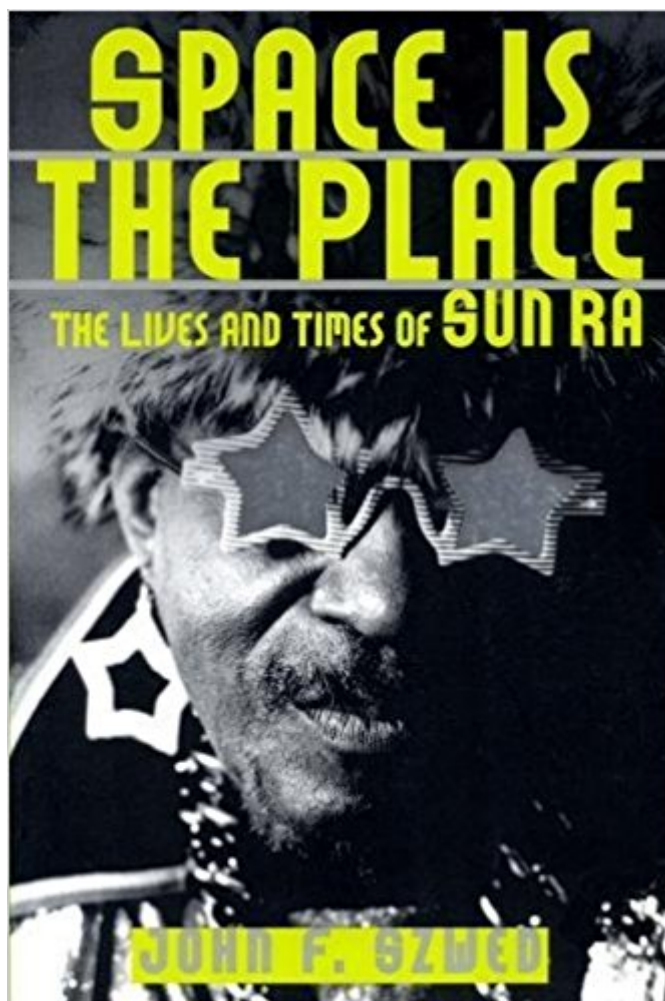


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Space Is The Place: The Lives And Times Of Sun Ra



Synopsis

Sun Ra, a.k.a. Herman Poole "Sonny" Blount (1914-1993), has been hailed as "one of the great big-band leaders, pianists, and surrealists of jazz" (New York Times) and as "the missing link between Duke Ellington and Public Enemy" (Rolling Stone). Composer, keyboardist, bandleader, philosopher, poet, and self-proclaimed extraterrestrial from Saturn, Sun Ra led his "Intergalactic Arkestra" of thirty-plus musicians in a career that ranged from boogie-woogie and swing to be-bop, free jazz, fusion, and New Age music. This definitive biography reveals the life, philosophy, and musical growth of one of the twentieth century's greatest avant-garde musicians.

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Customer Reviews

Born Herman Poole Blount in Alabama in 1914, he reinvented himself in the 1950s as Sun Ra, the great surrealist of jazz whose free-form performances with his Arkestra amply justified the description "space music." His mystical beliefs were equally avant-garde; Yale professor John Szwed sympathetically explains some fairly far-out notions as "driven by a hunger for totality that only music could express." Szwed recovers the biographical facts Sun Ra was often at pains to obscure, without losing sight of the overriding role imagination played in this visionary life. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

... Szwed has produced a rare jazz biography--one that takes full account of the history that shaped the music and its central personalities. An anthropologist, historian and musicologist who teaches at

Yale, Szwed brings an impressive array of skills to this job. He needs them all to track down a subject whose every word seems intended to protect him from scrutiny. -- The New York Times Book Review, Brent Staples

