

Michael Lowenthal

Face the Music

Sun Ra claimed to hail from Saturn, but he and his Intergalactic Arkestra still had to suffer the trials of earthly travel. When his agent phoned us to say they'd be driving up early, a day before their hotel was expecting them, we had to scramble to find beds.

Adam, our piano player, lived in Panarchy, a frat that had bucked its Greek identity and become a refuge for students too queer, in a range of senses, to fit in at tight-assed Dartmouth. He asked his pals if they'd host one of the world's most offbeat jazz bands, and the Panarchists, always game, agreed. Mattresses and questionably clean bedding were dredged up, dusty couches cleared of detritus. Adam's girlfriend, Angela, commandeered the kitchen, churning out hundreds of dumplings for dinner.

I must've come late, because I found my bandmates gathered on the floor, gazing up at a cockeyed armchair in which, as if enthroned, sat Sun Ra. He looked like no creature I'd ever run across. Said to be seventy-five, he seemed a hundred, till I peered closer: a toddler's puffy cheeks, eyes aglint with childish restlessness. His goatee was dyed an uncanny shade of orange, the hue of a Dinka tribeseman's hair, or maybe a Mohawked punk's. His bulk, shrouded in a floor-length poncho, appeared almost weightless, ectoplasmic.

"... get the planet ready for space beings," he was saying. "People need to be *tuned up*. They're out of tune with the universe. That's why they need my *cosmos* songs."

His voice came in lispy, whispered bursts; we all leaned in.

"My music's *power-ful*," he said. "Few months back, we played behind the Iron Curtain. What happened? Y'all saw: the Wall came down!"

On and on he speechified, his brown skin blushing plummy as his vehemence increased: *history versus mystery*; his *story*, my *story*. Part lecture, part homily, part string of

schoolyard brags, his spiel was equally baffling and bewitching. The other Arkestra members (he'd come with eight or nine) hovered at the room's margin, gobbling dumplings, chiming in occasionally with the "Mm-hmm" or "That's right!" you'd hear at a Baptist church.

And the students at Sun Ra's feet? Some were nodding, brows furrowed, as if in a foreign-language class; others were trying their best not to laugh.

Our group, the Barbary Coast, was the Dartmouth College jazz band—like Panarchy, an oasis at our WASPy, old-guard school. Don, our director, did what he could to shake things up, to expose us to worlds beyond our blinders. Every winter he invited in a guest artist, who'd teach us for a week, then guide us in a Saturday-night performance. In recent years we'd had a string of hall-of-famers: Max Roach, Slide Hampton, Lester Bowie; each, in late career, had mastered the master-class circuit.

But Sun Ra had never done a college stint like this, let alone at a place as reactionary as Dartmouth. Even at Panarchy, you could sense the culture clash, see how squeamish Sun Ra was at being a college mascot. He looked as comfortable as a parrot in the Arctic.

Or maybe I was projecting my own discomfort.

At twenty, I'd played the trumpet for fully half my life: thousands of hours of finger drills and scales. I was good, and loved to play, but what I truly excelled at was excelling; musical discipline was part of my whole strive-for-straight-A's M.O. But now, four months from graduation, I was wondering (among a welter of discomposing questions) how the trumpet would fit in my new life. I wasn't nearly good enough to make a living from it. Without the structure of school, without the earning of brownie points, would trumpet playing lose its meaning? Or would it, conversely, give me a tether to cling to?

All of which was a way of asking: What had my years of follow-the-track striving finally won me? Was this how I wanted to live?

The overachieving me had, increasingly, been warring with another self who yearned to shed his “best little boy in the world” duds. For one thing, I’d lost some faith in the world I wanted praise from. Two years back I’d come out as gay, then banded with campus leftists, hot to undermine the old-boy system. While classmates suited up for investment banker interviews, I was deciding to try my hand at writing. I’d recently found out I’d be our class valedictorian, but that achievement induced almost as much unease as pride: that I could so succeed within the very system I questioned seemed to cast doubt on my integrity. Addled and angsty, I couldn’t tell which version of me was true, which would serve me in the world and which might soon grow hollow.

Enter Sun Ra, brimming with eccentric insurrection, claiming his mercurial music’s power to topple walls. He kindled in me a combination of skepticism and envy: I didn’t think I wanted to believe what he believed, but he sure made me long to believe *something*.

Sun Ra was one of the great jazz visionaries, according to Don, who gave us a crash course on the man. In the 1940s, still named Herman Blount, he’d played in Chicago with the famed Fletcher Henderson. Then, in the ’50s, he’d become Le Sony’r Ra, proclaiming he’d arrived from outer space, and started making his “music of the spheres.” He’d been a pioneer in using synthesizers, said Don, in treating all manner of sounds as jazz. He’d toured the world for decades, his “Arkestra” always performing in flamboyantly weird regalia: sequined robes, floppy wizard’s caps. They’d put out maybe two hundred albums.

“He’s built a kind of cosmological cult,” Don explained. “Science fiction, Egyptology, a bunch of black pride. But hey, if it’s not your thing, don’t get stuck on the spiritual stuff. The *music* is what’s really out of this world.” It wasn’t the shapeless muck, he said, that often gets a pass as “experimental.” They played Monk and Ellington and wacked-out Disney tunes;

they'd influenced everyone from Herbie Hancock to Sonic Youth. "Just try the music, okay?" said Don. "Keep an open mind."

Normally, in advance of the visit, our guest artist would ship us his charts: full-scale arrangements, pages long, with multiple parts each for trumpets, saxophones, and so on. But Sun Ra demurred; first he wanted to see what our band looked like.

Don mailed him a photograph. We waited.

A packet of music finally came, but the envelope was thin. He'd sent ten or so single sheets; on each was scrawled a title and an unadorned melody—without chords or tempo marks or any other accompaniment, like jingles from a kindergarten songbook.

What, if anything, we wondered, did this have to do with the photo? Had Sun Ra seen our buttoned-up, upper-crust looks (and the fact that all but one of us was white) and decided this was as much as we could handle? Don phoned and asked what we should do.

The pages turned out to be the alto sax parts. Sun Ra said to transpose them for every other instrument. "Then play 'em all together. *Real slow.*"

Dutifully we rehearsed the songs in death-march unison. But they were confoundingly simple. The more we played them, the less sense they made, like words repeated so often they crumble into nonsense. Was the music a kind of avant-garde joke?

Or were we, in our cluelessness, the joke?