing Relevant Culture.”

In a typical lecture, Sun Ra wrote biblical quotes on the board and then “permutated” them -- rewrote and transformed their letters and syntax into new equations of meaning, while members of the Arkestra passed through the room, preventing anyone from taping the class. His lecture subjects included Neoplatonic doctrines; the application of ancient history and religious texts to racial problems; pollution and war; and a radical reinterpretation of the Bible in light of Egyptology. Sun Ra the southern black man, the jazz musician, the militant, the hippie icon, the avant-gardist, was now Sun Ra, visiting lecturer (pp.294-295).

Apparently, the Arkestra was less than vigilant on the afternoon of May 4, 1971, as a tape recording of Ra’s fifty minute lecture survives and can be found on disc two of Transparency’s 2007 release, The Creator of the Universe (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 1). The sound quality is exceptionally good, all things considered, and you can clearly hear the sound of chalk on blackboard and the disconcerted giggling of students. Sonny’s voice is measured and calm, but there is an angry undertone to his discourses on race and black man’s failure to embrace his “alter-destiny.” While it would be easy to dismiss all this as the ravings of a lunatic (or pure charlatanism or fakery), that would, in my opinion, be a grave mistake. Sonny is witty and
entertaining but also deadly serious; there is a method to his madness for he believed that by breaking the bonds of logic and received wisdom and thereby “decoding” mystical texts, humans could realize their spiritual nature, transcend earthly existence (death), and “do the impossible”:

I’m talking about something that’s so impossible, it can’t possibly be true. But it’s the only way the world’s gonna survive, this impossible thing. My job is to change five billion people to something else. Totally impossible. But everything that’s possible’s been done by man, I have to deal with the impossible. And when I deal with the impossible and am successful, it makes me feel good because I know that I’m not bullshittin’ (quoted in Szwed, p. 295).

Here, Sun Ra unequivocally claims that, at least sometimes, he is able to successfully “deal with the impossible” and his guileless statement about how this makes him “feel good” indicates this is, in fact, more than just mere bullshit. The truth of this assertion is evidenced by the music and structure of the Arkestra, where true freedom exists within the confines of extraordinary discipline and where a strictly hierarchical organization allows for genuine self-expression within a utopian society based upon the harmonious relations between people. Szwed devotes twenty-five pages to an extended paraphrase of Sun Ra’s philosophy, drawing upon a vast bibliography of interviews and articles in which Sonny expanded upon his ideas, from the nature of God and spirit, good and bad, angels and demons, life and death, truth, history and myth, racial relations, and music’s innate ability to overcome the limitations of language (pp.294-319). Despite surface appearances, all that carrying on about “interplanetary music” was more than just kitschy, space-age theatricality; it was about “creating myths about the future” (p.315): “Myth speaks of the impossible, of immortality” (quoted in Szwed, p. 316). On this recording of Sun Ra’s Berkeley lecture, you can hear him practicing “wordology,” constructing “cosmic equations” based upon “phonetic equivalence, as in homonyms and homophones, and recognizing euphemistic equivalence” (p.305). Listening to it, one feels more like an initiate into an ancient mystery cult than a student at a major research university and it is unsurprising that a permanent faculty appointment was not forthcoming. It is nonetheless a fascinating historical document which provides first-hand insight into Ra’s complex metaphysics. Even if Sun Ra’s cosmology is ultimately dubious, there can be no doubting the sincerity of his beliefs and the goodness of his works.

+++ Disc one contains a forty-eight minute concert fragment recorded at The Warehouse in San Francisco on (supposedly) June 10, 1971. I am skeptical about this date as it would place it a mere two days before the Arkestra’s concert at J.P. Widney Jr. High School in Los Angeles and the band appears to have different personnel. (This concert is not listed in Campbell & Trent – I think it’s time for a third edition!) Specifically, the extended drum solo on track three sounds suspiciously like Clifford Jarvis, who does not appear on the June 12 show. Then again, Ronnie Boykins is definitely present on bass and Tommy Hunter, Lex Humphries, and Jarvis all traveled to Europe in the fall, so I suppose anything is possible. The sound quality is OK, probably recorded from the soundboard (vocals are way up front, drums way back), but it’s degraded in a most unfortunate fashion: the original master probably sounds very good (wherever it might be), but this CD is clearly several generations removed and there was obviously a “Dolby mismatch” along the way, resulting in muffled and swishy upper frequencies, most noticeable in the sound of the cymbals. Oh well, so it goes with Sun Ra’s “unofficial” discography.
The tape opens with an unknown number in the “Discipline” series of compositions, conceptually similar to “Discipline 15” but with differently un-resolving harmonies. Spacey improvisational sections follow statements of the slow, somber theme, featuring Boykins’s inimitable thrumming and bowing and (I’m guessing) Eloe Omoe’s growling and burbling bass clarinet. “Ra Declamation” is just that: a twenty-five minute mytho-poetic polemic full of cryptic admonishments and black-power sentiments, interspersed with moments of bashing free-jazz skronk. It is interesting to compare this to the U.C. Berkeley lecture and his venomous “curse” on Los Angeles two days later as Sonny mines related material absent the scholarly affectations of the former and the abject fury of the latter. Next up is an unknown title for ominous percussion and brooding trumpet which gives way to a lengthy yet oddly compelling drum solo. If this is Jarvis (and that hyperactive bass drum sure sounds like him), he is not as blithely self-indulgent as usual, resulting in a musically satisfying prelude to Sun Ra’s typically inventive synthesizer solo. Ra coaxes worlds of sounds from his MiniMoog, once again demonstrating his quick mastery of that technologically sophisticated instrument over the past year. “Satellites Are Spinning” follows with June Tyson and John Gilmore duetting on the loping sing-along. Sadly, the tape cuts off a mere two minutes into “Enlightenment.” Ouch.

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I must admit to having deep ethical qualms about the Transparency label since most of their Sun Ra releases consist of amateur recordings that have circulated amongst collectors for years. As such, these CDs can best be described as “bootlegs.” I read someplace where Marshall Allen has granted Transparency the “moral right” to release these recordings and, in return, the Arkestra receives a percentage from their sales. That is all very well and good, but copyright law does not (as far as I know) recognize “moral rights” and, even if it did, it is questionable whether or not Allen retains those rights with regard to these recordings. Nevertheless, I have to admit that any effort to bring these tapes to light should be applauded by those of us who are fanatically obsessed with Sun Ra’s music. For the merely curious, I would suggest staying away from the Transparency CDs and sticking to the myriad “official” releases on offer. If you already have all that stuff, then by all means, indulge yourself; these recordings are well worth hearing, despite their dodgy provenance. But, as always, caveat emptor!

January 31, 2010

Sun Ra: *Intergalactic Research (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 2)* (Transparency CD)

Campbell & Trent describe two performances at The Native Son in Berkeley, California on June 19 and July 14, 1971 which were recorded by Sun Ra and sold to Black Lion in the infamous tarmac transaction later that year, but never issued (pp.171-172). What’s the deal there? Has anyone heard these? Our intrepid discographers list tantalizing titles such as “Sun-Earth Rock” and “Cosmic Africa.” Huh?! If these tapes still exist, they need to be released! Come on, folks, let’s get busy!

In the meantime, Transparency has released a twenty-five minute fragment purportedly recorded at The Native Son around this time period on *Intergalactic Research (The Lost Reels Collection Vol. 2)*. The sound quality is actually quite good; in fact it sounds to me like a low-generation soundboard tape. Which makes me wonder -- could this be from that stash of unissued recordings sold to Black Lion? Who knows? The provenance of Transparency’s releases is sketchy at best.
While mostly a continuous performance, it is cleverly edited, opening with the audience stamping and cheering which is overlaid with music, fading in on an untitled improvisation. John Gilmore launches into a typically marvelous tenor saxophone solo, full of twisty scales and impossible stacks of harmonics and multiphonics. Wow, this is truly an astonishing tour de force. Incredible! It sounds to me like there are two bassists here, one of whom is unmistakably Ronnie Boykins. Perhaps Alzo Wright is playing cello? Whoever it is, he bows away with a maniacal, Strange Strings-like abandon. Oboes and flutes join in the fray, weaving webs of spindly counterpoint until June Tyson enters with mumbling glossolalia, chanting “Strange Worlds” over the reedy din. Gilmore quickly joins in to sing “It’s After the End of the World” and the bumptious “Outer Spaceways Incorporated,” which is anchored by Boykins’s wildly inventive but rock-solid bass. Ra then asks the rhetorical question, “Why Go to the Moon?” while chirpy oboes and a swooping slide-whistle (!) provide gently mocking commentary. An open improvisation follows with the bassists (or bass and cello) engaging in a throbbing duet until someone (perhaps James Jacson) enters with a blisteringly overblown solo on the Neptunian libflecto. This is greeted with a huge round of applause followed by two minutes of stamping and cheering...in fact this is the same stamping and cheering that begins the segment, creating a neat, infinite loop effect. I suspect this particular concert fragment was compiled by Sun Ra himself to be released as an album side. Which begs the question: What did the other side sound like? Will we ever know? Oh, the mysteries of Mr. Ra!

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The rest of this CD is taken up with a thirty-two minute concert fragment recorded at an unknown venue on an unknown date circa. 1972. We’ll listen more carefully in due course, but I will note here that it is another decent-sounding board tape containing some very adventurous music. Bootleg or not, this is a must-have disc for the hardcore Ra fanatic.

February 7, 2010

Sun Ra & His Blue Universe Arkestra: *Universe in Blue* (Saturn LP>CDR)

Released as Saturn ESR 5000 IGB in 1972 (in mono), *Universe in Blue* was recorded live somewhere on the west coast presumably around August, 1971. However, the greatly reduced Arkestra suggests that it could have been recorded “somewhere on the road” in mid-1972, as they straggled across the country on their way back to Philadelphia for good (see Campbell & Trent pp.172-173). To further confuse the matter, “The Good Doctor” at ESP-disk’ provides a firm date of August 17, 1971 but insists the venue is Slug’s Saloon in New York City (see below). Who knows? In any event, behind the striking, psychedelicized album cover awaits a tasty selection of smoky, blues-based compositions, dominated by Ra’s patented “space-age barbeque” organ.

Sun Ra leads the way on the somnambulant title track, a dreamy, slowly smoldering blues, demonstrating his mastery of the tradition while summoning up swelling and percussive Hammond-like sounds from the otherwise cheesy Farfisa organ. After a blissful five minutes, Kwame Hadi enters on trumpet, only to be rudely cut off by the tape running out. Ouch! Some amount of music is missing, with part two picking up with the rhythm section reaching a low boil, with a sparse horn section offering swinging punctuation to Hadi’s bravura trumpet statements. John Gilmore then takes over with his soulful growl for a chorus or two on tenor sax before Ra returns with a brief, understated solo on organ to end. “Blackman” sets up a moderately rocking groove for June Tyson, who evokes a time when “Pharaoh was sitting on his throne, when the
Blackman ruled this land.” Over and over she implores, her voice cracking with emotion, “I hope you understand!” When I hear her sing, I think I do understand.

“In a Blue Mood” is another slow burner featuring more fingerlickin’ good organ from Mr. Ra. Campbell & Trent suggest Alzo Wright is playing cello on this gig (p.172), but I can’t hear him at all. In this instance, Sonny is playing a wandering walking bass with his left hand, soloing all the while with his right. This is a truly superb solo performance by Sun Ra. “Another Shade of Blue” concludes the album with a mid-tempo swing number led by Gilmore’s indomitable tenor. Sonny shifts gears seemingly at random with unexpected key modulations while ad libbed horn riffs pop in and out. Unfazed, Gilmore just keeps things cooking -- and good lord, twelve minutes later, he’s still wailing away like a madman as the track fades out. Dang! Yes folks, it’s yet another incredible John Gilmore solo – what more can I say? It must be heard to be believed.

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In the summer of 2008, “The Good Doctor” at ESP-Disk’ produced a six-part internet radio tribute to Sun Ra which included over two hours of music from this concert -- recorded in stereo, amazingly enough. Even more surprising, “Universe in Blue Pts.1&2” is presented uncut and it sounds much better than my “needle-drop” of the LP. (Curiously, the rest of Universe in Blue is not found on the broadcast, adding further confusion about possible recording dates.) After some polite applause, a fifteen-minute “Intergalactic Research” follows with another extended tenor workout from Gilmore. “Discipline 27” allows the full ensemble to shine on this sweetly harmonized swing number. The thirty-minute “Blackman” is very different from the LP version, beyond its extraordinary length. Without introduction, Tyson begins by singing a cappella with Marshall Allen soon joining in on some wiggly oboe. Allen then takes over with a thrilling solo as a roiling groove is built up in the rhythm section, Pat Patrick leading the band with the hypnotic three-note riff on baritone sax. Suddenly, a male voice (Eloe Omoe?) starts yodeling and carrying on hysterically, compelling Tyson to resume her incantatory singing. At the eleven minute mark, Ra embarks on a lengthy declamation, assuming the role of the resurrected Pharaoh, who has returned from outer space to lead his people back to Egypt, away from "the path of destruction." “Destiny rules and fate decides and I command both of them!” he exclaims. After twenty minutes of feverish ranting, the piece ends quietly with tick-tock-ing percussion and distant, muted trumpet. Another fifty-three minute segment posthumously entitled, “I Roam the Cosmos,” starts out with a brief solo statement from Danny Davis followed by Tyson singing the newly composed “Astro Black” over a massively slowed-down “Love in Outer Space”-type groove. Soon after, Ra begins hectoring the audience about the usual subjects: race, outer space, and doing the impossible -- “Give up your death for me!” he insists at one point, with Tyson echoing virtually every word of his tirade. Meanwhile, the Arkestra noodles around on the two-chord vamp with Hadi and Akh Tal Ebah providing running commentary on trumpet and flugelhorn, respectively. Overlong, it does get a bit tedious, but Ra’s preaching is simultaneously terrifying and laugh-out-loud funny.

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Universe in Blue is another one of those classic Saturn LPs which remains way out of print, originals commanding princely sums on the collector’s market. That’s a shame since this is one of the warmest, most approachable albums in the discography. ESP-Disk’ or Atavistic or Art Yard or some other perspicacious label should compile all this material together and reissue Universe in Blue in a deluxe, two-disc edition; I’m sure it would be a big hit.
February 14, 2010

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Rehearsal, Oakland, CA circa. October, 1971 (CDR)

In preparation for the Arkestra’s second European tour scheduled to begin in October, 1971, Tommy “Bugs” Hunter recorded this sixty-minute rehearsal segment sometime in late September or early October -- or possibly a mere days before departure (see Campbell & Trent, p.173). This tape was subsequently broadcast by WKCR-FM during their Sun Ra memorial event on May 22, 1995 and now circulates widely amongst collectors. The rather crude monophonic recording offers a window into the inner workings of the core Arkestra as Sun Ra pontificates on various subjects and works the band through a handful of compositions, three of which were never performed again. This was apparently common practice, where numerous compositions were vigorously rehearsed, but never performed (see e.g., Id. p.170).

The tape opens with Ra talking about new experimental synthesizers and a “secret” electronic instrument (sort of like a Theremin) which won’t respond to a black person’s skin. Of course, Sonny is bemused by the apparent racism of this “mean” technology and chortles: “You go talking about equal rights and here you got an instrument that won’t play for you if you’re black!” Even so, Ra is interested in the instrument’s ability to play a “purple C” and a “red C” and play “sixteen pitches between C and C#.” I have no idea what he’s talking about, but he sure sounds convincing. Getting down to business, he leads the 10-member Arkestra through part of an unidentified title that sounds somewhat similar to the “Discipline” series, with lushly harmonized horns playing slowly interweaving parts over a repeating bass ostinato. After a couple of minutes, Ra cuts things off to enquire whether James Jacson has been reached on the telephone in New Jersey regarding travel arrangements to Europe. (He wasn’t home. “He wasn’t home last night, either,” Ra complains.) A lackadaisical run through of “Love in Outer Space” follows which prompts Sonny to chide the drummers and wax enthusiastically about Clifford Jarvis, who was apparently eager to get his old job back. Even so, Sonny does acknowledge Jarvis’s propensity to overplay: “You can’t just get a recording with nothing but drums, drums, drums, drums. That’s what I used to try to tell Clifford Jarvis. Now, he took about a forty-minute solo on the thing… I told him, ‘we’re recording!’ Made no difference, though… That’s all his fault, boy, he don’t know when to stop!” I agree!

Sonny then assumes the role of the stern taskmaster, devoting more than fifteen minutes to diligently work out the arrangement and subtle rhythmic nuances of the old standby, “Friendly Galaxy.” First he tells Marshall Allen to play the melody on alto flute rather than piccolo, so the melody will “cut through.” This seems counter-intuitive to me (the piccolo cuts through just fine) and indicative of his inexplicable ire towards Allen. Because then he starts to get angry and repeatedly reprimands Allen for playing “on the beat!” Sun Ra scolds him: “You been playing that number for ten years and can’t play it yet!” Ra explains that he wants the melody played with “anticipatory rhythms” – a little bit ahead of the beat. “If you play it right on time, you’re gonna be wrong! It’s designed for sound,” he says. Ra then demonstrates on the keyboard, playing the “in-time” bassline and the “out-of-time” melody simultaneously. “See? I’m not asking you to do something I can’t do. I’m doing it!” After a slightly more successful take, Sonny declares:

See, you almost played it that time because you wasn’t counting and you wasn’t thinking about it. You just have to do this like I’m talking. And I’m not measuring my words and saying, ‘one-two-three’… I can’t do that. Music is a language, so you not supposed be counting. I might hold a word a little bit longer than usual if I want to emphasize what I’m saying. That’s the way music is.
Ra goes on to talk about playing behind the beat and makes his point more explicit: “That’s hard to do too. So, it’s either ahead or behind – and then there’s some music that’s right on the beat. Well, white people can do that! When it’s right on the beat, they got you!” After another run-through, Ra really starts to preach it:

It’s all about togetherness. The white race is together. Don’t let ‘em fool you what they talking about revolitin’ and revolutin’. What they got to revolute against? They got everything! But that’s for you! [...] Talkin’ about revolution. I told the truth the other night when I said, ‘No. Not gonna have no revolution of black folks. Not no more freedom, not no peace, they don’t need nothing like that. They need unity, precision, discipline.’ That’s it. That’s the only thing white folks gonna respect and get out of the way [...] They got their stuff together and I got mine together. And I’m not afraid of them. I ain’t worried about them. Now, I’m telling ‘em that. It’s about unity, precision, discipline [...] That’s what jazz is: it’s precision, discipline.

After some discussion, Ra calls for “Intergalactic Universe,” a gently floating space vamp in 5/4 meter. The piece was never performed live and was likely never finished as you can hear Ra interrupting the proceedings several times in order to tweak the arrangement. Despite almost eighteen minutes of rehearsal, the music never quite gets off the ground although the piece clearly had some potential. Ra laments the lack of time for more rehearsal, but insists on working on another obscure composition, “Living Myth 7,” a terrifically complicated melody in 7/4 which is through-composed in intricate, close harmony. The ensemble sounds tentative at best. After a lurching, half-time read-through, Ra calls for double-time but the Arkestra once more hobbles its way through the thorny score until the tape cuts off. Never played again, this is another tantalizing “lost” work from Sun Ra’s oeuvre.

Although none of the musical performances really hang together, this rehearsal fragment offers an intimate glimpse into Ra’s working methods circa.1971 and his role as leader of the rag-tag Arkestra. At once genial storyteller, exacting schoolmarm, and political firebrand, Sonny clearly commanded attention and elicited a fierce loyalty from his most devoted disciples. As “crazy” as Sun Ra might sound, he certainly got results. This tape recording allows a first-hand account of the fearsome charm by which Sun Ra achieved his ultimate aim: “Unity, precision, discipline. That’s it.”

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
About "Intergalactic Universe," you say: "a gently floating space vamp in 5/4 meter. The piece was never performed live." Actually, we now know that it was performed live at least 3 times! Here are the versions we have:

1. 1971-08? (15:13) from the ESP Radio Show. Same concert as "Universe in Blue," but in stereo. You mentioned this in your review of that LP: "a fifteen-minute 'Intergalactic Research' follows with another extended tenor workout from Gilmore." The mistake in the title is probably mine, although the Good Doctor may have announced it as such. This is a beautiful version, with a truly transcendent Gilmore solo. It ends with unaccompanied Gilmore.
2. Delft 1971-11-11 (18:42) This is another super-beautiful version, with Ra on piano. It's soulful, it swings, and it's got another killer Gilmore solo, and a wonderful Kwame Hadi trumpet outing. The vibes and flutes provide a nice two-chord background.

3. Mystery Board 1972-11-02 or -03 (9:09) Here's what I had to say about this, in the notes to "Live Highlights": "The only other place this composition is known to appear is on the rehearsal tapes before the European tour of 1971. [Again, we now know that's not the case!] That makes this a perfect example of the catalog of compositions band members have said they'd rehearse extensively before a show, only to never play it that night. Of course we don't have recordings of every single show from this tour, but it is interesting that it doesn't show up on even one. [Wrong again!] What amazes me is how Ra could neglect this wonderful piece; it certainly deserves more attention. It's a soul-jazz groove guided by Rocksichord/clavinet with the head beautifully executed by Gilmore, who then proceeds to play gorgeous variations. He just sounds fabulous. This solo is a gift. Anything that follows has to be anticlimactic, but Kwame Hadi's trumpet solo is compelling on its own terms--actually, it's quite beautiful! This is just a killer performance."

February 21, 2010

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Dramaten, Stockholm, Sweden 10-12-71 (FM CDR)

In the fall of 1971, the Arkestra embarked on their second European tour, this time enlarged to twenty-two musicians, two singers, six dancers along with Sun Ra himself. Once again, the itinerary was haphazardly arranged, with gigs spread far and wide and lack of money would cause many of the newcomers to abandon the tour along the way (see Szwed pp.286-287). Curiously, while Ronnie Boykins had returned to the fold and is clearly present on the rehearsal tape recorded just days before their departure, he did not make the trip to Europe. In fact, there was no bass player at all on this tour, except when Pat Patrick would put down his baritone sax and pick up the Fender electric bass on a few tunes. Nevertheless, when a gargantuan Arkestra took the stage on October 12 at Sweden's prestigious Royal Dramatic Theatre (a/k/a Dramaten) in Stockholm, they were clearly energized and inspired by the lavish surroundings. In another measure of how well Sun Ra was treated in Europe, the state-run radio station broadcast sixty minutes of the performance, a copy of which circulates amongst collectors. Thank you, Sweden! The stereo FM reception is a little hissy and there are occasional wow-and-flutter problems but overall, it is very nice recording for the period and truly an excellent performance.

There is, however, considerable confusion about some of the titles found on this tape. Campbell & Trent list the first track as “Discipline 2” (p.174) but I don’t think that is correct. If so, it is a radical rearrangement of the “official” version which was recorded just weeks later and released on Nidhamu (Saturn LP) (now, confusingly, found on Art Yard’s Horizon CD). After careful listening, I am unconvinced. Sam Byrd (who is really is much more of a Sun Ra expert than I am) suggests they are playing an early version of “Sometimes the Universe Speaks,” a composition which was recorded in 1977 and released on The Soul Vibrations of Man (Saturn LP). I think Sam might be correct, although, again, the arrangement is very different, making direct comparisons difficult. The long-breathed melody for two flutes certainly shares a similar contour, but here they are accompanied by saxophone and trumpet harmonizations and there is a swinging fanfare section midway through that I do not hear on the LP version. In any event, it is a lovely composition that gives way to a very pretty duet with Ra on synthesizers and William Morrow on vibraphone before the coda. Afterwards, Sonny launches into a prototypical “mad-scientist”-style organ solo with the Arkestra contributing some free-jazz skronk here and there.
A dramatically dissonant organ chord signals another mysterious piece which Campbell & Trent identify only as some unknown number in the "Discipline" series. The label on my (weirdly indexed) CDR says "Discipline 5" but, after comparing it to the "official" version recorded in December 1971 (released on the Freedom/DA Music CD, Calling Planet Earth), I don't think that is correct either. Whatever its title, this composition is conceptually similar to others in the "Discipline" series with its through-composed horn-lines and sweet and sour harmonies, fading out to Ra's spacey, vibrating organ clusters. Whatever the actual titles, this thirteen-minute sequence conclusively demonstrates Sun Ra's prolific genius as a jazz composer.

Pat Patrick takes up the electric bass for joyful romp through "Enlightenment" wherein the rest of the Arkestra sings along with June Tyson, except for Marshall Allen's lone flute obbligato. The ragged choir moves seamlessly into "It's After the End of the World" before all hell breaks loose with wild free-group-improv, finally yielding to Eloe Omoe's reedy bass clarinet and a typically fire-breathing solo from John Gilmore on tenor sax. The intensity level becomes almost unbearably as the Arkestra prods Gilmore to ever greater heights of outrageous invention until Ra cuts things off with quivering organ chords to introduce "Discipline 8." Another moody piece for intricately hocketed horn lines, this particular number eventually settles on a brooding, three-note riff, harmonized in modal parallels which repeat endlessly, undergoing subtle permutations of tone and timbre through shifting instrumentation. Meanwhile, the soloists, led by Gilmore's tempestuous tenor, take things totally out over the heaving, trance-inducing riff. Art Jenkins even contributes an evocative “space voice” solo accompanied by Marshall Allen's flutter-tongued flute, followed by a brilliantly flashy trumpet solo by Kwame Hadi and distantly clanging marimba.

Suddenly, Ra plays a brightly swinging chord change, William Morrow plays a bebop-ish melodic figure on vibes and, while Campbell & Trent list the ensuing composition as "The Rainmaker," I think Sam Byrd is again correct in identifying this fleeting piece as "Sketch," which only otherwise appeared on 1964’s Other Planes of There (Saturn/Evidence CD). (Good ears, Sam!?) While the organ and vibes only hint at the composition, the horns enter with a surprisingly adept run through the entire head before the dissolving back into the three-note riff and a reprise of "Discipline 8." Fascinating! The tape closes with a long, rip-roaring rendition of "Rocket Number 9," over twelve minutes of ecstatic antiphonal vocals and wigged-out saxophone solos. “Zoom! Zoom! Zoom! Up in the Air!” Just as Ra cues a throbbing, screechy space chord, the radio announcer interrupts to conclude the broadcast. Argh!

Despite some minor technical problems, this is an exquisite artifact and well worth seeking out. If the original master reels still exist, it would make for a wonderful CD which I would certainly buy in a heartbeat. And perhaps more of this concert was recorded than was broadcast…? One can dream…

February 28, 2010

I'll return with more from Sun Ra’s 1971 European tour next week. In the meantime, here is a very entertaining video of the Arkestra performing in front of a large audience in Japan on July 30, 1988. Enjoy!

March 7, 2010

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra:
On October 14, 1971, the Arkestra performed in Helsinki, Finland and, lucky for us, the entire two-and-a-half-hour concert was broadcast by the Finnish Broadcasting Company, YLE. An off-the-air tape recording of the broadcast circulates amongst collectors and Transparency has recently released a 2CD set which purports to be derived from the radio station’s master reels, but I’m skeptical. (If anyone out there has heard this, I’d love to know your opinion!) The circulating tape is slightly hissy and probably more than a few generations away from the master, but it is recorded in stereo and sounds pretty good for the period.

The first set starts off with a bang: Sonny cues a mammoth space chord over which Kwame Hadi lays down some bravura trumpet over the throbbing mass of sound. Following a brief pause, the Arkestra launches into another unidentified number in the “Discipline” series of compositions, readily apparent by the dirgey blocks of harmonies in the reeds and brass floating over freely rubato drumming. At the conclusion, June Tyson and John Gilmore sing “Theme of the Stargazers,” which leads to a lengthy and particularly inspired multi-keyboard solo from Ra, full of synthesized blips, whirrs and spaceship sounds, twistedly polyphonic synthesizer/organ displays and astonishingly aggressive organ attacks. As the drums get heavier, saxophones are drawn into the fray with Gilmore the clear victor. After some further keyboard ruminations, William Morrow enters with some tasteful vibraphone which is countered by Ra’s wiry Clavioline-like sound, making for a hauntingly beautiful texture. “Discipline 8” follows in a much less expansive arrangement than we heard in Stockholm, although Gilmore’s tenor saxophone solo is typically brilliant. Pat Patrick picks up the electric bass to propel an extended “Love in Outer Space” into a trance-inducing groove that just goes on and on and on, no doubt accompanying a parade of dancers and other shenanigans. Meanwhile, Sonny keeps up a frenetic, electrically chiming keyboard accompaniment right through to the big molto ritardando ending. “Watusi” is taken at a furious clip and the long percussion jam that follows elicits all kinds of excited whoops and hollers from the audience, who burst into exuberant applause after the return of the theme and final, universe-shaking space chord. Ra introduces “Enlightenment” with his boing-boing-ing Rocksichord and Tyson and male chorus sing the joyful song while traipsing around the venue, inviting the audience to join them on their “space world.” The set ends with “Next Stop Mars,” another keyboard solo full of spacey synthesizer and apocalyptic organ clusters.

The second set opens with baleful organ chords before the antiphonal chanting of “Calling Planet Earth.” This prompts a spasm of crazy free-jazz skronk that eventually yields to another glistening vibes and keyboard duet. I’m really enjoying Morrow’s contributions on this tour! An unidentified title follows featuring a mellifluous flute choir in bright major key harmonies, over quietly burbling percussion (including distant timpani). This is another ingenious Ra composition that was apparently only performed once and discarded. What a shame! This piece is as pretty as a spring morning and perhaps the highlight of the concert. A protracted “Space is the Place” immediately follows, brimming with soulful crooning, sanctified wailing, and ecstatic carrying on from a multiple vocalists over waves of roiling drums and percussion. Fun -- but truthfully, it goes on a bit too long. After a brief coda, Ra launches the band into “Angels and Demons at Play,” which was last heard on the 1960 Saturn LP of the same name. Basically a groove in 5/4 anchored by Pat Patrick’s endlessly repeating bassline, it’s really just an excuse for another sprawling, chaotic percussion jam and more space-age theatrics. Oh well. Next, Tyson and a veritable Greek chorus sing the lilting “The Satellites Are Spinning” as they march around the theatre before Ra signals a raucous version of “The Second Stop is Jupiter,” full of swooping, screaming vocalizations and riotous organ vamping. The lurching, big-band number, “Somewhere Else” follows, allowing Patrick to finally strap on the baritone saxophone and let it
rip with a growling, blues-inflected solo. Up next is the genially swinging composition, “To Nature’s God.” This tune first appeared as an instrumental on the 1969 Saturn LP, My Brother the Wind, but here gains a set of lyrics in praise of “birds, lightning, sunshine, wind, rain, the leaves on the trees” and their prolific creator. Curiously, this intricate re-arrangement would only be performed once more before being permanently dropped from the repertoire (Campbell & Trent, p.842). The concert ends with a series of space chants, anchored by Patrick’s remarkably fluent bass playing, beginning with “Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space” and “Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds,” concluding with a reverent quotation of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.”

While it is certainly nice to have a complete concert from this vintage in decent sound quality, the overall performance is somewhat diffuse and lacking the ultra-adventuresome music making heard a couple of nights earlier. There is more of a “good time party” atmosphere at this concert which leads to some overlong and self-indulgent episodes which were no doubt visually entertaining at the time but do not translate well to audio tape. That said, Ra’s own playing is outstanding and the lovely unidentified title for flute choir in the second set makes this tape worth seeking out for the duly obsessed fan.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
I am in total agreement with your assessment of this, Rodger. The first half of the first set is the real kicker here—the rest doesn’t wear as well for those of us not fortunate enough to be there to see the spectacle of the dancers and all the visuals that were surely in effect. Is the only other vocal appearance of "To nature’s god" the one on "Dark Myth Equation Visitation"? It's always nice to have another version of "Somewhere else," one my favorite Ra post-bop big-band-idiom numbers. Great solo from Patrick. That and the first part of the first set alone make this worth having—the sound quality is a true bonus. But as a whole, it's not nearly as transcendent as Stockholm 1971-10-21 was, or as the 1971 Egypt concerts yet to come.

Rodger Coleman said...
There is a vocal version of "To Nature's God" on the Delft concert, in stunningly good sound quality (on the 2001 rebroadcast).

I agree that Stockholm is the most transcendent concert of the European tour.

March 14, 2010

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra:
Vejlby Risskov Hallen, Aarhus, Denmark 10-19-71 (AUD 2CDR)

Eighty-five minutes of the Arkestra’s performance at the Vejlby Risskov Hallen in Aarhus, Denmark on October 19, 1971 was captured on an extremely bad-sounding audience recording which circulates amongst more fanatical Sun Ra collectors. How bad is it? It sounds to me like the recordist stuck the microphone in his shoe and shoved his foot into Sun Ra’s amplifier. It is unbelievably boomy and woefully unbalanced with every instrument aside from the jacked-up, distorted keyboards sounding distant and muffled, making it impossible to tell exactly what’s going on with the music. Of course, the intrepid fan is to be commended for making the effort; there are no other known recordings of this concert. But, really, this tape borders on the unlistenable.
Which is shame, since it would appear the Arkestra is in fine fettle, premiering the stately “Discipline 2” and tossing off a blindingly fast version of the insanely complicated “The Shadow World.” There’s also yet another unknown number in the “Discipline” series of compositions which leads to a spectacularly far-out synthesizer and organ solo from Ra. But the sound quality is so awful that I could hardly bring myself to listen to it more than once. Campbell and Trent point out that James Jacson’s Ancient Egyptian Infinity Lightning and Thunder Drum can be heard for the first time at the beginning of this tape (p.176). As the legend goes, Jacson made the enormous ceremonial Infinity drum while the band was living in Oakland out of tree that had been struck and dried out by a bolt of lightning. After its naming by Ra, it would become a fixture of the Cosmo Drama for years to come (p.171). So, there is that.

As a true obsessive, I treasure this as a historical artifact, even if I might never listen to it again. Given the fact that there are several other better-sounding recordings from this tour, more reasonable persons would go out of their way to avoid ever hearing this tape in the first place. Brutal!

March 21, 2010

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra:
Technische Hogeschool, Nieuwe Aula, Delft, The Netherlands 11-11-71 (FM 3CDR)

Several weeks later, the Arkestra appeared at the Technische Hogeschool, Nieuwe Aula in Delft, on November 11, 1971. Once again, the state-run radio station recorded the concert and broadcast it on November 14. According to Campbell and Trent, portions of this concert were also televised on Dutch TV on November 17, but the tape no longer exists in the VPRO archive (p.176). The audio recordings do exist, however, and, fortunately for us fans, the entire three-hour concert was re-broadcast in 2001. The sound quality is exceptionally good and it’s a wonderful performance to boot.

The first set starts off with glistening vibraphone arpeggios over roiling drums, each of the various percussion instruments nicely captured in a wide stereo image. After a brief pause, the Arkestra blasts into an explosive space chord that sets up a long electronic keyboard extravaganza, punctuated by intermittent ensemble freakouts. This is certainly an intense way to begin a concert! After about nine minutes, Ra launches into the bouncy vamping of “Enlightenment.” This is a note-perfect rendition with everyone crystal clear in the mix, including the descending counter-melodies on flutes and trumpet and the multi-voiced chorus that accompanies June Tyson’s melodic crooning. “Love in Outer Space” predictably follows, but this time it’s taken at a more relaxed tempo than usual, settling into a sultry, slinky groove for almost twelve sensuous minutes, relentlessly driven forward by William Morrow’s doubling of Pat Patrick’s electric bass line on vibes. Not much happens musically until Ra enters to state the theme a few times on a wheezy electric organ at the end -- but that’s OK.

Sonny then signals the space-chant, “Space is the Place,” which is full of soulful group vocalizations over the mellow groove. Until, that is, the saxophones enter with some dissonant squealing and the rhythm starts to disintegrate, with the vocalists going crazy with ecstatic wailing about “outer space” etc. Rather than wearing out its welcome, all this nonsense quickly subsides to give way to a series of solos and various ensemble sections including Ra’s “mad-scientist” organ, some saxophone duels, raging horn battles, and pounding kettle drums. Another unknown number in the “Discipline” series emerges from the ashes, where richly
orchestrated horn parts wander through a thicket of chords while rubato drums rumble around underneath. A beautiful trumpet solo follows (probably Kwame Hadi) accompanied by some spacey vibraphone, which gets a nice response from the audience. Morrow then takes over with Ra joining in on marimba, while drums beat randomly and ominously. Out of the ether, June Tyson enters with a brief declamation: “Out of every nation they shall rise, with an invitation of the Sun to journey to the outer darkness, to the outer heavens of the intergalactic dawn!” Then the ensemble enters with a reprise or coda to the “Discipline” piece. As the work concludes, Eloë Omoe adds his wild bass clarinet scribbling which prods the ensemble into some full-blown skronky free-jazz, led by John Gilmore’s indomitable tenor saxophone.

June Tyson interrupts the mayhem with the declamatory “We’ll Wait for You” which is ticklingly echoed by the ensemble voices. Another wave of high-energy group improv follows, featuring Art Jenkins's ghostly “space voice” and another long segment of vibes and marimba noodling. Sonny then takes a rare turn on solo acoustic piano, interspersing luscious ballad chords with furious avant-garde attacks, later rhapsodically hinting around the “Theme of the Stargazers,” which is taken up by Tyson and Gilmore in perfect unison. This gives rise to a long, quiet, very spacey improvisation with vocalized horns and gently tapping marimba and percussion. At times, an eerie, “Strange Strings”--like atmosphere arises only to move in other, equally compelling musical territory. Finally, Gilmore steps up with an anguished saxophone cry and takes over with a typically mind-blowing solo, which is greeted with wild applause. Wow.

An early version of “Discipline 27” follows right behind. Campbell and Trent point out that these early performances are “pre-mitotic; [they] combine[] a riff from the later ‘27’ and one from the later ‘27-II’ along with a counter-theme for the saxes that was not used in later versions at all” (p.177). Not surprisingly, the ensemble sounds a bit tentative on the interlocking horn parts, and the rhythm section never quite attains the stately grace the work requires. Hadi ventures first with an uncharacteristically modest but tasteful solo while Morrow provides some rather aimless filling on vibes, mostly making for a not quite satisfying performance of this otherwise languid and dreamy composition. As the piece tapers off, the chorus enters with an a cappella rendition of “Outer Spaceways, Incorporated,” ending the set with delirious chanting and clapping while the Arkestra parades off the stage.

The second set begins with another out improv led by Gilmore titanic tenor, together with peals of squalling horns and energetic free drumming. The mix is a little weird until Tyson enters with a lovely solo rendition of “They’ll Come Back,” which elicits an enthusiastic response from the crowd. Another unknown number in the “Discipline” series follows, featuring slowly ascending, densely harmonized horn swells and a honking bass clarinet solo from Omoe. A free improvisation opens up for more vibes/marimba spaciness before the ensemble returns with the heaving chords of “Discipline,” this time with hysterical vocalizations from (perhaps) Malik Ramadin. Interesting. The piece formally concludes, giving way to Danny Davis on wailing alto saxophone, later joined by Marshall Allen and some jittery percussion and vibraphone. The music rises and falls a number of times before Gilmore takes over with another spectacular tenor solo, bringing down the house to stunned applause. Ra then moves to acoustic piano for a rare performance of “Intergalactic Research,” a loping vamp in 5/4 featuring subtly inventive solo turns from Gilmore and Hadi. As the rhythm section starts to deconstruct, Ra embarks on a spaceship synthesizer solo punctuated by dissonant organ stabs, with an onomatopoeic white-noise blast-off at the conclusion.

A held organ chord cues “The Satellites Are Spinning,” its mellow groove supporting the soulful singing of Tyson and band. After a big ending and a brief percussion interlude, yet another number in the “Discipline” series is performed, this one orchestrated for thick stacks of low
saxophones with a breathy flute on top. As Pat Patrick begins to play a counter-melody on baritone sax, more flutes and French horn enter, making for an impossibly lush texture. A sweetly improvised flute choir follows, with additional commentary from various percussion instruments and a reedy synthesizer -- until Ra suddenly charges into “Watusi,” taken at a brisk yet controlled tempo. After a tight rendition of the theme, the usual percussion fest follows, which benefits from the excellent stereo sound; this sometimes dull segment is actually quite mesmerizing! But by the time Morrow’s clanking vibraphone induces Ra to return to the vamp, the tempo has increased noticeably. Even so, the Arkestra returns with a jubilant restatement of the theme and a huge pulsating space chord to end. Sonny then taps out the tune, “To Nature’s God,” on Rocksichord, but drops out for Tyson and the guys to sing the song over a hypnotic two-chord vamp supplied by vibraphone and electric bass. “Sometimes you should appreciate the work of Nature’s God! -- Give credit where credit is due!” they implore. While it’s sort of understandable why this tune was dropped from the repertoire, it’s still nice to have this rarely performed vocal arrangement in such good sound quality.

Next up is an extended performance of the mysterious “Shadow World.” Ra outlines the weird chords at a breakneck tempo, but when the horns come in with their wickedly complicated, interlocking lines, they are almost completely overwhelmed by howling feedback. Yikes! The mix continues to suffer as the technicians attempt to cope with the barrage of instrumental attacks. Eventually, the rhythm section amiably falls apart, allowing for a series of solos, first a densely contrapuntal Rocksichord etude, then Gilmore with his screaming multiphonics and fleet-fingered runs of notes, which again elicits a round of applause from the audience. Pat Patrick honks out the “Shadow World’s” enervating riff, while Gilmore continues to wail, building up to an almost unbearable level of intensity until he’s all alone again on the stage, blowing his ever-living brains out. With a flourish, he stops and the stunned audience responds with another big hand. Geez, what can I say? It’s another incredible John Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi gamely follows with a high-wire trumpet solo, full of rubber-lipped special effects which is greeted with respectful applause. Ra furiously assaults the organ with remarkable, ten-fingered dexterity, producing a richly textured, purely electronic sound. Then the Arkestra suddenly enters with a wobbly space chord, serving to introduce a brief untitled composition, perhaps from the “Discipline” series, scored for long-breathed flutes and alternately moaning and riffing horns. Very interesting! After a spacey vibraphone interlude, Ra returns with an extended synthesizer excursion, again demonstrating his mastery of electronic keyboards in the early nineteen-seventies. After a solemn conclusion, Ra deftly segues into the closing space chants. First, there’s a short romp through “The Second Stop Is Jupiter,” with Tyson and Gilmore gleefully chanting the line in weirdly antiphonal harmony. Tyson then moves into “Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds,” which includes quotations from “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and a disconcertingly catchy refrain: “This world ain’t gonna be here long -- we got to go!” Meanwhile, the Arkestra embarks on its slow procession off the stage, banging and clanging, chanting and singing. Several minutes of clapping, cheering and hollering from the audience is also included on the rebroadcast.

Whew! What a show! How delightful to have this recording of an expansive Cosmo Drama in such vivid high-fidelity sound! This one is a keeper, for sure! Unfortunately, the haphazard booking of the European tour was taking its toll on the Arkestra’s finances, which led to an ugly scene back at the hotel after this concert. Szwed explains:

The performances were spread so far apart that the money they were receiving ran thin, and three of the musicians began demanding to be paid. After the Delft concert one of them tried to take the money by force in Sonny’s hotel room, and was stopped only when other band
members came by and heard what was going on. Sonny fired the three of them, and over the next three weeks eleven more left, including all the dancers except June Tyson (p.287).

Campbell and Trent list no performances between the October 19 concert in Aarhus and this one on November 11 and the next documented performance wasn’t until November 29 in Paris (which was supposed to be the last one of the tour). It’s rumored, however, that the Arkestra also played in West Germany at some point, but no definitive information has been uncovered (p.176). In any event, such a large ensemble of out-jazzers couldn’t possibly survive in a foreign country while working only once every few weeks, so it was inevitable things would come to a head with the less-experienced Arkestrans. Fortunately, the core members of the band soldiered on, enthusiastically agreeing to a last-minute trip to Egypt, despite the impossible logistics, which included some hastily arranged gigs in Denmark in December which were intended to pay for the excursion. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. A fragment of the Paris concert and one “officially released” recording from Copenhagen still await us. See you next week.

COMMENTS:
Anonymous said...
June Tyson blew my mind as did the whole band, one night in Manhattan near the Chelsea Hotel for $17 in 1985 or ’86. Unreal. And the description here about this older recording reminds me clearly of the goosebumps and dynamics.

March 28, 2010

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Research Arkestra:
Théâtre du Chatelet, Paris, France 11-29-71 (FM CDR)

Of all the European cities the Arkestra toured, Paris was apparently Sun Ra’s favorite:

Paris reminded Sonny of Montreal [where the Arkestra briefly lived before their arrival in New York City in 1961], and he loved to walk the streets and visit museums, especially the Egyptian section of the Louvre. [Dancer] Verta Mae Grosvenor said, “Walking with Sun Ra in France was something else! Everyone stared at us. We were a sensation...like Josephine Baker’s arrival in Paris” (Szwed, p.287).

The Arkestra performed at the Théâtre du Chatelet on November 29, 1971 and the concert was broadcast over the radio. A very degraded sixty minute recording of the radio broadcast circulates amongst the more fanatical collectors -- and you really have to be a fanatic to get into this one. The first forty-five minutes borders on the unlistenable: hissy yet muffled, under-recorded yet boomy, woefully unbalanced, and just plain bad. The remaining fifteen-minute segment is from a different source, but only marginally better-sounding than the rest. Even so, buried within the murk is some remarkable music that is worth the effort -- maybe.

The recording starts from the beginning of a set, with tribal drums setting up Ra’s grand entrance on weird electric space keyboards. Without going on too long, Sonny cues up “Discipline 27” in its early, “pre-mitotic” arrangement (see Campbell & Trent, p.177). Gilmore takes a rip-snorting tenor solo while the Arkestra heaves and sighs around him, but it’s difficult to hear exactly what is going on within the music. After a brief keyboard interlude, the band launches to “Enlightenment,” only to have the sound quality deteriorate even further. Ugh. “Love
In Outer Space" predictably follows, but this time Sun Ra keeps up an enervating, electro-metallic din over the polyrhythmic percussion jamming to unsettling effect. Despite the poor sound quality, you can tell this is a particularly intense version of this sometimes throw-away piece. There’s a churning darkness to Sonny’s organ playing that reminds me of textural effects found on Miles Davis’s *On the Corner* album (which did not come out until 1972). *Interesting.*

Next up is the first known performance of “Third Planet,” a twisted bit of big-band fun, with a jaunty, slightly old-timey rhythm and a riff-happy horn arrangement. Ra takes a nicely buzzing Rocksichord solo before the reprise. After a brief interruption from the radio announcer (in French), and piano introduction from Ra, Tyson sings “Somebody Else’s Idea” accompanied by hypnotic percussion, an ooh-ing and ah-ing male chorus, and, sometimes, Marshall Allen’s ethereal flute. The announcer rudely interrupts again before an unknown number in the “Discipline” series composition fades up. It’s amazing how many of these things there are! This one is really just handheld densely through-composed ensemble chords, which quickly gives way to an a cappella Gilmore solo. Sadly, the tape cuts off just as things start to get cooking. Too bad, as I suspect there was much more music that followed. Finally, “Watusi” is from a different, slightly better source, more balanced and clear, but the fifteen-minute long percussion jam is still a distorted mess. The track fades just the horns start to take things out. *Oh well.*

Despite the interestingness of much of the music contained on this recording, it is inordinately difficult to listen to without squinting your ears. However, rumor has it that the Art Yard label is planning a two-CD release of this complete concert mastered from the original reels – now that would be a most welcome addition to the official discography! I’ll keep you posted.

April 4, 2010

Sun Ra: *Calling Planet Earth* (DA Music/Freedom CD)

The Paris concert was supposed to be the last of this ill-fated tour -- but at the last minute, Sun Ra decided to go to Egypt. Someone had tipped him off to cheap airfare from Copenhagen to Cairo and a handful of gigs in Denmark were cobbled together to pay for a trip to the Land of the Pharaohs (see Campbell & Trent p.178). Egypt was a place of obvious spiritual importance to Sun Ra, but half of the rapidly shrinking Arkestra bailed out and returned home. Nevertheless, the core musicians dutifully carried on with the shoe-string adventure. As it turned out, the Danish promoters failed to pay, and Sonny financed the trip by selling a batch of tapes to the Black Lion label, the desperate transaction taking place on the tarmac as the Cairo-bound plane awaited its departure (Id. p.179; Szwed p.292). Among those tapes was a recording from Odense on December 3, 1971 but never issued (has anyone heard this?) and the December 5th concert from the Tivoli Theatre in Copenhagen, which was finally released by the DA Music/Freedom label as *Calling Planet Earth* in 1998.

The homemade stereo recording was made from the stage (probably by Tommy Hunter), and while it sounds fine, there is some distortion during the loudest parts and you can hear the seams of a hasty editing job. Hunter’s voice (likely recorded in the hotel room afterwards) announces the date and venue before cutting into a brief turbulent percussion jam, which serves as an introduction to “Discipline 5.” The through-composed sequence of sweet-n-sour harmonies rises and falls over the busy percussion section, yielding to an unaccompanied alto saxophone solo by Danny Davis, and returning for the reprise. Kwame Hadi remains as the only brass player, but the saxophone section is full and lush: besides Davis, mainstays Marshall Allen, John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, Danny Thompson, and Eloe Omoe and newcomers Larry
Northington and Hakim Rahim are all present and help to flesh out the intricate arrangement. “Discipline 10” is more groove-oriented, propelled by Ra’s barbequed organ comping over which the Arkestra riffs on a handful of big-voiced chords. Ra solos interestingly on organ while Patrick grinds out a stumbling bass line until Gilmore enters with a fiercely overblown solo on tenor sax. Unfortunately, he’s way off-mic and hard to hear. Even so, you can tell he’s really blowing his ass off! After a return of the head, Ra steers the band into a nicely sung rendition of “Enlightenment.” A severely truncated version of “Love in Outer Space” ends what would have been side one of the LP, fading out just as things start to come to a boil.

“Discipline 15” begins with a fugue-like organ solo, outlining the highly chromatic harmonic areas of the piece. Then the ensemble enters tentatively with the richly orchestrated rubato theme, dark, reedy saxophones contrasted with airy flute and trumpet. Ra takes a dramatic unaccompanied organ solo before suddenly shifting gears, launching into “The Satellites Are Spinning” which is taken up by June Tyson and Gilmore in a sung duet. After the urgent chanting of “Calling Planet Earth,” the Arkestra slams into “The Outers,” some high-energy free jazz skronk: the horns wail, the drums bash, and Sonny attacks his electronic keyboards with fists and elbows. This goes on for a while, until Sun Ra takes over for good with an agitated mad-scientist-style solo on organ. A deft edit drops us into the floating space-groove of “Adventures Outer Planes” (mis-titled “Adventures Outer Space” on the CD), a two-chord vamp supporting a wandering melody for flute and trumpet that never quite seems to gel. Ra again leads the way with a genially meandering organ solo, while the Arkestra takes up small percussion instruments. A second time through the composition sounds a bit more confident than before, although there are some weird (and possibly wrong) notes strewn about. The track fades out inconclusively. Hmmm. According to Campbell & Trent, this piece was only performed this one time (p.811); too bad as it definitely had potential. It is astonishing to discover so many tantalizing but rarely performed works scattered throughout the discography!

While there is some interesting music here, the Arkestra sounds hesitant on the newer material and some of the more exciting improvisational music has obviously been edited out from a much longer performance, making this album less than totally satisfying to me. Then again, I’m spoiled. Any good-sounding Ra music from this vintage should be heartily welcomed. Next stop: Egypt.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Yeah, you're definitely spoiled! :) I quite like this CD, and while I agree that "Adventures" may not quite gel, it's still a fascinating piece with a killer groove and some really nice keyboard work. And all three Discipline pieces are really, really super. "Discipline No. 10" is in the "My Brother the Wind" space-bbq mold, and as such is right up my alley. Too bad about the under-recorded Gilmore! I love "Discipline No. 15"--its yearning melody reminds me of "Barbizon." Overall, yes, some things are cut, but as programming for an album? Hell yeah--it would have been a killer LP!

April 11, 2010

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra: Horizon (Art Yard CD)
With the money obtained from Black Lion, the Arkestra was able to board the waiting plane and travel to Cairo, arriving in the evening of December 7, 1971. But they did not know anyone in Egypt and neither did they know where they were going to stay nor how they were going to pay for it. Szwed describes the scene:

When they landed they were held up at Egyptian customs because of the unlikelihood of an entire orchestra arriving as tourists and because of the name on Sun Ra’s passport. To be named after the sun god twice was really a bit too much. On the latter objection Sun Ra resourcefully suggested the guard call the curator of the National Museum of Antiquities with whom he was ready to discuss Egyptology. They let him in, but customs kept most of their instruments just in case. The band took cabs to the Mena House Hotel outside of Cairo, and they woke up the next day to see the morning fog slowly lifting to reveal the pyramid of Giza. A day later Tommy Hunter began taking motion pictures of members of the Arkestra as they faced the pyramids, while the wind made their costumes billow so it appeared they were flying. These were the films that Sun Ra would later project behind the band at Slug’s and at concerts (p.292).

Here is the film:

Thanks to Sun Ra fan, Hartmut Geerken, a German writer and free musician who was teaching at the Goethe Institute in Cairo, a series of performances were arranged, including an invitation-only concert at Geerken’s home in Heliopolis on December 12. While most of the Arkestra’s instruments were still being held by customs, they were aided by a most unlikely personage named Salah Ragab:

[He was] a brigadier general and the head of military music in the Egyptian army and himself a jazz drummer. Though he was later disciplined for the contact, he continued to meet with the band under various disguises, including once when he came with the son of [Egyptian President] Gamal Abdel Nasser, also a jazz musician. Musicians and dancers were jammed into the house with several dozen guests, but they still managed a light show and dancing, and a march throughout the house and into the garden (while the Egyptian secret police kept watch from outside) (pp.292-293).

The Arkestra also performed at the famed Ballon Theatre in Cairo on December 17 courtesy of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, who had cancelled ballet previously scheduled for that date (p.293). The concert was recorded from the stage (in mono) by Tommy Hunter and released on various impossible-to-find Saturn LPs over the years (see Campbell & Trent, pp.180-183). Most of this material was finally compiled onto a CD entitled, Horizon, and released by Art Yard in 2008. It is a truly special performance: after the cold, grueling tour of Europe, the Arkestra sounds well-rested and inspired by the ancient, mystical--and warm--environment. Ra sets the stage with some ominous electronics before a brief “Theme of the Stargazers” and a howling a cappella solo from Danny Davis on alto sax. The band then launches into “Discipline 2,” a moody and mysterious piece that begins with throbbing, densely harmonized horns which give way to a twittering flute choir before returning with a somber coda. Sonny then signals “The Shadow World” and we’re off to the races. This is a spectacular, seventeen minute rendition, with Ra driving the band hard and the ensemble responding with near-perfect execution of the extraordinarily complicated melody lines. Ra takes the lead with a skittering organ solo before an energetic group improvisation section that yields to Gilmore’s furiously wailing tenor sax. Yes, it’s another incredible Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi also takes a turn on trumpet and acquits himself well, ranging around from high-wire acrobatics to smeared, low-register noodling before Ra signals the reprise. After a brief pause, Ra lightens the mood by moving into “Enlightenment,” which is joyfully taken up by June Tyson and her male choir. “Love In Outer
Space" predictably follows and while this version lacks the menacing darkness heard in Paris, there's plenty of exciting organ work and another tasty solo from Hadi.

The neo-big-band swing of “Third Planet” follows with the Arkestra again nailing the ensemble sections and supporting Hadi’s bebop-ish solo with swelling riffs. Hadi’s really in the spotlight at this concert! Ra takes a bumptious, barbecued organ solo as the rhythm section starts to really heat up, only settling down again for the return of the head. Sonny then lurches into some dissonant organ clusters to introduce “Space is the Place.” Pat Patrick grinds out the repetitive bassline, percussion sets up a quasi-Latin groove, the singers chant, clap and dance, and meanwhile Marshall Allen squeals and moans on alto saxophone. It was likely quite a spectacle. “Horizon” begins with Ra blasting off with his Moog synthesizer, punctuated with a searing space chord at the end. An eerie organ swell signals “Discipline 8,” with its oscillating ensemble chords over rumbling, rubato drumming. Eloe Omoe emerges from the thicket of harmony to blow some honking bass clarinet until Gilmore takes over with a blistering display of high-pitched harmonics, howling multiphonics, and low-register growls, joined at the end by the altos in an all-out saxophone battle. After reaching a feverish pitch, the saxophones subside, leaving Hadi to brood. All the while, the Arkestra’s riffing continues to heave and sigh, rising and falling with contours of the soloists’ excursions. After a cued ending, June Tyson chants “We’ll Wait for You” with the Arkestra echoing her lines antiphonally. While Sonny outlines a narrow harmonic area, the Arkestra briefly engages in some free-jazz freakouts before Ra signals “The Satellites Are Spinning,” which closes the CD with its optimistic chanting about the “great tomorrow,” accompanied by some bitingly skronky saxophone solos and supported by a propulsive groove laid down by Clifford Jarvis’s skillful drumming and Pat Patrick’s workmanlike bass playing. You can hear the Egyptian audience starting to get into it, whooping and hollering as the Arkestra parades off the stage.

While the set list is typical of the period, the performance is particularly focused and intense. Given the pleasantly spacious acoustic of the recording, this makes for a must-have CD for any Sun Ra fan. In 2009, Art Yard released Nidhamu + Dark Myth Equation Visitation, which contains three more tracks from this concert, along with portions of the Heliopolis performance and a TV appearance taped on December 16. We’ll have a listen to that one next week.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Well, I found two more versions of "Third Planet" (one of which just showed up on shuffle!):

--1978-03-13 Horseshoe tavern, Toronto

--1978-05-05 Public Theatre, NYC

The NY one is marred by that sucky Michael Ray echo thing, but otherwise is really nice. I included both of these on "Further Live Highlights 2."

April 18, 2010
Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Myth Science Solar Arkestra:
*Nidhamu + Dark Myth Equation Visitation* (Art Yard CD)

In 2009, Art Yard gathered together the remaining Egypt material on a CD entitled *Nidhamu + Dark Myth Equation Visitation*. Most of this music was previously released on impossible to find Saturn and Thoth Intergalactic LPs over the years, making this an essential companion to the magnificent *Horizon* CD, also on Art Yard. The CD opens with three additional tracks recorded at the Ballon Theatre on December 17, 1971: “Space Loneliness #2” begins with an unusual ensemble of saxophones, flutes, and oboe with a detuned synthesizer obbligato. The yearning, dissonantly harmonized melody and rubato drums feels conceptually similar to the Discipline series of compositions and may be a completely different piece. Ra then takes an unaccompanied solo on dual synthesizers which focuses more on pitch and rhythm than spaceship noises for a change. After moving to Rocksichord and outlining a bluesy set of changes, the ensemble returns with a lushly orchestrated coda that echoes the big-band riffing of the original “Space Loneliness.” After some polite applause, Ra introduces “Discipline 11” with a spacey organ solo until trumpet, flutes, and saxophones enter with the dirge-like composition. After some more organ chording, Marshall Allen takes a mellifluous, heavily reverb-ed solo on flute until Sonny interrupts with more scary electronic mayhem. A glorious rendition of the stately “Discipline 15” follows with John Gilmore adding his inimitable tenor sax improvisations over the top. Unfortunately, after a short percussion interlude, the track quickly fades out. Even so, it’s a wonderful performance of this rarely played composition.

“Nidhamu” is a long (thirteen minute) double-synthesizer solo recorded at an invitation-only concert at Hartmut Geerken’s house in Heliopolis on December 12, 1971. Ra again demonstrates his mastery of the then new technology, exploring the vast range of sounds available: from space age bleeps and blorps, to sweeping portamentos; pure sine waves to tsunamis of white noise -- all the while maintaining a loose internal structure built around a jittery four note figure that appears and disappears in various permutations throughout the piece. A dignitary who attended this concert invited Ra to appear on Egyptian television on December 16 (Szwed, p.293), and the next four tracks document that event, which was, sadly, not preserved in the station’s archives (Campbell & Trent, p.181). “Discipline 27” fades into Kwame Hadi’s trumpet solo while Tommy Hunter’s voice (probably dubbed later) announces the date and venue. Hadi plays nicely, as usual, supported by a swelling Arkestral accompaniment that gradually resumes the brightly riffing composition before fading out too soon. “Solar Ship Voyage” consists of a brief synthesizer solo in Ra’s rocket-ship style, punctuated with skittering runs of notes and piercing, high-pitched whines. “Cosmo Darkness” is a short group improvisation with squealing horns pitted against Ra’s rumbling electronic organ. Ra wins. “The Light Thereof” opens with an enervated organ solo before the ensemble takes up the mournful, densely arranged composition, which was apparently performed only this one time (Campbell & Trent, p.827). Another lost masterpiece! An ensemble of saxophones, flutes and trumpet improvise simultaneously while Gilmore takes the lead with a display of tenor pyrotechnics until Ra points the finger and the piece stops on a dime, eliciting enthusiastic applause from the small studio audience. Quite a display of avant garde weirdness for Third World television!

