

PHAROAH MEETS THE FARMER

By Joe Stinnett

I don't know how much everyone here knows about jazz music, some of you way more than me probably, so forgive me if I cover some familiar territory before I get into my speech. I want to talk a little about 20th century jazz music.

The accepted starting point for what became jazz is Congo Square in New Orleans, where African Americans were allowed to dance and play music even during slavery times. Around the turn of the 20th century, that rhythm and those drums started to swing.

Generally, jazz is distinguished from other genres of music because of that swing, of that emphasis on the back beat, of the rhythmic structure which gives a string or sequence of notes a little bounce or rebound, like the secret ingredient of a special sauce. Improvisation is another key component of what make jazz music distinctive. It happens when a musician takes off from a score or arrangement or simply the tune from a standard Broadway show song and starts basically making up the music as he or she goes along, within a structure like key or rhythm.

In the '50s and '60s and '70s, some of the players even did away with that structure resulting in something that was maybe closer to noise than music, later triggering in turn a return to traditionalism in the 1980s.

What I want to talk about tonight involves someone who improvised their entire life — not primarily in musical terms but in everything — meaning he went off the score, off the charts, off the books and created his own story, really his own art out of his life and what he did, and it's that sort of gestalt — that wholeness — that defines him, rather than any specific part of combination of parts.

Prior to World War II, jazz was more popular than it is today. Big bands playing swing music were the order of the day in polite society for blacks and whites. The music grew in popularity as the technology to record and replay and broadcast it grew after beginning to really take off in the 1920s. No tv, just radios playing jazz music from big cities like New York and Chicago and 78 rpm records available in places like Lynchburg — and even farther out in the hinterlands.

One of the people who took advantage of all of the above to become one of the greatest American musicians, and certainly the greatest jazz musician, was Duke Ellington. The Penguin Guide to Jazz (1994) says "Ellington's story on record remains the most commanding legacy in the music, impossible to surpass." A few pages later, the writer notes that Ellington was "one of the first composers — in any field — to recognize the aesthetic implications of recording." Back

then, recording was new technology, just like rockets and satellites were the new technology of the 1950s two or three decades later.

While Sir Duke played piano, composed, led small groups and was practically a UN ambassador for the United States, he's primarily known as the leader of a Big Band. And so is the subject of my speech – who is not Duke Ellington...

Duke Ellington. Swing and Sway with Sammy Kaye. Jump and Sweat with Charlie Barnett. Glenn Miller. Tommy Dorsey. Fletcher Henderson. Sonny Blount. Maybe you have heard of many of these folks, but not all of them?

When trends peak, they mutate, and that's what happened with jazz and big bands after World War II, with the rise of bebop, or just bop. Charlie Parker – Bird – Clint Eastwood made a movie about him – pioneered this sound, along with a few other artists like Dizzy Gillespie — the trumpet player with the bulging cheeks.

Bop has more of an edgy, sometimes skittering sound and rhythm, often played rapidly with a lot of notes but not always, different and faster than the fluid swinging mood of most pre-war jazz. Bop flowered in the 1950s and one stream evolved into something called the New Thing or “free jazz,” – which the subject of my paper would argue was not free at all. Free jazz can sound like noise to the casual listener, and that was the point of some of it. Rather than noise, I would compare it more to the art of the Abstract Expressionists who also flourished in the 1950s in New York. Free jazz dispenses with rhythm and key and shoots off into a highly-individualistic, often dense, stream or storm of urgent sound.

Like a Jackson Pollock painting or Beat poetry from the 50s, the meaning/nonmeaning/feeling of a free jazz piece of out-there improvisation is not always apparent, but it begins to pull you in if you study and focus on it. Often, I believe, those are the cultural experiences which are the most meaningful.

Here are a few lines from “Howl,” written in 1955, by Allen Ginsburg, that connect to my topic:
“Angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection/
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night/
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking/
in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating/
across the tops of the cities contemplating jazz”

In 1960s, rock swept away what was left of all kinds of jazz, from traditional to free, in the mind of the record-buying public. The musicians kept at it, out of the spotlight for the most part. Ellington and Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, remained popular for more than just the strength of their music. Other jazz stalwarts continued to forge their own path, out to the fringes of music and sound.

Tonight, I want you to join me way out on those fringes as I share my enthusiasm about my topic, Herman “Sonny” Blount, better known as Sun Ra.

SLIDE: first one, of Ra.

This tale begins in the Deep South, in Birmingham, Ala., known as the Magic City, in 1914, then moves north to Chicago, then to New York for the 1960s, then finally to Philadelphia, with a frequent side trips to ancient Egypt and outer space. Or outer jazz anyway. Sun Ra was a musician so far ahead of his time we may never catch up to him. He turned his entire life into a work that I believe music lovers and scholars will continue to examine for many years to come. In addition to music – he was a composer and recording artist probably on a par with Duke Ellington – his interests included poetry, philosophy, mysticism, afro-futurism, the Bible, Egyptology, satellites, nuclear war, Batman, and Walt Disney. If you had to categorize Sun Ra and his band, a big band called the Arkestra, let me spell that out A-R-K – estra – Ark of the Covenant — Noah’s Ark? — you could put him on the far-out fringe of bebop, the sometimes dissonant and difficult version of jazz I mentioned earlier that developed after World War II. Like Ellington, he could write out complex music as fast as he could think of it. And often, he contradicted expectations and wasn't that far out at all.

