

Sun Ra.

January 1968. A Monday evening at Slugs on the lower Eastside. Three white^s, early, at the bar. Negroes begin drifting in, band members, hangers-on, spies and enemies, nonchalantly conspiratorial and/or ragged, intense, spiritual like 19th century intelligentsia. No gate for them. An archtypal dwarf proprietor, Van Dyke, parka, collects the gate in a small tin box which he carries around, occasionally confiding it to someone. He later chats sometimes, sometimes grooves to the music, finally mostly reads a paper back which he holds under the table. Now and then a dime evokes from the juke box a marvel, some extraordinary Ray Charles, a fine Holiday, some early Miles or vintage Ellington. Haphazardly the tone is set. The customers cluster by the juke box. The radiator is behind it, a musician warms his trombone over it. There is sawdust on the floor.

The large band's* dense welter of different, complicated, most

* Sun Ra (piano, organ, celeste, clavecine), John Gilmore (tenor, clarinet, percussion), Pat Patrick (baritone sax, clarinet, flute, percussion), Marshall Allen (alto flute, oboe, percussion), Danny Davis (alto flue, percussion), Sothan Callins (trumpet, percussion), Charles Stevens (trombone, percussion), Dick Griffin (trombone, percussion), James Jackson (log drum, trumpets, percussion), Clifford Jarvis (drums), Carl Mimrod (Nigerian trumpet, percussion), Art Jenkins and Thlan (?) Aldridge (space voice, percussion), Danny Thompson (bassoon, flute, percussion), Robert Cummings (bass clarinet, percussion), Bill Davis (bass). Oh the Anglo-Saxon names!

specific and shining instruments invades the room from the low, narrow, shallow band stand next to the open washroom door. You are in a laboratory. Young technicians with long-term apprenticeships behind them are synthesizing--Something. For a century now the American Negro has been working with borrowed equipment, underground in these makeshift laboratories which only recently have dropped their camouflage of harmless euphony. Surfacing with a store of inventions and discoveries he is making it into space in one leap.

The Master is appropriately late and last. The music gets going. Each set lasts hours.

Right off we are slowed down. Penetrating the sound-barrier, we are lifted up and arrested. Spaces are stretched. They are outlined by rhythms running in different directions in different dimensions. Bells clang, sudden appearance of cryptic signs.

Loud. The great sound-volume creates ^aspace, substantial space--extension in being. It isn't just that the space that's there to begin with, the interior of Slug's, the area by the bar or over the long row of empty tables along the wall, is filled--spaced out--by the sound; the sound carries its own kind of spatiality. Space for the ear substitutes itself for seen space, like it's dimensional, untime, roomy, but not radiating

from Me and without the many heres of seen space. The listening ego, dynamic body, is all through and in all of this created, contourless space the substance of which is sound, that: ^{is} silence.

The stage is dark. The origin in human act of the sound is negated. Small colored lights glimmer.

Oriental flutes throw out dawns, rainfresh meadows. They stride, the upper margins of rushing clouds.

We see pictures: the flow of rivers, glare of moons, growth of trees, cascades of rock, river valleys imbedding, geological strata settling (eons), herbs sprouting, stones, lying, suns exploding. Not really pictures: providing colors and names, we routinely attach individuality and substance to the verbs. The instruments make verbs--the growth of large and small things.

The percussion is a living, growing thing, self-moving in a vastly indifferent universe. Things go on. Things go on and on. There are things going on. The vibrating drum, singing like a banjo, measures out the stride of extension. The hollow of the log drum glitters with omena. Rhythms of what might be or might not be.

Growls, snarls, yelps--but neither descriptive nor expressive: declarative.

A self-generating sequence of structured tones flying off singly. Their irregularity (the rhythms are understood) makes for attentive time. The silences in between are theirs'.

Zinging strings. The clang of metal. Sawing. - All echoing. - Materials at work: abstract dynamisms beyond concrete event, beyond, even, conjunct of formulae. Unconscious process.