The disc concludes with three more tracks recorded on December 12. Ra has been provided an acoustic piano, which he uses to push the band a ragged but still effective performance of “Friendly Galaxy #2,” featuring a twittering flute choir over the insistently repeating trumpet note. Ra then takes a meditative solo, slowing the tempo to a full stop before launching into the single-long arrangement of “To Nature’s God,” which is taken up by June Tyson and Gilmore with gusto. Sonny quickly drops out and everyone takes up percussion instruments to bang along
with Pat Patrick’s electric bass vamp, while Tyson and Gilmore sing, dance, chant and parade around the room. Despite the band’s enthusiasm, this was apparently the last performance of this quirky little ditty (Campbell & Trent, p.842). Finally, the disc closes with the bouncy space chant, “Why Go to the Moon,” which, unfortunately, fades out after about two and half minutes. Supposedly, the entire three and a half hour Heliopolis concert was recorded by Tommy Hunter, but it is unknown whether the rest of the tape survives (Id., p.181). Given that none of it appears on this Art Yard CD, it seems unlikely. But you never know what might surface...

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The Egyptian sojourn was supposed only last a few days, but they wound staying two weeks “as they rode camels, shopped, hitchhiked, and went sightseeing” (Szwed, p.293). They even ventured into the great pyramids, where the lights dramatically went out as soon as they entered the mystical King’s Chamber. As they made their way back out in pitch darkness, Sonny calmly remarked, “Why do we need light, Sun Ra, the sun is here” (Id.). All this was no doubt great fun, but the trip was taking its toll on the Arkestra’s already precarious finances:

One night near the end of their stay in Cairo, Geerken saw Sun Ra seated at a table in the hotel with a candle and piece of paper covered with long rows of numbers. It was not numerology; they were again out of money, with not even enough to pay the hotel bill. This was becoming a regular occurrence on tours, as Sonny loved traveling and became depressed when they returned to Philadelphia. Geerken once saw Sun Ra pay for a $1000 phone bill by selling the rights to a master tape of the band. This time, members of the band sold personal items to get the money. And Sonny left his Sun harp with Geerken as security against money he loaned him (Id., pp.293-294).

1972 would turn out to be another lean year for the Arkestra and they would not return to Europe again until the fall of 1973. They did, however, make a movie: the pseudo-Blaxploitation classic, Space is the Place and sign a recording contract with a major label, ABC/Impulse! Coming up next on Sun Ra Sunday!

April 25, 2010

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Arkestra: Space is the Place (Rhapsody Films VHS)

Soon after their return to California, Sun Ra was approached by film producer Jim Newman about a possible thirty-minute documentary about the Arkestra to be aired on PBS. While that idea never panned out, with the help of director John Coney, a different kind of film was envisioned: Space Is the Place, “part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic” (Szwed p. 330).

The final version of the film is easy enough to summarize (if not so easy to understand): having been traveling in space for some years in a rocket ship propelled by music as fuel, Sun Ra locates a planet which he deems suitable for the resuscitation of the black race. He returns to earth and lands in Oakland, circa. 1972 (where in real life the Arkestra was staying and where the Black Panthers were under stack by the police and the FBI). Throughout the film Ra battles with the Overseer, a supernatural pimp who profits from the degradation of black people. Sun Ra offers those who would follow him into space an “alter-destiny,” but the Overseer, the FBI, and NASA ultimately force him to return to space prematurely (Id. pp.330-331).
Sun Ra was actively engaged in the film-making process -- to the point of editing out several scenes, including two “sexual situations,” a scene where a junkie responds to Ra’s music by quitting drugs and getting on the spaceship, and one in which Sun Ra saves some white people (!) (Id. p.332). In the end, the movie was cut from ninety minutes to just over an hour and while it’s fun to watch, it’s really not a very good film (we fell asleep watching it last night). My favorite scene is the flashback to 1943 and it is apparently based upon a real event back when Sonny was playing piano in a strip joint during his early days in Chicago: after being threatened by the Overseer, Ra plays an increasingly cacophonous piano solo which literally blows everyone out of the bar in a cloud of smoke and atonal fury. Hilarious!

The film finally opened in 1974 and enjoyed a few screenings in San Francisco and New York, but soon sank without a trace. Over the years, the Arkestra would sometimes project pieces of the movie during concerts and it eventually earned some status as a “cult classic.” But Sonny had high hopes for the movie and was bitterly disappointed in its failure. He later (rather implausibly) claimed that some of his ideas were stolen from him in Star Wars and Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Id. p.333). Rhapsody Films issued it on VHS cassette in 1993 and Plexifilm released an expanded version on DVD in 2003 -- both of which are now long out of print. Here are a couple of clips to give you an idea of what it’s like:

The Arkestra also entered a real recording studio for the first time since leaving New York to record the soundtrack to the film, which was released by Evidence in 1993. We’ll have a listen to that next week.

COMMENTS:

Rodger Coleman said...
Sadly, I never picked up the DVD of this when it was available, and it now commands absurd collector's prices. So I'm not exactly sure if the deleted scenes were restored. Anyone know?

Sam said...
Yes, I'm pretty sure the deleted scenes are restored, although maybe not every scene you mention--I haven't watched this in a while. Definitely the scene with the Overseer and two naked girls in the hospital has been restored (to the overall detriment of the film).
To me the absolute best part of the film (because of the music) is the scene when Ra rides through the streets of Oakland in the white convertible with the Overseer. Check the music playing during that scene--this is great stuff, and it didn't appear on the soundtrack CD. The only other version of this I know of is from one of the 1972 Slug's shows.

May 16, 2010

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Solar Arkestra:
Soundtrack to the Film Space is the Place (Evidence CD)

In early 1972, the Arkestra entered a real recording studio for the first time since their relocation to California in order to record the soundtrack and to be filmed for inclusion in the movie, Space Is the Place. The name of the studio is unknown and, in any case, it is long gone by now; but according to producer Jim Newman, it was “on Connecticut Avenue at the foot of Potero Hill in San Francisco” and the crew was borrowed from the legendary Different Fur Trading Company (Campbell & Trent, p.185). While an accompanying album to be released on Blue Thumb is
alluded to in the movie, most of the music recorded at these sessions was finally issued for the first time by Evidence in 1993. The material was heavily edited for the film and mostly drawn from the working repertoire of the period, including such live stalwarts as “Watusa,” “Satellites Are Spinning,” “Outer Spaceways Incorporated,” “We Travel the Spaceways,” “Love in Outer Space,” and, of course, “Space Is the Place.” While the performances are rather abbreviated on the CD, the sound quality is excellent and, despite the fact that John Gilmore is heard primarily on drums rather than saxophone, there are several interesting bits of music which make this well worth hearing.

For example: “Under Different Stars” is an intense conducted improvisation featuring trumpeters Kwame Hadi and Wayne Harris bathed in thick reverb while Sonny makes burbling noises on electronic keyboards. And while “Discipline 33” is mis-titled according to Ben Opie (Id.), it is definitely from the Discipline series of compositions with its intricately interweaving horn riffs and Hadi again turns in a tasteful solo; sadly, it fades out too soon never to be played again. “The Overseer” is another free-jazz freakout, tautly reined in by Ra’s orchestral organ sprays while “Mysterious Crystal” evokes the futuristic exotica of Strange Strings, featuring a typically brilliant oboe solo by Marshall Allen. Finally, Sun Ra takes a thoughtful MiniMoog solo on “Cosmic Forces” and launches into some portentous declamations on “I Am the Alter-Destiny” and “I Am the Brother of the Wind,” the latter allowing Eloe Omoe to shine on raspy bass clarinet while the ensemble rages in the background.

According to Campbell & Trent, edited versions of “We’re Living in the Space Age” and the “Unknown Factor” were used in the film but not included on the Evidence CD (Id). Furthermore, the wonderfully atonal piano solo from the hilarious strip club scene is also absent. It seems likely all this music was recorded at a later date as work continued on the film well into 1974, but these have not turned up to date. Additionally, the 2001 ESP Radio Tribute broadcast included extended versions of “Outer Spaceways Incorporated” and “We’ll Wait for You,” which segues into “Strange Worlds” and ends with another spaced-out synthesizer solo. Unfortunately, these tracks are in mono and suffer from slightly degraded sound quality. Even so, completists will want to search them out.

Space Is the Place may have been something of a cinematic failure, but the soundtrack CD is enormously satisfying and makes for an excellent overview of the Arkestra’s music during this period. For casual and fanatical Sun Ra fans alike, it is absolutely essential.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Re: the Discipline piece, incorrectly titled "Discipline 33" (the actual D.33 appears on the Blue Thumb LP): this is a great piece, for me the highlight of this album. Hadi's trumpet solo is transcendent, a perfect distillation of his style. And the baritone sax riffs are just so cool! The only other appearance of this tune, I think, is on the 1972-08-19 Slug's show, with vocals added on top ("At first there was nothing...").

May 23, 2010

Sun Ra: Intergalactic Research (The Lost Reels Collection, Vol. 2) (Transparency CD)

By the spring of 1972, the Arkestra’s living situation was becoming increasingly precarious. Sun Ra had returned to the University of California in Berkeley hoping to teach another class in black
aesthetics but soon quit after not being paid (Szwed p.330). He claimed the university targeted him due to the controversial subject matter of his lectures, but for whatever reason, his academic career (such as it was) was now over (Id.). Moreover, the Black Panthers evicted the Arkestra out of their house in Oakland due to “ideological” differences (Id.) -- likely regarding the Panthers’ recent rhetorical turn toward violent revolution. As Sun Ra predicted, this move would doom the Panthers as a legitimate political party or progressive social movement. As Sonny later acidly remarked: “we got kicked out by Eldridge Cleaver or somebody” (Id.). And so with little paying work and no place to live, the decision was made to leave California in May, 1972 and move back to Marshall Allen’s house on Morton Street in Philadelphia -- this time for good.

Naturally, some band members took off immediately for points elsewhere but, as usual, the core musicians hung in and slowly made their way with Sonny across the country, hustling gigs as they could. Sadly, very little documentary evidence exists of this period. However, a thirty-two minute concert fragment from an unknown venue was issued as part of Transparency’s Lost Reels Collection, Vol. 2 and it just might be possible this was recorded in the spring of 1972, prior to the band’s arrival back east. On the other hand, the presence of Pat Patrick on baritone sax and electric bass is suspicious for a later date (he does not appear on the soundtrack or in the film, Space Is the Place). So who knows when exactly this was recorded? In any event, I’m sticking it here for the time being.

While all too brief, it is a remarkably good sounding tape, recorded in mono with on-stage microphones or, perhaps, from the soundboard. It is also a fantastic performance, starting out with a surprisingly subdued MiniMoog solo, full of gentle, swooshing noises and lazy portamentos. This serves as a prelude to an outrageous rendition of “Outer Space” with Sun Ra cueing thunderous space chords to punctuate his mad-scientist-style organ solo before giving way to a powerful tenor sax blowout by John Gilmore. Yes, it’s another incredible Gilmore solo! This leads into a conducted improvisation which begins with some noodling electric bass over a smattering of percussion; but as things start to heat up, Kwame Hadi comes in with some high-register trumpet acrobatics, his rich tone full-bodied and warm. Suddenly, Ra cues the ensemble in an energetic group improvisation which is abruptly silenced by a gigantic blast of organ, the piece ending with some quietly hissing chords. Interesting! Finally, a rare performance of “Intergalactic Research” concludes the tape with its long, loping jam built upon an endlessly repeating two-note figure which is passed around the Arkestra in various instrumental combinations. (Interestingly, Ra is heard on acoustic piano on this track.) Eloe Omoe takes a snaky bass clarinet solo, but he’s off mic and hard to hear but Hadi provides another virtuoso turn on trumpet. After fifteen minutes of groovy vamping, the ensemble returns with the theme only to have the tape fade out. Argh! Too bad the rest of this concert (whenever it was recorded) was not preserved!

It wasn’t all bad news for the Arkestra: producer Ed Michel had recently offered Sun Ra and Alton Abraham a potentially lucrative contract with ABC/Impulse! to reissue most of the Saturn LPs and to go into the studio to make a bunch of new albums (Id. p.333). According to Ra, the label promised "to spend almost a million dollars in publicity" (Id.). ABC/Impulse! was, of course, the home of John Coltrane’s late recordings, which had spawned “The New Thing” and a stream of semi-popular albums by such Coltrane acolytes as Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp. At the time, it probably seemed like Sun Ra would fit right in. Ultimately, the deal didn’t quite turn out as well Sonny had hoped; but for a brief while, Sun Ra records were widely available in stores and helped take the band to the next level. The Arkestra would make its first recording for the label, the classic Astro Black, while in Chicago on May 7, 1972 (Campbell & Trent p.185).
May 30, 2010

I’m taking a break for the holiday weekend -- and so should you. Instead of reading my rambling drivel, have a listen to the man himself in this brief interview from WTZA-TV 62 which was aired to promote the Arkestra’s appearance at The Getaway in Saugerties, New York on June 13, 1986. Note that the death of Bennie Goodman, “The King of Swing,” is announced right after Ra’s segment.

June 6, 2010

Sun Ra: Astro Black (ABC/Impulse! LP)

According to the jacket of Astro Black, Sun Ra’s first new recording for ABC/Impulse! was made at “El Saturn Studio” in Chicago on May 7, 1972, but that date is questionable since the Arkestra was just leaving California in May -- and the studio name is “strictly mythic” (Campbell & Trent p.186) Whatever the date or actual location, it was clearly made in a professional recording studio as the sound quality is exceptionally good. Sun Ra was obviously determined to take advantage of the mass exposure a major label could bring, producing one his finest albums. Notably, Ronnie Boykins makes a welcome return on bass after a long absence and he is prominently featured here, driving the band to great heights. The Arkestra is augmented with both Akh Tal Ebah and Kwame Hadi on trumpets, Charles Stephens on trombone, Alzo Wright on violin and viola, along with several conga players, who give much of this record its avant-exotica feel. But Boykins’s clearly inspires Sonny and his fluent explorations on organ and synthesizer throughout the album demonstrate a consummate mastery of electronic instruments. Astro Black is, in my opinion, one of Sun Ra’s crowning recorded achievements.

A radical re-arrangement of the title piece opens the album with June Tyson’s lugubrious singing supported by Sun Ra’s swooshing synthesizers, a pointillist horn chart, and Boykins’s stuttering bass groove. After the vocals subside, a thoughtful improvisation follows featuring a woozy synth duetting with Boykins on the bow, the horns eventually entering with some energetic episodes of free jazz blowing. After a few minutes of controlled chaos, Tyson reprises the lyrics and Sonny ends the piece with more spacey synthesizer noises while Boykins continues to saw away in the uppermost registers of his instrument. Nice. A brief rendition of “Discipline 99” again demonstrates Boykins’s ability to provide a rock-solid rhythmic and harmonic foundation on this obliquely swinging composition. Ra provides some glistening, tremulous vibraphone and the ensemble sounds tight and well-rehearsed with individual soloing kept to a minimum, thereby turning in a note-perfect reading. Boykins again leads the way on “Hidden Spheres,” spinning endlessly inventive variations on the hypnotic three-note ostinato over the percussionists’ simmering, semi-exotic groove. On top of all this, John Gilmore contributes a pithy but harmonically adventurous statement on tenor saxophone before Hadi’s wide-ranging trumpet solo and Eloe Omoe’s honking bass clarinet which concludes the piece.
All of side two is taken up with a nearly twenty-minute conducted improvisation entitled, “The Cosmo Fire,” which ranks up there with the other great long-form pieces in the discography such as “Other Planes of There,” “The Magic City” and “Atlantis.” While only loosely structured, Ra is totally in control, directing the band from behind his bank of “mad scientist” keyboards, signaling space chords and drawing out various sub-ensembles that come together and mutate while soloists enter and exit at his command. This extended piece is not as overtly episodic as the aforementioned previous experiments and instead builds up a cumulative momentum with Marshall Allen’s delightfully quacking and squealing oboe an almost constant presence within the restlessly shifting instrumental textures. The oboe is not an instrument you hear much in jazz except for Marshall Allen and here he distantly evokes the ancient Middle Eastern nay amidst all the cosmic afro-futurism and “out jazz” blowing. Allen is an underappreciated virtuoso on this difficult, rarely heard instrument. And again, Ronnie Boykins’s inimitable bass anchors the proceedings with an effortless élan which allows the rest of the band to freely take flight. Really, Boykins’s playing on this album is quite remarkable -- even for him -- and his unifying effect on the band is obvious and thrilling. Too bad he could not commit himself full time to Sun Ra.

It’s also too bad that, within three years, the purportedly “lucrative” deal with ABC/Impulse! went sour and the label unceremoniously dropped Sun Ra from the roster and promptly deleted all the albums (which included a number of reissued Saturn titles). To add insult to injury, Astro Black has never been re-issued on CD or otherwise, despite the label’s continued exploitation of other perhaps less-worthy “New Thing” titles in its catalog. It boggles the mind that this classic album is still out of print. Accordingly, original copies in good condition are extremely hard to find and fetch astronomical sums from collectors. That is really a shame as it truly is one of the finest records in Sun Ra’s discography.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
I agree with you wholeheartedly about the brilliance of this album, Rodger! It’s definitely in my top 5. Boykins was never recorded better, and his playing really shines here.

The title cut is wonderful because it’s so understated. June Tyson makes the melody abstract--it's yet to develop into the melodious versions familiar from all the live recordings. Here, it's more arrhythmic and more mysterious. Ra's use of the synthesizer is restrained and darkly calm.

"Discipline 99" is one of my favorite Disciplines--here, we get a fine Gilmore solo. It'll be interesting for you to contrast this version with the one on "Out Beyond the Kingdom Of," which features a wonderful exploratory, lengthy piano postlude.

One thing that catches my attention in "The Cosmos Fire" is the subtle restraint of the drumming, the way the drums work with the percussion--the drums are very unobtrusive (similar to the drums in "Other planes of there" and some of the Heliocentric pieces). The whole piece floats on waves of sound, implying non-movement, and yet at the same time has a propulsive, forward momentum that consistently sustains interest. I love this quality of Ra’s longer guided improvisational pieces like this (see also "Fireside chat with Lucifer" for another example).

While many top-tier Ra albums in my book are due largely to the presence of great Gilmore solos, this one is upper-echelon Ra due to its group dynamic, its excellent synthesizer, and the playing of Boykins.
paul dean said...
It recently occurred to me that Astro Black might be a response to Afro Blue, the jazz classic. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiHS8Hf7Tb4

I found your site while looking for the lyrics to Astro Black, but apparently they are not to be found anywhere and I’m just gonna have to listen carefully. Of course you know this version: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WKjCgrN6Y8

Nice discussion here!

Roddus said...

June 13, 2010

THE SHADOW OF THE FIRE

The vibrations of the sounds seem the same
But the meaning of the sounds
Take separate directions
At the crossroads
of the Cosmic point of the arrow…
Beyond this Age
Through the darkness of the light years
And the light years of the darkness
And the pure darkness of the pure light.
The light is as the darkness
Because the light is the image
And the shadow of the fire.

-- Sun Ra

June 20, 2010

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Slug’s Saloon, New York, NY 6-07-72 (AUD 2CDR)

When Sun Ra & his Arkestra returned to the east coast in May of 1972, they were welcomed back to Slug’s Saloon, the legendary Lower East Side nightclub where the Arkestra regularly held court from 1966 until their departure to California in 1970. But things were not the same: On February 19, trumpet star Lee Morgan was shot to death at the club by his enraged girlfriend further scaring audiences away from what was already well known as a rough neighborhood. By the summer, the club was on its last legs and would shut its doors for good shortly thereafter (see Szwed pp.218-220). So the Arkestra’s residencies at Slug’s during the summer of 1972 were both festive homecoming and sad farewell to an unusually supportive New York City venue. Fortunately for us, most of a complete set from their appearance on June 7 was recorded from the audience and circulates amongst devoted collectors. The mono tape recording sounds pretty decent for the period although it suffers from all the usual sorts of
problems: generational loss, assorted glitches and drop-outs, general muddiness and, sometimes, outright distortion. If you're willing to tolerate such anomalies, then it is well worth seeking out this spectacular performance.

While the core musicians remained faithful to Sun Ra's vision, The Arkestra's extended membership was, as usual, in flux. Once again left without a bassist, Alzo Wright steps in with some barely audible cello while Akh Tal Ebah replaces mainstay Kwame Hadi on trumpet, giving him an opportunity to step out from the shadow of Hadi's showy virtuosity. For all that, the band sounds well-rehearsed and they tackle a bunch of new Ra compositions and re-arrangements with gusto. After an opening improvisation for arco cello and oboe followed by a long percussion work out, another unknown number in the “Discipline” series arises, this one fulminating with regal pomp. Moments later, another unknown title gets its first (and perhaps only) hearing: an agitated ostinato in 7/4 held together by Danny Ray Thompson’s relentless riffing on baritone sax. “They’ll Come Back” gets a dramatic vocal performance from June Tyson and ends with a brief but exquisite moment of “Strange Strings”-style orientalism. Ebah’s smeared tonality contrasts nicely with the churning skronk on “Calling Planet Earth” and, after a short statement of “Theme of the Stargazers,” “Discipline 11” is given a gospel-ish reading via spirited drumming from Lex Humphries with Ra’s aggressive organ solo pushing the band to ecstatic heights of electro-free-jazz intensity. Wow. This is a superb version of this rarely heard composition.

Another under-performed piece, “Somewhere Else,” gets an interesting (if somewhat tentative) reading here, with John Gilmore staking out the harmonic areas a cappella before the Arkestra enters with the oddly swinging, interlocking riffage. Ra takes one of his patented barbequed organ solos before Ebah attempts his own high-register acrobatic act, showing he was Hadi’s equal in terms of brilliant ideas, if not in their flawless execution. Personally, I love Ebah’s warm, mellow tone and find his blurry articulation endearingly expressive. A quick run through “Enlightenment” is followed by a typically grooving “Love in Outer Space” with Sonny rapturously vamping away on the organ throughout. Yet another unknown “Discipline” number follows, this one in the swinging big-band mold with multiple riffs colliding over swelling chords. Sadly, the tape is marred by numerous drop-outs, obscuring the composition’s subtle intricacies. As the drums devolve into more tribal sorts of rhythms, Gilmore takes a truly incendiary solo on tenor sax that gradually but insistently pushes the band towards its ultimate destination: “The Shadow World!” As the sound quality of the tape begins to improve, Sun Ra lays down the enervating chord sequence at a blindingly fast tempo. Astonishingly, the Arkestra erupts with a note-perfect rendition of this fantastically complicated composition. This inspires a tense, “mad-scientist-style” organ solo, Sun Ra spraying cluster-bombs of notes about the room with wild abandon, much to the crowd’s obvious delight. Not to be outdone, Gilmore returns with another blistering solo before the band returns with a tight reprise. Outstanding! Shifting gears, Sonny plays a pretty organ interlude over a set of melancholically descending chords which serves as an introduction to another unknown “Discipline” number. This one sets a pair of repeating, minimalist horn figures to balance atop the polyrhythmic rhythm section while Ebah blows a long-breathed, minor-key melody on top. Interesting. Danny Davis (or is it Marshall Allen?) takes flight on alto sax before a relatively brief drum solo which introduces a rare performance of “Angels and Demons at Play” in its recent bare-bones rearrangement. Unfortunately, the band still sounds unsure of itself and, after failing to coalesce, Sonny cues up “Watusi” which eschews the head for another tumultuous tenor solo from Gilmore before the extended percussion jam — although Ebah can be heard wailing away in the background throughout. The tape cuts off shortly thereafter.
The Arkestra appeared once more at Slug's a month later and again surreptitiously recorded from the audience (we'll take a listen to that one next time). Both of these gigs have been compiled into a six-disc box set by the Transparency label, purportedly with improved sound and approximately thirty minutes of additional material, but I have not heard it and do not know anyone who has. Can anyone out there in Internetland comment on this? These performances are so good I would gladly pay for an improved mastering of these recordings. Until then, I'm happy to have these widely-circulated “bootlegs,” despite their obvious flaws.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
I wanted to mention, once again, the only other appearance (I think) of that fantastic 7/4 vamp piece--it's the background music in the film "Space is the Place" that's playing when Ra rides with the Overseer in his car through the streets of Oakland. It's a fantastic scene, and a wonderful piece of music--just one of seemingly dozens that Ra never "officially" released. It's a miracle, really, that we have what we do.

Another thing to mention is that this 7/4 vamp is sandwiched in between (again, I believe the only, though I may be wrong) an instrumental shuffle-driven of "Along Came Ra" --a piece usually reserved to introduce Ra in the mid- to late-80s corridor, sung by June Tyson (an excellent version is in the film "Joyful Noise").

I hope somebody chimes in about the Transparency versions of these Slug's shows; I too am curious.

June 27, 2010

FLIGHT

What I thought I am
I am not
What was and is
Is not
What dreams were mine
I am not
What was and is
Is not
The laughter, the tears
The fleeting years
Are not
Gone like a sigh
Or a bird swift
In sudden flight.

-- Sun Ra

July 11, 2010
The Arkestra returned to Slug’s Saloon a month later and the August 19, 1972 performance was captured (almost) in full on a 180-minute mono tape recorded from the audience. The sound quality is both better and worse than the June 7 tape. There’s a bit less generational loss and more presence to the sound -- but perhaps a bit too much presence as when things get loud, the tape overloads and distorts badly, making for a sometimes difficult listen. Too bad, as it’s another excellent performance. The Arkestra is further enlarged with the return of Pat Patrick to the bari sax, Kwame Hadi re-joining Akh Tal Ebah on trumpet and a gifted trombonist (either Charles Stephens or, possibly, Tyrone Hill) fleshing out the horn the section and contributing several outstanding solos. Clifford Jarvis is unmistakably back on the drum stool, which makes for a driving rhythm section (but also lengthy and pointless drum solos) while the addition of a (barely audible) bassist (possibly Bill Davis) adds some bottom end to the ensemble. Finally, June Tyson is joined by The Space Ethnic Voices (Ruth Wright, Cheryl Banks and Judith Holton) on the big vocal numbers, making for (at least) eighteen musicians and singers crowding the tiny stage on this summer evening (see Campbell & Trent pp.187-188).

Sonny gets things started with a thoughtful Moog/organ solo that sets the stage for the first known performance of “Stardust from Tomorrow,” a jaunty swing number featuring glowing vocals and propelled by Ra’s up-front organ comping. From there, we’re immediately in “The Shadow World,” and it’s a rip-snorting version with bracing solos from John Gilmore, Omoe and Hadi, but Danny Ray Thompson brings down the house with a thunderous libfecto outing. The group-improv section features a big saxophone battle with some aggressive organ playing from Ra and a nicely articulated trombone solo thrown in before the first overlong drum solo of the evening. Without bothering a full reprise of the hyper-complicated tune, the band moves quickly into “Why Go to the Moon?,” a chance for Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices to strut their stuff. The rhythm section settles into a slinky groove, only to have Jarvis ruin the mood with another tedious drum solo. Why did Sonny put up with this? Because he was so good? Because good drummers are so hard to find? It’s a mystery. Tyson enters with a brief but nicely sung “Strange Worlds” while horns flitter and flutes twitter about. As the drums start to get heavy, Patrick cues up a composition last heard on the *Space Is The Place Soundtrack* (mis-titled there as “Discipline 33”). It is classic Ra with its cleverly interlocking horn parts set against that patented space age barbeque groove with a long-breathed, vaguely Arabian-sounding melody on top. Perfect. (But what is the correct title? And why did they stop playing it? Who knows!) While the Arkestra is busy riffing and vamping, Ra enters with a quasi-Biblical declamation: “At First There Was Nothing.” It goes on and on, punctuated with crazy-sounding stage-laughter and it’s hard to hear exactly what’s going on, but it sounds like some kind of crypto-cosmic theater piece. The Arkestra starts taking liberties, playing around with their parts, trading places, while chaos rages around them. Hadi and Ebah play high register games and -- what is it? A soprano saxophone? Who is that? Gilmore? Anyway, Ra returns to the organ bench to launch into “Angels and Demons at Play,” which churns and grinds with almost Milesian, dystopian darkness. Unfortunately, the intense volume levels cause the tape to distort badly until finally cutting off abruptly just as the audience starts to whoop and holler.

The tape picks up again at the beginning of the second set with a squiggly synth solo full of spacey blops and whirs like alien Morse Code broadcast from Mars – “Calling Planet Earth!” Everyone joins in the antiphonal chanting as the drums swell and an insistent one-note horn figure develops, only to devolve into free-jazz bashing and group improvisation, high trumpet on top. Sonny cues up “Watusi” and it’s the usual percussion fest, although with a heavy afro-urban feel quite different from the lighter, celebratory groove found previously and with Ra’s organ taking on a more menacing tone than usual. Of course, this also means another Jarvis solo. Oh
well. When the rest of the band takes up hand percussion, it gets a little more compelling and then someone starts up with the space-vocalizing, declaiming, preaching, and politicking. Good lord! Who is that? It’s almost impossible to make out what he’s saying, but I suspect we’re not missing much. After a statement of the theme, Tyson is left alone to chant about outer space before another avant-jazz blowout that leads to an awesomely distorted and electro-fied libfecto solo (Thompson again, I presume) that leaves the audience in stunned silence. One person claps. After some more group improvisation, they move effortlessly into “Discipline 27,” a joyous big-band number full of classy riffs, close-cropped harmonies, and a swinging middle section for Hadi to play with. Patrick smoothly reintroduces the theme so that the ensemble can finish with an elegant reprise. “Discipline 27” would become a fixture in the Arkestra’s setlists for the rest of its career.

Tyson and the chorus inform the audience: “We’ll Wait for You” and after some skronky madness, Gilmore takes over with a short but intense solo on tenor. This acts as a prelude to another unknown (but extremely interesting) composition for contrasting concertinos: low reeds and brass. This is contrasted with conducted improvisations for pairs of instruments: bass clarinet and trumpet; tenor saxophone and trombone; oboe and trumpet. Jarvis turns up the heat and the intensity level rises as more and more instrumentalists join in the fray – and the tape distorts so badly it’s impossible to really hear what’s going on. But then Ra cues a ghostly, suspended chord that allows space for a hair-raisingly aggressive a capella tenor solo from Gilmore. Whew! After a brief pause, the Arkestra introduces “Discipline 27-II” a variation on the central two-chord theme of “Discipline 27” that would also become a concert staple, its floating harmonies supporting a mellifluous alto sax solo from Marshall Allen and a long declamation from Sun Ra about life and death, Tyson echoing his every line in tandem. They conclude that “Life is Splendid.” Meanwhile the band holds it all together by continuing to play around with the oscillating riffs of "Discipline 27-II" throughout the entire twenty-three minutes duration. In fact, the tape cuts out before they’re even finished. The Arkestra is obviously well-rehearsed and into it.

Tyson and Gilmore sing through “Theme of the Stargazers” before a breezy rendition of “Space is the Place” full of over-the-top vocalizing and a hilariously caricatured trombone solo. It’s all a bit silly, but Jarvis and a second drummer (possibly Gilmore) establish an almost Mardi Gras/Bo Diddley beat that makes you (well, me) want to get up and dance. Even so, at almost fifteen minutes, it gets a little boring. I guess you hadda been there. Indeed the audience loves the swirling synth/organ solo that emerges from “Calling Planet Earth,” but the sound is totally overdriven and distorted on the tape -- especially when the drums start really pounding -- making it hard to appreciate as much as they obviously do. You can tell it’s a good one, though. The volume level drops for a quick version of “Enlightenment” notable for its flute choir accompaniment but picks up again for “Love in Outer Space” which is its usual perky organ jam over percussion exotica. The tape ends with the first known performance of “Discipline 33,” one of the most fascinating compositions in Ra’s catalog. Ostensibly jazzy, it is thickly scored for grouped reeds and brass with piccolo, flute and oboe on top, but the trombone stomps off while the horns wander around in various time signatures. Meanwhile, ensembles come together and fall apart between short improvisational statements. Finally a coda consisting of impossibly beautiful harmonies floating above Ra’s wispy organ chords ends the piece with a contented sigh. Just lovely.

Both of the 1972 Slug’s Saloon recordings have been compiled into a six-disc box set by the Transparency label, purportedly with improved sound and additional material, but I have not heard it. Can anyone out there comment on this? In the meantime, I’m happy to have these widely-circulated “bootlegs,” despite their obvious flaws.
July 18, 2010

Sun Ra: *The Universe Sent Me (Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 5)* (Transparency CD)

Between the Arkestra’s appearances at Slug’s Saloon in June and August, they also performed *en plein air* at the South Street Seaport Museum in lower Manhattan on July 9, 1972. Twenty minutes of this concert was recorded from the audience and the tape was recently exhumed and released on Transparency’s *Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 5* CD. What’s most notable about this recording is that it is in stereo (still a rarity in 1972) and the outdoor ambience makes for very enjoyable sound quality indeed—for as long as it lasts anyway.

The tape picks up mid-set with a smattering of applause and Sun Ra’s organ introduction to “Outer Spaceways Incorporated.” Tyson and the guys chant the song a handful of times while Gilmore adds some scribbly saxophone *obbligato*. Then Sonny cues a big blasting space chord that launches the pummeling free-jazz group improvisation led by Jarvis’s hyperkinetic drums and the two high-wire trumpeters, Hadi and Ebah. After a few minutes of this sort of thing, Sun Ra cues a break and takes over with low-register synth and organ squiggles with Gilmore providing out-cat commentary. Eventually, Gilmore is left alone a *cappella* to deftly wield his knife’s edge tone and execute massive, teeth-rattling multiphonics on his ostensibly monophonic horn. Classic Gilmore solo! After another quick organ interlude and reed-splitting *libflecto* outing from Thompson, we get another early performance of “Discipline 27-II.” Basically consisting of the main riff from “Discipline 27” slowed down to a dreamy sway, the ensembles gradually metastasize through endless repetition. Usually this was accompanied by a hortatory declamation from Ra (e.g. “What Planet Is This?” and/or “Life is Splendid”), but here we have a purely instrumental rendition and the spacious stereo recording allows one to really hear the subtle shape-shifting of the instrumental textures. Unfortunately, after about seven minutes of bliss, our recordist experiences technical difficulties and the sound quality deteriorates markedly, with suddenly distant sound and intermittently violent tape warbles. It could be the venue itself was experiencing electrical problems as someone right up next to the microphone says, “He ain’t got no power either! The music—.” A few seconds later the tape cuts off. Not sure what happened there, but oh well. So it goes with Sun Ra’s “unofficial” discography!

The remainder of the *Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 5* is redeemed by a fifty-minute audience recording from Paris on September 8, 1973. It sounds pretty good but we’ll get to that one in due course.

July 25, 2010

Sun Ra & His Solar Myth Arkestra: *Life Is Splendid* (Alive!/Total Energy CD)

On September 9, 1972, Sun Ra and His Solar Myth Arkestra performed for more than 12,000 people at the First Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, conceived and produced by the Sixties counter-cultural icon, John Sinclair. The suitably eclectic bill included, among others, the Art Ensemble of Chicago, Junior Walker & The All Stars and the legendary Howlin’ Wolf. The proceedings were recorded by Atlantic Records and a 2-LP sampler of the festival (including an edited version of Sun Ra’s “Life Is Splendid”) was released in 1973 as Atlantic SD2-502 (and later reissued as ATL 60058) (See Campbell & Trent, p.189). I have not heard this record but it
should be noted here that the Art Ensemble’s set was also released by Atlantic and entitled, *Bap-Tizum*—it is excellent.

Sadly, the original 16-track masters were lost in a fire, leaving only this two-track reference tape of Sun Ra’s performance which was finally released on CD by Sinclair’s Alive!/Total Energy label in 1999. The sound quality is not great, but it’s not terrible either—certainly way more listenable than many of the audience recordings we’ve been listening to lately! Unfortunately, the tape is incomplete: According to Sinclair’s liner notes, the first several minutes of the set are missing because “a proper mix could not be achieved.” Given the 20+ member size of the Arkestra, I’m sure it was a challenge! It’s a pity since we’re apparently missing the usual opening improvisation and the (possibly) more exploratory material performed that evening. The Arkestra’s sets had by this point become somewhat routine-ized with the latter half of the set devoted to cosmical space-chants, singalongs, and dance/percussion workouts. Quite a spectacle, I’m sure—but not always compelling listening (or maybe I’m getting tired of this project).

Anyway, another annoying thing about this CD is the total absence of indexing; it’s just one thirty-seven-minute long track, making it impossible to isolate the individual compositions. Put it on and you’re committed. Oh well, so it goes with Mr. Ra’s records. The tape picks up with the usual “Enlightenment,” complete with flute choir and muted trumpets accompanying June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices. Despite the unbalanced sound, you can tell the Arkestra is luxuriating on a spacious stage in front of a large, receptive audience. But Ra keeps an accordingly tight leash on the band, making sure they deliver a carefully choreographed version of the “Cosmo Drama” for mass consumption. This is probably to be expected given the heightened circumstances (and after all, Ra’s music was about discipline), but it results in a less than totally satisfying recording.

Sonny’s gritty organ self-propels the afro-space-groove of “Love in Outer Space” but doesn’t go on long enough to get airborne. “Space Is the Place,” other hand, is much more expansive, exuberantly sung with lots of squealing horns and Ra’s spacey barbeque sauce holding it all together. The conducted improvisation that follows contains everything you could want from a Sun Ra jam: roiling drums, battling altos, a jaw-dropping Gilmore blow-out, and some super-freaky electronics from Sun Ra—but hyper-compressed into a handful of minutes. “Discipline 27-1I” supports a series of pontifical declamations, including “What Planet Is This?,” “Life Is Splendid” and “Immeasurable” delivered with a stagey theatricality. The full-bodied Arkestra sounds supremely confident on the languid, flowing arrangement, improvising laughing riffs here and there in response to the hysterically antiphonal vocals. But again, Sonny cuts things short with a dissonant organ cluster to signal the inevitable “Watusi.” The Arkestra swings right into full-throated statement of the head but then it’s the standard percussion workout led by Lex Humphreys and (mysterious multi-instrumentalist) Azlo Wright on drums (Jarvis is notable for his absence at this high-profile gig.) The clattering and banging, dancing and carrying on is allowed to build up a good head of steam but Ra suddenly cues up another bit of out-there improv before a cursory verse of “Outer Spaceways Incorporated,” sung by Tyson. Some rocketship synthesizer noise ends the set amidst shouts of “Space is the Place” and thoroughly enraptured cheering and applause.

Despite its flaws, *Life Is Splendid* is a welcome (if fragmentary) document of Sun Ra’s historic appearance at the 1972 Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival. The sound quality is decent and there are several fleeting moments of truly inspired music-making to be found here. Who knows, it might even be a great introduction for the novice with its concise and flawless executions of
Ra’s working repertoire of the time. But to me it sounds almost too restrained, too self-consciously playing to the crowd, never letting things get too "out."

Then again, maybe I’m just getting tired of this project, or at least tired of the rather repetitious and bad-sounding live recordings we’ve been listening to recently. Fortunately, dear reader, Sun Ra returned to the recording studio in the fall of 1972 and dropped two-LPs of amazing material. The deal with Impulse! was starting to bear fruit and some of the most outrageous music of Ra’s career would be forthcoming. So, I can’t stop now—in fact, I can’t wait to get into it. But I cannot keep up a weekly schedule and hope to do this music justice. So Sun Ra Sunday will continue with poetry and videos for a few weeks while I get my ears around this next phase in Sun Ra’s multi-faceted career. Stay tuned.

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**August 1, 2010**

**THE ENDLESS REALM**

I have nothing
Nothing!
How really is I am….
Nothing is mine.
How treasured rich am I
I have the treasure of nothing….  
Vast endless nothing
That branches out into realm beyond realm.
This and these are mine
Together they are nothing.

The idea of nothing
The notion of nations
Nation….notion

I have the treasure of nothing
All of it is mine.
He who would build a magic world
Must seek my exchange bar
In order to partake of my endless
Treasure from my endless realm of nothing.

—Sun Ra

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**August 8, 2010**

**Sun Ra: Space Is the Place** (Blue Thumb/Impulse! CD)

Hoping to capitalize on the impending release of the movie, *Space Is the Place*, producer Ed Michel brought the Sun Ra and his Arkestra to Chicago’s Streeterville studios to record an eponymous album for the Blue Thumb label on October 19 & 20, 1972. In all, enough material for four albums was cut on these dates although only two were ever issued (see Campbell & Trent pp.189-192). Blue Thumb LP BTS 41 was released in 1973 and reissued on CD by
Impulse! in February 1998. Why Impulse! chose to release this instead of their own (arguably superior) *Astro Black* remains a mystery to this day. Still, *Space Is the Place* is an (almost) great album, cunningly compiled to represent the panoply of Sun Ra’s music from swing to bop to free-jazz to outer-space chanting and beyond.

By 1972, sixteen-track recording was becoming more common and it is apparent from the side-long title track that Ra (and/or producer Michel) was keen to take advantage of this new technology by the use of overdubbing and elaborate stereo mixing strategies. Unfortunately, it doesn’t always work as the whole album was no doubt hastily completed during these two marathon sessions. One can picture Sun Ra and his crew manning the board, turning the mix into another performance, track faders flying. Sonny wields an array of electronic keyboards, including squiggly organ, buzzing Rocksichord and uncharacteristically cheesy Moog portamentos. Danny Ray Thompson holds down the bari-sax riff while Pat Patrick dons the electric bass to support June Tyson and a full complement of Space Ethnic Voices on this signature anthem. To keep things interesting, the rhythm section brings things to an intermittent boil and the horns occasionally wail with wild abandon. But after about fourteen minutes, the mix begins to lose focus and the incessantly weird vocalizing just gets annoying, finally coming to an end with some inconclusive keyboard noises. Sure, it’s fun in that sort-of-psychedelic way, but not altogether satisfying compared to other iterations in the discography.

Side two is more compelling, beginning with the revival of “Images,” a Sun Ra original dating back to 1959’s *Jazz in Silhouette* (Saturn/Evidence). This joyful swing number (with Ra on acoustic piano!) provides an opportunity for Kwame Hadi and John Gilmore to show off their fluent dexterity navigating the highly chromatic chord changes. Ra himself even turns in a tastefully understated chorus at the end. The reappearance of this tune signals the broadening of the Arkestra’s stylistic palette that was beginning to occur to encompass pre-war jazz amidst all the trappings of pan-African-futurism. “Images” would thenceforth become a regular feature of the live set. “Discipline 33” follows in an intricate arrangement for low reeds, flutes and trumpets with a meandering melody that floats above the tonally ambiguous harmonies and languid rhythm. It’s just lovely—and a perfect example of Ra’s sophisticated and adventurous approach to structure and orchestration.

“Sea of Sounds” is one of those frantically hare-brained big-band rave-ups taken at an impossibly fast tempo that a well-oiled Arkestra manages to nail with unflagging energy and precision. As the rhythm section continues to cook, Akh Tal Ebah contributes a mellifluous flugelhorn solo surrounded by rude libefecto grunts and crazy alto saxophone scribbles. Meanwhile, Ra’s gurgling and wheezing organ drives the band into super-intense, out-jazz territory. All this chaos gives way to a neatly choreographed saxophone battle, with Gilmore emerging on top of the start-stop rhythm section. A somewhat awkward edit cuts into Ra’s patented “mad-scientist-style” organ solo before Hadi’s high-register fireworks heralds the reprise of the taut and twisted theme. A splash of smeared harmonies brings things to a decisive close. Awesome. The album concludes with a quick romp through an old standby, “Rocket Number Nine.” Sonny obviously saw some latent commercial potential in this song as he recorded it several times, first back in 1960 and even releasing a small-group version on a Saturn single around 1967 or 68. Now presented with the opportunity to reach a (potentially) large audience, Ra was sure to end the album with a tight rendition of this enervating space-chant. Taking advantage of the multi-track environment, this version is densely layered with overdubbed vocalizing, clattering percussion and swooping synthesizers. Much too strange for radio play, it is still an appropriately entertaining conclusion to a typically quirky Sun Ra album.
Ultimately, *Space Is the Place* is a mixed bag with the overlong title track unable to sustain interest across its twenty-one and a half minutes. But side two contains outstanding performances of some of Sun Ra’s more interesting compositions, which, combined with the hi-fi stereo sonics of the recording, make this is a must-have album for the hardcore fan. Others who are curious about what this Sun Ra obsession is all about may find it a useful and easily obtainable introduction and a pathway to unknown worlds. Space is, indeed, the place—and Sun Ra can take you there.

**COMMENTS:**

Sam said...
I have to part ways a little bit on you in terms of the title track here, Rodger--I think it's highly successful, and easily one of the all-time best versions of this Ra chestnut. The whole piece develops as if Ra and the Arkestra have all the time in the world, and as you immerse yourself in it as its languid pace washes over you, you start to have that time too--or is it space that you have? Space is indeed the place. If not endlessly fascinating, it's at least compelling all the way through. I love the way all of its myriad facets—the synth, the vocals, the horns—are orchestrated and controlled, with Ra's superb sense of restraint and spaced-out momentum.

Side 2 is of course the true masterpiece, but the title track more than holds its own, and is way more successful than the other side-long chestnut from these sessions, "Discipline 27-II" (coming up soon, I hope!).

**August 15, 2010**

**Sun Ra: Discipline 27-II (Saturn LP>CDR)**

Another album was hurriedly compiled for the newly re-constituted Saturn Records from the sessions produced by Ed Michel at Streeterville Studios in Chicago on October 19-20, 1972. *Discipline 27-II* was released as Saturn LP 538 in 1973 and, in a sign of the times, it is the only quadraphonic Saturn LP ever released (Campbell & Trent, p.191). The album was ultimately obscured by a deluge of records that came to market that year, including the Blue Thumb movie tie-in, *Space Is the Place* (also recorded at these sessions), the magisterial *Astro Black*, and a slew of classic Saturn LPs re-issued *en masse* as a part of Sun Ra’s recent deal with Impulse!.

Unsurprisingly, *Discipline 27-II* remains out of print and nearly impossible to find, although bootlegs and fan-created “needle-drops” are readily available to the intrepid fan. Apparently, enough material was recorded at these marathon sessions to produce four full albums: a second Blue Thumb release was planned but never issued and another Saturn LP was proposed to Impulse! for distribution but ultimately rejected. Prof. Campbell lists a number of tantalizing titles in his discography, including “East” parts 1-3 (!) and “Piano of Never” but the master tapes have supposedly disappeared (see Id. pp.190-192). What remains are a pair of uneven yet utterly revelatory records that belong in every Sun Ra collection.

Side one is just about perfect, opening with a casual one-off composition entitled, “Pan Afro,” serving up one of those quintessentially off-kilter, modal grooves in six that only Sun Ra could come up with. John Gilmore delivers a sure-footed and soulful solo with the kind of deeply penetrating tone that rivals Coltrane at his most intensely spiritual. Of course, Coltrane acknowledged his debt to Gilmore (see Szwed pp.189-190) and it is safe to say that Coltrane would likely not have become the iconic figure he did if not for Gilmore’s early example and the oracular influence of Sun Ra’s presence in New York in the early 1960s (see Id. pp.76-78).
While Gilmore briefly flirted with a solo career, he returned to the Arkestra full-time by 1966 and willingly allowed his talents to be subsumed (some might say constricted) by Sun Ra's peculiar vision. Accordingly, his reputation as a superlative saxophonist has been greatly diminished if not completely overshadowed by Coltrane and others much less gifted who went on to make a name for themselves playing "The New Thing" the early 1970s. Gilmore's all-too brief solo on the otherwise unremarkable "Pan Afro" is just one example among many of his staggering brilliance. Yes, it's another incredible Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi, Sun Ra and Elo Omoe take turns on trumpet, Rocksichord, and bass clarinet respectively, but they are unable to top Gilmore's "tour de force" opening. That's OK, no one could. The band sounds relieved to return to the head although Sonny wants to keep on going. The track ends with a long fade out on Ra's smoky comping.

"Discipline 8" is given a definitive reading by the Arkestra: the heaving and moaning harmonies flow through various instrumental combinations while soloists, duos and trios flitter around in the wide open spaces. This is a fine example of Ra's genius as a composer and orchestrator. "Discipline 8" is not built on the usual soloist with accompaniment model, but rather seeks a new synthesis: "free" improvisation seamlessly interwoven through a tightly arranged composition, conducted by Ra at the keyboards. Good stuff. "Neptune" closes the side with another nice medium swing number with plenty of Sonny's tasty space-age barbeque sauce ladled on with his crude electric organ. A wild group improver erupts in the reeds section over some super-funky dual-bari-sax riffage and when June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices enter, Gilmore starts really wailing. Holy moly! Then Danny Ray Thompson's window-rattling libfecto takes over amidst the pealing trumpets of Hadi and Ebah and all hell breaks loose in the rhythm section. But Sonny deftly reins it all in with some expectant vamping before Tyson alone chants: "Have you heard the latest news from Neptune?" Yes, we have—and it is good news indeed.

Side two, on the other hand, suffers from the same kind of aimless self-indulgence that mars the title track to Space Is the Place. Consisting of a side-long rendition of "Discipline 27-II," with a full complement of the usual space-chants and hortatory declamations, it further lacks the adventurous mix-down techniques of the latter (probably due to time constraints) that might have added some much needed auditory interest—or at least made the densely layered recording sound marginally coherent. It is a sprawling, twenty-five-minute mess with the dream-like, subtly shape-shifting ensembles buried under innumerable wacked-out vocal tracks, which are also murky and hard to understand, making for an agonizingly frustrating listen (maybe it sounds better in quad!). A lost opportunity, perhaps; or maybe this kind of thing only worked well in a live setting (and even then, it can get a little tedious). Maybe I'm being too harsh and project-fatigue is no doubt starting to set in, but this recording of "Discipline 27-II" is assuredly one of Sun Ra's least successful studio efforts. Whatever; the magnificence of side one more than compensates for the obvious deficiencies of side two and makes this half-great album well worth seeking out. One can also hope that the lost masters from these October 1972 sessions will someday resurface so as to provide some additional insight into these erratically fascinating records. You never know with Sun Ra…

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
I'm with you on the title track! Unfortunately, this model (using the D.27 and D.27-II riffs a backgrounds for extended call/response or repeat exhortations, rants, and sermons) was one that Ra repeatedly used throughout the rest of the '70s and into the '80s in live gigs. Some made their way onto record ("I, Pharaoh," etc.), but it's on umpteen concert recordings. I know he had to get the message out, but I much prefer "Pan Afro."
Rodger Coleman said...
Side 2 of "Space Is the Place" and side 1 of "Discipline 27-II" would have made one incredible record. But they'd have to title it something else!

"Pan Afro" is so great, but its greatness is something I would probably overlook if I wasn't listening to this stuff so closely. The whole thing is just tossed off, but, wow, it's a killer track.

August 22, 2010

VISIONS OUT

Metamorphosis Vision
Transmolecular light
Transcendent darkness rule/measure of the outerness
Black, chromatic
Synthesis on
It is yon diamond project differential
Sapphire beam ruby
Gem-Gemini
Plane transcendent / visions out.

-- Sun Ra

August 29, 2010

Sun Ra: “The Mystery Board” (Thumbs Up! (boot) 2CD)

A bootleg CD entitled "The Mystery Board" appeared on the mythic Thumbs Up! label some time ago purporting to have been recorded November 2nd or 3rd 1972 “for a possible Saturn release.” As with any bootleg, all this needs to be taken with an enormous grain of salt. Yet the 1972 date seems reasonable considering the repertoire and personnel and, given Sun Ra’s aptitude with a razor blade and splicing tape, it’s certainly possible he could have crafted a satisfactory LP out of this mess, had he so desired. Such as it is, "The Mystery Board" is a rough listen with the mix suffering from the usual deficiencies of a soundboard tape made in a small venue: the vocals and soloists are way up front, with the drums and everything else (with the notable exception of Ra himself) almost entirely inaudible. Accordingly, all the ensemble sections are woefully unbalanced, but some of the less instrumentally dense material actually sounds pretty decent, believe it or not.

Disc one begins with an intensely confrontational “Cosmo Drama” regarding “The First Man.” Ra viciously hectors the audience about their “black ignorance” for wanting “to be number one” and implores them to “go home and read your Bible – ’cuz the Second Man is you!” With the June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices echoing his every threatening word, at times it sounds like a riot is about to break out. Sometimes the Arkestra plays some halting swing but for the most part Sonny is just furiously preaching it. Thankfully, after about five minutes, Ra segues into a brief, previously unheard composition with a descending minor key melody over a gentle swing groove. What is this??! I swear, if I were really serious about this project, I’d create a spreadsheet to try and keep track of all these fleeting, unknown titles just in case they turn up
again elsewhere. This composition is a great little bluesy number that ends before it even begins. Sonny then plays a spacey organ interlude to introduce “Neptune.” Tyson and Ebah share vocal duties while the band intermittently erupts into bouts of free-jazz skronk. Gilmore takes a typically brilliant tenor sax solo, but as he wanders on and off mic, the effect is considerably lessened. In fact, the mix is so murky that the remainder of this track is hardly worth bothering with.

The next thirty-minute segment, on the other hand, is quite interesting, featuring three somewhat rarely heard compositions. “Spontaneous Simplicity” finds Sun Ra on acoustic piano for a change, accompanying Marshall Allen on this relaxed, dreamy tune. Allen’s airy flute sounds quite lovely and Sonny even takes a gently floating solo of his own. The mix is much clearer on this quiet chamber piece and it sure sounds like the inimitable Ronnie Boykins on bass during this entire sequence. Danny Davis joins Allen for “Friendly Galaxy No.2,” a minor mode waltz led by the piano, bass and drums with the flute choir playing long-breathed, dissonant melodies above and around a moderately propulsive rhythm. Again, Ra takes sweetly singing solo, clearly relishing the opportunity to play a decent piano. Just gorgeous!

“Intergalactic Universe” follows with its modal groove in five providing a backdrop for an extended John Gilmore outing, wherein he shows off his mastery of post-bop saxophone techniques, moving from small motivic figures to complex “sheets of sound” and culminating in a squalling climax of piercing multiphonics and rapid-fire glissandos. Yes, it’s another incredible Gilmore solo! Kwame Hadi gamely follows with his typically fluent articulation in all registers, but when the Neptunian libflecto enters (Thompson?), the tape abruptly cuts off. Too bad; things were really starting to cook.

Disc two opens with a percussive and atonal piano to introduce “Angels and Demons at Play,” which is taken at leisurely tempo. Boykins’s (?) bass and Pat Patrick’s baritone saxophone double the enervating 5/4 ostinato while Allen plays the lead on alto saxophone rather than the usual flute. This provides a relatively rare opportunity to appreciate Allen’s brilliance on that instrument as he takes a long, labyrinthine solo exhibiting a vast range of timbral variety and expressionistic melodic invention—so good it elicits a round of polite applause from the audience. Next up is the usual group improvisation, featuring a set piece for John Gilmore’s pyrotechnics, long experimental keyboard outings from Ra, and tightly controlled moments of screaming free jazz mayhem. Unfortunately, the tape cuts in and out with the mix utterly atrocious in parts: drums and bass completely buried and the solo instruments over-mic’d and horrifically distorted. Nevertheless, Ra’s extended solo segments are a delight, with kaleidoscopic tone colors courtesy of his “space organ,” Moog synthesizer and a battery of electronic effects, including repeaters, tremolos, phasers and some deliberately nasty distortion. Excellent. “Space Is the Place” arises from the ashes with Akh Tal Ebah joining June Tyson and the Ethnic Space Voices on this signature anthem. Sadly, the mix is again abysmal with the histrionic singing much too prominent and the rhythm section almost non-existent. Interestingly, what sounds like electric bass is clearly audible, casting some doubt on whether or not Boykins is really present on this recording, or if this segment is possibly from a different concert altogether. After about seven minutes of carrying on, the track quickly fades.

The disc closes with an unknown number in the “Discipline” series, the one which was tragically mis-titled “Discipline 33” on the soundtrack to Space Is the Place. This misnomer has caused all kinds of consternation because this piece (whatever its proper title) was played fairly regularly during this period—and it is definitely not “Discipline 33!” It is hard enough to try and keep up with all these unknown “Discipline” pieces without having to contend with further discographical confusion! (Like I said, I really need to create that spreadsheet.) This version is incomplete, picking up at the beginning of the “Cosmo Drama” segment. Ebah provides some
tasty flugelhorn obbligato over the easy swing of the piece, but when Ra announces, “It’s after the end world, don’t you know that yet?” the band drops out for some full-throated declamations: “A cosmic equation was sent to you, men of Earth, and you couldn’t solve the problem! Therefore, the universe sent me to converse with you!” Wow. The Arkestra later revives the repeatedly descending theme behind the declamations, but it’s all rather distant-sounding and hard to hear. And again, it is clearly an electric bass anchoring things a bit too proficiently to be Pat Patrick and I’m not sure Boykins ever played the instrument at all. So who is playing? No idea. After a little over seventeen minutes, the tape abruptly cuts off, leaving us pretty much in the dark.

Sam Byrd (who knows way more about Sun Ra’s music than I do) has suggested that the order of the discs in this set is reversed: that is to say, disc two is actually disc one and vice versa. After listening to them in this order, I think he might be right: the music seems to flow better with the “Cosmo Drama” dividing the two discs. Then again, I also suspect this material might actually be from two different concerts, with Boykins on some of it and an unknown electric bass player on the rest. But who knows? This is truly a “Mystery Board” and while much of it borders on the unlistenable, there’s enough compelling music here to make it worth seeking out. Caveat emptor!

September 5, 2010

"A Space warning from Sun Ra to the Planet Earth" via Pat Griffiths in Friends (London), February 2, 1971. (Click to enlarge)

September 12, 2010

SPIRAL OUTWARDLY

When there is confusion
Chaos reigns with multi-dimensional song
Where like some bird
Sound ecstatic
To fly around the crossroads
Whence dimensions meet
And wind their way
Of circular paths spiral outwardly.

-- Sun Ra

September 19, 2010

OTHER PLANES OF THERE

The displaced years
Memory calls them that
They were never were then;
Memory scans the void
And from the future
Comes the wave of the greater void
A pulsating vibration
Sound span.....bridge to other ways and
Other planes of there.....

-- Sun Ra

**September 26, 2010**

I apologize for the lack of substantive writing on Sun Ra Sundays of late. Honestly, I've been taking a little bit of a break. Moreover, I've been working on a different kind of Sun Ra project the past few weeks: My friends, Scott and Rose, are getting married next week and they asked me to come up with some “Happy Ra” for the wedding reception. What an amazingly cool idea! Here’s what I came up with:

Disc 1:
1. Dreaming (The Cosmic Rays) (from *The Singles*) (Saturn/Evidence)
2. Stranger in Paradise (Nu Sounds) (from *Spaceship Lullaby*) (Atavistic)
3. 'Round Midnight (from *Sound Sun Pleasure!!*) (Saturn/Evidence)
4. You Never Told Me That You Care (from *Sound Sun Pleasure!!*) (Saturn/Evidence)
5. Hour of Parting (from *Sound Sun Pleasure!!*) (Saturn/Evidence)
6. Back In Our Own Backyard (from *Sound Sun Pleasure!!*) (Saturn/Evidence)
7. Enlightenment (from *Sound Sun Pleasure!!*) (Saturn/Evidence)
8. I Could Have Danced All Night (from *Sound Sun Pleasure!!*) (Saturn/Evidence)
9. But Not For Me (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
10. Day By Day (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
11. Holiday for Strings (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
12. Dorothy’s Dance (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
13. Early Autumn (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
14. I Loves You, Porgy (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
15. Body and Soul (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
16. Keep Your Sunny Side Up (from *Holiday for Soul Dance*) (Saturn/Evidence)
17. Paradise (from *Sound of Joy*) (Delmark)
18. Dreams Come True (from *Sound of Joy*) (Delmark)
19. Sometimes I’m Happy (from *Nuclear War*) (Saturn/Atavistic)
20. Tapestry from an Asteroid (from *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra*) (Savoy)

The first disc was a no-brainer, consisting of *Sound Sun Pleasure!!* and *Holiday for Soul Dance* in their entirety. These albums find Sun Ra and his Arkestra at their most straight ahead and easy to digest, including some romantic crooning that should fit the mood. Of course, this being Sun Ra, the arrangements are sometimes a little strange and already in the 1950s Sonny was exploring electronic keyboards to interesting effect. I also had to include a couple of love-sick doo-wop tracks just for fun along with some otherwise stylistically congruent tracks from *Sound of Joy* and *Nuclear War*. Finally, “Tapestry from an Asteroid” (from *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra*) is so pretty, I couldn’t help but tack it on at the end.