A keyboard player, Ra first made his name in Chicago in the late 1940s for his ability to transpose complicated big band arrangements into different keys for a variety of instruments, working with Fletcher Henderson, a big band leader who was hipper than Glenn Miller, but of that ilk. This was at the tail end of the big band era, at the Club De Lisa. “One of Chicago’s better clubs,” sniffed the NYT in Ra’s obituary.

Ra’s Chicago-era music is tame compared to what came next, when he moved the Arkestra to New York City in the early 1960s. New York was the site of his most far-out music, music that could be harsh, a hard-to-understand and even harder to appreciate cascade of sound, or noise. For a few years, that was the point of it all for jazz, in the spirit of the rebellious times, to rebel against structure in music.

SLIDE: RX cover and Space Pharaoh pic. Here are a couple pics of Ra in the late 60s and early 70s.

After less than 10 years in New York, the band moved to Philly, where Ra lived for almost the rest of his life, playing music, studying, talking and rehearsing the Arkestra almost 24-7. A few of his key band members followed him from Chicago to New York and on to Philadelphia and played with him for his entire career. The band lived communally in a row house on Morton Street in Philadelphia, where at least one of them still lives.

Now might be a good time to listen to a little bit of Sun Ra. I have some samples of his stuff from the tame to the weird to the amusing to the flat-out crazy. This first tune is pretty tame, it's called Saturn.

SLIDE: 1958 Jazz in Silhouette cover, original, compare to abstract art.

MUSIC: from the 1958 record, Jazz in Silhouette:

Saturn, first 15-20 sec, then about 2 minutes in.

I've been a fan of Sun Ra for a long time and have many, but nowhere near all of his recordings. There are so many recordings and writings that hardly anyone can keep track of them, although discographers are making valiant efforts. Of the hundreds of recordings, many have been released multiple times on a variety of obscure labels. Ra had his own record company, called Saturn, and issued his own recordings willy-nilly in small amounts, selling them at shows from cardboard boxes. At the shows, you could pick through and buy what you wanted, if you could figure out what it was, since the records often lacked labels or were mislabeled.

I compared him to Duke Ellington earlier, but Sunny's presentation was about as far from the elegant Sir Duke as you could get and stay on the same planet. Not that Ra claimed to be from Earth anyway! He was very very visual and his clothes and costumes and album covers, many of which he drew himself, complement the music.

SLIDE: Ellington and Ra

Herman Blount – later Sun Ra -- could sight read and compose music from age 12 on. He was a pioneer in self-recording and especially in incorporating the sound of the recording itself into the music. He demanded discipline and precision and constant practice from his musicians. While most of his compositions allowed plenty of space for improvisation, the overall structure was tightly planned, and some of his scores are in the Library of Congress (where he put them) today.

SLIDE: Score from 1954

Relatively unknown compared to people like Ellington or even Miles Davis or John Coltrane — the giants of 20th century jazz music – Ra is highly regarded by critics and other musicians. Here is what the Penguin Guide to Jazz, has to say about him. “A much maligned but hugely influential figure ... one of the most significant band leaders of the post-war period ... He drew on Ellington and Fletcher Henderson ... he developed a convincing role for the synthesizer and was a strong rather than subtle piano player ... the bands were terrific ... frankly experimental ...”

Peter Watrous wrote in the NYT obituary: “The construction of his personality, with all its strange references, was strivingly independent, and his willingness to play almost anywhere, from jazz clubs to Egyptian pyramids, from Lower East Side dives with huge 50-member bands,

to Coney Island with John Cage, allied him with early performance artists. His career argues persuasively against limitations.”

Sun Ra’s life and recorded works are slowly becoming better documented, despite his own efforts to the contrary, thanks to in part Dr. John Szwed, an emeritus professor of African-American Studies and Anthropology at Yale who wrote Ra’s biography, “Space is the Place;” and Dr. Robert Campbell, a psychology professor at Clemson, who assembled the first solid discography of Ra’s major works. And John Corbett is a Chicago writer, producer, gallery and owner who found a home for more than 150 boxes of Sun Ra material from Ra’s manager’s estate at the University of Chicago library. In addition to Sun Ra’s own voluminous writings and poetry and interviews, I’m drawing some of my specifics from their works, as well as the research of all the people who wrote the detailed liner notes for the series of remastered Saturn CDs that were issued by Evidence Records in the 1990s.

Now, a little about his personal life: I can’t really find that he had much of a personal life. He grew up smart and a bit lonely and often claimed that since he was from another planet, he didn’t have a family. He never married, had apparently no interest in sex with women or men, and had no children. His living room was really his rehearsal hall.

SLIDE: Ra outside Morton Street

SLIDE: Ra in Morton Street living room

But he was gregarious and thoughtful and friendly. He was listed in the Philadelphia phone book under “Ra, Sun” and liked to sit out on his stoop in the evenings chatting with his neighbors and kidding around with the local children. He recorded many singles in Chicago primarily to help out small vocal groups that needed a break. His concerts were like celebrations.