The celeste alternates between benign though impersonal electronic explosions: catastrophes integrated into universal harmony and radiations of potency through the void. Coldness--of a good universe. Participation in its all-producing indifference posed as universal challenge. A moral challenge? The slightly false (penumbrally other-colored) unemotionality of all science fiction. An occasional extraordinary lyricism. Theatrical music. Sun Ra can make his celeste sound like a dixie cornet or like a cool-jazz alto sax...

A mardi gras parade, gravely ceremonious, from the bandstand to the front door and back by Carl with his long slim open horn and three flutists, bells on their shoes--fantastic clowns illustrating music's mobility, the far-reaching humor of the New World African, reaching for the stars smiling.

Creative music reproducing cosmos and local evolutions. Or: illuminations, courtesy of the band, cast from a path through

the cosmos? An African chant, a Coletranesque excursion on the alto sax. These are Negro avenues.

Voices succeed one another in controlled order. A guided tour providing chance crucial views. Or the voicing structure of the real? Now one, now the other? Sun Ra's music flagrates with the contradiction of all would-be-true statements; they are sequentially extended and joined but they deny that what they are about is sequential or joined.

Now, the sympathetic auditor is empathic. He undergoes a mystic-type experience. He is cosmic energy and/or intuitis it purely. Such events in the mind pacify the oscillation between the "this is it" (epiphany of essence) and the "I am hearing things" ("Sun Ra is showing me around, is up to his tricks"). But the miracle of the fruit in the forest persists: the paradox of individuated life in cosmic indifference. Now the celeste produces the pulsating energy of a sun, now cosmic energy. Now the flutes create this clearing, now all the joyous births, an infinity of dawns, the instantaneous delight-in-itself of life itself. Now the drums beat out the involutions of one unique life in the living of it, now the rhythm of life itself (time). The oboe speaks of/is/we are the air above a lake--or eternal predicate of still purity?

The lights over the band stand go on, the Master plays a nostalgic country club piano, presenting as his personal signature the stereotyped Europeanisms of the Hendersons that wrote for Goodmans. The Angelic choir of a stately Wagnerian horn ensemble carries us back into the impersonal. Or does the piano, well-listened to, say: birds, vox humana, sunshine, harmony? An oecumenical attempt to salvage the sentimentalities of white America for humanism? A marimba follows!

A historical introduction into the ahistoricity of current cosmogony takes off from the big-band music of the fifties. The line of the heavy beat governs the horns vining around it. No cosmic evocations: music in the mind: subjective music: popular themes of self-satisfied contentment in despair. What in the world can the relation of this music to the other be? We are back in this America. It is native music--the notes chasing one another, the climaxes well-rounded....

Dexterously the saxophones move you from the fifties at a quarter past midnight to the ending sixties and Himself at a quarter to one by way of the squeaking detritus of that big-band sound--humorous, though, rather than agonizing, a bird music in disturbed flights, a self-infected cancerating musical organism straining itself into cacaphony. This merry noise gets itself

together into the sound-volume-space-substance of Sun Ra's cosmic reconstructions, in the large blocks of sound matter of which those jiving solos that generated those shrieking bird-flights--bebop?--are reborn as pulsations in a vibrating medium. The beat, now the living body of the melody, is again three-dimensional. It no longer rushes. Withal, the ting-aling-ling of Shrove Tuesday cymbals in Port-au-Prince glitters through, a shining demonstrative gaiety.

The celeste is the solar energy source of this pulsating universe of organizing noise: then sometimes takes over, all devouringly burns up the other voices--then suddenly a Bachian organ-prelude shrills with the true awesomeness of Divine reference--descends into infernal shrieking--sings the harsh song of an accommodated almost leisurely dweller in hell: all this, the drum now surfacing into a dryly summative second voice, leading into an open scandal of all the instruments, a jungle growth of cosmic matter.

