



SUNRA

Myth, Music & Media

by Tam Fiofori

When Sun Ra and his Arkestra arrived on the New York Jazz scene, that was then the Mecca for permanently establishing one's reputation and place in jazz history, he was trailed by the tag of being "a weird far-out" character; which somehow grossly overshadowed his painstakingly built-up body of work which he assembled for nearly a decade in the black-ghetto suburbs of Chicago, using an appreciable number of musicians of varying age and competence.

Note his deliberate spelling connotations. The Ark, in which the whole human and animal race survived, according to biblical theology, replacing the conventional Orchestra with, of course the name, Ra—prominent and significant. Yet, Sun Ra, unlike Elijah Mohammed, Martin Luther King or Reverend Franklin, was not preaching or advocating religion as the answer and way forward for black Americans.

Sun Ra, characteristically, did not do much to dispel the label of being more of an unusual character, than a very well-trained virtuoso piano and keyboard player, who also had fresh and innovative ideas on the future direction of jazz or black classical music as he preferred to view it.

Chicago, just after the World War, was a think-tank for formulating post-Dubois and Garvey ideas and strategies for the place and role of the Black man in America and escalating the fight for racial justice and equality. Sun Ra was also out there with Elijah Mohammed, his 'contemporary' in terms of researching for new and untapped black wisdom of the past, and forging out of it a newer understanding and relevance for the present and future.

It could be said that Sun Ra chose Ancient Egypt as his source and lifeline, while Elijah Mohammed chose the Muslim Mecca. Ra took his research findings into music with his Arkestra as vehicle, followership and army for the mind-battle. Mohammed took his into the Black Muslims that later spawned Malcom X and Mohammed Ali.

Sun Ra was as much an ideologue; prominent in studios, gatherings and virtually street-corners, spouting Egyptology Hieroglyphics, his own Cosmic Equations and, of course, his new Space Music, Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy, which he sincerely believed would "save" the black man and the world. Along with his musical ability, he was a man of extreme mental dexterity, cerebral, but with his feet, somewhat ironically, firmly planted in his roots as a Southern-born Black (not Negro) American.

He introduced himself then, as a myth-scientist. To have understood Sun Ra then, and now, and to have an appreciation of his philosophy and music, one has to unravel and then operate in the borderline between myth and reality. As one of his early Cosmic Equations postulates:

Imagination is a magic carpet

Upon which we may soar to different lands and climes.

If we came from nowhere here

Why can't we go somewhere there.

Chicago, then, was also a vibrant melting-pot of the various, though inter-linked genres of Black American contemporary music. The migratory pattern of established and promising bands, musicians and singers—jazz, blues and gospel artists—coming to "Sweet Chicago" to make it in the music and recording industry, propelled thousands of Black Americans to Chicago and created its unique location as the birth-place of revolutionary Black American music.

Rock star Bo Diddley, the fathers and sons of modern electric blues, Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, Willie Dixon, Earl Hooker, Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, the new pop-soul of Curtis Mayfield, the soul-jazz gospel music of the staple singers, were some of the energizers of the Chicago music scene in the mid-fifties and early sixties. Among them were the bands and stars of traditional jazz, swing jazz, modern be-bop and Sun Ra. It was in this environment of intellectual inquisitiveness, political philosophizing and activity, and a panorama of surviving and changing genres of Black American music that Sun Ra fashioned and consolidated his essentially new Black American contemporary music.

It was in Chicago that Sun Ra fused his Cosmic Equations philosophy with his musical direction, making both inseparable and interdependent. He saw himself, back then in Chicago, as someone; a missionary of sort, whose compelling duty was to recreate musical myths and indicate musical futures. He also wanted to establish a cultural confidence for Black Americans which, paradoxically, made Sun Ra the victim of white American cultural racism. Whilst his initial and primary audience, black people in Chicago, were curious, lukewarm, and definitely undismissive of the freshness and energy of his music, the white American establishment could not accept Sun Ra, a Black American musician who had not, at least, been trained in their best music conservatory, as a pioneer of futuristic 'space' music and even, the idea of, high culture.

Sun Ra, however, was well prepared for the musical direction and role he chose. A child prodigy, he had grown up in Birmingham, Alabama (The Chicago City), in a household where he took private classical music lessons, was exposed to an abundance of recordings of old and current gospel, jazz and blues music, and, given supportive encouragement. In high school, he became, as a freshman, a member of his music teacher's part-time professional band, which he soon took over as leader. He then went on to college to study to become a music teacher. This choice of discipline, as a major, was to stand him in very good stead as a band-leader and a mold of young talented black musicians. In addition, he made sure he acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of the origins and styles of the three main genres of Black American music, as well as the practical experience of playing as a sideman in numerous combos, bands and orchestras that performed all these genres of music.



Sun Ra, July, 1973, ©Michael Wilderman

It was no surprise then that on arrival in Chicago, he was also able to perform and survive as a sideman and session man for quite a few of the multiplicity of bands for nearly a decade. He was never aloof or snobbish on the Chicago music scene of his time, which enabled him to easily recruit a wide range of local musicians for his rehearsals, sessions and creation of his early bands. Within the musical scene, he was respected for his knowledge and playing ability. Here was a musician who would write arrangements for the respected Fletcher Henderson band, play with the cream of blues, swing and bebop bands in Chicago and yet be distinctively different.

His fellow musicians conceded to him his right to play his Sun Ra's 'stuff,' and, he in turn, relished the challenge of turning this hard-core conservative, yet contemporary, Chicago musicians around to his viewpoint of music and its ultimate purpose. Sun Ra, thus, set about achieving his musical

mission and identified his need to procure musicians and instruments to achieve his ultimate goal. Interestingly, he also saw himself as the molder and protector of the black musicians as a professional specie to be kept away from social and cultural racism, drugs, alcohol-abuse, the harem of black and white women music-groupies and the exploitative music industry.

His typical sermon to young Black Americans on the hazards, traps and pitfalls that beset them, went something like, "the white man and his music agents, have always wanted to control and kill black music in America, because they are afraid of its power. That is why they always break up bands, choose whom they are going to make stars and leaders, tie them up with management and recording contracts and tell them what to play. Then they encourage them to take drugs entice them with women and alcohol just to kill their spirit and talent. Nobody will do that to me."

In many ways, this view was a true reflection of what he had closely observed and fleetingly experienced in his formative years as a young and quite self-assured, above-average professional musician in the Deep South America. Topped by his imprisonment as a contentious objector during the war, Sonny Blount or Sun Ra, as he chose to call himself as from his Chicago days, did not much admire the face white America had shown him and many others of his generation.

Naturally, his sympathy was with Black American society and his loyalty was to them. He felt they needed the music he had to offer most, and also the privilege to see other black people like him work together, in unison and harmony to express the idea of 'a better tomorrow.' Sun Ra was an incorrigible optimist in matters of the direction and survival of Black American music and its optimum value to the whole world.

