

527 West 29th Street New York NY 10001  
Tel 212-925-6190 Fax 212-334-9139  
info@davidnolangallery.com  
www.davidnolangallery.com

# Interview

ART  
**SUN RA  
TOUCHES  
DOWN**

By RACHEL SMALL

**June 26, 2014** — To understand the postwar jazz musician Sun Ra is to receive him as a performer with ideas and ambitions literally out of this world. Impossible to miss in Egyptian-style garb, the Philadelphia-based artist was known for complex free jazz compositions—and, speaking in an Alabama drawl, his insistence that he was born on Saturn. “We have the human race and the alien race,” he said in a 1981 interview with *Detroit Black Journal*. “I’m not human, because to err is human... I didn’t get my status making errors.”

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Sun Ra’s “Earth Jubilee” (how he described his birth). Along with various commemorative events, including a major rerelease on iTunes, there has been a renewed interest in his music, as well as the singularly bizarre, fully fascinating myths he built around himself. Beginning this week, New York’s David Nolan Gallery will present a collection of ephemera related to Sun Ra, including album art, rarely seen photographs, and one rather atypical press release. All was recovered from his late manager Alton Abraham’s home by the writer, musician, and curator John Corbett.

“I think Sun Ra always thought he deserved to be famous,” says Corbett, a Chicago-based gallery owner and renowned free jazz advocate, who co-curated the show with his gallery partner Jim Dempsey. “I think he would take the fact that he is being acknowledged so broadly now as kind of setting the record straight.”

As far as setting the record straight goes, Sun Ra was



Sun Ra, *The Soul Vibrations of Man*, c. 1976, offset print on paper, unwrapped back album cover, 13 1/2 x 13 1/2 in 34.3 x 34.3 cm

actually born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Alabama. He started out as a comparatively normal jazz musician, living and working in Chicago in the 1930s through the early 1950s. By midcentury, he started to gather a rehearsal band and was slowly adopting a more flamboyant look. From then on, he never broke character. In the late 1960s, he moved to Philadelphia and set up a communal home for his band, by then known as the “Arkestra,” who he’d summon for rehearsals lasting up to six hours. It’s hardly a surprise that performances would be wild affairs: A YouTube clip shows Sun Ra playing a synthesizer by violently strumming it, whirling around to pound it behind his back, periodically closing his eyes as if meditating.

With his unwavering persona came a steadfast desire to change Earth, which he believed was in “peril,” with an idyllic vision of beauty and spirituality. Many of his ideas are synthesized in his 1974 film *Space is the Place*, in which he attempts to transport Earth’s black population to a new planet for a fresh start. “He was very specific with what he was trying to achieve,” explains Corbett. “He thought it was his job [to change the world]. I think his job was a messianic one. He saw himself in an enlightening role.” Sun Ra is now viewed as an early afro-futurist, an academic term connoting futuristic fantasy trends in black culture as a

means of critique and exploration of African diaspora; though the term didn’t exist until 1993, the year he died.

Whatever Sun Ra’s long term significance, Corbett is excited to sustain a dialogue through the show. “It shouldn’t be one person talking about it; it should be a lot of people talking about it,” he says. Sun Ra’s otherworldly utopia could be a little closer to our reality, and why fight the beat.