Disc 2:
1. Lullaby for Realville (from *Sun Song*) (Delmark)
2. Fate in a Pleasant Mood (from *Fate In a Pleasant Mood*) (Saturn/Evidence)
Disc two was a little more complicated, with lots of strong contenders which just didn’t make the cut. I tried keep the mood light (but not too jumpy) and rejected any tracks that suffered from especially poor sound quality or just got a little too weird, while still capturing some of the magical qualities of Ra’s music in the Sixties and Seventies. No easy task! I’m listening to the disc as I write this, and I think it works pretty well, moving as it does from late-Fifties rocking and riffing to floating space rhumbas to Rocksichord boogaloo—and, of course, there is a heaping helping of Sun Ra’s patented space-age barbeque organ thrown on top to boot. Maybe that will get people up and dancing.

Disc 3:
1. Song No.1 (from Antique Blacks) (Saturn/Art Yard)
2. Where Pathways Meet (from Lanquidity) (Saturn/Evidence)
3. That’s How I Feel (from Lanquidity) (Saturn/Evidence)
4. Twin Stars of Thence (from Lanquidity) (Saturn/Evidence)
5. On Jupiter (from On Jupiter) (Saturn/Art Yard)
6. UFO (from On Jupiter) (Saturn/Art Yard)
7. Door of the Cosmos (from Sleeping Beauty) (Saturn/Art Yard)
8. Sleeping Beauty (from Sleeping Beauty) (Saturn/Art Yard)

If that doesn’t work, then disc three ought to get the booty shaking, gathering plum tracks from Ra’s “disco” albums, Lanquidity, On Jupiter, and Sleeping Beauty, while opening with the extended groove-fest, “Song No.1,” from the otherwise disturbingly polemical Antique Blacks. Then again, perhaps this stuff really is too “out there” for most people. We’ll see how it goes over. In any event, it’s been a lot of fun to put this all together and I’m pretty sure the bride and groom will enjoy it—and that is what counts.

(Thanks (as usual) to Sam Byrd for his invaluable input on this project!)
Volume three of Transparency’s *Lost Reel Collection* is another stumper. Although the liner notes (such as they are) posit 1972 as the approximate date of this live concert, close listening suggests it was recorded much earlier. For one thing, none of the “Discipline” pieces appear in the setlist, and they were constants by the beginning of 1972. Secondly, Ra does not play the MiniMoog synthesizer, highly unlikely during this period. On the other hand, the presence of June Tyson’s vocal on “Strange Worlds” implies a post-1970 date. So, my best guess is this was recorded in late-1970/early-1971, prior to the European tour in the fall. But who knows? It’s another one of those Mysteries of Mr. Ra. Sound quality is rough—at times barely listenable—but there is a surprisingly wide stereo image suggesting on-stage microphones and reminding me at times of some of Tommy Hunter’s recordings. But to be sure, we’re a long way away from the master (presumably lost) and there is plenty of generational distortion, including wow and flutter, oversaturation and noise. Be forewarned, this is only for a hardcore Sun Ra nut like me.

The first thing that hits you (besides the horrific sound) is the presence of trombone on the opening “Outer Space,” a rare instrument in the Arkestra during this period and providing another cryptic clue as to the possible date. Further, a distinctively hyperactive bass drum confirms Jarvis is on the drum stool. After a bit of skronk, Ra embarks on a long organ/Rocksichord solo buoyed by murmuring percussion. But after about nine minutes, Jarvis can hardly contain himself and comes charging out of the gate. Ra counters with some dark funk before bringing things around to a mellow space-rhumba. The vocalists proceed to sing a wordless three-note figure while oboes and flutes play a long-toned counter-melody. Who knows what the name of this piece is or whether it was ever played again? While it doesn’t really go anywhere, it establishes a pleasant mood and the instrumental texture is delightfully lush. *Interesting.* The old-timey “Stardust of Tomorrow” follows, appearing in its full-vocal arrangement. Unfortunately, the words are impossible to discern. Yet Sonny turns in an insistently nattering solo atop the medium swing before the big reprise, which sounds suspiciously under-rehearsed. Too bad this version never got a proper recording.

The hypnotic polyrhythms of “Exotic Forest” are taken at a brisk tempo and two drum sets are clearly audible. With the addition of congas and other hand-percussion a dense, churning groove in six is set in motion while a trombone lays down a repetitive, wide-interval riff. Marshall Allen leads off with some wailing oboe and Kwame Hadi follows with a long, thoughtful solo on trumpet as the rhythm section keeps the soup at a low boil. After some tricky lick-trading between Allen and Hadi, nothing much happens until Ra enters with a quietly contemplative clavinet solo that eventually segues to organ to introduce “The Shadow World.” After a ragged ensemble section, John Gilmore enters with another one of his typically hair-raising tenor solos, with his super-humanly precise articulation of impossibly difficult multiphonic and altissimo effects. Yes, it’s another incredible John Gilmore solo, this time even getting a rise out of the otherwise subdued audience. After some dissonant organ chords, Danny Davis takes over with some similarly adventurous alto, but just as a slinky, slow groove is established (featuring what sounds like acoustic bass – could it be the great Ronnie Boykins?), the tape cuts off. *Oh well.*

Disc two opens in the middle of some fearsomely intense avant-jazz mayhem with atrociously bad sound. *Ugh.* You can still hear Ra throwing out some two-fisted organ blasts, but the
pounding drums overwhelm just about everything. And when the horns return, some seem to intimate a reprise of “The Shadow World,” but the headstrong drummers insist on their own frenetic freedom before finally coming to a full stop (no doubt at Ra’s friendly but firm direction: there will be no twenty-minute Jarvis solo this evening, at least not yet). After some stunned applause, Sonny plays a pretty interlude on an acoustic piano way, way off in the distance while June Tyson starts chanting about those “Strange Worlds” in another room. He then moves to clavinet for an expansive, spidery etude on clavinet, supplemented with thick washes of organ color. Beautiful. A jaunty chord sequences announces “Enlightenment,” sung by Tyson and the boys, with a ticking hi-hat and clonking cowbells keeping easy time. Nothing too unusual. Next up is the ecstatic chanting of “Outer Spaceways, Incorporated” and “Prepare for the Journey to Outer Space” but the recording is woefully unbalanced with the vocals buried by the pummeling drumline. Even so, our unknown trombonist delivers a high-spirited, bluesy solo, exhibiting a huge tone that easily cuts through the din. Who is this guy?

Ra’s spooky organ accompanies Tyson’s recitation of “The Shadows Took Shape” and Gilmore paints a pointillist picture with a delicate concertino. Perfect. Suddenly, the motoric ostinato of “Friendly Galaxy” arises and the Arkestra launches into the work with gusto, the trombonist adding warmth to the cool flutes and trumpets. As the groove gets settled in, someone takes an extremely curious solo—but what instrument is this?? At times it sounds like Ra’s MiniMoog, but other times it sounds like Gilmore’s saxophone amplified through an overdriven Twin Reverb; there’s a soulful vibrato that seems to preclude a purely electronic source (circa. early-Seventies). Whatever instrument, it’s a fascinating solo, with tasteful note choices and endlessly evolving timbres that defy description. I think it’s probably Sun Ra making these sounds, but I have no idea how he’s doing it. After that, it’s just the usual overlong dancing and percussion fest, interrupted by a quick spin through “Watusi” before the tape brutally cuts off.

The Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 3 is a frustrating listen: the fatally unbalanced and distorted sound quality requires a lot of work to penetrate—yet there are moments (however fleeting) of rare and sublime music that (sort of) reward the effort. As a historical document, it poses more questions than it answers, only adding to the overall sense of frustration. Accordingly, I cannot recommend this to anyone but the specialist or truly obsessive. For them, it is a tantalizingly inscrutable text worthy of monastic study. Most anyone else might be understandably repulsed. Caveat emptor.

October 17, 2010

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: [Unknown Venue, Circa. 1972] (AUD CDR)

Here’s another mysterious concert fragment recorded (in mono) from the audience at an unknown location sometime in 1972. The sound quality is typically awful: warbly, hissy, and distorted. Only about thirty-seven minutes long, there’s hardly enough here to even consider. What’s remarkable is how many more audience recordings were being made during this period. Portable recording devices were still primitive, bulky and very expensive in the early-seventies, requiring serious devotion on the part of the intrepid recordist. So, we should be thankful for their work, even if the results are sometimes, as here, virtually unlistenable. There are, as usual, some moments of brilliance buried in the noise.

The tape picks up in the middle of the set, cutting in on an improvisation already in progress, Eloe Omoe squealing and squawking on the bass clarinet. After some group skronk, John Gilmore takes off a cappella; it’s the usual tour de force, but the sound is so distorted it’s hard to
appreciate. But then some eerie, otherworldly vocalizing follows, similar to what was heard at the Ann Arbor Blues and Jazz Festival in September. Presumably one of the Space Ethnic Voices, this is singing so extreme it makes Yoko Ono’s screech seem like a lullaby. At times sounding like a Theremin’s electric whine, or at other times spitting out guttural woofs, whoever this is, she has a superhumanly extended vocal technique. Despite the poor sound quality, this brief segment is still quite impressive. A jaunty “Enlightenment” emerges from stunned applause with “Space Is the Place” right behind. It’s the usual stuff with Akh Tal Ebah sharing the vocal duties with June Tyson and Marshall Allen delivering a tasteful solo on alto. “Love In Outer Space” quickly descends into an extended percussion workout which is rendered as an impenetrable wall of noise on tape. As the audience starts to get restless, you can hear people talking in the background—and when a man close to the microphone says, “Hey, what’s happening brother?” it’s startling and funny like some kind of homemade musique concrète. As the Arkestra settles into the heavenly quietude of “Lights on a Satellite,” the sound quality improves considerably. After an organ intro, Ra moves to acoustic piano to support the delicate arrangement of flutes and trumpets, with Gilmore taking the lead on low-register tenor sax. “Lights on a Satellite” is one of my favorite Ra compositions and this performance is nearly perfect, the interlaced ensemble floating peacefully above a gentle space-rhumba groove. The audience likes it and responds with a sincere round of applause. “The Shadow World” starts up from a dead stop with Sonny banging out the angular rhythmic figure on piano and it sounds like it’s going to be a good one as the ensemble begins to execute the hocketed melodies with terrific precision. Sadly, the tape cuts off after only a minute and a half. Oh well.

While this is a typically fine performance by the Arkestra, the tape doesn’t really have a whole lot to recommend it considering the bad sound quality and constricted running time. The outrageous glossolalia segment and the always beatific “Lights On a Satellite” are worth hearing, but I wouldn’t go out of my way to seek this one out. Nevertheless, I thank our anonymous recordist for making the effort.

October 24, 2010

ABSTRACT PLANES

The cosmic roles
Are written on sundry parchments
Tinted with fire
Blue vibrations of pulsating flame
Energies...G-Force dimensions
Abstract planes of sound and sight.

--Sun Ra

October 31, 2010

Sun Ra: The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums: Cymbals & Crystal Spears (Evidence 2CD)

The deal with ABC/Impulse! was slowly bearing fruit: Astro Black (AS-9255) was finally released in early 1973, along with a batch of Saturn reissues, pushing Sun Ra’s music into the mainstream marketplace for the first time ever. And there were even bigger plans in store: as many as thirty reissues, and a sampler LP to be entitled, Welcome to Saturn. Then there was a
A standard Artist’s Contract (“Everything You Have Is Ours…, ” spelled out in some detail over seven pages) was presented. Alton put it in his briefcase, shook hands all around and said, “We’ll look it over and get back to you,” and they were gone. The following day, Alton was back with a retyped contract (no small stuff—this was well before personal computers—every single bit had to be typed by hand, overnight) in which the Saturnians—rather than engage in the point-by-point wrestling and mud-slinging match that constitutes most recording-industry contractual discussions—simply retyped the contract, turning everything on its head, with ABC, rather than Saturn, at the short end of the stick.

[…] The Head Lawyer called me (naturally, I was in the studio), and tried to explain The Inexplicable Behavior Of These People, and why it was Impossible To Try To Do Business With Them. I sort of suggested that maybe a counter-offer was in order (“Ridiculous! They’d probably want to turn that around, too”), and then, alarmed at the thought of my not being able to get in on any of the fun, I pointed out that if it wasn’t possible to make a New Recording Artist Deal, perhaps it might be possible to make a Licensing Deal for some of the already-issued Saturn “product.” Amazingly, it worked, although I still don’t know why or how.

[…] I never saw a copy of the original contract (I do have some deal memo notes, but recall that the contract proffered turned out to be a whole lot different), but I know it could have been drawn up rather succinctly: “Sun Ra and Alton will give ABC twenty-one masters, which ABC will clean up as well as possible, provide new cover designs, sit on for a while, then return to Sun Ra and Alton, in return for which ABC will give The Saturn Guys a bunch of money, including a nice payoff to terminate the original agreement.” Would have saved a lot of extra typing.

Newly made recordings were also subject to this licensing agreement, with ownership reverting to Sun Ra and Alton Abraham after the deal went south. This was actually fairly shrewd (and, at the time, extremely rare) although Sonny was unable to really capitalize on this cache of intellectual property during his lifetime. This was exacerbated by a dispute with Abraham over ownership of the masters that briefly split Saturn into two opposing companies (see, Szwed pp.338-339). Meanwhile, Sun Ra continued on his own way and would not make another record for a major label until 1988, when A&M offered him a two-record deal. Similarly, those records also went out of print almost immediately after their initial release. The Arkestra would remain an underground phenomenon, for the most part, right up to the end.
Curiously, three tracks meant for **Cymbals** were later issued on an obscure, hodgepodge LP entitled, **Deep Purple** (Saturn 485), but their connection to the unreleased Impulse! albums was unknown until Prof. Robert Campbell began his research for his monumental discography, *The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra* (Cadence Books) (see p.194). As originally conceived, Cymbals was to have been another in a line of great blues-based records a la *[My Brother The Wind, Vol. II]* and *[Universe In Blue]*, with Ra leading a small-group Arkestra from his patented “space-age barbecue” organ. Significantly, Ronnie Boykins is back in the band with his huge-toned bass adding heft to these five loosely structured pieces. “The World of the Invisible” opens the album with some portentous spookiness, ghostly organ chords and a herky-jerky rhythm section supporting a serpentine bass clarinet solo by Eloe Omoe. Sun Ra hints at a descending figure on MiniMoog which is then taken up by Boykins in an extended bass solo, accompanied by Ra’s skittering organ. “Thoughts Under a Dark Blue Light” is a slow-burning blues, with a simple harmonized horn riff setting things in motion across its seventeen-minute duration. John Gilmore starts off with some authentically soulful roadhouse wailing on tenor saxophone, slowly building up to an astonishing climax of blurred multiphonics and low-register honks, before effortlessly returning with a bluesy coda. Yes, it’s another incredible John Gilmore solo! Ra then turns in some typically hermetic organ while Boykins steadily walks and drummer, Harry Richards, and conga-player, Derek Morris lackadaisically shuffle alongside. Alone in the trumpet chair for a change, Akh Tal Ebah delivers a long and thoughtful solo, his warm tone and smeared articulation offering a nice contrast to Kwame Hadi’s usual showy virtuosity. Sadly, the track fades out before being allowed to finish.

“The Order of Pharaonic Jesters” (sic) is another mid-tempo blues, dominated by Sun Ra’s multihued electronic keyboards, alternating between sweet-and-sour organ tones, shimmering vibraphone sounds, and the reedy Rocksichord. Really just a meandering jam, Ra keeps things interesting with his restlessly shifting timbres and sophisticated harmonic sensibility, Boykins following him every step of the way. The tempo picks up a bit for “The Mystery of Two,” a minor-key bebop confection that once again lets the spotlight shine on the underappreciated Ebah, whose introverted, melancholy sound and careful note choices yields an understated elegance. The album closes with “Land of the Day Star,” a quirky, stutter-step groove supported by Boykins’s awkward, bowed bass, Ra’s burbling keyboards and some herky-jerky drums. This time, Danny Davis gets a rare solo spot on alto saxophone, coming out from behind the shadow of Marshall Allen, who was apparently absent at this session. Again, the track fades just as the soloist starts to get going, which is a little frustrating. Nonetheless, this track—and the album as a whole—is really all about Sun Ra’s interaction with the masterful bass playing of Boykins and the almost amateurish drumming of Richards. It is this dynamic but unstable rhythm section that provides the cool, elusive mood of this fine record.

**Crystal Spears** (originally titled *Crystal Clear*) is something else altogether. If **Cymbals** is relatively earthbound, **Crystal Spears** is a rocketship ride to the planet Saturn, showcasing Sun Ra’s more experimental compositional techniques and radical orchestral strategies. A full contingent of Arkestrans is present, although Boykins is notably absent and no one steps in to play bass. It doesn’t really matter as Sonny is by now well used to this arrangement and fills out the space with his electronic keyboards and the addition of marimbas and multiple percussionists, while Clifford Jarvis’s return to the drum stool allows for a steadier, more intuitive rhythm section. The title track opens with piercing blasts of distorted wah-wah organ, indicating from the first moment that this is going to be one of those Sun Ra records that will fry your tweeters and blow your mind. Oh yeah. After sketching out a quasi-twelve-tone row, drums and congas enter with complex, overlapping rhythms while Marshall Allen plaintively reiterates the theme. Prof. Campbell states in his liner notes that Sun Ra subsequently moves to marimba at this point, but I believe it must be someone else, as, moments later, Sonny can plainly be heard
playing MiniMoog and organ while marimbas continue to skitter in the background. In any event, a rich texture is created and sustained, similar to what was heard back in 1965 on the *Heliocentric Worlds, Vol. 1*, thickened by an enlarged arsenal of electric keyboards.

Having reached a sub-orbital plateau, the Arkestra relaxes the tension a bit with “The Eternal Sphynx” (sic). Prof. Campbell suggests in his liner notes that this piece “continues the interlocking riff constructions found in Ra’s numbered ‘Discipline’ series of compositions” and the theme sounds vaguely familiar. Is it possible we’ve heard this before on one the many poorly documented tapes from this period? Perhaps (I really should create that spreadsheet—someone want to give me a grant?). In any event, it is similar to the “Discipline” series in its stately demeanor and expressive orchestration, the instruments playing at their most extreme registers, trumpets flatulently low, saxophones squealingly high, creating a lush yet unsettled ensemble sound. Danny Davis steps out once again with a soulful alto sax solo, followed by Ra on organ before a brief reprise, this time with Marshall Allen doubling on flute. Things start to get strange again with “The Embassy of the Living God.” Sun Ra’s woozy organ chords and Moog bass notes establish a creepy, dissonant soundworld, while the entire horn section, led by Danny Thompson’s honking baritone sax, execute the tricky composition, with both trumpets (distressingly off-mic), playing complex counter-melodies. The piece evolves organically from there, with solos, duos and trios from Allen on oboe, Omoe on bass clarinet, Gilmore on falsetto tenor sax, and Hadi in his usual highwire fashion. Percussion comes and goes along with Ra’s sea-sick organ, which takes the lead unaccompanied just before the horns return. Foregoing a restatement of the theme, the track fades out on some full-on group improvisation. Very interesting.

“Sunrise in the Western Sky” was intended to take up all of side B and essentially consists of a twenty-minute tenor saxophone solo by John Gilmore over the kind of gently floating, Afro-exotica percussion jam that Sun Ra was so fond of. That description makes it sound like it would be boring and self-indulgent, but in actuality, it is a monument to Sun Ra’s genius as a composer and Gilmore’s unheralded greatness as soloist. Opening with a magisterial statement from Allen’s yearning oboe, Ra’s chiming keyboards, mumbling marimbas, and burbling percussion establish an unsettled environment for Gilmore’s entrance. It appears that the saxophone part is at least partly written out as Sonny’s organ follows closely along the tonally ambiguous melodies. At about the eight-minute mark, Ra’s shapeshifting organ begins to coax the rhythm section into a duple-meter reverie while Gilmore follows along with more written material intermingled with extemporaneous improvisation. At the eleven-minute mark, Marshall Allen’s flute enters with a counter-melody and the texture subsequently thins out, leaving only percussion and saxophone. At this point, Gilmore loosens his grip on the theme(s) and begins to elaborate, weaving inquisitive lines, concluding with question marks rather than periods and finally disappearing into the hypnotic percussion ensemble. A crash cymbal is ceremonially struck seven times to end the album with a solemn finality.

*Cymbals* and *Crystal Spears* are indeed *The Great Lost Sun Ra Albums* and we should grateful to the folks at Evidence for locating the tapes and finally issuing them on CD. The Evidence label also rescued *Pathways to Unknown Worlds* from the dustbin of history and we’ll have a listen to that one next time. It’s a doozy!

**COMMENTS:**

Sam said...

Excellent analysis, Rodger! I got nothing to add except to say “Thoughts Under a Dark Blue Light” contains one of the all-time greatest of the greatest Gilmore solos. I love both of these
albums. It’s nice to hear some extended Eloé Omoe soloing on "The World of the Invisible." And Harry Richards’s drumming is perfect for the subdued mood of much of "Cymbals"--no virtuoso grandstanding, instead just another emphatic, listening voice in the mix.

November 7, 2010

THE POTENTIAL

Beyond other thought and other worlds
Are the things that seem not to be
And yet are.
How impossible is the impossible
Yet the impossible is a thought
And every thought is real
An idea, a flash of intuition’s fire
A seed of fire that can bring to be
The reality of itself.
Beyond other thought and other worlds
Are the potentials…
That hidden circumstance
And pretentious chance
Cannot control.

--Sun Ra

November 14, 2010

Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra: Pathways to Unknown Worlds + Friendly Love (Evidence CD)

Pathways to Unknown Worlds was released by Impulse! in 1975 but was soon deleted along with the rest of the catalog licensed from El Saturn Records. That meant literally cutting off the corners of the jackets and dumping the remaining stock below wholesale, thereby cutting off Sun Ra from any royalties that would have otherwise been due (see Szwed p.333). For a brief period in the mid-1970s, Sun Ra records could be found in the sale bins of mom-and-pop record stores across America, but they quickly disappeared for good and, by the end of the decade, had become rare, expensive collectables. It wasn’t until the Evidence label began reissuing Sun Ra’s music on compact disc in the early-1990s that Ra’s most obscure discography was again readily available. In 2000, Evidence concluded their reissue campaign with the resurrection of two Great Lost Sun Ra Albums recorded for Impulse! which were originally conceived as part of a proposed trilogy that would have progressed from earthy blues of Cymbals (AS-9296) through the hyper-modern jazz of Crystal Spears (AS-9297) and on to the improvised outer-space music of Pathways to Unknown Worlds (AS-9298) (see Campbell & Trent pp.194-196).

Shorn from its intended context, Pathways to Unknown Worlds must have appeared a puzzling artifact for the very few people who heard it back in 1975. Mixed to primitive Quadrophonic Sound, almost no one owned the expensive Sansui QS decoder and extra pair of speakers required—and those who did probably wondered why it was being deployed for a
mere twenty-seven minutes of skronky free-jazz-noise (even so, I would be very interested in hearing these original “surround sound” mixes!). In 2000, Evidence remixed the album to stereo from the multitrack tapes and, in the process, discovered an additional (untitled) track that was omitted from the original LP, expanding it to a (slightly) more reasonable thirty-four minutes of music.

The pieces on Pathways to Unknown Worlds are all “guided improvisations,” with Sun Ra directing the flow of music from his bank of electric keyboards. Ronnie Boykins is back, anchoring the proceedings with his rock-solid bass, accompanied by the indomitable Clifford Jarvis on drums, who plays with admirable restraint here. This was by far the most fluent and supple rhythm section Ra would ever enjoy (sadly, it was intermittent at best and ultimately short lived). Joined by a full complement of horn players, this was an Arkestra particularly sensitized to Ra’s vision and well suited to realize his most exploratory music.

A blow-by-blow description seems rather pointless; I can only say that the music is a model of tightly controlled chaos and this album stands with the best of that lineage of long form improvisations, like Magic City and Other Planes of There. Sun Ra disdained the excesses of the “free jazz” scene and his group improvisations are as thoughtfully constructed as any of his written compositions, full of startling dynamic contrasts and unusual instrumental textures, fueled by his own endlessly inventive approach to electronic keyboards. Kwame Hadi is present on trumpet joined by Akh Tal Ebah on mellophone (a cross between a trumpet and a French horn), making it possible to really compare them side-by-side. Sometimes, Ebah shoves a contrabassoon reed into the mouthpiece to create the “Space dimension mellophone,” rendering an earth-shattering blast of sound akin to the Neptunian libflecto (a bassoon with either a French horn or alto saxophone mouthpiece attached).

Előe Omoe is given especially prominent solo space throughout the album, allowing an opportunity to fully appreciate his richly expressionist bass clarinet in a variety of settings. Omoe’s story is interesting: born Leroy Taylor (1949-1989), he was a member of a Chicago street gang until 1970, when Sun Ra took him in and changed his name (see Szwed p.280). While his frantic overblowing shtick was a constant feature of the Arkestra’s live gigs during this period, he was, in fact, a gifted auto-didact, and his playing here shows a remarkable versatility.

John Gilmore comes through with one of his typically mind-melting tenor saxophone solos on “Cosmo Media,” but this album isn’t about individual soloists or group freakouts. The Arkestra is literally Sun Ra’s living instrument, their highly individualistic voices subordinated to his stringent yet benevolent command. Accordingly, this music cannot be said to be freely improvised; it is rather composed by Sun Ra in the moment of its realization. If anything, Boykins is the star of the show, the glue that holds it all together; there is hardly a moment where he is not furiously thrumming or bowing away with astounding facility and invention. Yet Pathways to Unknown Worlds is also not merely a concerto for bass; it is a thoroughly ensemble conception, with the whole being much more than the sum of its parts—hence the pointlessness of a detailed description. Together with The Great Lost Albums, these are some of the crowning achievements of Sun Ra’s long recording career and need to be heard to be believed.

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Four more LPs were recorded by Saturn and offered to Impulse! as part of the proposed licensing deal, but were rejected. Across the Border of Time (Saturn 576), Flight to Mars (Saturn 547) and Tone Poem (Saturn 672) were never released, although Prof. Campbell has speculated that tracks from some of these records were cannibalized for later Saturn releases,
such as the ultra-rare **Song of the Stargazers** (Saturn 487) (see Campbell & Trent pp.196, 270-271). However, while preparing these Evidence CDs, the two-track reel-to-reel tapes containing the long-lost **Friendly Love** (Saturn 565) were found in a box and issued for the first time, appended to **Pathways to Unknown Worlds**.

Unfortunately, Boykins is once again absent but the laconic Harry Richards returns on drums along with Atakatune (Stanley Morgan) on congas and they provide a relaxed, contemplative rhythmic feel throughout. Lacking formal titles, the album is presented as a suite in four parts, and while Prof. Campbell suggests in his liner notes that these are all guided improvisations, I’m not so sure: Sonny’s organ often seems to be outlining pre-ordained chord sequences and parts one and four settle into the kind of dreamy, modal grooves that were a hallmark of Sun Ra’s compositions during this period—in fact, the horns play a repeating, five-note figure towards the end of the suite that was obviously written out and harmonized. It may be possible the Arkestra was merely “jamming out” on this date, but I kind of doubt it. In any event, the soloists are exceptional: Hadi and Ebah each deliver delightfully contrasting brass excursions and Danny Davis is featured throughout on alto saxophone. Danny Ray Thompson even coaxes some surprisingly tender melodies from the unwieldy Neptunian lirflecto. But Gilmour’s tenor sax solo on part four is the real standout, an especially soulful, bluesy meditation seasoned with astonishing extended techniques and punctuated with pregnant silences. Yes, it’s another incredible John Gilmour solo. Get used to it!

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Exact dates and locations for all these recordings are unknown, but Prof. Campbell’s research indicates they were likely made in early-to-mid-1973 at Variety Recording Studios in New York City (and I have no reason to doubt him):

As on so many recordings done for Saturn, the mythical “El Saturn Studio” in Chicago is given as the location on the Impulse jacket. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it’s wisest to assume that [Sun Ra’s] studio recordings during the 1970s were made at Variety (and if [James] Jacson, who was living in New York City and often not touring with the band, is really present, that would make Variety even more likely [since he had connections there]). (Campbell & Trent, p.196)

Clearly, Sonny had high hopes for the Impulse! deal and spent much of 1973 in the studio, going so far as to prepare a handful of seven-inch singles for the El Saturn label. Indeed, with the release and widespread distribution of the brilliant Astro Black and the reissue of a number of classic Saturn LPs, Sun Ra’s fortunes were looking up: the Arkestra would make its triumphant return to Carnegie Hall in July, in a concert recorded and broadcast by Voice of America, and the fall tour of Europe was, by any measure, an unqualified success. It wasn’t until 1975 that things fell apart with Impulse! and Sun Ra returned to the “sub-underground.” Nevertheless, his reputation was firmly established amongst the hip-jazz cognoscenti and new records would continue to pour forth from Saturn and various independent labels, like breadcrumbs on an intergalactic space trail. His music was treated with near-reverential respect abroad and foreign sojourns would become constants of the Arkestra’s life, grueling itineraries that barely managed to provide a modicum of financial security for the band.

Meanwhile, back home, “The New Thing” fad gave way to slick, commercial fusion by the late-1970s and the band worked where and when it could, crisscrossing the country playing dingy nightclubs, outdoor jazz festivals, and any colleges or universities that would have them. For the most part, Sun Ra’s music was met with indifference or, at best, a bemused skepticism—and in
some quarters, he provoked outright hostility, summarily dismissed as charlatan, a fake. By the
1980s, with much of the discography long out of print and/or impossible to find, Sun Ra’s music
was shrouded in mystery, his live show an anachronistic circus act, wildly out of step with the
neo-conservative times exemplified by Wynton Marsalis and his ilk.

Thankfully, the invention of the compact disc has since allowed Sonny’s vast output of incredibly
obscure recordings to be heard once again. Moreover, the rediscovery of these “lost” albums
offer profound insight into Sun Ra’s unique musical genius in its full flowering, at its most
ambitious. Hopeful of a better world realizable in sound, Sun Ra sincerely thought he could
change the world, and in some not-so-small ways, he did. These albums are essential
documents of one of the Twentieth Century’s most widely misunderstood and underappreciated
masters.

November 21, 2010

TO OUTER UNSEEN WORLDS

Come my brother, you are dear to me
I will take you to new worlds
Greater in splendor than anything earth possesses.
If you are fearful, you are of the futile persuasion
If you are strong, you will be as I
I am nothing
My symbol is the name of nothing
And yet I speak as the living pattern
For the spirit.
The spirit is as I
Nothing can withstand my will
I cover the earth
And hold it like a ball in my hand
I can dash it to bits if I will
Or with the power of many forces
I can take it in seconds
To another galaxy
And set it gently in another place.

--Sun Ra

November 28, 2010

Lucky me! I received a couple of gifts for my birthday which had been on my want list for a while
and will help further my Sun Ra research project. Today, I want to take the time to briefly
discuss them and thank my kind benefactors: Thank you so much!

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Sun Ra: Collected Works, Vol. 1: Immeasurable Equation was published by Phaelos Books
& Mediawerks in 2005 and collects 260 of Sun Ra’s poems and a 1968 prose piece entitled,
“Music Is My Words” in a handsome 226 page volume along with a handful of black and white photographs. Edited by Alton Abraham’s son, Adam, the book provides a comprehensive selection of Ra’s literary works, including numerous, side-by-side alternates and revisions along with introductory essays by James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken which seek to contextualize these idiosyncratic writings within the otherworldly, messianic persona Sun Ra constructed. As Wolf points out:

[Ra’s] poems are so bravely and unabashedly un-poetic. I know of no other poet who uses fewer concrete nouns than does Sun Ra…Wisdom, dimensions, endlessness, potentials, blackness, source, word, world, etc…abstractions all. Two barely concrete words reappearing every now and then are bridge and crossroads, signals of what Sun Ra is presenting to us in his volumes, crossings from one place to another, points of intersection where changes of direction become possible. Beyond these two, there are almost no moments in his entire written corpus that could be called “images” which suggest visual, sonic, or tactile scenes or experiences.

The question arose, and will again for others, is this really poetry? Is this philosophy disguised as poetry, just as Sun Ra’s music is “Images and forecasts of tomorrow/Disguised as Jazz?” (p.xiv)

Geerken focuses on the mutable materiality of Ra’s poetic language and, drawing upon ancient mythology and western metaphysics, suggests that he achieves “a kind of cosmic formula about life and the world which can be employed to harmonize the individual, society, science, politics and art”(p.xxv):

Sun Ra’s poems untie language following the recipes of the Dadaists, the structuralists, the lettrists, the futurists and the cosmologists. Above all, his poetic texts consist of energies. Sun Ra did not write because he wanted to communicate thoughts but because he cultivated particular vibrations and frequencies from which the texts emerged more or less automatically and spontaneously. The reader of Sun Ra’s poems “enters a while and free world, a world without a pope, without kings, without religion, and without refuge. He becomes a tree, a bird, a dancer, a barque, a wave—parts of a cosmos which creates all possibilities and destroys all certainties” (p.xxvi). [Quotation from Gerhard Penzkofer, Introduction to Poésie Spatiale/Raumpoesie, Bamberg 2001.]

Sun Ra may have been a shaman or he may have been a charlatan—or likely he was a little of both. He was a man born Herman Poole “Sonny” Blount, who reinvented himself as Sun Ra from the planet Saturn. The transformation was total: he legally changed his name to Le Sony’r Ra and disavowed his earthly mortality. This was decades before Prince! Sun Ra created his own reality—at least while he was alive—and his written works are keys to his mind. These Collected Works make for fascinating reading and will be a great resource for future Sun Ra Sundays. Thank you, Steve & Katie!

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ESP-Disk recently unearthed over ninety minutes of unreleased material from the May 18, 1966 concert at St. Lawrence University in Potsdam, New York and has released the whole shebang on a two-CD set entitled, College Tour Vol. 1: The Complete Nothing Is…The discovery of previously unreleased Sun Ra music from the ’Sixties is reason enough to celebrate, but this release exceeds all expectations. Of course, Nothing Is… is a perfect album in itself, but it was skillfully edited to showcase the more out-there extremes of the Arkestra’s live act. This
expanded edition restores the concert’s proper sequence, including some of the old-timey swing numbers and groovy space chants which were omitted from the original album; to hear this edition of Arkestra rip through some of the ‘Fifties-era material such as, “Advice for Medics” and “Space Aura,” is a rare delight indeed! And the second disc is truly revelatory, opening with an unusually expansive, contemplative version of “The Satellites Are Spinning” and going on from there.

This was one of the best bands Sonny ever assembled: Ronnie Boykins and Clifford Jarvis in the rhythm section (along with James Jacson and Carl Nimrod on percussion); John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Pat Patrick, and Robert Cummings filling out the reeds; and, instead of the more usual trumpets on top, there are the trombonists, Teddy Nance and Ali Hasan, who give the ensemble sections are darker, mellower tone while also being strong soloists in their own right. My only complaint is the interminable drum solos—why, oh why, did Sun Ra indulge Jarvis so? It’s not that I have anything against drum solos per se (although I generally think they’re a bad idea); it’s just that Jarvis always just plays a bunch of flashy bullshit. Excuse my language, but it’s the most appropriate term. Every time he goes off like that, he abandons the truth of the music for the lie of empty technical displays. Usually, Sonny has to finally cut him mid-paradiddle so as to get things back on track. Left to his own devices, I swear he would go on forever.

But I quibble. Disc two includes almost thirty-five minutes of the evening’s soundcheck/rehearsal featuring two previously unknown compositions: “Nothing Is,” a floating, rhapsodic kind of blues, propelled by Ra’s wandering piano, is sometimes countered by long-toned horns while “Is Is Eternal” sets angular piano chords amidst cascading, rubato rhythms over which the horns heave and sigh in densely orchestrated harmony. Brief solo statements break the surface here and there, but this is very much a through-composed ensemble piece that was, apparently, never performed. Interesting. A leisurely romp through the riff-happy “State Street” follows, featuring dueling bari-saxes in the lead and “The Exotic Forest” concludes the disc in what sounds like a rehearsal but, curiously, applause can be heard at the end. Is it merely tacked on? Who knows? Regardless, College Tour Vol. 1 is a most welcome addition to the Sun Ra discography, an essential document from this most fertile period. The Arkestra played five concerts on this tour, all of which were supposedly recorded by ESP-Disk’. Could this mean more volumes will be forthcoming? One can only hope. In the meantime, this will certainly do!

Thank you, Kath & Justin!

December 5, 2010

SOUND/SILENCE
What can I say other than the music itself?
Music?
Yes, to the ears that dare to hear
That dare to hear
Both the silence and the sound!
Music?
Yes, the silence/sound duality necessity belongingness . . . Balanced projection pointless
Cosmo-Nature/natural feeling sensitivity
Dial pointer vibration-intensity indicator
Express image expression need necessity being code alter-otherwise continuance
Continuance On . . . On . . . On
The music is in the word of words ON . . . . . .

--Sun Ra (1972)

December 12, 2010

Sun Ra: The Singles (Evidence 2CD)

In 1974, at the height of the Impulse! deal, the resurrected Saturn label released two seven-inch 45-RPM singles, in an effort, perhaps, to capitalize on the major label’s support and media exposure. Crudely manufactured in small batches, they were sold from the bandstand or to certain favored record stores for cash on the barrelhead, making them extremely rare and highly-prized collector’s items today. Thankfully, the Evidence label has collected all the known Saturn singles onto two CDs, making these weird and wonderful sides available to all. As usual, the discographical details are sketchy, but we can rely on Prof. Campbell’s research and speculations to fit them into the chronology.

“I’m Gonna Unmask the Batman”/“The Perfect Man” (Saturn ES 537)

Continuing Sun Ra’s odd infatuation with Batman and Robin the A-side is a remake of the Lacy Gibson/Alton Abraham ditty first recorded for Repeto in 1968 (without Sun Ra’s involvement). This version “I’m Gonna Unmask the Batman” was probably taken from a live broadcast at WXPN-FM in Philadelphia on July 4, 1974 under the auspices of Hal Willner (see, Campbell & Trent pp.209-210). The vocalist is Sam Bankhead (who appeared in the Space is the Place movie) and there’s a small complement of riffing horns while Sonny provides the bass-line on his reedy RMI Rocksichord. Despite the silliness of the tune, Sun Ra would return to it again and again in concert, making this, I suppose, the definitive version.

The flip side is something else altogether: In his liner notes to The Singles collection, Prof. Campbell suggests that “The Perfect Man” may be Sun Ra’s “most perfectly realized synthesizer performance.” A particularly captivating space-rock-boogaloo driven by Sonny’s boing-ing MiniMoogs, the head is tightly arranged for the tangy ensemble of Marshall Allen’s oboe and John Gilmore’s tenor sax. Probably recorded at Variety in May 24, 1973, the “Micro-Ensemble Unit” actually sounds surprisingly well rehearsed and polished on this almost-pop-worthy confection (despite the amateurish drumming of Danny Davis). Very interesting.

“Journey to Saturn”/”Enlightenment” (Saturn ES 538)

Saturn ES 538 focuses on two of the common space-chants from the repertoire. “Journey to Saturn” is taken from an unknown live performance circa. 1972-74, as indicated by the unbalanced and overamplified sound. Clifford Jarvis swings hard on drums and Gilmore and June Tyson duet while Sonny churns out some gritty organ accompaniment. After a bluesy solo from Ra that veers off into distant keys, Tyson returns briefly a cappella. The B-side is yet another remake of “Enlightenment,” a song that obviously meant a lot to Ra. Recorded at the House of Ra in Philadelphia sometime between 1970 and 1974, this stripped down version is really quite affecting. The tempo is slow and deliberate, held together by Gilmore’s remarkably supple drumming and Sonny’s orchestral clavinet playing. Gilmore and Tyson sing with full-throated sincerity and, even though Gilmore drops his sticks at one point, he never loses a beat.
The lo-fi, homemade quality of the recording only adds to the charm—this one has that inimitable “Saturn Sound.” A nice rendition of this sometimes overplayed song.

December 19, 2010

THE ROSE WILL BLOOM

The rose will bloom
The broken bowl
Will never know
The perfect self
It once was shaped.
And though the heavens
Are as far from man
As all the past,
They are not lifeless
Or insensitive
As one would think . . . . . .
Seeing they are so distant;
Even as the past knows all the ways
Knows all the ways of man,
So the vast
And
Timeless firmament knows:
And being what is,
It bides that we should search
For celestial-cosmo-truth of myth;
That we should know at last
Our true worth and insignificance
In proximity to the
Endless-Eternal Myth . . . . . . . . .

--Sun Ra

December 26, 2010

Happy Holidays from Santa Ra!

COMMENTS:

Anonymous said...
Hello from Belarus, Rodger!

Sorry for my English if something is wrong, Russian is much more easier for me, but my friend from Japan says Japanese is the easiest :)

Just found your blog and must say "Thank you very much!!" a lot of times. I was a bit surprised that there are just a few comments, so this is somewhat of my comment. I hope (and wish you that) many more people to know about your blog in the future.
Last year's September (and last September again!) I visited Egypt. It was amazing to trip to Cairo and Giza and to see the Pyramids. But it was not less exciting experience for me to see the Sound and Light Theater, where the Grateful Dead shows took place in 1978, it is just few rows of seats (now much less than I saw on the pictures of the event) in the shadow of Sphinx. Since then I had a bit of interest on who else of artists visited Egypt with concerts and found just a few ones in my research: Jean-Michel Jarre, Agitation Free, and... Sun Ra. I only begin to discover Sun Ra's music for myself, so you can imagine my headache when I tried to get any information and to organize a huge mountain of releases in my mind. But sometimes surprises happen, and I manage to find very useful places in the space. Last Sunday it was Sun Ra Album-by-Album Thread and then a link to your wonderful blog. Thank you (and Sam Byrd, too) for excellent analyses you do. All your posts are very interesting. I have enjoyed reading. It is just what I wanted. As I see you begin since 1961 NY Workshop recordings onward. And now we are somewhere in the middle of 1973 (after two years of blogging!). I look forward to new Sun Ra Sundays and hope there will be the continuing of the story soon, not only the poetry. Any chance for Chicago albums digest and "The Futuristic Sounds Of Sun Ra" (1961) for completeness? And how about San Ra Other Days for additional information/upgrades, i.e. "The Paris Tapes 1971" and "Live In London 1970" have been released.

A lot of new interesting releases and discoveries for you in New Year!

Best wishes and Happy New Year,
- Andrei

Rodger Coleman said...

Andrei—

Thank you so much for your thoughtful comments! I can’t tell you how gratifying it is to know that half-way around the world you are reading my humble blog with such interest! Your English is quite good—much better than my Russian could ever be (or Japanese for that matter). Your trip(s) to Egypt sound fascinating. I would love to hear more about that!

To tell you the truth, Sun Ra Sunday came about by accident, actually. As the whole “financial crisis” unfolded in 2007 I could only think of Ra’s refrain, “It’s after the end of the world, don’t you know that yet?” Later, when I started to get “serious” about it, I began with The Choreographer’s Workshop period because I am particularly fond of those recordings and they are scattered across various releases, causing considerable confusion in my mind. I do not pretend to be any kind of expert on Sun Ra, although I am, obviously, a huge fan; I am basically feeling my way through the discography to get a handle on what is there. Now, two years later (!), I do kind of regret not starting from the beginning, but I’m committed now, I guess. My plan (such as it is) is to continue through 1980 and “Sunrise In Different Dimensions” and then double back to the very beginning, leaving the 80s-90s for later (if ever). I started doing this for my own edification but it is nice to know others find it worth reading.

Re: “The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra.” That is one of my very favorite albums and it actually would have made an excellent starting point or prelude to The Choreographer’s Workshop recordings. Alas, it will have to wait until…when? Your comment has certainly inspired me to maybe pick up the pace a bit....
Re: “The Paris Tapes 1971.” I have had some difficulty locating a copy of this here in the states for some reason. After several vexed attempts to order online, it has supposedly shipped to me today from California. I can’t wait to have this CD in my hands! Sam Byrd played me selections from this when I saw him on Monday and I can report that the sound-quality is superb—especially as compared to the atrocious bootleg tape I previously reviewed. Believe me: I will update my post regarding this concert once I have had a chance to absorb this new release.

Re: “London 1970.” To be perfectly honest, I am wary of the Transparency label. On paper, this looks to be a significant upgrade from the dismal recording that circulates but I need to hear some trustworthy first-hand reports confirming such before I’m willing to shell out the cash. This is another excellent concert where the circulating tape sounds just awful. Have you heard it? How does it sound? Please let me know!

Again, thank you for your comment and best wishes to you and yours in the New Year!

--Rodger

January 2, 2011

Sun Ra & His Space Arkestra: What Planet Is This? (Leo/GY 24/25) (2CD)

Although it can be assumed that the Arkestra performed as frequently as ever, live concerts in 1973 are rather sparsely documented, at least as compared to the previous couple of years. Prof. Campbell mentions a 214-minute audience tape recorded at The Village Gate on February 26 (possibly part of multi-night stand at the legendary New York nightclub) but this artifact does not circulate amongst collectors and Campbell offers no details whatsoever (Campbell & Trent p.192). Meanwhile, work continued on the Space Is The Place movie, with Sonny and Tommy Hunter flying to California in late June to film the hilarious nightclub scene wherein “Sunny Ray’s” increasingly outrageous piano playing rains destruction upon the room, thereby vanquishing the evil gangsters. This is my favorite scene in the movie! Sadly, this extraordinary bit of music was not included on the soundtrack CD released by Evidence in 1993 but can be heard (and seen) in the film (Id. pp.198-199). On July 4, Sun Ra appeared with a small group consisting of John Gilmore on tenor sax, Ronnie Boykins on bass, and Beaver Harris on drums as part of a memorial tribute to Louis Armstrong (who died on July 6, 1971) at Flushing Meadow Park, in the borough of Queens, New York. Six minutes of this performance was recorded by Voice of America but never broadcast and, although the tape exists in the Library of Congress, this tantalizing fragment of small-group Ra does not circulate as far as I can tell (see, Id. p.199).

[Some of the information in this post is incorrect; please see my update here.]

On July 6, the Arkestra performed at the “Newport In New York Festival” in a marathon concert at Carnegie Hall which included an opening set by Cab Calloway. This billing must have seemed completely incongruous to those in attendance, but, in later years, Sonny’s connection to Calloway’s brand of pre-war swing and proto-R&B would become increasingly clear. Ra’s entire two-hour set was again recorded by Voice of America but, for some unknown reason, never broadcast. The tapes languished in the Library of Congress until their discovery by researcher Larry Applebaum in the mid-1990s (see, Id. pp.199-200). Subject of rampant speculation in the ensuing years, the small but enterprising British label, Leo Records, finally released these recordings on their Golden Years imprint in 2006, somehow exploiting the grey areas of international copyright law and carefully avoiding any mention of the concert’s venue or the tape’s unusual provenance. Despite its rather non-descript packaging (and potential ethical/legal quibbles), What Planet Is This? Is, for any Sun Ra fan, a most welcome release.
indeed as the sound quality is (for the most part) first-rate and the maximum-strength Arkestra was well-rehearsed and in top form for this prestigious concert.

Opening with the usual processional/improvisation, the first thing you notice is a full contingent of low brass, including two trombones and tuba (likely played by Charles Stevens, Dick Griffin and Hakim Jami, respectively). Sonny often had to make do without the rich, warm sonorities of the trombone in his working ensembles, but he would usually recruit players for high-profile gigs such as this, re-tooling the arrangements to accommodate an expanded sonic palette. The second thing you notice is the presence of Ronnie Boykins, who brings his sure-footed authority on the double-bass, anchoring the proceedings in his own inimitable fashion. Curiously, Clifford Jarvis is absent, replaced by Lex Humphries on trap drums. While Humphries’s laconic style may lack the fiery, propulsive drive of Jarvis, we are also spared the interminable drum solos that would have inevitably resulted—and that is a good thing, as far as I’m concerned.

Once the twenty-five member Arkestra has assembled on stage (including an array of percussionists and The Space Ethnic Voices), June Tyson solemnly intones “Astro Black,” accompanied by delicate bass thrumming but ending with an explosive, full-band space chord and free-form freak-out. Whew! Then, just as suddenly, the chaos melts into the big-band swing of “Discipline 27,” led by Pat Patrick’s baritone sax riffing. The Arkestra sounds great, with the trombones and tuba prominently featured amidst the reeds and trumpets. But Ra is playing a different kind of organ than usual (or perhaps he’s just poorly miked)—it sounds oddly muffled and distant here. Fortunately, he was provided a decent grand piano and, in the long improvisation which follows, he makes excellent use of it, throwing off astonishingly dexterous runs and thick, dissonant harmonies a la Cecil Taylor. Then he moves to the MiniMoog synthesizer to create pulsating walls of industrial noise against which the horns spatter notes like graffiti. And again, the organ sound is…strange, kind of like “The Mighty Wurlitzer” at a baseball park. Is there a theatre organ at Carnegie Hall? Is that what he’s playing? Who knows! This remarkably compelling improvisation goes on for almost thirty minutes, dominated by the shifting hues of Ra’s keyboards and held together by Boykins’s macroscopic sense of structure and groove (not to mention the thrilling crescendos of tympani). Various solos and ensembles are queued by Ra, giving shape to an improvised construction of remarkable cohesiveness and expressive beauty. Despite the seemingly excessive length, it’s actually over before you know it and the band launches smoothly into “Space Is The Place.” Wow! One of the Space Ethnic Voices (who?) does some of her insane, post-Ono vocal acrobatics before the band eases into lush and dreamy versions of “Enlightenment” and “Love In Outer Space.” These arguably overplayed numbers could sometimes sound glib and tossed-off in performance, but here they sound poised and purposeful, aided, in part, by the relaxed drumming of Humphries and the rock-solid bass of Boykins.

But Humphries shows he’s no slouch on “The Shadow World,” kicking up furious polyrhythms in tandem with Aye Aton [Robert Underwood] and a host of burbling congas. Starting from a dead stop, the Arkestra executes the dauntingly difficult composition with startling precision, the hi-fi recording allowing us to hear deep into the densely orchestrated ensemble. The improvisation that follows is another perfect example of Ra’s disciplined freedom at its most cogent—even Gilmore’s unaccompanied solo (often a show-stopping tour de force) is ultimately curtailed and subsumed within the evolving group dynamic, just a part of the intricately woven musical fabric. After about fifteen minutes, the band settles into a quiet, Afro-Asian feel, with Alzo Wright’s cello providing some “Strange Strings”-style bowings and Marshall Allen wailing away on a plangent oboe—both of which elicit surprisingly respectful applause from the audience, given how weird and otherworldly the sounds. It is a magical moment. By this point, the audience has been transported, if not into outer space, then into Sun Ra’s alternative reality, where such sounds
are as natural and nutritive as the air we breathe. This is truly an exemplary rendition of “The Shadow World” and needs to be heard to be believed. “Watusa” and “Discipline 27-II” conclude the set in the usual fashion, with a percussion/dance workout and a seventeen-minute sermon of cosmic declamations. Yet the ultra-spacious sound quality and the richly textured Arkestra’s near-definitive performances make them worth listening to—even if, like me, you think you’ve heard these routines too many times already.

So, yeah, this one is a keeper. No doubt the incendiary rhetoric found at the conclusion of this concert scared the pants off the bureaucrats at the VOA, who, upon hearing the tapes, shipped them off to some remote storage facility of the LOC, never, they hoped, to be heard by anyone else ever again. I’m speculating about all this, of course—and I have no idea about the legal ramifications of this CD (I am NOT a lawyer)—but the tangled history of this tape is certainly intriguing. All I care about is having the opportunity to hear this music after all these years, by whatever means. Please don’t get me wrong: Leo is a well-established label with impeccable bona fides—their loving devotion to Anthony Braxton’s most ambitious music is to be wholeheartedly supported—and I do not mean to impugn the label’s business ethics in slightest. For all I know, everything is kosher, the rights-holders are paid and everyone is happy. Whatever, I don’t really care (my only complaint is that the Flushing Meadow Park fragment was not included). Hey, this is the record business—the shadiest business ever. As a fan, I only rejoice at its current availability and recommend to others they grab a copy before it goes out of print forever, as these things often do. Carpe diem!

January 9, 2011

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Arkestra:
Outer Space Employment Agency (Alive!/Total Energy CD)

On September 10, 1973, the Arkestra returned to play John Sinclair’s fifth annual Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival, a huge outdoor concert held at Otis Spann Memorial Field. This was a rare opportunity for Sun Ra to play in front of a large audience, appearing on the final night of the festival on a bill with Luther Allison, Hound Dog Taylor, and Otis Rush. The entire concert was broadcast over the radio, including most of Sun Ra’s seventy-three minute set (see Campbell & Trent p. 201) and a tape of this broadcast apparently circulates amongst collectors, but I haven’t heard it. Finally, in 1999, Sinclair released a fifty-two minute fragment (omitting “Discipline 27” and “Astro Black”) on his Alive!/Total Energy label on a compact disc entitled, Outer Space Employment Agency. To be honest, it's a mixed bag.

Sinclair certainly means well—but as Prof. Campbell points out, he “continues the tradition of incorrect titling that has afflicted so many commercial releases of Arkestra concerts” (Id. p.202). That’s putting it politely! The first track is actually an untitled improvisation (mistitled “Discipline 99”), opening with a bit of “mad scientist” keyboard noodling before a brutal splice takes us into the middle of a howling space chord—what’s that about? Whatever, the group improv that follows is a real corker—and you can plainly hear the sizable crowd rapturously whooping it up in the background. The great Ronnie Boykins is once again present on bass and right away he starts bowing away, widely ranging from rich, low-register double stops bristly sul ponticello scraping. Lex Humphries returns on drums, joined by Tommy Hunter, and (along with a battery of conga players) they kick up a suitable din for a series of solos and duos, climaxing with some barn-burning saxophone from John Gilmore on tenor and Danny Davis on alto. After a brief organ interlude, “Discipline 99” (mistitled “Love In Outer Space”) follows, and it’s a treat to hear this rarely performed number in such exquisite high fidelity. A languid, almost melancholic
ballad, the Arkestra sounds well-rehearsed on this lush, intricate arrangement with Gilmore briefly taking the lead with a soulful, bluesy solo before giving way to Akh Tal Ebah’s mellow, burnished flugelhorn. Just lovely.

After that, the rest of the disc is something of a letdown. Kwame Hadi’s fiery trumpet enlivens an otherwise desultory “Love In Outer Space” but the following “Watusi” is the usual percussion jam (featuring about fifteen clanking cowbells) accompanying some hysterical chanting and the pharaonic dancing (this segment is mistitled “Watusa/Discipline 27-II” on the CD). No doubt this was a mesmerizing visual spectacle in person, but it comes across as a diffuse and a little dull on disc—nothing new there, I guess. A medium tempo “Discipline 27-II” concludes the set in the usual fashion, with Sun Ra furiously preaching the Cosmo Drama, his rhetorical—sometimes downright inflammatory—declarations echoed by June Tyson, a crooning Ebah and various Space Ethnic Voices. It’s the usual stuff and the ultra-spacious sound quality lets us clearly hear the subtly morphing orchestration of “Discipline 27-II” beneath all that vocal carrying-on. Even so, at over twenty minutes, it’s more than a little much. Again, I think you had to have been there.

Still, there’s a lot to like about this CD. The sound quality is much improved over the 1972 set (released as Life Is Splendid) and the crackling opening improvisation and beautiful rendition of “Discipline 99” make it a necessary acquisition for the hardcore Sun Ra fan. But the shoddy documentation, meandering percussion jams and endless, inscrutable chanting will likely leave novices scratching their heads. With a choice of live recordings available from this period, I cannot wholeheartedly recommend this one. Yet be aware that all three of the Alive!/Total Energy releases are now out of print; if you’re interested, better grab them now before they disappear for good.

January 16, 2011

Sun Ra: “The Universe Sent Me”: Lost Reel Collection, Vol. 5 (Transparency CD)

There is some confusion as to when exactly the Arkestra’s third European tour began. The last four tracks on Transparency’s Lost Reel Collection Vol. 5 were purportedly recorded in Paris on September 8, 1973 while Szwed says the first concert was on September 9 at the Fête de l’Humanité (p.335). Neither date is possible since the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival performance definitely occurred on September 10. Prof. Campbell (via Julian Vein) suggests the Fête de l’Humanité took place on either September 18 or 28 with another concert at the Olympia in Paris on September 30 (p.202). These later dates make more sense, with September 28 being the most likely.

In any case, I believe this fifty minute fragment was probably recorded on that date at the Fête de l’Humanité, an event sponsored by the Communist Party and which almost turned into a full-scale riot. Recorded from the stage (presumably by drummer, Tommy Hunter), you can hear a sizable audience in the background and, more tellingly, “Discipline 27-II” makes an unusually early appearance in the set, allowing Sonny an opportunity to cast his spell upon the surly crowd. Szwed describes the scene:

When they arrived at the festival grounds they found the audience in an especially ugly mood, having driven Jerry Lee Lewis off the stage, and Chuck Berry was leaving fast (the word was that their arrival in limos had been enough to set that volatile post-May ’68 crowd off). When the Arkestra reached the stage a moratorium began as the crowd froze in amazement: audience
and critics alike were bewildered by what they saw, then won over. But what had they seen? A particularly arcane black nationalist paramilitary display? A ridiculous parody of European avant-garde theater? . . . For whatever reason—shock, delight, puzzlement—the Arkestra brought the audience to its feet seven times that day, clapping and cheering. “Music,” Sonny said matter-of-factly, “soothes the savage beast.” It soothed them enough, in fact, that the Ballet Folklórico de Mexico which followed next was also received well, for which the dancers and the Minister of Culture of Mexico credited the Arkestra (pp.335-336).

We pick up in the middle of “Discipline 27-II” and while the vocals are distant, the horns are upfront and reasonably clear. The accompanying declamations can get a little tiresome but it’s always worth paying attention to how the arrangement changes from night to night: it’s never quite the same, the instrumentation subtly shifting with each repetition of the theme. Ronnie Boykins is present holding down the rhythm section, joined by Hunter and the usual gang of percussionists. After about ten minutes, John Gilmore signals a free, bashing, group improvisation which quickly gives way to Sun Ra’s scary sci-fi electronics. Four measures of stately organ chords introduce “Discipline 99” in yet another rearrangement: the tempo is a little faster than we heard in Ann Arbor while flutes and piccolos take the lead amidst some added horn riffing. This is one of Sun Ra’s more interesting compositions, with a wistful, slightly melancholy mood evoked by the descending minor-mode melodies. But, apparently, he was dissatisfied with it as it was performed only a handful of times during this period before being briefly resurrected in the early-’80s and then abandoned (see Campbell & Trent p.818). Sonny takes a short but dramatic solo before Gilmore lays down some deeply penetrating soul-blues and the rhythm starts to loosen up the backbeat. Akh Tal Ebah essays on flugelhorn while Sonny’s organ grinds away and horns circle and dodge. Marshall Allen finally takes over with a delightful flute solo and the texture starts to thin. Rather than recapitulating the theme, it just sort of dissipates, which is kind of disappointing, given the fact that “Watusi” is up next. It’s the same old thing: after a quick run through the head, drums and percussion, whooping and hollering, dancing and chanting go on and on for ten tedious minutes. I’m sure it was quite the spectacle!

But then something happens: Kwame Hadi starts into a pealing high-register thing and the rhythm shifts into high gear, Boykins setting down an insistently throbbing bass line. Swirling organ and quicksilver horns enter the fray and now we’re into a ferocious group improv—only to have Sonny suddenly signal the reprise of “Watusi.” Wow! This gets a big hand from the audience and Hunter boldly steps up with a (relatively rare) drum solo. Unlike Clifford Jarvis, he keeps it short and tasteful, establishing a tribal beat on the tom-toms appropriate for Eloe Omoe’s bass clarinet rumblings which follow. Sun Ra cues a harrowing space chord but it quickly dissolves into flickering, pointillist horn figures. Boykins gets out the bow for a misterioso bass solo and is later joined by Marshall Allen’s oboe and Ebah’s flugelhorn, a rare and beautiful sonority. Sonny is out front hectoring the audience about “The Impossible Equation” but it’s hard to hear. That’s OK because the Arkestra is in deep space exotica mode, all orbiting horns and solar drums. As things heat up, Gilmore blasts off with some hair-raising altissimo runs and someone (Ra?) starts honking what sounds like a car horn (?). Just as the intensity level becomes almost unbearable, the tape cuts off. Argh! Surely there was a lot more to this set…

According to Szwed, the events at Fête de l’Humanité prompted an outpouring of typically French theorizing:

One critic wrote that [the Arkestra] was a quasireligious phenomenon, and like the Church itself, the band used cheap props and son et lumière effects. But, he asked in all seriousness, could a secular group like this move forward and progress, or would they be trapped forever in their
rituals like the Church? Whatever they were, the Arkestra was disrupting critical predispositions and habits, their show calling attention to the critics’ limitations. A performance like this would require multiple levels of readings, and a fuller understanding of different genres, different forms of media, and different styles of playing (pp.335-336).

