

Long before Jean Michel Basquiat wowed the art world with his trademark bad boy, Afro centric, sly, self effacing, emancipating paintings; before George Clinton could say "Parliament" and "Funkadelics"; before Rammellzee suited up to battle the Word; before Renee Cox flipped the script with her disturbingly beautiful photographs that de/reconstruct the socio cultural myths stifling black females; even before Octavia Butler wrote her first sci fi story (at age 12) and all the books that eventually

followed (which earned her a Macarthur genius grant); and way before house music, hip hop, and rap; there was Sun Ra.

Who was Sun Ra? For starters, he was a brilliant jazz keyboardist, composer, pioneer of electronic music, and bandleader extraordinaire, categorically off the chain. Like a court jester, he vacillated between zany and profound usually in the same sentence. A freethinking intellectual, Ra rejected textbook history and created an Astro Black Mythology connecting



"Sun, the pope of Afrofuturism" Design © Peter Dennett. Art Yard Ltd 2013

A NEW TAKE ON AN OLD STAR

WHO RA?

Par Anne Gregory



"Of the Sun", acrylic on canvas. Sending it out to Sun Ra. © 2013 Anne Gregory

ancient Egypt with outer space. He concocted a fate of the universe based on the Bible, the Quran, and Flash Gordon comics and concluded "the only way this world can be saved from being completely destroyed is through music."¹ So he proceeded to make music that was out of this world for 60 years.

"The only way this world can be saved from being completely destroyed is through music."

¹ Cotter, Holland. (2009, April 30). Beamed From Tomorrow, New York Times. A quote attributed to Sun Ra. attribute

Born Herman Poole Blount, in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1914, he discarded his past like some ill-fitting suit, got rid of his slave name, too. He claimed to be from Saturn and he was here with a message from higher beings. "Space is the Place" was his mantra. He touched down in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia and spread that message through his music. Known for his wacky Afro/techno attire, sparkly robes and bedazzled crowns with whirly gigs were worn as a uniform. Behind this amusing façade (Ra had a wry sense of humor and said he was the biggest joke ever played on the world) there was a sincere man on a serious moral mission.

The Sun Ra phenomenon can be viewed as a metaphor for liberating the African Diaspora from its history of oppression into a future of cosmic possibilities and infinite freedom. Indeed, Sun Ra felt the burden of saving all humanity. He said he hated people because he loved them so much. That if they weren't in such a mess he could have skipped his earth gig and been a free spirit floating around the universe. But he shared the love through his music and his musings. The 1959 letterhead for his Le Saturn Records label read: "Beta Music For Beta People for a Beta World".

Once in a while you come across an artist who blows your mind and touches your spirit -- someone who reaches for the highest human potential instead of aiming for commercial success. That's Sun Ra.

His example inspires me to make paintings that send out strong positive energy – like his music. In my painting "Of the Sun" a radial pattern suggests an offbeat version of a mandala – an ancient motif that represents the universe and gives a symbolic offering.

Like Ra, artists across all media tell and retell events as a way of revising the past and holding the present accountable in order to fix the future. After all, the survival of the planet may depend on it!

Anne Gregory is an artist living in Durham NC, USA. Currently she is working on a series of paintings called Uprising which explores conflict and resolution in the context of world events focusing on Africa, the Arab Spring, and Women's Issues.