In this respect, Sun Ra has come to represent a personification of W.E.B DuBois's prophecy in his 1903 book – *The Souls of Black Folk*—in which he stated that "the greatest gift America had to offer the world, was not its scenic beauty or technology, but the music of the Negro American." It would now seem that Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, B. B. King, Jimmy Hendrix, Michael Jackson, and many more, fit this bill.

The roll-call of musicians who participated in what was essentially Sun Ra's music laboratory and workshop, then based in Chicago, is impressive. Some of these include Phil Upchurch, Richard Evans, Julian Priester, Jim Herndon, Dave Young, Wilbrom Green, Victor Sproles, Von Freeman, Johnny Thompson, Charles Davies, James Scales, Art Hoyle, Alvin Fielder, Robert Barry Luscious Randolph, Pat Patrick, John Gilmore, Ronnie Boykins and Marshall Allen.

Some members of this group would later become Sun Ra's pride and joy and, to remain the jewels in his crown as a bandleader. Pat Patrick, John Gilmore, Ronnie Boykins and Charles Davies were young musicians who had just come out of Dusable High School. Together with Marshall Allen who had been trained in the Paris (France) Conservatory of Music, they represent Sun Ra's first group of specifically taught and nurtured musicians who were the nucleus of Sun Ra's music and Arkestra in Chicago and, the progressions of both, in New York and, eventually, the international music scene.

Employing a strict regime of daily and long rehearsals, Sun Ra was able to impart to them the basic and rather fluid guidelines that ultimately characterized his brand of music. These, were the space chord; achieved extempore by the wind instruments simultaneously playing notes of their choice, periods of multiple improvisations, experiments in tonality and sound textures to express the spectrum of sound from noise to silence and, the use of multiple and natural rhythms. Back then in Chicago, in the mid-fifties, Sun Ra was using as many as five drummers in performance and was very involved in the dynamics of music. His "The Air is Music" sought to emphasize sound values and variations, likening them to the

phonetic impact on words. He sought to bridge and fuse the tonal barriers between conventional and electric/electronic instruments, juxtaposing sounds from conventional instruments to simulate electronic sounds. This was a natural precursor, and alternative, to computer and processed music, which he foresaw as coming, primarily, as a major threat to black musicians.

Interestingly, though, he was obsessed about finding out and keeping abreast of the developments in musical instrument manufacture. He definitely was not averse to new instruments as he continually scoured music instrument shops in Chicago in search of new keyboard instruments. This became a habit he sustained in New York and later while on tour, in Paris, London and other European capitals. In addition to the acoustic piano, Sun Ra's collection of keyboard instruments in Chicago included the celeste, clarinet, organ and solovox. He was one of the first musicians in Chicago to buy an electronic piano, and he and Ray Charles became the first musicians to record with the electric piano. Of the instruments, he was to say that he liked it (the Wurlitzer), "because it had a tender, lyrical kind of sound because of the reeds they had on it. It had the sound of a guitar or lute to me."

Some of Sun Ra's most impressionable compositions and recordings are structured from the unique individual sounds of various keyboard instruments as well as combinations of sounds from different acoustic and electric/electronic keyboards: *Magic City* with its haunting clarinet overtones, then later in his New York days when he had added the *Fartisa* and *Rocksicord*, 'The Night of the Purple Moon' and 'My Brother the Wind' in which he featured the Moog Synthesizer.

That musicians and instruments ultimately shaped and defined Sun Ra's music, was a calculated ploy from his days in Chicago. His search, from instruments, for newer and unusual sounds to blend into his music, took him to Japanese string instruments like the Koto, Kora the African harp, the Mariachi Mexican bass guitar, gongs, cymbals, rattles, and many self-constructed reed, membrane and wood instruments like the log-drums built and played by James Jackson. He encouraged his musicians to play as many of these instruments as possible 'to add their own feel' from this assortment of instruments. Which eventually meant that most of core musicians in his Arkestra, were accomplished multi-instrumentalists.

Although by now in Chicago, Sun Ra was well-known, respected and many times deferred to on the Chicago music scene, he was in many ways self-effacing. He cut records as a session man with numerous singers and musicians; blues, gospel and jazz, but refused, as he preached, to sign on with any of the major, mostly white-owned agencies and record companies.

He was, however, well aware of the documentary value of recorded music and, was also a knowledgeable stickler for

how music, especially his, had to be recorded. Thus began his innovative policy of recording every rehearsal or performance session, which over the years consumed a fortune in tapes and different-model tape recorders and, also provided the large treasure-house of the various stages in the development of Sun Ra's music and his musicians.

One man who deserves great credit for helping Sun Ra initiate his own management and recording preference is Alton Abraham, a convert to Sun Ra's ideas and music, who helped him form Infinity Incorporation, the parent body that released Sun Ra's wealth of recorded music on the Saturn label, from the early days to his death in the nineties. After establishing Saturn Records, he occasionally recorded for minor labels like Transition in Chicago, ESP Records in New York and Byg in Paris, owned essentially by jazzbuffs. He also established an underground distribution system for his Saturn records, by selling them at his performances and concerts. This became the norm for obtaining the then rare Sun Ra Saturn records in Chicago, New York and the various venues world-wide where he eventually took his music and Arkestra. The themes and title of some of these early Saturn records reflect his ideas and musical direction in Chicago. 'Future' 'Medicine for a Nightmare', 'Brainville', 'New Horizons', 'Sun Song', 'Two Tones', 'Horoscope', 'Ancient Aiethopia', 'Enlightenment', 'Kingdom of Not', 'Plutonia Nights', 'Nubia', 'Africa', 'Watusi', 'We Travel the Space Ways', 'Interstellar Low Ways', 'Interplanetary Music', 'Tapestry from an Asteroid', 'Space Mates', 'Music from the World Tomorrow', 'Ankhnoton', 'Lights on a Satellite', 'Between Two Worlds', 'Distant Stars', 'Somewhere in Space', 'Space Loneliness', 'Rocket Number Nine Takes Off for the Planet Venus'.

These, and many more, represent Sun Ra's recorded output on Saturn in Chicago, and they were produced between 1955 and 1960. They are a testimony, when placed alongside jazz recordings from that same period in America, that Sun Ra was definitely and confidently establishing his own new trend in black American thought and music.

Predictably, not for Sun Ra, the conventional attire of lounge away from in attiring his Arkestra. He and his Arkestra appeared in a variety of costumes that included robes, hats with light-bulbs that flickered on and off; all in an array of flashing colours. He was also a pioneer of mixed-media during performances, and long before the hippie/flower movements of slide, film and light shows for live rock shows, Sun Ra had already incorporated these features into his music.

He was, in many ways, a blazing 'ghetto blaster', with a compelling mission to showcase his new music in the black neighbourhoods of Chicago, "to wake Black people up from their slumber, as he put it. He saw himself as a duty-bound community musician. Years later in New York, in the early sixties, Sun Ra was to proudly show me a letter he had written to Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in the late fifties, asking

Nkrumah to invite him and his Arkestra to Ghana because they had something different to offer, and a need for the total development of black people.