Indeed. It’s pure speculation on my part that this recording is from the Fête de l’Humanité debacle, but, after listening to other documents from this tour, it makes sense. Regardless of exactly when or where it was recorded, this volume of the *Lost Reel Collection* (which also includes a fragment from the *Southport Seaport Museum on July 9, 1972*) is of definite historical interest to all Sun Ra fanatics. Be forewarned: as usual with Transparency, the sound quality is not great—clearly several generations away from the master (presumably, um, lost)—but it’s certainly listenable, as these things go. Musically, the Arkestra is at its best, bringing a fresh enthusiasm to even the most overplayed repertoire and improvising with an almost telepathic cohesion. The rarely heard “Discipline 99” and the (truncated) closing improvisation are particularly satisfying, despite the bootleg sound quality. Newbies should start elsewhere, but Sun Ra aficionados who know what to expect will be amply rewarded by *The Lost Reel Collection Vol. 5*.

January 23, 2011

**Sun Ra: Live In Paris at the “Gibus”** (Atlantic—France/Universe CD)

Unlike the previous European tour (an extended sojourn which ranged widely across the continent, culminating in an impromptu trip to Egypt), the 1973 visit seems to have consisted of barely a handful of gigs in and around Paris. Also unlike the well-documented 1971 excursion, there were no high-profile radio broadcasts and very few amateur recordings survive. The tour likely began with the ill-fated Fête de l’Humanité at the end of September (possibly found on Transparency’s *Lost Reel Collection Vol. 5*) and while Prof. Campbell mentions a 180-minute audience tape from the Nancy Jazz Festival on October 14, that’s about it (p.203) (and I haven't heard this tape). Otherwise, it seems the Arkestra settled into a multi-night stand at the famed *Gibus Discotèque* in Paris until their return to the states sometime in mid-to-late-October. Fortunately, the French division of Atlantic Records recorded a portion of this gig and released it as *Live In Paris at the “Gibus”* (Atlantic 40540) in 1975—but only in France (*Id.*). It remained an obscure collector’s item until 2003, when the Italian *Comet* label reissued it on CD on their Universe imprint in a deluxe, gatefold mini-LP package with excellent sound quality. *Finally!* This is one of the essential Sun Ra albums: an impeccable performance, well-recorded, documenting a crucial period in the Arkestra’s development.

It helps that the repertoire and sequencing is particularly inspired, possibly assembled by Sonny himself from several night’s recordings (he was, after all, a master of the razor blade and splicing tape). Who knows?—the liner notes are deliberately vague. The album begins with two of Ra’s most whimsically captivating compositions, both of which had been out of the setlists for a while and are now radically rearranged. “Spontaneous Simplicity” dispenses with the horn statements altogether and becomes a feature for Ra’s chiming organ and the “space-rhumba” groove is a bit looser, with Boykins leaning heavily on the riff. Suddenly, Ra goes into a frenetic double-time feel but the rhythm section keeps right with him to the end. An interesting re-imagining of this piece. The beautiful and tranquil “Lights On a Satellite” which follows is intricately through-composed, from the flute and trumpet harmonizations right down to the *arco* bass pedals and pitter-pattering percussion figures—and it is taken at a glacially slow tempo.
The Arkestra sounds a little restrained but they deliver a note-perfect performance of this chamber-jazz masterpiece, one of my very favorite Sun Ra compositions.

A deft edit (indicative of Sun Ra’s hand) puts us smack in the middle of “The Shadow World” (mysteriously re-titled “Ombre Monde #2”), with Danny Ray Thompson’s baritone sax riffing just tailing off. John Gilmore comes in with another spine-tingling tenor solo, made all the more intense by Sun Ra’s insistently busy organ figuration. Kwame Hadi then solos on trumpet, easily holding his own against the rumbling thunderclouds and lightning flashes of electric organ but Sonny finally takes over with an apocalyptic fury before another surgically precise edit dramatically brings the track to an end. Wow! It would be nice to have the whole thing, but this is a powerfully edited fragment that stands alone as a coherent piece of music. Whether constructed by Ra or unknown French engineers, this is a bravura bit of record making.

Then we have something completely different: The Arkestra busts out a free-wheeling arrangement of Jelly Roll Morton’s “King Porter Stomp,” a proto-jazz number dating back to 1923. This signals a brash new direction for the Arkestra: resurrecting the old (if not old-fashioned) practices of the swing-era big bands within their futuristic space music and re-connecting the so-called avant garde to the deepest roots of early jazz. This kind of stuff was always an element of Sun Ra’s music, with its old-timey shuffle rhythms and pre-bop formalism, but here it becomes explicit. Of course, at age 59, Sonny was older than almost everyone else in the band by a number of years and had worked with Fletcher Henderson in Chicago back in 1946. Henderson was Herman Poole Blount’s childhood idol in 1930s (see Szwed, pp.11-12) and it may very well be one of Henderson’s arrangements the Arkestra plays here. By 1973, “[t]he recent deaths of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong had him reflecting about the forgotten masterworks of that era” and he began to introduce “mini-concerts of swing classics” at every performance.

It was a move both oppositional and prescient: he had seen the limits of the avant-garde, and sensing a shift beginning in American sensibilities, he was unwilling to give up the large audiences he had drawn. And even if he moved toward the middle, his goals were still the same: “My music is self-underground—that is, it is out of the music industry: I’ve made records with no titles, primitive, natural and pure. I’m also recording standards so that people can compare what I do with those in the past. The avant-garde can’t play other people’s music because they’re not mature enough” (Szwed, pp.337-338).

One may agree or disagree with his last assertion, but it is in keeping with Ra’s musicosophy, which was about discipline, not freedom, and this little swing revival within the Arkestra was in keeping with a living tradition that was perhaps obscured by the “out-there” music and space-age trappings. The Arkestra’s exuberant performances of these old chestnuts are anything but polite re-creations made for nostalgic, easy listening. No, the music is as sweaty and funky as a roadside saloon, a room full of crazed jitterbuggers ecstatically dancing the night away. The music is alive! Thence forward, every concert would feature a number of swing tunes from the ’20s and ’30s, done up with rousing enthusiasm. It’s over before you know it and now we’re blasting off into outer space. “Salutations From The Universe” is a group improvisation which opens with a some jittery space chords and a brief declamation from Ra, but he soon embarks on a long synthesizer/organ solo full of scary spaceship sounds; hieroglyphic counterpoint; weird, microtonal effects; and hair-raisingly aggressive, two-fisted noise attacks. The howling space chords return and Sonny sounds the air-raid sirens as bombs boom forth from his speaker cabinets. Finally, a repeated organ note cues “Calling Planet Earth” and everyone joins in the chanting (including someone with a policeman’s bull-horn), all of them
gleefully hectoring the crowd while Ra continues his sonic onslaught. Another perfectly timed edit ends the album with a dramatic silence. Whew!

*Live At The Gibus* is one of the great live Sun Ra albums, not only because of the interesting song selection and excellent sound quality. The Arkestra is at its disciplined best and Sonny is the star of the show—not only as master composer and bandleader, but also as virtuoso instrumentalist. His electronic keyboard solos on this record are truly out of this world. Sun Ra was a visionary player; no one even tried to sound like him on synthesizer or organ! He is *sui generis*! This record also shows the band in transition: swing numbers are coming to the fore and the Cosmo Drama is being reinvented and routinized. But the routine was paying dividends, both commercially and artistically, and within that structure, Ra could continue to work his magic. Pushing sixty, he was well aware of transient nature of fads and fashion and was positioning himself, as always, for the long haul. *Live At The Gibus* documents the Arkestra at a mid-career peak and showcases Sun Ra's outrageous musicianship to stunning effect. An absolute must-have record.

**COMMENTS:**

Sam said...
Re: "King Porter Stomp"—it definitely is Fletcher Henderson's arrangement. Henderson had done a version of this in late '20s, but he revamped it for the swing era (mid-'30s), renaming it "New King Porter Stomp" (and basically speeding it up). It is this arrangement that Ra closely follows here (and in practically every other version I've heard him play). Henderson's version can be heard on the ASV/Loving Era disc "Under the Harlem Moon" (which, by the way, is primo Fletcher 1932-1937!)

**January 30, 2011**

**Sun Ra: “The Road To Destiny”: Lost Reel Collection Vol. 6 (Transparency CD)**

The latest volume in Transparency’s *Lost Reel Collection* is noteworthy for a couple of reasons: First and foremost, it offers further documentation of the Arkestra’s stand at *The Gibus Discotèque* in 1973. Secondly, it comes from the collection of Tommy “Bugs” Hunter, who often served as recordist for the band when he was available (he even provides a spoken introduction to the CD, wherein he states the tape was recorded “around midnight” on Thursday, October 18th or 19th). It features remarkably good sound quality, likely recorded from the stage and since it is mastered from the original tape, it does not suffer from the kind of gross distortion and generational loss that plagues most of the volumes in this series. All this makes it of interest to Sun Ra fans, but the music is not particularly revelatory. If the Atlantic—France LP, *Live at The Gibus*, indicated a change in direction, this CD demonstrates that Sun Ra was still up to his old tricks.

The disc starts off strong with a spacey version of “Astro Black.” A smattering of horns precedes June Tyson's entrance, who sweetly sings to Ronnie Boykins’s spare bass accompaniment. Drums are heard faintly in the background, but soon become more prominent as the song comes to a conclusion and a blaring space chord signals a brief group improvisation. The music quiets and one of the Space Ethnic Voices does her crazy, super-high-pitched vocalese trick along with some twisty trumpet obbligato from Kwame Hadi. Impressive, but very strange! This goes on for barely a minute or so before Danny Ray Thompson’s baritone sax riff introduces “Discipline 27,” which is taken at a relaxed, easy-going tempo, buoyed by Boykins’s sure-footed
bass-playing. This is a cheerfully pleasant version of the big-band swing number, with Hadi and Akh Tal Ebah providing dual trumpet lead and Sonny soloing fluidly on "vibra-organ" before the reprise. Nothing special, but a solid performance nonetheless.

Then the Arkestra drops the tempo and smoothly segues into an extended "Discipline 27-II," complete with its full complement of chanted declamations. The recording foregrounds the instruments at the expense of the vocals, which sound distant and hard to hear, as if coming from monitors at the other end of the stage. That’s OK since, as is usual, the endlessly morphing horn arrangement is what keeps the piece interesting to listen to while Sun Ra’s space-preacher shtick can get a little tedious, to say the least. But don’t worry, when he and June raise their voices (which happens often enough), you can hear them loud and clear. After nearly twenty-seven minutes (!), the Arkestra finally abandons the composition and descends into a chaotic group improvisation with terrifying saxophone battles, bashing drums and throbbing bass. Sadly, the tape fades out just as things get going. Oh well—I would love to hear what came next! Instead, the disc ends with a series of space chants, cutting in on Tyson’s lead on “Prepare for the Journey to Other Worlds.” Others join in for “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Why Go to the Moon?,” but the vocals are swamped by layers of distortion and feedback—yet you can still our unknown Space Ethnic Voice doing her screeching thing amidst all the mayhem, so that’s something to listen for. Just as Gilmore starts to wail on tenor saxophone, the tape brutally cuts off. Argh!

**Lost Reel Collection Vol. 6** is a mixed bag: good sound and excellent playing (especially from the ever-inventive Ronnie Boykins), but the song selection is rather mundane. We’ve heard all this stuff many times before and this CD offers very little in the way of fresh insights. The most interesting thing here is the weird, post-Yoko vocalizing of the anonymous Space Ethnic Voice on “Astro Black” and during the closing chants, but that’s not saying a whole lot. Fanatics and completists will be happy to have this as an adjunct to *Live at The Gibus*, but others will wonder what all the fuss is about. Nice, but non-essential.

**February 6, 2011**

**Sun Ra: Concert for the Comet Kohoutek (ESP-Disk’ CD)**

It’s unclear when exactly the Arkestra returned to the states, or what they did (if anything) until the end of the year, when ESP-Disk mounted an ambitious Concert for Comet Kohoutek at New York City’s prestigious Town Hall on December 22, 1973. Given the supposedly cosmic significance of this astronomical event, Sun Ra was asked to headline a marathon concert featuring other ESP-affiliated artists such as the Miamis, Randy Burns, Amanda, Buddy Hughes, Donald Raphael Garrett and Paul Thornton (of the Godz). Like the eponymous comet, the concert was something of a bust. I’m old enough to remember the hype surrounding Kohoutek and the deep sense of disappointment that followed its weak display. In retrospect, the deflation of naïve idealism that accompanied Kohoutek’s passage by our planet seems to fittingly symbolize the end of “The Age of Aquarius.” It’s not surprising to learn the Town Hall concert was “rather poorly attended” (Campbell & Trent p.204) or that the tapes of Sun Ra’s set would become a source of bitter contention, unreleased until 1993, a year after Sonny’s death and twenty years after its recording. The times had indeed a-changed—but not for the better.

Originally released via the licensing deal with German ZYX label, that disc was marred by poor sound, random indexing and woefully incorrect titling. **Concert For Comet Kohoutek** was eventually reissued in a slightly expanded and remastered edition by the re-formed ESP-Disk’ in
2006, although the graphics are noticeably fuzzier and it dispenses with the thick booklet of text and photographs which accompanied the ZYX version. Instead, we get a bizarre, two-page essay by ESP-Disk’ founder, Bernard Stollman, wherein he accuses Sun Ra of stealing the original (presumably stereo) master tapes from his apartment, which necessitated the use of a mono reference copy for the CD (contra. Campbell & Trent p.204-205, both editions are mono). Stollman further insinuates Sun Ra extorted a royalty advance from him shortly after this concert and, later, breached a contract regarding concert recordings to be made on the upcoming Mexican tour. Well, whatever the veracity of these allegations, the tone of cynicism and bad faith is certainly in keeping with the post-’Sixties malaise the Comet Kohoutek seemed to auger. Indeed, this posthumously released album presents the end of an era in Sun Ra’s music: the outrageous experimentalism would thereafter be tempered by an increasingly regimented formalism and the space-age cosmo-philosophy would be subsumed into more a more calculated sense of showmanship. Sure, he continued to make interesting music, but it inevitably changed with the times.

A profound sense of anticlimax pervades the opening remarks by the hapless M.C., who earnestly attempts to narrate a slideshow of NASA space photographs. The Arkestra can be heard noodling around and tuning up in the background and as he begins to expound upon the drug-addled fantasies of Timothy Leary, the audience becomes audibly restless. “Somebody has asked me to get the f*** off [the stage],” he announces with a nervous chuckle. “Is there anybody here that wants to hear more about [Leary’s] Terra 2? Otherwise, I’ll get the f*** off.” The audience responds with resounding cheers. “By popular demand, I will get the f*** off.” This little exchange (omitted on the ZYX CD) neatly summarizes the cultural zeitgeist of the mid-'Seventies.

Then the Arkestra goes at it, opening with a earth-shattering space chord and “Astro Black.” June Tyson sings a cappella, then with quiet accompaniment from bass and drums, ringing cymbals and cowbell. Beautiful! Then John Gilmore leads some assultive group improvisation which quickly melts into the melodious strains of “Discipline 27,” but the tempo is oddly plodding and off-centered. After a brief but intriguingly out-there solo from Gilmore, they lurch into what Prof. Campbell calls “Journey Through the Outer Darkness” (p.204) but I believe is another “Discipline” piece, a heaving minor key vamp in five. But again, while Boykins tries to anchor the rhythm section, the multiple drummers and percussionists fail to coalesce, even during Hadi’s otherwise fluid trumpet solo. As if sensing defeat, Sonny starts interjecting weird synthesizer squiggles, eventually taking over with a long keyboard solo, occasionally punctuated with conducted blasts of high-energy group improvisation, climaxing with a typically mind-blowing tenor solo from Gilmore. Good stuff! After some more scary electronics, Sonny launches into “Enlightenment” and it’s the usual, with Tyson and Gilmore singing in harmony along with the Space Ethnic Voices and host of clanking percussion. Unfortunately, Marshall Allen’s flute obligato is off-mic and hard to hear, but it’s still a nice version of this concert staple.

“Love in Outer Space” is one of those wonderfully heavy, organ-driven versions with Danny Davis joining Allen in a dual alto saxophone display towards the end. This elicits some hearty applause after which Ra begins playing “Discipline 15” (mistitled “Kohoutek” on this CD). A mournful, rubato ballad, this composition was rarely performed yet the Arkestra sounds remarkably well-rehearsed, unfazed by Ra’s weird and increasingly frenetic organ plinking. After its solemn conclusion, Sonny takes charge with another display of electric pyrotechnics, full of thunderous, low-register rumbling; two-handed, staccato runs; and dissonant organ clusters. A cued space chord signals the entrance of bass and drums and then things get really crazy, with Ra building up forbidding walls of synthesizer/organ noise while horns chirp and squeal in the background. Just as the texture becomes impossibly dense, a trombone makes a dramatic
entrance (probably Dick Griffin or Charles Stephens) (Id.) and more mayhem arises in its wake. Wow!

Finally, Sonny guides the band into “Discipline 27-II,” taken at a moderately fast clip, and the keyboard attack continues for several minutes before he takes to the microphone to ask “What planet is this?” The usual series of declamations follow, echoed by Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices while the ensemble arranges and re-arranges the endlessly malleable composition, all held together by Boykins’s endlessly creative bass playing. Thankfully, it doesn’t go on too long and everyone quiets down for some of that post-Yoko screeching and screaming from one of the Space Ethnic Voices. Nice! Then Tyson announces, “We’re openin’ up the doors of the Outer Space Employment Agency!” and short but super-funky version follows. Only forty-seven seconds long, I would have liked to hear a bit more of this killer groove, but before things are allowed to get going, it’s interrupted by Ra’s insistence on “Space Is The Place.” After an over-amped organ introduction, the singing, dancing and chanting begins in earnest, with Akh Tal Ebah doing his soul-man thing along with Tyson’s more reserved crooning. Eventually, the percussion drops out leaving the vocalists supported only by Boykins, who is riding the wave, in the pocket and he doesn’t want to stop! Sun Ra steps up to say, “There’s no place for you to go except for in or out…try the out!” This gets a big hand from the audience. Saxophones scribble, the Space Ethnic Voice shrieks and screams, while Boykins just keeps on rockin’ until finally bringing it to a close with big cadence. The small but enthusiastic audience claps and hollers its appreciation while the musicians exit the stage.

The actual Concert For Comet Kohoutek was, like its namesake, something of a letdown for its promoters. But the music preserved on this CD is a stunning reminder of Sun Ra’s prowess as instrumentalist and bandleader during this period. His keyboard solos are some of the most hair-raisingly intense to be found on record and his control over the Arkestra’s resources is complete, deftly steering the music in contrasting directions as it unfolds. Despite the acrimonious history surrounding the tapes and the less-than-perfect sound quality, this is still a worthy addition to the official canon. If the original stereo masters still exist somewhere, let’s hear ’em! Until then, Concert For Comet Kohoutek (particularly the expanded and remastered edition) is highly recommended.

**February 13, 2011**

**TRUTH IS BAD/GOOD**

Truth is bad
Or truth is good
It depends upon where
And how and who you are.
The word truth must be considered carefully
And the precepts of that which is called truth
Must be equationized and balanced
And understood.
Or else, it must be abandoned
And another truth placed in its place.
This is the idea of the greater age
The outer worlds of etherness
This is the word from the Cosmic-Cosmo-Tomorrow.
Anonymous said...
I have a Sun Ra question for you:

I have heard that there are hundreds of compositions in Sun Ra's Discipline series. However, when I look through the chunk of his discography I've managed to get my grubby paws on, I notice much less Disciplines than that. Are the songs given regular titles? I was expecting them to be numbered. What's the story?

Q

Anonymous said...

One more comment.
The Norton releases of Sun Ra doo-wop outtakes/rehearsals has some really great moments on them. (I've heard two of the three). Have you heard them?

Q

February 27, 2011

Sun Ra: Flushing Meadow Park, Queens, NY, July 4, 1973 (CDR)

As it turns out, I was mistaken in my review of What Planet Is This?: Not only did a copy of the July 6, 1973 Carnegie Hall concert circulate amongst collectors prior to its release by Leo Records, but this “bootleg” edition also included Sun Ra's appearance at the memorial tribute to Louis Armstrong held in Flushing Meadow Park in Queens, New York on the afternoon of July 4. In fact, I used to have a copy, but threw it away after purchasing What Planet Is This?, not realizing this track was missing on the official release. Oh well—just goes to show I should never get rid of anything without more careful consideration! Big thank you to the Sun Ra fans who pointed out my error and kindly provided me with a copy.

Like the Carnegie Hall concert, this was recorded by Voice of America but never broadcast, the tapes deposited into the Library of Congress and promptly forgotten (see Campbell & Trent p.199). It's a curious fragment, about six minutes of music played by a small band consisting of Ra on electric piano, John Gilmore on tenor sax, Ronnie Boykins on bass and Beaver Harris on drums, in his only known appearance with the Arkestra. The whole thing has a very impromptu, ad hoc feel to it, as if it had been organized at the last possible minute. The announcer is harried and clueless, first introducing the bassist as Reggie Workman and then, after the band corrects him, calling him “Ronnie Barkin” (and, later, “Ronnie Bodkin”) Sheesh! Sonny gingerly fingers a Fender Rhodes piano, an instrument he was not associated with at this time, and its politely chiming, bell-like tone clearly displeases him. So, he starts to work it, cranking up the gain, making it distort, adding skittering, polyphonic voices while Boykins and Harris set up a churning, free-jazz groove. Now Ra is really going for it, attacking the keyboard with two-fisted fury—but the engineer freaks out and turns down Sonny's volume, greatly reducing the effect. Argh! Gilmore enters with what sounds like a pre-composed, modal theme and a set of full-throated, late-Coltrane-style variations. Despite the wonky sound, this is pretty exciting stuff! Harris gets maybe a little too excited and starts to overplay while Boykins tries his best to rein
him in. Suddenly, Harris gets the message and drops out altogether, leaving Gilmore to solo a cappella, continuing in an atonal, post-bop vein, peppered with bluesy call and response effects and concluding with a dramatic flourish. Although brief, this is yet another incredible Gilmore solo!

In the aftermath of Gilmore’s stunning display, piano filigrees float up from the stillness and Boykins picks up the bow, accompanied by softly tinkling cymbals. Ra sets the mood with celeste-like chording to surround the pleading, arco bass solo while Harris starts to turn up the heat. Then Boykins plays alone for a minute before the full band returns with a bashing storm of dissonant wailing. Sadly, the mix is horribly unbalanced by this point, with Ra’s dense figurations appearing way off in the distance while the tumultuous drums and squealing saxophone are way up front. The intended texture is obviously thick and rich, but is rendered thin and incoherent on tape (maybe it sounded better in person). Eventually, even Gilmore wanders off-mic, leaving Ra to bring it all to an end with a huge, harsh tone cluster. Our hapless M.C. rushes back to the microphone to defend this outburst of avant-garde mayhem to an audience that was perhaps expecting to hear a more traditional-sounding tribute to “Satchmo”: “I know a lot of you are thinking…well, you know…but it’s the energy that Louis had and all musicians have which comes out in a little bit different form, and yet a very valid thing as far as these men are concerned.” Well, he gets that right!

Too bad Leo declined to include this track on What Planet Is This? since it would have easily fit (and dodgy sound quality has never prevented them from releasing stuff in the past). It’s an interesting if not altogether successful piece, marred somewhat by Harris, who while a fine drummer, does not quite fit into Sun Ra’s cosmic equation here. And it’s really a shame Sun Ra’s Fender Rhodes assault is mixed so far back, as a more balanced recording would have made this a much more powerful and effective listening experience. Even so, the diminutive, four-piece Arkestra packs a lot of music into a short amount of time, Boykins holding it all together with his sure-footed bass playing while Gilmore is his typically brilliant self. Not essential by any means, but if you’re a Sun Ra fan, this little artifact is definitely worth seeking out—and holding onto.

March 6, 2011

Sun Ra Arkestra with Wilbur Ware: House of Ra, Philadelphia, PA 1973 (CDR)

In 1987, Columbia University’s WKCR-FM embarked on a “Sun Ra Festival,” broadcasting 116 straight hours of music and interviews with members of the Arkestra, including the man himself, who brought with him several never-before-heard recordings for the occasion. A tape of this broadcast circulates widely amongst collectors and contains a wealth of interesting material, including this twelve-and-a-half minute piece recorded at The House of Ra in 1973 with bassist, Wilbur Ware. Born in 1923, Ware had worked with Sonny briefly back in Chicago and can be heard on one of Ra’s earliest known recordings as a leader (see Campbell & Trent p.43). Ware was well-regarded for his bebop skills, playing with folks like Stuff Smith, Sonny Stitt, Roy Eldridge and Art Blakey but he was probably best known for his work with Thelonious Monk in the late-1950s. By 1973, however, his career was at a standstill due to a combination of health issues and drug abuse and he had relocated to Philadelphia, where he hooked up with the Arkestra for this impromptu jam. “It’s quite different, you know, to hear him play what you might call avant-garde,” Sonny remarks during the interview. “It sounds very nice.”

Actually, it’s more than just a jam and while it would appear that Ware is leading the way, it is
actually Sun Ra who guides the Arkestra through the improvisation, cueing entrances and exits and various changes in feel in his own inimitable way. Despite Ware's personal difficulties during this time, he sounds great here, playing with supreme confidence and big-eared sensitivity, exploring the entire compass of the instrument and even pulling out the bow for a short interlude. Rarely do all eight musicians play at the same time, giving this piece an austere, modern chamber music quality while Ra moves from slippery synthesizer to a wobbly, wah-wah organ, emphasizing a rising portamento which is echoed by the bass throughout. Soloists include John Gilmore, who introduces a long-breathed melody and multiphonic variations on tenor saxophone; blurry trumpet from Akh Tal Ebah (later joined by Marshall Allen and Danny Davis on alto saxophones); and Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet. Sometimes the horns drop out altogether, leaving Ware to duet with Sun Ra's keyboards; at other times they engage in fleeting bouts of group improv. Drummer Lex Humphries makes only a brief appearance mid-way through only to conclude the piece with a solo of his own. Amazingly, Ware keeps things going with strong yet supple support, no matter what's going on around him.

It's tempting to speculate this was a sort of audition for Ware, since the bass chair was often empty due to the comings and goings of the brilliant Ronnie Boykins (who would leave the band for good after 1974). From the evidence, it seems like Ware would have been a good fit for the Arkestra. Although he was rooted in the language of bop, Ware was obviously a good listener. As Sonny points out in his interview, the ability to listen is the most valuable skill a musician can possess and key part of his cosmo-philosophy:

Every band has something to say. The good part about it is that you have men together, who are not in the army to destroy people, they—it’s something to have men working together for beauty, and for precision and discipline. It’s wonderful. It’s the most wonderful thing about the planet that you do have men who are in the armed forces—who have to be in there—but you have some more who are doing some other things that’s not destructive, with unification and discipline. Because they have to be disciplined to play music. If they’re in a band, they got to listen to somebody and that’s what all men ought to learn, that they need to listen to somebody. Because you take the basketball players, they got to listen. Prizefighters got to listen. Actors got to listen to a director. So I would say every individual person needs to listen to somebody because successful people are those who listen to somebody and do as they’re told. Or try to.

Sadly, Ware withdrew from the music scene altogether and died of emphysema in 1979. This tape presents an opportunity to hear this underappreciated musician in an unusual context and, for that reason alone, is worth checking out. (Photo of Wilbur Ware by Francis Wolff/Blue Note Records.)

**March 13, 2011**

**THE NAME OF SOUND**

The name can be music
Played by infinite instruments
The name can lift nothingness
From nothing to reality
And keep the myth parable apparent.

Like once silent voices burst into song
The name strikes the ear
And the sound of it 
Rushes like a wild thing 
To take its place 
As the core 
Of the music, the infinite instruments 
And the vital vibration 
Of the meaning 
Of the name.

--Sun Ra

March 20, 2011

Sun Ra & His Mythic Science Arkestra: 
The Paris Tapes: Live at Le Théâtre Du Châtelet 1971 (Art Yard/Kindred Spirits 2CD)

Before moving on to 1974, I need to catch up a bit and comment on The Paris Tapes: Live at Le Théâtre Du Châtelet 1971, recently released by Art Yard (in collaboration with the Dutch label, Kindred Spirits). This nicely packaged two-CD set officially came out last fall, but has been somewhat difficult to find here in the States. I'm not sure why that is, but it's worth making the effort to track down. As we know, this concert from November 29, 1971 was broadcast by French radio and a horribly degraded tape fragment circulates amongst collectors. Therefore, this upgraded and expanded edition is a most welcome addition to the official discography.

Even so, don't be throwing away that crummy-sounding bootleg just yet—some very interesting and unique music has been edited out of this otherwise excellent release! Mastered from what appear to be the pre-broadcast reels, the sound quality is superb with spacious ambience and startling instrumental clarity. But according to producer, Peter Dennett, about an hour of music was omitted due to technical problems with the tapes and to limit the release to a more economical two CDs. That is completely understandable, if unfortunate for us crazy completists, who would love to hear every note, sonic warts and all.

What we do get is very good indeed, with an extra-generous serving of Sun Ra's incredibly outrageous electronic keyboard playing. Right from the start, Sonny is shooting laser beams and cracking whips with his MiniMoogs, summoning up torrential storms of noise and distortion, pounding out thundering low-register grumbles on the organ, or stringing delicate and wobbly portamentos against thick, dissonant tone clusters. That's just the "Introduction!" Then he turns in a groovy, blues-inflected electric piano solo on a "pre-mitotic" version of "Discipline 27" while the hypnotic, dark metallic funk of his organ comping dominates an extended version of "Love In Outer Space." The rarely-heard "Third Planet" also features a tasty, reedy Rocksichord excursion a la Night Of The Purple Moon while Ra's space-age barbeque organ makes an appearance on "Discipline Number Unknown." And, finally, the album concludes with an astonishing tour de force of Sun Ra's patented, mad-scientist-style mayhem: fifteen minutes of spooky murmuring, shrieking sirens and bursting bombs, all culminating in the arrival and departure of the alien spaceship to take us back to Saturn. Wow! This is truly one the all-time great Sun Ra epics! If there was ever any doubt of Ra's visionary genius and sheer instrumental prowess, this release should put that notion to rest for good.

In between, there's the usual thing—yet the vocal numbers such as "Somebody Else's Idea," and "Space Is The Place" as well as the dance/drums workout, "Watusi" greatly benefit from the luxurious sound quality and tightly focused performances (notorious drummer, Clifford Jordan,
exhibits remarkable restraint throughout). A meandering “Angels and Demons At Play” is perhaps overlong, but Marshall Allen’s evocative flute periodically adds interest to the percussion jamming. Particularly noteworthy is the discovery of yet another never-before-heard “Discipline” composition on disc two wherein characteristically interlocking horn riffs are cast upon an enchantingly off-kilter space-groove in seven. During a series of solos (Kwame Hadi on trumpet, Ra on BBQ organ and Elo Omoe on bass clarinet), the arrangement gradually morphs into a wild group improvisation for massed saxophones and skittering, clattering polyrhythms. Pretty exciting stuff!

So, what’s missing? The “Enlightenment” after the opening improvisation has been cut and while that in itself is no great loss, the following unknown “Discipline” piece has also been omitted. Now, that’s a real shame as this is the only known performance of one of Ra’s most strikingly beautiful compositions (and the bootleg tape appears to be incomplete). Moreover, there are no big John Gilmore solos on either of these two discs, which feels wrong given his usual prominence in the Arkestra—I suspect “The Shadow World” made an appearance at this concert and no doubt Gilmore did his thing there (and elsewhere). So, that’s a little frustrating. Regardless of any technical anomalies, I, for one, would love to hear the rest of the tapes from this gig and would have gladly paid extra for a complete, three-CD set. Oh well. Perhaps, if this sells well, a volume two will be forthcoming.

But I quibble. Art Yard and Kindred Spirits have done a fabulous job with The Paris Tapes and it is an essential purchase for any self-respecting Sun Ra fan (if you can find it). Despite the absence of certain crucial material, Sun Ra’s performance here more than makes up for the loss with amazing displays of keyboard pyrotechnics. And the overall sumptuous sound quality will gratify even the most casual of listeners, making this a most highly recommended release.

April 10, 2011

Sun-Day

This is my day
A sunny day
This is my day
With so much to give to all
Bright beams
Striking at the shadows impartially.
This is my day
I have so much to say

Out of the sun colors come
Like spores the rays strike the earth
And forms of being take shape to be
Being raises itself accordingly
To the vibration of the ray to which it synchronizes itself.

The invisible light is the ultra-light . . . . the darkness
The darkness is the cosmo-light . .
The all pervading all
Thus the cosmo-equation of the light
Is that the darkness is as the light
So distinguish the meaning of this
And ultra BE: an Ultra-being.

--Sun Ra

+++ 

I'll be back with more record reviews next week--I promise!

April 17, 2011

Sun Ra: Space Probe (Saturn 527/Art Yard CD 011)

Space Probe is another super-obscure Saturn release with a tortured history. Originally released in 1974, early discographies assigned a catalog number Saturn 527, although no known copies bear this number (See Campbell & Trent, p.107, 158). Instead, matrix numbers 14200A /14200B appear on most labels, although the sides are sometimes reversed (ld.). To make things even more confusing, the album was sometimes titled A Tonal View Of Times Tomorrow, Vol. 1 (Saturn 527!) and, worse, there are numerous hybrid versions of Space Probe with a completely different B-Side (See, ld. for all the gory details). And that’s just the beginning of the discographical weirdness. So it goes with Sun Ra records! And that’s essentially why I feel compelled to write about this stuff—it’s the only way I can make sense of it all. Thankfully, the Art Yard label has recently reissued the original version of Space Probe in an expanded CD edition which includes unedited performances and several unissued outtakes from the era. Hooray!

The title track was recorded in August, 1969, shortly after Sun Ra purchased his first MiniMoogs, making it one of the first epic synthesizer solos he ever recorded. And it is truly epic: almost eighteen minutes of spaceship noises, cosmic bloops and bleeps and other electronic mayhem. While not as hair-raising as later live performances would be, it’s still an adventurous solar voyage and demonstrates his near-osmotic mastery of the complex technology. Michael D. Anderson, Executive Director of The Sun Ra Music Archive, makes an interesting (if somewhat garbled) statement about Ra’s electronic keyboards in his liner notes for this release:

Sunny was great in using the moog and other organs as an extension of himself reaching out into the outer spheres. This is why later in the mid 80’s when the Moog, Farfisa and the Yamaha organs were stolen in the [sic] Sunny began to strictly play piano and more standard music material. I knew that this unnoticed by others [sic] pained him. I would look at the expression on his face and you could see that he had so much more to say but was limited without the organs.

I had never heard Sun Ra’s keyboards had been stolen and Szwed makes no mention of it in his biography. I just figured he went digital like everyone else by the mid-80’s. In any event, it’s true: the big multi-keyboard freakouts were eventually abandoned by that time.

Side B of Space Probe goes in a completely different direction, consisting of two tracks recorded at the Choreographer’s Workshop in New York City on April 29, 1962. Originally, “Primitive” was just a couple of minutes of percussion jamming, but when Evidence was
preparing the CD release of *When Sun Comes Out*, they discovered the rest of the track. Previously, I wrote:

When working with the master tape to prepare this CD in 1993, Evidence discovered an unreleased track running backwards in an unused stereo channel. On hearing the track for the first time in thirty years, John Gilmore gave it the title “Dimensions in Time” and it appears here as a bonus track. Echoing drums and tapping glass bottles underpin Gilmore’s seductively meandering bass clarinet. His tone is dark, rich and gorgeous as he weaves delightful melodies around the pitter-patter percussion. Unfortunately, just as he reaches a climax, the track suddenly ends. As it turns out, the second part of this piece can be found on the 1974 Saturn LP entitled *Space Probe*. Entitled, “Primitive,” the track cuts in exactly where “Dimensions in Time” ends with the last few notes of Gilmore’s bass clarinet statement after which the percussion vamp continues for another couple minutes before fading out. As discrete fragments, these two pieces are a bit frustrating to listen to (despite Gilmore brilliant playing); someday I’d like to digitally rejoin these tracks to hear the complete piece in all its original glory.

Well, the engineers at Art Yard have done just that, retitling it, “Earth Primitive Earth,” and it’s sublime! The question remains: did Sun Ra deliberately edit out Gilmore’s solo, leaving only a percussion track? Or did the first half just go missing prior to 1974? If this track is compiled from the two known fragments, it is seamlessly well done—or is this the original, unedited master? Well, in my opinion, the inclusion of Gilmore’s rarely heard bass clarinet playing greatly improves the track and the album as a whole, whatever Sonny’s intentions were. Maybe he was mad at him that day…

More discographical mysteries: Originally titled, “The Conversion of J.P.,” Art Yard has retitled this track, “The Conversation of J.P.” Huh? I’m not sure if that’s a typo or if that is the real title but it certainly changes the meaning considerably! I previously wrote:

> Plopping drums create a feel similar to “The Nile” with Marshall Allen’s expansive flute melody rising and falling amidst long spells of trance-inducing percussion. Then, at about the eight-minute mark, Ra enters with some incongruously gospel-ish piano chords. I guess this is the conversion happening! Ra then moves through a whole hymnal’s worth of plain, protestant harmonies before a final, insistently repeating cadence. Hallelujah! Now, who exactly is J.P.? And how are we to take all this apparent proselytizing given Ra’s complicated, downright contentious relationship with the Christian church? Indeed, the tension between the pagan percussion/Pan-flute and the holy-rolling piano never quite comfortably resolves. Another curious thing about this track is that, at almost fourteen minutes, it is by far the longest stretch of continuous recorded music from this era.

Now if the real title is “The Conversation of J.P.,” well never mind. Either way, it’s a wonderful piece—but I think “The Conversion” is a more evocative and fitting title than “The Conversation.” And we still don’t know who “J.P.” is. Oh, and while the liner notes claim this version is “complete” and previously unreleased, it is actually the same as on the original album, except for perhaps a smoother fadeout at the end.

Art Yard generously fills out the rest of the CD with five previously unissued tracks recorded during the Choreographer’s Workshop period, circa. 1962-63. Two of them are mere fragments: a forty-seven second alternate take of “Circe” featuring Thea Barbara’s dramatic vocalizing and “Destiny,” thirty-three seconds of spacey piano and percussion bathed in Bugs Hunter’s reverb/echo device. The rest are more substantive: “Solar Symbols II” is an extended alternate
take from *When Sun Comes Out*, featuring clankety cans and bottle percussion accompanying Ra’s dreamy, rhapsodic piano while “Dance Of The Wind” works in a similarly tensile, polyrhythmic fashion, with the plodding hand drums pushing and pulling against Ra’s increasingly enervated keyboarding. Finally, “Recollections of There” again features Thea Barbara, who wordlessly intones a modal melody with Sun Ra’s densely figured piano and sparse, eerie percussion. Ra is playing at an astonishing level of virtuosity here (albeit on a beat-up, out-of-tune piano). At the core of the piece is a fleeting chord sequence which appears just as quickly dissolves into controlled abandon, Sonny tossing off spiky, ten-fingered polyphony across the entire range of the instrument. It’s quite a display and reminder that he was an extraordinarily gifted and visionary pianist.

Ultimately, *Space Probe* is something of a mixed bag—a fact that is reflected in its unstable discographical history. The title track is a wild synth space-out—but not something I want to listen to every day. However, the Choreographer’s Workshop stuff is where it’s at for me. There is a certain vibe to those recordings—the sound, the ambience, the relaxed, experimental approach—that was never quite replicated as the Arkestra became more professional and routinized. Those recordings are magical, even if they sometimes fail to cohere musically. Even the tiniest fragments offered on this expanded CD reissue are tantalizing to listen to, full of promise. So for me, this is an essential purchase (the complete “Primitive” and “The Conversion of J.P” are classic tracks, whatever the titles). But the merely curious should consider starting elsewhere and go from there.

April 24, 2011

**VOICE OF THE TIMELESS SPIRIT**

What can I do to help the world?
What could I do?
It is not my world.
Or at least I think it isn't.
Have I forgotten something?
Am I to blame?
Did I create this?
What did I do wrong?
What does the creation groan and suffer?
If I can help in any way
Should I?
We do not accept each other.
I have so much to offer them.
What do they have to offer me?
They are spiritually poor. I have sympathy
For them, they have no sympathy for me.
What can I do?
I do not wish that they should think or say
I am their god but if I help them - what would
They say?
They have been
Alone so long.

-- Sun Ra
Sorry, folks, time got away from me this week. The next album in the queue is significant and requires more research to write about coherently. I'll have the review up next week (I hope).

May 1, 2011

Sun Ra: Out Beyond The Kingdom Of (Saturn 61674 LP)

By 1974, the Impulse! deal was starting to bear fruit, with almost a dozen LPs coming out during the course of the year, including several reissues from the old Saturn catalog. In addition, the Saturn label had been resurrected and new releases were being pressed in tiny editions for sale at gigs and at select record stores. Given the fact that all this product was suddenly flooding the marketplace, it is not surprising very few new recordings were made during the year. Much like 1973, 1974 is rather sparsely documented (relatively speaking), but most of what's there is worth a listen.

In February, shortly before Sonny's sixtieth birthday, the Arkestra travelled to Mexico for an extended tour at the invitation of the Ministry of Culture—an invitation which dated back to the Fête de l'Humanité fiasco in September 1973, where Sun Ra's music quelled a near riot and allowed for a triumphant performance of Ballet Folklórico de Mexico. While the musicians were given “plush accommodations,” by the grateful Mexican government, the musician’s union protested and prohibited them from performing—as musicians. The Actors Union interceded and the shows went on as “Sun Ra and His Cosmo Drama.” Szwed writes: “Sun Ra told the band that an earthquake would even the score, and later it was said that the Union's office building had been leveled [in 1985]” (p.338). The Arkestra stayed in Mexico two or three months, playing two concerts at the Pallacio de Bellas Artes, a two-week stand at the Teatro Hidalgo, as well as concerts at Chapultepec Park (“where they played on a little island while people rowed around them in boats”) (Id.), the University of Mexico, and in front of the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacán. The Arkestra also appeared on TV in Mexico City on Siempre en Domingo, “a variety show rather like Ed Sullivan's” (Campbell & Trent, p.206). According to Francisco “Ali” Mora, a Mexican drummer who joined the band during the tour, concert tapes probably exist (Id.) but no recordings have surfaced to date.

On June 16, the Arkestra performed at Hunter College in New York City and the concert was recorded, possibly by the college itself (the sound quality is remarkably good). Portions were compiled by Ra for release as Out Beyond The Kingdom Of (Saturn 61674) later in the year (although some copies are titled Discipline 99) (Id.). The first thing you notice is the school has provided Sonny with a decent grand piano, and he relishes in the opportunity to tickle the ivories. “Discipline 99” is given a stately, confident reading by the band and features a long piano solo, alternating pretty harmonies with flurries of dissonant tone clusters. The following medley of old standards (an impossibly romantic ballad, “How Am I To Know?” and the up-tempo, “(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up”) allows Ra to show off his inimitable, inside/outside comping skills behind John Gilmore's big-hearted, languorously swinging tenor solos. “How Am I To Know?” is a thing of rare beauty and the presence of Ronnie Boykins on bass and Clifford Jarvis on trap drums gives new life and humor to the old-fashioned rhythms of “(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up.” Good stuff!—and a harbinger of things to come: a mini-set of jazz standards would increasingly become a fixture of the Arkestra’s live sets as the ‘70s rolled on.
Side two shifts gears, with an emphasis on space chants and ensemble freak-outs and is, frankly, a lot less interesting to my jaded ears. But to be fair, this record must be considered in context, as a historical artifact. An obsessive collector in the year 2011 will have heard these routines many times before, but in 1974, live recordings were scarce. Sonny was shrewdly filling the gap, documenting the Arkestra’s current show for eager fans. Considered in that light, Out Beyond The Kingdom Of was exactly what it needed to be: a souvenir you could take home with you from the Cosmo Drama. As such, side two is fun, with June Tyson and Ankh Tal Ebah at their soulful, hortatory best and Boykins and Jarvis keep things grooving nicely. The highlight is “Cosmos Synthesis,” a wild group improvisation for horns and free-bashing rhythm section which stays heavy longer than usual. But Sun Ra himself is inaudible for most of the side until the very end of “Journey To Saturn,” when some spooky organ chords fade up and fade down.

For me, Out Beyond The Kingdom Of is a half-great album, with side one being of particular interest to Rafficianodoes. Unfortunately, it is way out of print and the “needle-drop” which circulates is a less-than-perfect transfer (though I’m certainly glad to have it). I wonder if other tapes from this concert exist? If so, it would be a good candidate for an expanded CD edition (see below). In any event, it deserves an official release, despite my antipathy to side two.

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Prof. Campbell describes two different audience recordings made at this concert. One is ninety-five minutes long and contains most of the first set and the end of the second. The other tape is purported to be over a hundred minutes long and more complete (see pp.206-209). I have a copy of “Tape 1,” and it’s a typical bootleg and suffers from the usual sonic defects: veils of hiss, a boomy and distant acoustic, plenty of extraneous noise and distortion, etc. Nevertheless, it’s not completely unlistenable and contains some interesting music. Any opportunity to hear the Boykins/Jarvis rhythm section is worth the effort.

After the brief opening improvisation and a series of space chants, “Tapestry From An Asteroid” sets the stage for a full-scale freak-out from the Arkestra, culminating in an outrageous alto sax solo from Marshall Allen. Despite the clouded sound, this is still very impressive. A strutting “Discipline 27” is marred by a typically overlong drum solo from Jarvis, made worse by the noise and distortion on the tape. Ugh. With that out of the way, Boykins then picks up the bow for a beautiful unaccompanied solo joined later by Ra on Rocksichord before moving into a long, spacey synthesizer outing. Sadly, as the texture thickens and the Arkestra joins in, the wretched sound quality almost completely obscures the details of what’s going on. Well, the audience liked it and they offer a nice round of applause before the band launches into “Enlightenment.” It’s the usual thing, but with Allen’s flue counter-melodies coming through sharp and clear for a change. The percussion barrage of “Love In Outer Space” is reduced to a dull roar on the tape, with Sonny’s metallic organ comping occasionally peeking through the din. It’s tough going, but when Kwame Hadi comes in just at the right time with the aching, long-toned melody, it almost makes it worth the while. Almost.

The tape then picks up in the middle of “The Satellites Are Spinning,” June Tyson with her all-male chorus soulfully singing it and Boykins laying down some heavy-duty bass riffs. Ra then interjects some “mad-scientist” keyboard inventions before they venture off into “The Shadow World.” It’s a fractured, abstract version: the insistent ostinato is only hinted at while the full ensemble sections are not actually stated. Instead, John Gilmore erupts into a ferocious tenor sax solo as if he’d been waiting all night for this moment. He is ready to play! Yes, ladies and gentlemen: it’s another incredible Gilmore solo! Too bad the sound is so funky. Then Danny Davis does his thing on the Neptunian Libflecto and it gets a big rise out of the audience. Just
as Hadi starts to play, the tape cuts off. Then we pick up with “Angels And Demons At Play,” which, like “Love In Outer Space,” suffers from exceptionally bad sound. Finally, we have “How Am I To Know” and “(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up” as heard on Out Beyond The Kingdom Of (but in significantly worse sound quality).

I have a second disc which supposedly contains part two of “Tape 1,” but since it consists of overlapping music recorded from different (inferior) source, I am confused. Is this part of “Tape 2” or is it something else? Whatever it is, it sounds atrocious, like the microphone was stuffed down the recordist’s pants. We get “How Am I To Know” and “(Keep Your) Sunnyside Up” again, only this one is more complete with solos from Hadi, Pat Patrick on baritone sax, Ra on piano and Boykins arco before the reprise of “Sunnyside.” Or at least I think that’s what’s happening; it’s kind of hard to tell. An unidentified title has all the earmarks of a “Discipline” number: densely arranged horn figures in sweet and sour harmony over interlocking bass and baritone sax riffs. Very interesting—yet another lost Ra composition (and a nice flugelhorn solo from Ebah)—too bad the recording sucks. “Sun Ra And His Band From Outer Space” ends the tape (and the set) with a thud.

I can’t really recommend these bootleg recordings to anyone except the most obsessed Sun Ra fanatic. There is some fascinating music here, but it only makes me want to hear an expanded, remastered Out Beyond The Kingdom Of. Here’s hoping those tapes still exist and some intrepid label will make it happen.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
One thing that rally struck me again on reading this: Sun Ra was already 60 by 1973, and still had 20 years of playing ahead of him! What an amazing accomplishment. Life certainly wasn't over at 40 for him!

Nice write-up, as always. I'm with you on the side 1 vs. side 2 thing, but it is helpful to look at it in context, as you point out.

paul w. said...
hi roderg,

i've just read your very interesting opinions and review of "out beyond the kingdom of...." let me give you my opinion on this record. i like most of sun ra recordings very much, especially the most avant-garde/free-jazz pieces. i have all or almost all of the officially released records. and i'm sorry but i don't like "out beyond" at all... my opinion on it is so bad that i excluded this record from my sun ra collection and i put it into other house where i keep obsolete things. i have several reasons for it - the music isn't interested from my point of view, the sound on the LP is very so-so, i can't find even the interesting free solo parts and sun ra is almost inaudible for the part of the LP. i think that about 150 sun ra official records are much better than this one.

keep your sun ra sundays alive, they are great. it was after reading your opinions on sun ra bootlegs from the red garter 1970-07, j.p. widney los angeles 1971-06-12 and stockholm 1971-10-12 that i started looking for them and finally got them all.

thanks.
best regards.
paul w.
May 8, 2011

PLANES OF NATURE

If they would rise up above their knowledge
They would be able to see with their intuition’s heart
They would be able to see beyond their sight
Their spirit's eye could pierce the night
Where earth dwells in hooded shame
Yes, earth was once a noble name.
If they would rise up above their yes-bound self
They would know the things to no . . . . . . .
Then they would see nature as it is
And at long last they would feel
The touch of the Cosmo-Real
And they would know that they know they know
That there is no need to know,
If you cannot feel.

--Sun Ra (1980)

May 15, 2011

These things only come around a couple times a year, so I got up this morning and headed over to the Holiday Inn by the airport for the Alpha Music Record Collectors' Convention. I got there just after they opened and the tiny meeting room was already jam packed with fanatical record fiends. Wow! I didn’t find any Sun Ra records (and I didn’t really expect to) but I did find a few treasures (see if you can pick them out of this coming week’s playlist!). Consequently, I spent the rest of the day cleaning records and listening to them; so, no time to write a big review. Honestly, the next Sun Ra album in the queue is one the strangest records in a very strange discography and I’m more than a little intimidated. Check in next week and see if I’ve found the words to describe it. I’m not making any promises!

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By the way, I see the re-constituted Saturn label has reissued The Soul Vibrations of Man (Saturn 771) (1977) on vinyl only. Has anyone out there heard these new Saturn LPs? Any information you could share would be most appreciated! I see them around sometimes and wonder how they sound (as nice as the Evidence CDs are, they went a little overboard with the noise reduction, in my opinion). However, with no CD issue of this one in sight, I might have to pick it up and find out for myself. I’ll keep you posted. Maybe this means its companion, Taking A Chance On Chances (Saturn 772), will also be forthcoming…?

May 22, 2011
The Sun Ra literature is depressingly thin. Aside from Szwed’s excellent biography and Prof. Campbell’s exhaustive (but now out of date) discography, there’s not much else out there. Fortunately, a couple books came out recently to help to fill the void.

After a long delay, the third and final volume documenting the spectacular 2006 exhibition, “Pathways To Unknown Worlds” was published last year by Whitewalls. Curated by John Corbett, Anthony Elms and Terri Kapsalis, the first volume in the series, The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra’s Polemical Broadsheets And Streetcorner Leaflets collects facsimiles (and transcriptions) of Ra’s earliest writings while the second volume, Pathways To Unknown Worlds: Sun Ra, El Saturn And Chicago’s Afro-Futurist Underground 1954-68 serves as a catalog for the exhibition with high-quality reproductions of album art and other business ephemera along with essays by Corbett, Glenn Ligon, Adam Abraham, and Camille Norment. Finally, Traveling The Spaceways: Sun Ra, The Astro Black and Other Space Myths compiles presentations from a two-day symposium held at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago in November 2006. I haven’t read the whole thing yet, but our own Prof. Campbell offers his research on Sonny’s earliest years in Chicago and there are essays by all the curators as well as notable critics, Kevin Whitehead and Graham Lock. Like others in the series, it is a slender but lovingly produced volume and, taken together, they make a wonderful reference source regarding Sun Ra’s Chicago years.

Additionally, good old John Sinclair has put together a book for Headpress simply titled, Sun Ra: Interviews & Essays and it looks pretty interesting. Collecting journalism from various sources, the book makes available writings that would otherwise be impossible to find—like an interview Sinclair conducted with Ra in 1966 for the Detroit Sun or a 1994 interview with trumpeter Michael Ray, published Offbeat. Again, I haven’t had a chance to read much of it yet, but I’m grateful to have it. Saturn Research continues!

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I know: I punted again. Tune in next week for more record reviews—I promise!

May 29, 2011

Sun Ra & His Myth Science Solar Arkestra: The Antique Blacks (Saturn/Art Yard CD)

On August 9, 1974, Richard M. Nixon resigned as President of the United States. I imagine this extraordinary event was on Sun Ra’s mind when, a week later, he assembled a small Arkestra for a live radio broadcast at Temple University in Philadelphia on August 17 [FN1]. While not making any direct references to Nixon, Ra took the opportunity to sermonize at length and he felt strongly enough about the performance to edit the recording for an LP entitled, The Antique Blacks, released on his own Saturn label later in the year (Saturn 81774). Ra clearly felt he had to get his message out. In actuality, this record was pressed in vanishingly small editions, sometimes re-titled, Interplanetary Concepts or There Is A Change In The Air and with various covers, including a generic “Acropolis” sleeve (see Campbell & Trent, pp.212-213). Like the mystical texts in his personal library, The Antique Blacks was probably made available to only initiates or persons Ra felt could decode his deeper, spiritual meanings. The ever-resourceful Art Yard label has reissued the album on CD with a bonus track recorded at the same session—but beware: Ra’s philosophizing is as inscrutable as ever, making this a strange and difficult listen for the casual fan. Keep in mind: it was a different era.
The record starts out easy enough with “Song No.1,” a gently rollicking space groove propelled by burbling percussion (including Clifford Jarvis on trap drums and Atakatune on congas) and Sonny’s reedy Rocksichord comping. This is one of my favorite “genres” of Sun Ra’s music (think “Love In Outer Space”) and this is particularly fine example. John Gilmore is up first with a terse but beautifully melodic tenor sax solo: starting with burnished low-register figures and then flying into the highest registers, he gracefully returns to earth with a variation on the theme he’d extemporaneously established. Yes, it’s another brilliant Gilmore solo! Ra is up next and then—what’s this?—who’s playing the screaming electric guitar? That’s a good question. The liner notes to the Art Yard CD say it’s the mysterious “Sly” while Campbell & Trent insist it’s a 15-year-old Dale Williams (p.313). Whoever it is plays with a rocked-out, psychedelized abandon which works well enough in this setting, despite a severe intonation problem. Then Akh Tal Ebah enters with one of his smeared, expressionistic trumpet solos. Kwame Hadi is absent at this session, giving Ebah a rare opportunity to stretch out. While Ebah doesn’t hit every note with refined precision (like Hadi), his melodic ideas are unique and interesting. Gilmore enters with a tasteful counter-melody and, after some more buzzy comping from Ra, the “Song No.1” comes to an end. Very nice.

Much of the rest of the album appears to be taken from a long, continuous piece, but chopped up and re-arranged for release. Ra outlines a simple ascending bassline in waltz-time then pauses to make his declamations, the Arkestra periodically entering with pulsating space chords, ensemble freakouts or out-jazz solos. Gilmore is joined by Marshall Allen and Davis for a full-blown saxophone battle on “There Is a Change in the Air” and Williams/Sly sounds a little like Sonny Sharrock with his gonzo, metallic attack. On “The Ridiculous ‘I’ and the Cosmos Me,” Gilmore delivers one of his trademarked a cappella blowouts and James Jacson takes a positively ripping solo on the otherwise unwieldy bassoon. For the most part, Ra sticks to Rocksichording incongruous harmonies and skittering runs, except at the end where we get some spaceship synthesizer. But, most of the time, Sonny is preaching it, hot and heavy.

So, what is he on about? “There is a change in the air!” (Nixon has resigned!) “Do you not hear the heavy silence there?” Then he warns: “Some people are on the right road, but they’re going in the wrong direction. They need to turn around. The arrow points to pointlessness.” And it goes on from there with exhortations to “The Antique Blacks” (“they belong to me!”); a disquisition on “so-called equality”; the summoning of “dark spirit” Lucifer; and, of course, an invitation to join him in outer space. It might be interesting to transcribe the declamations and do some sort of exegesis, but I’m afraid I’m not the man for the job. And it is also tempting to dismiss this stuff as the rantings of a crank and accuse him of blatant charlatanism. But that would be unfair—and completely miss the point (whatever it is). Sun Ra is speaking in code and I lack the esoteric knowledge required to decipher his true meaning—or call his bluff. As a white guy in the year 2011, I also suspect I am not the intended audience for his message, who might have taken false hope in Nixon’s ignoble departure in the summer of 1974. Indeed, he makes it clear that while “There is a change in the air,” it is not necessarily for the better.

Thankfully, all this heaviness is leavened by a bit of frivolity: “This Song Is Dedicated To Nature’s God” is joyous and bouncy, a major-key singalong, with everyone chanting the title again and again over burbling percussion and herky-jerky Rocksichord. It’s a fun little number, although the guitar is woefully out of tune and whoever is playing seems to be struggling with the irregularly repeating chord progression. The album concludes with small-group arrangement of “Space Is The Place,” with Jarvis whipping up a swinging groove on his reduced kit and Ebah doing his “soul-man” thing. June Tyson is regrettably absent, but it does sound like a female vocalist is scatting away in the background—who is it? One of the bandmembers singing
falsetto? I suppose it's possible. In any event, the record ends on a high note with band exclaiming, "Sun Ra and his Band from Outer Space have entertained you here!"

Art Yard adds a bonus track, "You Thought You Could Build A World Without Us," another long declamation with instrumental punctuation, but with Sonny playing synthesizer in "mad scientist" mode. Campbell & Trent list this ten-minute track separately as it was unheard until broadcast on WKCR's Sun Ra festival in 1987 and they suggest it was material cut from the *Space Is The Place* movie, which was still unfinished in the summer of '74 (see p.209). The Art Yard CD states it was recorded on August 17 and while the sound quality is reduced, it is almost certainly from the same session. The reverb-drenched electric guitar meshes well with squiggly synthesizer and Ra is at his most messianic: "If you refuse to recognize me, I refuse to recognize you!...I am The Magic Lie! Greater than your truth!" Meanwhile, the Arkestra titters in the background and spare horns and ominous percussion ebb and flow while Ra continuously demonstrates his mastery of the MiniMoog, keeping things interesting and intense, even as he's sermonizing away at the microphone. It’s an interesting track and fits in perfectly with the rest of the album.

Ultimately, *The Antique Blacks* is a difficult album for me to fully appreciate. I don’t enjoy being preached at, even if it’s Sun Ra up in the pulpit. At the same time, I cannot dismiss this stuff out of hand. Ra’s philosophy (such as it is) may be shrouded in hokum and showbiz and fail to cohere into a plausible cosmology, but it is interesting to note how well it served him. Herman "Sonny" Blount conjured up an elaborate persona, Sun Ra, and lived it—fully and completely—to the end of a long life, surrounded by a core of musicians who were as devoted to him as the followers of any guru. So it obviously worked—for him. *The Antique Blacks* is prime source material regarding Sun Ra’s psyche but it is musically less than completely satisfying. That said, the eight-minute “Song No.1,” is one of Sun Ra’s most delightful “space grooves” ever and makes this essential for the truly obsessed fan. As usual with Art Yard, the sound quality and packaging is first rate so if you want this, rest assured you get your money’s worth (and some of that money goes to the surviving Arkestra). But I wouldn’t recommend *The Antique Blacks* to novices.