At home, around his friends and band members, he was generally referred to as Sonny, writes the poet David Henderson, one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement. “There was also a boyish air of discovery around him, one that merged with his deep beliefs regarding music’s inherent spirituality ... His numerology would give way to overviews on the condition of humanity, especially as concerned his charges, the long exiled Blacks of this new world ...”

Still, the last line of his obituary — he was born in 1914, died in 1993, and is buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Birmingham, also the final resting place of Paul ‘Bear’ Bryant — is stark: “There are no survivors.”

SLIDE: The Magic City sign

Sonny grew up within sight of this sign, near the train station. Ra had what sounds like a not-so-awful upbringing for the times in Birmingham ... He once said of his childhood, “I came home to find a piano there, and I learned to play it.”

His older brother had some Fletcher Henderson big band 78s, which young Herman loved. His great aunt Ida bought him the piano when he was 11. He taught himself to read music from books, without lessons -- amazing his family! -- and within a year or so was writing music as well as poetry. He could sight-read, meaning he didn't need to hear the music played first. At this stage of his life, that same great aunt took him to weekly stage shows in Birmingham. There was lots of church music, and street music. In high school, he was lucky enough to fall under the influence of a terrific music teacher, Fess Whatley, who later recommended musicians to Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington's bands.

Szwed, the Yale professor, is the source of most of what we know about the Birmingham days. Szwed says that Whatley, Ra's music teacher was "tough and autocratic, rigid and demanding, sarcastic and occasionally abusive. He is remembered for his fanatical insistence on punctuality, abstinence, neatness, and mastery of fundamentals." These latter traits stood Ra in good stead later in life, especially abstinence — which he took literally — no drinking, no drugs, no sex.

Ra got excellent grades in high school in everything except business, which is interesting considering his later insistence on being paid in cash for everything, at all times. After graduation he didn't have the money to pay for college, and this being Alabama in the mid-1930s, there weren't a lot of opportunities for black kids to seek higher education. But he and the band he was leading were such accomplished musicians that with the high school music teacher's help they all got scholarships to Alabama State A&M.

At college, Blount began to further his interest in arcane knowledge. (The Tomb of King Tut had been big news when he was a child, in 1922). He once said THAT although he was making excellent grades, there was no use in becoming an intellectual unless he could do so something that had never been done before, "so I decided I would tackle the most difficult problem on the planet" — I love the grandiosity of his language! — and find out "the real meaning of the Bible."

Szwed says at this point he withdrew even more into himself as he began to spend lots of time in the college library studying. He was also mocked by his roommates who he said had found his diary with a detailed account of what sounds today like a UFO-abduction story, he said, although these were kindly aliens who sketched out his future life for him — which did not involve completing college. Note: Sonny didn't start telling this story until 1953, a year after the first reported "UFO sighting" in 1952.

I believe some of his iconoclastic nature stemmed from the years after he left college after one year and returned to Birmingham. "His uniqueness was a source of pride, but at the cost of loneliness," Szwed writes. "He had no best friends, but he had no enemies either," said an acquaintance.

His band continued to play swing music at colleges throughout Alabama into the war years. He once spent an hour backstage talking to Duke Ellington when he passed through town in the late 1930s.

When World War II and the draft came, Blount declared himself a pacifist and ended up spending more than a month in jail, and then a while in a camp for conscientious objectors, although medical problems with a hernia and one of his testicles were also cited as reasons why he could not serve. I really don't think he was morally opposed to war in the conventional sense as much as he was just not interested in anything other than music and his emerging philosophy, and he saw war as worth avoiding.

In 1946, his great-aunt died, and he took that as a sign to get out of Birmingham. He left on a bus for Chicago and didn't return for 40 years. A friend said Ra hated Birmingham because of the racial prejudice there. But the original cover of *The Magic City*, one of his greatest records, describes it as "a city without evil, a city of possibility and beauty." Throughout his life, Ra looked to places and topical events for inspiration and themes for his music, despite his otherworldliness.

SLIDE: PR photo signed Sonny Blount from 1946

When he got to Chicago, he dived into the study of Egyptology full on, studying books by Sir Wallis E.A. Budge, translations of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, books on hieroglyphics. He also learned that the Ancient Aeothians were the source race of all mankind, the original race, and that possibly the Egyptians were also the original blacks. Or the Antique Blacks, as he titled one of his records. Blount was particularly drawn to Ra, the Sun God, as you may have guessed by now.

I can't overemphasize how well-read in all this material Ra was. Szwed quotes book after book — ranging from a 1791 essay which was also studied by Blake, Jefferson, Shelley, Thomas Paine, and Walt Whitman — to a later work by African-American writer George G.M. James, called "Stolen Legacy, the Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, but the People of North Africa, Commonly called the Egyptians."

How did he find time to study all this and play and perform and rehearse constantly? He didn't need much sleep, his musicians said. No kidding!

SLIDE: Playing piano in 1953

SLIDE: Birdland

SLIDE: Budland

SLIDE: Band 1955

SLIDE: Fez

MUSIC: from the 1960 record, Fate in a Pleasant Mood:

Calling Planet Earth — about 2:50 seconds in

Sun Ra's best and most innovative music was made in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, which coincided with the Cold

War, the Space Race and the constant threat of nuclear destruction. His song and album titles, the imagery of the record covers, his poetry, his writings, is filled with outer space references.