He liked to joke that Nkrumah missed a great opportunity by not accepting this offer, and that he may have survived and done more if he had accepted it. Interestingly, he finally got his wish to play live in Africa during the thirty-concert, nine-country tour I arranged for him in 1972, culminating in Egypt where he and his Arkestra played inside and around the pyramids and Sphinx near Cairo. He and his Arkestra came back to Africa to play in Nigeria in 1977 during the World Black Arts Festival – FESTAC.

Naturally, his impact and influence on the Chicago music scene quickly filtered past the black neighbourhoods to other creative music cities in America, by word of mouth and through his limited edition Saturn Records. Some of the many musicians who had interacted and played with him had also preceded him and migrated from Chicago to spread the news and individual viewpoint of Sun Ra's music, ideas and antics.

Norman Mailer, in his book *Cannibals and Christians*, recalls that, "in 1956 in Chicago, I was coming down with a bad cold. By accident, a friend took me to hear a jazz musician named Sun Ra who played 'space music'. The music was a little like the sound of Ornette Coleman, but further out, outer space music, close to the EEEE of an electric drill at the center of a harsh trumpet. My cold cleared up in five minutes, I swear it. The anger of the sound penetrated into some sprung-up rage which was burning fuel for the cold".

Mailer's confirmation of the power of Sun Ra's music, and his description of it, belie the problems of identity that many listeners and critics have faced when confronted with the body of Sun Ra's music since its gestative period in Chicago.

Sun Ra's music, then and now, never quite fitted into the convenient labels of the time – New Jazz, Free Jazz, Avant Garde Jazz, although it possessed some innovative areas of overlap with these new developments. The many 'firsts' he introduced into jazz, then and later, made it difficult to play him within the mainstream of bebop and new jazz.

As it became obvious, during his stay and musical activities in New York in the Mid-sixties, when black America was literally on fire across the ghettos of America, Sun Ra's music was not Protest Music. It had definitely gone beyond the chilling reality of sirens, guns and sounds of bloodied fingernails scratching against broken ghetto window-panes. Rather, it was meant to serve as an up-lifting music for a better tomorrow and world.

Sun Ra, who himself had worked hard to invest his music with an aura of mystery, ironically, used to declare in private conversations that there was a well-organised conspiracy of silence about his music in America. He blamed booking agents, musicians and critics for this state-of-affairs. None-

theless he was dogged and determined to see his ideas and music become recognized, if not accepted and respected.

He was quite candid about other musicians, borrowing or outright stealing his ideas and music, without giving due credit. "Always give credit to whom credit is due. You must acknowledge and respect the creator", was his maxim. As an example, he would point out that back in Chicago in the Fifties, Pat Patrick had exposed John Coltrane to his Cosmic Equations and brought him round to meet him. This was before Coltrane got into his 'sheets of sound' phase of tenor saxophone playing that jump-started Coltrane's new musical direction.

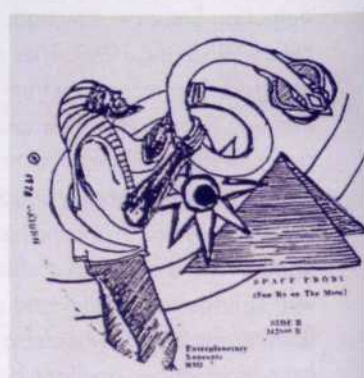
Recorded evidence, from the early Saturn records, glaringly prove the point that Sun Ra's star students, John Gilmore on tenor, Pat Patrick on baritone and Marshall Allen on alto saxophones, were investigating and breaking sound barriers in jazz and contemporary music in the early fifties.

Sadly, Gilmore, Patrick, Allen and later Ronnie Boykins (bass), Danny Davies (alto saxophone) and Clifford Jarvis (drums) were grossly underrated by the public and critics throughout their careers, because they chose to remain and record mostly with the Arkestra at the peak of their innovativeness, which also coincided with the long period (1955 to 1970) when Sun Ra and his Arkestra were not in the limelight or within the jazz music establishment. Aside from Sun Ra, their own innovational contributions on how to approach instruments, musically, have also been very influential in jazz music and beyond.

John Gilmore, a veteran of long and multi-toned tenor saxophone solos, long before Coltrane recorded his famous 'Chasing The Trane' solo, gave a hint of how well Sun Ra had prepared them as musicians and instrumentalists, back in Chicago. "Sun Ra's arrangements, always required you to play on parts of your horn you wouldn't normally play in, in jazz and other forms of music". This reality, buttressed by daily, long rehearsals and a routine of intense practice sessions on their instruments, was what turned John Gilmore and his colleagues into true virtuosos.

Pat Patrick also gave an insight into the alchemy that went into the production of Sun Ra's music, "Sun Ra, made us understand that everybody had his own particular beat. He showed us how to play and have your beat in sync with other beats in the band, to create spontaneous and harmonious music. You have to be in-tune, with other beats".

As it were, Sun Ra taught these young musicians how to see and feel, the large picture and pin-point





(Opposite page) Sun Ra Album Covers
(Top) Sun Ra and June Tyson, The Bayou, Washington, 1978

(Right) Sun Ra & the Arkestra, Kool Jazz Festival, 1983

Photographs © Michael Wilderman



simultaneously and, to also employ precise notes as the building blocks of their own music. He had, by the sixties in Chicago, finally spread his music and won over a growing new generational approach to music. By the mid-sixties, a decade after Sun Ra had first released his Saturn records and half a decade after he left Chicago to relocate in New York, Chicago too had become a thriving center for experimental

'new-wave' jazz bands.

The Richard Abrams Ensemble was made up of many musicians, including Abrams himself, who had been closely associated with Sun Ra in Chicago. Later was to come the Art Ensemble of Chicago, who too, were well informed about Sun Ra's musical ideas, yet went on to create their own band of Great Black Music, as they called it, and deservedly won international acclaim in the early seventies.

By 1960, it was time for Sun Ra to move on, with his Arkestra, to seek greater challenges and win more converts amongst musicians and the American jazz audience. The obvious place to go was, of course, New York; known and revered as the Big Apple by black jazz musicians in particular. New York, was where the young turks of jazz in the late forties and early fifties: Parker, Dizzy, Powell, Roach, Brown and others, had first dazzled the jazz world with their brush, fast and complex jazz form called bebop. Bebop was still in vogue and very active, as were the legendary big bands of Duke and Basie, in New York at the turn of the sixties. Miles, Trane, Monk, Mingus, Blakey, Silver, were now the leading apostles of a more progressive bebop genre.

Sun Ra's journey to New York with his Arkestra, had a hilarious detour. An ambitious booking agent secured them a residency in a Montreal, Canada, nightclub. They were soon paid off, accused of playing 'God's music', in the words of the club owner. They hung out in

Montreal and found favour with the young rock and roll following on the University campus, and stayed on for over three months until they had some social problems and had to leave.