Another Monday evening. A saxophone blossoms serenely in a nest of jagged percussion, confidence in the message of each sound making it unnecessary to lay out a real background. Coalescence into a living ensemble of noise "in one place," the saxes and other horns the events in the action-world of the starting/

stopping percussion. The Master comes in with a harsh, probing celeste solo, then the drum joins in, takes over, a note of gravity, its whirls flourishing in ephemeral seed-beds that it lays out. It drops its knots next to the accents--the celeste rides the invisible horse.

What seems a standard sequence: night club piano to dito horn ensemble to South American band on rhythm section background to swinging trumpet solo (lights, on so far, go out)--the piano surfaces again, the same South-American jiggle of ball-bearings--the lights go on again--smooth, trivial harmony, horns blowing up a zephyr.

The set weaves in and out of white themes and modes--to tear them up?--to indulge in?.... There is a dialogue going on here: white/black. It seems curious Sun Ra should be wasting his time on that--but, perhaps his remark on slavery being generosity covers this integration. He started out this night coming on strong in his own odd way: but since then the evening has been mostly white music--tonalities.... Petion, Dessalines, and Christophe in a dialogue across the Massif Central? But there is true imperialism in this: the whites (Debussy, Ravel) have not really been able to speak in many tongues.

Toward the end of the set a Negro in a well-cut grey coat, brown

sporting cap, shades, cadges a drink of port off me--belligerently--an act of race war--throwing off hints. It's a doubting Thomas from Detroit, baritone saxophonist, off for the Vanguard where X is playing--"shit man that (Sun Ra's music) is not my apple pie." When Sun Ra joins me at the bar, it seems as though this man had come expressly to challenge him, taunts him with his luck of success ("You are paying fifty musicians?!").

Sun Ra unsettles him with talk of those below ground "known to me" (to Sun Ra), Sun Ra "has some friends there".... With child-like simplicity, Sun Ra throws his sophisticated cacaphonies into les quartiers gris, sans nom.... He says "the lights look pretty tonight"--referring to the blinking colored lights on the bandstand.

His Nigerian disciple, dark glasses inclined toward his OD trench coat, behind him the dark wood of the bench, shiny, is gathering silence within himself--memories?

Another set. The recurrent contrast between the terrific excitement of mounting drum-whirls and the tranquility of their repetition: building up in the blood but really a joke also. A vast drum-concert dominated by one glorious drum, breath of life, diurnal rhythm, rain on a pane trumped by a celeste solo, impressionist, then an organ hymn, pure Protestant themes cleanly

piped forth: resting on that Dahomean foundation. A message of Kierkegaardian paradoxality. Stillness of the auditorium, no shadows moving under the terrific storm of vibrations. The band is going wild, drums and taps as though on a hunt: a village materializes.

Cliff Jarvis does take over--runs the show--the Master is embarrassed--the horns are nowhere.... "You have never heard my bassoon yet...he's undergoing discipline"....

A dialogue of the celeste with the drum.... In the end, the great walking rhythm is all--celeste and saxophone are sliding, flying above the infinitely galloping drum--on and on. Not exactly African but universally Negro--the chant of the horns above the walking drum.

The rhetoric of band-name, of the titles of compositions predispose the listener to fantasies of space. The trains of the country blues guitars and boogie woogie pianos have departed.

Since the work at Penemünde we have resumed fantasy in the mid-17th century, direct heirs of Newton and Descartes. Our minds whirl with solar galaxies, stellar nebulae, the birth of worlds and the death of our's. But then it was a world of the eye, for painting, of corpuscle points and line-rays: to be visual-

ized, dealt with by a geometrically infecundated^{et} algebra. This is no longer so. Our images are of radiant energy, transformations of energy, the birth of matter from energy and its disappearance back, of vibrant, electric matter, not definitely located, charge: happenings in an endless space despatialized into space-time--of the death and birth of life itself at circumstantial conversion-focci. Einstein relativized Euclid, the Geo-meter, quantum-mechanics has rendered requirements of continuity suspect--science has thrown popular imagination into crisis by impairing its visual recourse. Though our imagination is still, habitually, fantasy ("giving visual form to..."), its vision-creating reach falters. We suspect our visual images to be symbols of a different reality. As the cloud-chambers proliferate sub-atomic particles, our confidence in the particle-image weakens. Our intellectual schemata are cosmogonic, of energy and process, the infinite giving birth. This calls for a new language. Of sound? Even our cities, shapeless, in change, places of displacement, evanescent congeries of momentarily emerging part-functions....