Once the Space Age became real, Ra wasn't satisfied. In 1958, the year after Sputnik, he wrote that in tomorrow's world, "artificial instruments such as jets and space ships" would be unnecessary because the new man will "think" of the place he wants to go, and his mind will take him there. Ra put this concept to practical use -- he said -- a few years later when he checked out a place to live in New York while he was still in Chicago, employing astral projection to teleport himself there rather than taking a plane or train. Apparently, it worked well, because he landed in the East Village and lived there until the rent got too high.

In the 1950s in Chicago, the band also took to releasing little toy robots to run around the stage and into the audience. Fittingly, there's some whirring and quacking at the end of one version of "We Travel the Spaceways" which comes from one of these toy robots. Often, he combined outer space words and imagery with his interest in ancient Egypt and the Black Liberation movement.

SLIDE: Super-Sonic Jazz cover – or grouping of 4 covers?

SLIDE: Band, group, from 1960

SLIDE: Cover of single in basement of club

Ra had a special key that he like the musicians to play in: not B minor or D or A or anything like that — it was the "space key." That actually meant they musicians were to play with no key signature. "He'd tell you to play a tune, and you'd say, 'What key?'" and he'd say "space key," said Art Hoyle, a longtime horn player with the band.

SLIDE: Band rehearsing at the Choreographer's Workshop.

SLIDE: Second. Note how disciplined they look, esp. Ra

SLIDE: Cover of Cosmic Tones

MUSIC: From Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy

And Otherness — start and midpoint

Kosmos in Blue — about 3 minutes in

That's from 1963, in the early years of Ra's far out New York period. I love this description of the first piece, which the band apparently actually performed in a mental asylum, from critic Michael Shore: "A craggy forbidding extra-terrestrial landscape stretching out before us. Suddenly Ra emerges wraith-like from the Venusian methane haze with his Clavoline (a tiny French proto synthesizer keyboard, with a Theremin-like tone perfect suited to Ra's profound sci fi/monster movie proclivities) — he hovers, buzzes us, then zooms away into a thicket of twittering flute and oboe."

Ra also made a science-fiction movie with a space theme, in 1972, the year after he taught a class at Berkley. What, I haven't mentioned his college professor role yet? More about that later.

The movie was called "Space is the Place" and involved Ra landing from space on a rocket propelled by music, on another planet, then returning to Earth — specifically Oakland, Calif. — to battle the Overseer and free the people. It's not very good as movies go, but it's a fairly coherent expression of Ra's philosophy.

SLIDE: Ra in Pharaonic headgear from Space is the Place

MUSIC: Space is the Place title track.

First minute or so

Ra, along with his longtime manager, the somewhat mysterious Alton Abraham, a younger man Ra met in Chicago who was also interested in science fiction, Egyptology, the occult, arcane knowledge, and Black Nationalism, and what later came to be called Afro-Futurism, started and controlled their record company Saturn/El Saturn completely, absolutely, un beholden to anyone. This home cooking gave Sun Ra, and Abraham, complete control over his music – with the tradeoff of very low sales due to the lack of a distribution network compared to record company efforts for the same era for a jazz artist like Bill Evans.

SLIDE: Visits Planet Earth cover – or maybe drop this and add this one to the grouping of sci-fi ones earlier

SLIDES: Ra red and Ra orange labels

The original Sun Ra recordings were pressed in small quantities, almost like a vanity book is published today, maybe 500 copies at a time. His insistence on precision and discipline in playing and life did not carry over to his own documentation of his work. With the original records sometimes released without labels, or with labels applied long after they were recorded, the only way to identify some of the records is by the matrix number scratched into the runout groove, the blank space near the center of the record. Serious Sun Ra collectors need some mastery of that system, because sometimes it's the only way to tell exactly which pressing is which. -- And I this point and this level of minutiae, I realize I may be going from informative to obsessive, yet I will try to press on ...

SLIDE: Something from Saturn 50s-60s

MUSIC: Reflections in Blue

From the mid-50s.

Ra's business practices foreshadowed today's hipster ethos of DIY – do it yourself. He arranged his own recording sessions, or recorded himself at home, had the records pressed in small quantities, and then sold them himself at shows. He and his friends created the album artwork. About as close to hand made as you can get with a mechanical product, as one critic wrote.

Other than the technology involved, this is no different than what many musicians began doing as the alternative genre developed in the 1980s and '90s with the accessibility of digital equipment and easily-recordable CDs, bypassing the need for a record company to

back your project. Record your music at home, make 50 or 100 copies of the CD on your computer, and sell them at shows.

This is exactly the model Ra pioneered, although he was so far out of the mainstream it's doubtful many people actually drew their inspiration for DIY music from him. Saturn is, in fact, considered to be one of the first musician-owned labels. Ra beat the Beatles to this by something like 15 years, by the way.

Ra's business was handled dealt strictly on a cash basis, what he called "no bullshit C.O.D." This meant that he was essentially trading the actual records for cash, sometimes on the tarmac in Europe or wherever the buyers were. Or Ra and Abraham would fly somewhere with a box of unlabeled records, decorate and letter the labels by hand, then sell them. Ra claimed that his insistence on cash only dated to the 1930s, to the first piece he wrote which was also recorded, on a 78, and for which he was never paid.