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[FN1]: The location for this recording is highly speculative, based on the teenage recollection of Dale Williams (Id. p.213). It certainly sounds like a studio recording, but it lacks the ambience of Variety Recorders in New York, Sonny's usual choice. Considering the impromptu feel of the proceedings, a college radio station seems a likely venue. But who knows? No tapes of the broadcast have surfaced (if indeed it even occurred). Another discographical mystery.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Great description, as always! This certainly is a strange album, but it's not like we shouldn't have been prepared for it...there are plenty of earlier live declamations that are just as bitter (and directed towards a primarily black audience). There's also precedent for the vocal/band call-and-response exhortations in pieces like "The Bridge." I may be off base, but I think you may be reading too much into the Nixon resignation angle. The high point for me, too, is "Song No. 1," but the rest of the album hangs together in a way that a lot of the live exhortations don't...maybe it's just because here there's a better balance between the band's wailing and the preaching. Also, I love how the guitar fits in this so well! Over the years, Ra used guitar more
frequently than usually comes to mind, and this may be the best instance of Hendrix/funk-derived guitar in his recorded output.

Rodger Coleman said...
Sam -- Well, yes, the Nixon thing is overstated, but I struggled with this one and sort of "hung my hat" on that hook. Your comments are, as usual, very perceptive. I agree this is much more compelling than many of the live rants/routines and needs to be considered apart from all the bootleg stuff. It's still a weird, uncomfortable album.

June 12, 2011

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Sub-Underground (Saturn LP>CDR)

The appropriately titled Sub-Underground (also known as Cosmo-Earth Fantasy and Temple U.) is another super-rare artifact, badly in need of upgrade and reissue. Originally released as Saturn 92074 in late 1974, Prof. Campbell posits side one was recorded at Variety Recorders in New York City sometime in September while side two was recorded live at Temple University in Philadelphia, possibly on September 20 (Campbell & Trent p.214-215). Yet, as usual with Sun Ra, there is much confusion and uncertainty regarding the details of this recording and, after careful listening, I’m not sure I agree with our discographer in all respects. Unfortunately, the sound quality is somewhat murky and my less-than-perfect transfer of the original LP does not help to clarify much. Despite (or perhaps because of) its difficulties, Sub-Underground a fascinating record.

Side one is taken up with “Cosmo-Earth Fantasy,” an epic, twenty-two minute improvisation, obviously recorded in the studio. It begins with Arkestra scrubbing, scraping and plucking a variety of zithers, harps, guitars and other “Strange Strings” while Ra strums the interior of a piano. I love it! Enervated bass octaves come and go. Is this electric bass? (Prof. Campbell thinks so.) Or is it Ra on some sort of keyboard? Maybe—it’s hard to tell. Anyway, the spacey exotica goes on for about seven minutes before Ra fingers an ominous chord sequence on Clavinet, signaling Marshall Allen to pick up the oboe and echo Ra’s insistently repeated figures. Sonny continues to hold down a pedal point and outline upper-register harmonies while Allen keenly elaborates on the simple theme. Just lovely. Then the oboe drops out and there’s more “bass,” with what sounds like a melodica wheezing around the corner. At the half-way mark, a high-pitched marimba (Ra?) starts clattering away, Chinese-style, eventually joined by Allen on flute. Then the texture starts to thicken (possibly through the use of overdubbing) as multiple flutes, “bass,” Clavinet and percussion build up a spiky, Messiaenic din. Wild! After some slow, held chords, the piece comes to a definite, satisfying conclusion. Prof. Campbell lists additional instrumentalists, including John Gilmore on tenor sax, Eloë Omoe on bass clarinet and (possibly) Dale Williams on guitar (Id.), but I just don’t hear them on this track. Regardless, “Cosmo-Earth Fantasy” is a classic.

Side two begins with “Love Is For Always,” another impossibly romantic piano ballad featuring Gilmore’s creamy and delicious tenor saxophone—yes, it’s another incredible Gilmore solo! This beautiful Ra composition was, apparently, only performed one time. What a shame! The distant and boomy drums indicate it was indeed recorded live, although, curiously, any applause has been deftly edited from the end of the track. “The Song of The Drums” shares the same reverberant acoustic, and the eponymous drums are almost impossible to hear. Eddie Thomas [Thomas Thaddeus] vocalizes in an absurdly eccentric patois, later joined by another male vocalist (possibly Akh Tal Ebah—but it doesn’t really sound like him) while Ra alternates
between bright, major-key comping and ominous Morse code messaging on Rocksichord. It’s sort of interesting, but ends inconclusively. Finally, the album concludes with “The World Of Africa,” which sounds to me like it was recorded in studio (possibly at the same session as “Cosmo-Earth Fantasy”), with its comparatively clear and dry ambience (but who knows?). June Tyson and Cheryl Banks wordlessly intone a repeating melody over a two-chord Clavinet vamp and percussion and while the hypnotic 6/8 groove is suitably enchanting, it fades out after only a few minutes, breaking the spell too soon. Oh well.

*Sub-Underground* is a weird and wonderful record. Certainly, “Cosmo Earth Fantasy” is one of the great long-form improvs, notable for its unusual instrumentation and “Love Is For Always” is also beautiful and unique. While the other tracks are perhaps less essential, they are interesting vocal experiments well worth hearing. Let’s hope Art Yard or some other intrepid label will rescue *Sub-Underground* from its willful obscurity.

**COMMENTS:**

Sam said...

It will be interesting when you get to "Song of the Stargazers." "The Song of the Drums" has some affinity with a couple of the minor percussion-oriented pieces there, in mood and ambiance. I find this track to be one of the less-interesting Ra album cuts out there--it's atypical, yes, but in this case, to me, its atypicality (is that even a word?) makes it sound dated.

"The World of Africa" is a sweet melody that shows up in some live shows in the late '70s--it's very appealing, but it doesn't really go anywhere--not that music has to go anywhere, really, but if the destination is out, then having a destination implies a direction...on the other hand, I love static pieces like "Strange Strings" and "Mu" or "Lemuria" on "Atlantis" that also don't go anywhere, so...basically, I don't know what I'm talking about.

At any rate, "Cosmo" and "Love" more than make up for the slight, grab-bag feel of the rest of side 2.

**June 19, 2011**

**THE OTHER SIDE OF MUSIC**

Some music is of specialized interpretation.
Some music is of synchronization precision.
Every light is a vibrational sight and sound:
It is rhythm in harmony with beam/rays/intensification
and projection visibility.
Music is light and darkness . . . precedent
of vitality . . . stimulation extraordinary
Equational harmonic differential pause prelude
to the sound that is on its way . . .
EVERY PLACE THERE IS, IS MUSIC, CHAOS
IS MUSIC AND HARMONIOUS PEACE IS MUSIC
What direction does it: decides the way until . . .

Silence is music.
There are different kinds of silences:
each silence is
A world all its own.
In a lesser but not least important sense,
Silence is an integral part of all music:
in a fractional sense,
When judged metrically.

We must not forget transposition.
Transposition always results in a
change of color.
Behold the vastness of music,
It is as vast as the greater allness
and the greater neverness . . .
And too music in its meta-phases
must not be ignored.

Are you thinking of metaphysics
alone? Well, don’t.
In the future (and even as of Now),
you will have to contend with and
recognize METAMENTAL and METASPIRIT:
also you will come face to face with
oblique METATHESIS.

--Sun Ra (1972)

June 26, 2011

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Jazz Showcase, Chicago, IL 9-08-74 (AUD CDR)

The Arkestra was apparently quite active in the fall of 1974, including a two-week stand at the
“new” Five Spot in New York. Four-hour sets were the norm and, according to witnesses, “the
band books carried by the musicians were thick as two phone books; except for a few numbers
like ‘Watusi,’ many otherwise unknown compositions were played along with some 1950s
pieces and few were repeated” (Campbell & Trent p.215). Sadly, there are no known tapes from
this legendary engagement. However, we do have this sixty-minute audience recording from
Chicago’s Jazz Showcase on September 8, which hints at the Arkestra’s expanding repertoire
during this period. The (mono) sound quality is typically awful—but it is by no means the worst
sounding tape we’ve had to suffer through during this project. Despite the obvious sonic flaws,
it’s a terrific performance well worth hearing.

“Images” dates back to 1958 and Sun Ra’s first Saturn LP, Jazz In Silhouette, and is here given
an extended reading, including a dramatic piano intro which moves from ominous rumblings to
skittering dissonances before settling into the slightly old-fashioned swing rhythms and chord
changes of the piece itself. The Arkestra enters with the subtly off-center big-band arrangement,
the saxes and trumpets filled out with flutes and piccolo. Kwame Hadi solos first, but John
Gilmore steals the show with a series of increasingly expressionistic choruses, demonstrating
his mastery of both pre- and post-bop tenor stylings. Just gorgeous. Then Ra takes a weirdly
“inside-out” solo before the band returns with the oblong coda.
“Somewhere Else” is similarly structured, with another lengthy piano introduction before the band comes out and struts its stuff. Besides Akh Tal Ebah and Hadi, a mysterious third trumpet player can be heard. Chicagoan Phil Cohran seems a likely candidate, but Prof. Campbell says it’s not him (Id. p.213). There’s also a bassist present—his big tone and fleet soloing almost brings to mind the inimitable Ronnie Boykins, but it’s obviously someone else, whose identity is unknown (Id.). At almost twenty minutes, just about everyone gets a chance in the spotlight on this medium groover, including all three trumpeters, Marshall Allen and Danny Davis on alto sax, Gilmore on tenor, our unidentified bassist (who earns a nice ovation) and, of course, Ra himself.

“Discipline 27” is given a focused reading – with some jazzy electric guitar audible (possibly Dale Williams). Ebah acquits himself admirably, but again, Gilmore upstages him with another incredibly inventive and precisely articulated tenor outing. Ra moves to organ for “Outer Spaceways Incorporated,” almost drowning out June Tyson and the Space Ethnic Voices with its electronic roar. But he eventually drops back and the sound clears up considerably. Of course, it’s the usual thing, if a little restrained—until Allen (or is it Davis? I have a hard time telling them apart sometimes) steps up with a blistering solo on alto sax before the reprise. Ra’s groaning organ chords also threaten to overwhelm the delicate “Lights on a Satellite,” mostly obscuring the intricate counterpoint of flutes, trumpets and saxophones. Regardless, you can tell the Arkestra is tight and well-rehearsed: it’s a note-perfect performance, short and to the point; beautiful, in spite of the dreadful sound quality.

Sonny introduces “Barbizon” as an original piece he wrote “in France, near Fontainbleau, an artists’ colony” and it’s another brief but elaborately orchestrated, through-composed work, devoid of any opportunity for improvisation. The dirgey, sweet’n’sour harmonies and tense voicings remind me of the early “Discipline” numbers and, like those works, “Barbizon” was only sporadically performed. That seems a shame, as it is another fascinating composition demonstrating Ra’s mastery of unusual forms and creative arrangement. Then again, the audience doesn’t quite know what to make of it. Is this “jazz?” No—it’s something else altogether.

Ra again steps up to the microphone to introduce “The Shadow World,” offering a clue to its meaning:

The next song is entitled, ‘Shadow World.’ To me, the Earth is a place of shadows and dreams and not the reality of the cosmos. This ‘shadow world’ concerns the potential of humanity and not the reality, which I have to reject.

He hammers out the organ ostinato at a fast clip and the horns rip through the complexly hocketed melodies with fearsome intensity. Hadi solos over boiling percussion but quickly drops out. Then Gilmore takes over and—well, yes, it’s another *a cappella* blowout, but a particularly inspired one. Ra attempts to steer him back to the head, but Gilmore will have nothing of it. He continues to blow his brains out, ranging across the entire register of the horn (and beyond), capping it off with an astonishing display of multiphonic pyrotechnics. Wow! Gilmore is on fire! This elicits several outbursts of whooping and hollering and stunned applause when he finally finishes. Not even five minutes long, this is probably one of the shortest performances of “The Shadow World” ever, but boy is it ever potent! “Space Is The Place” follows, but, unfortunately, the tape cuts off after only a minute and a half. *Oh well.*

Aside from Gilmore’s outstanding soloing (will he ever get the credit he deserves?), what’s interesting about this set is how tightly controlled it is. Foregoing the usual long, open
improvisations, freewheeling medleys and cosmic pageantry, the Arkestra is on a fairly short leash. Sonny's straight-faced spoken intros are also highly unusual. Whether it was the venue’s posh ambience or simply a measure of Sun Ra’s developing professionalism, these discrete performances are taut, lean and immediately appealing. Of course, it’s quite possible the rest of the set was completely off the hook. But it is clear Sun Ra was continuing to refine his vision and, next time, we’ll listen in on a lengthy rehearsal session from later in the year, which provides some insight into his peculiarly effective working methods.

+++  

**UPDATE:** This was written out of order. Two nights before this gig, the Arkestra performed at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in Exile, documented on *It Is Forbidden*. John Sinclair identifies the bass player as Reginald "Shooby-Doo" Fields and the guitarist is definitely Williams. I apologize for the confusion.

**July 10, 2011**

You know what would be really cool? Sun Ra Arkestra Action Figures! I can just picture it: Sonny with a miniature Rocksichord, Allen, Davis and Gilmore with their saxophones and flutes. Collect the whole series! Hadi and Ebah! Pat Patrick, Boykins and Jarvis! Wind him up and he plays a thirty-minute drum solo! They could have an interchangeable wardrobe of space-hats, capes, and space-boots. Maybe they could even ride in a toy spaceship; press a button, June Tyson sings “Space Is The Place.” I think it would be awesome! Imagine an alternate universe where *Space Is The Place* is the smash hit movie of 1974, spawning a hugely popular Saturday morning cartoon show and generating all kinds of merchandise tie-ins, such as Sun Ra Arkestra Action Figures. Wouldn’t that have been cool alternate universe to live in?

Yeah, OK, I’m dancing in place here and I know it. It has been pointed out to me that I skipped an item in my chronological survey and, well, it’s gotten me slightly discombobulated. It just goes to show: I am no expert on this stuff! As it turns out, this particular album does not appear in Campbell & Trent’s discography (which badly needs a 3rd edition) and, despite my best efforts to organize my collection of Sun Ra recordings, I had completely forgotten about it. Obviously, my organization skills leave something to be desired. So it goes... Sun Ra’s recorded output is truly massive (and seemingly ever-expanding)—which is the very reason I started *Sun Ra Sunday*: to listen carefully and try to sort it all out in my mind. Not an easy task—and since nobody is paying me to do this, it’s going to take some time.

So please be patient dear readers. We’ll hopefully catch up next week and then keep moving forward, incrementally. In the meantime, here’s a little poem about alternate universes where Sun Ra Arkestra Action Figures are possible:

**PARALLELS**

If it is not here,  
It must be there:  
For somewhere and nowhere parallels  
In secret versions of each other’s where  
Or even before somethings came to be.

--Sun Ra (1980)
July 17, 2011

Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Arkestra:  
*At the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in Exile 1974: It Is Forbidden* (Alive!/Total Energy CD)

The Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival had enjoyed increasing commercial success in its first three years and promoter John Sinclair made sure to prominently feature Sun Ra’s Arkestra ever since their triumphant appearances in 1972 and 1973. So, by all appearances, 1974 was looking to be more of the same—only better—with a lineup including such heavyweights as B.B. King, John Lee Hooker, Cecil Taylor (!) along with the Godfather of Soul himself, James Brown, headlining the event. Ra’s Impulse! albums had started hitting the stores earlier in the year, garnering favorable press. Moreover, there were plans for a sixteen-track recording and a film documentary of the festival; this was going to be a big opportunity for the band.

However, it was not to be. A mere six weeks before opening night, the Ann Arbor City Council denied Sinclair’s Rainbow Multimedia organization the requisite permit, citing their failure to clean up the festival site in 1973. Sinclair admits: “The clean-up problem was troubling” (liner notes). The crew had effectively gone on strike after the payroll money disappeared in a “multiton marijuana deal that, unhappily for all, failed to come off” (Id.). But there was more to it than that: political machinations were actively seeking to undermine his plans. Sinclair’s Rainbow People’s Party, itself an outgrowth of the notorious White Panthers, was splintering into competing factions and its influence (modest as it was) had precipitously declined in the municipal power struggle. “The Establishment” was fighting back against the hippies and, as a result, the 1974 Blues & Jazz Festival was simply not going to be allowed to happen—at least not in Ann Arbor.

“It Is Forbidden,” the City of Ann Arbor ruled in July, and pandemonium reigned for several days until the festival organizers were invited to bring the banned event across the Detroit River and into the lovely outdoor amphitheater at St. Clair College in Windsor, Ontario … Canada. Radio powerhouse CKLW-AM agreed to serve as sponsor of the event, pledging lots of free ad spots, and the Canadians waxed enthusiastic in their professions of support for the orphaned music festival (Id.).

Not surprisingly, it was a bust—literally. Ticket sales were thin while crowds of would-be festival goers were turned back at the “fiercely guarded border”(Id.)—including Sinclair himself, who was detained while escorting the Arkestra through Canadian customs. Ultimately, he was deported on the basis of his 1969 marijuana conviction (also the subject of John Lennon’s eponymous song, which really didn't help things). “This marked a major turning point in my life,” according to Sinclair:

I went back to my room in the Shelby Hotel Friday afternoon and watched myself talk to a television news reporter who had covered the impromptu deportation proceedings. As I witnessed the farthest-out group of characters I had ever seen in America being allowed entry into Canada while I was turned back as “too far out,” I was struck hard with the realization that my public persona as dope fiend, ex-convict and virulent revolutionary agitator had now cut me off from the participating in the most important event in my career as a music promoter (Id.).
Needless to say, the festival lost untold amounts of money and the planned record and feature film never materialized when the master tapes were “quite reasonably withheld” by their recordists after payment was not forthcoming (Id.). Sadly, these tapes seem to have disappeared for good. Nevertheless, Sun Ra’s sixty-four minute set on Friday, September 6, was preserved on a cassette tape recorded from the soundboard and was released on Sinclair’s Alive!/Total Energy label as *Sun Ra & His Intergalactic Arkestra at the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival in Exile 1974: It Is Forbidden* (NER 3029-2) in 2001. Accustomed, perhaps, to their sub-underground status, Sonny and the band were not dissuaded by the small crowd or the tense backstage atmosphere and deliver a typically committed performance while they “visualized their paychecks floating off into the darkening gloom” (Id.).

The opening improvisation is particularly intense, with pummeling percussion, pealing trumpets, skronky blasts of saxophone and Neptunian libflecto—and some crazed, psycho-delic guitar from Dave Williams, whose nastily distorted, wah-wah-infused tone brings to mind the sort of dark, metallic funk Miles Davis was brewing up with Pete Cosey during this period. Wild! After about thirteen minutes, the strutting baritone sax riffs of “Discipline 27” emerge from the chaos. But while bassist, Reginald “Shoo-Be-Doo” Fields, tries his best to hold down the odd-metered groove, Clifford Jarvis is his usual hyperactive self, overplaying the drums and nearly derailing the tune. Oh well; with no one quite able to navigate an effective solo, they quickly give way to one of Sun Ra’s jaw-droppingly awesome “mad scientist” synthesizer and organ displays. A throbbing space chord yields more group improvisation (led by Hadi’s trumpet) before Sonny signals “Love In Outer Space” and it’s the usual, groovy thing, but marred by a wonky, drum-heavy mix. Still, it’s a pleasant romp. After a brief, spooky organ intro, the band launches into “The Shadow World” at maximum velocity, yet they perfectly execute the tricky, interlocking melodies—even as the rhythm section suddenly drops out. Wow! Then Gilmore takes over with a fearsome tenor sax solo, accompanied by chattering electronics and bashing drums, followed by Hadi’s high-wire acrobatics and a brief arco segment from Fields, all of which receives a round of polite applause from the intrepid crowd.

Ra abruptly changes gears, cueing up the chanting and carrying on of “Space Is The Place.” By now, Jarvis is tremendously overexcited, just chomping at the bit; but Sonny keeps him on a short leash. As June Tyson exclaims, “The Second Stop Is Jupiter!,” all hell breaks loose, with one of the Space Ethnic Vocalists (either Judith Holton or Cheryl Banks) doing her terrifying, Yoko-styled shrieking. Yikes! Even so, Jarvis is denied his usual overlong drum solo as the heaving chords of “Discipline 27-II” set the stage for Ra’s rhetorical question: “What Planet Is This?” Fortunately, the declamations last only a few minutes before he moves to acoustic piano for a lovely rendition of “Images,” Fields and Jarvis locking into the jaunty, slightly old-fashioned rhythms and the Arkestra delivering a full-throated rendition of the tune. Excellent! Ebah finally gets an extended turn at the mic, his mellow, slightly smeared sound a nice contrast to Hadi’s forthright virtuosity. Gilmore follows, picking up on Ebah’s staggered phrasing and gradually builds up to a thrilling climax of impossibly fast runs, multiphonic glossolalia, and heart-stopping altissimo squealing. Yes, folks, it’s another mind-blowingly incredible John Gilmore solo! Truly, what more (or less) can I say? Just stunning.

Then the Arkestra premieres a new composition, “It Is Forbidden,” possibly written in honor of the doomed festival (and likely never performed again, that is until its posthumous resurrection in 1996 (Campbell & Trent, p.763)). As Ra pounds out a repetitive diatonic chord sequence, the band gleefully sings their heads off: “It is forbidden, it’s strictly forbidden to touch on the tree of the knowledge of the good and evil!” It’s tempting to hear this as a gentle rebuke to Sinclair and his muddle-headed politics, but I could just be projecting. “Watusi” follows and Jarvis is finally given his opportunity to wail, though tempered by myriad other percussionists and the spectacle
of dancers. And again, Sonny keeps things short, calling for the reprise of the head after only a few minutes. “Sun Ra And His Band From Outer Space” happily concludes the set with a quick chant and some outer spaceship synthesizer noise. What few people who were able to attend the ill-fated festival certainly sound appreciative; they erupt into loud cheering and clapping after it is all over. Or perhaps they were just excited about James Brown.

This was the last Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival for twenty years, until the City Council finally relented and the festival was reborn in 1992—and without Sinclair’s involvement. With his organization in tatters at the end of 1974, Sinclair abandoned political activism and artist management for “less grueling pursuits,” such as journalism, poetry and grant writing (Id.). Undoubtedly, Sonny lamented the loss of a rare high-profile performance opportunity here in North America, but, in the end, it was just another gig. Two nights later, the Arkestra appeared at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago on September 8, 1974, playing a very different sort of set (which I wrote about (prematurely) here).

*It Is Forbidden* is perhaps the most musically satisfying of the three CDs released on Sinclair’s Alive/Total Energy label and, seeing as they are all now out of print, it is the one most worth seeking out, in my opinion. The sound quality is decent and the performance, while somewhat truncated, is mostly first-rate. Heck, “Images” alone makes this one worth the cost of admission! But it should be noted that all three feature extensive (if self-congratulatory) liner notes from Sinclair and wonderful photographs of the concerts by his wife, Leni; so, all are well worth having as a historical document. But this is the one I’m more likely to pull off the shelf. My only quibble is their continued failure to index any of the titles on the disc, requiring an hour-long commitment from the listener. Well, maybe that’s the way it should be heard: with commitment, with Ra-like discipline, as it happened in real time. *Highly recommended.*

**July 24, 2011**

*Can you tell me about the music you make?*

**Sun Ra:** Well, the music, it’s about feelings, it’s not about what I know. It’s about what I feel. If we lose feeling then we’re really dead. Most people on this planet have no feeling anymore because they don’t care about each other. They turn to religion and philosophy and they think that’ll do it. But it hasn’t done it yet.

**July 31, 2011**

**Sun Ra: Dance Of The Living Image: Lost Reel Collection Vol. 4 (Transparency 2CD)**

In October 1974, the Arkestra traveled to California for an extended sojourn, playing gigs at the Keystone Korner and Off Plaza in San Francisco and the One World Family Center in Berkeley, where they moved into a rented house on Baker Street (Campbell & Trent p.215). They stayed on the West Coast until the end of the year, performing in venues large and small, including an impromptu small group appearance at the San Jose State University Student Union on December 9; at the cavernous Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium on December 11; and a New Year’s Eve show at the Afro-American Historical Society in San Francisco (Id. pp.215, 217). Of these known performances, only the Santa Cruz concert is documented (in a typically grungy-sounding audience recording), although Peter Hinds asserts that a tape exists of the New Year’s gig (Id.). However, in 2009 the Transparency label unearthed a hundred-minute
rehearsal tape purportedly recorded in San Francisco in December, 1974 and released it as *Dance Of The Living Image*, volume four of *The Lost Reel Collection*. I say “purportedly” because, as usual with Transparency, the documentation is spotty (if not outright wrong) but I guess we have to take some things at face value while trying to correct errors where we can. That’s what I’m here for. Being a rehearsal, it’s not a completely satisfying musical experience, but it gives some insight into Ra’s working methods and reveals a surprisingly bawdy sense of humor. It also corroborates the musicians’ accounts of rigorous rehearsals of material that was never actually played in concert.

The first disc opens with two takes of “Dance Of The Living Image,” the first a mere fragment and the second (also incomplete) misidentified as an “unknown title.” Originally recorded in early 1970 and released on the classic album, *Night Of The Purple Moon*, this tune was apparently never performed live. That’s too bad, as it’s a groovy modal number driven by Ra’s reedy Rocksichord. But the deceptively simple construction is actually a lot harder to play than it would seem. On the first track, Ra demonstrates the vamp and appropriate scales as the band sets up in the background. But then on the second take, the arrangement keeps breaking down and you can hear Sonny stopping to instruct the band on the tricky ostinato. Newcomer (and Bay Area resident), Damon Choice, is on vibes (probably—see Id., p.217) and he seems to have difficulty getting the hang of it. In fact, the band never really comes together and they eventually give it up. Too bad. The next track is an unknown title (misidentified on the disc as “Sometimes I’m Happy”), possibly a number in the “Discipline” series. The background riffing is similar to “Discipline 27,” but embellished with additional sax and trumpet lines and some jazzy electric guitar from Dave Williams. *Another mystery.*

Track four (mistitled “Astro Nation) is actually “Sometimes I’m Happy,” a hoary old standard originally recorded in 1962-or-3 and released on *The Invisible Shield*, which, incidentally, had just come out on the newly rejuvenated Saturn label. While it was performed at *The Red Garter* in 1970 (and perhaps elsewhere), the song didn’t become a fixture of the Arkestra’s live sets until the ’80s. And this is a particularly weird take on this ridiculous piece of schmaltz: the horns heave and sigh while Williams hits a dissonant, wah-wah’d clank on the one…Then Ra gets right up to the microphone and mumbles/croons the song in an unexpectedly woozy, almost drunken manner while the band takes it further and further out behind him. Choice runs away on the vibes, Williams turns up the volume and reverb, the horns’ swaying structure on the verge of collapse. *Whoah!* “Astro Nation” (misidentified as an “unknown title”) is another vocal number, an odd-metered space chant precariously set against a bumping rhumba. Despite its seeming simplicity, it requires several minutes of unsteady repetition before the band starts to gel. Despite this inauspicious beginning, the song quickly became a live staple, at least through the end of the ’70s.

Disc one concludes with two tracks, wherein two (or three?) previously unknown titles are heard for the first and only time. This twenty-minute sequence is really quite fascinating. Track six shows the band sight-reading a chart, Danny Ray Thompson honking out a slowly repeating bari-sax note, accompanied by off-centered guitar arpeggios. Meanwhile, the horns play a twisty, asymmetrical melody. The sparse, lurching drumming (Jarvis?) makes the band sound twitchy and unbalanced, though the trumpets (Hadi and Ebah) sound confident on the fanfare-like bridge. But just as it seems they’re building up a head of steam, Sonny calls a halt (though Williams and Jarvis continue to play around with their parts). There’s a discussion in the background about what tune they just played, and it sounds like Ra calls it “Opus No.” *Hmm.* “Let’s play the San Francisco tune,” he says. OK. Track seven (not even listed on the disc!) picks up with the band again reading through a complicated chart. Ra counts aloud in five and stops the band repeatedly to make corrections. The piece sounds something like the previous
track, only sped up and with more saxophones, but it’s hard to tell what exactly is going on. After about five minutes, the tape cuts off and picks up on some noodling and talking—until Danny Ray Thompson starts in on a snaky bari-sax riff and the band falls in behind him with what sounds like an already well-rehearsed arrangement (although never performed live or on record)[UPDATE: this composition has been identified as "Sun Procession"—see comments for details]. It’s one of those regal, Pharaohonic themes, richly orchestrated for saxophones, flutes and trumpets, supplemented with Ra’s tinkling electronic keyboard—only Williams’s Superfly guitar antics seem out of place. Interestingly, nobody solos (except for maybe Ra, who never lets up) yet the composition continues to subtly evolve across its ten-minute length before coming to a precise end. Wonderful!

Most of disc two is taken up with “Hard Hearted Hannah,” a Tin Pan Alley hit from 1924, revived here by the Arkestra for (apparently) the first and only time. Actually, it’s more of a jam, led by Ra from the Rocksichord, calling out the chord changes and sometimes providing some (inaudible) instructions. Unfortunately, the twenty-two minute instrumental version never really goes anywhere and Jarvis’s jittery drumming fails to provide a satisfactory groove (he sounds bored, frankly). Another attempt is made, only this time with vocals, but it’s impossible to hear. Then the tape cuts and Ra has now enlisted the entire Arkestra into singing the full lyrics about “the vamp from Savannah, G.A.”—and he gets a big kick out of it (you can hear him cracking up in the background). Sonny comps away while Choice does a Lionel Hampton thing on the vibes. It’s not really happening, but you can tell they’re having fun. The band can hardly believe it when Ra suggests they play it at the gig! (I don’t think they ever did.) The tape cuts in again on more shenanigans: riotous laughter and a song about…farting! “When you eat, don’t eat too fast or you’ll make music with your ass—passin’ gas!” Well, it’s good to know it wasn’t always super-serious Astrometaphysics 24/7 with Ra. Hilarious!

Continuing the old-timey, pre-War vibe, Duke Ellington’s “Sophisticated Lady” follows. During this period, Ra was trying to integrate historical material into the Arkestra’s repertoire, but it’s unclear whether this particular tune had entered into the set at this point. The band sounds like they’re familiar with the arrangement, but Sonny periodically stops to lecture them on the finer points of the rhythmic feel required. Hadi takes an exquisite solo, punctuated with daring, high-register squeals, followed by Gilmore, who is, unfortunately, way off-mic; nevertheless, it is typically brilliant. Finally, the rehearsal concludes with something that is definitely not “Watusi,” despite what the liner notes say. Another unknown composition, the Arkestra struggles with the intricately interlocking melodies. “Are you playing the two or the one?” Ra asks. After some indecipherable discussion, the band tentatively starts again. The effect is hypnotic but the band sounds completely unsure of itself. Then Gilmore and Davis trade licks while Allen plays a long-toned counter-melody on flute, offering further possibilities—but, sadly, the tape cuts off. Oh well—there goes another lost Sun Ra composition.

Like others in the series, Volume 4 of the Lost Reel Collection is for hardcore Sun Ra fanatics only. Being a rehearsal, nothing here really coheres musically (with the exception of the “hidden” track seven and the absurdly amusing “Passin’ Gas”). However, all the previously unknown titles are interesting in their own right, even if incomplete or badly played. Well, for me, the whole thing is essential listening—if only to peek behind the veil, to hear the master at work. Good stuff.

COMMENTS:

Anonymous said...
Hi Rodger.
There is one other version of this Sun Ra composition at the beginning of disc 2 of the now out of print 2cd set 'Pleiades' on Leo records from 1990 and it bears the title 'Sun Procession'. Drummer Francisco 'Ali' Mora who played occasionally with the Arkestra during the mid '70's referred to it in an interview as 'Procession of the Sun'.

I love both versions of this piece - It's in that great line of stately Ra compositions (Ancient Aethiopia/Mayan Temples/Eternal Sphynx) that invoke both lost ancient worlds and the dark immeasurable cosmos.

Keep up the great work.
PG

Anonymous said...
Hi again- Just to clarify, my earlier post refers to the concluding 'hidden' track of disc 1 of 'Dance of the Living Image'.
PG

Rodger Coleman said...
@PG -- Wow! Good ears! I have "Pleiades," but hadn't listened to it in a very long time. Dang, that's sixteen years later! Campbell says "Pleiades" is the only performance...that seems hard to believe. Something to keep my ears open for when wading through the bootlegs. I like your description of the music...it's very prototypical Ra. Thanks so much for your comment!

August 7, 2011

NEW HORIZONS

Music Pulsing like a living heartbeat,
Pleasant intuition of better things to come . . .
The sight of boundless space
Reaching ever outward as if in search of itself.
Music spontaneous rapture,
Feet rushing with the wind on a new world
Of sounds:
Invisible worlds . . . vibrations . . . tone pictures . .
A new world for every self
Seeking a better self and a better world.

Music akin to thought . . . .
Imagination . . . !
With wings unhampered,
Unafraid . . . . .
Soaring like a bird
Through the threads and fringes of today
Straight to the heart of tomorrow.
Music rushing forth like a fiery law
Loosening the chains that bind,
Ennobling the mind
With all the many greater dimensions
Of a living tomorrow.

--Sun Ra

**August 21, 2011**

**THE SUBSTITUTE WORDS**

How carefully laid the scenes
How brilliantly superimposed
The substitute words to say and do.
How forced the seeming way of the pseudo-life.
If they would believe that vanity has them captive
If they would but believe the earth-gravity
Has them chained to its earth-plane vibration
Then they would come to know
Beyond the thing they call
The Beginning and End of knowledge-wisdom.
They would come to know
And they would know they know.

--Sun Ra

**September 4, 2011**

**Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Civic Center, Santa Cruz, CA 12-11-74 (AUD 2CDR)**

Of all the gigs the Arkestra played on the west coast at the end of 1974, only this set from the Civic Center in Santa Cruz, California from December 11 was documented (see Campbell & Trent pp.215-217). Surprisingly, the 100-minute audience tape was recorded in stereo—but the sound quality is pretty horrific: boomy, distorted and indistinct (not surprising given the cavernous venue). Nevertheless, it’s a fine performance and a little patience on the listener’s part is periodically rewarded with some great music.

The tape cuts in on the opening improvisation, free-jazz skronk featuring a snippet of Marshall Allen’s oboe, Kwame Hadi’s high-wire trumpet act and some psycho-delic guitar from Dave Williams. The Arkestra is on fire! “Discipline 27,” “Enlightenment” and “Love In Outer Space” are the usual thing and well-played but the fifteen-minute “Shadow World” is something special, indeed. After a near-perfect run through of the ridiculously complicated head, John Gilmore delivers one of his typically amazing, high-energy solos, inspiring excellent contributions from Danny Ray Thompson on libflexco, Hadi on trumpet, Williams on wah-wah guitar and Allen on alto sax. It’s an epic tour de force guided by Ra’s scumbling keyboards; after a series of ever-greater climaxes, Ra signals the reprise to end, leaving the audience clearly stunned. Wow! Despite the poor sound, this version of “The Shadow World” is well worth hearing.

The set continues with “Theme Of The Stargazers” and “Calling Planet Earth,” with some outrageous synthesizer and organ work from Ra eventually giving way to “Space Is The Place,” in a full horn arrangement. “Images” makes another welcome appearance, but the tape cuts in and out and the levels go up and down, making it impossible to tell what’s really going on. Yet
About half-way through, the band has settled into a sultry groove, the audience clapping along, when all of a sudden, Gilmore comes in with a rip-snorting, gut-bucket, blues-drenched solo. He’s blowing his lungs out, “walking the bar”—but also spinning off complex chromatic runs punctuated with keening, multi-phonetic wails, chasing the rhythm section in spiraling circles—on and on, coming back again and again to a three-note flourish and ending with a bang. Whew! Yes, it’s another incredible Gilmore solo! And again, while the sound quality is dreadful, this performance needs to be heard to be believed.

As usual, “Discipline 27-II” devolves into a series of space chants, including “Life Is Splendid” and “Destination Unknown,” with June Tyson and Akh Tal Ebah taking the lead but, after a swelling space chord, “Astro Nation” follows in its first known performance. It’s come a long way from the rehearsal tape we previously heard yet while the rhythm section is more solid, only Sonny seems able to recite the off-meter syllables on top of the up-and-down disco beat. (It would take a while for the band to get this odd little tune together.) Soon, Hadi pierces the din and the saxophones begin to take it out and things really start to get interesting—but as Sonny tries to bring the vocals back around, it falls apart and just sort of dissolves. Then a super-intense improvisation rises up over Ra’s droning organ, with loud, distorted guitar, pealing trumpets and squalling saxophones but, sadly, the tape fades out after only a couple of minutes. Argh!

“We Travel The Spaceways” is given an relaxed reading, evolving into a lovely doo-wop-style medley, incorporating elements of “Journey To Saturn” and “Rocket Number 9,” sung in luscious harmonies and anchored by Ebah’s (?) rich baritone. Just lovely! After a quick statement of “Planet Earth,” “Watusi” follows with the flutes weirdly dominant. Fortunately, Clifford Jarvis’s over-excited drumming is countered by some weird, metallic counter-rhythms, adding interest to the usual percussion-fest, but the sound quality is particularly grim at this point, overloaded and distorted. Things quiet down for “Friendly Galaxy No.2,” although the mix is still wonky. Flutes and bass clarinet play the serpentine melody while the bleating trumpet figure is passed around the rest of the band and, as the flutes begin to improvise, an eerie calm is established—then Ra steps up to recite “I, Pharoah,” with June Tyson and others emphasizing each declamation. Sonny’s on a roll: “I Could Have Enjoyed Myself On This Planet” he shouts, “if the people had been alive!” The band joins in on some swing/rap silliness, repeating the refrain accompanied by the Yoko-esque shrieking from one of Ethnic Space Vocalists—is this impromptu or pre-conceived? It’s hard to tell. The craziness subsides, replaced by the tranquility of “Pleiades,” pretty flutes and rubato percussion, with Damon Choice’s glistening vibraphone faintly audible in the background. Very nice—but Ra continues with the tirade: “The Universe spoke to me!” Etc. Finally, the set concludes with “Face The Music,” taken at a slow-ish tempo as the Arkestra sings, chants and saunters off the stage.

You’re probably wondering what the heck takes me so long with these blog posts. Well, I was ready to write this one off as yet another dismal sounding bootleg, but I kept listening—and my ears became more and more used to the sound. And each time through, I found interesting little nuggets, diamonds buried in a dung-pile of noise. So I kept listening. At this point, weeks have gone by…well, this is how it seems to go. Is it worth it? I suppose so; there is some extraordinary music here (Gilmore is in particularly good form), even if it’s a struggle to discern. It may not be the worst-sounding bootleg out there—like I said, my ears got used to it—but this one is strictly for hardcore fans only. Frankly, I’m looking forward to moving on to 1975…

September 11, 2011
A month later, the Arkestra found itself far removed from the mild and mellow California climate, shivering in the brutal cold of a mid-western winter. A gig at the Smiling Dog Saloon in Cleveland, OH on January 30, 1975 was broadcast by WMMS-FM and preserved on this sixty-minute recording but the band sounds a bit ragged, exhausted, perhaps, by the long-distance travel and inclement weather. Sadly, they never quite seem to get warmed up. But somewhere along the way, Sonny has picked up a hotshot bass player, whose identity is unknown (see Campbell & Trent p.218). Whoever it is, he provides an unusually funky bottom-end to the proceedings. The Arkestra had to make do without a bassist at many shows during this period (particularly after the final departure of the inimitable Ronnie Boykins in mid-1974) making the rhythm section sound thin and incomplete, so the presence of the bass is always a welcome addition during this period (even if it isn’t the best show ever). Audio quality is pretty good (especially compared to other “bootlegs” we’ve been listening to recently) suffering more from careless microphone placement and poor balance than subsequent generational loss (my copy indicates the original broadcast was recorded to reel-to-reel, with only one cassette generation prior to being converted to digital). For better or worse, our anonymous bassist is certainly mixed front and center throughout!

After an introduction from the resident DJ, Ra fingers a dissonant organ chord before launching into “Astro Nation.” Loud electric bass anchors the groove and though he tends to overplay, he never loses the beat. The whole band joins in on the weirdly asymmetrical chant, clapping and singing as they tramp around the nightclub with vocalist/dancer Eddie Thomas (a/k/a Thomas Thaddeus) adding some soulful yelps and moans. But it goes on for far too long without anything happening, ending with a desultory space chord. I’m sure it was a visual spectacle if nothing else. Sonny teases “Love In Outer Space” before changing his mind and queuing up “Enlightenment” in a new, rhythmically clipped vocal arrangement, ending a cappella. Sort of interesting, but nothing special. Then “Love In Outer Space” follows, propelled by Ra’s BBQ organ comping. Curiously, the theme is never played and after a few minutes, Ra drops out completely, leaving spacey African percussion and handclaps. Eventually, the organ vamp returns, accompanied by some bleating horns, but it ends inconclusively.

“Theme of the Stargazers” and “The Satellites Are Spinning” are presented as a brisk medley and is nicely sung by the band—but the audience doesn’t quite know what to make of it. When it ends, there’s total silence, not even a smattering of applause! Undeterred, Sonny brings up the pulsing drone of “Friendly Galaxy No.2” joined by the electric bass and, later, by pealing trumpets. The mellifluous flutes are woefully off-mic but a ringing vibraphone is crystal clear (presumably Damon Choice). But then Sonny steps up to pontificate, riffing on “I Am The Brother The Wind” and “I, Pharoah.” Here we go again! The unbalanced recording combined with an uncharacteristically subdued performance is disappointing: rather than hypnotic, it is merely boring. Oh well. Next up is a long keyboard solo which also seems to be less than totally inspired. It’s the usual spaceship synthesizer noises and dissonant organ clusters and the fact that the tape repeatedly fades up and down (and cuts in and out) doesn’t really help matters very much. However, after about seven minutes, Sonny speeds up the cheesy “rhythm machine” on his organ and plays along briefly, a hint of Disco 3000 to come!

Finally, we get a very strange rendition of Duke Ellington’s “Sophisticated Lady.” Opening with a skronky free-improv (led by Kwame Hadi’s trumpet), Ra quickly moves to (distant-sounding) acoustic piano for a rhapsodic intro, sprinkling thunderous pounding with pretty, impressionistic harmonies. Then he goes into the slightly-old fashioned rhythms of the tune, taken at a lugubrious tempo and accompanied by walking (well, plodding) bass. The Arkestra comes in,
sounding slightly shaky on the arrangement led by John Gilmore’s tenor saxophone, whose
breathy tone evokes Ben Webster in his prime. Akh Tal Ebah takes a nice, smeary solo on
trompophone accompanied by riffing saxophones before giving way to Gilmore. Unfortunately, this is
not one of Gilmore’s better efforts, with halting, incoherent phrasing and wobbly intonation. Well,
it just goes to show the guy was not super- human. But then Sonny and Thomas start mumbling
and crooning the rarely-heard lyrics about the seemingly “sophisticated lady” who cries alone at
home. But their mocking attitude is somewhat shocking as they cruelly taunt: “boo-hoo, boo-hoo
for you!” After fourteen tedious minutes, the arrangement collapses into a clumsy ritardando
and, mercifully, sputters to an end. Huh. Revivals of big band classics were to become a regular
feature of Arkestra concerts from here on out, but there was never another performance of
“Sophisticated Lady” quite like this—and that’s a good thing.

Interestingly, the circulating CDR contains two additional tracks not listed in the discography, but
they are most certainly from another (unknown) performance: the ambience is completely
different, in front of a large audience, possibly outdoors. Also, there’s considerable hiss and
distortion—and the presence of trombones on the bandstand. Probably recorded in the mid-’70s
sometime, I have no idea where this is from. Anyone know? “Calling Planet Earth” features
some intense group improvisation, but the recording is so overloaded, it’s hard to hear what’s
going on and “Space Is The Place” is the typical chanting, dancing and carrying on that rarely
translates well to tape. Whatever the provenance, this ten-minute fragment is hardly worth
mentioning, but there it is. These “mystery tracks” are not really much of a bonus.

So the Smiling Dog Saloon gig was an off night for the Arkestra; too bad, since it’s a decent-
sounding recording for the period. Hardcore fanatics and completists will want this but everyone
else would be better off looking elsewhere for that Sun Ra magic.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Yeah, I have to agree with you on this one--it's lackluster, and the plodding bass (a local
addition, maybe?) helps ruin it for me. "Sophisticated Lady" is by far the most interesting thing
here, and that just barely. The arrangement is pretty close to what they were rehearsing on
"Dance of the Living Image," but it doesn't help that you can hardly hear the drums, and the
bass is overdone. Gilmore's solo is not as off as you say, though---it's got some nice lyrical
parts. But it's not transcendent, which you can certainly say for 99.9% of his solos.

Rodger Coleman said...
@ Sam -- I guess that's it. I was hoping for transcendent and got merely fluent. Or something.
The whole band sounds out of sorts to me on this. It would be nicer if you could hear the drums
and not just the bass!

September 18, 2011

Sun Ra: The Singles (Saturn/Evidence 2CD)

Although the Arkestra was fairly active in 1975, with several known performances up and down
the east coast and extended sojourns to the mid-west, it is one of the most sparsely
documented years in the discography (see Campbell & Trent, pp.217-221). The Impulse! deal
had pretty much run its course, with all the albums dumped into the cut-out bins and summarily
deleted—so I suppose there was little incentive to make any more records during this period. Sadly, there are also very few “bootlegs” available to fill in the gaps.

Nevertheless, a live concert (possibly recorded on May 23) yielded a ten-minute track which was (briefly) issued as side-B of *What’s New* (Saturn 752), a hodgepodge record with a tortured discographical history. According to Prof. Campbell, matrix numbers and label texts vary and, in any event, most copies replace the original side-B with side-A of *The Invisible Shield* (Id. pp.218-219). Confusing? Yes. Well, don’t worry about it. The track fades up on the end of “Space Is The Place” and segues immediately into a hectoring Cosmo Drama (sometimes titled, “We Roam the Cosmos”). There are some amusing raps about Sun Ra bounding across the universe “using the planets as stepping stones” but the sound quality is extremely noisy and distorted, rendering it virtually unlistenable. Since there’s really not a whole lot going on musically, I see no real reason to go out of your way to locate this impossibly rare pressing (an amateur “needle-drop” can be found on CDR, if you’re really interested).

More intriguing are a bunch of unreleased Saturn singles, including “Things Ain’t Going To Be Like They Used To Be,” “Make Another Mistake” and a seven-minute version of “I’m Gonna Unmask The Batman” (Id. pp.217-218). None of these tracks were included on the Evidence CD set, but “Batman” circulates amongst collectors, albeit in the lossy MP3 format. Recorded live (possibly at the same concert as “We Roam The Cosmos”), it also suffers from grossly distorted sound as Akh Tal Ebah (?) sings, shouts and screams into the microphone while the horns riff in the background. John Gilmore takes a loopy solo on tenor saxophone followed by—could it be? Walter Miller on trumpet! Maybe Prof. Campbell is wrong about Kwame Hadi’s presence on this, since the vocalist calls Miller out by name. It certainly sounds like him! Regardless, the super-funky drumming (by someone named “Freddie”) is the highlight of the track and he takes a killer drum break, ripe for the hip-hopper’s sampler. Ra’s fascination with “The Caped Crusader” is somewhat inexplicable—maybe it was the campy costume—but this odd little ditty (written by Lacy Gibson and Alton Abraham) would be performed fairly regularly during the 1980s.

Finally, a typically quirky seven-inch single was released as Saturn 256 at the end of the year. The A-side features newly overdubbed vocals on the 1970 recording of “Love In Outer Space” (found on *Night Of The Purple Moon*). David Henderson croons the surprisingly sentimental lyrics about “love everlasting…love for everybody…love for everything”—and amazingly enough, it works! This is, of course, a classic track from one of the all-time great Ra albums and the vocals manage to add a touching sweetness that is truly unique. The flip-side, “Mayan Temple,” was probably recorded June 27, 1975 at Variety Recorders in New York and it’s an early version of what would later become known as “The Mayan Temples” (Id. p.221). Ra plays the loping, minor-mode bass line on MiniMoog, while scattering tinkly notes on the Rocksichord; meanwhile, Marshall Allen blows wildly keening oboe. What it lacks in melody and harmony is more than compensated for in spacy atmosphere, making for a subtly evocative record. Unfortunately, it fades out much too soon. Still, it’s the perfect single and belongs in every hipster’s jukebox.

In the coming weeks, we’ll listen to a couple of verité recordings (one of which is not listed in Campbell’s discography) with a detour through Ronnie Boykins’s solo LP on ESP-Disk before moving on to 1976, where things start to pick up considerably. Stay tuned.

+++ Special thanks once again to drummer extraordinaire (and Sun Ra expert) Sam Byrd for providing me with a bunch of rare stuff I was missing—I couldn’t do this without his help!
COMMENTS:

Rodger Coleman said...
So, I'm now listening to The "New" Five Spot recording from June 11 (which is a remarkably decent-sounding bootleg), and I could swear that "What's New" track is taken from this show. Could it be this "New" Five Spot recording is from Ra's own stash? I'll have to compare them more closely...

Sam said...
Thanks for the kind words, Rodger--glad to help if it means I get to read your wonderful writing! One note: I'm pretty sure the long version of "I'm Gonna Unmask The Batman" appears on the recent compilation "Rocket Ship Rock." At first I thought this was all reissues of what was already on the Evidence singles release, but in fact there are several unissued gems there...alternate takes of Yochanan stuff, and an extended version of the Lacy Gibson "Batman" single, and this 7-min. workout (which doesn't interest me so much, but still, it's there!).

September 25, 2011

SAGA OF RESISTANCE

Resist me -------
Make me strong.
Resist me -------
Make me strong.
For since I cannot be what you will
I shall always be that much more so
What I will.
Resist me -------
Repulse my dreams
Thus is a spark brought from nothing . . . .
Stone rubbed against stone
Upon the thirsty grass,
Dried and baked by a burning sun . . . . . .
Then suddenly: flame.
Flame feeding flame.
. . . Now, nothing is the same:
The stones are blackened -------
The grass is ashes
The burning is still no less itself
But all else is changed
Nor ever shall be as it was before.

--Sun Ra (1966)

October 16, 2011

POINTS OF THE SPACE AGE
THE SPACE AGE CANNOT BE AVOIDED.

The greater future is the age of the space prophet
The scientific airy minded second man.
The prince of the power of the air.
The air is music.
The music is power.
The power of the past was its music.
The greater power of the future greater
Is its greater music.

Greater music is art.
Art is the foundation of any living culture.
Living culture is skilled culture
Skilled beautifulness, aim and care
And love of beauty is the only way to produce art.

Skilled culture is the new weapon of nations,
The new measure of determination as to whether a nation
Is ready to be a greater nation is art.
A nation without art is a nation without a lifeline.
Art is the lifeline because art is the airy concept
Of greater living. It is the airy foundation of the airy
Kingdom of the future.

TOMORROW BEYOND TOMORROW IS THE GREATER KINGDOM.

--Sun Ra (1984)

October 30, 2011

I picked up this cool little book at Downtown Music Gallery while we were in New York: This Planet Is Doomed: The Science Fiction Poetry of Sun Ra, which contains a number of previously unseen poems as well as a forward by Amiri Baraka and an overview of Ra’s literary pursuits by Bhob Stewart. Published by Kicks Books in association with Norton Records and Michael D. Anderson of the Sun Ra Music Archive, it’s definitely a worthy addition to the Sun Ra bookshelf. Here’s a great example (from page 73):

infinity is the language

all created art is music
art
choreography
sculpture
poetry
artworks
photographs
painting
architectural designs found in nature
trees
November 6, 2011

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: The “New” Five Spot, New York, NY 6-11-75 (AUD CDR)

Over the past couple of years, Sun Ra had introduced a few Swing-Era jazz standards into the Arkestra’s live sets but, for the most part, they were loosely arranged and casually executed. By 1975, this repertoire would suddenly become an integral part of every live performance, with “mini-sets” of historical big-band numbers, expertly re-orchestrated and performed with astounding authenticity. Szwed suggests that this was a shrewd business maneuver as much as anything:

It was a move both oppositional and prescient: he had seen the limits of the avant-garde, and sensing a shift beginning in American sensibilities, he was unwilling to give up the large audiences he had drawn (p.338).

Indeed, the free jazz scene had virtually disintegrated, at least in the United States. While it might have seemed like a good idea for Impulse! to sign Sun Ra to a multi-album deal back in 1972, by 1975 it was a bust and the records were deleted and sold off as “cut-outs,” thereby depriving Ra of any royalties otherwise due him. Accordingly, Ra’s revival of the standard jazz repertoire might seem to anticipate the rise of 1980s conservatism and the shallow, “well-dressed jazz” of Wynton Marsalis and his ilk. But Sun Ra was deeply affected by the recent deaths of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington (Id. p.337) and it must be remembered he was also of that era. Ra was by now in his sixties, much older than most of the members of the Arkestra and his growing audience of college students and urban hipsters. Moreover, I’m not sure this old-timey music had much commercial appeal at the time—it certainly took me a while to come around to liking it, much preferring the wild spacey stuff. Instead, I believe Sun Ra’s intention was mostly pedagogical, to teach his musicians and audience about this beautiful, highly disciplined music that was in danger of disappearing into the past (or coopted and smoothed over for contemporary, postmodern tastes).

This monophonic audience recording from The “New” Five Spot in New York City on June 11, 1975 opens with a fully-developed “mini-set” of Big-Band era classics and, unlike the loosey-goosey renditions previously heard, the Arkestra sounds super-tight and thoroughly well-rehearsed. When they tear through this old repertoire, they sound rough-and-ready and totally into it! This is probably how this stuff actually sounded on roadside bandstands during its glory years of the 1920s and ‘30s—it is more than just “authentic,” it’s real. The recording’s primitive sound quality simultaneously enhances and detracts from the listening experience. On the one hand, the hissy mono recording sounds like it’s from a distant time-zone, an intergalactic transmission faintly audible on our humble earthbound receiver units. Nevertheless, it sure
would be nice to hear this in high fidelity! Well, we take what we can get and this one is a keeper, despite its sonic flaws. Sonny rhapsodizes on “Yesterdays” at the piano for a few minutes before Gilmore solemnly announces: “And now, Duke Ellington’s 'Lightnin'!”—and they’re totally smoking, with Ra turning in a rollicking piano solo. Ellington’s “Slippery Horn” from 1932 is presented in an unusual arrangement with Robert Northern taking the lead on French horn (!) and Gilmore making a rare appearance on clarinet. Just lovely! Finally, the “mini-set” ends with a romantic piano interlude and a rip-snorting “King Porter Stomp.” Gilmore helpfully informs the crowd it was “composed by Jelly Roll Morton and arranged by Fletcher Henderson.” Taken at a slightly more relaxed tempo than later versions, the performance is confident and assured with newcomer Ahmed Abdullah coming through with a weirdly swinging trumpet solo. In all, a scintillating ten-minute history lesson from the Sun Ra and his Arkestra.

The rest is more typical of the era, but played at an extremely high level. Notable is the presence of a very fine bassist, whose identity is, sadly, unknown. Although Prof. Campbell suggests Ronnie Boykins or John Ore could be present (p. 218), I’m not so sure it’s either one of them. Whoever it is, he confidently holds down the groove on a lengthy jam on “Moonship Journey,” which moves through a series of space chants/songs including “Third Heaven,” “Journey to Saturn” and “Outer Space Employment Agency” without ever losing a beat. A dramatic synthesizer solo leads into “The Shadow World,” always a welcome occurrence. After blazing through the hyper-complicated head, everyone gets a chance to solo—including Northern’s French horn—but Gilmore steals the show with a ferocious outburst of saxophone pyrotechnics. Yes, it’s another amazing Gilmore solo! After a quick reprise, the set concludes with “Space Is The Place,” but cuts off just as it starts to get going. Oh well. Interestingly, my copy tacks on “Space Is The Place/We Roam The Cosmos” from the side-B of What’s New. Aside from a slight change in sound quality and volume level, the ambiance and energy of the performance fits right in with the rest of the “New” Five Spot show—the unknown bass player certainly sounds the same. Could this be from the same gig? Is this “bootleg” actually an on-stage recording copied from Sonny’s stash, another “Lost Reel”? Who knows? In any event, this track works better in the context of an entire set than as a stand-alone (and far too brief) album side, making it a satisfying bit of filler.

Despite the less-than-perfect sound quality, this “bootleg” recording is worth hearing, if only for the expertly performed “mini-set” of obscure jazz classics and spectacular version of “The Shadow World.” That it may also contain the missing material from What’s New just makes it all the more tantalizing.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...

Interesting notion, Rodger, that the "What's New" material is a continuation of the Five Spot set. They do sound very similar conceptually. RLC does cite two different dates for the material, and typically I see no need to second-guess the dates assigned. "Lightnin'" and "Slippery Horn" are two brilliant 30s-era Ellington pieces--I wish Ra had returned to them a bit more often than he did some of the more overplayed Fletcher tunes like "Yeah Man!" But yeah, the band sounds well-rehearsed and ready to roll on these numbers here, and boy do they swing!

November 13, 2011

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Jordan Hall, Boston, MA December 1975 (AUD CDR)
Ah, The New England Conservatory of Music, NEC, my alma mater (of sorts), otherwise known by my cohorts at the time as “The Disturbatory” or “Not Exactly College” (among other amusing epithets). It’s frankly hard to imagine Sun Ra and his spaced-out, ragtag Arkestra gracing the stage at Jordan Hall in December 1975. But although NEC was (and always will be) a bastion of stuffed-shirted classical music snobbery, its president at the time was Gunther Schuller, who was hip enough to allow Ran Blake to start the “Third Stream” department (where weirdoes like me were admitted) and encouraged the development of a “jazz” curriculum to compete with the Berklee College of Music down the street. So I guess it’s not so surprising that Sonny was invited to perform in one of the most acoustically perfect concert halls in the country—not that you would know it from the sound of this primitive audience recording. Gosh, it sounds awful! Hissy, warbly, distorted, unbalanced and, to make matters worse, most tracks cut off with a loud pop. Ugh! Upon close listening, it seems the original master might have sounded decent, but generational loss has obliterated what fidelity there was. Still, you can still hear Ra on his best behavior in this prestigious venue, introducing some well-rehearsed new material and keeping the polemical excesses in check.

The seventy-one minute tape (unlisted in Campbell & Trent) contains almost a complete set, cutting in on the opening improvisation which features Marshall Allen’s keening oboe over ominous percussion. Suddenly, Ra queues “Love In Outer Space” with some blasting organ chords—but the taper apparently didn’t care for this tune (or experienced technical difficulties) as the recording cuts off just as it gets going. Oh well. Eddie Thomas announces “Images” and, after a moody organ introduction, the tune takes off at brisk tempo. Kwame Hadi was out of the band at this point so the high-trumpet part has been assumed by Ahmed Abdullah and he takes a long, winding solo over several choruses. The hotshot bass player we heard at The “New” Five Spot is still present, holding down the swinging rhythm section and closely following Abdullah as he takes it increasingly “out” and deftly leading the band through the reprise of the head. A stellar tour de force from Abdullah and Mr. Anonymous! Not to be outdone, John Gilmore takes over—a cappella at that—doing his best post-Coltrane tenor thing. Without missing a beat, the rhythm section slips in behind him and, supported by Ra’s piano, he really starts to fly! Yep—another incredible Gilmore solo! Get used to it! Ra follows with some impressionistic piano, showing off his underappreciated keyboard skills before the Arkestra returns with the finale. A superb rendition of this classic tune—too bad it sounds so crappy!

Sonny then moves to the Rocksichord, to which he’s attached a whooshing phase-shifter—a sound that would dominate the Cosmos album the following summer (one of my favorite Ra albums of all time). This unknown title would have fit right in on that record, opening with a long introduction from Ra that moves from pretty, modal chords to roiling, industrial dissonances and back again before the band comes in with a stately melody. With its lumbering rhythms and sweet’n’sour harmonies, the piece brings to mind the Discipline series of compositions but with the relaxed, languid feel of Ra’s hypnotically grooving space ballads. A short bass clarinet solo almost sounds like Gilmore but Abdullah soon takes the reins with some more high-wire trumpet. Mostly, though, it’s Sun Ra’s creamy Rocksichording that keeps things interesting. Again, it’s a terrible shame the sound quality on the tape is so poor since the gently floating, interlocking bass and percussion parts are just about impossible to make out. Well, it’s a rare and beautiful composition, badly recorded.

