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THE SUN RA ISSUE

CONDITIONS AND APPRECIATION

Nate Wooley

Appreciation has conditions. In other words, I *like* a thing *because* the conditions of my appreciation, whatever they are, have been met. These conditions act in different ways for different people on different objects. Sometimes the conditions are negligible, because the object of appreciation is just plain likable. For example, only a few conditions must be met for the vast majority of the population to enjoy a piece of pie. Sometimes our love of something has conditions added to it over time, even though our initial experience of it was free and clear. I remember eating the chicken livers my grandmother would prepare. Now, I have to overcome an accrued knowledge of what a liver *is* and what it *does* to be able to eat the same dish.

Finally—and this is the basis of the writing to come—there are objects that we recognize as worthy of appreciation but the individual conditions we've placed on them are almost impossible to meet. My wife hates olives but, for some reason known only to her, she tries to eat one about once a month to see if she can overcome the brininess and unlock the passage to its culinary wonders. Our conditions for appreciation in these instances are, essentially, obstacles that have to be overcome before we can appreciate something; one keeps trying—like my wife eating her monthly olive—because they intuit that the appreciation they are trying to develop is worth the work.

Since I was in my early 20s, I have grappled with my conditions for appreciating Sun Ra. Dozens of people have tried to *help* me—their goal being to bring me into their global community, as in “how do we convince Nate to stop being an idiot and start loving Sun Ra like the rest of us?” The result, while unsuccessful in that I haven't yet overcome my obstacles, has been positive: I'm learning to, at least, define these personal conditions of appreciation.

SUN RA HAS CONDITIONS.

As I wrote in my introduction to *SA2: The Networking Issue*, I have a hard time understanding the beauty of belonging to any organization. The faintest whiff of a group's hierarchy will have me quietly backing out the door long before I'm able to appreciate what could be gained by its structure and feeling of community. I recognize this is a neurosis built on a lot of historical experiences and my own special brand of irrationality. But, because of that neurosis, some of the most widely accepted signifiers of Sun Ra's greatness—the Arkestra, its communal aspect, his hierarchical place in it—are the greatest obstacles to my appreciation.

GLENN BRANCA'S SYMPHONY NO. 13 “HALLUCINATION CITY” FOR 100 GUITARS AT THE WORLD TRADE CENTER PLAZA JUNE 13, 2001

(Excerpt from a memoir in progress)

Reg Bloor

Glenn Branca had been asked by the French government to write a piece for 2,000 guitars for their year 2000 celebration in Paris. This concert, of course, never happened because that's completely absurd. The soundcheck alone would've taken a week. But he was paid handsomely to write the piece, which he did not do.

However, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) in New York had heard about the project and they were interested in staging a large-scale piece of that sort. They initially proposed a more realistic 200 guitars, but Glenn talked them down further, to 100. The piece became Symphony No. 13 “Hallucination City” performed at the World Trade Center Plaza on June 13th, 2001.

I had started working with Glenn the previous year, just a few months after arriving in New York, but this was the first project I worked on with him completely from beginning to end, and it was when I solidified my role as concertmaster and right hand in his operation. This is a role I would serve right up until his death in 2018, and still continue in his absence.

Glenn never started working on a piece before contracts were signed and advances were paid. The contract was signed on May 5, which meant we had five weeks for him to write the piece (which the LMCC didn't know he hadn't yet done), for me to copy the parts, recruit the musicians, and photocopy and send the parts to the musicians in time to work on them (not to mention learning my own part). It would encompass every waking moment.

He wrote the piece on graph paper. Each horizontal square was an eighth note and each vertical square was a half step. He could actually draw the lines of the chord motion. I copied them by hand onto the parts in staff notation because he didn't have time to teach me Encore, the music notation program he used at that time. He'd been using it for so long, he had a two-digit serial number. We never did make a full staff notation score for this version.

This piece was written for nine guitar sections in unison octave tunings:

- four alto sections tuned to two octaves of high E,
- three tenor sections tuned to two octaves of middle B,
- two bass sections in standard tuning,
- with ten or eleven people assigned to each section.