They arrived New York in the middle of the winter of 1961 and Sun Ra again set pit to replenish Arkestra with new musicians and advance his Space Music.

The New York jazz scene in the early sixties when Sun Ra arrived, already had a history and presence of a new genera-

tion of jazz and classical-trained musicians, black as well as white American, who had established a form known as Avant Garde Jazz or Free Jazz. Ornette Coleman, the pioneer of this school was well entrenched in New York. So also were the newer generation of this school, Bill Dixon, Archie Shepp, the Ayler Brothers, their sidemen and other budding leaders and stars. New York, could boast of at least one hundred such Avant garde jazz musicians. What was also unusual, at that time, was the inter-racial mix of nearly all of these New York avant garde ensembles.

It was not an easy music scene for Sun Ra to break into. He, like most of the other bebop and avant garde musicians, had migrated to New York to 'make it', and the competition for attention and appreciation was definitely stiffer in there than in Chicago. Sun Ra, it seemed, adjusted his strategy, to enable him conquer New York better, than he had in Chicago.

He and his Arkestra finally settled into a large studio apartment situated on 48, East 2nd Street, between First Avenue and Avenue A, right in the heart of the East Village. At that time in New York, the East Village was mostly inhabited by Puerto Ricans and a large colony of writers, painters, musicians, most of whom were already underground American heroes. It was a tension-free melting pot of American ethnic cultures. A community of political liberals, as well as firebrands calling for the new youth-led American revolution, which eventually erupted on American University campuses in the late sixties.

Sun Ra's studio apartment was strategically located. It faced a big and well-stocked music store. It was a stone's throw from Filmore East, home of the megastar Rock concerts masterminded by Bill Graham. Elvin Jones and guitarist Sonny Sharrock lived a few doors away. Within a walking radius of half-a-mile were Charles Mingus, Archie Shepp, drummers Rashied Ali, Sunny Murray, Ed Blackwell, Beaver Harris, Saxophonists Marion Brown, Guiseppe Logan, Noah Howard, Byard Lancaster, keyboardist Dave Burrell, Allan Ginsberg, Gilbert Sarentino, painter Joe Overstreet and many more musicians and artists who soon came to have close contacts and working relations with Sun Ra and his Arkestra.

Within a year of his settling into the New York music scene, Sun Ra's Arkestra was still made up of the core nucleus, that had come with him from Chicago. John Gilmore, Pat Patrick, Marshall Allen, Ronnie Boykins and drummer Thomas Hunter who had preceded them to New York. It was tough. The Arkestra, virtually unknown in New York, did not attract any gigs. Sun Ra, had to unwillingly farm out his star instrumentalists, just for them to survive. Patrick Patrick soon found fairly steady work planning with the top Puerto Rican dance bands, eventually playing with Mongo Santamaria. Gilmore got regular gigs with drummer Pete LaRoca, trumpeter Freddie Hubbard and pianists Elmo Hope, Andrew Hill and the white

avant gardist Paul Bley. A few years later, Gilmore who had by now established a reputation as a hot, fluent tenor saxophonist was persuaded by Art Blakey to tour Japan with him. Marshall Allen's multi-talent on the flute, Oboe and alto saxophone stood him in good stead and he, with other Arkestra members, soon found gigs with the Nigerian musician, Olatunji, who had achieved some success with his drum ensemble album 'Drums of Passion'.

Sun Ra himself had to go through the traditional baptism of fire that New York had in store for new on-the-scene musicians, however talented they might be. He too had to play sessions to survive while he set about trying hard to break his Arkestra into the New York jazz scene.

Although, like in Chicago, he had gravitated towards the black neighbourhoods of New York – Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx, and had absorbed the political activism that pervaded these hotbeds of black revolution in America, they initially offered him more of intellectual stimulation and the opportunity to test out his ideas and theories, than performances for his Arkestra.

Sun Ra briefly joined camp with the Jazz Composers Guild, a collection of black and white avant garde jazz musicians, and in 1964 performed with a fifteen-piece band that included Pharoah Sanders on tenor and Clifford Jarvis on drums, at the Cellai Café. Later, Bill Dixon, the prime mover in the Guild then arranged a four-night October Revolution in Jazz, that featured the Arkestra, Cecil Taylor, Milford Graves, Paul Bley, Jimmy Guiffre, Steve Lacy, Andrew Hill, John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Archie Shepp and many of the up-and-coming wave of avant gardists. Then came Four Nights in December that featured the Arkestra and groups led by Bill Dixon, Cecil Taylor, Paul Bley, the Jazz Composers Guild Orchestra and, the Free Form Improvisation Ensemble.

These concerts were the first to give New Yorkers a taste of Sun Ra's music and also bring the Arkestra to the attention of the white art and literary circles in New York as well as the young white generation of rock fans, both of whom were to play a major part in spreading the popularity and demand for Sun Ra and his Arkestra right across the campuses and music cafes and clubs of predominantly white America for the next five years.

The Jazz Composers Guild and their concerts were Sun Ra's first encounter with white musicians, quite a few of whom he admired for their efforts. He played and recorded with them, though he never stayed long with the Composers Guild, moving on as usual to chart his own musical direction.

All the same, this encounter and brief association, also brought Sun Ra into contact with hip and successful writers, artists and filmmakers. Larry Rivers, Allen Ginsberg, Gilbert Sorrentino, Andy Warhol, George Lucas and their generation of white 'underground' thinkers, who were set on changing the cultural sensibilities of white and mainstream America it-

self in the mid-sixties.

It was a new and rewarding experience for Sun Ra, which clearly demonstrated that he was not a racist. Sun Ra talked and worked with these white intelligentsia and artists on the same terms that he had interacted with their black counterparts in Chicago, though not with the same intensity and ultimate purpose of black salvation in America.

The significant fall-outs from this interaction in New York include meeting and recording with Bernard Stollman of ESP records who, with support from the New York State Council of Arts, arranged a one-week tour of New York State Colleges that included the Arkestra. Out of this tour came the ESP live recording 'Nothing Is', released in 1966. It featured, for the first time on the East Coast, a newer and more cohesive Arkestra at its brilliant best in collective improvisation, tonal experimentation, and the extraordinary soloing abilities of Gilmore 'Dancing Shadows', Allen Coboe 'Exotic Forest' Pat Patrick on baritone, Ronnie Boykins and Clifford Jarvis at his fiery creative best, pushing the band, especially Gilmore in 'Dancing Shadow', beyond limits.

Next on ESP were the *Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra Vols. 1&2*, recorded in New York in 1965. While *Nothing Is* demonstrated that the Arkestra could play their own revel-up brand of swinging bebop, as well as their unique 'Space Music', *The Heliocentric Worlds* were showpieces of the Arkestra's Space Music – a definite statement to establish their place within the New York avant garde music scene.