On the downside of the DIY equation, Ra also sold the rights to his songs like popcorn, once even signing over some of his rights in return for enough money to fly the band to Europe for some gigs, according to Szwed. And multiple rights sales for multiple releases of the same works led to virtual chaos when it came to the musicians getting paid for their work as it became more appreciated and popular. Again, that's similar to the ongoing argument over musicians being paid for their music in today's era of free or at least easily copied songs.

Ra's DIY philosophy dated to his early years. He had one of the first wire recorders in 1937, but could only record 30 seconds of music at a time. Thirty years later, he was still experimenting with recording technology, connecting the output of a reel to reel tape recorder to one input, using a microphone to record the music into the other input, thereby creating a tape delay reverb effect.

Although he continued to release his own music on Saturn throughout most of his life, he probably made "the most important career move of his life," according to John Corbett, when he and Abraham made a deal with Impulse records, a division of ABC in the early 1970s, to release some of the older Saturns. This deal, while it lasted, introduced Ra's work to a much larger audience, with more or less national distribution of his work through record stores around the country, rather than sales only at shows and in tiny jazz record shops here and there.

SLIDE: Impulse cover of Angels and Demons

MUSIC: From Angels and Demons

Between Two Worlds — start for about 30-40 sec.

I love the story of how the Impulse meeting took place, according to one of the Impulse executives. *It was one of the Man from Saturn's "close encounters" with the popular culture of the day.*

Now, ABC owned Dunhill, the label of the Mamas and Papas, Steppenwolf, Three Dog Night, and the Grass Roots. ABC's jazz label Impulse was looking for something different and because this was the era of the underground, anything seemed possible, writes the executive, Ed Michael.

Ra, wearing his robes, with manager Alton Abraham, met with the ABC corporate brass, who no doubt were expecting these two weirdos to agree to anything to get their music on the label. Ra and Abraham were presented with a standard contract that essentially gave everything to the record company and very little to the artists. Ra and Abraham took it away to look over and the next day brought back a retyped contract with ABC "on the short end of the stick." However, that deal was for new work, and the company refused, so somehow they worked out an agreement to re-release 21 of the Saturn records on Impulse.

Only 10 were released before the deal fell apart, after two years, possibly because the terms were actually too favorable to Ra and the Arkestra! Basically, Impulse had agree to clean up and remaster the original tapes, release them, pay royalties, turn over the rights to the masters back to Saturn, and agree to a final payoff to Ra and Abraham to terminate the original contract.

Sun Ra talked a lot, and a lot of his talk and writings have been preserved. I've tried to make sense of or find some kind of coherent theme in what he had to say, to sum up his philosophy, his religion, his beliefs, or at least his beliefs as he expressed them. I think that a good subtitle for this paper, based on what Ra had to say about life and outer space and God and freedom and death might have been "holy hokum" or "wholly hokum."

Or maybe Holy Wholly Hokum. All hokum, all holy.

Here's how I would sum up Ra's philosophy. It involved the realization that striving for Freedom on Earth was a fruitless struggle and that Death was the only true form of freedom. Hence, everyone should quit trying to find freedom and peace and instead, try to be happy, and Ra believed himself to be a, and perhaps the, chief purveyor of this happiness through his music

I think that is what he was saying anyway. I find his philosophy reminiscent of Buddhism, although he is sometimes lumped in with the Nation of Islam, as part of the Black Nationalist movement. A central tenant of Tibetan Buddhism is the earthly struggle to release ourselves from cyclical existence, but failing. So then, we die, and are reincarnated, perhaps as an insect or other life form, and this cycle continues until we can free ourselves. But only the Buddha has been able to do that so far. Or at least no one had managed to do it except him by the early 1970s, when I took Tibetan Buddhism at the University of Virginia.

Ra liked to talk about how "ridiculous" or meaningless life and earthly events were, again, reminiscent of Buddhist concepts. One of my favorite Ra albums is entitled "Nothing Is," again, an expression to me of a Buddhist concept that reality is very impermanent, that everything can be broken down into smaller parts until it more or less ceases to exist.

Here's a little bit of "Nothing". It was recorded during the Arkestra's tour of colleges in the Northeast in 1966, near the height of their powers.

*MUSIC: Something intense from Nothing Is
Dancing Shadows, about 5:40 in
SLIDE: Sonny and quote about chaos.*

It seems that Ra was saying that mankind, and black people in particular, could struggle and struggle and strive and strive but the ultimate goal of freedom, for anyone, was unachievable. It's a very pessimistic thought, no?

*SLIDE: Quote about free to be dead
May not need to read, same thing below:*

Here's a quote from a 1966 interview with Ra: "So when the United States (is) talking about peace, it's talking about death. They mean that kind of peace. And when people got a Prince of Peace, the Prince would have to be Death. Of course, this is another kind of mathematics I'm doing ... it's something that they can see if they'll just go and look in the cemetery. There's a lot of people out there — it's a city, they got more people out there than they got on the planet walking around. And they are showing you what peace is. Because they (are) at peace — final peace, definite, absolute peace. Now they're free too — and nothing bothers their freedom. They're free to be dead.

"... They say that truth is stranger than fiction, but I know one thing, I balance my equations, and I balance them scientifically ..."

