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African American Review, Volume 45, Numbers 1-2, Spring/Summer 2012, pp. 197-203 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/afa.2012.0006](https://doi.org/10.1353/afa.2012.0006)



AFRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW

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Performing the Past to Claim the Future: Sun Ra and the Afro-Future Underground, 1954-1968

On the South Side of Chicago in the early 1950s, jazz musician Sun Ra began a lifelong project to re-envision the relationship between music, technology, society, and African American identity. While the popular image of Sun Ra during much of his career was that of an offbeat, creative character at the margins of both mainstream and avant-garde jazz, a significant number of scholars in our time and place now see Sun Ra as a central figure in the era's African American embrace of science and technology. Sun Ra's art, in this view, looked to both the past and future to re-imagine and claim new metaphorical and material spaces for the diaspora.

The extraordinary collection gathered together in *Pathways to Unknown Worlds: Sun Ra, El Saturn & Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground, 1954-68*, curated by John Corbett, Terri Kapsalis, and Anthony Elms, adds many layers to our understanding of Sun Ra and his work. The former exhibition is now a book. As an exhibition and a comprehensive, lavishly illustrated guide (Corbett, Elms, and Kapsalis), *Pathways* is a lost "manuscript" that chronicles fourteen years of a largely untold, subcultural history of Chicago's South Side. *Pathways* leads us through the marked transformation of a musician who began his career under the tutelage of Fletcher Henderson, one of the architects of the big band sound, but who during the 1950s, embarked on an extraordinary project to reinvent African American history and claim the technological future. This transformation is captured through the vast array of artifacts that *Pathways* gathers from Sun Ra's Chicago years, that seminal period in which the themes that the musician and members of his sprawling band explored throughout their long careers first took shape. For example, a 1956 exhibition photograph of Sun Ra, the mainstream jazzman, sitting stolidly at a piano, quickly gives way to a video of a late-1960s performance, with band members attired in elaborate Egyptian and outer-space costumes.

The strongest aspect of this exhibition and guide is an expansive logic of inclusion that allows for revealing juxtapositions. Ephemera such as business cards, receipts, and letterhead sit alongside "do-it-yourself" (DIY) analog and electronic instruments, all of which document how Sun Ra's artistic practice unfolded across several media and across many social contexts. In this light, the mundane becomes startling (a 1957 flier advertised a benefit dance for a "Mayor of Bronzeville" candidate with music performed by "SUN RA [Sun God of Jazz?]), just as the startling also becomes mundane (expense ledgers served as doodle pads for artists drawing album covers that explored themes of outer space and enlightenment). Indeed, the exhibition and guide wonderfully reveal many aspects of the art world that Sun Ra traveled through, and capture him variously as a working musician, outsized performer, Big Band leader, entrepreneur, and inventor. *Pathways* also makes clear the importance of Sun Ra's collaborators and the city of Chicago to his artistic practice. The Chicago Afro-Futurist Underground included a host of musicians and artists such as Claude Dangerfield, who designed a number of album covers for the band, including many stunning outer-space landscapes that were never used. Meanwhile, long after Sun Ra moved to New York in the early 1960s, Alton Abraham, Sun Ra's business manager and co-owner of the El Saturn record label—"one of the first musician-owned record companies"—manufactured the band's albums in Chicago by relying on the city's independent, black-owned businesses (Corbett, "Sun Ra" 7-8).



Fig. 1. *Thmei Research*. Courtesy of the Chicago Jazz Archive, Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Pathways forces us, as the best archival collections do, to reconsider our assumptions about Sun Ra, his art, and his era. How do we explain Sun Ra's founding, in 1951, of Thmei Research, a secret society dedicated to the study of the occult, Egyptology, the Bible, and new technologies? Or Sun Ra and Abraham's plans for a Saturn Records research center devoted to the Bible and outer space? Or the fact that by 1955, the year of Emmett Till's death, Sun Ra charted an alternative to the civil rights movement, handing out broadsides on biblical exegesis and language permutations on Chicago's streets, and investigating land west of Chicago for the building of a utopian society? As one encounters radiant outer-space landscapes, bolts of cosmic energy, swaths of psychedelic colors, and the imagery of the occult, there is the striking feeling, underlying it all, that the Summer of Love somehow occurred a decade earlier on Chicago's South Side.