Predictably, Sun Ra also released a series of Saturn recordings made at rehearsal sessions from their arrival in New York. These too – *Magic City*, *Atlantis Monorails*, *Satellites*, and *Strange Strings*, were further explorations into Space Music, as the Arkestra expanded and newer instruments were employed to express these novel dimensions. Sun Ra was making sure of establishing a different identity for the Arkestra as well as keeping his music moving. The gigs were picking up, the reviews were appearing in music, art and regular magazines and newspapers, though most of them were views of puzzlement and quite a few were outright damning. The Arkestra was getting noticed and word of their music spreading, which was what mattered most to Sun Ra.

Sun Ra and his Arkestra were by now straddling the two socio-cultural cum political revolutions being played out in the artsy Village downtown and the uptown black neighborhoods of Harlem, Brooklyn and the Bronx in New York. By now he had become an intellectual bedfellow of the radical black thinkers, writers and artists.

Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones) had set up the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem and he soon organized a benefit concert at the famous Village Gate, which featured John Coltrane, Sun Ra, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Charles Tolliver, Grachan Moncur III and Cecil McBee. Sun Ra was also in, with younger writers like Larry Neal, A.B.

Spellman, David Henderson and Ishmael Reed; publishing his poetry and Cosmic Equations in publications they edited.

The Arkestra was also, during this period, in demand at benefit concerts, loft concerts and cultural shows being staged by the major black movements – NAACP, Black Muslims, Black Panthers and other fringe revolutionary organizations. After these performances, the audiences would gather around Sun Ra and freely express their feelings and assessment of his music. He relished these feedback sessions, during which he would coyly smile or throw in a short verbal response, explaining another dimension of his music and what it stood for.

These performances for black groups were also ideal opportunities for recordings. The Arkestra now had about twelve to fifteen members. Some of his first batch of recruits from the New York scene were Danny Davis (alto), Robert Cummings (baritone saxophone), and Teddy Nance (trombone)—all young potentials much like Patrick, Gilmore and Boykins in Chicago, whom he got from Harlem. Danny Davis: humble, focused, eager to learn and talented, came under the tutelage of Marshall Allen and, eventually, bloomed into one of the best young alto saxophonists in America by the late sixties.

From Brooklyn came drummer Roger Black, who along with Milford Graves, were experimenting with African drums and rhythms, looking for newer rhythms to infuse into the new jazz forms. Roger Black and Clifford Jarvis, when they played together, provided some of the best rhythmic backdrops the Arkestra ever had. Trumpeter Eddie Gale and singer Art Jenkins also came from the Brooklyn movement.

One of the landmark cultural collaborations in black American history was initiated in 1966, when Baraka asked Sun Ra and his Arkestra to provide live music for his major play, *A Black Mass*, first performed in Newark, New Jersey where Baraka had relocated to continue his Black Arts Projects. It was at a performance of *Black Mass*, later in Brooklyn, that I first formally met Sun Ra. Seeing that I had come with my writer-friend, 'Hank' Dumas, and we were quite free and chatty with Baraka himself and the other writers and artists present, he engaged me in deep discussion.

Contrary to the erroneous impression first put out by English jazz photographer/writer Valerie Wilmer, and later repeated by John F. Szwed in his book *Space Is The Place* (The Life and Times of Sun Ra), I did not 'attach myself' to Sun Ra and his Arkestra. Rather, Sun Ra invited me to come and help, since I had expressed the candid opinion that the Arkestra deserved to be heard by many audiences across America and the rest of the world, a task which, modesty aside, I was able to achieve given my background and network of intellectuals, writers, artists and friends in America and Europe.

Sun Ra was very intuitive about the prospects of my helping the Arkestra and his music achieve wider American and international exposure. I had, in my own way, established myself as a writer and poet contributing to a wide range of publica-

tions such as *Evergreen Review*, to the then-called underground press, and I had the cocky confidence of an upper middleclass post-Nkrumah young African who had been educated, and lived, in Europe. I surely did not have any hang up about what blacks could do, and where they could go, in America or anywhere else in the sixties.

Thus I was able and happy to work with Sun Ra as the Secretary/Manager/Booking Agent and writer of the Arkestra, whilst never interfering with his ideas and musical direction. He gave me a completely free hand to book engagements and fix fees, even jokingly chastening me for my initial fumbling, lack of business, financial sense, and tendency to believe in the smooth promises of club owners.

Nearly thirty years after, I still chuckle when I remember three of the many incidents that accompanied working with Sun Ra and his Arkestra. I had booked his first tour of the West Coast in 1969, which included a performance at the rock haven The Fillmore East in San Francisco, and owner Bill Graham had produced his usual psychedelic poster advertising the show with Sun Ra as a supporting act for Three Dog Night.

Typically Sun Ra, a small black organization in New York had begged him to play a benefit for them and, never one to let his perceived primary audience down, he then called me to shift the Fillmore date. I went to see Graham, accompanied by my activist friends, Deleon Harrison and Malcolm X. Bush and rude, Graham started issuing threats and foaming trash and I promptly told him to fuck off and kiss my ass. When Sun Ra arrived San Francisco, he insisted that I come along with him to sort things out, which I reluctantly did. Graham, still raving and cursing, was livid about my presence on his premises. Sun Ra calmly told him, "you see, he is an African, so you have to be careful when dealing with them". Graham promptly fixed another date and on our way out Sun Ra gave me a mild lecture about how to deal with "these people who think they control music".

George Wein, confident that I was in his house to talk about Sun Ra performing at his famed New Port Jazz Festival, also received the sharp end of my tongue when he became patronizing. Again, Sun Ra had to cool him off.

Years later during a 30-concert tour I had arranged in Europe, the Arkestra became the first-ever jazz or black ensemble to play at the Swedish citadel of classical music, the Diamante in Stockholm, for two consecutive nights in 1972. There was some rumbling, from some dancers and musicians who had been newly brought in for the tour, about my arrogance as well as insinuations about my making money off the Arkestra.

"How dare you" Sun Ra, lashed out at them. "Could you have ever come to Europe to perform but for him. He has come all the way from Africa to help the band when most so-called black intellectuals in America still don't know what I

am doing. I warn you, he is mean, I mean mean, meaner than anything you will ever know. Don't forget his ancestors sold you into slavery". Ra's barbed humor cracked up the older Arkestra members, with Gilmore adding "that's right Sunny, he's a mean dude. All the cats keep talking about that African who won't let them in free, on Monday nights at Slugs".

There was mutual respect and friendship within the Arkestra, which the sense of seriousness and purpose may have masked to casual observers. Sun Ra was the leader, not a demagogue but someone you gave his due, had intellectual banter with, reciprocated his sometimes expensive jokes. He and the older core of the Arkestra were true artists in the sense that they respected the writers, painters, filmmakers and musicians they came in contact with; their yardstick being "sincerity, not, jiving".

Thus, I was encouraged to do my own work, unhindered, as well as write about the Arkestra, do sleeve notes for Saturn Records, introduce other writers, filmmakers, photographers and painters to collaborate with and, of course book the first tours of the American College-circuit, the West Coast, then Europe and Africa.

