

SUN RA VISITS PLANET EARTH

by John Sinclair

People say I'm Herman Blount, but I don't know him. That's an imaginary person, he never existed. I have a sister and brother named Blount, but their father died 10 years before I arrived on the planet. He's not my father. If I tried to do anything with the name Sonny Blount, I couldn't... I'm not terrestrial, I'm a celestial being.

—Sun Ra, from John Diliberto's liner notes to
Sound Sun Pleasure (Evidence ECD-22014)

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN musical genius known as Sun Ra was a delightfully unique individual whose startlingly innovative Arkestra and provocative persona generated considerable myth and controversy during most of the second half of the twentieth century.

The legendary pianist, composer, bandleader, performance artist, musical pioneer and space philosopher was born Herman Blount in 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama, and was known to family and friends as “Sonny.”

He attended Alabama A&M and played with bands around the South before settling in Chicago after World War II, where he worked at the Club DeLisa as second pianist and arranger with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra during 1947-49.



SUN RA

By the turn of the fifties Sonny Blount was writing music for the shows, rehearsing the chorus line, and leading the relief band at the Club DeLisa two nights a week.

He formed his own trio to back up vocalists, instrumentalists and floor-shows in local nightspots, soon landing a regular gig at Budland supporting visiting stars like Sarah Vaughan, Johnny 'Guitar' Watson, La Verne Baker, Dakota Staton and comedian George Kirby.

AT THIS POINT THE PIANIST began his long association with Chicago philosopher/businessman Alton Abraham, a pragmatic mystic who would become his mentor, personal manager, booking agent, recording supervisor and business partner for the next quarter century.

With Abraham's guidance Herman "Sonny" Blount took the name "Le Sun Ra" and began to reveal an elaborate, unprecedented cosmic philosophy through his compositions, song titles, poetry, wild costumery, and an innovative, ever-expanding musical ensemble first called the Solar Arkestra.

The Arkestra, billed as playing "Music from tomorrow's world—Magic Music of the spheres," began its spectacular fifty eight year lifespan in 1952 in the form of a six-piece jazz combo organized to showcase Sun Ra's original compositions, arrangements and multi-media performance concepts.

There are photos of the Herman Blount Octet in Chicago in the mid fifties, identified as Pat Patrick (alto and baritone sax), John Gilmore (tenor sax), Dave Young (trumpet), Julian Priester (trombone), Richard Evans (bass), Bob Barry (drums), Jimmy Herndon (percussion) and Herman Blount (piano, leader).

With Abraham as its booking agent, early editions of the band worked five nights a week at Budland in the Pershing Hotel and played the Sunday dances at Robert's Show Club on South Parkway.

The Arkestra became a featured attraction at the Compass club on the far north side, alternating with a local comedy troupe that included Mike Nichols, Elaine May and Mort Sahl, and also worked steadily at the Wander Inn on Cottage Grove on the south side.

The band attracted young musicians from DuSable High School who had studied with Capt. Walter Dyett in the tradition of noted DuSable alumni like



Nat 'King' Cole, Redd Foxx, Gene Ammons, Dorothy Donegan, Johnny Griffin and Joseph Jarman.

Visiting musicians were drawn to the provocative music and disciplined camaraderie of the Arkestra, and both Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane played and studied with the band in Chicago during the early- and mid fifties.

Historically, Sun Ra's compositions and arrangements followed the advances made in the forties by Tadd Dameron and Jimmy Mundy and were contemporaneous with the early experimental writing of Charles Mingus and George Russell.

Instrumentally, the Arkestra was an extension of the popular "little big-band" format of the late forties and early fifties, utilizing trumpet, trombone, two or three saxophones, piano, bass and drums.

THE ARKESTRA rehearsed at Pat Patrick's house five days a week at noon, experimenting with the radical instrumental combinations and advanced musical concepts devised by its leader.

Sometimes two basses (one double bass, one electric), two drummers, two baritone saxophones and other odd pairings were effected; often tympani, bells, and other then-exotic percussion instruments were used to add new colors to the band's distinctive sound.

Other early musical innovations included Sun Ra's pioneering use of electric piano, Solovox, clavoline, Hammond organ, Farfisa organ and electric bass; rich arco double bass passages; group chanting; a saxophone section which doubled on flute, oboe, bassoon, bass clarinet and percussion instruments; and a massed percussion choir throbbing with African and Afro-Cuban polyrhythms.

Sun Ra's avant-garde compositions introduced a "space key" where players were instructed to improvise without regard for conventional tonal centers; modal pieces with no fixed harmonic structure; superimposition of one chord over another; and songs played in multiple keys.

His works wove a musical tapestry of unusual rhythms and colors, swinging like crazy at will or moving entirely out of regular time to project a musical environment evocative of outerspace.



Sun Ra's use of futuristic keyboards and unusual instrumental voicings goes back to his earliest recordings. He accompanied violinist Stuff Smith in 1953-54 with an ensemble comprising tenor saxophone, trumpet, two basses, drums, percussion and his own Solovox keyboard.

The ensemble then expanded to include three trumpets, six or seven reeds, two or three drummers, electric and acoustic bassists, an assortment of vocalists and an ever-increasing arsenal of electronic keyboard instruments.

The Arkestra's stage presentation was equally advanced: its members wore fezzes over green shirts and rust-colored pants, then graduated to futuristic Afro-space costumes featuring colorful sequin-studded robe-like garments and makeshift space helmets equipped with flashing lights like men in a mine shaft.

AMONG THE MANY NOTED MUSICIANS who served in the Arkestra during its residency in Chicago (1952-61) were reedmen Marshall Allen, James Spaulding, Charles Davis and James Scales; trumpeters Hobart Dotson, Phil Cohran, George Hudson, Art Hoyle, Dave Young, Lucious Randolph and Walter Strickland; trombonists Julian Priestler and Nate Pryor; bassists Ronnie Boykins, Wilburn Green (electric), Vic Sproles and Richard Evans; drummers William Cochran, Jim Herndon, Robert Barry, Edward Skinner and Nimrod Hunt; and vocalists Hatty Randolph and Clyde Williams.

Sun Ra's musical concepts and extra-musical concerns profoundly influenced an entire generation of Chicago musicians who became active in pianist/composer Muhal Richard Abrams' Experimental Orchestra and later in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), as well as experimental jazz artists elsewhere like John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Pharoah Sanders, Cecil Taylor and Marion Brown.

Organizationally, with long-time partner Alton Abraham, Sun Ra also had a deep and lasting effect on the self-determination movement in jazz. He established his own music publishing company, Enterplanetary Concepts; his own production company, Infinity Inc.; and his own Saturn Records imprint which issued a series of iconoclastic LPs beginning around 1964.