I played the tenor part, the B tuning, as I had for Symphony No. 12, the first live show I did with Glenn in 2000. B is the more difficult tuning because guitar players are so used to E, but it didn't take me long to get used to reading for it. It was similar to reading for the second string on the guitar in standard tuning. The notes on the staff were either played as unison bar chords, or if they had a squiggly line next to them, as half-step clusters. Lee Ranaldo, who cut his teeth in the Glenn Branca Ensemble

SUN RA AND DUKE ELLINGTON: PARALLELS IN PRACTICE FOR THE 20TH-CENTURY LARGE ENSEMBLE

Ken Vandermark

SUN RA: CHICAGO BACKGROUND

Sun Ra arrived in Chicago from Birmingham, Alabama, in 1946, and worked with Fletcher Henderson and his big band at the Club DeLisa as a pianist and copyist/arranger from the summer of that year until May of 1947. The impact of Henderson's music and this period of working with the band was clearly profound—more than three decades later he was still performing Henderson's compositions ("Big John's Special" on the album *Sunrise In Different Dimensions* [Hat Hut: 1981]). After his tenure with Henderson, Sun Ra remained in Chicago until the autumn of 1960, performing to mixed success with an evolving ensemble that began as an octet in 1954, and which came to be called the Arkestra. The ensemble traveled to Montreal to perform after the Chicago period, then continued to New York City in the summer of 1961, basing activities there until a permanent move to Philadelphia in the fall of 1968. By 1970 Sun Ra and the Arkestra were touring around the world.

The time spent in Chicago laid the foundation for Sun Ra's creative work as a composer, big band leader, theoretician, poet, songwriter, and director of a record label. All of those activities started in that city, as did an increasing emphasis on the idea "Space Is The Place," indicated by compositional titles and song lyrics that included references to outer space, as well as elaborate costumes and staging that indicated a connection to "other worlds." This complex mythology continued to develop throughout a career that spanned four decades, ultimately becoming a central part of Sun Ra's identity. It is in many of the aspects found throughout this period of creative activity that I find strong parallels to the work of Duke Ellington.

ECONOMIC STRATEGIES FOR CREATIVE CONTROL

By the mid-1950s, the economic heyday of the big band was long gone. Sun Ra had just begun work as a bandleader, while Ellington had already been leading a large ensemble for three decades. Both were faced with an economic challenge that few jazz orchestras participating in the big band era of 1935–1945 were able to meet. And yet, both maintained an orchestra over a period of many decades and until the end of their lives (51 years for Ellington, 39 years for Sun Ra). In order for their groups to survive, it was necessary to come up with financial strategies that could adapt to the economic shifts that confronted them throughout their lives.

When Ellington started working as a bandleader, the practice of long-term, well-paid residencies for musicians was common

ACCORDING TO SUN RA, NONE OF US ARE REAL.

Naima Lowe



THE EXECUTION OF SUN RA (VOLUME II) A CONVERSATION WITH THOMAS STANLEY

Luke Stewart

Written in 2014, *The Execution of Sun Ra* (Volume II) is a guide through the effects Sun Ra, as a human being, had on our culture. The works that had previously been written about him mainly focused on biographical information, a specific time period or series of works. In this book, however, author Thomas Stanley calls for the audience, and for the human race in general, to use Ra's life and words seriously. Sun Ra made music for the 21st century while living in and being of the 20th century, and only in recent times has this longtime cult figure entered popular culture. Artists like Solange and concepts like Afrofuturism have placed Sun Ra—his music, his aura, his message—in the contemporary conversation. It is now, more than twenty years after his death (leaving of the planet) that his popularity is at its height with the continued touring of his Arkestra under the leadership of Marshall Allen, and it is the current generation that has embraced Sun Ra's music without ever experiencing the live performance. More than a reflection of his life and work, *The Execution of Sun Ra* is a call to the 21st century—the century of Sun Ra—for abrupt change in mental and physical being for all humanity.

I met Thomas Stanley in 2008 at WPFM 89.3FM, a community public jazz radio station in Washington, DC. We were radio programmers who went back to back in the middle of the night. At that time, our late-night slots were dedicated to people who wanted to showcase more avant-garde forms of the music. Being decades my senior, Thomas reached out to me in many ways as a mentor figure, one who would help me in my early days as a radio programmer. He would share music and we would generally talk about the things we liked. A few years later, we were in a band together called Mind Over Matter, Music Over Mind (MOM[^]2), using electronic setups for sonic exploration and experimentation. Over the years we have continued to work together on various projects, including some of the research around his book.