He took a shot at Jesus Christ with that comment about the Prince of Peace, and he didn't stop there. Here's what he had to say about God. "... if there wasn't a God, then people wouldn't die. I came to that conclusion, that the only reason people died was because there is a God, and the only reason people are suffering is because there is a God ... the way people die proves that something is killing them — so death is a god if nothing else, and all people are subject to it, so death's their god ..."

Instead of seeing himself as a victim of these forces, this God of Death, Ra saw himself as a being who could help everyone escape, through music, from this meaningless existence and striving, again, like the Buddha.

There's a quote I love from another jazz musician, Art Blakely, a contemporary of Sonny's, that really sums up what I think Ra was talking about, in much simpler terms: "Music washes away the dust of everyday life."

*SLIDE: "Sun Ra" doodle
SLIDE: quote about musicians
MUSIC: My Favorite Things
1 minute in, goes into melody*

There's also a strong element of Gnosticism in Ra's writings and interviews, the feeling that there's secret knowledge out there to which, if we were only privy, we could understand everything. I think this is where some of the hokum comes in as well, making you pause for a moment and wonder if it was all just words, or if Ra really believed what he was saying.

One of the sales pitches Arkestra members employed when selling records directly to record stores was to note how rare the records were, then to go on to describe them, Szwed writes, as "Cosmically potent, containing truths which were potentially dangerous and whose sale had to be closely monitored."

SLIDE: solar system on his head;

SLIDE: Heliocentric Worlds cover

On this flip side of all this mystery, there's a playfulness to Ra that I love. My favorite album cover is another example of this side of his personality. The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra Vol. II (1965), which we see here, includes a rather standard antique planetary diagram, along with cameo portraits of the great astronomers and thinkers of the ages, including Tycho Brae, Copernicus, and ... Sun Ra!

SLIDE: Band at club in NYC in 1970

SLIDE: Golden bird

SLIDE: Cubist image

In an improbable career move, Ra spent part of 1971 as a lecturer at University of California at Berkeley teaching a class called "The Black Man in the Cosmos" in the music department. Most of my information about this comes from the Szwed biography. I want to spend a few minutes on it because I think that especially our members who are professors and academics might enjoy it.

Szwed says that the class was attended by only a few actual Berkeley students, but lots of local people. The hour-long class generally consisted of a half-hour lecture by Ra (I wonder how he contained his comments to only 30 minutes) and then about a half hour of performance by himself or the band.

Ra had handouts, assignments, and a reading list, which I find particularly spectacular and want to list in detail:

SLIDE: Reading list below, no need to read

— *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*

— *The Radix (19th century astrology)*

— *Two Babylons by Alexander Hislip*

— *books on etymology, hieroglyphics, color therapy, Afro-American folklore, and ex-slaves;*

— *Writings by Madame Blavatsky*

— *The Book of Oahspe (spiritually channeled)*

- *Henry Dumas poetry and short stories*
- *Livingston's travels in Africa*
- *The Bible*
- *Accounts of the Rosicrucians.*

Some of the students complained that they couldn't find all these in the library.

In class, Ra liked to put Bible scripture on the blackboard and then “mutate” it, change the letters and syntax into new meanings. Lecture topics included neo-Platonic doctrines; application of history and religious texts to racial problems; pollution; war; and the reinterpretation of the Bible in light of Egyptology.

Ra taught this class during the same year when California Governor Ronald Reagan was blasting Berkley for having the radical Angela Davis on the payroll. Wonder what Mr. Reagan would have thought of Sonny?

For his part, Sonny remarked during one of his lectures that the White House was going to be turned into a Black House, and later complained that he was never paid for his gig at the university. Maybe he wouldn't take a check!

Now might be a good time to hear from the man himself. This is from a Japanese release of a live recording of a lecture Ra gave in New York City in 1979.

SLIDE: Altered Destiny poster

MUSIC: Possibility of Altered Destiny — depending on time

Ra wrote a voluminous amount of poetry, all of it expressing this philosophy. Some of it weird, some intriguing, some almost inspiring, and some, a lot, bad. Maybe that's what Michael Chabon was referring to in his recent best-selling novel, “Telegraph Avenue,” which revolves around a record store in Oakland, Calif., and has several references to Sun Ra — which I happened across while writing this paper.

Chabon mentions Sun Ra and his “awful Arkestra.” Unlike the poetry, no way was the Arkestra awful. Here, I hope, Chabon is using the term “awful” in the sense of vast and terrifying and unknown and “inspiring awe,” or “profoundly impressive.”

In “Telegraph Avenue,” the music of Ra and the Arkestra is referred to as as “cosmic nuclear radiation background noise.”

Slide: Nuclear War cover

One of my favorite songs, and I mean song here as the lyrics, words, not just the music, is “Nuclear War.” One of Ra's early albums was titled Fate in a Pleasant Mood. Apparently, fate was no longer in a pleasant mood in 1982 when Ra recorded this song. Corbett, the Chicago Ra

researcher, says that this song may have been inspired by a topical event, the Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown in 1979, which was less than a hundred miles from Ra's home in Philadelphia.

With the Nuclear War record, Ra and Alton Abraham also apparently were hoping for commercial success and tried to get Columbia to release it, despite repeated use of the word "motherfucker." (Substituted "an obscenity" in the actual speech.) Ra raps about nuclear war and the end of the world, and comes back to one of his favorite philosophical themes, the inevitability of death.