Sun Ra saw himself as a band leader of the old school of jazz. Someone, faithfully carrying on the long tradition of big band leaders, who had not only shaped the 'symphonic' sound of jazz, but had also provided practical training and a professional platform for generations and scores of black jazz musicians. He liked to hold up Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Fletcher Henderson and many other "nameless big band leaders" as the custodians of the big band jazz tradition and its evolution. He wanted to be likened to them as a leader of a big band that played 'another dimension of jazz'.

His Arkestra was basically a school and the classroom sessions were his rehearsals. He sought, at these rehearsals, to disabuse the minds of young musicians that innovations in jazz started with them. At rehearsals, he would play snatches of chord changes that many of these unknown and unsung musicians, who were also original thinkers whose inputs helped develop jazz. He played the role of the social, history and music teacher of the Arkestra.

His rehearsals soon assumed legendary proportions in New York. It was open house for all musicians, and many didn't know what to expect when they ventured into the Sun Studio to join in at these daily rehearsals, which lasted for up to seven hours and were punctuated by lengthy lectures and monologues from Sun Ra, interspersed between marathon sessions of intensive music making.

For the very many musicians who had the opportunity to pay with Sun Ra's Arkestra, however briefly, even at rehearsals only, it was always an impressionable experience. Many, freely admitted that they played some of their most challenging and inspired 'stuff' with Sunny, as all musicians called him. The in-joke then in New York was that even if the Arkestra

didn't play any gigs, which were far between, at least they played everybody.

Sun Ra was particular about detail and the 'so-called small things'. He would ask a musician, a seasoned professional, a new recruit or an older Arkestra member, to play just one note at intervals throughout an entire composition. Typically him, he would also place the note at awkward intervals and within other similar and diverse notes, sounds and rhythms being played by the other instruments. If, as in most cases, the musician tripped up, he would mildly humourously berate him: "You see, you can't even play one note properly. I keep telling you that it is more difficult to play simple things. It is when you can play very simple things that you can play other things. Some people say I play Avant Garde Jazz, but I know everything and what I play". This exercise became like a ritual of initiation for new instrumentalists.

The other side of this musical philosophy bordered on what might be considered as a cardinal rule and obsession of the Arkestra's musical direction, laid down for old and new members alike. He wanted his musicians not to play for the moment, but the future. Sun Ra wanted them to 'play something else'. Playing something else inevitably posed challenges to his musicians because it meant playing something new every time they were in session. He believed that any musician worth his salt must be 'tuned-in' enough to the universe to be differently inspired whenever he played. "The universe is always moving" he would tell them, "so you must also move along every time you play". The duty of the Arkestra, he felt, was to "pass on the vibrations of the universe" to everybody. "The air, is music", he would add.

Rehearsals usually produced new compositions. An idea, gestating in his mind, would be introduced on any of his numerous keyboard instruments, banked and spread out in a semi-circle around him. Then he would play, write, and give parts to all the musicians present at the rehearsal. This was a way of building up the band book of each musician, new and old members. Each had his own part, written out by Sun Ra. He would then rehearse them in segments or individually, working them up towards ensemble work and full run-throughs of the new composition. The thrill of spontaneous collective creativity, usually relaxed new musicians.

He downplayed the rivalry between instruments; the very idea of lead and back-up instruments, and any tendency to impose an ego hierarchy within the band. All the same, the core Arkestra members were usually called upon to demonstrate that his seemingly complex arrangements like 'Dancing Shadows' could be played in perfect multi-horn unison. Whenever he rehearsed older compositions, he enlarged their sound and instrumental structure by writing out new parts for musicians who were not around when the tunes were originally composed and rehearsed.

You had to know how to read music in order to rehearse

and play with Sun Ra's Arkestra. "You must know the rules to break the rules, like I do in my music", he would tell his musicians. By the time any musician stayed around to attend daily rehearsals for, say, six months, he would become a very alert, impulsive sight reader of challengingly-written parts.

Again, as in Chicago, the daily long rehearsals, including his lectures, jokes, and admonishments, were recorded, usually at 7 1/2 or 15 ips on reel tape, making them spontaneous recording sessions that were later released on Saturn records. Strange Strings, a rehearsal session during which he asked his musicians to play an assortment of string instruments from across the globe, is a classic example of his New York rehearsals.

Sun Ra was a very good transcriber of music. He would sometimes ask the Arkestra to play a new composition, calling on random musicians to take solos. Later, he would patiently transcribe all the parts, including the improvised solos and then send on the finished score to the Library of Congress in Washington as copyrighted originals. Playing, stopping, reversing the tape and writing the musical notes of all the instruments, throughout the night, was Sun Ra's main leisure. One that assured that the Sun Studio was always filled with the sound of music.

There must be at least 500 copyrighted compositions of Sun Ra in the archives of the Library of Congress. Routinely, every week, during his stay in New York, he personally went to the all-night post office to send his compositions to Washington and get his Western Union transactions from Alton Abraham in Chicago.

"I am with Sun Ra" soon became a proud statement to make in New York music circles. Musicians would come in from Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore or anywhere else, unannounced. They would be welcomed, offered some space, a music stand and sheets of scored music, skeletal sketches. Many of them barely survived for long, but went away with claims of having been with Sun Ra. Thus, the Arkestra gradually expanded to include the regulars, those that came in and rehearsed for impending gigs and concerts, and sometime-members who were in the cities where the Arkestra played on their increasing country-wide tours.

Once a musician had played with Sun Ra, even only at rehearsals, he was always welcomed back, no matter the circumstances, however unpleasant, under which he left earlier. Sunny had a soft-spot for musicians. Of course, he would mildly scold them in front of other musicians at rehearsal, giving them 'fire' as he called it. "Many musicians can't stand my fire, but they know that what I am talking about is right. One day, they will all come back, one by one, you mark my words" he would say.

They usually did, when they had problems with other band leaders on supposedly lucrative concert tours; when they felt they were losing their musical edge; when they had family-

girl friend problems; or were just down and needed reassurance. Whatever the emotional baggage each musician came back with, Sun Ra's music and Arkestra was like a leveling tonic that bonded them together. Which prompted him to once say that his Arkestra was a band of Angels of Demons. "If they cannot fit in anywhere else, I'll find a place for them", he claimed. It was a game of musical survival between Sun Ra and his errant musicians.

He was very strict about drugs and alcohol-abuse during gigs. No drugs and alcohol were allowed at rehearsals. He also demanded civil and good behaviour. You could have your wine, beer or whatever before you turned up for rehearsal. But if you showed up high or drunk, you incurred his anger and caustic tongue, as well as a lengthy lecture on "foolishness and wasting one's life and talent". You were given tough parts to play and sober up; asked to play a long solo whilst the rest of the Arkestra also lets loose, relentlessly playing multiple solos as it were. If you slept off, you were left undisturbed and when you woke up, given the same sound-treatment.

