

Afrofuturism: A Dive Into Sun Ra and Incremental Liberation

By Sophia Crum



Music is essentially wavy air. Your favorite song is just a compilation of vibrations that create consonance. Our world is filled with them. Each chakra in our body has a special frequency that, when influenced, can be freed of energy blockages. Our brains vibrate constantly, as do the colors on your favorite flowers, and the molecules in the air. What's more, vibrations live throughout space. They are what connects us to ourselves, the world around us and the worlds beyond us.

While math is considered the language of the world, some musicians regard music as the language of the cosmos. It transcends spoken word.

Enter Le Sony'r Ra, born Herman Poole Blount, better known as Sun Ra after the Egyptian sun god, the legendary jazz musician, bandleader and composer of the 50's and 60's. Ra famously claimed that extraterrestrials from Saturn advised him to channel the energies and truths of the universe through music.

Ra was not only a figurehead for the jazz world, but for Black creatives as well. He influenced the way we examine Blackness and Black culture, and their trajectory and advancement into the future. We can see him anywhere from Janelle Monae, to "Black Panther", to the "Hot Girl Summer" narrative.

Samuel Scranton, a PhD student of music composition and technology at Northwestern's Bienen School of Music, describes Sun Ra's relation to music as a "social responsibility." During a time when not

only Black musicians but Black people in general struggled to form their own narrative, Ra aimed to look at the music of the past in order to redefine his own sound in relation to history. Music was an "active generator of identity" as well as a way to "recreate yourself and create your own lineage."

The members of Sun Ra's "Arkestra"—his version of "orchestra"—came from far and wide. Similar to the indiscriminate nature of the Creator of the Universe, Ra accepted anyone from exceptionally talented musicians to mildly skilled players who, if left to their own devices, might find other, more destructive ways to spend their time. What's more, he never fired anyone; this was the Creator's band after all.

Ra worked his members to the bone, sometimes making them rehearse until 4 a.m. When he felt that the spirit of God was in the rehearsal room, he would not rest until it left. But his intuition for individual energies and spirits also allowed him to personalize the content the Arkestra played. Every arrangement and part was tailored for a specific person depending on that player's own personality, tonality and potential.

While his band members respected him, his few followers *adored* him. In 1969, a magazine called "The Cricket" published an issue titled "Black Music in Evolution." In it was a piece titled "Sun Ra at the End of the World," written by Joe Goncalves. During a performance at the San Francisco Art Institute, he recounts:

"Total control. Seasoned space travelers, that's the feeling you get, as you watch the brothers move about the stage, changing instruments, blowing, beating, shaking. And two sisters: dancing, singing, keep you geared, take you where the band is headed. Asking you, "If we can come from nowhere here, why not go from somewhere... there." Expansion.

"Instruments. Things that click, shimmer, cling, blast, below, wail, humm... it gets beyond barb-wire frontiers, ghettos, bloated categories, things like that. It's outer space. Comes from the stage. Into you. These gemini players. Players. Space-players.

Spacers. Space-makers. For us:

"What we never had for so long, space outer. Or much space at all, squeezed so tight. From the slaveship to the shack to the tenement. No space to really move. No space to really function. Sun Ra & Co. herald Space To Come, Freedom, to move. To live again as ourselves. Expansion.

"And future talk is ordering talk. Getting pretty much what we order and ordering pretty much what we get, future has to be incorporated into today as surely as history. When we hear a brother say, "A nigger ain't never been shit, a nigger ain't never going to be shit," we know he has no knowledge of his past, and no past = no future. Sun Ra is future/ALTER/ what's coming. Tomorrow's breath, breathing. Getting ready."

In a world where there is no social space made for you, Sun Ra's music was like a God-send. It provided an emotional, expansive release; when you listen to it, the only way to go is up, up into the cosmos.

"Just like the Black Identity, Afrofuturism is multifaceted."

This notion of expansion came from a mythology Ra called "myth science," the idea that you have the agency to invent your own beliefs. It's not something you inherit, rather your invention, assembled using both historical context and

your own creativity. John Corbett, a Sun Ra scholar, art gallery curator and music writer, calls it an "active approach" to manifesting one's identity, a means to reclaim your history.