The *Pathways* exhibition and guide coincides with the emergence, over the last decade, of renewed interest in Sun Ra and many of the themes he explored in his art. Theorists of Afro-Futurism provide much of the interpretative analysis of Sun Ra's work through the lens of African American technocultural practices (Corbett, *Extended Play*; Eshun, "Further"; Eshun, *More Brilliant*; Williams). For these scholars, Sun Ra's art is a canonical example of a broader African American project aimed at "recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (Eshun, "Further" 301). While much of the work on Afro-Futurism is grounded in the humanities, historians and sociologists of science and technology have in recent years explored these material interventions, which scholars refer to as "technological appropriation" (Eglash et al.). This line of work critiques dominant analytical perspectives of sociotechnical change (Hughes; Kline and Pinch; Latour) in focusing on the relations of power that underlie technological development,



Fig. 2. *Jazz in Silhouette* (1947), LP cover. Courtesy of the Chicago Jazz Archive, Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

while showing how African Americans and others socioeconomically excluded from high technology and design engage with artifacts on their own terms.

Pathways offers a singular opportunity to see the metaphorical and material interventions developed by Sun Ra and members of his variously renamed band, the Arkestra. It is, perhaps, the closest experience to which anthropologist John Szwed, Sun Ra’s comprehensive and insightful biographer, had access. Viewing this collection through the lens of sociotechnical and Afro-Futurist theory, Sun Ra “redeployed, reconceived, and re-created” (Fouché 642) the materials and metaphors of cold-war science in his artistic practice. There are a number of examples in the exhibition and guide, from DIY instrumentation to experiments with electronic costumes and multimedia performances. In Fouché’s terms, these are spectacular examples of “black vernacular technological creativity” (639), or the embrace of science and technology in ways that go beyond aesthetic form to engage with materiality itself. *Pathways*, then, helps us reposition Sun Ra as not only a musician that aestheticized technological forms (Dinerstein 20-28) through his outer-space sounds, but actively reengineered them in the service of his art. On the level of metaphor, Sun Ra constructed and performed a “black knowledge society” (Kreiss 60-62) grounded both in Egypt, an ancient black technical civilization, and outer space. In doing so, he reconceived cold-war science in terms of black history and social narratives in order to foster black technical agency as a path towards building alternative societies on outer-space landscapes.

To date, Afro-Futurist and other scholars have focused on reading Sun Ra’s work within distinctly African American cultural (Lock) and political (Spigel) traditions. In doing so, these scholars have revealed many important influences on Sun Ra’s work. The Chicago of the 1950s was a crucible for the black religious, political, and cultural movements that shaped Sun Ra’s thinking and art. It was in Chicago that Sun Ra joined a small black nationalist group interested in outer space (Campbell n. pag.), and debated Christian preachers and Nation of Islam members on matters related to theology, politics, and technology (Szwed 106, 132-33). He navigated a



Fig. 3. *We Travel the Spaceways* (1947), LP cover. Courtesy of the Chicago Jazz Archive, Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

Chicago jazz scene like few others, joining the dying big bands of many greats, and rubbing shoulders with a new generation of musicians, such as Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Corbett nicely captures the flavor of Sun Ra’s Chicago during this period:

If you were in Chicago in 1958, you might have happened into a jazz club on the South Side to find a band of musicians dressed in outer-space costumes, chanting “rocket number nine, take off for the planet Venus,” and setting loose battery-driven robots. On another day, on a stroll through Washington Park, kitty-corner from the Baptist preacher and across from the Nation of Islam representative, you could have come upon a street-corner lecturer in a flowing faux-leopard cape and black beret, detailing the etymology of the word “negro” and the coded meanings of the Bible (“Sun Ra” 6)