"Nuclear war, nuclear war
It's a m———f———
When they push that button
Your ass got to go ..."

This is a good expression of several parts of Ra's persona, not the least of which was his playfulness, making something funny out of something else he talked about a lot, death. And on the album version of this, Ra showed that things were not all bad if we all could at least appreciate and enjoy beautiful music, because this album also includes Drop Me Off in Harlem.

MUSIC: Nuclear War — 1:38 in avoids MF word

MUSIC: Drop Me off in Harlem — 2:45 in

Talking about the upbeat part of Sun Ra's work, please be aware that he has an album of Walt Disney songs – "Second Star to the Right (Salute to Walt Disney)" released in 1989. Amazon describes the live recording as "fun-filled and strange." Ra's Disney record was the 369,275th best selling CD on Amazon last fall ... in case you were wondering why you have never heard of it.

MUSIC: Disney tune, Hi-Ho, Hi Ho — singing starts about 50 sec in

Ra was "on the cover of the Rolling Stone" in 1969 and was the musical guest, with the Arkestra, on Saturday Night Live in 1975. But he took an even deeper dive into popular culture back in the 1960s, when he contributed keyboard parts to a recording of music from the Batman television show.

I really couldn't believe my ears when I first heard this record. The songs are fairly straight-up versions of the Batman theme — "du-di-du-do, du-di-du-do – Batman!" and other music from the show.

Possibly even more unexpected is Ra's pairing with the other musicians on the record, who were mostly 20-something members of the Blues Project, some of whom went on to form Blood, Sweat and Tears – I know we are now getting onto more familiar terrain for some of you, right?

On the Batman disc, Ra plays the Hammond B-3 organ, which is also probably the most distinctive of the rock 'n' roll keyboard sounds. The other keyboard player on the Batman Record has long been rumored to be young white boy Al Kooper (he denies this) who also played on some of Bob Dylan's most famous work. And in a weird record industry coincidence, one of Bob Dylan's earlier producers, Tom Wilson, was also a friend and producer of Ra's.

SLIDE: Dylan poster

I mentioned early that Ra got a piano as a child and learned how to play, and the keyboard became his instrument, much like the piano was for Duke Ellington.

Sometimes, people use the word keyboard to mean just the piano or organ. But with Ra, keyboard meant just that. A musical instrument with which the player used a keyboard to produce sounds and notes. Ra used almost every type of keyboard known at the time, plus some that weren't.

He was playing the Solovox in the 1950s. It sounds something like a Theremin, which produces the humming sound that characterizes the Beach Boys' Good Vibrations — who-we-uwe-who-eee — His sound was described as an "Egyptian meets New Orleans trance rhythm."

SLIDE: Ra on keyboard — color

SLIDE: Ra on keyboard - b&w

MUSIC — Monorails and Satellites – title track — about 2 minutes in

Others keyboards (I like lists, sorry) included the Wurlitzer electric piano, the Hammond B-3, ; the Farfisa (an early portable electric organ); the Selmer Clavioline. The Clavioline was also used by the Beatles on Baby You're a Rich Man. Also the Hohner Clavinet, the "ultimate funk keyboard," later used by Stevie Wonder on Superstition; and a Gibson Kalamazoo organ, which the Doors used. And a record as heavy as Hiroshima called for the use of a theater organ. Also, the Arp, the Fender Rhodes, the Yamaha electric organ ...

He played a mini-Moog synthesizer around 1969 or 1970. Apparently Ra got hold of a prototype model, because this wasn't even released for sale to the public until 1970. Ra's sound with that piece of gear was described by Szwed as evoking the sounds of "white noise, meteor showers, NASA test patterns" and "even a dishwasher on the fritz."

But there was much more to Ra's music than the keyboards. A writer for the Philadelphia Inquirer made a good point when he wrote that "the sound of horns clattering and blowing is key to understanding Ra's path." And percussion became more and more important as Ra's music got further and further out in the 1960s.

He was fond of giving regular instruments different names or doing something to change their sound. For example, one instrument listed on a 1973 recording is the “Neptunian libflecto.” John Szwed says that’s actually a bassoon that has suffered a “hostile takeover” from a French horn or alto sax mouthpiece. I love that!

SLIDE: Marshall Allen

SLIDE: Ra and John Cage

MUSIC: Other Worlds from Heliocentric Vol. 1 about 1:50 in

Something else I love about Ra is how difficult his music is to explain. Critics and listeners resort to all sorts of metaphors to describe it, especially the far out stuff. Here are some examples: “Chattering multiple keyboard intervention” “frantically overblown bass clarinet” “ball-peen hammer against I-beam” “Asian folk music, academic experimentalism, and even Stravinsky’s Firebird” “sheer sonics obliterate conventional musical forms” “Passion for spontaneously shattering and reconfiguring forms” “an ominous conversation of bass marimba, bowed bass, two trombones, piccolo, bongos, and timpani” “exquisitely proportioned and detailed polyphony” “previously unheard sound combinations and colors run rampant” “calculated freedom, not chaos.”

The far out, abstract period of creativity that Ra experienced was limited to roughly the decade of the 1960s and into the early 1970s. By then I believe the players had exhausted their listeners if not themselves.