One of America's most prolific and daring musicians, Sun Ra located himself in outer space, beyond both the geographical limits of the United States and the ideological limits of Jim Crow and the Cold War. Such views, spliced with a homegrown Egyptology, earned Sun Ra a reputation as an Afro-eccentric charlatan-genius in the tradition of Marcus Garvey and Elijah Muhammad, and kept his "Arkestra" below the radar of concert halls and record companies. This biography charts Sun Ra's career, showing how he defied critics' periodization schemes, pioneering free jazz and electronic music in the 1940s and reviving big bands in the 1970s. Szwed presents Sun Ra's neoplatonic philosophizing as serious scholarship, however, rather than the charismatic myth-making and -unmaking that it clearly was. The book's treatment of his music--a joyful noise authorized by biblical prophecy, rooted in his native Birmingham's African-American fraternal, club, and society dance orchestras of the 1930s, and branching out into the heavenly spheres--suffers by comparison. Perhaps this late romantic jazz totalist, who shunned sex and drugs, rejected modern notions of race and nation, and took his merry band of "tone scientists" on shoestring-and-bootstrap world tours, will never be brought down to earth. Copyright © 1996, Boston Review. All rights reserved. -- From The Boston Review --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I've not had an easy year. Extreme stress, trauma, working constantly, moving back and forth across the country, and repairing several addictions. It made me put down my guitar, my synthesizer, microphones. I picked up this book out of curiosity, having listened to compilations of the Arkestra's recordings over the years and seeing time and again my favorite musicians cite Sun Ra as a major influence. I started reading through it and fell in love with music itself all over again, reconnecting with that cosmic spiritual power it has over my being. I've started writing and composing feverishly again, putting aside anything that gets in the way of the music. As far as the book goes, it does a great job painting the scene with little details and keeping in mind the historical context. Szwed explicates some of the more mystifying ideas and places them in a social and racial context. It's safe to say I now 'get' Sun Ra's mantra 'Space Is The Place': the vastness of the cosmos, the possibilities for new feelings, new sounds, is where humanity needs to look to in order to grow and exceed the bounds of its manifold limitations. This book in no way proselytizes Sun Ra's ideology but spells it out for the curious in the context of his life story. Highly recommended.

The author of this book was most successful in conveying the feeling of inspiration which fuels the artistry in Sun Ra's music. He documented Sun Ra's life in a very multi-dimensional way. I have listened to about 8 of Sun Ra's recordings so far. This has been over about a ten year period. I am not a musician, so I don't relate to Sun Ra's music in that way. I do relate to it in terms of the spiritual inspiration and information by intuiting the sounds that arise when he transmits his vision of the cosmos. This whole book was a very delectable journey for me into the realms of my own past as Sun Ra's journey unfolded during some of those same years. We are all the recipients of his wisdom and the splendid variety of sounds he left as his legacy. This book is a welcome testament to his influence on the planet. After reading this book it was apparent to me that Sun Ra, besides being a genius of a musician and hands down the most creative synthesizer player I've ever heard, was also a spiritual trailblazer who channeled the higher aspects of his being in a most marvelous and inspirational way.

Space Is The Place is John F. Szwed's remarkably well-researched biography of Sun Ra. Speaking as a professional jazz musician, I appreciated the compelling insights into the creative processes behind Sun Ra's innovations in sound. The book also presents a thorough exposition of Sun Ra's life philosophy, one that was informed by works stretching back thousands of years. Sun Ra was so disciplined and principled, he served time and suffered contempt from the community and his family for being a conscientious objector during the Second World War. Sun Ra was truly a unique individual, and John Szwed's book is as unique as its subject.

I've always loved SUN RA. I own about 20 Sun Ra CDs and already knew a bit about him. But this book really makes you appreciate the ARTIST. Meaning all the components, personality and philosophy that makes up a true genius. He was a real american master. Just the way David Bowie was a real innovator and national treasure of English rock. He's in a category where the person is just as important as the music he made. There is a spirit in the man that transcends his own work. This book reveals just how underrated he is in everything - as a jazz giant, as a philosopher, as a poet, as a band leader. He's even underrated as an African American. He was a true trailblazer of black esteem, pride and equality. He encouraged people to discover their own roots and history. People always made a fuss or a joke of him because he always claimed he was from outer space - but I think this was a supreme act of self-realization in the face of the extreme prejudice in his day. This is a man who built his entire life, music and philosophy out of NOTHING! Incredible. The book is thorough, enjoyable, and you can actually open it in any spot and enjoy. Sun Ra was a series of

cosmic vignettes. So jump around. I'm docking a point for the terrible cover art. With all the colorful pictures that exist of Sun Ra - almost all of which make him look both fun and imposing at the same time - a terrible black and white photo with campy star sunglasses was chosen. The cover makes the usually stoic and grand Sun Ra look like a Parliament/Funkadelic reject! Now if only someone could get around to writing a book about Sun Ra's kindred brother-in-arms, MOONDOG!

Sun Ra has remained one of the most misunderstood musicians of our time. And in the case of many music geniuses, Sun Ra would keep the critics and fans at arm's length, but welcome musicians into his world of philosophy and art. Author John F. Szwed does an almost impossible task of peeling of the layers of myth and disinformation to present the real life, struggles and triumphs of Sun Ra. Szwed brilliantly weaves through the situations which shaped his life while growing up in Birmingham, Ala., the highs and extreme lows in the jazz world of Chicago and New York City & how persistence finally yielded an understanding - on various levels - from fans who also wanted to challenge the barriers erected in the music industry. The philosophy of Sun Ra is explained and Szwed shows how it influenced every facet of his life on and off stage. I strongly believe Szwed ends any debate on how Sun Ra lived his life and what he demanded from those around him. This must have been a very difficult undertaking for Szwed, but his outstanding research and balanced reporting yields a fantastic biography on a person we can continue to learn from.

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