“Space Is The Place” follows but is presented as a hyperactive rhumba, with Eddie Thomas and June Tyson deliriously singing the lead. Predictably, it descends into cheerful chaos soon enough, but the audience gets a big kick out of the spectacle, whooping, hollering and clapping along. “Journey To Saturn” is more of the same, climaxing with a honking alto solo from Danny Davis and ending with weird portamento organ effects from Ra. “Discipline 27-II” slows things
down for a series of space chants, Eddie Thomas doing the substitute preaching—interestingly, Sonny keeps his mouth shut throughout and the pontificating is kept mercifully brief. The following “mini-set” of old jazz chestnuts is just two tunes, but they’re perfectly executed: “How Am I to Know” is a maudlin torch song made famous by Billie Holiday (and, later, Frank Sinatra) and here it showcases some of the most gooply romantic playing of Ra’s career, incongruously performed on his swelling, roller-rink organ. Meanwhile, Gilmore plays smoky tenor. It shouldn’t work, but it does—just lovely! Up next is the jump swing standard, “Rose Room, with more full-throated Gilmore and pealing trumpet from Abdullah, all punctuated by Ra’s relentlessly stabbing organ chords. Finally, the concert concludes with a vanishingly quick “Calling Planet Earth” and a fast-paced romp through “We Travel the Spaceways,” as the band marches off the stage to wild cheering and hearty applause. From the sound of it, the swells at NEC were surprisingly welcoming to Ra and his space men! Sun Ra’s star was finally starting to rise.

It’s a strong show, but the tempos are generally too fast and there’s no real opportunity for wild improvisation, as if time constraints required Ra to truncate his usual set. Yet, despite the atrocious sound quality, there’s enough interesting music here to make it worthwhile to fanatical collectors. “Images,” “How Am I To Know?” and especially the unidentified Cosmos-like piece are obvious highlights. Ordinary people, however, will be suitably repulsed by the noise and distortion; you are hereby dutifully warned.

COMMENTS:

George said...
I really enjoy reading about your musical exploits, especially Sun Ra. For the life of me I can’t figure out how/where one gets these amazing audience CDRs. I Google them and don’t find anything. One place talks about doing “trades,” but how do I get anything to trade?

By the way, I’m wondering if you ever listen to Henry Cow, the amazing avant-rock RIO band from the 70’s. I bought their 3 box sets a few years ago and really enjoy them! And what about Burnt Sugar? I think you’d enjoy much of their electric-Miles-meets-Sun Ra-huge band eclecticism.

Rodger Coleman said...
@ Nicolus - Thank you for your comment. I’m not really comfortable posting my email address to my blog. You can communicate with me via the comments section or, if you prefer, you can also find me on Facebook (although I hardly ever hang out there).

@ George - First of all, welcome to my humble blog and thank you for commenting. I can appreciate your frustration in trying to find these "bootleg" CDRs if you are just starting out. I am blessed to have a friend who is even more obsessed with Sun Ra than I am and he has kindly passed on a lot of items I didn’t have. Sometimes, his enthusiasm for my blog far exceeds my own! But beyond setting up trades with people, this stuff appears occasionally on certain BitTorrent sites (legal and otherwise). Keep in mind that part of the fun of being a record collector is the "chase" and, as I try to warn in my little reviews, the recordings themselves can be pretty rough listening! There are a fair number of items listed in Campbell & Trent that I do not have but would love to hear—no matter what they sound like! Good luck with your search!

P.S. Love Henry Cow but do not have the three-box set. I should probably bite the bullet and get it before it goes out print...
November 20, 2011

MY WORLD IS A SPACE AWAY

my world is a space away
and that's the way to another dimension
of living
the arial concept of being alive
out on the vibrating planes of outer space

my world is a space away
the broad road that never ends
an endless channel
that connects worlds upon worlds
of cosmic space
there is the doorway of my world
pause at the threshold, think a while
before you enter
but once having entered
there is no turning back

--Sun Ra

November 27, 2011

Ronnie Boykins: The Will Come, Is Now (ESP-Disk’ CD)

Ronnie Boykins was one of the first members of Sun Ra’s fledgling Arkestra, joining the band in early 1958 and his innovative yet rock-solid bass playing was a key element in the music’s rapid development up through the mid-1960s (it was also Boykins’s car that carried the band from Chicago to Montreal in 1961 and, thence, to New York City). Boykins had been classmates with John Gilmore and Pat Patrick at Du Sable High School (where he played sousaphone in the band) but he had already established himself as an in-demand bassist prior to joining the Arkestra, having played with such diverse figures as Muddy Waters, Johnny Griffin and Jimmy Witherspoon. In 1966, Boykins left the Arkestra to pursue other opportunities, (notably including work with Rahsaan Roland Kirk) and, as we’ve seen, Sonny had a hard time finding his replacement, opting on many occasions for doing without the bass altogether. Boykins intermittently performed with Arkestra thereafter with his last known appearance being at Hunter College on June 16, 1974 (portions of which were released as Out Beyond The Kingdom Of ). While Prof. Campbell suggests he might been a part of the two-week stand at The “New” Five Spot in June, 1975, he is not present on the bootleg tape which circulates (Campbell & Trent p.220). According to Szwed, growing animosity between Boykins and Ra over money and lack of composer credit for some of the Arkestra’s recordings caused him to quit the band for good sometime during this period (Szwed p.119).

But ESP-Disk’s Bernard Stollman recognized Boykins’s genius early on:

I first met Sun Ra during the October Revolution festival in the Cellar Café (in 1964), and he invited me to hear the Arkestra perform in a loft in Newark, New Jersey. It was there that I singled out Ronnie Boykins, and invited him to record for ESP. He told me he would let me
know when he felt he was ready. During the decade that followed, I heard his work in the Arkestra, and late night sessions with Sam Rivers in Studio Rivbea on Bond Street, and in Ornette Coleman’s Prince Street loft. Ronnie called me in 1975, to announce he was ready to record his first album as a leader (liner notes).

As it turned out, Boykins waited too long and The Will Come, Is Now is the only record Boykins ever made under his own name—he died suddenly of heart attack in 1980 at the age of 45. And ESP-Disk' was in serious decline by 1975, this being one of the last few recordings the label released before finally going under. Accordingly, it was cheaply made, pressed in miniscule quantities and poorly distributed, resulting in one of the rarest ESP discs of all. Fortunately, the resurrection of the label at the turn of the century has brought nearly the entire catalog back in print on CD, including Boykins’s one and only solo album, nicely remastered from the original tapes. Although neither Sonny nor any of the Arkestra appear on it, Boykins’s importance to the Sun Ra saga is undisputed and, therefore, The Will Come, Is Now merits a mention here.

Perhaps my expectations were too high, but I found this album to be something of a disappointment. It certainly looks promising: Boykins composed six ambitious pieces for the album, featuring a septet of himself on bass and sousaphone; Joe Ferguson, Monty Waters and James Cass on saxophones and flutes; Daoud Haroom on trombone; Art Lewis on drums; and George Avaloz on congas. And, to be sure, each of the pieces showcases Boykins’s unique compositional voice and his flair for rich orchestration but the album suffers from a basic lack of rehearsal and slip-shod recording technique. The title track is typical: a loping ostinato in 7/4 with a twisty, complex head arrangement followed by a series of modal solos—but the sound is boxy and indistinct and the off-center groove never quite solidifies, almost dissolving completely during Boykins’s bowed bass solo. “Starlight At The Wonder Inn” appears to be an evocation of the early days in Chicago: a slightly old-fashioned ballad form with sweet ‘n’ sour horns and Boykins carrying the melody on arco bass—but, this time, intonation problems undermine the piece’s nostalgic beauty.

On the other hand, the three-minute “Demon’s Dance” works a bit better, a riffing post-bop number with everyone soloing at once, Dixieland-style. Even more intriguing is “Dawn Is Evening, Afternoon,” which sets yearning, unresolved harmonies and dissonant counter-melodies against a swinging solo section. The humorously titled, "Tipping On Heels," is an appropriately tipsy, stop-start, big-band type number where, after stating the theme, soloists pair up for duo improvisations. At least here the ensemble sounds like they’re in their element but the abrupt ending appears to be a clumsy splice rather than a planned conclusion. The last track, “The Third I” could have been a real masterpiece: it begins with a ritualized percussion segment with everyone clanking on cowbells, shaking rattles and jangling tambourines before Boykins starts rumbling away on the giant sousaphone. Unfortunately, the blast of low frequencies caused the recordist to panic (Marzette Watts as it happens), resulting in disconcerting volume fluctuations throughout the rest of the track. Oh well. This eventually gives way to a genially meandering jam for flutes and horns which finally coalesces into a 15/8 ostinato laid down by Boykins on the bass. Finally, at around the ten-minute mark, the full band comes in with stabbing horn tattoos and a weirdly harmonized melody—exciting!—but then the track fades out just as they get going. Argh! Obviously, this piece continued for quite a while longer but was cut down to save space for other works on the album. That is really frustrating since "The Third I” might be the most compelling thing on the album. And so it goes…

Ultimately, The Will Come, Is Now is all unrealized potential and it is tempting to fantasize about what the Arkestra could have brought to this material, even with limited rehearsal time and
amateurish sound quality (which was, after all, the norm for them). It is also reasonable to speculate on what sort of music Sonny would have made with Boykins continuously at his side. Well, for whatever reason, it was not meant to be and, sadly, Boykins has never achieved the acclaim he deserves. Even though he played with several luminaries of the loft-jazz scene in the 1970s, very little of it was recorded, leaving this as his only solo statement. As such, *The Will Come, Is Now* is an important document of Boykins’s wide-ranging musical conception and inimitable instrumental prowess. But it is less than completely satisfying on a musical level, if only because it could have been so much better. Then again, my expectations might be too high.

**December 4, 2011**

**ONCE UPON A TIME**

time upon time
upon time
upon time
upon time is time
time once upon
once upon is time once
once once once
once upon a time
a time once
upon time a once
once once
upon a time
once once once time
in time in time in the past once
the past
once the past
once time once
the past past the past past
time in time time in time in it time in it
time in it
time out out time out time out
comes beyond time beyond time
before a time
before a time is time out
time out time out
there is no time when
time is out time is out
time is out

--*Sun Ra*

**December 11, 2011**

The next couple of records in the discography are some of faves, so it's taking a while to get the words together. In the meantime, check out Sun Ra's appearance on [David Sanborn's](#) "Night
Music” from 1990. You know, I always thought Dave Sanborn was a cheeseball, but this show was some of the best music television ever. For that, Sanborn deserves enormous props. Sun Ra takes full advantage of the opportunity. Good stuff! See you next week.

December 18, 2011

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: *Live At Montreux* (Inner City 2LP/2CD)

Not much is known about the Arkestra’s activities in the first half of 1976, but according to Douglass Walker and John Szwed, they performed at an event sponsored by the so-called People’s Revolutionary Convention on July 4 and, predictably, clashes between police and demonstrators flared up outside the church during the concert (see Campbell & Trent p.222). The “revolution” was on its last legs.

Immediately thereafter, the Arkestra headed to Europe for the first time since 1973. It was, as usual, both boom and bust. Szwed writes:

In the summer of 1976 the Arkestra began their fourth tour of Europe with twenty-eight people and ended with fourteen, playing all the major festivals, Paris, Montreux (where they recorded *Live at Montreux*), Pescara, Nimes, Northsea, Juan-les-Pins, and Arles, and were greeted everywhere as celebrities. Yet once they returned home to Philadelphia, they still sank back into semi-obscurity, the band playing down the block at the Red Carpet Lounge to a neighborhood audience of twenty, or at outdoor free concerts in the parks of North Philadelphia, to which sometimes no one came (p.341).

While very little documentation survives of this tour, *Live At Montreux* was to become a watershed album for Ra. Recorded for a state television broadcast at the legendary Swiss jazz festival on July 9, 1976, it was first issued as a two-LP set as Saturn MS87976 and reissued by Inner City as IC1039 in 1978 (Campbell & Trent, pp.222-224). *Live At Montreux* would be one of the few Sun Ra records to be widely available in the late-1970s and early-1980s and it was, for many people my age, their first (and perhaps only) exposure to his music. But what a great record it is! Ra was provided a decent piano and he makes good use of it (along with his battery of electronic keyboards), guiding the Arkestra through a remarkably inventive setlist. The enormous band includes many returning alumnus, including Pat Patrick on baritone sax and flute, Chris Capers on trumpet and Craig Harris on trombone, and their performance is uniformly first rate. Moreover, the sound quality is excellent—a blessed relief after all the grungy bootlegs we’ve been listening to lately. In fact, it might be one of the best-sounding releases in Ra’s enormous discography. In many ways, *Live At Montreux* is the definitive Sun Ra album.

Unfortunately, its history in the digital age is somewhat spotty: It did not appear on CD at all until 2003 when the Italian Universe label reissued it in a handsome gatefold mini-LP-style package, but they reversed the labels on the discs and inexplicably omitted four minutes of “On Sound Infinity Spheres.” To make matters worse, the track numbers do not line up correctly with the music. *Sheesh!* The Japanese edition on P-Vine corrected these errors but it was horribly expensive and just about impossible to find in the U.S. For a recording that was formerly ubiquitous, it was frustrating to find it suffering from such callous neglect in the CD era (thankfully, I kept my old LP). Finally, in 2008, Inner City reissued *Live At Montreux* domestically in its complete form, remastered from the original tapes and available at a reasonable price. Although the pedestrian jewel box packaging is not as deluxe as the Universe or Japanese
editions, this is the one to have. The LP has that warm, analog sound and an extended top-end (including a fair amount of tape hiss), but I prefer the CD, which lets the music seamlessly unfold, rather being interrupted by having to flip and change the records every twenty minutes.

As many times as I've listened to this record over the years—and repeatedly over the last several weeks—I still am at a loss for words for how to describe it. Any attempts at rote description miserably fail to convey what makes this album so special, even beyond its significance in the Sun Ra canon. While there are long periods of intensely skronky improvisation where it seems like everyone gets to solo, it all magically holds together from beginning to end. Everyone plays at such a high level that no one soloist—not even Gilmore—stands out above the others. The Arkestra is truly speaking with one voice: Sun Ra’s. There’s even some weird new compositions (“From Out Where Others Dwell” and “On Sound Infinity Spheres”), a couple of rarely-played oldies (“Lights On A Satellite” and “El Is The Sound Of Joy”) and a monumental rendition of the Strayhorn/Ellington classic, “Take The A-Train” which needs to be heard to be believed—not even Jarvis’s drum solo can derail it! Throughout it all, Sonny’s piano playing is just spectacular, with his introduction to “A-Train” being one of his most impressive solos on record, a history lesson tracing the development of the instrument from ragtime to avant-garde and on into outer space. If there is one Sun Ra album I would take to the proverbial “desert island,” it would probably be this one. Live At Montreux is just about exactly perfect.

I would assume that if you’re bothering to read this, you already own Live At Montreux, so there’s really no need for me to go into further detail. If you are reading this and don’t own it, well, what are you waiting for?

COMMENTS:

Rodger Coleman said...
Sam -- I almost added a footnote to that comment to point out the incredible Gilmore solo on "A Train" but the truth is, as great as that solo is, it doesn't stand out quite like other shows. What really impressed me re-listening to this again and again is how strong that first disc is: out but in, group improv tightly controlled--and Sun Ra at his finest! I wimped out on this one, but really what is there to say except, "it's great!"

Anonymous said...
Thought you should know about this

Special Show - www.wwoz.org - Air Time: Tuesday, December 27, 2011 - 10:00pm - Wednesday, December 28, 2011 - 12:00am - Central Standard Earth Time

The Kitchen Sink Tone Scientists of Ecstatic Space will bring you the annual Sun Ra New Year's Party on WWOZ. At least 2 hours of Sun Ra from the over 60 recordings that the Scientists have accumulated. Expect Space, Time, Jazz, Space Time Jazz, and the Astro Infinity Arkestra from the limitless repertoire of Sun Ra. Doo Wop, Swing, Avant Garde - it will all be here. And as an added bonus, we'll be featuring Sun Ra poetry from the Kick Books (http://www.nortonrecords.com/kicksbooks/sunra.php) edition of "The Planet is Doomed" published in 2011.

Roddus said...
This was one of the first Ra albums I heard after borrowing a copy from our public library. What always stood out in my memory was the monumental piano solos on disc one. It was many years later that I managed to get my hands on a digital copy and not long after I discovered the Inner City release which now resides in my collection and my memories of those colossal Piano solos are vindicated.

January 1, 2012

LIGHT FROM OTHER WORLDS

I have forgotten
the old ways
the old paths
I seek
I seek a new way
not like this new place of one dimensions
not like this place
this place of shame confused with glory
but a vaster realm
of profitable enlightened vision
a region of chromatic truths
abstracts of living design
full of warmth
and sundry planes of light from other worlds
and sundry planes of light from other worlds
--Sun Ra

January 8, 2012

Sun Ra: Cosmos (Cobra/Spalax CD)

While on their fourth tour of Europe in August 1976, the Arkestra (a portion of it, anyway) entered Studio Hautefeuille in Paris to record an album for the French Cobra label, which released later in the year as Cosmos (COB 37001). I originally wrote about this album way back in 2009, when I first started posting Sun Ra Sunday (and before I started the chronological assessment) and this is what I had to say:

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According to Robert L. Campbell’s discography (1st ed.), this LP was also issued on Musicdistribution 60005 and Inner City IC 1020 shortly after the original Cobra release. It was first re-issued on compact disc by the French Buda label (82479) but the original CD apparently suffers from a boomingly bass-heavy mix. This 1999 issue on Spalax purports to correct that deficiency - but I’m not so sure; it sounds lopsided still, with prominent electric bass and distant drums. Regardless, this is one of my very favorite Sun Ra records.
The sonic imbalances no doubt have to something to do with the cramped quarters of the recording studio. According to French horn player (!), Vincent Chauncey, the Arkestra was reduced to a core group of twelve musicians for this session due to the limited space (Campbell (1st ed.) p.73). Oh, but what a group! Along with Chauncey, Ra’s faithful stalwarts, John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Danny Davis, Danny Thompson, Elo Omoe, and Jac Jackson fill out the reed section while Ahmed Abdullah plays sensitive, tasteful trumpet and the incredible Craig Harris virtuosically holds down the trombone chair. The rhythm section consists of R. Anthony Bunn on (nice, but overloud) electric bass, Larry Bright on (barely audible) drums, and, of course, Sun Ra himself on the electric Rocksichord. Caught in the midst of a European tour, the Arkestra sounds well-rehearsed, at the top of their game.

But as great as the band sounds on this date, it is Ra’s electric keyboard that makes this such a delightfully engaging record for me. Throughout the album, Ra’s Rocksichord has this weird, wire-thin, reedy sound quality, upon which he pours some molasses-thick phase-shifter that hisses away incessantly in the background. Now, in anyone else’s hands, this would be unbelievably cheesy, even amateurish. Yet Ra guilelessly tackles the wide variety material and, through his visionary technical abilities, miraculously balances the seemingly limited electronic keyboard textures with the expansive, acoustic Arkestra to create a decidedly strange, but appropriately otherworldly ambience. Ra’s ultra-spacey keyboard turns tracks like “Interstellar Low-Ways,” “Moonship Journey,” and “Journey Among the Stars” into dreamy, nearly narcotic reveries. Even the more straightforwardly big-band-ish tracks like “The Mystery of Two,” “Neo Project #2,” and the aptly-titled “Jazz From an Unknown Planet” are transformed by Ra’s swooshing, buzzing Rocksichord. The brief title track stands out as a vehicle for another classic John Gilmore solo on tenor saxophone atop an intense Arkestra arrangement, but overall the mood is pretty and mellow and perfect for a Sunday evening.

+++ 

Not really too much to add except to update the citation to the second edition of the discography (Campbell & Trent p.225). It is a curious feeling coming back to this record after three years (!) of listening to what came before. While it is like visiting an old friend, I now hear Cosmos as clearly a minor effort compared to many of the classic albums of this period. It’s an odd mixture of remakes of older material combined with newer, swing-oriented compositions that is less than totally satisfying, like a slightly off gig. But it remains a favorite record of mine, if only for Sonny’s blissfully phased-out Rocksichord sound. The “narcotic reveries” of “Interstellar Low Ways,” “Moonship Journey” and “Journey Among The Stars” are the standout tracks in that regard, and are essential listening, in my opinion. Cosmos is worth seeking out for those tracks alone; everything else is just a bonus.

COMMENTS:

93curr said...
I can't guarantee that the Spalax CD sounds identical to the Cobra LP (I only ever owned the Inner City vinyl, sadly) but it definitely is a major improvement over the dreadful Buda CD, which sounded like a vinyl transfer from a particularly bad record through a cheap ceramic cartridge with a quarter taped to the headshell and with the bass on the preamp racked up to "11." There's also a CD edition on P-Vine. I'd be curious if anyone has ever compared it to the Spalax.

(I was also hoping someone would have chimed in with an opinion about the P-Vine vs. the Inner City CD editions of 'Live At Montreux' in an earlier post)
Rodger Coleman said...
@93curr - Thank you for your comment! I think I heard the Inner City copy many years ago, but can't really remember how it sounded compared to the Spalax, which actually sounds pretty good. I would also be curious to hear about any differences in the P-Vine editions of these records. It used to be that Japanese editions were almost always better, but that is not the case so much in the digital era.

January 15, 2012

STRANGE WORLDS IN MY MIND

strange
worlds
whirl
in
my
mind
with a glow like sunset and a
pillow-like dawn
strange worlds whirl in my mind
with the living people of the living
dreams
strange dreams in my dream world
a world
awhirl
strange dreams
strange world
awhirl
awhirl
dreams
whirl
awhirl

--Sun Ra

January 22, 2012

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Châteauvallon, France 8-24-76 (AUD 2CDR)

The Arkestra stayed in Europe almost two months during the summer of 1976, opening the tour at Mutualité in Paris on July 8 and immediately traveling to Switzerland to record *Live At Montreux* on the 9th. On July 10, the band was in Pescara, Italy where an eighteen-minute portion of their performance was broadcast on RAI, Italian state television but I have not seen this (I do not believe a recording circulates). From there, the tour crisscrossed the continent: July 11 in Nimes, France; July 18 at the North Sea Jazz Festival in Gravenhage, Netherlands; July 20 at Giornate del Jazz in Ravenna, Italy (an audience recording is purported to exist, but I don't have it); July 25 at La Pinéde, Juan les Pins, France; back to Montreux on August 6; Arles, France on August 7; and, after recording *Cosmos* at Studio Hautefeuille in Paris, concluded the
tour with two shows at Châteauvallon on August 24 and 25. (See Campbell & Trent pp.222-227.) These last two concerts were recorded from the audience (probably by the same person) and is widely traded amongst Sun Ra collectors. The sets are mostly complete and while the sound quality is not very good (hissy, boomy, distorted, etc.), they are certainly listenable, as these things go (a little tweaking of the EQ helps tremendously).

At only about one-hundred minutes, the concert on the 24th is considerably shorter than on the 25th and is notable for the absence of June Tyson (leaving John Gilmore to lead the way on most of the sing-a-longs). Perhaps this was an impromptu appearance by the Arkestra, with the “official” gig being the 25th? Moreover, Sonny has not been provided a piano, meaning the old-timey numbers have a souped-up, electrified feel quite different from the Montreux arrangements. In any event, they would play a more conventional set the following night.

The opening improvisation has a wonderfully exotic, “Strange Strings” sound that goes on for a few minutes until Gilmore starts chanting “For The Sunrise” and Sun Ra enters the stage to enthusiastic applause. After a world-shattering space chord, “Discipline 27” follows. The band sounds big and full-bodied (if dimly recorded), the baritone saxophones heading the charge while Ahmed Abdullah delivers a tasty trumpet solo. Then Sonny charges into “The Shadow World” and we’re off! Despite the dodgy sound quality, this seventeen-plus minute version is extraordinary. We get the usual freakouts from Gilmore on tenor sax and Elœ Omoe on bass clarinet, followed by a mad-scientist organ solo from Ra—but then there’s a long, spacey group improvisation featuring colorfully smeared trumpet (Chris Capers?) and James Jacson’s throaty bassoon (!) and it goes as far out there as the I’ve ever heard the Arkestra go! Astounding! After Ra signals a quick reprise of the fanatically complicated head, the sudden ending is met with stunned silence from the crowd. Seriously, all you can hear is tape hiss!

Undeterred, Duke Ellington’s “Lightnin’” is taken at a rollicking tempo but the ensembles sound a little shaky and Ra’s phasey Rocksichord sound is just plain strange. Meanwhile “Watusi” is the usual (including an overlong drum solo from Clifford Jarvis), but it has an unusually skronky improv in the middle that makes it worthwhile. The old Noble Sissle/Fletcher Henderson stomper, “Yeah Man!” is even better, with Gilmore on clarinet for the surrealistically authentic-sounding ensemble sections and switching to tenor sax for a rip-snorting solo. Incredible! But then an awkward version of “Taking a Chance on Chancey” follows, Ra duetting with Vincent Chancey’s wobbly French horn, sometimes accompanied by eerie drum taps and a distant flute. Very weird—and not in a good way. The new composition, “Jazz From An Unknown Planet,” is given one last performance and yields a nice trombone solo from Craig Harris. Too bad this tune was apparently dropped from the repertoire; it definitely had some promise. Next up, Ra’s swirling organ gives “Take The A-Train” a circus-like feel and although Gilmore tries his best during his solo, he never quite builds up a full head of steam and the overall effect is muted by the incongruously maudlin organ swells. Oh well; it is a noble effort nonetheless.

“Space Is The Place” is given a surprisingly energetic reading, led by Gilmore’s vocals and augmented by a howling alto solo from Danny Davis. Or, rather, I’m guessing it’s Davis. Honestly, I have a hard time telling him apart from Marshall Allen. Based on his flute and oboe playing, I think Allen’s playing is slightly more lyrical and brilliantly virtuosic than Davis—but I could be wrong. Anyway, it’s ragingly great solo, whoever it is. The tempo slows as they effortlessly segue into “Lights on a Satellite,” which features a gorgeous tenor solo from Gilmore atop a delicate arrangement of swooshing Rocksichord and twittering flutes. Although the woefully unbalanced recording is difficult to hear through, it is a lovely rendition of one of my favorite Ra compositions. A hypnotic “Love In Outer Space” is driven by Sonny’s furious comping on the Rocksichord and a tasty solo from Abdullah. For some reason, “Images” is less
successful: although Abdullah and Gilmore deliver the goods, the band never really takes flight. Well, they certainly make up for it during the lengthy “space chant” segment that opens with “Theme of the Stargazers” and moves through “Next Stop Mars,” “Second Stop Is Jupiter” and concludes with “Calling Planet Earth.” The singing and chanting is ultimately overwhelmed by waves of freestyle group improvisation which gets crazier and more intense as it goes along: buzzing trombones, screaming saxophones, bashing drums and impressionistic, almost rock-ish chording from Ra—until, finally, Sonny goes completely nuts on the electronic keyboards, driving the crowd into a spaced-out frenzy. Just when you can’t take it anymore, Ra eases the band into “We Travel The Spaceways” to end the set. Wowza!

This show is a decidedly mixed bag with iffy sound and inconsistent performances—yet the group improvisations are particularly strong and “The Shadow World” is just about as good as it gets. Accordingly, it’s definitely worth seeking out if you’re a hardcore fan—but I wouldn’t recommend it to a novice. We’ll take a listen to the second Châteauvallon show next time on Sun Ra Sunday. See you then!

January 29, 2012

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Châteauvallon, France 8-25-76 (AUD 3CDR)

At a little over three hours, the second concert in Châteauvallon on August 25, 1976 is almost twice as long as the previous night's performance and was again recorded from audience, possibly by the same person. Unfortunately, the copy which circulates contains several glaring errors in the text file and it took me several listens just to sort it all out. So, here is the actual running order and timings for all three discs:


As you can see, that is a lot of music! Sound quality is marginally better than the previous show, with more defined bass and drums and slightly less hiss and distortion—but it’s still pretty rough going. And, although you can hear female singers in the background, I do not think June Tyson is present since John Gilmore once again leads the choir. Nevertheless, this is a fantastic performance from start to finish, from the opening improvisation (featuring Marshall Allen’s keening oboe) to the closing space chants. The ensembles are spirited and tightly disciplined while all the soloists are in fine form, especially Gilmore, who simply plays his ass off all night long. Take “Velvet,” for instance: this is an outstanding example of Gilmore at his absolute best. I know I’m always saying this or that solo is “incredible,” but that’s not just hyperbole—it’s true! Gilmore was one of the finest tenor saxophonists of his generation and nowhere is this more apparent than here. More mind-blowing Gilmore can be heard on “Images”; “Satellites Are Spinning”; “Spontaneous Simplicity”; and “Face The Music”—not to mention his usual antics on
“The Shadow World” or the big band classics, “Rose Room”; “King Porter Stomp”; and “Slippery Horn,” where he again plays clarinet. This is Gilmore at the peak of his powers, no doubt about it, and Sonny has given him free reign to blow his brains out on this night. "Incredible" is simply the only best word to describe John Gilmore.

Ra is provided a piano and plays a romantic yet aggressive, Cecil Taylor-ish intro to “Images,” but abandons it later on for organ and Rocksichord (both with and without the whooshing phase-shifter). Perhaps there were technical problems with the acoustic instrument, but it sounds fine to me. Oh well. Regardless, his playing is inspired throughout, with his buzzing and whirring electric keyboards giving the old-timey numbers a modern edge while propelling tracks like “The Shadow World”; “Angels & Demons At Play”; and “Watusi” into the stratosphere. These last two tunes could sometimes drag on a bit—but not here! On “Angels,” Ra whips up a “mad-scientist” organ blast to accompany Gilmore’s solo and he gets the tenor saxophonist barking like a dog through his horn. Totally outrageous! There is one mystery tune that is particularly intriguing (disc 2, track 2). Is this a composition or an improvisation—or both? It starts out with modal arpeggios on the Rocksichord and Gilmore hazily outlining a descending melody amidst disorienting flurries of notes, false harmonics and altissimo squeals. Ra takes over for a bit, the harmony wandering further and further afield until Vincent Chancey comes in on his precariously intonated French horn. Then Ra pushes a button, thinning the electronic texture and starts comping a swinging vamp—and the rhythm section comes in with a cha-cha! Huh? Chancey continues his balancing act until Ra brings the piece to a close with a dissonant false cadence. Very beautiful, but what exactly is this? Who knows?! Another wonderful Ra moment comes after “Face The Music,” when Sonny launches into the 1933 McHugh/Fields pop song, “Don’t Blame Me,” on solo organ. Just lovely.

A five-thousand word blow-by-blow of this epic show seems like a pointless exercise (or maybe it's beyond the limited number of words in my vocabulary). It's a stunningly great performance; just take my word for it. If you can tolerate the less-than-great sound quality, it is a richly rewarding listen—if only to hear Gilmore at his finest. According to Prof. Campbell, “Rose Room” and “Satellites Are Spinning” appear on the 1978 double-LP, Unity (Horo—Italy HDP 19-20) (see pp.226-227). Frankly, I'm not so sure about that—we'll have to try and figure it out when we get there. But, if true, it means a high-quality recording of this concert is possibly stashed away in the Sun Ra archives somewhere. An official release of this complete show (or whatever is extant) would certainly be a worthy addition to the discography—are you listening, Art Yard? Ah well, one can dream, anyway, right? In the meantime, this “bootleg” recording will have to do.

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Speaking of Art Yard, they have recently released a new two-CD set entitled, Wake Up Angels: Live At The Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival 1972-1973-1974 (Art Yard CD12). According to the description on Downtown Music Gallery’s website, there is supposedly additional material included on this edition not included on the original releases on Total Energy (now out of print)—but I don’t see how that is possible, given that the number of discs has been reduced from three to two. Anyone out there know for sure what the deal is with this? Please let me know!

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Great write-up of this outstanding show! Yeah, Gilmore’s on fire...you can't exaggerate that.
Yes, "Rose Room" and "Satellites" definitely appear on "Unity"--but don't get your hopes up on a superior sound source. As I recall, they don't sound much better there.

Re: "Wake Up Angels"--maybe DMG got too high on all the exclamation marks they use. As far as I can tell from a cursory glance at the lineup (at http://fatteningblogsforfatteningblogsforfatteningblogs.blogspot.com/2011/12/sun-ra-and-his-arkestra-live-at-ann.html), there's no extra material here. However, like they say, "It Is Forbidden" is indexed, so that's cool. I'll try to dig around more on this...maybe somebody out there has it and can confirm one way or the other.

yotte said...
Hi Rodger,

No extra material as far as I can tell. In fact, two tracks from Life Is Splendid have been omitted to allow for the 2 CD release (Love in Outer Space & Watusi). Most of the liner notes are culled from the Blast First releases. As usual with Art Yard, the packaging is gorgeous.

February 5, 2012

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Rehearsal, Unknown Location 9-76 (SBD? CDR)

This thirty-minute rehearsal tape, recorded at an unknown location in September, 1976, was played on WKCR-FM's Sun Ra memorial broadcast in 1995 (Campbell & Trent pp.227-228) and circulates widely amongst collectors. There is a small audience present, indicating this was actually a soundcheck at a venue, rather than a rehearsal proper and, accordingly, there is neither in-depth working out of arrangements nor any verbal instruction whatsoever from Ra, unlike what we've heard in other rehearsal tapes. Instead, we get a miniature three-song set, presented as a contiguous performance, just as it would have been in concert. Sound quality is pretty good, with a strikingly close-up perspective, possibly recorded from the stage but more likely from the soundboard (bass and vocals are notably way up front while drums sound distant and indistinct). Perhaps this comes from Sonny's personal stash of tapes? Who knows?

After a bit of hand percussion, June Tyson briefly leads the singalong on "(The World Is Waiting) For The Sunrise" before Danny Ray Thompson charges into the bari-sax riff of "Discipline 27." The ensemble sounds a bit shaky and out of tune, eventually devolving into some skronky group improvisation and culminating in an a cappella tenor solo from John Gilmore—nothing special so far. After a quick space chord, Sonny enters with "The Shadow World" ostinato on organ, but soon drops out as the head commences. Meanwhile, everyone gets to take a solo (both with and without accompaniment) across its twenty-three minute duration: Marshall Allen and Danny Davis on alto saxophones, Elo Omoe on bass clarinet, Ra on "mad scientist" organ and Abdullah on trumpet. Even Tony Bunn gets a turn on fuzz bass followed by Dale Williams on distorted electric guitar, giving this a particularly rocked-out feel. While that might look good on paper, this is not the most compelling version of this showpiece, with the soloists sounding a bit listless (aside from Ra himself, who plays brilliantly as usual) and the ensembles failing to cohere. Well, it is a rehearsal and/or soundcheck after all.

While the unusually decent sound quality makes this an enjoyable listen, it is ultimately not very satisfying; a curious bit of filler that will be of interest only to the most committed Sun Ra completists.
February 12, 2012

I need to catch my breath here but, in the meantime, check out this amazing French television footage filmed at the House of Ra circa. 1969. Enjoy! I'll be back with more reviews next week!

February 19, 2012

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: *Jordan Hall, New England Conservatory, Boston, MA, Nov. 1976 (AUD CDR)*

According to Prof. Campbell, the Arkestra appeared at York University in Toronto on October 7, 1976 and at the Famous Ballroom in Baltimore on October 10 under the auspices of the Left Bank Jazz Society, but no recordings are known to exist of these performances (p.228). The Arkestra returned to The New England Conservatory of Music for another concert at Jordan Hall sometime in November and the first forty minutes or so was recorded from the audience. This tape surfaced sometime after the second edition of the discography, so dates and personnel are sketchy at best. However, the sound quality is actually quite good for the period with the stereophonic image roughly capturing the warm, resonant acoustic of this prestigious venue.

The concert begins with June Tyson intoning “Tapestry From An Asteroid” mostly *a cappella*, followed by a blast of horns and a brief rendition of “Astro Black.” Then the rest of the band joins with Tyson in singing “(The World Is Waiting) For The Sunrise,” with the audience heartily applauding Sonny’s entrance on stage. Baritone saxophones lead the way into “Discipline 27” and it’s the usual thing but with a particularly exuberant trumpet solo from Ahmed Abdullah. However, the piece quickly descends into a long group improvisation consisting of various solos and duets punctuated with splashy space chords and bashing percussion. Interestingly, there appear to be two bass players here, one playing *arco* and one *pizzicato*. There is some nice soloing from Ra on piano and “mad-scientist-styled” electric organ (not to mention an out-there trombone solo from Craig Harris), but nothing is really allowed to fully develop despite the fifteen-minute duration. Sonny seems to be keeping the band on a pretty short leash. Two classic big-band numbers follow: “Yeah Man!” and “Lightnin’,” which are taken at absurdly fast tempos—yet the band is super-tight and, of course, John Gilmore rips it up on tenor sax. Although Ra has been provided a piano, he sticks to the buzzing Rocksichord and roller-rink organ, giving these old-timey numbers a weirdly modernized sound. *Good stuff!*

Then an unusual thing happens. Sun Ra speaks: “Not all of America is dis-integrated, there some things that are unified. With me tonight, I have two members of the band who have been with me for about twenty years, Robert Barry and John Gilmore [who will] improvise some outer space stuff for you.” Never mind that Barry the drummer had been absent from the band since 1968 (Id. p.784), he and Gilmore duet in a groovy, post-Coltrane style, but condensed down to a riveting four minutes. Then Ra introduces Tommy Hunter and Marshall Allen, who duet in a more aggressively avant-garde manner, but, again, all too briefly. Finally, Ra sets Danny Davis’s alto sax against James Jacson’s bassoon for a quickie two-minute honk-fest before the tape ends. I’m not sure what Sonny was up to here. He seems to be trying to school these Conservatory kids on the art of instant composition—I only wish these duos were allowed to go on a bit longer.
As for the last track on my CD, I do not think it is actually taken from this same gig—the ambience is very different, obviously recorded in a bigger venue in front of a much larger audience. In fact, I do not think this is Sun Ra at all, but rather the Grateful Dead circa.1974, when bassist Phil Lesh would duet with synthesizer player Ned Lagin between sets in the manner of their weird and woolly Seastones album. At first listen, you might think it is Sun Ra at his spaciest—but I am almost positive it is the Dead. A couple of minutes in, you can hear someone in the audience yell out “St. Stephen!”—a dead giveaway, if you will.

So, even though this concert fragment is less than completely satisfying, the better-than-usual sound quality and the brief but powerful duo segments make it worth the effort to track down. There is some excellent playing here—I just wish we could hear the rest of the concert!

February 26, 2012

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Jazz Showcase, Chicago, IL 11-27-76 (AUD 2CDR)

Paging through the Discography, it is apparent that, beginning with the Châteauvallon tapes (August 24 and 25, 1976), we have entered a new era of audience recordings. With portable compact cassette recorders becoming widely available in the late-1970s, “bootleg” tapes would start to proliferate, resulting in a flood of generally high-quality tapes by the 1980s as the technology matured. When I first dipped my toe into reviewing these types of recordings, I hesitated, knowing full well what I was in for: variable sound quality, repetitive setlists and occasionally uninspired performances. In many ways, I wanted to avoid these things altogether and concentrate of the officially released albums—there are certainly enough of those to deal with! Yet, since my goal has been as much to discover Sun Ra’s music as to memorialize it, it made sense to dive into the world of “bootleg” recordings and see for myself just what was out there. But, honestly, it can be something of chore to sit through some of this stuff and my antipathy towards the exercise is no doubt reflected in my sometimes hastily concocted judgments. I try to be fair: I listen to everything several times (which is partly why this project is taking so long) and there is almost always something worth hearing, even on the worse-sounding tape. But I must apologize for the lack of enthusiasm I often demonstrate when confronted with yet another dodgy “bootleg.”

This ninety-minute recording from the Jazz Showcase in Chicago from November 27, 1976 is a case in point and presents the usual sorts of challenges. Sound quality is actually pretty decent—so vivid, in fact, it sounds like it was recorded from the stage (right next to Sonny’s amplifier!)—but the set is dominated by an overlong declamation segments and interminable percussion jams that might have been highly amusing in concert but are almost intolerable to listen to on tape. Moreover, the CDR dispenses with any index markers, meaning you can’t skip to the good parts. I quibble, but there you go (it’s my blog and I can cry if I want to). Nevertheless, there is some interesting music here and there, if you have the patience to sit through the rest of it.

The set begins with processional drums to introduce June Tyson, who sings “Astro Black” accompanied by pitter-pattering percussion. Then a throbbing space chord sets up “Along Came Ra,” a weirdly dissonant fanfare with vocals led by John Gilmore—an evocative opening, for sure. But Sun Ra enters the stage and immediately starts lecturing: “I Have Many Names!” “You’re On the Right Road, Going In The Wrong Direction!” Etc. Meanwhile the dual bassists (probably Tony Bunn and Richard “Radu” Williams) (Id. pp.228-229) hack and saw away with their fingers and bows and the horns interject skronky improvisations. Well, OK then! Ra moves
to organ and we get a bouncy, slightly uptempo “Friendly Galaxy No.2” but, unfortunately, the delicate flute arrangement is buried under his thick electronic chords and brassy solos from Ahmed Abdullah on trumpet, Craig Harris on trombone, and Vincent Chancey on French horn. Even so, it’s an enjoyable (if somewhat meandering) rendition, held aloft by Tommy “Bugs” Hunter’s laconic groove on trap drums. Then Ra starts declaiming “I, Pharoah” over it all and things start to get a bit tedious. The ensemble tries to maintain interest by displacing and elaborating upon the hypnotic tattoos of “Friendly Galaxy” but Ra is intent on hectoring the audience: “Who’s gonna save you now?,” he demands. Moving back to the organ, Sonny brings the proceedings to a close and introduces “The Satellites Are Spinning,” which is also played at a faster than usual clip. After a brief sing-along, “Calling Planet Earth” signals more bashing out-jazz improv, culminating in a frenzied, “mad-scientist-style” organ solo from Ra. Sadly, the tape cuts off in mid-flight. Oh well.

Disc two picks up in the middle of “The Shadow World,” taken at an impossibly quick tempo, with Ra’s skittering, pulsating organ driving the band to the breaking point. Gilmore tries to do his thing on tenor, but he seems overwhelmed by Ra violent keyboard attack and is left sputtering and honking in desperation. Eloe Omoe is similarly overtaken but space finally opens up a bit for Abdullah and, afterwards, Gilmore comes charging in for another shot—and he does not disappoint, offering up a ferocious a capella solo before the reprise. A shrill organ cluster sets up “Watusi” which has a less frenetic feel than usual courtesy of Hunter’s laid-back drumming style, although it still goes on for far too long. This was undoubtedly a visual spectacle, what with the dancing and carrying on that accompanied the percussion workout, but that stuff just doesn’t come across on tape. “Rose Room” starts with a romantic organ intro before moving into the jaunty swing arrangement, led by Gilmore’s tenor. He wails for several choruses, but is again nearly subsumed by the grinding organ chords and thrumming basses. Abdullah’s piercing trumpet is easier to hear (and nicely executed) but Chancey’s three-note solo seems perversely out-of-place amidst the continuously cycling pre-Bop chord changes. Frankly, it is not the most satisfying version of this big-band classic. “What’s New” begins with another rhapsodic organ solo before the head arrangement—but then the bottom drops out and it’s just Gilmore and drums. Gilmore gamely keeps the tune’s structure intact during his lengthy improvisation but he ultimately sounds restrained by the absence of accompaniment. Interestingly, Ra ditches the organ and returns on acoustic piano—which sounds so nice!—but the tape cuts off just as he begins to solo. Argh!

So, here we have another semi-frustrating “bootleg.” The sound quality is decent, but the instrumental balance is woefully off-kilter, with Sonny’s organ and booming basses dominating the sonic space. The ensembles sound fresh and inspired yet the soloing is merely OK—aside from his second blow-out on “The Shadow World,” Gilmore sounds tentative and subdued here, at least compared to his usual mind-blowing displays. Then again, perhaps my opinion is colored by the technical flaws which make this recording difficult to listen to, despite the reasonably good sound quality. But that’s how it goes with “bootlegs”: I’m happy to have them as historical documents, but I don’t necessarily enjoy listening to them. Your mileage may vary.

March 4, 2012

Before we finish up with 1976, check out this television footage from Live At Montreux which recently turned up on YouTube:

COMMENTS:
Sun Ra: **WXPN-FM, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 12-25-76 (FM CDR)**

Sun Ra celebrated Christmas Day, 1976 by appearing on the University of Pennsylvania radio station, WXPN-FM to read a selection of his poetry over musical selections and the thirty-minute broadcast circulates widely amongst collectors. Prof. Campbell speculates that the apocryphal Saturn LP, *Celebrations For Dial Tunes*, originated from this session, but no copies are known to exist (see pp.205, 229). I don’t recognize the music quietly playing in the background, but it is obviously pre-recorded: there’s some Arkestra stuff featuring Marshall Allen’s keening oboe but it’s mostly spooky synthesizer solos and tinkling Rocksichord. Sonny brings his own kind of Christmas message, permutating Bible stories into space-age mythologies, sometimes treated with dramatic space echo. As kooky as it sounds, he is deadly serious and the two halves play like two sides of an album. This session sounds so deliberately thought-out; it very well could have been intended for commercial release.

Poetry was always an important part of Sun Ra’s radically reinvented persona. He wrote poems as a child, handed out polemical broadsides on the streets of Chicago in the 1950s and his space poetry was often prominently displayed on record jackets. After arriving in New York, he hooked up Amiri Baraka (nee Leroy Jones) and Larry Neal, who included Ra’s poetry in their mammoth 680-page *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* in 1968. That same year, *Umbra Anthology 1967-1968* published some of Ra’s poems alongside such hip luminaries as Langston Hughes and Allen Ginsburg, cementing Ra’s reputation as an underground poet of note. After a deal with Doubleday fell through, Sonny and Alton Abraham self-published *The Immeasurable Equation* and *Extensions Out—The Immeasurable Equation Vol. 2* in 1972 through Ihnfinity, Inc./Saturn Research (see Szwed p.320). These pamphlets were printed in vanishingly small numbers and almost impossible to find until Abraham’s son, Adam, compiled 260 of Ra’s poems in *Collected Works Vol.I: The Immeasurable Equation*, published by Phaelos Books & Mediawerks in 2005. (Another collection of poems, *This Planet Is Doomed*, came out on Kicks Books last year.)

Whatever their literary worth, working with words was clearly part of Sun Ra’s Earthly mission: as Szwed points out: “He had read Sidney Lanier’s *The Science of English Verse* when it was argued that sound could serve as artistic material, the body as a musical instrument. Poetry offered him a chance to compose with language as he did with music” (p.319). Sonny himself described his poems as “scientific equations”:

> What I want to do is associate words so they produce a certain fact. If you mix two chemical products you produce a reaction. In the same way if you put together certain words you’ll obtain a reaction which will have a value for people on this planet. That’s why I continue to put words together. Einstein said he was looking for an equation for eternal life. But we built the atom bomb, and his project has never materialized. But I’m sure he was right. To put words together, or, even if you could, to paint the image that is necessary to put out the vibrations that we need, that would change the destiny of the whole planet (quoted in Id. pp.319-320).

Regarding this Christmas broadcast, Szwed writes:
The choice of poems and their sequencing offers a sense of what Sun Ra thought was most important in his writing. Here are key words like “cosmos,” “truth,” “bad,” “myth,” and “the impossible,”; attention to phonetic equivalence, the universality of music and its metaphysical status; allusions to black fraternal orders and secret societies; biblical passages and their interpretation; and even a few autobiographical glimpses. The poems were read softly, with little expression, the music punctuating the words, with heavy echo and delay in the studio sometimes reducing the words to pure sound without meaning (Id. pp.320-321).

Another fifteen minutes of Sonny reading his poetry over pre-recorded music appeared on the eleven hour ESP Radio Tribute back in 2005 and while no dates are provided, it sounds very similar to this 1976 session, complete with low-key vocal delivery and spacey echo effects. The Norton Records label has issued three CDs of Ra reading his poetry on Strange Worlds in My Mind (Space Poetry Vol. 1); The Sub-Dwellers (Space Poetry Vol. 2); and The Outer Darkness (Space Poetry Vol. 3). I haven’t heard these, but they apparently contain all this stuff and a whole lot more, compiled by “The Good Doctor” (Michael Anderson, director of the Sun Ra Archive). The completest in me says I need to have them—and maybe someday I will—but until then, these CDRs of the original broadcasts will have to do. Not for everyone, but a crucial piece of the Sun Ra puzzle.

COMMENTS:

Sam said...
Don't forget the other edition of Ra's poetry, "The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose," compiled and edited by James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken (500+ pages, 2005). I have no idea how the content compares to Abraham's version.

March 18, 2012

This BBC documentary, Sun Ra: Brother From Another Planet, is fun but a little disappointing. It neither works as a compelling overview for newcomers nor presents anything new for longtime fans. Nevertheless, there's some nice footage, so it's definitely worth watching. Enjoy!

March 25, 2012

Pat Patrick’s Baritone Retinue: Sound Advice (Saturn LP)

Pat Patrick had recently returned to the fold and in 1976, joined with Arkestra alum, Charles Davis, to form Pat Patrick’s Baritone Retinue for a few one-off gigs. One of these concerts was recorded and released on an LP entitled, Sound Advice, in 1980 (Saturn ESR 770) and it is one of the few non-Sun Ra albums ever issued by El Saturn Records (and, as it turns out, the last) (see Campbell & Trent pp.229-230). Curiously, Sound Advice is also one of the only Saturn albums ever released on cassette (Id.). It’s an odd grouping: eight (8!) baritone saxophones (with some doubling on alto and flute) accompanied by a rhythm section consisting of Hilton Ruiz on piano, John Hart on bass, Steve Solder on drums and Babadefmi Humphries on conga.
Both Patrick and Davis contribute tunes and arrangements while sharing the solo spotlight on this mostly straight-ahead affair.

The album is bookended by two crudely edited takes of Benny Golson’s “Stablemates” sans solos, a curious way to open and close the record—especially given the ensemble’s rather severe intonation problems! Jimmy Heath’s “Funny Time” starts out as a bumptious rhumba but settles into swing changes for the solos. Patrick goes first with a gruff and soulful outing, marred only by a squeaky reed, while Davis is smoother but also maybe a bit too slick for my tastes. This pattern repeats for most of the album. Patrick’s “Uptightedness” boasts an evocative title but is merely a medium blues of little interest but Davis’s “Eastern Vibrations” is better: a snaky melody over mysterioso piano and bass, a bit of jazzy exotica with sweet and sour harmonies. The bridge moves into movie-music swells before medium swing for the solos with Davis up first with an effortless couple of choruses and Patrick taking over with more adventurous fare, which gets a nice round of applause from the audience. A tasty piano solo from Ruiz then rounds things up for the reprise.

Antônio Carlos Jobim’s “Sabia” opens side two with a mellow samba rhythm, the melody arranged for baritones, altos and flutes. Patrick is in the lead, doing his best Harry Carney impersonation: big, wide vibrato and breathy, romantic articulations. Very nice. Next up is the most interesting track on the album: “East Of Uz” an early Sun Ra composition (c.1956) the score of which was deposited in the Library of Congress, but never recorded by Ra (as far as I know). It’s a Latin-inflected space groove with descending harmonies set against an oddly dissonant melody and the arrangement here is fairly intricate with loping counter-melodies orchestrated for baritone choir. Ruiz really shows his stuff with a sprightly solo in parallel octaves, which elicits some applause before Patrick and Davis take their turns at the mic. This is possibly one of the hundreds of tunes rehearsed by the Arkestra but never performed—too bad as it would have been nice to hear Sonny’s take on this weird little number. “The Waltz” is another composition by Davis and it’s just what it sounds like, a modal, three-four romp that dances in place while the soloists take flight. Then it’s another incomplete take of “Stablemates” to conclude the album.

Sound Advice is a pleasant enough listen and it’s always a pleasure to hear Pat Patrick taking the lead. But the indistinct recording job, sloppy ensembles and other technical problems prevent it from being everything it could have been. Soon after this recording, Patrick would abandon the baritone for the more easily deployed alto saxophone—a shame as he had a unique sound and melodic sensibility on the bigger instrument. Sound Advice would be Patrick’s only recording under his own name and is worth checking out for that reason alone.

COMMENTS:

Anonymous said...
Thanks for your review!

I think you are one of few lucky dogs who listened this music. I searched for it for a long time but it was impossible to find. I'm an Italian fan of Sun Ra. I saw him and the Arkestra at 1983 Italian tour and the concert was so amazing I went the next night in another city to see again Sun Ra. Few years ago I saw the Arkestra leaded by Marshall Allen and I talk with Charles Davis about pat patrick and he told me Pat Patrick dead by leukemia in 1991, a great loss. If it's possible I'd like listen this music and you can send me the file or a copy of cd-r I will be very thankful. My mail is beacei@libero.it and my address is Alessandro Polin via XXIV maggio 14 31044 Montebelluna Italy
This one is a stumper. Half of the music was originally released in 1987 as filler on *A Night In East Berlin* (Leo LR 149) (one of the very first Sun Ra CDs ever made), but in 1994 it was re-released in complete form as *A Quiet Place In The Universe* (Leo LR 198). It’s unclear when this material was recorded since, according to Chris Trent’s liner notes, the original tape provided to the record company merely contains a handwritten label identifying some (but not all) of the track titles. However, it’s obvious that all of the tracks are taken from a single concert, probably recorded in 1976 or 1977, based on personnel and repertoire. Prof. Campbell’s “best guess” is “early 1977” but there are some anomalies (such as Pat Patrick’s presence on alto saxophone) which make a date certain impossible to determine (see p.235). In any event, it is a terrifically full-bodied stereo recording, well-balanced, with a warm, dry acoustic and a worthy addition to the official discography, despite its mysterious provenance.

The disc starts off with the title track, a rare Sun Ra composition in its only known recording. After an announcement from John Gilmore, it starts off as a conventional big-band ballad *a la* Sun Ra—but as it goes along, the yearning harmonies get progressively more dissonant and strange, eventually wandering far away from the initial key center as it slowly builds to a harrowing climax. Moreover, the horns play at the extreme ranges of their instruments, raising the intensity level even further as the volume increases, similar to the earlier “Discipline” series of compositions. Interestingly, Vincent Chancey takes the only solo, his French horn being an odd choice for such a challenging composition; nevertheless, he acquitted himself admirably on the unwieldy instrument. What Chancey lacks in technique he makes up for in enthusiasm for the music! After an elongated reprise, the piece ends with a flourish from Gilmore and another announcement: “‘A Quiet Place In the Universe’, a composition by Sun Ra!” And what a great composition it is!

“I, Pharoah” picks up at the end of “Friendly Galaxy No.2,” with Sun Ra eventually taking up the microphone for a lengthy declamation. At over eighteen minutes, this sort of thing could be tedious (to say the least), but the recording manages to minimize the distorted vocals and enhance the delicate flute arrangement, making for a surprisingly enjoyable listening experience. Although the next track was labeled “Images” on the original tape, that’s not what was played. Instead, we essentially get a duet improvisation between Ra’s electric organ and Chancey’s French horn, with the rhythm section supplying some subtle swing changes about half-way through. Very nice. “Love In Outer Space” follows, featuring a rather over-long conga workout from (possibly) Atakatune—nothing special, but the sound quality is superb.

Then we have the hoary chestnut, “I’ll Never Be the Same.” The instrumental version by “Matty” Malneck and Frank Signorelli was originally titled, “Little Buttercup” when it was recorded by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra but with lyrics (and a new title) courtesy of Gus Kahn, the song was a hit for Mildred Bailey in 1932. The tune would become a regular in Sun Ra’s live sets in the years to come but this version is unusual in that Pat Patrick takes the lead on alto saxophone. This suggests a later date than 1977, but then again, who knows? Patrick was in and out of the band during this period and would eventually abandon the baritone sax with which he made his
name for the lighter, more flexible alto. Not surprisingly, he gets the same gruff, expressionistic sound out of the smaller horn, making his playing instantly recognizable. This version is a delight, with Ra’s organ swells adding an appropriately romantic nostalgia to the proceedings. Finally, “Space Is The Place” concludes the disc, but fades out after a few minutes. No great loss there, I suppose.

As befitting the title, *A Quiet Place In The Universe* is a somewhat subdued affair lacking any wild, skronky improvisations, rip-snorting big-band numbers—or even a single Gilmore solo. Nevertheless, it is a uniquely satisfying album with the title track worth the price of admission for its rarity alone. It also helps that the sound quality is excellent throughout. Leo CDs can be a little hit-or-miss, but this one is a keeper.

April 22, 2012

I'll be back with more reviews next week (I hope). But in the meantime, check out this 1971 interview with Sun Ra, which also includes some excellent Arkestra footage as well. Dig those groovy shades!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=AMMWNwVhq5k

June 3, 2012

Sun Ra ‘77

1977 was a busy year for Sonny.

On January 6, the Arkestra appeared at the Famous Ballroom in Baltimore, Maryland again under the auspices of the Left Bank Jazz Society. No recording exists, but “[a]ccording to a review by Ken Buford, reprinted in the Baltimore Jazz Scene 1977, the program included ‘Along Came Ra,’ ‘Calling Planet Earth,’ ‘When There Is No Sun’ and ‘Space Is The Place’ along with blues, swing numbers, an ‘outer space dirge,’ and a flute duet’ (Campbell & Trent p.230). Then, at the last possible minute, Sun Ra was asked to participate in FASTEC 77, a four-week-long “World Black and African Festival of the Arts and Culture” in Lagos, Nigeria scheduled to begin at the beginning of February. Performers from sixty-two different countries were invited, all representative of the Pan-African diaspora, with Sun Ra’s Arkestra representing black Americans. It was contentious from the outset:

With only a few days’ notice and no money up front, the band thought it was ridiculous to even consider it, but Sonny was adamant: “Your ancestors came into America without a cent. How much money do you have?” When one of the musicians answered fifty cents, he said, “That’s fifty cents more than your ancestors had.” They were going.

Sun Ra noticed that very few musicians had been invited to the festival—a mistake, he thought—and he assumed that having been asked at the last minute meant that music had been an afterthought, and that “only those who weren’t tied up to the white man could make it.” Still, he said it was important for them to help destroy the African’s stereotype of the American black man. From the moment of their arrival he was in a combative mood. When a Nigerian at the airport called out, “Welcome home, Sun Ra,” Sonny answered, “Home? Your people sold mine. This is no longer my home!” At each performance the artists displayed flags from their
own countries; but when Sun Ra got on stage he raised a purple and black banner that he called “the flag of death.” He was annoyed that they were only allowed to play at the festival twice, and it was made worse when the Arkestra played overtime as usual and a large number of people left to catch the last buses back from the hall: misunderstanding their exit for rejection, Sonny saw it as typical of blacks to not respect one another. But at their second performance the lighting man was so impressed by the music that he lowered the lights after they left the stage and refused to turn them back on as the Miriam Makeba set began: “The Master has spoken!” he proclaimed. Sonny interceded and insisted that she, too, was an artist, and should be treated with respect.

Over the four weeks, there was time to visit outside the city, to hear local music and to play for Africans and see them dancing to the Arkestra’s music at informal performances. The band was invited to visit the flamboyant and politically rebellious Fela Anikulapo-Kuti at his house and nightclub where he was staging a counter-FASTEC, but Sonny thought it unwise and told the band not to go—a decision which he said was justified later when Fela’s place was attacked and burned down by troops of the Nigerian army. The trip ended on a bitter note when the Arkestra was not allowed to march in the final grand parade because Ra would not agree to give the raised fist salute of Black Power. Then afterwards, when National Public Radio reported on the festival, one woman interviewed said his music didn’t represent black people in the United States.

After the festival was over they returned by way of Egypt, and this time traveled in that country more widely, and wound up playing for the multinational troops in the Sinai Peninsula (Szwed pp.341-342).

According to Tommy Hunter, tapes exist from the African sojourn but are not available (Campbell & Trent p.231). By February 26, the Arkestra was back in the states and an audience recording from their performance in East Lansing, Michigan apparently circulates but I have not heard it. Additionally, live performances of two old-timey numbers, the Dixon-Henderson standard, “Bye Bye Blackbird,” and George Gershwin’s “Embraceable You,” were recorded around this time for a Saturn single that was never released. These tapes were later broadcast by WKCR-FM during their 1987 Sun Ra Festival but I don’t have a copy of this either. According to Prof. Campbell, the rendition of “Bye Bye Blackbird is “slow and dozy and, if one does not listen carefully, sounds like a straggler from Ra’s Discipline series” (Id.).

At this point, concert “bootlegs” begin to proliferate as Sun Ra’s reputation as a spectacular live performer became more widely known and miniaturized recording technology (slowly) improved. And it is at this point where I had to take a break from the poor sound quality and somewhat repetitive setlists and give Sun Ra Sunday a rest for a little while. But the fact remains: Ra made a bunch of good-to-great albums in 1977, including several rare solo piano recitals, the classic Some Blues But Not The Kind That’s Blue(Saturn/Atavistic) and the first of the legendary Horo LPs. I’m actually very excited to get to these; so, having rested my ears, I’m ready to tackle the dodgy “bootlegs” in order to get to the good stuff. Not that there isn’t “good stuff” to be found on these amateur concert recordings—it just takes a whole lot more effort to discern.

Up next: a sprawling, two-and-half hour set recorded (badly) at the Showboat Lounge in Silver Spring, Maryland on March 18, 1977. I’ll take a listen so you don’t have to!

