

# Space Is The Place



BY SUN RA

How the interstellar pioneer of free jazz created a mystical, Afro-futurist epic as a gift for the Creator: "He was the most unusual person..."

**W**HILE HISTORY IS full of musical auteurs, single-mindedly pursuing their own niche interests and expanding the minds of a coterie of cult followers, few have been quite as dedicated to their art as Sun Ra. Born Herman Poole Blount in 1914 – though he claimed he was in fact from Saturn – and backed by his Arkestra collective, he released multiple albums of experimental jazz each year from 1957 until his death in 1993, sometimes in runs as small as 75 copies.

"He wrote at least one composition a day!" marvels Arkestra member Knoel Scott. "Every day. I remember I'd see him at the piano in the mornings. I asked him why, and he said, 'Everybody all over this planet is always begging the Creator for things, but nobody ever gives the Creator anything. So every morning I give the Creator a song...'"

One of his most enduring gifts to the Creator remains "Space Is The Place", a 22-minute epic that appears to mix Duke Ellington, West African funk and Afro-futurist mysticism. With the title repeated by female singers including the late June Tyson, the song builds and builds, propelled by percussion, free-jazz saxophones and Sun Ra's interstellar organ.

"He pioneered a lot of things," explains Val Wilmer, the British jazz photographer and writer who became good friends with Sun Ra and the Arkestra during the late '60s and '70s, "in the use of keyboards and so on, in jazz. The other

thing he did, the way they dressed in that Egyptian look, well, Earth Wind And Fire and lots of other bands were inspired by that."

As well as acting as the title track and centrepiece of the *Space Is The Place* album, the song also gave its name to a feature-length film that Sun Ra and his group filmed in 1972. Mixing live footage with a surreal narrative, the movie dealt with time travel, teleportation and the emigration of all African-Americans to a distant planet. As Scott explains later on, this wasn't just some Ziggy-style fantasy, but genuinely a deeply held mythological belief system for Ra and many of the Arkestra.

"He was the most unusual person," says Marshall Allen, Sun Ra's trusted lieutenant and now leader of the Arkestra. "He kept you working and kept ideas flowing until there was so much that it was sometimes overwhelming. It was once in a lifetime, you know?"

TOM PINNOCK

**VAL WILMER:** I first met Sonny – everyone who knows him calls him Sonny – in New York in the late '60s to interview and photograph him. I

## KEY PLAYERS



**Marshall Allen**  
Alto saxophone



**Danny Ray Thompson**  
Baritone saxophone



**Knoel Scott**  
Arkestra saxophonist



**Val Wilmer**  
Photographer

started off by asking, "When were you born?", and he said, "Well, we are trying to do away with the idea of being born. I've developed an equation which will show that if we were never born, we will never die."

**KNOEL SCOTT:** The more I study the cosmology of ancient Egypt, the more I understand Sun Ra, because I realise it really was as if he was an Egyptian priest, with the concepts he's talking about.

**WILMER:** I remember their house in New York was just total chaos. There was so much stuff. There were instruments hanging everywhere, there was silk

from a parachute hanging, to stop bits of plaster falling off the walls, and a rubber ball suspended from the ceiling. You could hardly move for drum kits and everything. The back room was full of books and various literature about black history and everything under the sun.

**DANNY RAY THOMPSON:** We were in Denmark in 1971, just before "Space Is The Place". We'd just done a 10-month tour or something, and Sun Ra said, "We're going to Egypt." We stayed in the beautiful Mena House Hotel. It was right by the pyramids. We danced on the Sphinx, and I met



Sun Ra on Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, CA, November 10, 1974

the Minister Of Culture, and the Minister Of Antiquities for the region – Zahi Hawass, he's really big now. He told us, "There's a lot of strange stuff that goes on around the pyramids – why don't you bring a tape?" So he opened up a tomb for us that had just been excavated, the mummy was still in there, all the hieroglyphics were still on the wall. He took me and another fella in there, and we recorded this song called "Along Came Ra". About halfway through us playing, we heard something go "Mmm..." So we played it again, and got to the end and heard "Mmmm..." So Zahi told us, "Let's go." We found out it was the keeper of the secrets. It was his tomb. We also went deep inside the Great Pyramid, said the name "Ra" nine times, and the lights went out and it was unbelievably dark. I told the BBC this story when they came to Philadelphia, and the lights went out in the hotel we were in. I said, "I told you it was a true story!"

