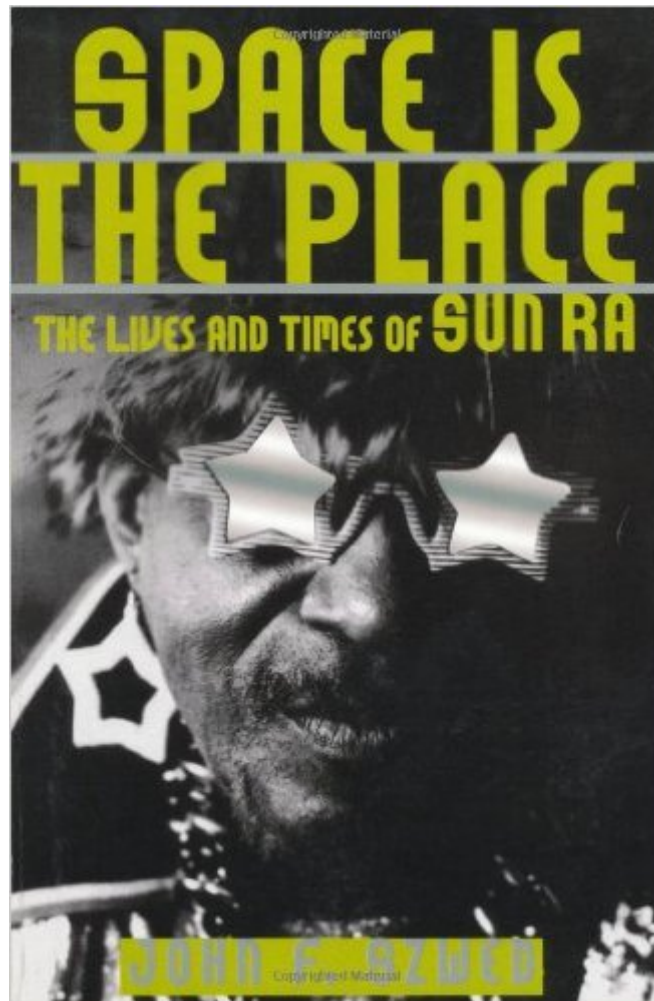


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Space Is The Place: The Lives And Times Of Sun Ra



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First let me say that I am a bigtime Sun Ra fan. If someone did not like Sun Ra's music, this book would probably not be as much fun, but it still might be interesting - say, a three-star rating instead of a five. Ra has made much of his swing era big band background, having arranged for and performed with Fletcher Henderson ca. 1947, during that band leader's years of decline. This book documents something much less obvious: Ra's indebtedness to doo wop, R&B and even mood music. Who would have guessed the resemblance to Les Baxter? I now hear both Ra and Baxter with new ears. Starting in the first chapter, the book provides important background available nowhere else, such as detailed description of the 1930s Birmingham social clubs, a little known musical scene. About two thirds of the way through, the narration freezes and the book gets bogged down in describing Ra as a philosopher and poet. This is rather thin soup. Szwed tosses out

twenty-dollar terms like "gnosticism" without giving any clear evidence that he, or Ra for that matter, really understands them. Fact is that Ra's genius was largely intuitive, and his uses of Egyptian history and futuristic technophilia were largely metaphorical posturing. Ra's philosophy and poetry are valuable only because he was a musical genius. Students of the music should remember that the programmatic content was used ritually in performance but in no way validates his music or makes it better. The chapters covering the 1930s through 1960s are fairly detailed. In contrast, the narration about Ra's last 15 years (1977-92) is curtailed (perhaps by a deadline), and we get barely one page per year of activity.

John Szwed's "Space is the Place" is a monumental achievement. Sun Ra is arguably the most difficult figure on whom a person could possibly write a biography, since throughout his life he denied that he was even from Earth. This makes Szwed's careful analysis of his formative years in Alabama, replete with factual details, all the more compelling and welcome. What soon becomes apparent is that Sun Ra was often a misunderstood musician and composer who was one of the few artists in jazz history that encompassed every generic possibility of jazz in his art. In Ra's music, you heard everything from swing, be-bop, hard-bop, free-jazz, and even traces and significations of more popular musical forms (i.e., doo-wop, blues, and even disco in the late-70s). And he not only drew from these genres, but in many ways helped to shape them, by forming new and revising old musical trends. One can only hope that the world will eventually be graced with biographies of Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor that are as carefully researched as Szwed's study of Sun Ra. Szwed's book also delves deeply into the space-influenced philosophy of Sun Ra and its emphasis on "discipline" and "precision." While Szwed features direct quotes when possible, he also paraphrases the philosophy of Sun Ra frequently. His analysis could have gone much farther into Ra's critique of Christianity and his use of language. At one point, he mentions that both Ra and Nietzsche "unflinchingly assaulted received Christianity" (p.383), but he does not extend his analysis further. (It would have been interesting to compare how both artists used the theme of "overcoming" in their art, or perhaps a discussion of the similarities in their critiques of democracy.

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