Yet, as this description suggests, Sun Ra also stood apart from many of these movements. He drew from artistic tributaries that extended far beyond Chicago and distinctly African American cultural forms. An autodidact, Sun Ra was steeped in literatures and music that crossed racial boundaries and intellectual genres, from the mysticism of the Gnostics to the musical ideas of the European classical avant-garde. The themes that he explored in his music and performance—among them collective improvisation, the materiality of instrumentation, energy, and intersubjectivity—were central to a more general, postwar “culture of spontaneity” (Belgrad) that emerged in media as various as poetry, painting, and jazz as part of a larger cultural project to liberate consciousness from the trappings of an alienating, technocratic society. Meanwhile, Sun Ra’s emphasis on bringing about new forms of technically enabled human consciousness and collectivity is strikingly parallel to the artistic practice of the “cybernetic art worlds” of the 1950s (Turner 45-51) that traced their lineage to this culture of spontaneity. For example, there are strong affinities between Sun Ra’s 1950s costumed multimedia performances and John Cage’s first appearance at Black Mountain College in 1952. The two even alternated sets on the same stage in Coney Island in 1986. *Pathways* also contains the album covers Sun Ra created in the mid-1960s, using the automatic drawing techniques pioneered by the

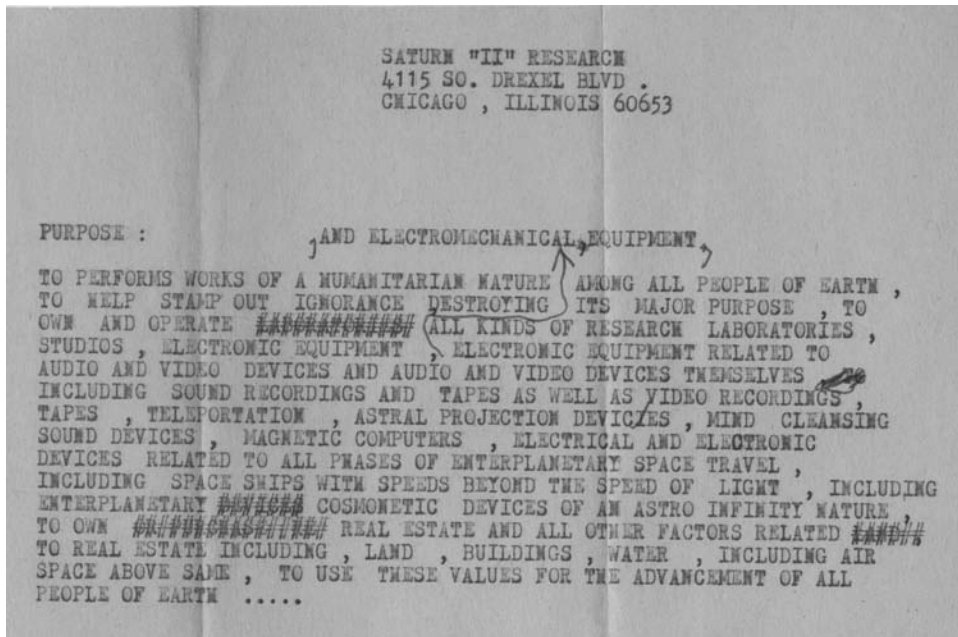


Fig. 4. Saturn "II" Research. Courtesy of the Chicago Jazz Archive, Special Collection Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

French surrealist André Breton, artistic practices designed to express the unconscious that was revived among the artists at Black Mountain in the 1940s.