**SCOTT:** I think Sun Ra was a representative of the culture of African-Americans in its correct depiction as descendants of the ancient Egyptians, the Nubians who built the Pyramids and created science and mathematics. When the Blues Brothers say "We're on a mission from God", amplify that a thousand times and you have Sun Ra. He was on a mission, and he was totally consumed with this mission to spread enlightenment. These are the concepts within "Space Is The Place".

**WILMER:** Sonny never stopped talking, he ran the band like an army. He was very firm with them and restrictive on their activities. Some

people went along with it when they were recovering from problems like drugs and drink, that's how they survived, but other people wanted to go out and live a normal life and he said, "No, we have to rehearse at the drop of a hat." He really worked them hard. He would have them rehearsing from, for example, four in the afternoon to six in the morning, non-stop.

**THOMPSON:** We used to rehearse with Sun Ra seven days a week when we were at the house on Morton Street in Germantown [Philadelphia].

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**"If you want money,  
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with me, because I  
work for the Creator"**

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SUN RA

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It could be at any hour that he could call a rehearsal, he didn't really sleep too much, he just cat-napped. I lived in the house, John [Gilmore] lived in the house, and a couple of other guys, too.

**MARSHALL ALLEN:** I'm still living here, on Morton Street, yeah. Of course we lived together, and we had to rehearse because we had all these

numbers we had to learn. It was all day, everyday, or any time of night. I didn't like it because I liked to run out sometimes. But I see why he did that. He'd have thousands of numbers, piles of music that we hadn't even played yet. He wrote so much, he was a 24-hour man, he was always writing something. He was fast, so he didn't linger on a number. Each time you played it, he'd play it differently, or switch your part. To us it was like, 'Ah, we gonna take all day doing this!' I always had to take notes. It's difficult stuff, you gotta study it when you go to bed, and then the next day he'd probably give you a new part, change yours or give you someone else's!

**WILMER:** It was just an ordinary house. It belonged to Marshall's father and he gave it to them – sold it to Sonny for \$1 or something. It was quite a nice place, though a bit spartan. No-one was making any money out of this music, let's face it. That's why he kept them on a firm leash and made them eat beans and rice and corn bread all the time.

**SCOTT:** When I auditioned for Sonny, he said, "Look, I work for the Creator, and my band is the Creator's band. If you want money, fame or fortune, you don't wanna work with me, because I work for the Creator." And he went on to talk about a few other things, then he repeated, "If you want money, fame or fortune..." That was the first time I sat with him, but I found that whenever you talked to Sun Ra you would hear about the Creator.

**ALLEN:** You didn't have no time for yourself no more, to do other things. But that's the way it is. ●

Sun Ra, Marshall Allen and John Gilmore, Moers Jazz Festival, Germany 1979

● He had so many ideas and he didn't want to miss none of them. He'd write them down and off we'd go, all day long, half the night, take a break, eat, then go back at it. You still had to rehearse every day on the road. Riding the bus, you get tired – then you're gonna have a rehearsal, ha ha. Then you wanted to relax, but you gotta rehearse. You lived the music. I got a stack of music as tall as I am, and that's just my parts! Yeah, he was strict, as he needed discipline and he needed precision. **THOMPSON:** The neighbours had gotten used to us. In fact, one next-door neighbour had children there, she had five girls. And one of them told me later, "We grew up, we did our homework, we did everything to Sun Ra's music."

**WILMER:** The basis for Sun Ra's music was very different to what Miles Davis was doing, for example. Sonny was making them do something else, and lot of the things they played are much more intricate.

**THOMPSON:** We played "Space Is The Place" for about six months or something before we recorded it. Our bass players usually lived in New York so they couldn't come down all the time for rehearsal. So for most of the bass parts for these songs, Sonny had me play them on baritone sax. He wrote "Space Is The Place" in 4/4, but the bass part is in 5/4 – don't ask me how it fits, it just fits. He wrote that bassline for me.

**ALLEN:** We recorded "Space Is The Place" in Chicago, and it was one of the first records with all the girls singing. It was a long one, you know! We were hitting a groove, so it just went on. They had to fade out on it, it was so long.