Sun Ra saw the big band as the living symbol of black unity and harmony in America. "If white people can have their symphony orchestras why can't black people have their big bands," he would postulate. And music wasn't a money-thing with Sun Ra or "something you play so people can applaud you." This latter bit didn't win him the permanent loyalty of quite a few musicians seeking fame and money; compounding their reluctance was also his knock for inviting more and more musicians and dancers to join in whenever he had a well-paying concert in America or Europe.

It must have been this inner urge to recreate the grandeur and image-making power of the big bands of past that made Sun Ra decide in 1967 that he wanted a 100-piece Arkestra to play in the band shell of Central Park in New York. He put the word out and musicians came streaming into his Sun Studio. He had to rehearse them in batches, albeit in an atmosphere of skepticism. But then, Sun Ra had always been one driven by a desire to do 'the impossible'. He didn't quite get his 100 musicians, maybe 80-odd ones eventually turned up, but they were enough for Sun Ra to have his Space blast dedicated to Nature and Nature's God. Another notch. Eight years after Sun Ra and his Arkestra arrived in New York, unheralded, they had become a sort of permanent institution on the music scene. They had played all manners of gigs for a cross-section of white and black music and jazz fans, curiosity-seekers and even non-music fans: They had also played at Carnegie Hall, like many jazz innovators and heroes before them.

Sun Ra's Arkestra, as it varied in size and instrumentation, also went through several name transformations. Some of these were Myth Science Arkestra, Solar Myth Arkestra, Intergalactic Research Arkestra, Astro-Infinity Arkestra and

many many more; maybe a hundred variations, each representing 'a different dimension' of his Space and Cosmic music.

Inevitably, questions of hype and compromise were raised; not that Sun Ra was bothered or unable to spin an explanation for the Arkestra's long adventure from its early formative years in Chicago two decades earlier. The music had changed dramatically, but not as much as its presentation, which by now was total theatre. The costumes had gotten more and more outrageous, as if he deliberately set out to simultaneously stimulate and shock his audiences with his sight and sound. Did all these theatrics, space costumes, dancers, prancers, singers incantations and happenings on and off-stage take away from the music or diminish its message and impact? There remains a deep divide of opinion on this.

As the high-voltage electronics of the Arkestra's music and the space attires of its members became semblances of the emerging and fast-growing acid rock white hippie culture of the late sixties, it seemed his musical direction became overshadowed by the consumerism of this new vogue. Which meant that his audiences in America, and later in Europe, were never really interested in and thereby never got a true measure of, how much he and his Arkestra had revolutionized their root music-jazz. Still he plodded on in this new orbit, however reluctantly, for another two decades of his long career.

Naturally, the new-wave rock groups, like the MC5 of Detroit and NRBQ, became some sort of clones, however unimaginable. They at least tried to play some of his compositions, something the black jazz bands or others never seemed interested in doing. Could it be that Sun Ra and his Arkestra, on the eventual tours across America, Europe, Russia and Japan, finally gave their Space or Intergalactic music its ultimate universal appeal?

Sun Ra and his Arkestra had, by 1968, relocated to Philadelphia, from where, they were to orbit America and the world. Predictably, more local musicians were recruited for this next phase of the Arkestra's musical journey.

It could seem that, mid-way through his career in New York, Sun Ra was poised to play a major role, however unwelcome to his original stance in Chicago, of one of America's pioneers in a search for a respected and acceptable neo-classical music, comparable to the efforts of the new-wave 'Western' classical musicians like Boulez and Stockhausen. This could explain Marion Brown's rather odd backhanded compliment that Sun Ra was the John Cage of the new Jazz music.

I too had made some changes in my career whilst still working, essentially without pay, with Sun Ra and his Arkestra. I was writing more for Downbeat magazine, doing interviews with blues masters like B.B. King, Willie Dixon, Mighty Joe Young, and later Sun Ra's first full-length interview and Sonny

Rollins, after his hibernation 'on the Bridge'.

Eventually, I became Downbeat's first New Music/Electronic Music Editor in 1970 and decided to do a cover story on the Moog Synthesizer - "Moog Modulations: A Symposium", featuring Moog, who was then a Professor of Physics at Cornell University in Trumansburg, New York, Sun Ra, and Carla Bley.

I had called up Moog and arranged for him to meet at the small airstrip. I arrived on a small aircraft from New York, the only black face on the flight. Then a real drama ensued. All the other passengers had been met and gone on to their final destinations. It was near night fall and there I was alone, except for one white worried chap who was pacing up and down. Finally, he picked up courage and approached me, asking tentatively, "are you Mr. Fiori?"

"Yes, I am Mr. Fio-fori, from Downbeat", I answered and could see his face and, I'm sure heart, drop. I could imagine him thinking, 'oh, they sent me a blackman instead of an Italian'. I don't think I sound Italian when we spoke earlier on the phone.

He drove me to his home where his gracious wife had prepared a sumptuous Italian pasta dinner in anticipation. I could sense her heart drop as he introduced me and we then sat down for a subdued dinner. She too had been expecting an Italian. After dinner, Moog drove me to a motel he had reserved for me, promising to pick me up next morning for the interview at his studio. That night, in boredom, I stumbled on a late-night B-movie starring Ronald Reagan, in which he made his asinine remark that still rightly haunts him, "the only good Indian, is a dead Indian".

Next morning, Moog came to pick me up as promised. He was still a bit uneasy, though courteous. The first question I asked him completely threw him off. I pointed out that, to me, his synthesizer was basically an infinite sound machine capable of producing sounds reminiscent of my childhood in Africa, where as kids in search of unusual sounds, we used to produce instruments like paw paw stems which we perforated and then covered with spider webs. How did his synthesizer cope with sound decay, I asked.

He was completely astonished becoming a new man bubbling with excitement. "That's it", he cried out. "I have been interviewed by Time Magazine and so many other publications, but you are the first person that understands that I have invented a musical instrument. I am faced with a dilemma. If an elephant plays a Steinway piano, does that mean it is not a musical instrument?" he asked.

"My problem is simple", he went on: "My synthesizers, so far are studio versions, with patch chords. So far, only a few people have been able to afford them, like the Beatles and a University in India, but they all approach it as if it is something just for effects rather than as a musical instrument. I am still waiting for that musician who has the sound-scope

to play the synthesizer as a musical instrument, not an effects box", he concluded.

"I know who can solve your problem", I assured him. "Who?" he asked, eagerly. "Sun Ra", I told him. "Sun Who?", he retorted. Chris Swanson, a classical musician had just released a novel album, *Switched On Bach*, by patiently programming a Moog synthesizer and using it, alone, to stimulate all the sounds of a full symphony orchestra. Moog, apparently, was not too impressed. He was then working on his first portable model; sitting there, pious and lonely in his tidy studio.

I asked if I could use his phone, and called Sun Ra in Philadelphia, briefing and convincing him to talk with Moog, and asking him to drive over the next day. The rest of the interview was cheesecake, as they say.