Thomas has been a key companion and guide in my own journey through the works of Sun Ra. When he was researching his book, I was also deeply engaged in finding the deep cuts and allowing myself to be influenced and inspired by Ra's words and life. In a way, I was doing my part to help my friend, while continuing to develop my own connection with the music. At the behest of another mutual friend, and through interacting with Marshall Allen and Arkestra saxophonist/bassoonist Danny Ray Thompson, Thomas and I made a trip—or perhaps pilgrimage—to the Sun Ra house in Philadelphia, where we were able to comfortably chat with everyone present and even sit in on a rehearsal.

Thomas has thoroughly researched the works of Sun Ra, including perusing at least two archive locations plus a plethora of

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN DAY: SUN RA, ALTON ABRAHAM, AND THE TAMING OF THE FREAK

John Corbett

"Track Six / Anything Can Happen Day: Sun Ra, Alton Abraham, and the Taming of the Freak,"
in *Vinyl Freak*, John Corbett, pp. 221–242.

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By the time I stumbled to the phone, the machine had already picked up. "Rise and shine, sweetheart," crowed a chirpy electronic voice. "Day's getting old!" I interrupted the message, the receiver's hovering proximity to the transmitter instigating a brief convulsion of feedback, before switching the answering machine to "off" and murmuring hello to Vic. "It's now or never," he said. Still dazed, dozey from painkillers, I forced out a question: "OK, wow, that's kind of a big surprise, so what's the plan?" Vic seemed to have been awake for hours and mainlining caffeine. He spoke with flickering intensity: "Today is anything can happen day. Be ready to go in twenty minutes. I'll pick you up at your place." I registered assent. Vic punctuated the call's end with: "We ride!"

It was just after sunrise on a warmish September morning. I was decked out in Chinese silk pajama bottoms. Pulling them out by the elastic band in front, I examined the gauze pad, which had seeped a little with blood and pus in the night. Slipping into a T-shirt and tennis shoes, I splashed cold water on my face, kissed my sleeping wife, grabbed the vial of drugs, and set out for points south, the far South Side of the city that hugs the contour of the lake, into a neighborhood I'd never seen, the home of a man I'd known a little, about a stash of historically invaluable stuff he and I had once discussed. He'd been dead for more than a year.

Three months earlier, on a griddle-hot July afternoon, I'd been sitting in my un-air-conditioned home office, tooling around on e-mail, which then took what now seems an unacceptably long time to load. Among the new messages that oozed its way onscreen was one interestingly headed: "Emergency!!! Sun Ra's Home in Peril!!!!" It had been forwarded twice, once from Mike Watt, bassist of FIREHOSE and the Minutemen, and then from an acquaintance of mine who knew about my abiding interest in Ra. The e-mail's source had been shed in the process of forwarding, but its contents gave a few details: Sun Ra's home in Chicago was being vacated and all his possessions were being thrown into the trash; could anybody help?; if so please write back to Mike. Somewhere in the message, the sender mentioned a film festival and her own name, which was Heather.

It wasn't Ra's house. I knew that because he'd left his Chicago apartment in 1961. But the hidden meaning of Heather's message was clear to me. Alton Abraham, Ra's first major supporter and his manager in the '50s and '60s, continuing piecemeal for decades after, had died nine months earlier. It was Alton's place. I remembered having thought to myself at the time I heard of his death about the mountain of materials he'd told me about—instruments, writings, tapes, documents. I had suggested finding a place to safeguard and archive these precious objects, and he agreed, charging me with finding the right institution. I'd made inquiries, tried to

FOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT MILES DAVIS'S *ON THE CORNER*

Chris Pitsiokos

Miles Davis wasn't quiet about his intentions to broaden his audience. In his *Autobiography* he says, "It was with *On the Corner* and *Big Fun* that I really made an effort to get my music over to young black people. They are the ones who buy records and come to concerts, and I had started thinking about building a new audience for the future."¹ Apart from employing Stevie Wonder/Motown bassist Michael Henderson, Miles included more funk and R&B elements in *On the Corner* than he had ever before, citing Sly Stone and James Brown among his popular music influences. The sounds of popular music permeate the album, from Henderson's stripped-down bass grooves to Davis's use of wah-wah trumpet. The use of handclaps on *Black Satin* is reminiscent of Sly Stone's use of claps in *Stand!*, especially on the track "I Want to Take You Higher," as pointed out to me by multi-instrumentalist, composer, and *On the Corner* fan Tyshawn Sorey.