As I said earlier, all this musical experimentation was associated with the free-thinking 1960s and early '70s when all forms of authority, including and especially musical, were suspect.

“Free jazz snubbed its nose at the established order, and in an era in which the establishment was increasingly under assault, this alone was a powerful rallying point,” writes Ted Gioia in “The History of Jazz.”

Free jazz music reflected an interest, really a passion, for disorder and discord, writes Gioia, unlike what had once been sought by art — beauty and harmony — much like abstract expressionism repelled more traditionally-minded folks who preferred pretty landscapes and realistic depictions of life. The “sounds bad-difficult to listen to-so it must be good” complex got so out of hand that at one point a critic wrote that he purposefully recommended records that he thought listeners were “least likely to enjoy.”

So this wild new sound fizzled out – and, almost unbelievably, the New Thing was replaced by the Old Thing, the New Traditionalism espoused by Wynton Marsalis, another child prodigy who is now director of Jazz at Lincon Center, a self-appointed expert whose disdain for Free Jazz is becoming doctrine thanks in part to his glorification by the Ken Burns series, *Jazz*. (Fortunately, Wynton does still embrace bop, I think. His brother Branford, formerly Jay Leno’s band leader, does anyway.)

As the New Traditionalism took hold in the 1980s and thereafter, Ra could say, ‘been there, done that, was into that all along while you earthlings were busy struggling to understand.’

That’s because by the early 1970s, Ra, who never ever abandoned his roots, was already back to playing traditional swing and big band tunes, with a twist, mixing them with his work from the 1960s and his space music to create what became his standard show, which he toured around the world for almost 20 years.

Rarely humble, Sun Ra told a magazine in 1978: “You might say I am the spirit of jazz”

SLIDE: Purple Night cover – Here’s Ra near the end of his life, in 1990 or so.

MUSIC: Stars Fell on Alabama, intro and about 3 minutes in

Well, I’ve talked about Chicago, Philadelphia and New York, and Birmingham, because they are key places in the stream of Ra’s life. But there were also a lot of islands in that stream including small places like Charlottesville, where he played a couple of times, and even Lexington. So I want to end my remarks with a personal anecdote about one of those performances, the only time I saw Sun Ra perform in person.

In August 1988, Sun Ra was scheduled to play in the amphitheater at the outdoor Lime Kiln Theater in Lexington in a setting that British folk musician, guitarist and song writer extraordinaire Richard Thompson has called “the Forest of Arden.” But it was raining, hard, so the concert had been moved to a tent thrown up over a stage that fronted the actual sheer rock face of the old Lime Kiln quarry itself.

The rain ran down the dark slick rock behind the musicians, most of them wearing tatty Egyptian hats and smocks and other such gear. (Actually, I learned later, some of the “Egyptian” hats were actually women’s tube tops that produced the desired ancient-floppy effect.) At the keyboards, Sun Ra himself was in a robe with some headgear, I believe the turban-type thing he often wore later in life. He was to the left of the band, which he directed with sweeping arm gestures. The Deadheads used to have a saying about their beloved Grateful Dead, “There is nothing like a Dead show.” Even more so for Sun Ra.

SLIDE: Hand gesture

SLIDE: Ra tapping head

A few hundred people were seated in metal folding chairs under the tent. The sometimes dissonant and arrhythmic beat of the Arkestra swinging the music was accompanied by the steady drumming of rain on the taut canvas.

The Arkestra repertoire at this stage ran from '40s big band to the hardest of bop. I don't remember the songs. I was just starting to get interested in Sun Ra at the time, and have often wished I'd bought some of the records that were for sale at the show.

Ra was 74 years old in 1988. He was to have a stroke in 1990 and pass away in 1993. But on that rainy night in Lexington, he was very much alive, leading the band through complicated arrangements. Like old Pharaoh, or maybe Joseph, he was in charge of the musicians in their coats of many colors.

The audience was varied, young, old, artsy, about what you'd expect. But one listener stood out to me. He was an older man, maybe near Ra's age himself. He appeared hale and hearty and he was dressed like the anti-Ra, wearing a khaki-tan work shirt and pants, looking like my old farmer uncle in his rural uniform ready for a day on the tractor.

Throughout the show, this fellow sat impassively, his arms folded across his chest. He wasn't glowering, but almost. I imagined that he was a regular subscriber to Lime Kiln filling up a seat because he or his wife had already paid for it in hopes of hearing something much tamer than the cacophony of squawks and honks that punctuated this jazz music of unearthly beauty.

Ra and the Arkestra played two sets, a full evening of music. During the last song, they arose from the stage and still playing, wound their way in a line down the aisles, with old Ra leading the way, bobbing and weaving and waving and dancing right along.

The farmer, in an aisle seat, remained stock still as Ra came up behind him. Evidently Sonny had seen him from the stage.

Ra stopped, the musicians stopped behind him, Ra grabbed the man by the shoulders from behind, and gently gave him a shake.

Well, I'm here to tell you that the peaceful appeal of this musical giant got through to even the farmer, who instantly dropped his arms and looked up and laughed and even began to sway along a little as the music wrapped up.

Everyone applauded, and that was the end of the show, and that is the end of my speech.