Pathways makes it clear that Sun Ra was working with cultural forms in the 1950s that, by the 1960s, flowered into a full-blown, pan-racial aesthetic movement. When Sun Ra moved to New York's Greenwich Village in 1961, he encountered a mixed-race, cultural avant-garde that was working with many of the same "new metaphors" of "energy, spirituality, metaphysicality, and freedom" (Szwed 234-35). For Sun Ra and many avant-garde jazz artists of his time, such as Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and Cecil Taylor, the path towards psychological integration and new forms of intersubjective understanding became accessible in the pursuit of spirituality, truth, and changing consciousness through art. Many in the jazz avant-garde believed that white racism stemmed from alienation that could only be overcome through psychic transformation and liberation. For example, Ayler described his music as the pursuit of spirituality and universal truth directed at freeing individuals from the "ghettos" of the mind, whether that mind was black or white (Schwartz n. pag.). In affinity with these artists, the artifacts gathered in *Pathways* make clear that at the heart of Sun Ra's work was a decidedly pan-racial vision of a techno-utopia premised on scientific knowledge, aesthetic energy, and expanded awareness.

In adopting these artistic practices, like many avant-garde jazz artists of his time, Sun Ra had a fraught relationship with the black social, political, and cultural movements of the era. While he articulated a black knowledge society to claim technical agency for African Americans, this was never a separatist vision. Sun Ra did not embrace the black aesthetic and the "service of art to politics" advanced by Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement during the 1960s, and like many of the avant-garde, often "stridently resisted any single narrative of racial and socio-aesthetic identity" (Robinson 1). Indeed, what stands out about the artifacts in *Pathways* is the lack of the expressly racial aesthetic themes that characterized the Black Arts Movement. In its place are futuristic drawings of spaceships, extraterrestrial landscapes, and abstract expressionist drawings that recall Ornette Coleman's reproduction of a

Jackson Pollock painting on the cover of his seminal 1960 album, *Free Jazz*. At the same time, Sun Ra turned from the politics and tactics of the civil rights movement and social movement organizations, including the Black Panthers. He remained deeply committed to a politics of consciousness that looked much different from the Christianity of the civil rights movement and the revolutionary Marxism of the Panthers: “If people would base what they done on culture and beauty, they would immediately become part of the nation of the world that knows beauty is necessary for survival” (Lock 24).

Given Sun Ra’s legacy, *Pathways* provides us with insight into Afro-Futurism as a syncretic cultural tradition. To the extent that Sun Ra is a seminal figure for Afro-Futurist practice and theory, the artifacts gathered in *Pathways* shed new light on African American cultural and material appropriation of science and technology, while revealing new histories and opening new vistas for interpreting this project. As described above, Sun Ra’s work was rooted in and influenced by a broader avant-garde aesthetic formation that crossed racial lines and developed distinct artistic practices in response to perceived psychological alienation in the culture. This helps us better understand Sun Ra’s emphasis on spontaneous practices, as well as on the materials and process of artistic creation. Through Sun Ra’s work, this cultural formation in turn has indelibly helped give shape to Afro-Futurism, which can count among its ancestors not only hard-bop jazz musicians, but also many of the white Black Mountain artists who worked in a similar cultural idiom. At the same time, we can see how Sun Ra drew from the artistic practices of this postwar avant-garde to create a distinctly black techno-mythic consciousness and technological agency. Yet, as *Pathways* makes clear, Sun Ra was always engaged in a broader project of bringing about human psychological change, intersubjective understanding, and new forms of community through his mediated music and performance. While much of Afro-Futurism is generally conceived as a project of African American liberation, Sun Ra’s art was articulated in terms of a pan-racial, utopian society.

As a forgotten manuscript, *Pathways* provides a window onto the work of Sun Ra, one of the seminal figures in twentieth-century jazz. Not only does it help us understand his early work, and that of a group of artists gathered on the South Side of Chicago in the mid-1950s and 1960s, but it also provides clues as to the cultural sources of his art. This has implications for our understanding of both avant-garde jazz and the political and cultural movements of the era. *Pathways* also provides us with access to early forms of material and metaphoric technological appropriation that are at the heart of Afro-Futurism and, arguably, the contemporary information age. As such, it offers a potentially rich site for scholars to explore dominant cultural themes in relation to technoculture, especially post-humanity, cyborg identity, and technical agency.

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