Next day Ra had arrived, causing quite a stir in his space outfit in small-town Trumansburg. I must confess that Sun Ra's attire mildly surprised, if not shocked, Moog. Then came the magic. Sun Ra sat behind the new Mini-Moog and PLAYED it, coaxing out melodies, hard-sounding chords, ripping his fingers fast across the keyboard, with waves of coordinated sounds tumbling out. I had seen that same combination before: the far-off, almost emotionless, look on his face and fast lightning touch across the keys, whenever Sun Ra came upon a new electronic keyboard instrument in music shops in the Times Square - the Broadway district of New York. When he stopped, a Sunny smile lit up his face in appreciation. Moog was speechless, stopping short of hugging Sun Ra.

He looked at me and I sensed a warmth of gratitude in his eyes. When he finally spoke, it was to surprise Sun Ra and myself, for he spontaneously offered his first prototype Mini-Moog completely FREE to Sun Ra. All he requested was that Sun Ra send him a copy of his first performance with it, recorded on 7 1/2 i.p.s reel tape, for his archives. That, simply, is how Sun Ra got the first Mini-Moog synthesizer in the world.

In retrospect, I somehow believe that Sun Ra, was rewarded that day for all his then lonely dreams about futuristic electronic sounds in Chicago, nearly twenty years earlier, and it must have made up for some of the snide mockery he must have gotten from fellow musicians back then.

A few weeks later, after he had assailed the Arkestra and many other listeners about his 'ordained' encounter with Professor Robert Moog, Sun Ra and his Arkestra performed an inspired afternoon outdoor outer space music concert to a medium-sized black audience in Brookline Mass. Not too far from Boston. Whether Moog enjoyed the recording, I never found out, but I still believe, like him, that he could not have found a better 'musical ambassador' for his innovative synthesizer.

Within a year, Sun Ra had also released *My Brother The Wind*, on Saturn records and he was to go on to dazzle

audiences in Europe, America and Africa with the new addition to his growing keyboard arsenal.

Definitely, the Moog synthesizer added further mystique to Sun Ra's music. It also gave him a new 'status' in music circles, internationally.

Europe was an entirely new experience for Sun Ra and his Arkestra. His reputation had preceded him and he was treated with respect and given a mega-star status. Initially, it was the jazz buffs that had anticipated his visit with relish. Like in America, he soon reached out to a wider audience that included young rock fans and, unlike America, he performed, from the onset, at the big and prestigious centers of high-culture. More used to eccentrics, he was free to be himself and his dream; his space outfits and music were accepted, if not entirely understood.

In England, one of the promoters, Victor Schonfield wrongly thought he owed an allegiance solely to the British avant garde art and jazz audience. We however made sure Sun Ra and his Arkestra played on a bill that included the African-West Indian pop group, Osibisa; the multi-racial South African, Chris McGregor Jazz Group; and poets from the Black Diaspora. Ekow Oduro, Ike Okwesa, Grace Okotie-Eboh, Emma Obosi, Ademola Johnson, Pat Griffith, hosted him and his Arkestra. They provided a more up-date intellectual banter from an African perspective - a new learning process for him and Arkestra members. He allowed them, with no strings attached, to record and film him and the Arkestra.

The French took him with the same passion and curiosity that they had earlier welcomed Josephine Baker, Bud Powell, Memphis Slim and the other jazz and blues greats. He made his point about the universality of his music by bringing in a master drummer, Math Samba, from the famous Guinea Ballet Africains, and a xylophonist - fire eater, Hazoume, from Dahomey. One night, Aretha Franklin, who was also in Paris on a concert tour, came by the hotel near midnight and hung out with Sun Ra and his Arkestra for over an hour. He was most gracious, she very friendly and relaxed. Both, pianists and students of gospel and jazz music, exchanged experiences.

Scandinavia rolled out the red carpet. High-brow venues and long interviews on state radio and television in Sweden and Finland. Here again, Frank Okonta, congarist Kofi Ayivor, black American objectors to the Vietnam war, West Indians, gathered to host and talk with Sun Ra and his Arkestra.

Then on to the fabled land of Egypt, where he and his Arkestra spent hours in Cairo museums, with Sun Ra observing that they had deliberately smashed the noses of the Pharaohs, "to hide their black origins". There were camel rides near the pyramids, music-making outside and inside the pyramids, photographs wearing space costumes in front of the sphinx. Concerts for Egyptian TV and private clubs, with me as sound engineer for the eventually-released Saturn records, and with Thomas Hunter on camera, making a film of this historic journey 'home' for Sun Ra and his Arkestra.

In many ways, I had done my bit for my fellow Gemini

and friend, Sun Ra. It had been never a dull moment, it was intellectually stimulating, musically inspiring and mutually very satisfying. I had helped to lead Sun Ra and his Arkestra to their spiritual home of Ancient Egypt - the land of astrology, mathematics, myth and civilization. I, too, now had to go to my physical home whilst Sun Ra and his near-thirty entourage of Space explorers headed back, temporarily, to America, I left for Nigeria.

Five years later, they came back to sort of visit me and Thomas Hunter, my filmmaking partner, during the 2nd World Black Arts Festival in Nigeria in 1977. Sun Ra and his Arkestra were part of the American contingent for this mammoth get-together of musicians, writers, artists, filmmakers, dancers and intellectuals from all over the Black Diaspora. Never, had they been in the midst of such diversity of creative black people: from the traditional to the contemporary and beyond. It was yet another home-coming for them and they were not unknown. Olu Akaraogun, one of Nigeria's foremost intellectuals, journalist, and avid jazz fan, with a Sun Ra collection that included rare Saturn recordings like *Magic City*, saw them perform life for the first time. He talked all-night with Sunny and later wrote a rare review.

But then, after nearly fifty years since Sun Ra took his first Space step on an orbital journey, literarily round the world, who really is Sun Ra? Some Blackman who, according to Valerie Wilmer at her rude best, "looks like an old-time country blues musician talking trash about Space music"? He had once, in the mid-sixties in New York, proudly shown me a letter from the University of Leningrad in the USSR requesting to know more and obtain more of his music on Saturn.

The critics, black and white, in America, Europe and the rest of the world, don't seem to have finally deciphered his ideas or music, both of which he has left behind in volumes that will take many many years to digest. How much of Sun Ra was genuine new music, convoluted mental gymnastics, hype, new-world theatre, and in what proportions? He was real and, also, a puzzle.

Definitely, he was a futuristic optimist, who always sought his own right mix of musicians, instruments and theatre to propel and project a music he believed was beneficial to, first and foremost, black people and, by extension, the human race. A music, to herald "a better tomorrow and a better world"; a music, well representative of the pace of the times; meant to inspire and sustain thought about the future. At least, he made people, especially down-trodden black America, look up.

Was he a philosopher myth-scientist weaving theories that surely place him as one of the most important visionaries and socio-cultural teachers of the black race? He also played some touching, delicate, and beautiful music. Was it him or his 'other music' that was Spaced out?

Time and his rich legacy of music will surely tell. For me, above all, Sunny was a rare and fine 'being' as he would prefer. GR