Shapeless, colorless music, contingent realization of output of kinetic energy, energetization of space, radiation and vibration, formally process, intensity rather than extension, space-filling but not localized, real but immaterial, organizing

rather than ordered, event, is appropriate medium for the modern imagination. While, with abstract expressionism, painting has assumed musical action-character, music compositionally is losing the character of paintings-on-time--Cage, Stockhausen, free jazz, r and r. Where it does--owing up to its temporal essence, growing, not structured, it is appropriate medium.

Echoing electronic sound is movement.

It puts us in orbit, high and far out. Putting it this way, we are still stuck in spatial talk. Actually modern music makes us drop out. We lose our center. We are going, but no place. Thus also, of course, the point(!) is not that Space, now our home, is bigger than Aristotle's sub-lunar confine, nor even just that it is endless which it has been since Copernicus, but that there is no where in it, least of all this planet.

The arkestra is big. Its power produces a habitat for which you are incidental receptor. You are it. It is cold--past the heartbeat and breathing of the post-Coleman saxes. The sound is not continually onrushing. It stands. (There is a great deal of careful composition here, in the later 19th century European manner, post-impressionist, sometimes orientalizing.) The action is unlocate pre-form of motion. When the beat does figure motion-in-a-direction rather than vibration, oscillation,

agitation, the pre-form yields form. Such a beat is not metre. It does not take over to define place, e.g., by where it's heading (as in the psychedelic section of 2001) or by excited statement of where the action is at. This ensemble of qualities (envelopment, thick weave, impersonality, stand in timbered harmony) of the sound approaches it to modern non-space space.

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The master's studio on East 3rd Street is a poor people's apartment, all bed rooms, cluttered with instruments, tape recorders, tape, tubes, parts of amplifiers, many men's clothes. He was late but then though having an engagement that evening he spoke a long time, politely disregarding my repeated offers to leave. His face is bland, powerful, sweet, seductive.

He has read the Bible twenty times--it is a contract, so he is suspicious of it. He first approached it emotionally, then with the mind, went through it with a red pencil. Other reading is necessary to understand it, other religions--he had^s read the Koran. The different translations of the Bible differ in significant ways--he has studied Greek and Sanskrit. He does not claim to know these languages. An attentive reading of the two testaments in a manner of logic-minded study shows them to be self-contradictory--the master, quoting, points out the contrary ways in which the Lord identifies His people and His

warnings of His own deceiving ways. We may infer from the contradictions that the accounts, precepts and promises are ambiguous--do not always mean what they seem to mean. This shows that God is tricky: devious and deceiving: Skullduggery Inc. The Lord is a trickster.

His message is for the fools, they are His people. Smilingly, the Master calls his own theories and work foolish. He adds that he got good grades at school.

God has created much evil, terribly much--the Master again and again reverts to the plenitude and power of evil in this world. It is a test for man--and for the so-called Negro in particular. It may win out. Having created, the Lord does not speak. But He watches. And He keeps interfering, cunningly fashioning events into misleading signs: much of what happens is other than it seems to be. Its apparent insignificance is a trap but so is its apparent significance. To confuse is the Lord's intent, but if we keep up our guard and think, the world reveals Him as much as does the Book. Simply an attentive reading of the newspapers shows the continual interference of a cunning power. People don't notice but the papers are full of such.*

*The master's own discourse being in fact discrete and cunning, I could not make out whether he thought of God as evil or as prankster or whether possibly His tricks and castigations might fit into a benign masterplan. Is He perhaps indifferent? The Master's music conveys these perplexities leaving them unresolved.