**THOMPSON:** Sun Ra would direct tracks while we were in the studio, he'd point to somebody and we just played intuitively. We didn't overdub. On "Space Is The Place", it was straight down, it was what you hear. We had all our dancers and we had just come back from Ann Arbor Jazz & Blues Festival, then we went to Chicago and cut the song. On a recording session, Sun Ra would tell

the engineers to turn the tape on and keep moving. But that time the guys never did turn the tape on. So we played it and I thought we were recording it. It's a very long song, 22 minutes, I think. So we played it once and found out they didn't turn on the tape. I'm like, "Oh boy, here we go again"... but the music is so energising that it didn't make any difference. So we did the second take, and it was 22 minutes long again. After it stopped, Sun Ra was like, "Yeah, that was it, that was nice." You should've heard the first take. You think the second take was something – the first take was really something.

**SCOTT:** There are certain types of Sun Ra songs that are mantra songs. But it's not an Egyptian or Indian mantra thing, it's an African-American mantra thing that goes back to the church. Musicologically speaking, "Space Is The Place" comes from the gospel shout. That's why all the best bands came from the South, 'cos they all came out of the church, and that feeling went into the music.

**THOMPSON:** The *Space Is The Place* movie took about six or seven months to make. It was a regular film with actors, cameraman, all kinds of stuff, a director. Sun Ra didn't have a script, though, he didn't want one. Anything you heard Sun Ra say, it was coming from his spirit.

**SCOTT:** *Space Is The Place* was Sun Ra's solution for the problems African-American people were experiencing over 400 years over here [in America], that the Nubians of ancient Egypt had experienced away from their earthly home, which was Egypt, and away from the place where they originally came, our original planet, Sirius

on. It's an unusual piece and it's one of our favourites, the crowd always loves it. It is an endurance test somewhat, but the music has got so much energy in it that it makes you feel extremely happy. Sun Ra had a mission and we were all for it, even now. Marshall Allen, you know he's for it, he's the bandleader now. Sun Ra's music is so happy and so healthy, and it does some wonderful things to you.

**SCOTT:** Sun Ra would say that when you're really into a tune, and you know it, and you're playing your ass off, and you really think you're doing it, then that ain't nothing. He'd say, when you're not

sure, when you're wondering if you're playing right and you're trying to get this out, that's when you're really playing. And I have found that to be true.

**WILMER:** The last time I saw him was when I went to theirs in Philly many years ago. I went to interview John Gilmore, but Sonny and I hung out for a while, too, and he gave me a record and signed it to me. Someone drove me and Sonny to the station, and I got on the train. The next thing, I hear him shouting at me – I had forgotten the record. All I can remember seeing is him running down the tracks, sort of tummy wobbling, and he says, "Here Valerie, you forgot this!" And that's the last

time I saw him. But you see what I mean – he was also a normal human being. ●

Gilles Peterson's Sun Ra compilation, *To Those Of Earth... And Other Worlds* is out now. Many of Val Wilmer's photos can be found in the new, revised Omniverse Sun Ra book. <http://artyardrecords.co.uk>

## FACT FILE

- **Written by:** Sun Ra
- **Produced by:** Alton Abraham and Ed Michel
- **Recorded at:** Streeterville, Chicago
- **Personnel includes:** Sun Ra (Farfisa organ), Marshall Allen, Danny Davis, Larry Northington (alto sax), Danny Ray Thompson (baritone sax), John Gilmore (sax, vocals), Elloe Omoe (bass clarinet), Pat Patrick (bass), June Tyson, Ruth Wright, Cheryl Banks, Judith Holton (vocals)
- **Released:** 1973

## TIMELINE

### Early 1971

Sun Ra teaches a course at the University Of California - 'The Black Man In The Cosmos'

### December 1971

The Arkestra travel to Egypt to explore the ancient sites and play shows

### 1972

Sun Ra and his group film *Space Is The Place*, a feature film produced by Jim Newman, which

attempts to present some of Ra's beliefs

### October 19, 1972

The collective record "Space Is The Place" at

Chicago's Streeterville studio, releasing it as the title track of the *Space Is The Place* LP the following year