

The Guardian

Take your brain to another dimension: how Sun Ra inspired our tube artwork

The cosmic philosopher, jazz musician and poet Sun Ra has inspired artist Harold Offeh, and you can see and hear the results in London's tube stations.

Harold Offeh

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Futuristic, funk-inspired artwork, *Transporter* created by Artist Harold Offeh and local young people for London Underground's 150th Anniversary at Notting Hill Gate Tube Station on September 26, 2013 in London, England. The artwork can be seen on escalators at Notting Hill, Ladbroke Grove and Bethnal Green underground stations. Photograph: Tim P. Whitby/Getty Images for Art on the Underground

Anyone who passes through Bethnal Green, Notting Hill Gate and Ladbroke Grove tube stations over the next few months will encounter a series of works I've created with two local youth groups, Canalside Activity Centre and Baraka Youth. It's been commissioned by Art on the Underground as part of the 150th anniversary of the tube, and the project, *Transporter*, presents the young people's future visions of the underground on escalators and via audio announcements (here's a few you'll hear - St Paul's, Tottenham Court Road, Holborn , or Chancery Lane).

They present psychedelic coloured stations populated by aliens and various technological advancements. Our collective starting point was Sun Ra, a visual and sonic reference that validated their imaginative renderings.

I first encountered Sun Ra, the seminal American avant garde composer and mythmaker in Kowdo Eshun's book, *More Brilliant Than the Sun, Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, a work that wonderfully reveals and interweaves various sonic arts narratives. In it Sun Ra, aka Herman Poole Blount, figured prominently. At the time I didn't go much beyond the oddness of this figure who had rejected his given name and formulated a new identity, not only for himself but for the whole black diaspora.

Sun Ra's stated narrative was that Blacks were descended from the advanced ancient Egyptians, after all, an African civilisation. A civilisation so advanced it was in fact extraterrestrial, from Saturn.

A greater exploration of the man and the myth revealed what Kowdo Eshun calls "music and mythopoesis". Sun Ra was a living *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art, the pure embodiment of music, image, text, pseudoscience, philosophy and spirituality.

Ra was and is light years ahead. From his early explorations in free jazz in the 50s to the full-on realisation of Sun Ra and his Arkestra in the 60s and 70s, he didn't just play the myth - he lived it. It's this conviction that I find totally seductive and inspiring.

Sun Ra's grand myth cycle is formulated against the tumultuous backdrop of upheaval and change in 60s and 70s American politics, culture and science. The civil-rights movement, Vietnam, social unrest, moon landings, youth culture, identity politics and hypercapitalism are the meat and bones of this period.



Sun Ra in the film *Space is the Place*.

Somehow Sun Ra manages to embody all of these issues. In 1972 he made a film, the extraordinary *Space is the Place*, a must-see, directed by John Coney. The film is set in 1970s Oakland, California. Ra and the Arkestra land with a mission to spread the word that urban blacks unwelcome in America should seek refuge and, dare I say it, emancipation beyond the stars.

The film itself is an amazing hybrid of lo-fi sci-fi meets blaxploitation meets political broadcast meets extended proto-music video. The central moment of the film for me is when Sun Ra appears - or apparates - in a youth club. Surrounded by Oakland's black ghetto youth they question him and whether he is for "real". His reply is poignant and insightful.

"I'm not real. I'm just like you. You don't exist, in this society. If you did your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real... we're both myths. I do not come to you as reality. I come to you as a myth because that's what black people are: myths."

In this instance Sun Ra's fantastical narrative takes on a bitter truth. Underneath the shiny capes and kitsch Egyptian get-up is a sophisticated articulation of the black American narrative: social and political disenfranchisement.

Later in the film Ra mentions the US space programme, moon landing and all; and says to the same audience of assembled youth: "I see none of you have been invited." JFK's 1961 challenge to land a man on the moon by the end of that decade opens up a further cultural exploration space for the US. Nasa's space programme grows in parallel to the emerging identity politics of the time. But while the actual Nasa programme remains a white male space, the imaginative "space" opened up by space exploration provides a blank canvas for the formation of alternative identities and representations. There is an opportunity to project utopian visions on the imaginative possibilities opened up by the voyager space programmes and such.

In 2006, I developed a project, the Mothership Collective, for the South London Gallery. The project used George Clinton's Funkadelic Mothership, originally a UFO stage show prop and now preserved in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, as framework for a series of workshop "encounters" between the public and an array of artists who had been invited to develop ideas responding to futurisms and utopian visions. While the project had many manifestations and outcomes, the framework set up by Clinton and Sun Ra allowed audiences to engage with the real power of the sci-fi genre: in imagining the future you mirror and articulate the present.

The upcoming exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, entitled *The Shadows Took Shape* will seek to reframe Sun Ra and Afro-futurism within an international context. For full disclosure I should point out that I'll be participating in the exhibition showing an ongoing series of works called *Covers*. Presented as photographs and live performances, the works consist of my attempts to recreate album covers by artists such as Grace Jones, Funkadelic and Betty Davis (funk songstress, and Miles Davis's ex-wife). Curators Zoe Whitley and Naima J Keith's major exhibition attempts to posit Afro-futurism within a wider landscape of utopian visions and narratives that inform popular culture.

Sun Ra's meta-narrative and the wider group of artists, writers and musicians now associated with what we call Afro-futurism seize the metaphor outer space provides, the ability to create, reframe and project a self-made identity. It's this gesture that provides a blueprint for others, including myself.

It's easy to explore the legacy of Sun Ra, through his music and influence on musicians such as George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic, Earth, Wind and Fire, Erykah Badu, Sa-Ra, Flying Lotus and Janelle Monáe among many more. Even Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore is a Sun Ra aficionado. In art the Ra's rich cultural heritage has filtered through such American artists as Glenn Ligon, Ellen Gallagher, Mike Kelley and Laylah Ali.

It's Sun Ra's ability to reach out beyond the contexts and conventions of the present and open up a space for fantastical future-gazing and myth-making that continues to inspire. For good or bad Sun Ra embodies the promise of contemporary culture, the fantasy of an autonomous self-created identity.

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