Far from quickly expanding his audience, *On the Corner* was a commercial failure. Davis felt that this had to do with Columbia's refusal to market the recording as a pop album.² He may have had a point.

Regardless of the reason, *On the Corner*, initially, was almost universally maligned. Mainstream jazz and rock critics, esteemed avant-garde musicians, and even some of the musicians on the recording initially disliked the music. Eugene Chadbourne, in an article for *CODA*, wrote, "His new music is pure arrogance. It's like coming home and finding Miles there, his fancy feet up on your favorite chair"³; Paul Buckmaster, who provided arrangements and plays electric cello on the album said, "It was my least favorite Miles album"; and Dave Liebman, who plays the first solo on the album explained, "I didn't think much of it."⁴

In time, the rock and pop community, and later, some subsets of the jazz community, would come around. Rock critic Lester Bangs, who initially hated the album, came to consider it a masterpiece that captured the sound of the modern metropolis.⁵ Paul Buckmaster would ultimately praise the album in the liner notes to *The Complete On the Corner Sessions* box set.⁶ *On the Corner's* influence today is incalculable.

Incidentally, the other great electric free funk band of the 1970s, Ornette Coleman's *Prime Time*, was also an ill-fated attempt at expanding an audience. Coleman missed the immediate connection he had with the audience in the rhythm-and-blues bands he played in in his youth. His experience with the Master Musicians of Jajouka inspired him to try to renew that connection while maintaining his dedication to creative, forward-thinking art music.

A CONVERSATION

Audra Wolowiec with
Freya Powell

This interview took place in a small office booth at Parsons School of Design, where we both teach—a liminal space that seems appropriate to talk about the interstitial qualities of Freya Powell's work and her upcoming project, *Only Remains Remain*. We met having just become (working) mothers and over this past year have communicated in fragments and texts, checking in with each other about how to navigate the unknowns that surround our new roles. Freya's work engages with ideas of memory, loss, and how to record these states of being, oftentimes within the confines of political systems that include place, belonging, and otherness. She works fluidly across platforms from video, sound, installation, and performance, with undercurrents of writing and storytelling. The ways in which she uses the materiality of language to evoke voice, through slippages and gaps in translation, are especially inspiring as they are the elusive yet embodied qualities that I aim for in my own work with sound.

AW I was listening to the recording of your rehearsal for *Only Remains Remain* on the train, as I traversed along the Hudson River, and was glad to listen without reading the script first. I knew a little bit about the project from speaking with you but something about being immersed in the "ocean of sound," as David Toop calls it,¹ seemed important for the first read. I heard both speaking and singing, words, phrases, and deconstructed syllables, and there was also a call and response that emerged, a layering of individual voices and a chorus. From reading the script afterwards, I became more aware of the language and various roles of each character. I wonder if you could talk about how you came up with the structure of the work?

FP It's set up as a chorus of fifteen women, and if you think of a chorus in terms of classic Greek tragedies, they are a collective voice. So I think of each person, even though they are part of a collective, as having their own individual place that they're speaking from and they each are given an action word to keep in mind. When I wrote the script I was following the format of the chorus in *Antigone*, a parados, five stasimons, and then the exodus.² Each of the fifteen performers are each assigned a section that they are speaking from. The parados and the exodus (spoken by the first and fifteenth performers, respectively) are essentially the introduction and the conclusion, the backstory and the "where do we go from here." Then the lines of the five stasimons (the Ode to Man, the Ode to Hope, the Hymn to Eros, or Empathy, the Ode to Fate, and the Ode to Mourning) are divided amongst the remaining thirteen characters. That's how it was initially written, in this linear

QUANTUM BLACK IN THE MOMENT

QUANTUM
THE BLACK
IN THE MOMENT
STACKED UP PARTICLES
REVERN LEON SULLIVAN
AERO SPACE AGENCY
NORTH PHILLY SATELLITE
DOX THRASH
PAINTS SHADOWS OF THE FUTURE
RIDGE AVE GATEWAY
FREE JAZZ HIGHWAY
LOW GROAN BUBBLING
COLTRANE STRAWBERRY MANION
A LOVE SUPREME
PLASMA THROUGH CONCRETE
THE PERSISTENT PAST
HIGH SCREECHING
FEEDBACK ROSETTA
LOOPING THE EVER PRESENT WAVE
QUANTUM
BLACK
IN THE MOMENT

FUTURISM