



Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra

John F. Szwed

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Always riveting, *Space Is the Place* is the definitive biography of "one of the great big-band leaders, pianists, and surrealists of jazz" (*The New York Times*)—unparalleled for his purposeful outlandishness, a man who exerted a powerful influence over a vast array of artists.

Sun Ra—a/k/a Herman Poole "Sonny" Blount—was born in Alabama on May 22, 1914. But like Father Divine and Elijah Muhammad, he made a lifelong effort to obscure many of the facts of his early life. After years as a rehearsal pianist for nightclub revues and in blues and swing bands, including Wynonie Harris's and Fletcher Henderson's, Sun Ra set out in the 1950s to find a way to impart his views about the galaxy, black people, and spiritual matters through the various incarnations of the Intergalactic Arkestra. His repertoire ranging from boogie-woogie, swing, and bebop to free form, fusion, and whatever, Sun Ra was above all a paragon of contradictions: profundity and vaudeville; technical pianistic virtuosity and irony; assiduous attention to arrangements and encouragement of collective improvisation; respect for tradition and celebration of the fresh.

Some might have been bemused by his Afro-Platonic neo-hermeticism; others might have laughed at his egregious excesses. But Sun Ra was at once one of the great avant-gardists of the latter half of the twentieth century and a black cultural nationalist who extended Afrocentrism from ancient Egypt to the heavens.

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