June 10, 2012
On March 18, 1977 the Arkestra appeared at the Showboat Lounge in Silver Spring Maryland and a 150-minute audience tape circulates amongst the most fanatical Sun Ra collectors. Interestingly, this venue would quickly become one of Ra’s favorites: “[A]ccording to John Gilmore, Ra wrote several compositions meant to be played only at that location, including one titled, “Silver Spring” which was revived by the Arkestra in 1996” (Campbell & Trent. p.233). It would appear at least one of the things Sonny liked about the Showboat was that he was given free rein to play as long as he wanted. Take a look at the setlist:


This constitutes part of the first set and a mere fragment of the second—it sure looks juicy, doesn’t it? Well, be forewarned: the sound quality of this amateur recording is truly abysmal. To be fair, the circulating copy is probably pretty close to the original (mono) master tape since there is very little hiss or wow-and-flutter and, occasionally, it sounds... okay. So, it has that going for it. The problem is that the (decidedly lo-fi) microphone has been placed right up next to Sonny’s amplifier so the organ is much, much louder than anything else on stage—and when he steps on the gas and that amp starts to distort, you will think your own speakers are being shredded right before your very ears. It is most unpleasant to listen to, despite the otherwise high quality of the performance.

Indeed, there is some incredible music buried under the noise: the old-timey big-band numbers are given relaxed, authoritative readings and Gilmore does his inimitable thing on “The Shadow World,” “Images,” “The Mystery of Two” and, most impressively, on “Embraceable You.” Pat Patrick takes the lead on baritone sax on a truly bizarre ballad composition (disc 1, track 2) and picks up the alto for a gorgeous rendition of “I’ll Never Be The Same.” But what’s most interesting are all those unknown titles such as the above ballad, the tangy “Discipline”-styled piece (disc 2, track 3) or the phase-shifty Rocksichord and French horn duet (disc 2, track 7), with Vincent Chancey sounding more assured than ever on that unwieldy instrument. It is always fascinating to hear “new” Sun Ra compositions, even if the sound quality sucks.

And, boy howdy, does the sound quality suck. Only the most hardcore Sun Ra fan will want to sit through this in order to mine any nuggets of musical gold that can be found. Even so, I keep coming back to those “unheard” compositions and find myself wishing the rest of the second set had been recorded; no doubt there were more “new” Sun Ra works to be found there, perhaps written especially for the venue. I guess that makes me hardcore. The rest of you should stay far, far away.

COMMENTS:
Sam said...  
Aw, come on---it's not really -that- bad. Is it? Naw. I'd say "tolerable"--but just. All the new (and rarely recorded) compositions, as well as the too-rarely-played "On Sound Infinity Spheres," make this worth returning to. The treatment of "Bye Bye Blackbird" is similar to what RLC describes of the version from the WKCR show, and it's a pleasure to hear Gilmore's take on "Embraceable You."

June 17, 2012

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Smuckers, New York, NY 4-17-77 (AUD CDR)

A month later, we find the Arkestra back in New York, appearing at Smuckers on April 17, 1977 and, at least compared to the Showboat Lounge tape, this amateur recording is a hi-fi sonic spectacular! Recorded in stereo (still something of a rarity at the time), it has a pleasing ambience and excellent instrumental balance, with the drums and cymbals coming through crisp and clear but without being overwhelming. But this tape has its share of problems: the recording levels go up and down; there is considerable distortion when things get loud; and, about halfway through, the surreptitious recordist panics and tries to hide the microphone, causing the sound quality to deteriorate significantly. Oh well; that's just the way it is with "bootlegs" from this era. Also unlike the more accommodating Showboat Lounge, the economics of Manhattan nightclubs dictated a short, hour-long set with few surprises. All that said, this is a half-decent recording of the band on a pretty good night—plus there's a special guest sitting in at this show, vibraphonist Walk Dickerson. Well, perhaps not that special (see below).

The set opens with a brief but ominous "Strange Strings"-styled improvisation before June Tyson comes in singing "(The World Is Waiting) For The Sunrise." As the guys in the band join in the chorus, the words slowly morph into "The world is waiting for…Sun Ra" for Sonny's grand entrance. A massive space chord signals Danny Ray Thompson to take up the big bari-sax riff of "Discipline 27" and it's a barn-burner. Unfortunately, Ahmed Abdullah's trumpet solo is so ear-piercingly loud it causes the recordist to fiddle with the input levels for a couple of minutes while the rest of the Arkestra moves into a deliciously skronky group improvisation, capped by Marshall Allen's a cappella alto saxophone. This is a great version of this sometimes overplayed tune, albeit marred by severe technical problems with the recording. And so it goes...

Thankfully, the sound clears up a bit for "The Shadow World" and it's another high-energy blowout with gobs of "mad scientist" organ work and a string of outrageous solos from Allen and Danny Davis on altos, Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet, James Jacson on bassoon, and, finally, John Gilmore on tenor. The music moves through a variety of feels across its eighteen-minute duration, from the frenetic opening ostinatos to a deep, dark funk jam to wild, free-jazz bashing. Jacson's bassoon solo is perhaps his longest on record and an amazing display of virtuosity on this terribly awkward instrument and he gets a hearty round of applause from the audience. Who knew Jacson could play like that? The always impressive Gilmore is at his very best here, building an epic statement out of tiny cells of notes, effortlessly incorporating the entire range of extended techniques from impossible-sounding multiphonics to keening altissimo cries, all the while maintaining a coherent structure with a lyrical melodicism all his own. Yes, folks: it's another incredible Gilmore solo! After the Arkestra returns with a super-tight reprise of the insanely complicated head, the audience is left in stunned disbelief. This is another fantastic rendition of a composition which could never be "overplayed" in my book—the highlight of the set, for sure.
“Enlightenment” cuts off after about thirty-five seconds—no great loss, I guess—and then we pick up in the middle of “Love In Outer Space,” the organ vamping away over a bed of percussion. Just as Sonny returns with the melody, it sounds to me like the microphone gets shoved under the table in an effort to avoid detection by the band or nightclub staff; in any event, the sound quality takes a severe nose-dive from here on. “When There Is No Sun” is spiritedly sung, but suffers from muffled sound, as does “Lights On A Satellite,” which struggles to get into a groove, the tempo fluctuating wildly and, at one point, moving into a heavy-ish rock feel—but Sonny puts the kibosh on that pretty quick! Next up is an unknown title, possibly one of the “Discipline” series of compositions and it sounds vaguely familiar: strained, broken harmonies; braying horns; abstract drumming; dissonant, dramatic organ chords—but with weird, murmuring vocals. Very interesting. Then Walt Dickerson takes over with a long vibraphone solo—too long, if you ask me. Dickerson is a fine player, but he’s just noodling around here. It’s impossible to tell what else is happening on stage but sometimes it seems as if Dickerson just wants to stop playing—and Sonny won’t let him! It just goes on and on and, frankly, it gets to be quite boring—not something you can usually say about an Arkestra performance (aside from the drum solos). It doesn’t help that the sharp, metallic attack of the vibraphone causes painful amounts of distortion in the recording when he hits it hard—which is all too often. “Space Is The Place” ends the set with the typical carrying on, although notable for the inclusion of the baritone counter-melody in the head arrangement, a subtle but welcome variation to this concert mainstay. After an extended vocal segment, the Arkestra marches off the stage and that’s it.

No doubt there was a lot more music played on this night, but this is all we have: a flawed yet mostly listenable recording of one (almost) complete set, which starts off strong and then goes downhill. Committed Sun Ra fanatics will find this worthwhile for “The Shadow World” alone, but for others it is probably inessential.

June 24, 2012

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: The Empty Foxhole Café, Philadelphia, PA 4-29-77 (AUD 2CDR)

Taking its name from the 1967 album by Ornette Coleman, The Empty Foxhole Café was a student-run venue at the University of Pennsylvania, located in the basement of St. Mary’s Church at 39th & Locust Streets, at the time a particularly run-down area of Philadelphia. It housed an actual theater with a large stage, nice acoustics and student volunteers would serve natural foods between sets—hey, it was the ‘Seventies! Weekends were mostly reserved for avant-garde artists such as Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp and The Art Ensemble of Chicago, who are all known to have performed there. The Arkestra made an appearance at The Empty Foxhole on April 29, 1977 and a two-hour audience recording circulates amongst collectors (see Campbell & Trent, p.234).

As usual with these things, sound quality is problematic, to say the least. Once again, Sun Ra’s searing electric organ dominates all the other instruments—but however good (or bad) the original (monophonic) tape might have sounded, what we have here is many cassette generations removed, with severe wow-and flutter issues and, most egregiously, a Dolby mismatch or two, resulting in elevated hiss and distortion that was clearly not present on the original recording. To make matters worse, this horribly degraded tape was then sloppily transferred to digital, evidenced by audible clicks and digital distortion present throughout, getting progressively worse and worse as it goes along. Ouch! That said, there is, as usual,
some great (and not so great) music buried beneath all the noise—you just have to struggle to hear it.

The set opens with another “Strange Strings”-styled improvisation with kora, thumb-pianos, log drums and other myriad percussion instruments rattling away but it’s sadly impossible to make out exactly what’s going on. And it goes on for quite a while, moving through a variety of rhythmic feels while Vincent Chancey provides some lugubrious French horn and someone (probably Richard “Radu” Williams) (Id.) taking a rare bass solo. Just as the crowd becomes audibly restless, the horns split the sonic universe with a raucous space chord and one of the Space Ethnic Voices starts singing, “Make Way For the Sunshine.” But then June Tyson comes in with “(The World Is Waiting) For The Sunrise” and the two songs are sung at the same time in weird, polytonal counterpoint—very interesting! After Sonny’s big entrance, Danny Ray Thompson takes up the bari-sax riff for “Discipline 27” and it’s another hot rendition with an extended freakout section, Marshall Allen and Danny Davis duking it out on altos and Craig Harris going his own way on trombone. So far, so good.

Then Sonny moves to the Rocksichord for “How Am I To Know?” but his stomp-box phase-shifter is shorting out: it crackles, pops and cuts off and on of its own accord. The Arkestra carries on, though, with Rusty Morgan singing lead (Id.) and Gilmore taking a splendidly idiomatic solo that gets a nice round of applause. But Ra is clearly frustrated with the Rocksichord and abandons it altogether to join in the singing, only to let the song sort of peter out. Oh well. “Love In Outer Space” is the usual thing: a bit tedious at over fourteen minutes, but no doubt a delightful visual spectacle. The next thirty minutes are devoted to the big-band classics, “Lightnin’,” “Yeah Man!,” “Take The ‘A’-Train,” “Honeysuckle Rose” and “Red Room” and it’s an oddly uneven performance. John Gilmore displays his stunning virtuosity on the B-flat clarinet (a/k/a “The Misery Stick”) on “Yeah Man!” and delivers a typically rousing tenor saxophone solo on Fats Waller’s “Honeysuckle Rose”—yet he seems bored with “Take The ‘A’-Train” and unusually breathless on “Red Room.” We do get to hear the laconic Akh Tal Ebah take a rare trumpet solo on “Take The ‘A’-Train” while Ahmed Abdullah, is elsewhere his usual showy self. But by and large, this is not the Arkestra at its best: the ensembles are ragged and the band sounds unsure of the arrangements at times. It doesn’t help matters much that the sound quality is so terrible, no doubt clouding my opinion of the music—your mileage may vary.

Moving on: Allen and Ra duet on an untitled ballad, possibly through-composed: similar in feel to “Taking a Chance on Chancey” and other French horn duets we’ve heard, Sonny is outlining definite harmonies while Allen freely extrapolates on alto saxophone—whatever it is, it’s just lovely. “King Porter Stomp” brings us back to the Swing Era and Gilmore sounds more inspired here, taking a small motivic figure introduced by Harris’s trombone solo and running with it. “The Mayan Temples” settles into a gentle, spacey groove with flutes on top and Ra taking a pleasantly ruminative electronic solo—but the recording is marred by numerous technical difficulties, including an inconvenient tape flip and a faulty microphone cable. And so it goes…”Outer Spaceways Incorporated” is resurrected and reimagined as a weirdly asymmetric, mid-tempo swinger with a complexly hocketed vocal arrangement and Sonny pontificating amidst an increasingly enervating din. Whoah! I’m not sure if we’ve heard this arrangement before (or if we’ll hear it again), but it is an unusually refreshing take on this sometimes overdone singalong.

Finally, we get “The Shadow World,” which is always welcome. And, as usual, it’s a barn-burner: fast and tight with frenzied horns and pummeling percussion. Ra takes one of his patented “mad scientist” organ solos where he sounds like he has three hands, summoning up an astonishing variety of otherworldly textures, from percussive, high-pitched tinkling to swooning portamentos
to roaring whirlwinds of low-register noise—all at the same time. This is Ra at his most outrageous — yet he is firmly in control of every nuance possible from his crude electronic keyboards. A string of horn solos follows, both accompanied and a cappella, with James Jacson delivering another lengthy and impressive display instrumental facility on the difficult and unwieldy bassoon—but then Harris destroys the mood with an overly cute, bluesy pastiche on trombone. He manages to elicit some bemused chuckles from the audience but our recordist is clearly not impressed; running short on tape, he shuts off the machine until mid-way through Gilmore’s solo. Although Gilmore sounds great, the effect is ruined and—to add insult to injury—horrible digital distortion starts to creep in, completely overwhelming everything by the return of the head. *Ugh.* The tape mercifully ends there.

So, here we have another crummy “bootleg” with enough tidbits of interesting music to be worthwhile only to the most fanatical Sun Ra collector. One wishes the original master tape would resurface and be given a fresh transfer as it would sound a lot better than this inferior facsimile. Given what we currently have, most listeners will find the sound quality utterly repellent and should not even bother hunting it down — the rest of you know who you are.

COMMENTS:

**Sam** said...
Getting caught up here...
Okay, yeah, I’m one of the ones who know who I am! I really like this show. The "Honeysuckle Rose" Gilmore solo is great, as you say...but "unusually breathless" on "Rose Room"? I don’t hear that. Overall, yeah, it’s a rough recording, but in for a penny, in for a pound. And the "Discipline 27" improv is outstanding. The performances at this stage haven’t gotten quite as formulaic as they will in the mid- to late-80s; there’s still enough variation and spice here (such as the "Outer Spaceways” arrangement) to keep things hopping. Thanks for another great write-up!

**Anonymous** said...
This post brought back my own memories of Sun Ra at The Empty Foxhole, but this was back in either late 1970 or early 1971 -- wintertime, for sure, as there was precious little heat in the venue. And there was no "large stage," just a tiny one in a tiny room. The acoustics were about the same as someone’s living room. And Ra’s organ was deafening! The whole experience was overwhelming to me and my friend -- we were both green suburban teenagers getting our ears cleaned out. I have equally vivid memories of hearing the Sam Rivers Trio, Charles Mingus, and McCoy Tyner in that space. (The Tyner gig was in the summer, and it must have been 100 degrees in the club! A wonderful place, the Foxhole...

**July 1, 2012**

**FAST FADING ECHOES**

they taught me to share all I had
with them
I did
and I got nothing in return
one day I found that because I did,
I died
then another tomorrow they never told
me of
came with the abruptness of a fiery gun
and spoke of cosmic equations
the equations of sound similarity
a secret code of eternal elasticity
clear only to those meant to live beyond
the law of earth
who must choose to understand the
meaning of the
death insurance
of cosmic surety
and use it as a shield against the
pretenders
of the fast-fading
echoes
of the damned
yesterdays

--Sun Ra

July 15, 2012

Sun Ra: Solo Piano, Volume 1 (Improvising Artists CD)

Better known for his electronic experiments, Sun Ra never really got his due as a pianist, even though he was an obviously gifted player with deep roots in the jazz tradition. Prior to 1977, the only solo piano albums Sonny had ever recorded were the impossibly obscure El Saturn LPs, Monorails & Satellites Volumes 1 & 2, released in a minuscule editions a decade earlier—but the recondite material and low-fi sound offered a mere glimpse into Sonny’s wide-ranging keyboard technique. As we’ve seen, however, extended piano breaks were cropping up during live performances in the late-’70s, if an instrument was available to him. (For an excellent example, take a listen to the brilliantly virtuosic introduction to “Take The A-Train” found Live At Montreux recorded on July 9, 1976). Of course, insiders knew what he what Sun Ra was capable of:

Though many recognized him as capable of playing bombastically, and of using the piano for color, few thought of his as a major player. But Paul Bley, one of the two or three leading pianists of free jazz, believed Sonny was a great piano player, so great that he didn’t need a band. If anything, he felt, the band was a cover for his insecurity. Early in 1977 Bley convinced Sonny to do a series of piano duo performances with him in New York and Europe and to record for Bley’s new audio and video company, Improvising Artists (Szwed p.343).

On May 20, Sonny entered Manhattan’s Generation Sound Studios to record Solo Piano, Volume 1, which would be released later in the year as IAI 37.38.50 (RJ-7419 in Japan). It was eventually reissued on compact disc in 1992 as IAI 123850 but is now out of print (see Campbell & Trent p.236). The first in a series of solo piano recordings made in during the year, Volume 1 is also the most satisfying.

Alone in the studio, Sonny is in a reflective mood, ruminating on a handful of original compositions and choice covers. “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” is given a hauntingly abstract reading, alternating between enervated, polytonal passagework and serene,
floating chords. The following “Cosmo Rhythmatic” continues this rhapsodic, orchestral approach while “Yesterdays” is played mostly straight, with an occasionally bubbly ragtime feel that fittingly evokes Sun Ra’s early days on the south side of Chicago. On “Romance of Two Planets” Ra stacks up unstable blocks of vertical harmonies amidst flurries of repeated melodic figures, rumbling bass notes and sharply dissonant tone clusters—the most “out-there” piece on the album. Meanwhile, the impressionistic “Irregular Galaxy” sounds like a sketch for potential Arkestra number with its weirdly swinging chord progression and intricately intertwined counter-melodies. Finally, “To A Friend” demonstrates Sun Ra’s peculiarly inventive take on the blues: a two-chord vamp over which he elaborates in seemingly endless variation, sometimes in several keys simultaneously. As Szwed points out, “those who had known him for years understood that his origins were in the blues and assumed that side of his playing: ‘Sun Ra could play the blues for twenty four hours without repeating a phrase’ they claimed” (p.343). Even at seven-plus minutes, “To A Friend” is but a brief example of Sun Ra’s genius in this regard.

A flurry of solo concerts followed in the wake of Solo Piano, Volume 1, some of which were documented. And while the live audiences obviously energized Sonny, making for some exciting performances, the introspective, meditative quality of Volume 1 is special, a truly unique—and therefore essential—item in Sun Ra’s immense discography.

July 22, 2012

Sun Ra: St. Louis Blues: Solo Piano, Volume 2 (Improvising Artists, Inc. CD)

On July 3, 1977, Sun Ra shared a bill with Paul Bley at Axis-In-Soho as part of the Newport in New York Festival, which was recorded by Bley’s Improvising Artists label. A portion of Sun Ra’s set was released on LP in 1978 as St. Louis Blues: Solo Piano, Volume 2 (IAI 37.38.58) and reissued on CD in 1993 (IAI 123858) (Campbell & Trent pp.236-237). If Solo Piano, Volume 1 was an introspective studio album, Sun Ra is in an expansive, playful mood in front of a live audience. As Szwed points out in his biography, “Bley was surprised to see that once he was alone on stage, ‘Sonny was a ham who liked to clown and surprise the audience’” (Szwed p.343) and there is a bit of that to be found here.

Ra’s passagework is startlingly virtuosic, displaying an astonishing independence of fingers and hands and extreme sensitivity of touch, although it sometimes comes across a bit empty and showy. “Ohosnisixaeh” is a rhapsodic blues with impressively fleet soloing, but the music wanders rather than gets anywhere. W.C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues” is better, updated with a complex, polytonal arrangement. The simple “Three Little Words,” a 1930s showtune by Harry Ruby and Bert Kalmar is given an over-the-top reinterpretation that borders on corny, full of melodramatic glissandos and skittering block chords but always returning to that sweet, sweet swing. Side one closes with a short, romantic rendition of “Honeysuckle Rose” that alternates between rubato schmaltz and breezy ragtime.

Side two is more interesting, containing three originals that show off Sun Ra’s compositional skills as well as his brilliant keyboard work. “Sky and Sun” is onomatopoeic: drifting chords represent the sky and twinkling figures in the uppermost register represent the sun. This track is really quite evocative and it sounds he could do this sort of stuff all day long. Ra summons up an entire Arkestra on “I Am We Are,” from rumbling bass notes, scraping “strange strings” and exquisitely voiced harmonies to outrageous, free-jazz scree, with moments of two-fisted aggression a la Cecil Taylor—a tour de force and probably the best thing on the album.
“Thoughts On Thoth” ends the album with a slow space groove, articulated with remarkably fluid right-hand flourishes. It’s a brilliant display, but feels a little perfunctory to me.

Apparently, Improvising Artists released a 40-minute video of this concert (IAI V003), which replaces “Ohosnisixaeht” with another rendition of “Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child” (the studio version can be heard on Volume 1) and contains some other minor editing differences from the LP (see Campbell & Trent p.237). This video was only sporadically available in the 1980s and while “bootleg” versions circulate, I have not seen a copy. And here is an tantalizing rumor: “According to Fred Conrad, the concert ended with “When There Is No Sun,” on which Ra was joined by June Tyson (voc) and John Gilmore (voc). It is not known whether this piece was recorded” (Id.).

UPDATE:

Thanks to reader, Yotte, for this link to the IAI video of this concert:
https://vimeo.com/26187775

July 29, 2012

Sun Ra & Friends (IAI video)

This forty-minute videotape was recorded live at Axis-In-Soho in downtown New York, sometime in early July, 1977 and was briefly available from Improvising Artists, Inc. (as V004) in 1981 (Campbell & Trent pp.237-238). Simply titled Sun Ra & Friends, the concert includes some solo piano pieces as well as some small ensembles with John Gilmore on tenor saxophone, Danny Davis on flute, Ahmed Abdullah on trumpet and June Tyson and Eddie Thomas on vocals. The trippy colorization effects not only look dated and cheesy, they nearly obliterate the raw footage, making it almost unwatchable today. Still, there is some nice music here, including a way-out duet with Gilmore and casual, concise takes of “When There Is No Sun,” “Gone With The Wind,” and “The Mystery Of Two” as well as a preview of “A Different Kind Of Blues,” beautifully sung by Tyson.

Big thanks to reader yotte, for sharing a link to this video, as well as Solo Piano (IAI V003), which has now been posted over at last week’s review of St. Louis Blues. It seems unlikely these things will ever receive a legitimate digital release, so check ‘em out while you can.

https://vimeo.com/25088782

December 16, 2012

Hello, again. You probably think I had completely given up on Sun Ra Sunday, having not posted anything since the end of July. Around that time I ordered The Eternal Myth Revealed, the mammoth 14-disc box set on Transparency which collects most (if not all) of Sun Ra’s earliest recordings, including some speculative tracks that may or may not have some connection to Sun Ra. I figured I’d need to have it should I ever circle back around and cover the period leading up to the Choreographer’s Workshop recordings, where I (accidentally) began Sun Ra Sunday in earnest back in 2008.
I have not listened to one note (or word) of this box set—in fact, I haven't listened to any Sun Ra since my last post. This situation cannot is intolerable! So much great music awaits—not just the contents on this box but going forward where we left off: more solo piano sets, the legendary Horo LPs and the complete *Media Dream* and *Disco 3000* concerts recently resurrected by Art Yard. My intention remains to examine Sun Ra’s recordings up through 1980 and *Sunrise In Different Dimensions*, which seems like a good cut-off point. After that, I plan to start over from the beginning, starting with the material found on *The Eternal Myth Revealed*. One day, I hope to publish this chronological overview of Sun Ra’s recordings as a monograph—ha!

2013 promises to be a big year—but even if I can get back to a weekly posting schedule, it will take a long time to complete this project. Stay tuned!

**COMMENTS:**

Rodger Coleman said...
@ Jean K - It is somewhat arbitrary, but after 1980, the number of "bootlegs" increases exponentially. I'm not sure I'm ready to go there. At least not until I've covered the early years!
@ Sam - well, I may try to carve out some time to listen to some stuff out of sequence. I am certainly curious about much of the contents on that box!

Citizensmurf said...
I've listened to most of the 14 cds since getting it, and it is really amazing. Michael Anderson put together a very thorough picture of Sun Ra's early years. Some have complained that he narrates way too much, but I enjoy radio documentaries, and this is really one very large radio doc, with all the music to listen to, not just excerpts. He has more in the archives that needs proper funding before it gets released, so I think it is a great time to be a Sun Ra fan.

**January 13, 2013**

**Sun Ra & His Astro Infinity Arkestra:**
*Cosmo Earth Fantasy: Sub Underground Series Vol. 1-2* (Saturn/Art Yard CD)

Just when I thought the Art Yard label was defunct, with no new releases in over a year and some titles quietly going out of print, here they are with a new Sun Ra disc, *Cosmo Earth Fantasy: Sub Underground Series Vols. 1-2*. This one gathers together various tracks that were scattered across a couple of different Saturn LPs, including *Sub Underground* and *What's New?* (and some versions of *The Invisible Shield*). None of this material (recorded from 1962-1975) has ever been officially released on CD, making this Art Yard edition a most welcome release. Hooray!

Detailed liner notes by Paul Griffiths attempt to clear up some of the considerable discographical confusion surrounding this music. The original reel-to-reel tape of “Cosmo Earth Fantasy” was recovered in 2011 and while information on the label is “scant,” Griffiths points out that two handwritten words appear: “strings bandura.” Indeed, the opening portion of this epic, 22-minute track has a distinct “Strange Strings” sound, making the previously assumed date of 1974 highly unlikely. Given that most of the exotic stringed instruments were destroyed in an automobile accident in 1969 and the “Space Harp” (bandura) was given away in 1971, Griffiths posits “Cosmo Earth Fantasy” was “likely…recorded in 1967 or possibly early 1968, before the Arkestra moved from to Philadelphia.” I agree.
Sadly, the tapes from the Temple University concert on September 20, 1974 are apparently still missing, so “Love is for Always” and “The Song of Drums” (and, I believe, the rest of the CD) are taken from clean LP pressings and digitally restored. Griffiths points out that “The World of Africa” is “clearly not from the same concert…and takes us back to 1968 when vocalist June Tyson first joined the band.” Again, I think he is correct. Of course, the What’s New? material is from the magical Choreographer’s Workshop period, circa.1962—the stuff that made me start Sun Ra Sunday to begin with—so it’s wonderful to have this stuff in such good quality on an “official” release. Finally, the concluding “Space Is the Place> We Roam the Cosmos” remains a mystery, although the liner notes suggest a possible recording date of May 23, 1975 at an unknown venue. It’s another shouty, distorted “cosmo drama,” so who really cares where it’s from? Ha ha—just kidding (sort of).

This new Art Yard disc has reignited my enthusiasm for Sun Ra’s music, collecting as it does some impossibly rare stuff, much of it absolutely essential and previously only available (to me) as dodgy “needle-drops.” But there’s still so much more still left in obscurity! What happened with Atavistic? John Corbett’s “Unheard Music Series” resurrected a bunch of primo Sun Ra titles and promised an expanded reissue of Continuation back in like 2007 or something. That is one of the all-time great Sun Ra records and needs to come out! Come on! Give it to Art Yard if you have to, but let’s go!

Ahem. Please excuse my enthusiasm. Look for more Sun Ra Sunday next week.

COMMENTS:

Matt said...
Hi Rodger,
This is Matt from Philly, I've been avidly following your blog for Sun Ra Sunday for a while and am glad you're back to semi-regular posting.

I too have been waiting for eons for the Continuation reissue...there was a piece in the Chicago Reader in May of last year indicating that John Corbett has an imprint through his Corbett vs Dempsey gallery that is producing limited run reissues (they've already issued some Joe McPhee hatHut titles), with Continuation slated to be released with additional contemporaneous material. Exciting news if it ever materializes!

Anyway, keep traveling the spaceways...
Best,
Matt

Sam said...
I too am glad to see Sun Ra Sundays return! Rodger, as far as you can tell, is there anything on this Art Yard disc that was unreleased by Saturn? I'm guessing not, since I'm pretty sure you would have mentioned it.

Rodger Coleman said...
@ Matt - Thank you for the tip re: Corbett vs. Dempsey - I will be keeping an eye out for "Continuation!"

@ Sam - No, there is nothing previously unreleased on this. Here is the full track list:
"Sub Underground":

Comments:
January 27, 2013

Sun Ra: **WKCR Studios, Columbia University, New York, NY 7/8/77 (FM CDR)**

So, where did we leave off? Oh yeah, the summer of ‘77 and Sonny’s solo piano adventures, some of my very favorite Sun Ra records: the introspective studio LP, *Solo Piano Vol. 1*, and the more flamboyant live recording, *St. Louis Blues*. There was also one more solo piano set that month: a radio appearance on July 8 at WKCR, the left-of-the-dial FM station at Columbia University in New York City (which seemed to have an open-door policy whenever Ra was in town) and a 36-minute tape of the broadcast circulates widely amongst collectors. Actually, I discovered there are at least two different versions of this broadcast to be found, which caused me considerable confusion when I started to write this up a couple weeks ago. My first version appears to contain two additional tracks, but, as it turns out, the DJ proceeded to play side one of *Monorails & Satellites* after Ra’s set. Moreover, that first tape was plagued by loads of FM interference and other extraneous noises, sounding like it was recorded with a microphone held up to a speaker. It was rough, but listenable. The second (and more common) version of this broadcast sounds much, much better (more like a proper line recording) and does not contain the confusing album tracks (although the sequence is slightly different). It’s one of the better “bootlegs” out there and, despite this flurry of activity in 1977, solo piano performances were exceedingly rare, making this an indispensable addition to the collection.

Starting off with bluesy improvisation, it’s sadly apparent that the radio station's piano had seen better days: it’s out of tune, some of the keys are sticky, and the voicing is wildly inconsistent, dull and indistinct at one moment, shrill and piercing at another. But Ra makes the best of it, actively exploiting the weird resonances and at times making it sound like a funky clavinet or electronic Rocksichord. Although apparently improvised, there is an elegant structure, with a contrasting, “classical”-sounding middle section, complete with delicate trills and impressionistic arpeggios. Is this an unknown composition? Or is it just another example of Ra’s off-the-cuff genius? Who knows? The old stand-by, “St. Louis Blues,” is up next and it’s another barn-burning performance: three, four, five independent voices ringing out simultaneously in wildly swinging counterpoint. If there were ever any doubts about Sonny’s piano playing abilities, just listen to this! Another standard, “Sophisticated Lady,” follows and it’s given an oblique, fractured reading, with radical, pantonal re-harmonizations and some astonishingly intricate passage work—check out Sonny’s ultra-dexterous left hand! Another blues improv once again brings out
Ra’s brilliantly orchestral pianism with nimble bass riffs and thrilling horn lines, his two hands amiably wandering through distant keys.

After that virtuosic display, things get really interesting. It seems Sonny is just getting warmed up! An untitled original starts pits an agitated ostinato in seven against skittering right-hand flourishes and beautiful block-chord harmonies. The stuttering bass-line almost sounds familiar, but I can’t quite place it—another one for the “unknown” file, I guess. “Take the “A” Train” is given the same treatment as “Sophisticated Lady,” a ruminative extrapolation on an old favorite, blithely dispensing with all the clichéd familiarity and nostalgic sentimentality associated with this well-worn warhorse. His enervated explorations of low-register tone clusters and fiery single-note runs easily rival the intensity of Cecil Taylor at his most bombastic—but no matter how “out-there” it might sound at times, Ra deftly brings it all back around to the ragtime and swing which forms the basis of jazz. The vast expanse of African American musical history, from emancipation through the avant-garde is seemingly encapsulated in this four-and-half minute version of “Take the “A” Train.” Incredible.

Another unknown title follows: a two-chord vamp with pretty right-hand melodies, a space-rumba feel that gradually morphs into straight-ahead swing before going out. Although dreamy and imminently enjoyable, it feels more like a sketch for a potential Arkestra arrangement than a fully-fleshed out composition. The next track, however, was deemed good enough to appear on a Saturn single titled "Quest," in 1982 (Gemini 1982Z). However, the Evidence two-CD compilation misattributes this track to a later date (see Campbell & Trent, p.239). Even more confusing, my first version of this tape has “Quest” occurring at the very end of the set, making my correlation even more difficult. In any event, “Quest” is a short but intriguing tone poem, with jagged, irregular melodies, Morse code rhythms and brittle, uneasy silences. Incidentally, the sound quality of the 45-RPM single is considerably better than the off-air recordings we have here, indicating the possibility that a pre-broadcast master exists in the Sun Ra archives. Well, we can hope so, anyway.

The final track (at least on my second iteration of this tape) is “Trying to Put the Blame on Me,” a doleful, two-chord vamp over which Sonny starts to sing. Of course, there is no microphone near his mouth, so you can barely make out what he’s saying at first. But there are other voices in the background, faintly echoing Ra’s declamations: June Tyson and John Gilmore, who have been quietly sitting in the studio, apparently waiting for this very moment. The station engineers frantically move mic stands around and the song eventually starts to coalesce, a darkly paranoid indictment of those who would blame Sonny for…what? I’m not sure. “What’s the name of this game?” he asks. “Cuz if I’m the cause of it all, then that makes me the boss.” Whatever it is, he sounds eager to assume the role. According to Campbell & Trent, “Trying to Put the Blame on Me” would only reappear almost ten years later, at a concert in Cambridge, Massachusetts on June 10, 1986 (p.491-492). Surely, this song was performed at some point in the intervening years – or perhaps not? Maybe the subject of this diatribe was so specific, it only needed performing once in a while. Again, who knows? These are the sorts of tantalizing tidbits that keep me interested in this project: the mysteries of Mr. Ra.

As you all know, I have complained vociferously about the dismal sound quality of most of the “bootlegs” we’ve surveyed so far – but this one (especially the more common, correct version) sounds very nice indeed, despite the hiss and crackle inevitably associated with low-watt radio broadcasts of the era. More importantly, Sonny’s performance is extraordinary, combining the contemplative meditations of a studio session with the dazzling technical displays of a live concert. It is, in many ways, my favorite of the solo piano recordings from 1977. Definitely worth seeking out, even for the most casual Sun Ra fan—or any devotee of jazz piano. Sun Ra was
not just a great composer and bandleader, he was a fluent pianist and the living embodiment of a deep-rooted tradition dating back generations, a fact that sometimes gets lost in all the big-band hoopla and space-age gobbledygook. Here's proof.

February 3, 2013

**Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Somewhere Over the Rainbow (Saturn LP>CDR)**

Later that month, it was back to business as usual for the Arkestra as a contingent of musicians, singers and dancers traveled to the Midwest for an appearance at The Bluebird in Bloomington, Indiana on or about July 18, 1977. According to Prof. Campbell (who cites Michael Weiss), Sun Ra performed two nights at The Bluebird, each consisting of two three-hour sets (!) (see Campbell & Trent pp. 230-240). At least one of these concerts was recorded by Tommy Hunter and selections were released shortly thereafter as Somewhere Over the Rainbow (Saturn 7877). Some copies, however, are confusingly titled We Live To Be (Id.). Currently out of print in any format under either title, a copy of the vinyl LP circulates amongst Sun Ra obsessives as a “needledrop” CDR made from a rather crackly original. Oh well, we take what we can get and are thankful for it.

Side one opens with “We Live To Be,” a gorgeous original Ra ballad which was apparently performed just this once (see Id. p.845). How is that possible? John Gilmore is up first with a brief but astonishingly fluent solo on tenor saxophone, followed by Ra on an extended, romantic organ solo. Gilmore is in top form here, blowing his ass off in that intense, late-Coltrane fashion he inconspicuously inspired, melding avant-garde shrieks and squawks with the deepest jazz historical traditions. Rather than providing a conventional ending, Sonny cues a throbbing space chord to close, eliciting some stunned applause from the audience. The old standard, “Gone With The Wind,” is rendered in a soapy, melodramatic organ mode, veering towards holy-rolling gospel at times. The rhythm section (ShooBee Doo [Reginald J. Fields] on bass, Tommy Hunter and Luqman Ali on drums and Atakatune on percussion) sounds like they’re chomping at the bit, ready to explode as the music starts to climax. But who knows what happened next since the track abruptly cuts off.

Ra then leads a chant: “You made a mistake/You did something wrong/Make another mistake/And do something right!” It’s all good fun at first but gets kind of boring as it goes on. The crowd liked it, anyway, with someone crying out, “bravissimo!” at the end. Moving to piano, Ra plays a pretty, rhapsodic intro to “Take the “A” Train” before the band comes in with the arrangement. Ensemble passages are a little ragged but the solos make up for it. First, Akh Tal Ebah gets a rare turn at the mic. I love his mellow, loose-lipped sound compared to the blaring pyrotechnics of most trumpet players. Too bad his time with the Arkestra was about to come to an end. Next up is Gilmore and—what can I say?—it’s another incredible John Gilmore solo! A prime example of his ingenious harmonic logic, flawless technique and singular passion.

Side two begins with a curious title, “Amen, Amen (Amen, Meni, Many Amens),” an original composition which was also performed just this one time (see Id. p.811). Starting out with a funky organ thang, it soon settles into an easy swing, Ahmed Abdullah’s trumpet on top. Confident and self-assured on the high-note runs, he follows Ra’s meandering chord progression every step of the way until the organ drops out, leaving him to blow freely over bass and drums. When the organ returns, the guys in the band start chanting “Amen” over and over while ShooBee Doo locks into the groove. Sonny appears to be leading a church choir in
elaborately hocketed repetitions of “Amen” while Danny Davis solos outrageously on alto saxophone. This goes on for quite a while until a loud, dissonant space chord brings things to a close. “Amen,” Gilmore intones solemnly one last time. Very interesting.

The next track fades up on June Tyson singing, “The Next Stop Mars,” with Ra interjecting odd chords before finally taking over with a (mostly) unaccompanied piano rendition of “Over the Rainbow.” This is another tour de force performance, with aggressive dissonances interspersed with joyfully melodic fragments, bits of ragtime mixed with flurries of dense passagework, gleefully abstracting and dissecting this hoary old chestnut and serving it up anew. Clearly, Sun Ra was inspired by the solo piano work earlier in the month and solo segments like this one would turn up with increasing frequency in Arkestra concerts, at least when a piano was provided to him.

The album ends with “I’ll Wait for You,” quickly fading up on the chanting and percussion jam. The burbling bass and disco hi-hats sets up an enervated pulse reminiscent of Miles Davis’s On The Corner, with Marshall Allen and Danny Davis flittering around on flutes while Eloe Omoe hints at a melody on bass clarinet. A dark, dense texture is established, with the hectoring vocals thankfully mixed way back but fades out after only a few minutes.

Obviously, this album was quickly assembled to be sold off the bandstand while on the road, so it’s not surprising to find it kind of a mixed bag. But despite some ham-fisted editing, the sound quality is very nice (as was usually the case when Tommy Hunter was involved) and there is plenty of interesting and unique music to be found here. It may be a minor Sun Ra album in the grand scheme of things but Somewhere Over the Rainbow is imminently enjoyable. If the original tapes of this concert still exist, an expanded reissue could be something special indeed. Well, obsessives like me can dream, can't we?

COMMENTS:

Mark R said...
Great to have you back, Roger. I've been reading the blog for a couple of years but for some reason have never commented. BTW I just picked up a vinyl reissue of Soul Vibrations at Honest Jon's in London and there is a version of Amen (a great track). Is this another version, or the same one as on OTR? Another perplexing discographical detail in the Sun Ra story...

Sam said...
You're much more generous than I would have been to this album, Rodger, but yes there are some nice moments. I get tired of the "churchey" aspect of "Amen" and "Make another mistake" but yes you're right to highlight the wonderful sax solo in "Amen," which saves it. I also like the horn arrangement in "A Train," which is decidedly different from the one on the Montreux LP.

Rodger Coleman said...
@ Jean K - It took a while for this record to grow on me. It is kind of thrown together. But, yes, Gilmore is on fire!

@ Mark R - Thank you for your comment! I think the track on "The Soul Vibrations of Man" you are thinking of is "Third Heaven," a different sort of gospel thing. I was not aware of the 180-gram reissue of this - it's now on its way to me!

@ Sam - Well, like I said above, I didn't like this so much at first. But the more I listened to it, the more I came to appreciate its charms. I'd love to hear more from this concert if the tapes still
exist! I think the overtly churchey stuff is interesting given his antipathy/avidity towards Christianity.

February 10, 2013

**Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Fort Dupont, Washington, D.C. 1977-08-14 (AUD CDR)**

On July 22, 1977, the Arkestra played at the Michigan Union Ballroom in Ann Arbor and, supposedly, an audience recording exists. However, I’ve never heard it and Prof. Campbell offers no details (see Campbell & Trent p.240). A few weeks later, they appeared at Fort Dupont Park in Washington, D.C. on August 14 (Id. p.241) and a sixty-minute tape of the complete set circulates widely—but be forewarned: recorded from the audience on primitive, monophonic gear, the sound quality is simply atrocious. It’s the usual set of problems we find with bootlegs of the era: poor instrumental balance, with volume levels bobbing up down seemingly at random. Moreover, the sound is muffled and distorted yet oddly distant, with a Dolby mismatch or two somewhere in the genealogy, making a bad-sounding tape even worse. The original master tape might have sounded okay but the available copy is a miserable facsimile. Yuck.

Nevertheless, this is an interesting set, opening with an extended improvisation featuring Marshall Allen on oboe, which is always a treat. After a couple of sing-alongs led by June Tyson (“Astro Black” and the Sun Ra processional, “(The World Is Waiting) For the Sunrise,” the band slips into the old favorite, “Discipline 27,” before quickly launching into some bashing free jazz skronk. “Lightnin'” and “Yeah Man!” are taken at almost cartoonishly fast tempos, with John Gilmore wailing away like a madman on the latter. And while the band sounds remarkably tight, it is impossible to make out any details since the recording quality is so horrific. Oh well. A compact but typically intense version of “The Shadow World” follows, featuring plenty of crazy keyboard work from Sonny but, again, the murky sound obscures what appears to be an inspired rendition. “How Am I to Know” swings romantically, with Tyson and Ra singing sweetly to each other and fine solos from Danny Davis and Gilmore (I think—it’s impossible to really hear what’s going on). Next there’s a relatively rare performance of “Planet Earth” (complete with lyrics) before the usual percussion jam on “Watusi” and a long medley of space chants and free blowing to end the set (“Outer Spaceways Incorporated,” “Second Stop is Jupiter,” “Space is the Place” (in its new rearrangement), “Neptune,” “Journey to Saturn,” “We Travel the Spaceways,” “Greetings from the 21st Century,” and “Sun Ra and His Band from Outer Space”). In the midst of all this carrying on, abstracted versions of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” and “Stranger in Paradise” make fleeting appearances. Blink and you'll miss them.

Frankly, this one is for hardcore fanatics only. If you can tolerate the abysmal sound quality, then you might enjoy this short but action-packed set; everyone else should stay far, far away.

February 17, 2013

**I AM AN INSTRUMENT**

I am an instrument
The timbre of my voice flies with the
Winds of heaven
I belong to one who is more than a
Musician
He is an artist
I live to be his pleasure
I do not flee from him when he
Comes to me
For instruments are not sufficient in
Themselves
They are cold and lifeless without the
Tortured hands and mind
The artist holds myself tenderly in
His hands
First he touches the strings of my heart
Too fine to be in tune with the universe
Then suddenly vibrant thoughts
Strikes there
And music from the world of time
And space is born
-- Sun Ra

February 24, 2013

Sun Ra: Some Blues But Not The Kind That's Blue (Saturn/Atavistic CD)

On October 14, 1977 the Arkestra entered Variety Recording Studio for their first studio recordings in over two years. With their increasingly busy touring schedule and tenuous finances, most Saturn records from here on out would be made live rather than in a studio—not even one as low-budget as Variety. These sessions yielded the obscure LP, Some Blues But Not The Kind That's Blue, released on the Chicago Saturn label as LP 101477 in 1978. Alternative titles include My Favorite Things and Nature Boy and may display alternate serial numbers, LP 1014077 and 747 (see Campbell & Trent pp.241-242 for the gory details). In any event, this is one of rarest of rare Saturn LPs, with very few copies known to exist. Thankfully, Atavistic reissued Some Blues But Not The Kind That’s Blue on CD as part of their "Unheard Music Series" in 2008, remastered from the original tapes and filled out with a bunch of bonus tracks. As with the rest of the Sun Ra albums in this series, this one is a classic.

All that said, Christopher Trent suggests the title track was not recorded at Variety at all and is possibly a live recording (Id.). I agree. It has a totally different ambience than the rest of the album with a crude, microphone on the bandstand sound quality. It’s a decent recording – and Variety was no high-tech studio—so it’s actually hardly noticeable (in fact, the whole record appears to be mono). The structure of “Some Blues But Not The Kind That’s Blue” also suggests a live recording, starting out with a skronky group improvisation, with John Gilmore seeming to state some sort of theme—but then Sonny suddenly moves from space organ to the piano and now it’s a slow blues. After a quick chorus from Gilmore, Ra does his thing on piano, taking it just to the edge of the stratosphere before bringing it back to the slow, grinding blues progression. A series of horn solos follows (some of them way off-mic) as Luqman Ali attempts to get funky on the drums, Sonny shuts it down, calling for a big, squalling space chord (and pretty piano notes) to end. Yeah, this is a live recording.
On “I’ll Get By,” you can tell it’s a studio recording; the sound is more immediate—and also hissier. This torch song from Billie Holiday (written by Roy Turk and Fred E. Ahlert) was only played a few times in the Arkestra’s history (but see the 1973 bonus tracks below) and the sparse, bass-less rhythm section lurches rather than swings. Even so, Gilmore is great as usual, even if he seems a little hemmed in by the unsettled groove. A ruminative take on “My Favorite Things” is better, with Sonny providing the rhythmic drive on piano—check out that left hand! This is another Gilmore tour de force, offering his highly personal take on this tune which was so closely associated with John Coltrane. Exquisite! The Atavistic CD inserts an untitled bonus track at this point: Ra’s agitated piano ostinatos and the frenetic, out-there horns lend this a “Shadow World” feel. Interesting; but given the more subdued tone of the rest of the album, it is understandable why Sonny left it off.

“Nature Boy” is another hoary old chestnut given the inimitable Sun Ra treatment, starting out with exotic percussion and Marshall Allen’s snaky, split-tone oboe, Sonny providing pretty piano chords in the background. After a more traditional piano intro, Gilmore comes in with the melody, surrounded by an ornate arrangement for saxophones and flutes. Ra’s solo is slyly romantic, changing keys on a whim while Gilmore gets to do his thing a cappella. A dissonant, pulsating space chord lets loose some mellifluous flute solos before Sonny brings it to a close. “Tenderly” seems to pick up where “Nature Boy” left off, with a similar high-register riff and another rhapsodic piano outing. It’s nice and all, but feels sort of ad hoc. The solo activity of the summer had clearly given Sonny the confidence to go on and on like this on whatever tune struck his fancy. According to Campbell and Trent, this is only known performance of “Tenderly” and is worth hearing for that reason alone. The album ends with another one-off deconstruction of an old standard, this time the Mercer/Arlen classic, “Black Magic.” Sonny pushes and pulls at the rhythm, sometimes swinging, sometimes moving to a space rumba feel, sometimes hinting at ragtime. After a very loosely stated melody, Akh Tal Ebah gets a rare turn on trumpet and although he is a little sloppy (and maybe even a little unsure of himself harmonically), I love his warm, loose-lipped tone. Sadly, this would be one of his last appearances with the Arkestra. Danny Davis follows on alto before a big, loud off-color ending, Ra providing the final punctuation with a low, rumbling chord. Very strange, very beautiful.

The Atavistic CD adds two additional bonus tracks, two more takes of “I’ll Get By” recorded at the House of Ra in Philadelphia on May 3, 1973. Ra is on organ with Ebah on flugelhorn and Ronnie Boykins on bass—no drums. The rock-solid Boykins holds this together like superglue and Ebah’s playing is mellow and elegantly understated. Unfortunately, there are some weird sonic anomalies. As John Corbett puts it in his liner notes, “In the distance, the muffled remnant of a previous track appears, taped over on this home recording, the almost in-sync backwards drums providing a low-key element of surreality.” Yeah, like that. On the second take, Gilmore takes the lead before giving way to a tasty bass solo from Boykins. These tracks demonstrate that the appearance of “I’ll Get By” on Some Blues...was not just a spur-of-the-moment thing; the song had some previously unknown history.

Some Blues But Not The Kind That’s Blue is a typically quirky Saturn release from the ‘70s, somewhat unusual for its (mostly) studio setting. Its extreme rarity as an original artifact makes the Atavistic CD a godsend to Sun Ra fans, with the bonus tracks being icing on the cake. But these relaxed, easy-going takes on the standard repertoire should be approachable to any open-eared jazz fan, making it one of those extraordinary “gateway” albums to Sun Ra’s outer space music. In a discography numbering hundreds of albums, it can be difficult to know where to start; Some Blues... is as good a place as any.
March 3, 2013

So now we enter an extremely prolific period in Sun Ra's career: the live double-album, *Unity* (released on the Italian Horo label); two Saturn LPs derived from an appearance at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago; and one last solo piano set in Venezia - and that's just the rest of 1977! '78 is even more crazy! This is a lot of material to cover and I'm simply not able to keep up a once-a-week schedule and still do the music any kind of justice. Sorry!

In the meantime, enjoy the amusing photo above and a poem by the (space)man himself, which speaks to my predicament:

**WE MUST NOT SAY NO TO OURSELVES**

We must not say no to ourselves
For the greater deed
We must not say *can't*
If it is imperative that we should
We must not synchronize with anything
Less than art-wise dignity
It is either that we are cosmic giants of
Achievement, or something less than the
Greater super self
Across the thunder bridge of time
We rush with lightning feet to join
Hands with those
The friends of seers who truly say
And truly do.

-- Sun Ra

See you next week!

March 10, 2013

Sun Ra Arkestra: *Unity* (Horo 2LP)

During the last week of October, 1977, Sun Ra and his Arkestra headlined a week-long engagement at the prestigious Storyville jazz club in New York City and portions of the concerts on the 24th and 29th were recorded (probably by Tommy Hunter) and released on a double-LP entitled *Unity* by the Italian Horo label in 1978 (Campbell & Trent pp.242-243). It was also briefly reissued in Japan as RCA RV1 9003/9004 in 1979 (Id.). Horo was founded in 1972 by Aldo Sinesio in order to record local musicians and others in the international avant-garde jazz scene, including Giorgio Gaslini, Enrico Rava, Giancarlo Schiaffini, Steve Lacy, Archie Shepp, Lester Bowie and, of course, Sun Ra. *Unity* was one of three double-albums Sonny made for the label in 1978. However, with limited distribution in the United States, Horo records were
always hard to find and are, of course, long out of print. A CD reissue program was announced back in 2009, to be released through Atomic Records but nothing much came of it (and Atomic is now defunct), leaving these essential Sun Ra albums out of reach to all but the most fanatical (and well-heeled) collectors. My copy is a crackly needledrop CDR—but I’d sure love to hear a clean original pressing. It’s an excellent live document from the period.

The Arkestra is at full strength for this appearance, with the usual cast supplemented with Craig Harris and Charles Stephens on trombones, Emmett McDonald on bass horn and Richard “Radu” Williams on bass. This also marks the final appearance of Akh Tal Ebah on trumpet and, unfortunately, he gets no solo space here. Along with Ahmed Abdullah there’s a new trumpeter on board, Michael Ray, who would go on to become a key member of the Arkestra in the coming years. Ray had a background in jazz but made a name for himself on the R&B circuit, playing with Patti Labelle, The Delfonics, The Stylistics and, later, with Kool & The Gang. Ray’s hard-driving soloing was by far the most forceful trumpet voice in the Arkestra since Kwame Hadi left the band in 1975. Besides a tendency to overplay, Ray also liked to mimic an echo effect during his solos, a demonstration of superlative embouchure control but, over time, it becomes an annoying tic. He only pulls this stunt once on Unity (on the Miles Davis tune, “Half Nelson”), but soon it will become a fixture in just about every solo. Obviously, Ray brought something to the band Sonny appreciated—otherwise this behavior would not have been tolerated in the “Ra jail.” As with Clifford Jarvis’s interminable, masturbatory drum solos, Sonny could be over-indulgent with some of his pet musicians, for reasons that remain inescrutable.

The album starts out in the middle of a set, with Sun Ra essaying “Yesterdays” on organ, some wild, dissonant horns coming in only at the very end. After a formal announcement from John Gilmore, Duke Ellington’s “Lightnin’” is up next. Taken at a slightly more relaxed tempo than usual, the band sounds tight and full-bodied, with Gilmore handling the slippery clarinet part with ease. “How Am I To Know?” is presented in its full vocal arrangement, with Gilmore moving to the tenor saxophone. With a breathy, wide vibrato, he evokes both the lush pre-War swing of Ben Webster and the bluesy, hard-bop of Hank Mobley. Somewhat atypical for Gilmore, he plays in a deceptively simple, straightforward manner, staying well inside the harmonic sequence—but it is so deeply soulful and flawlessly executed that the effect is utterly mesmerizing. Yes, it’s another incredible Gilmore solo—just one of many on this album! A peaceful version of “Lights on a Satellite” surrounds Gilmore’s saxophone with fluttering flutes before another couple of classic big band numbers, ’Yeah, Man!’ (with Gilmore again shining on clarinet) and Jelly Roll Morton’s “King Porter Stomp.”

“Images” offers Ray his first opportunity to solo at length, alone with the drums. He has impressive technique but he’s a blaster, always playing full-bore with a big, blatty sound. He also knows how to take it progressively out—but Gilmore comes in and shows him how it should be done. The music gets almost unbearably intense as the tenor solo goes on and on and on. Ra tries to rein him in, but nothing doing; he just keeps going. Damn! Gilmore is on fire! Sonny cools things down with “Penthouse Serenade,” a lazy swing number for solo organ and there’s more organ balladry on Tad Dameron’s “Lady Bird.” This then segues into “Half Nelson,” which features barn-burning solos from Gilmore and Ray (who introduces his echo-echo-echo trick at the end). Ra announces “Halloween in Harlem” and slams down on a dissonant organ cluster before the ensemble comes in with the tense, lurching march. “My Favorite Things” again features Gilmore and what can I say? It’s yet another amazing Gilmore solo! Curiously, “Rose Room” and “Satellites Are Spinning” are taken from a concert in Châteauvallon, France on August 24, 1976 (id.). While a bootleg of this concert circulates, the sound here is quite a bit better. Ra is on Rocksichord rather than organ and the ambience is clearly outdoors rather than
inside a small nightclub. Even so, a crossfade puts “Enlightenment,” recorded at Storyville in 1977, in between—a rather odd way to end an otherwise remarkably consistent album.

While there are no outrageous, improvised freak-outs, mad-scientist keyboard experiments (nor tediously overlong percussion jams and space chants), Unity is a classic Sun Ra record—and home to some of Gilmore’s finest playing ever committed to vinyl. Despite the rough and ready sound quality, the accessible repertoire and stellar performances makes this another ideal introduction to Sun Ra’s music for the newcomer. Too bad it’s so hard to find.

March 17, 2013

Thanks to reader Mark R, I was reminded of a vinyl-only reissue of The Soul Vibrations of Man, which happens to be the next item in the discography. Since this record had never been officially released on CD (and my “needledrop” of an original pressing is a crackly mess), I decided to check it out. I had seen some of these Saturn LPs floating around the record bins, but was unsure of their provenance—were they merely bootlegs of the Evidence CDs? However, it appears that El Saturn Research is now owned by Universal Music Group and these vinyl reissues are legit—almost two dozen so far and three titles (My Brother The Wind Volume 1, Universe in Blue and The Soul Vibrations of Man), which have been out of print for decades in any format. Additionally, there’s a recent vinyl-only reissue of Of Mythic Worlds, a super-scarce LP originally released by Philly Jazz in 1978. All are pressed on 180-gram vinyl, housed in sturdy cardboard jackets and very reasonably priced—a no-brainer for the turntable-enabled Sun Ra fan.

Intrigued, I decided to investigate some of the other Saturn titles in order to compare them to the Evidence CDs, which suffer from some rather heavy-handed noise reduction and compression. Other Planes of There, one of my favorite recordings from the magical Choreographer’s Workshop era, sounds quite a bit more open and dynamic than the CD, leading me to believe it was taken from the original, un-futzed-with tapes. That was all I needed to know: I’m going to have to get the rest of them while they are still available. A look at my playlist from last week will show you how far I’ve gotten on this project and more should be arriving this week. The problem is: where will I put them? Well, there are far worse problems to have.

Incidentally, I wound up spending some time on eBay trying to track some of this stuff down and was amazed to see a large collection of incredibly rare, mint condition Saturn LPs up for auction in the UK. I knew albums like Invisible Shield and A Fireside Chat with Lucifer would attract a lot of bids, but I was not prepared to see these dozens of titles finally sell for such astonishing sums of money: from $600 to over $1300 a piece! Apparently, two collectors got into a bidding war at the last minute, with the victor spending many thousands of dollars to obtain these obscure Sun Ra records. Obviously, there is a market for these things—so, how about it Universal? Why not reissue the rest of the El Saturn catalog? Of course, the schism that developed between Sun Ra and Alton Abraham during the 1970s means that the Philadelphia Saturns are not owned by Universal and are likely stuck in perpetual legal limbo along with the rest of Sonny’s estate. Even so, there are still plenty of Chicago Saturns left behind—like Continuation. And, speaking of Universal, they also own the Impulse! catalog, which includes Astro Black, another classic Sun Ra album that is impossible to find in decent condition for a reasonable price. Come on, folks! Let’s go!

I’ll be back with a detailed examination of The Soul Vibrations of Man next week. In the meantime, go out and grab yourself a copy—it’s a good one.
March 31, 2013

Sun Ra: *The Soul Vibrations of Man* (Saturn LP)

If *Unity* presents the more approachable, trad-jazz side of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, the next item in the discography shows they were still capable of getting mighty strange during this period. Live recordings from the Jazz Showcase in Chicago in November 1977 were edited down and quickly released as Saturn LP 771, portentously titled *The Soul Vibrations of Man* (see Campbell & Trent pp.243-244). While original copies are extremely rare, it was reissued a couple of years ago on 180-gram vinyl by El Saturn Research, which is now, apparently, a part of Universal Music. It's one of those weird and wonderful Saturn LPs, with a cryptically symbolic cover and a metaphysical disquisition on the back, presumably by Ra, regarding numerology, astrology and “The Dead Past.” In keeping with all that, no titles are given for the five tracks, instead, Side A is titled, *The Soul Vibrations of Man Part I Volume VII* and Side B, *The Soul Vibrations of Man Part II Volume VII.* Okeydokey! Thanks to Prof. Campbell, Christopher Trent and Ahmed Abdullah, the individual tracks have been identified (Id.)—and it is an unusual set to say the least.

Side A opens with “Sometimes the Universe Speaks,” in its first known performance. Two flutes (Marshall Allen and Danny Davis) play a long, slow, folk-like melody, sometimes in unison and sometimes harmonized but mostly a cappella. After a couple of minutes, the melodies get freer while still coming together on pre-determined chords as the pitter-patter of percussion builds up underneath. Eventually, the melody ends and the drums take over, eliciting cheers from the audience. Suddenly, Ra interrupts with a homily: “Sometimes the universe speaks/And all is silence/Haven't you heard how loud the silence has become lately?” This might have gone on for a while longer, but instead it quickly fades out. More unaccompanied flutes (possibly three or four) lead the way on the pretty “Pleiades.” According to Prof. Campbell, Danny Ray Thompson, Eloe Omoe and James Jacson all doubled on flute, so it’s possible they are all playing on these tracks. The side ends with “Third Heaven/When There is No Sun,” picking up in mid-sermon, Ra preaching about how “Uranus is the Seventh Heaven,” while the boys in the band echo his every word. Joking aside, this is actually one of the more enjoyable space chants to listen to, with less shouting and a more musical presentation. After a few minutes, Sonny moves to the organ and fingers some chords to introduce “When There is No Sun,” which June Tyson and the guys sing in splendid harmony.

“Halloween in Harlem” opens Side B, a lumbering march that lurches rather than swings, its dissonant harmonies and strained, wide-interval melodies giving off a campy, horror movie air. Michael Ray takes the first solo, his trumpet blatty and smeared, with Sonny following up with a brief organ solo before the return of the theme. Next is an untitled improvisation, with Ra’s organ outlining a ballad form while Ray solos. As the rhythm section quietly joins in, it almost sounds like Ra is playing definite chord changes—is this really an improvisation? Who knows? In some ways, this reminds me of “Taking a Chance on Chancey,” the improvised duet Ra would often play with Vincent Chancey on French horn. Of course, Ray is a very different player—brash and forceful—and he indulges a bit in his trademark echo-echo effect at the close, which gets the desired rise out of the audience. After a blaring space chord, the band launches right into “The Shadow World” and here’s where things get heavy. A series of outrageously intense, high-energy solos follow, with Allen and Davis on alto sax, Eloe Omoe on bass clarinet and, finally, John Gilmore, who shows them how it’s supposed to be done. An incredible display of multiphonic split-tones, altissimo squeals and other impossibly extended techniques; yes, it’s
another amazing Gilmore solo! Then Sonny follows up with some wild, mad-scientist keyboards before the side abruptly ends.