E.g. the notice about the woman in California who had given her heart to a heart patient, followed by another news item a week later quoting her as saying that this was "nice"---a hearless⁺ woman saying this! Or when that bridge recently collapsed in Ohio, a survivor whom the catastrophe had widowed was quoted as having remarked to his wife a moment before it happened that it seemed like just a word might make the bridge fall.... One time a fellow was leaving, said he was going to church and when asked why? said he was seeking eternal life. The master told him not to go, that there was a judge that would give him life. Sure enough, soon after the man got a life sentence for rape-- he had raped a girl or it was said he had....

Going to give a concert at Bryn Mawr recently, they had been kept off the thruway because of their trailer with the instruments. Coming back they decided to try getting on it anyhow-- it was late and cold, they did not want to be bothered going through all the small towns--so as a joke one of the men played on an instrument what the master had at some time called Scriabin's magic chord. Sure enough, the guard handing them their ticket was looking the other way. Getting off, the guards were confused by the fact that they were there, it seemed impossible, they argued with one another, let them through after making them sign some papers. As a matter of fact getting to Bryn Mawr had been

a real hassle, it seemed as though somebody did not want them to get there. They kept getting lost in Philadelphia, kept asking the way--fortunately he has selected the members of his band somewhat according to how patient they are, so they just kept asking, but all of the twenty or so parties they asked misinformed them--and not out of ill will, some took a long time to explain. Some power must have possessed them. They just could not find the place. Finally they just decided to turn in some gate they were near. That was it, they were there.

Thinking the change might do his musicians good and to see how it was--he had never been out of the USA--he went on a date at a hotel in Canada. They were to play for a week. After two days the management asked him to play differently--rock and roll. He refused, would not compromise, told them he had played his music for years in Chicago in a black neighborhood where they did not like it but had listened even so; told them not to set themselves up as judges, to let him play the week out. But they would not listen. They complained to the union that he was playing spiritual music; he told the union he wasn't playing spirituals.... They broke the contract, that Tuesday night was their last. A girl that had been hired with them and stayed on came to their motel on Thursday and told them how on Wednesday night hundreds had shown up, all at once, in Rolls Royces...

wanting to hear. But they could not, he had been gotten out of the way.

The master considers himself a prophet: he can see what's happening and what's going to happen in the cosmos as plain as a movie. His music is a cosmic newspaper. Every evening has its mood. His piano chords set it out for the band as they play, he picks the succession of solos to develop it^{*} according to how the players have been trained and by their fitness^{**} to express that particular stage of it. The other evening he started off with Carl on the Nigerian horn--Carl is his forest man--forest music, trees.... In the forest there are all those beautiful flowers, you admire them, there is also some danger, but still, the flowers are beautiful. Then...(the master conveys a serenity tempered by unease).... People say we started in paradise. That means we might end up there. We should know what it is like so we will recognize it. The astronauts as they go out there may come into space--timeless space:^{***}

* The set tells the evening's story, but adapted to the type of people entering the club. Any good bandleader will do that.

** Their fitness is determined by their character and by the stage of the spiritual training they are undergoing.

*** The master gives an argument from the concepts of beginning and end, life and death, for the necessary eternity of space which I fail to follow. His musical newspaper also provides descriptive cosmography and prophecy.

paradise--they should know how it is before they get there.

His forest music gives a picture of it.

Sometimes what the band plays is impossible.

He knows he is a born teacher and that he cannot escape this responsibility. He once started to study pedagogy but gave it up. He would be the one to help the black people, in fact the only one. He does not want to get mixed up in this, but they keep coming back to him for help. They are no good. He will not flatter them as others do so they do not listen to him.

They have no culture of their own. Their music is beautiful, yes (music, just a melody, may keep a man going, the harmony keep his body together).... But they have no paintings, no cultural institutions, no lasting objects that could provide a center, for instance just a single painting, highly valued....