"For him, there was a sense of a desire to imagine a place where African Americans could go and be independent and not be subject to all of the crazy bullshit that they'd had to deal with for hundreds of years," Corbett says. "He specifically talks about imagining going to another planet where there were no white people and seeing what kind of culture, what kind of arts, would emerge there. Clearly a part of the space fantasy is getting away from this doomed planet, and getting to a place where this utopian fantasy of total separation, separatism and total independence could be lived out."

Sun Ra was one of the early architects of

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Afrofuturism, the idea that we can reimagine a future of visual arts, literature, music, science and technology through a Black lens. The term, first coined in the 1990s, was also about looking to the past and using Black history as a means for Black folks to reconceive an otherworldly future while also engaging with advanced technology.

But is it possible that the term is outdated? Looking to the past for Black folks may cause more harm than good. Using Black history in America as our vantage point can perpetuate narratives of social slavery.

According to Alexander Weheliye, a professor of African American studies at Northwestern University, "This goes back to the original ideas about Afrofuturism, that Black people have always been in diaspora, [and] have been forced to live in the future, given white supremacy," he says. "We've always had to be a few steps ahead in order to simply survive."

Today, most people use the movie "Black Panther" as the textbook example of Afrofuturism. In the short film "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto" by Black female artist Martine Syms, she critiques the ideas within the blockbuster film for its emphasis on wealth and shiny suits. Syms argues that "the rituals... of daily life are compelling, dynamic and utterly strange." Why should we need grandeur to make us feel magical? Let's redefine how we see ourselves and allow the world to see us, when most of the everyday behaviors of Blackness are stunningly *enough*.

But just like the Black Identity, Afrofuturism is multifaceted. We can use it in such a variety of viewpoints that even an expansive, all-inclusive



concept that envisions the potential for Black culture can be considered Afrofuturist. This idea of creating our own destiny is what brought us the mind of Janelle Monae.

In an interview for Spotify's "Black History is Happening Now" project, she states, "Afrofuturism is me, us, is Black people seeing ourselves in the future, being as magical as we want to be. There are limitless possibilities of where we can go, who we can be. We get to paint a different world on our own terms. I get to be whoever I want to be through Afrofuturism."

But how should we go about existing, discovering a sense of belonging together as a community? How do we redefine the way in which we live amongst each other?

Take the teachings of Octavia Butler, science-fiction novelist and "Mother of Afrofuturism." In one of Butler's later works, "Parable of the Sower," she devises a character named Lauren Olamina, who is the creator of a new religion called Earthseed. She bases her new methodology not only on her own beliefs and experiences, but also on the current state of the world



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around her. The essential tenet of Earthseed is its ability to empower those living in a dystopian world and provide them with the tools to save themselves, discover their own power, and utilize it to influence the environment and the universe.

Through Olamina, we can begin to understand Butler's vision for Black community-building and effecting change through an Afrofuturist's lens.

Community-building through this lens, particularly at a predominantly white institution, means shifting the narrative by changing the language we use to communicate with each other. No level of power or influence can purchase another community's truth. The responsibility lies on us to facilitate this atmosphere of belonging. Only when we provide a space for creation, communication, and expression will we be contributing to our incremental liberation.

In an essay for "Black World," the late poet and activist June Jordan wrote, "Language is the naming of experience and thereby, the possession of experience. Language makes possible a connection that leads to reality. For all of these reasons, language is political. Power belongs to the ones that have the power to determine the use, abuse, rejection, definition, redefinition of the words we try to say to each other."

Much like the music of Sun Ra, the literature of Octavia Butler and the visual elements of Afrofuturism, Black expression itself is *avant garde*; we move through our world with spontaneous improvisation. Like the arrangements catered to Sun Ra's big band members, every one one of us is different. Though we can find solace in our similarities, we find our power in our ability to imagine and reclaim the agency we possess over ourselves. Here we are, bare to the world and true, desiring to design our own narrative. Now try and tell me that our Black isn't beautiful.