Admittedly, the homemade sound quality is not that great, the edits are crude and the pressing is less than perfect—but The Soul Vibrations of Man is still a classic Sun Ra LP. The whole thing, from the crazy cover to the music contained in the grooves, has a deep, mystical vibe which neatly encapsulates Ra’s “mythic equations.” I say get it while you can.

April 7, 2013

OK, not Sun Ra, but Ash Ra Tempel--a different kind of space music.

Today, I went with my nephew to the semi-regular record show at the Holiday Inn over by the airport. It can be a hit or miss affair, with a lot of overpriced junk--and you have to get there early before everything has been picked over. But there was a new guy there today with boxes and boxes of rare old prog LPs in amazingly good condition. OMG! Needless to say, he was instantly mobbed by fanatical collectors (as usual, the place was packed). When I saw this early pressing of Ash Ra Tempel's first (and best) album, with the triple center-gatefold sleeve and minty vinyl, well I could not resist (despite the sphincter-tightening price tag). I bought a bunch of other cool stuff and he gave me a really good deal on the lot, so I am a super-happy record nerd. It really is a fantastic, totally cosmic album and almost impossible to find.

Of course, I spent the rest of the day cleaning and spinning LPs and the time has gotten away from me. Sorry about that! I'll pick up where we left off with rare Sun Ra records next week.

April 14, 2013

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: Taking a Chance on Chances (Saturn LP>CDR)

Also recorded at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago sometime in November 1977, Taking a Chance on Chances was released as Saturn 772, the companion volume to The Soul Vibrations of Man (Saturn 771). Being the final release on the Chicago-based Saturn label, it is exceedingly rare: there are only a hundred or so copies known to exist—but, unfortunately, all of them have a defective pressing on Side A (see Campbell & Trent pp.244-245). That fact (along with the somewhat mundane repertoire) makes this one a rather difficult and, ultimately, frustrating listen. The pressing defect manifests itself in a woefully unbalanced stereo presentation and a near-constant overlay of scratchy noises and horrifically ugly distortion which only begins to clear up towards the end of the side. Ugh. Pressing the mono button helps a little (if you have one) but not much. As listeners to The Soul Vibrations already know, these are not great-sounding recordings to begin with; the pressing flaw renders them almost unlistenable.

In any event, the title track opens the album; but, of course, the correct name is “Taking a Chance on Chancey,” since it is the usual improvised duet between Ra (on organ) and Vincent Chancey on French horn. Regardless, Chancey sounds remarkably self-assured on that notoriously unwieldy instrument, confidently navigating Ra’s twisty chord changes. About four minutes in, Michael Ray comes in with some blaring trumpet while the rhythm section starts to heat up and saxophones ad lib swinging background figures. Interesting. The “Lady Bird”/”Half Nelson” medley follows—but the sound quality takes an even more disastrous turn for the worse, making even John Gilmore’s wonderful tenor sax solo hard to enjoy. Fortunately, the
sound cleans up a bit for Sonny’s solo piano rhapsody, “Over the Rainbow.” This tune had become a near-permanent fixture in the setlists during this period but it is beautifully played and warmly received by the audience.

Side B sounds much better (though still decidedly lo-fi), starting off with a hard-driving take of “St. Louis Blues,” led by Sun Ra’s fleet-fingered piano work and supported by Richard “Radu” Williams on bass with Tommy Hunter and Luqman Ali on trap drums. Ra moves back to the electric organ for an extended take on “What’s New?” wherein Gilmore takes one of those monumental solos that only reconfirms his stature as one the all-time great post-bop tenor saxophonists. While hewing close to the labyrinthine harmonic sequence, he takes it further and further out as first the organ and then the rhythm section drop out from under him, leaving him naked and alone on the stage. Despite considerable microphone distortion, his tone is still earth-shakingly huge, with brilliant ideas spinning out in endless permutations. It seems like Gilmore could go on like this forever but Ra eventually puts a stop to it with an emphatic organ stab, inviting Ahmed Abdullah to take over on trumpet. While nice enough (and a welcome contrast to Ray's cloying extroversion), it seems a little anticlimactic after Gilmore’s astonishingly virtuosic display. The album ends with yet another rendition of “Take the ‘A’ Train,” notable for yet another incredible Gilmore solo. Sadly, my "needledrop” CDR starts to develop a horrible digital clicking sound about halfway through and becomes completely overwhelming by the end. Oh well; I take what I can get.

Obviously, the ever-amazing Gilmore solos are what make the generally bad sound quality worth suffering through on this one—particularly his tour de force outing on “What’s New?” But with several other, much better-sounding albums available featuring this sort of material, I can’t really recommend Taking a Chance on Chances to anyone but the most devoted Sun Ra freak (or slavishly devoted Gilmore fan). Perhaps a proper reissue (a la The Soul Vibrations of Man LP) would change my mind.

April 21, 2013

Living By Lanterns: New Myth/Old Science (Cuneiform CD)

I’ve recently been filling some holes in my collection of Mary Halvorson and Ingrid Laubrock discs and came across this one, which I had somehow missed when it came out last year. Sun Ra aficionados will definitely want to check it out:

Living By Lanterns is a group convened by Chicago drummer Mike Reed vibraphonist Jason Adasiewicz, in order to fulfill a commission by the Experimental Sound Studio (ESS) to create a performance based on material contained in the Sun Ra/El Saturn Audio Archive at ESS. The archive contains dozens of master tapes and rehearsal tapes as well as recordings of Ra’s poetry and lectures and “audio research” such as a television documentary about Duke Ellington and a radio talk show discussing the benefits of self-hypnosis (a jaw-dropping work-in-progress catalog of the archive’s holdings can be found here). Reed was provided an iPod with 700(!) hours of material culled from over 400 reel-to-reel and cassette tapes recorded from 1948 to 1985 and Adasiewicz, chose “Reel 43” to work with, an hour-long rehearsal tape labeled “NYC 1961,” which features Ra on electric piano, John Gilmore on tenor saxophone and Ronnie Boykins on bass. Reed describes the tape as “a stream-of-consciousness songwriting session with few details worked out but many ideas played through” (quoted in Terri Kapsalis’s liner notes). Adasiewicz isolated themes and harmonic sequences and, with Reed, developed new compositions for an all-star nine-piece band, featuring Greg Ward on alto saxophone, Taylor Ho
Bynum on cornet, Ingrid Laubrock on tenor saxophone, Tomeka Reid on cello, Mary Halvorson on guitar and Tomas Fujiwara on drums. Beautifully recorded at Electrical Audio in Chicago on September 3 & 5, 2011, the results were released in October 2012 on the venerable Cuneiform Records label as New Myth/Old Science.

Sonny’s voice can be heard admonishing and lecturing on the opening sound collage, “New Myth,” with Laubrock’s long split-tones and wispy melodic figures blowing in and out of the sonic landscape. Then it’s right into “Think Tank,” the longest and most viscerally intense track on the album. After a majestically rubato ensemble section, Halvorson delivers a blistering guitar solo full of metallic distortion and massive power chords over a propulsive, double-drum groove.

“2000 West Erie” is built around a twisty, post-bop head and yields an incredible tenor solo from Laubrock over a swinging rhythm section and scrabbling guitar. Although sounding nothing like him, Laubrock is clearly Gilmore’s heir as master of the tenor saxophone. “Shadow Boxer’s Delight” more overtly evokes Sun Ra’s unique style, with spacey electronics, a loping ostinato in 7/4 and a vaguely Egyptian-sounding theme. “Forget B” is another updated post-bop number with another astonishing solo from Laubrock while “Grow Lights” moves back to a leisurely space-groove kind of thing, with Abrams taking the lead on upright bass with Boykins-like authority. The album concludes with “Old Science,” an up-tempo rocker with another outrageous solo from Halvorson.

New Myth/Old Science is an intriguing album: rather than presenting Sun Ra’s music as a mere repertory project, sketchy, raw material has been transformed into entirely new, original music, performed by the leading lights of 21st Century jazz. It’s a fitting tribute to Ra’s genius and continuing influence—plus you get to hear some of Mary Halvorson and Ingrid Laubrock’s finest playing on disc. Good stuff!

+++ Another interesting item from the Sun Ra Audio Archive, ESS and Three Walls Gallery is Black Utopia, an extremely limited edition 2-LP/DVD set compiled by filmmaker Cauleen Smith, documenting her two-year residency and research on Sun Ra for her exhibition, “The Journeyman,” which the gallery describes as “an installation, recording studio and library about artistic process.” The recording contains music and other material from the Sun Ra Archive as well as original pieces created for the exhibit. Although I suspect they are all sold by now, I was able to order a copy online directly from the gallery—I’ll let you know when/if it arrives.

Who knows what else from this stash of rare Sun Ra material will see the light of day?

April 28, 2013

Black Utopia (A Cauleen Smith Movie) (Three Walls 2LP/DVD)

I was pleasantly surprised to find a copy of Black Utopia in the mailbox this week (after all, only 40 copies of the special “collector’s edition” were pressed) but I guess I got lucky. It is a stunningly gorgeous piece: two heavyweight colored vinyl LPs housed in hand-silkscreened jackets; an oversize booklet containing photographs, texts and interviews; a flyer commemorating filmmaker Cauleen Smith’s 2012 exhibition at Three Walls Gallery, “The Journeyman”; a giant newsprint foldout listing the various books on display from the Sun Ra/El Saturn Research library; a signed and numbered certificate of authenticity; and, finally, a data
DVD-R containing all four sides in 24bit/96kHz high-resolution WAV format. Black Utopia is clearly a labor of love.

The album is presented as an “audio documentary,” a movie for your ears by Smith, who spent the last couple of years in Chicago, researching the Sun Ra archives at the University of Chicago and the Experimental Sound Studio. Culling material from the 700 tapes in the audio archive (supplemented by rare LPs from the Dorchester Projects’ Dr. Wax Record Library), Smith has divided the four sides into movements (or episodes) entitled, “Gemini,” “Shaped Notes,” “Speculations” and “The Learned & The Learned,” formed out of snippets of Arkestra rehearsals, live performances and lectures by Sun Ra as well as cut-up radio documentaries and poetry by Krista Franklin and Avery R. Young. In conjunction with the print materials, it is a fascinating document of DIY scholarship and contemporary mythmaking that explores the esoteric intellectual pursuits and intensely “radical black creativity” that Sun Ra epitomized.

I have only had a chance to listen to it through twice, so I cannot really comment in detail—but it is superbly well-done and definitely worth the premium price. More than just a “record,” Black Utopia is a rare and beautiful work of art. It looks like I got one of the last copies of the “collector’s edition” (it is no longer listed on their website) but the “fan” edition (containing just the LPs and booklet in a slightly different jacket) is apparently still available—but you better hurry! It too is a limited edition of only 100 copies.

May 12, 2013

Even though we were both totally beat, Liz and I ventured out last night to hear Lambchop and the Matthew Shipp Trio—it was just too special an event to miss. Accurately described as “Nashville’s most fucked up country band,” Lambchop is way more popular in Europe than in the states and only plays their hometown once a year or so. And, of course, Matthew Shipp (and Mary Halvorson and all the other interesting jazz players) rarely play in the U.S.A. outside of New York – much less someplace like Nashville. Fortunately, there is a small but vibrant community trying to force “Music City” to live up to its name. But the sad truth is: an opportunity to hear either of these groups will not be happening again anytime soon so we had to seize the opportunity despite our exhaustion.

The good thing was that the venue was on our side of town, meaning an easy drive there and back. Plus, it was to be a low-key, sit-down affair. But the VFW Post 1970 is a funky place for sure and, in true southern rebel fashion, allows smoking inside. Now, I must sadly admit to being a smoker myself but the atmosphere permeated with the smell of stale tobacco and cheap beer was more than a little nauseating—especially since I was already feeling under the weather. Nevertheless, it was a sublime evening of music. Lambchop (who, much to my embarrassment, I have only recently discovered) was absolutely riveting, exhibiting extraordinary restraint and subtle dynamics to deliver their powerfully emotional songs. And the Matt Shipp Trio cooked from the get-go, climaxing with a gut-wrenching deconstruction of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” in honor of the veterans, whose post we had invaded for the evening. While much of the crowd had come to hear Lambchop, a goodly number stayed for the out-jazz part of the program, which was nice to see.

I got a chance to speak with Matt and Whit Dickey, both of whom I briefly knew at The New England Conservatory, and it was great to see them both after many years. I gave them a copy of my CD and told Matt that his music had long been an inspiration to me—even after I had
given up on performing myself. He was friendly and quite funny, just as I remember him. In all, it was another fabulous night in a long week of fabulous nights.

Now, I need some rest.

+++ 

What does any of this have to do with Sun Ra? Well, nothing except the connection to the jazz tradition (and the fact that Matt introduced his players as being “from outer space”). But, as you might have noticed, I have been ridiculously busy and have simply not had the time to write. Moreover, the next several records in the chronology are particularly challenging, both musically and discographically, and it’s going to take some time to sort it all out. I know: excuses, excuses! Please do stay tuned.

However, I’m overjoyed to see that the long-delayed 2-disc reissue of Continuation is now available from Corbett vs. Dempsey. Not sure if this is a limited edition or not, but I’d jump on it sooner rather than later. I’ll let you know my thoughts after it arrives.

+++ 

SHAMELESS PLUG DEPT.

Would you like your own copy of Rodger Coleman & Sam Byrd: Indeterminate (Improvisations for Piano and Drums)? Just click on the link below. You can also stream the entire album at our website, NuVoid Jazz Records, if you just want to check it out. Thank you for your interest and support!

May 19, 2013

Sun Ra: Continuation (Saturn LP/Corbett vs. Dempsey 2CD)

Announced way back in 2009, the two-CD reissue of Continuation (containing previously unissued material) is now finally available—but not from Atavistic, who have apparently shuttered the “Unheard Music Series.” Instead, the set has been lovingly packaged in a deluxe, triple-gatefold cardboard sleeve and released in a limited edition by Corbett vs. Dempsey, John Corbett and Jim Dempsey’s Chicago art gallery. It’s been well worth the wait.

Continuation has always been one of the rarest and most discographically obscure items in the El Saturn catalog—and that’s saying something! Released in a single, miniscule edition in 1970, the recording dates have always been assumed to be 1968 or ’69 (with side two taken from a live performance)—although Prof. Campbell expresses some doubts, suggesting that “on stylistics grounds an earlier date is possible” (Campbell & Trent p.148). It doesn’t help matters that the original album jacket contains boatloads of inaccuracies and outright misinformation: neither Wayne Harris nor Akh Tal Ebah are playing trumpet; it is, instead, Walter Miller on trumpet and Ali Hasan on trombone. Moreover, Robert Barry does not play drums (“lightning” or otherwise) and you will not hear Danny Thompson on “Neptunian libflecto.” To make matters even more confusing, the jacket places the recording place as “EL SATURN STUDIOS : Minneapolis, Minn.” but I don’t think anyone ever took that too seriously. In my own review, I wrote: “The presence of Tommy Hunter and his echo-echo-echo machine on ‘Earth Primitive Earth’ and ‘New Planet’ makes me think these tracks were recorded prior to 1968. In
fact, the overall ambiance (and massively increased hiss) sounds like some of the Choreographer’s Workshop recordings (but this might just be wishful thinking).

As it turns out, that is exactly where these recordings were made, during a single session on March 10, 1963 which (according to Corbett’s liner notes) produced parts of the classic albums, Other Planes of There (“Sound Spectra/Spec Sket”), When Sun Comes Out (“Calling Planet Earth”) and When Angels Speak of Love (“Ecstasy of Being” and “The Next Stop Mars”). Amazing! As long-time readers know, the Choreographer’s Workshop recordings hold a particular fascination for me and were the original impetus for my starting Sun Ra Sunday in the first place: I wanted to try and unlock their mysteries, particularly as they were presented un-chronologically on the Evidence CDs of the 1990s. To have another piece of the puzzle firmly in place is reason enough for celebration—but to have an additional 40 minutes of previously unreleased material from this period is truly miraculous!

The album itself is a classic (and now that we know its provenance, we know why) and side two can now be properly understood as another in a series of innovative, long-form conducted improvisations in the same vein as “Other Planes of There” and “The Magic City.” The spontaneous appearance of “The Second Stop Is Jupiter” amidst all the strangeness most likely prompted discographers to assume this was recorded in concert circa.1968 but all the tracks are clearly from the same Choreographer’s Workshop session. In retrospect, it’s hard to believe that the mellifluous Walter Miller could have ever been confused with the rough-edged Ebah—but now it all comes together and makes sense. Not ’68, ’63!

The nine “bonus” tracks offer further revelations into the obscure history of the Choreographer’s Workshop period. Several tracks (“Meteor Shower,” “Conversation of the Universe,” and “The Beginning Of”) sound like experimental soundchecks, testing Hunter’s echo/reverb device with various instruments. The vibe is typically spooky and spacey but the music never really develops into anything cohesive. Elsewhere, otherwise unknown compositions make their first (and perhaps only) appearances: “Blue York” (a pun on their newly adopted hometown) is a wistful blues featuring a breathy, romantic lead from John Gilmore on tenor sax while “Infinity” is a beautiful ballad form for piano and Miller’s warm-toned trumpet. At less than three minutes each, these lovely pieces are far too short—they’re over before you know it! “Endlessness” is more involved, pitting angular, uptempo swing against a twisty, complicated head arrangement. Although the mix is woefully off-balance and Gilmore sounds unusually short-breathed and squeaky, it’s obviously an ambitious composition. Similarly, “Red Planet Mars” evokes the splintered, frenetic pace of “The Shadow World,” complete with full-bore saxophone battles and high-energy group improvisation—yet the band sounds somewhat tentative, as if this were just a one-off run-through. Was either of the compositions ever played again? Who knows? The disc ends with “Cosmic Rays,” a vaguely familiar sounding construction of dissonant block-chords which gives way to more “New Thing”-styled free jazz. Gilmore sounds possessed, but leaves plenty of space for Miller and Hasan—and we even get some tasty bass clarinet from Robert Cummings. But an overlong drum solo and a pointless coda of uninspired group improv after "The Next Stop Mars" breaks the spell. As nice as it is to have additional Choreographer’s Workshop material available, these “bonus” tracks reveal Sonny’s astute editing skills more than anything else (especially during this period): he used only the best stuff for the albums.

That said, the CD mastering is superb and Sun Ra fans will definitely need to have this long-overdue reissue in their collections—but don’t hesitate! While there is nothing expressly indicating a limited edition, this article in The Chicago Reader states that “most” Corbett vs. Dempsey CDs are “strictly limited to 1000 copies—once they’re gone, they’re gone.” Vinylphiles should also note that an LP reissue (minus the bonus tracks and complete with erroneous
information on the jacket) is also available on El Saturn Research (now a part of Universal Music Group). Interestingly, this one is not pressed on 180-gram vinyl—and perhaps that’s a good thing since several of the heavyweight Saturn reissues I bought suffered from severe warping and non-fill problems. My copy of Continuation, however, looks and plays fine. In either format, this one is essential!

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Corbett vs. Dempsey has also just released a slender monograph, Sun Ra + Ayé Aton: Space, Interiors and Exteriors, 1972, a collection of color photographs of Ra taken on the set of the Space Is The Place movie along with Polaroids of Aton’s futuristic house murals painted under the influence and direction of Sun Ra during the late-'60s and early-'70s. Unfortunately, brief essays by Glenn Ligon and John Corbett are marred by poor copy-editing, with the latter’s essay riddled with blank spaces where additional information was clearly meant to be inserted. Oh well. Even so, the photos are nicely reproduced and Corbett should be applauded for continuing to make available such printed materials and other ephemera from the Saturn Research archives. Certainly, Space, Interiors and Exteriors 1972 should elevate Aton’s position in the pantheon of radical African-American visual artists.

June 2, 2013

Sun Ra: Piano Recital, Teatro La Fenice, Venezia (Leo/Golden Years CD)

On November 24, 1977, Sun Ra returned to Europe to perform a solo piano concert at Teatro La Fenice in Venice, Italy, a portion of which was broadcast in color over RAI (Italian Television). According to Prof. Campbell (via Francesco Martinelli), “the videos in circulation are 45 minutes long, the first and second unidentified titles are repeated, and there are only about 25 minutes of music. It is possible that ‘Cocktails for Two’ (which is heard in the background during footage of Ra walking in Venice, etc.) is from a rehearsal and not the concert itself” (Campbell & Trent p.245). Additionally, an audio tape apparently circulates which is from a different source but also repeats the first two titles while omitting “Over the Rainbow”(Id.). The audio tape, however, “includes an extra unidentified title (which develops into a blues) not on the videos in circulation” (Id.). I have neither seen nor heard either of these supposedly circulating tapes and, given the sketchy information provided in their discography (with only “Cocktails for Two” and “Over the Rainbow” being identified), it would appear Campbell and Trent hadn’t either.

Then, in 2003, Leo released Piano Recital, Teatro La Fenice, Venezia on their Golden Years imprint in a limited edition of 1500 CDs—but it is not sourced from these alleged RAI tapes. Moreover, neither “Cocktails for Two” nor “Over the Rainbow” make an appearance in the setlist, indicating they were not played at this concert and were probably recorded elsewhere. Although seemingly complete, the hour-long Golden Years CD is taken from an amateur audience recording—a “bootleg”—and the sound quality leaves a lot to be desired. The tape was clearly made in the back of the hall and while the acoustics in the 1790 opera house (which burned down in 1996) were obviously superb, the piano sounds distant and washed out on this primitive stereo recording. To make matters worse, low-frequency rumbles, bumps and thumps repeatedly intrude as the recordist manhandles the microphone. It’s not the worst-sounding bootleg we’ve heard (far from it) but a bootleg just the same. Even so, Sun Ra’s performance is extraordinary: a summation of the year’s flurry of solo piano activity—and the last such
appearance for several years. As such, the Leo CD is an important (if flawed) historical document of Ra’s brilliantly idiosyncratic pianism.

Sonny begins his recital with a rhapsodic improvisation, effortlessly moving from lush romanticism to furious atonality to bluesy noodling to impressionistic washes of harmony. In keeping with the ornate, classical music surroundings, Ra has been provided a fine piano, expertly tuned, with sensitive touch and a rich, resonant presence. At times he seems completely absorbed in its lush soundworld. An untitled blues follows. Is this an original composition? Some obscure cover? An extemporaneous improvisation? It’s hard to tell as it sounds like a tune that’s been around forever. In any event, Ra sounds like he is having fun and the large, enthusiastic crowd bursts into loud and long applause at its conclusion. Loosely orchestrated renditions of “Love in Outer Space” and “Outer Spaceways, Inc.” are little more than jams but Ra’s unerring internal rhythm and innate sense of structure holds things together, delighting the audience with his effortless aplomb. “Take the ‘A’ Train” and “St. Louis Blues” are given relaxed, carefully considered performances with astonishingly subtle dynamic shadings and fleet passagework. Ra is totally in his element here—and he’s just getting warmed up.

After a brief intro to “Penthouse Serenade,” Sonny attacks the piano in three-handed fashion, sounding like a slightly more mild-mannered Cecil Taylor, with fragments of the tune interjecting themselves into the furious outpouring of notes. This is Ra as virtuoso pianist and when he suddenly shifts back to the theme, the enraptured audience bursts into stunned applause as Sonny moves to a loping rag-time feel. At its conclusion, the crowd can barely contain their enthusiasm, hooting, hollering, cheering, clapping; Sun Ra was finally being given his due in one of Europe’s preeminent art-music capitals. A short take on “Angel Race” returns to jamming mode with Sun Ra singing the verse. There’s not much to it, but the audience eats it up. “I want to invite you to attend a party,” Ra tells them. “1980, on Jupiter.” Then he launches into an intense improvisation built around stabbing, Morse code-like rhythmic figures and towering block chords reminiscent of “Quest” (which appeared on the WKCR radio broadcast on July 8, 1977 and later released as a single on the Saturn label).

“Honeysuckle Rose” starts off with a slightly off-kilter take on the melody before Sonny moves into a “mad-scientist” keyboard assault. The independence of the hands and fingers is quite remarkable and his voicing of the thick, dissonant tone clusters strongly accents the consonant notes—meaning the functional harmony still functions. Ra knows exactly what he’s doing! No matter how “out” it gets, the music is still deeply rooted in the old-time jazz tradition and this tour-de-force performance is rapturously received by the audience, who vociferously demand an encore. “Friendly Galaxy/Spontaneous Simplicity” is another genially tossed off jamming vehicle (and somewhat overlong at almost eight minutes) but the audience loves it just the same.

Of the four solo piano recordings in 1977, Piano Recital, Teatro La Fenice is probably my least favorite. Although Ra’s performance is riveting, the fuzzy sound quality makes it hard for me to fully enjoy. However, given the rarity of such solo outings, it remains essential for the hardcore Sun Ra fan. Personally, I’d love to get my hands on a copy of the video.

June 16, 2013

Sun Ra & His Arkestra: The Bottom Line, New York, NY 1977-12-13 (CDR)

It’s unclear whether Sun Ra remained in Europe after the November 24 Piano Recital in Venice or returned to the United States before heading back to Italy in January 1978. There are no
entries in The Earthly Recordings regarding the entire month of December and, in an interview with Keyboard Magazine, Sonny spoke of the solo performance and the January ’78 quartet concerts as if they were part of the same tour (see Campbell & Trent, p.245). In addition, trumpeter Michael Ray states in his liner notes to the 2007 reissue of Disco 3000 that, following the week-long run at The Jazz Showcase (which produced the albums, The Soul Vibrations of Man and Taking a Chance on Chances), “[t]he very next phone call from Sun Ra was from Rome Italy. He asked if I was able to come to Rome to record an album.” This seems to indicate that Sonny had stayed behind to negotiate the Horo Records deal and set up last-minute concert dates for the New Year—and without even knowing who else might be joining him.

But, then, in the summer of 2008, two previously unheard Arkestra tracks were broadcast by Sun Ra archivist Michael D. Anderson on the ESP Internet Radio Tribute, both of which were purportedly recorded at The Bottom Line in New York on December 13, 1977. While I have no real reason to doubt “The Good Doctor” (and it would make sense, in a way, that Sonny would be back in the states during the holidays), upon close listening (and considering the information above), I’m not totally convinced that date is correct.

In any event, the contiguous 16-minute concert sequence is certainly unusual, beginning with (apparently) the only known performance of “I Cover the Waterfront,” the 1933 hit song by Johnny Green and Edward Heyman, which was popularized by Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald. As with other old-timey numbers in this vein, it is mostly a vehicle for one of John Gilmore’s extended flights on tenor saxophone, punctuated by harmonized riffing from the rest of the band and a short organ solo from Ra. Of course, it is always delightful to hear Gilmore playing in this sort of straight-ahead, post-bop fashion but, honestly, it’s not one of those jaw-droppingly amazing displays he was routinely capable of. Instead, it’s merely great: tasteful, inventive and swinging. “Song of the Stargazers” appears here in a radically re-arranged version, with an odd major/minor tonality, angular herky-jerky rhythms and lyrics that are antiphonally chanted by the band rather than sung. Even weirder, Sonny adds some cryptic declamations towards the end. Interestingly, I don’t hear June Tyson or any trumpets whatsoever but Vincent Chauncey sounds especially strong on the French horn and is later joined by someone (possibly Craig Harris) on a warm and brassy trombone. Frankly, the abject strangeness of this rendition makes me suspect a different date—but then again, who knows?

Ultimately, this snippet of tape poses more questions than it answers, particularly when it comes to nailing down the chronology. Perhaps there is more from this concert in the El Saturn archive, which might provide some more clues as to its origin. Regardless, the unusual repertoire and excellent sound quality make it a highly enjoyable listen. There is a lot of other rare material to be found on the ESP Internet Radio Tribute and is well worth tracking down—even if the discographical info is a little sketchy. So it goes with Sun Ra!

COMMENTS:

Roddus said...
The Earthly Recordings Of Sun Ra(2nd Edition) arrived in the mail this week. A great book but slightly disappointed with the physical quality. Several pages were still attached together at the tops as they were not guillotined properly and several pages in the artists index at the rear had badly smudged print. Bought it directly from Cadence as i couldn't find it anywhere else. I was pretty expensive for a paperback but Glad I have it.

I found an online Jazz shop last week and they had pretty much all the Transparency releases on CD which I have asked my electrical wholesaler to buy for me using my bonus points for
spending so much money with them over the last six months. Also they are getting me a copy of the 28CD set “The Complete Detroit Jazz Center Residency” (I Hope) from Amazon, possibly the last new one available anywhere.

The obsession grows.

I have managed to download the ESP internet Radio Tribute from Yotte’s Blog, looking forward to checking it out.

Rodger Coleman said...
Jean K is correct. The spine on my copy of “The Earthly Recordings” has split and the pages are loose. I hope someday a third edition is published - with a proper sewn binding!

Sam said...
I’ll chime in on the Earthly Recordings binding...I’m not at the rubber band stage yet but the spine is totally split at around 1974. But it's well-loved regardless.

June 30, 2013

This is just too good not to share on this beautiful summer Sun Ra Sunday. Via Include Me Out (h/t to Sam Byrd for hipping me to this!)

July 14, 2013

Sun Ra Quartet Featuring John Gilmore: New Steps (Horo 2LP)

While it’s possible Sun Ra returned to the states in December 1977 to appear with the Arkestra at The Bottom Line in New York, it seems more likely he stayed in Italy, where he worked out a deal to release a series of albums for the Horo Records label (Unity (recorded by Ra earlier in the year) and two new studio recordings, New Steps and Other Voices Other Blues, all of them double-LP sets). According to Prof. Campbell (via Gianni Morelenbaum Gualberto, who produced the sessions), “the Horo albums were made in a small studio [Horo Voice Studio] that specialized in jingles, because none of the other studios in Rome were available at the time...[They] were recorded in such haste because Sun Ra was about leave Italy. But after they were completed, Sunny changed his mind and extended his stay for another two weeks” (Campbell & Trent p.245-246). Although the Venice gig took place back in November, this is further evidence that Ra remained in Italy through the end of 1977.

Regardless, there was good reason for Ra to want to do something with Horo. The Italian jazz label was founded by Aldo Sinesio in 1972, and had released albums by local artists like Gianni Basso, Giorgio Gaslini, Enrico Rava, and Giancarlo Schiaffini as well as American luminaries such as Max Roach, Archie Shepp, Gil Evans, Don Pullen, Ran Blake and Lester Bowie. Yet, however prestigious and critically acclaimed, Horo records were unfortunately issued in vanishingly small quantities and were poorly distributed beyond Western Europe, making them extremely rare today (especially in the U.S.). Rumors of the label's resurrection have come and gone for years but nothing really has come of it and these classic Sun Ra records remain frustratingly out of print. As with Unity, my copies are merely OK-sounding “needledrops” but I’d sure love to have clean originals. Needless to say, they go for big bucks on the secondary
The Horo studio recordings are not only obscure and nearly impossible to find but also some of the most unusual in all the (already unusual) discography. The hastily gathered ensemble consists of a mere quartet with Sun Ra on piano, organ and synthesizer, John Gilmore on tenor sax and percussion, newcomer Michael Ray on trumpet and percussion and Luqman Ali on drums. This is rare opportunity to hear Sun Ra in a small group setting. Moreover, the skeletal ensemble prompted him to do something he didn’t often do: record overdubs on additional tracks. According to Gualberto, Sonny found “a small cheap keyboard” in the studio and used it to program overdubbed bass lines and other effects while the rest of the group provided additional percussion and drums (Id.). This gives many of the loosely constructed tracks an impossible, otherworldly quality that is truly unique. Nothing else Ra ever did (before or since) sounds quite like this.

New Steps was recorded first, on January 2 and 7 and released as a two-LP set in 1978 as Horo HDP25-26 (Id.) and the opening take of “My Favorite Things” signals the difference in the quartet’s approach. While the tune had appeared before on Some Blues But Not The Kind That’s Blue and Unity, here it is simultaneously stripped-down and souped-up. The ultra-laconic Luqman Ali makes Tommy Hunter sound like Clifford Jarvis while Ra’s nimble piano figuration and bizarre, overdubbed bass lines create a stuttering, bubbling counterpoint. This is a primo vehicle for Gilmore, who naturally plays his ass off, referencing John Coltrane’s famous remake while doing his own inimitable thing on tenor. Ray, holds his own throughout these sessions, playing with admirable taste and restraint (especially for such a young kid) but Gilmore is clearly the star soloist here. It is altogether fitting that these albums were billed to the “Sun Ra Quartet Featuring John Gilmore.”

Aside from such familiar fare as “My Favorite Things,” the old standard, “Exactly Like You” (in its premiere performance) and “When There Is No Sun” (complete with group vocals), these Horo sessions are all markedly experimental, with loosely structured head arrangements and an inspired, playful approach to multi-track technology. Sun Ra and his men are clearly enjoying themselves in the tiny, cramped studio and that sense of pleasure and adventure comes through in the music. “Moon People” and “Rome in Twilight” flirt with funk/rock grooves (a harbinger of what’s to come later in the year) while “Friend and Friendship” takes on a more somber, introspective tone. Interestingly, the longest tracks, “Sun Steps” (twelve minutes) and “The Horo” (more than fifteen), eschew studio trickery altogether and present the quartet naked and unadorned, improvising in an abstract but not-quite-free manner. Chord progressions and melodies appear and recede in a dreamlike reverie, spontaneous composition and guided improvisation at its most sensitive and refined, a synchronized group mind at work.

New Steps is yet another neglected masterpiece in the Sun Ra canon – and the follow-up, Other Voices, Other Blues, is perhaps even better. We’ll take a listen to that next time on Sun Ra Sunday.

July 21, 2013

Sun Ra Quartet Featuring John Gilmore: Other Voices, Other Blues (Horo 2LP)
The second Horo studio recording, Other Voices, Other Blues, was recorded at Horo Voice Studio in Rome, Italy on January 8 and 13, 1978 and released later in the year as a two-LP set, Horo HDP 23-24 (Campbell & Trent p.246). As with the other Horo titles, Unity and New Steps,
distribution was poor (especially stateside) and has never been officially reissued, making it one of the rarer albums in the already obscure Sun Ra discography. What a crime! While all of the Horos are fascinating records, Other Voices, Other Blues is by far my favorite of the two Italian studio sessions.

Unlike New Steps, there are overdubs on every single track (an unusual practice for Ra, even into the '80s and '90s), with Sonny adding synthesized bass lines (or other stuff) while John Gilmore, Michael Ray and Luqman Ali contribute additional percussion to the mix of keyboards, saxophone, trumpet and drums. This greatly thickens the sound of the quartet and lends a consistently funky and experimental flavor to the album. It’s easy to picture the four men crowded into the tiny studio, earphones on their heads, gleefully constructing these oddly captivating tracks. Any tentativeness heard on New Steps is gone on this second day in the studio—they are going for it! Gilmore is again the star of the show, delivering an endless stream of gloriously inventive solos, while Ray more than holds his own amidst Sun Ra’s burbling, wheezing keyboards and rollicking acoustic piano, only occasionally resorting to his patented (and often annoying) echo-echo trick. In fact, it appears that the young upstart may have gotten under Gilmore’s skin, inspiring some of his most fiery and intensely brilliant playing on record.

Yet, despite all these aural pleasures, there is something slightly dissatisfying for me about these quartet sessions. It’s not just the absence of bass since Ra is adequately providing the bottom end on synthesizer (at least most of the time), so I can only point the finger at the laconic—if not downright sleepy—drumming of Luqman Ali. To be fair, his subtle, sensitive touch contributes to the relaxed, dreamy quality of the albums. But I find myself wanting more from him on the longer, weirder tracks like “Bridge to the 9th Dimension” or “Constellation,” where his boom-chick rhythms remain stubbornly earthbound, only taking off with the addition of Gilmore’s overdubbed drums and percussion. I realize that it is totally unreasonable to expect Ronnie Boykins and Clifford Jarvis to be in the rhythm section, but I can’t help but imagine what that might have sounded like.

Nevertheless, there is an undeniably magical quality to the Horos—and especially Other Voices, Other Blues—which makes them uniquely special, with a loose, exploratory feel reminiscent of the classic Choreographer’s Workshop recordings. Beyond Gilmore’s phenomenal soloing and the ear-tickling studio wizardry, it is Sun Ra’s uncanny ability to transform the cheesiest, most primitive electronic keyboards (and beat-up pianos) into powerfully expressive instruments that is most impressive here. Turning these humble tools into a virtual orchestra of tones, timbres and effects, Ra demonstrates his mastery of electronic (and electrified) music while his compositions—mostly thrown together in the studio—show his effectiveness as an arranger and bandleader, with the simple but flexible heads allowing the small ensemble to wander far and wide. Curiously, Ra did not bother to provide proper titles to these new works, leaving them to Horo to invent. “Springtime and Summer Idyll,” “One Day in Rome” and “Along the Tiber” (and New Steps titles like “Friend and Friendship”) are probably not what Sonny had in mind and are embarrassingly incongruous to the music. However, I suspect he signed away his publishing in order to make these records, so he didn’t (or couldn’t) care what they were called. Whatever, these are inimitably Sun Ra compositions, however slight they may appear on the surface.

Quibbles aside, the Horo quartet records are an essential piece of the Sun Ra puzzle, with Other Voices, Other Blues being a near-masterwork. And Sonny was clearly inspired by this ad hoc, small group setting: he booked at least two concerts for the band while they were in Italy, which were recorded for release on his own Saturn label. We’ll take a listen to those in coming weeks on Sun Ra Sunday.
July 28, 2013

Sun Ra Quartet: *The Mystery of Being* (Horo/Klimt 3LP)

There have been several dodgy, grey-market reissues of the Horo records over the years and the latest is a vinyl-only box set, *The Mystery of Being*, released back in 2011 on the tiny French label, Klimt, which crams the two January 1978 double albums onto three LPs. Sound quality is actually pretty good — certainly better than my crackly needledrops—but at the same time, I suspect these are taken from vinyl sources and then (aggressively) de-noised.

Moreover, the sides are excessively long, resulting in diminished dynamic range and susceptibility to noise. Sadly, one side of my copy has a nasty pressing flaw, which causes the stylus to skip—and they are now out-of-print, so it is not so easily replaceable. *Bummer.* Although there are neither mastering credits nor any liner notes whatsoever, this set purports to present the music in chronological order, providing recording dates on the labels. According to them, the sessions occurred as follows:

**Side One:** January 2: My Favorite Things, Moon People, Rome at Twilight, When There is No Sun
**Side Two:** January 7: Sun Steps, Exactly Like You, Friend and Friendship
**Side Three:** January 8: The Horo, Sun Sky and Wind
**Side Four:** January 13: Springtime and Summer Idyll, Constellation
**Sides Five and Six:** January 2, 7, 8, 13: One Day in Rome, Bridge to the Ninth Dimension, Along the Tiber, Rebellion, The Mystery of Being

That makes some sort of sense until you get to the last disc, which could have been recorded on any one of those dates. *Huh?* This is less than helpful and just another indication of this set’s dubious provenance. I would guess that basic tracks for *New Steps* were recorded on January 2, with overdubbing taking place on January 7. Similarly, basic tracks for *Other Voices, Other Blues* likely took place on January 8, with overdubbing happening on January 13. That’s just a guess, but that would mirror the usual progression in a multi-track environment. Then again, such was a highly unusual practice for Sonny, so who knows how it went down? As with so much in the Sun Ra discography, not much can be known with certainty except that the music is fantastic.

I cannot whole-heartedly recommend *The Mystery of Being*, although if you can find one for a decent price, it might be worth it. Otherwise, I’d recommend ponying up for the rare originals. Me? I’m still waiting for a proper reissue of these classic Sun Ra albums. May I live so long...!

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August 4, 2013

**MAN AND PLANET EARTH**

The planet is the way it is because of the
Scheme of words
When you meet a man
You meet a scheme of words
Patterns of concept
So if the scheme of words was changed
Then man and planet earth would be
Different
Than what it is today
It is not that
The planet is wrong or man is wrong
It is just that
The scheme of words are not possible
To either man
Or the planet.

--Sun Ra

August 11, 2013

Sun Ra: Media Dreams (Saturn/Art Yard 2CD)
Sun Ra: Sound Mirror (Side B) (Saturn LP>CDR)

Obviously pleased with the Horo Voice Studio recordings, Sun Ra lined up some live gigs for the quartet, touring Italy until at least January 23, 1978, where they performed at Teatro Cilak in Milan and recorded Disco 3000 (Saturn CMJ 78). There were other concerts during the intervening weeks, as documented on two other Saturn LPs, Media Dream (Saturn 1978) and Side B of Sound Mirror (Saturn 19782) but the actual dates and locations for these recordings are unknown (see Campbell & Trent pp.247-249). Originally issued in miniscule numbers, these three albums are some of the rarest and most desirable El Saturn LPs in existence.

Thankfully, the intrepid Art Yard label came to the rescue. In 2007, they released The Complete Disco 3000 Concert (CD 001) on two CDs (with the original LP edit reissued as CD 101). Then, in 2008, they put out another two-disc set entitled Media Dreams (CD 002), which presents the original Media Dream album on one CD and a 50-minute concert fragment on another. Taken together, these Art Yard reissues present an almost-complete picture of this highly unusual (and haphazardly documented) tour of Italy. In his liner notes for Media Dreams, Trent points out that while the discovery of some (but not all) of the original tapes from this 1978 sojourn “clarifies some questions, establishing long suspected links between various Saturn albums,” it also “raises as many questions as it answers.” Aside from the Teatro Cilak concert, actual dates and locations remain a mystery. And so it goes with Mr. Ra...

In fact, most of the tracks on original Media Dream are not to be found on the concert recording contained in the Art Yard reissue and those tracks were significantly edited for the official release. Was it all taken from the same concert? Judging from the overall ambience, it could be—or it could be from more than one—but the sound quality on the second disc is significantly degraded, making a direct comparison impossible. According to Trent: “This particular tape is no longer in audiophile condition. It does appear to be the original master, rather than a copy, but is now in a poor state. Art Yard have rescued it in the nick of time and have gone to considerable lengths to improve its quality.” They did the best with what they had and while it sounds pretty good, the tape has dearly suffered the ravages of time.

What is most notable about these live quartet recordings is how they transferred the Horo studio experiments to the stage. While he has been provided with decent pianos at these gigs, Sonny
spends the bulk of his time with a variety of electronic keyboards, including a Moog synthesizer and a Crumar Mainman organ. *Media Dream* opens up with “Saturn Research,” a three-minute blast of ominous, dissonant organ and synth, accompanied by dramatic drums and percussion—and Sonny is only just getting started. On “Constellation” (confusingly not the same composition found on *Other Voices, Other Blues*), Ra switches on the Mainman’s crude rhythm box, which plays a slowed-down cha-cha beat supplemented with a simple, synthesized bass line. Now, in anyone else’s hands, this would be unforgivably cheesy—yet Sonny somehow makes it work and the primitive Mainman organ gives these recordings a uniquely retro-futuristic feel. After a scribbly “Yera of the Sun” (whose Morse Code rhythms vaguely recall “Quest”), the Mainman gets another workout on “Media Dreams,” a thirteen minute *tour de force.* Starting out as a weirdly beautiful ballad form, with twittering organ, legato synth chords and all sorts of electronica effects, Michael Ray takes a long, warm-toned solo on trumpet, ably following Ra’s harmonic twists and turns. Then it devolves into Ra’s wild, mad scientist display. At the ten-minute mark, John Gilmore comes in with a folk-like melody on tenor saxophone but just as Ra starts to heat things up again, the track quickly fades out. It sounds to me like this could have gone on forever.

Only the last two tracks on *Media Dream* are taken from the concert recording found on disc two of Art Yard’s reissue and they both feature Ra on acoustic piano. The curiously (mis)titled “Twigs at Twilight” is actually “Images,” but brutally edited, picking up about half-way through and beginning with Gilmore’s tenor solo. Although Gilmore takes many liberties with the tune, in retrospect, it is immediately recognizable as “Images.” Anyway, this is definitely another one of the all-time great Gilmore solos, not overly extended but still sublime. After a brief piano excursion and drum break, the track fades out before the return of the head, further obscuring its origins. Finally, “An Unbeknowneth Love” begins with rhapsodic piano and boom-chick trap-drumming from Luqman Ali—but someone (Gilmore?) is playing tympani, adding slippery and dramatic percussion effects: BOING! BOING! Ra gets into an aggressively dissonant, avant-garde mode before the drum solo, which fades out to end the album. *Very interesting.*

The second disc contains seven pieces, picking up with “Friendly Galaxy,” which is quite different from the version found on *The Complete Disco 3000 Concert,* where it was combined with “Third Planet.” Ra starts out on piano but quickly moves to organ, eventually getting the Mainman’s drumbox/bassline thing happening. Unfortunately, Ali drops in and out, unable to find the groove. Ra is going crazy with his ragbag arsenal of electronic keyboards but this is not a wholly satisfying group performance. “An Unbeknowneth Love” follows, with the drum solo leading immediately into “Of Other Tomorrows Never Known.” This track appeared in slightly edited form on the *Sound Mirror* LP and it is another virtuoso performance from Sonny. Woozy string ensemble chords and bubby bass synthesizer seem to outline a basic structure from which Ra builds his quirky original electronic music, full of astonishingly variegated textures and intertwined melodic lines. Meanwhile, light-handed drums scrape and murmur in the background. About six minutes in, you can hear Ra barking out instructions—though you can’t quite make out what he says. Soon thereafter, Gilmore plays an extended cadenza as Ra hints at the chord changes to “Images.”

Despite Ra’s commands and a fluid introduction, the horn players fluff their entrance—and while Ray and Ra solo admirably, it really isn’t until Gilmore comes in that things really take off. No wonder this version of “Images” was edited (and retitled) for official release! Next up is one of the earliest known performances of “The Truth About Planet Earth” (a/k/a “Bad Truth”), one of Sun Ra’s patently hectoring space chants. When he accompanies himself with a soulfully swinging piano vamp, this has an almost-commercial pop-song feel—but Ra eventually abandons the instrument and everyone takes turns at the microphone, a spacey echo effect
added to the voices at the soundboard. At nearly seven minutes, it goes on a bit too long for casual listening (although I'm sure it was thoroughly entertaining live). A brief rendition of "Space is the Place" offers an intriguing rearrangement of this concert staple, with new lyrics and alternative countermelodies, which immediately segues into "The Shadow World." Don't get too excited, though! It cuts off after only a couple of minutes.

That leaves the humorously titled "Jazzisticology" as the remaining track from Sound Mirror that was recorded on this Italian tour but is not found on either Media Dreams or The Complete Disco 3000 Concert. It is impossible to tell if it belongs with its companion, "Of Other Tomorrows Never Known," or if it is from a different concert altogether. The sound of Gilmore’s microphone sounds more gritty and immediate than elsewhere but it doesn't help matters that my "needledrop" of Sound Mirror is a crackly mess. In any event, "Jazzisticology" is another improvised post-bop number similar to what was done in the Horo Voice Studio, with Sonny cueing the arrangement and telepathically communicating the chord changes to Gilmore with his sparse piano comping. Then Ray solos over Ali's drums before the sax and piano return rubato, only to fade out too soon. An inconsequential track, perhaps, but there are other reasons to seek out Sound Mirror (which we'll get to anon).

Needless to say, Art Yard's Media Dreams is an essential, if still discographically mysterious, release. The Complete Disco 3000 Concert may be even better—we'll take a listen to that one next time on Sun Ra Sunday.

August 18, 2013

Sun Ra: The Complete Disco 3000 Concert (Art Yard 2CD)

The quartet of Sun Ra, John Gilmore, Michael Ray and Luqman Ali performed at Teatro Cilak in Milan on January 23, 1978, apparently at the very end of their extended stay in Italy. While their exact movements are poorly documented during this period, they were certainly back in the states on or before January 29, where the Arkestra appeared at the Famous Ballroom in Baltimore (see Campbell & Trent pp.247-250). The Teatro Cilak concert was recorded and portions were released later in the year as Disco 3000 (Saturn LP CMIJ78) and reissued by Art Yard in 2009. Prior to this, though, Art Yard released the entire Milan performance on two compact discs as The Complete Disco 3000 Concert (CD 001) in 2007. As with Media Dreams, these welcome reissues not only make available some of the rarest of all Saturn LPs, but also provide additional material that puts these weird and wonderful recordings into a wider context.

The concert opens with “Disco 3000” and, right away, you can tell the small band has really started to gel after several weeks working together. While Media Dreams is dominated by Ra’s electronica (wonderful as it is), Disco 3000 is much more of a cohesive group effort. There’s still plenty of mad-scientist keyboard extravaganzas, with the Crumar Mainman organ and cheesy rhythm box establishing an uneasy, mutant disco vamp—but here, Ali locks in comfortably with the beat and the horns are given plenty of space across its epic twenty-six minutes. About five minutes in, they suddenly launch into “Space is the Place,” but, curiously, not in the re-arrangement found on Media Dreams. After a couple of minutes of chanting, things take off again, with some absolutely killer tenor saxophone from Gilmore and hypnotic, quasi-ambient keyboard effects from Ra. It’s tempting to just say “Disco 3000” is the crowning achievement of the quartet’s brief existence and leave it at that. A classic Sun Ra track.
Not that there isn’t more great music on these discs! After a short drum solo, “Sun of the Cosmos” continues in the guided improvisation vein, including more crazed keyboard work from Sonny and another outrageous tenor solo from Gilmore, where he explores the entire range of extended techniques from altissimo screams to impossible split-tone multiphonics. Whew! Ra then moves to the piano for “Echos [sic] of the World,” a pretty ballad with Gilmore in the lead. “Geminiology” picks up the tempo with some jaunty swing and a riff-based head arrangement but Ra takes it way out: thunderous low-register tone clusters and furious parallel runs, just a total assault on the piano. Then it’s suddenly back to the cheery jazz feel for Ray’s extended solo on warm-toned trumpet. “Sky Blues” is exactly as the title suggests, a swinging blues riff, with Gilmore delivering the sermon. Lord have mercy! This is another incredible Gilmore solo, a blues history lesson: from honking, hokey gutbucket to dizzying post-bop harmonic labyrinths to the most out-there avant garde wailing—all without losing the thread of tradition and ending with an emphatic flourish. Dammnmmm.

Disc one concludes with six minutes of “Friendly Galaxy,” given an angular and dissonant rearrangement, fading out on Ray’s muted trumpet solo. Disc two then fades up some time later (the reel flip evidenced by the increased wow-and-flutter at the beginning of the track) and, after about a minute of noodling on “Friendly Galaxy,” Ra signals “Third Planet.” The two horns sound super-tight and Gilmore once again plays a mind-bendingly great tenor solo, this time accompanied only by the drums. Ali is uncharacteristically aggressive here, swinging like a mofo while Gilmore blows the doors down. No wonder Sonny picked this track for release on the original Disco 3000 LP! “Dance of the Cosmo Aliens” was also included on the original LP and it’s another spaced-out electronica-fest, with Gilmore and Ray putting down the horns and picking up percussion instruments. Even so, the expanded rhythm section struggles a bit trying to follow along with the crude electric drum box. Even so, Ra’s keyboard playing is otherworldly and the crowd eats it up, bursting into rapturous applause at the end.

“Spontaneous Simplicity” is given an electrified rearrangement with lots of wild keyboard effects and some blasting trumpet work from Ray, but is perhaps overlong at fourteen-some minutes. This segues into “Images,” which is given a tighter reading than on Media Dreams. While Gilmore’s solo is probably not the equal of “Twigs at Twilight,” it’s still pretty freaking awesome. Although the packaging says this includes “Over the Rainbow,” it actually appears on the following track, “When There Is No Sun,” which is given a gentle, gospelized feel, with Gilmore and Ray sweetly singing and Ra accompanying the on churchy organ. Then Sonny erupts into another electronic frenzy before slipping over to the piano for a brief sketch of “Over the Rainbow.” Finally, the concert ends with a reprise of “Space is the Place,” with Ra vamping on piano for a while before joining in on the chant. Interestingly, this rendition shares the quickened phrasing of the unique rearrangement heard on Media Dreams, but lacks the horn parts and countermelodies.

Sonny obviously thought highly of this concert, releasing not only the Disco 3000 LP but editing the title track and “Sky Blues” down for release on a seven-inch 45RPM single (Saturn 2100) which can be found on the two-CD set, The Singles (Evidence ECD 22164-2). Retitled “Disco 2100,” the sprawling original is reduced to two minutes and 43 seconds of Ra’s swirling, primitive electronica while the flip side focuses on the first two-and-a-half minutes of boogie-woogie. I don’t expect it got a lot of airplay.

While all of the Art Yard releases are essential in my opinion, The Complete Disco 3000 Concert is really something special, presenting Sun Ra in this unusual quartet situation where everything just comes together. You not only get Sonny at his most adventurous, demonstrating
his inimitable mastery of electronic keyboards (as well as some virtuosic piano playing) but the young newcomer, Michael Ray, plays with admirable taste and restraint while Luqman Ali more than holds his own as the lone member of the rhythm section. And Gilmore—well, what more can be said? Incredible! Get it before it goes out of print forever.

August 25, 2013

Sun Ra: *Disco 3000* (Saturn/Art Yard CD)

Although *The Complete Disco 3000 Concert* (recorded at The Teatro Cilak in Milan, Italy) contains all of the music found on the original LP, Art Yard also released *Disco 3000* (CD 101) as a straight reissue (with alternative artwork) in 2009. I’m glad they did because it is a classic—and very strange—Sun Ra album that deserves to be heard in its original form. Moreover, listening to the entire two-hour concert is a considerable time commitment, which, in some ways, dilutes the impact of the original *Disco 3000* LP in my opinion.

The first side consists of the twenty-six minute title track while side two contains “Third Planet,” “Friendly Galaxy” and “Dance of the Cosmo Aliens.” While you can my descriptions on my review of *The Complete Disco 3000 Concert*, what is interesting to me is how much more effective “Dance of the Cosmo Aliens” is when it is shorn from its original context, the twisted electronica bookending the album with “Disco 3000.” Or maybe my ears got tired by the time it was played, over an hour into the original concert. Hardcore fans will want both, but *Disco 3000* is essential.

In typically Saturnal fashion, Michael Ray’s liner notes (penned in 2007 and contained on both Art Yard CDs) are both enlightening and confusing. “It was here,” he says, “that most of my early dues were paid.”

Sun Ra would tell me “You playing your horn alright but try my way, unless you have some sort of mental block.” “Play that apple. Remember it is round so think of 360 degrees of sound and color. It’s red which means its energy deals with the first chakra, you have to be able to play the vibration.” We rehearsed like this from early in the morning to late at night for days. It was like having someone erase your mainframe and reboot your hard drive! Sunny always said expect the unexpected. “We might have a gig on Mars one day so you got to be swinging on your horn, because they don’t party like earthlings”

Elsewhere, he writes:
The Winter of ’78, I headed to Rome not knowing what to expect…Sun Ra would get up every day at dawn. We would then drive over to Media Dreams, a small studio run by Andreas and Alfie, very good friends of the band. Andreas was credited with the development of the Walkman, which he sold to Sony Company.

*Huh?* “Andreas” is presumably Andreas Pavel, inventor of a proto-Walkman, which was (according to Wikipedia) patented in Italy in 1977. So, it is certainly possible that he was in Rome in January of 1978—but, as far as I can tell, he had nothing to do with the Horo Records label or the “Horo Voice Studio,” where *New Steps* and *Other Voices, Other Blues* were (presumably) recorded (see Campbell & Trent pp.243-246). Ray makes no mention of Horo—is he referring to those albums or were there other studio recordings made in Italy in January 1978? If so, where are they? I’m “friends” with Michael Ray on Facebook; maybe I should ask him...
September 1, 2013

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hO1qSAirUPI

Wherein I take Sun Ra Sunday to the YouTube Vinyl Community.

February 2, 2014

Sun Ra Arkestra: Live At The Red Garter (Transparency 0319) (3CD)

The latest release from the Transparency label presents an expanded version of the Red Garter tape recorded in July 1970 across two CDs along with a third disc containing 82 photographs of the band by Lee Santa—a really nice bonus. The cool thing is that the liner notes are written by the one-and-only Sam Byrd!

The Transparency edition is taken from a slightly better source than the circulating CDR as it is a bit longer and appears to present the music in its proper sequence. Certainly, the sound quality is marginally improved. But make no mistake: this is rough going. Derived from a monophonic amateur recording made from the audience, all the attendant noise, distortion and balance problems remain intact. While the music is great (featuring the great Alan Silva on cello), the sound quality is still pretty dreadful.

Even so, Transparency should be commended for making some of the rarest Sun Ra material available to the masses. And kudos to Sam for his astute liner notes. I've said it before and I'll say it again: he is the one who should be writing Sun Ra Sunday! As for me, I am just now trying to get back into it. Stay tuned…

March 2, 2014

Sun Ra & His Astro-Infinity Arkestra: Other Strange Worlds (Roaratorio LP)

Just released from Roaratorio Records is Other Strange Worlds, containing previously unheard recordings from May 1965 from the Sun Ra Archive. While only available on limited-edition vinyl, it also contains a coupon for a free MP3 download—so, whether or not you even have a turntable, every Sun Ra freak needs to jump on this quick!

According to archivist Michael D. Anderson’s brief liner notes, the recording was intended as a “second volume” to the wonderfully weird Strange Strings album but, for whatever reason, never released. Certainly, the approach is similar, with an arsenal of exotic instruments deployed in what Sunny called “an exercise in ignorance.” But on Other Strange Worlds, the Arkestra is substantially reduced, down to a quintet of Sun Ra, John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, Ali Hassan and Art Jenkins. Along with the koras, zithers, kalimbas and fiddles, Gilmore and Jenkins stick mostly to percussion while Allen takes keening leads on oboe and Hassan adds warm trombone. Occasionally, Ra will brighten the texture by tinkling on the celeste; but, most of the time, he is subtly guiding the improvisations, turning them into challenging and sublime pieces of space-age chamber music.
Recorded in Sun Ra's apartment on the Lower East Side of New York (you can hear the telephone ring several times during the proceedings), *Other Strange Worlds* actually sounds quite clear and clean—especially compared to the noisy and distorted *Strange Strings*. The smaller ensemble obviously contributes to the transparent sound quality yet Sun Ra's mastery of effective lo-fi recording techniques is quite in evidence here. Thankfully, Roaratorio has done an excellent job with this vinyl pressing: my copy is flat as pancake, quiet as a ghost and sounds flipping fantastic. Officially out this Tuesday, run—don't walk—to your nearest record store and grab yourself a copy. Or do what I did and order it direct from their website. *Other Strange Worlds* is another essential addition to the Sun Ra discography and should not be missed!

**COMMENTS:**

**Roddus said...**

Yeah, bugger, I got no turntable, but it may turn up on Cd one day of Yotte will post it for us. Anyhow Rodger, I have finally got around to putting in some time listening to some of the Complete Detroit Jazz Center Residency 28 CD set and it is quite fantastic, sound quality is well above bootleg quality and with only 13 musicians in the band things are a little less chaotic. Lots and lots of excellent soloing. Compulsory listening. Have you heard it? I highly Recommend it.

March 1, 2015

While I was record shopping in Birmingham, Alabama I made a point of driving out to the Elmwood Cemetery to visit Sun Ra's grave. The humble marker was not easy to find--even with a map!--but it was incredibly moving (if a little bit creepy) to be standing at the site of Sonny's earthly remains.

Someone had left behind a pair of joss sticks (which I was unable to get lit in the wind) and some plastic flowers atop a small pile of pinecones. I found a pinecone and put it on the pile and looked around, surrounded by miles and miles of dead bodies, their grey stone sentries looming across the landscape. I'm pretty sure this not where Sonny wanted to wind up.

I swept off the gravestone and paid my respects. I apologized for letting him down with the Sun Ra Sunday project--and, I swear, I could hear him laughing at me down there under the ground. Well, maybe I'll get back to it one of these days. Making this pilgrimage was inspiring--and there's not much time left for me on this planet!

In the meanwhile, check out Sam Byrd's excellent post over at World of Abstract Dreams for an excellent overview of the recent iTunes-only remasters (which I don't have). There's also another vinyl-only release out on Roaratorio, a previously unheard studio album from 1974 called, *Sign of the Myth*. You don't need me to tell you that it is essential listening; if you are reading this, you need it.

Sun Ra may be gone, but his music lives on.