He gives no indication that he conceives of his music as therapy for or as an attempt to educate the Afro-American population. The members of the band are his disciples. He teaches them, they are selected on spiritual grounds and spiritually trained... they come to understand their drumming.... He cannot keep them away. He keeps firing his drummer Cliff for instance--he is too anxious to keep drumming, strongly, wonderfully, all night,

does not give the others a chance...but Cliff just keeps coming back. Once when he was making \$200 a week with another band, he just quit and came back: "we weren't making anything then." A very young man, eighteen, was working with him. His mother, disturbed by the vocabulary of a notice about the master in a California hippie publication (the master indicates that there are many worse things than bad language) came all the way from there to get her son. But he would not go with her though she took the car and left him no money. He tried to discourage the boy, a saxophone player, told him he did not need a saxophone but a bassoon knowing the boy had no bassoon nor the money to buy one. Two months later he showed up with a bassoon, knew how to play it.

Sun Ray

On one occasion he told one of his boys that he might do wrong. The boy was shocked. The master told him "I know you are righteous and want to do right" and told him to leave him if he had to. But if you travel on a road and see a detour sign will you insist on taking the direct road saying "I know it, I have travelled it many times before, there is that bridge up ahead..." or will you follow the sign? "I may do wrong to survive. I have to survive."

He has suffered so much abuse, there has been so much resistance He is moving beyond good and evil. He used to believe in

good.

He wants his work to be not only good but essential like water. If it is not essential, it is nothing. It must be needed, indispensable.

He can score any music exactly with all overtones and nuances. Such scores are very hard to play from, musicians do not like them. Scoring some music played by Art Blakely for somebody going to Europe he warned them against attempts to steal the bass score as the bass player would find it very difficult to follow. A week after they wrote back that the score had been stolen.

His music ranges over all the world's music...Africa, Russia, the East (he does not mention Europe): every people has expressed something of the truth or provides means for expressing some of it. He is now trying out a Ukranian bandura. In a recent recording he used some Chinese symbolic sounds with some Japanese instruments that friends in Japan had sent him. After listening to the record for a week they wrote that they enjoyed the beginning of it but that the Chinese sounds clashed, disturbed them. But a little later they wrote again. They now understood. There was harmony.

I ask about themes from Beethoven, Schubert, Bach. He denies

quoting other composers. He adds that sometimes he finds that other poets have written something he has written, just a word or a phrase. They glimpsed the truth briefly. But they did not realize what they were seeing.

He was playing at the Grand Terrace in Chicago during the late forties or early fifties. They did not like his music but they came and he played what he wanted. But the complaints that he was too far out made him decide to stop playing for five years. He and his musicians would get jobs various places, would only continue to rehearse together. They rehearsed further south at the Surf. But dancers, musicians crowded in, listened, began pushing them to play for the public. Somebody suggested the Birdland. He resisted, finally they said "will you play for them if they ask you to audition" and he said okay for the sake of the men and knowing they wouldn't take him. He auditioned for Cadillac Bill, played the furthest-out things he had but they still hired him. He stayed four years. But there were too many musicians wanting to sit in which it was his policy not to allow and this made many enemies for him in Chicago--also, too many singers crowding around, wanting to sing. We finally went still further south, to the Wonder Inn (?). Most of the opposition came from other musicians, not from the people--the opposite of the usual....

His poems are based on certainly true equations--on science, in which, that is, true science, not the kind involved in heart transplants, the master believes. Being absolutely distrustful, he checks and rechecks his poems to assure their conformity to the equations. These relate words. The resolution of words--words of the English language, as they are spelled--according to certain principles such as the suppression of all but one of adjacent vowels--into one or more other words furnishes the true meaning of the term analyzed. Intuition, etymology, pronunciation provide guides. That true meaning may either be given by a derived word or by equations between several derived words which indicate an inner identity of meanings illuminating the meaning of the original term. He illustrates. His accent is relevant to his derivations. He does not disagree with my comment that this theory presupposes an inner relationship of the English language to the cosmos.

Just like the Bible and like the world reported on by the newspapers, our own language is both deceptive and revelatory. Everybody all the time speaks the truth without knowing it.

On one occasion he asked a young fellow in his band "do you have any sins?", scribbling while asking him. He is writing something as he tells the anecdote. On being answered in the negative, he showed him what he had been writing (he shows me): "sense." He smiles.