

Exploring 'Gesamtkunstwerk', Afrofuturism and The Cosmic Jazz of Sun Ra. James Richards

For the purpose of this essay, I will be drawing upon a personal influence of mine and relating them to Richard Wagner and his popularisation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* - a term translated as 'total work of art', a culmination of the multi-disciplinary areas of music, literature, theatre, and live performance. While it may be easy to consider that in this modern age of technology and mass media, that the relationship of these various disciplines may have been born from our contemporary approaches to the arts - however on closer examination we can see how the evolution of blended creative media can be traced much further back to previous generations of artists, thinkers, philosophers, and visionaries. During the nineteenth century had occurred a revival of the interests in art theories and media. This increase of multi-disciplinary art forms is what led to the development of Wagners' '*Gesamtkunstwerk*' concept - an ambiguous phrase which has been associated with expression of an 'ideal work of art', a 'universal artwork' or an 'all embracing artform.'

Expanding from this notion of the 'ideal work of art' - an artist with whom I have a strong fascination and draw much inspiration from is the enigmatic jazz musician known as Sun Ra. Originally born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1914 - Herman Poole Blount was considered to be a prodigious talent from an early age, demonstrating the ability to read sheet music and play songs fluently on the piano without hearing the song itself first, as well as being able to transcribe music whilst listening to it. In 1952, Blount legally changed his name to Sun Ra, taking influence from ancient esoteric mythologies and the Egyptian Sun god, as well re-inventing a new musical career and identity for himself. Aside from being an exceptionally talented pianist and composer, Sun Ra also garnered much attention and cult following due to his involvement with poetry, philosophy, theatrical performance as well as being a major influential figure among Chicagos' avant-garde jazz scene.

"The earth cannot move without music. The earth moves in a certain rhythm, a certain sound, a certain note. When the music stops the earth will stop and everything upon it will die." - Sun Ra - 'Space is the Place' - 1974 film. [1]

Among some of the research discoveries I have encountered in exploring the connections to Wagners' notion of the '*gesamtkunstwerk*' idea, are the many ways in which Sun Ra remains to be seen as an iconic and influential musical and cultural figure who transcended the mould of being an entertainer and strived to push the boundaries of artistic expression. There is much influence to be found in the philosophy of Sun Ra, who as an individual had become the literal embodiment of his own artwork. Abandoning his birth name and taking influence from the name 'Ra' - the Egyptian god of the Sun - he felt this strengthened his connection with the cosmos. It is this personal transformation and reinvention of his identity that most appropriately identifies his work as having many similarities with

Wagners concept of the 'gesamtkunstwerk.'

This is further evidenced in the book, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* [2], a biographic book which helps to place the work of Sun Ra into a meaningful perspective. John M. Szwed (1997) is a Professor of Anthropology and African American studies at the Centre for Jazz Studies at the University of Alabama, and he is also the author of the book *Space is the Place* [3]. Szwed provides a meticulously researched insight of the life and philosophy of Sun Ra, and also provides important connections with Sun Ra and his Arkestra to the Gesamtkunstwerk concept (p.108). As someone who has listened to and been influenced by jazz music for many years, there is much inspiration to be taken in the way that Sun Ra managed to captivate the imagination of his audience and listener. Aside from being a tremendous musical composer, he was an innovator of free jazz expression and live improvisation, effectively transforming the face of jazz music at his time.

"He had studied architecture extensively, extended Goethe's theory of color, and drawing from Wagner's notion of Gesamtkunstwerk-in which all arts would be incorporated into drama he developed Mystery Plays which traced the spiritual development of characters through the use of music, color, speech, movement, and stage design."

John F Szwed - "Space Is the Place" - 1998 - (page 108)

An additional discovery, and amid continuing to explore the works of Sun Ra are what led me to finding Afrofuturism. Although there is a long list of other artists and jazz musicians who gave rise to the popularity of Afrofuturism, it can be said without doubt that Sun Ra was an important catalyst in bringing this blend of musicality, poetry, visual arts and esoteric philosophy into a unified movement. During a time when black civil rights movements were on the rise in America, jazz music was often associated with the liberation of black identity and the struggle for equal rights. Sun Ra seemed to take these ways of thinking, and push them to the limits of imagination. The Arkestra wrote and performed songs inspired by the visions of a more positive future. Their aesthetics and costumes were imbued with symbology and iconography of Ancient Egypt, and musically they aimed to transport the listener to another place in space and time. In *'Space is The Place'* the constantly evolving line-up is described (Szwed p.254):

"The arkestra became regulars at The East, a black cultural center in Brooklyn which had profound influence on the development of Afrocentric thinking and politics in New York City.

Sun Ra was honoured there once for a whole day as a key figure in the black cultural revolution." - John F Szwed - "Space is the Place" - 1998 - (p. 254)

A major step I have taken in relation to this research is the study of experimental and unconventional compositional methods, some of which have been heavily utilised by Sun Ra as well as paving the way for generations of musicians who came after him. The use of the keyboard synthesizer was relatively unpopular until players like Sun Ra brought them to the forefront of attention, and in discovering this I have tried to incorporate these synth

elements into my work by utilising certain keyboard motifs and modifying their expressions.

On the emergence of Afrofuturism [4], journalist Zuberi (p. 993) writes:

"Attention to aural texture meant stretching the sonic possibilities of existing instruments, often producing dissonance and atonality....new electronic instruments such as the Moog synthesizer produced peculiar tones outside the parameters of previous listening" - Nabeel Zuberi - "The Transmolecularization of Black folk" - 2004 - (p.993)

In addition to this, I have tried to find influence in the curiosity of utilising found sounds which do not necessarily have a musical origin. In this way, recorded audio taken from nature or the natural environment can be blended or juxtaposed with more traditional musical elements. Considering I am not a masterful piano player, or a classical player but moreso an avid percussionist I have tried to develop my own rhythmic abilities using unconventional intervals and sporadic improvisational elements.

"One positive thought produces millions of positive vibrations." - John Coltrane

Overall I feel the background research has provided me with a solid foundation to explore new sonic and aural possibilities by trying to blend together the best elements of my favourite genres using a variety of techniques and methods. In my own creative work moving forward I will be aiming to blend traditional instrumentation, recording, sampling and mixing techniques together with different elements of Afrofuturist inspired percussion and rhythms. I will aim to further my progressions by developing my creative approach into new unforeseen areas, and striving to challenge my creativity in new ways.

References:

[1] - "Space Is the Place" - film directed by John Coney, released in 1974 by Plexifilm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCalqwsicls>

[2] - "Space is the Place" - The Lives and Times of Sun Ra - John M. Szwed, 1997, Pantheon Books

https://monoskop.org/images/a/a2/Szwed_John_F_Space_Is_The_Place_The_Lives_And_Times_of_Sun_Ra.pdf

[3] - "Space is the Place" - The Lives and Times of Sun Ra - John M. Szwed, 1997, Pantheon Books

https://monoskop.org/images/a/a2/Szwed_John_F_Space_Is_The_Place_The_Lives_And_Times_of_Sun_Ra.pdf

[4] - "The Transmolecularization of Black Folk, Space is The Place, Sun Ra, Afrofuturism" - Nabeel Zuberi, 2004 - Off the Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema

[https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/362786/original/Zuberi-+The+Transmolecularization+of+%255BBlack%255D+Folk-+Space+is+the+Place%](https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/362786/original/Zuberi-+The+Transmolecularization+of+%255BBlack%255D+Folk-+Space+is+the+Place%255D)

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