

**SUN RA**  
a composition

Sylvan Oswald

AUTHOR CONTACT  
(646)325-8417  
essive@gmail.com

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## BEINGS

SON	a delicate prodigy. also, WOMAN, JESUS, EGYPTIAN BOY.
SONNY	a center of the universe. also INTERVIEWER, DOCTOR, MAILMAN.
RA	a veteran.
MARSHA	his sister at many ages. also LEROY, MARSHALL ALLEN, LUCIFER, INTERVIEWER, PHARAOH.
ALTON	his collaborator. also NATIONAL DRAFT BOARD, POLICE, HOMETOWN GUY.

## TIME

1993

## SPACE

THE MAGIC CITY

## NOTE

Actors may take on their other roles without any changes of costume or prop. Son is shown from late teens-just 30; Sonny from 30-60; Alton from 30s till 60s; Marsha from childhood till 60s; Ra as late 70s.

## SOURCES

This play takes liberties in dramatizing Sun Ra's story, but is humbly indebted to the research of John F. Szwed's definitive biography *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (1993). The play borrows scenarios and "samples" actual speech by Sun Ra from Szwed's book. It also samples from John Corbett's *Extended Play* (1994) and from *The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra's polemical broadsheets and streetcorner leaflets* (2006). These samples are footnoted in the text. The scene titles are taken from names of Sun Ra compositions.

The Weirdness, Outness, Way Outness, Otherness was immediate.  
Some space metaphysical philosophical surrealistic bop funk. Some  
blue pyramid home nigger southern different color meaning hip shit.  
Ra. Sun Ra.

Then they put on weird clothes, space helmets, robes, flowing  
capas. They did rituals played in rituals, evoked lost civilizations,  
used strangeness to teach us open feeling as intelligence. In those  
cellars & lofts, Sun Ra spun a cosmic metaphor. He was a  
philosopher musician. He used music as language, and image.

...Sun Ra's consistent statement, musically and spoken, is that this  
is a primitive world. Its practices, beliefs, religions are uneducated,  
unenlightened, savage, destructive, already in the past. That's why  
Ra left and returned only to say he left. Into the Future. Into Space.

—Amiri Baraka

The elasticity of words  
The phonetic-dimension of words  
The multi-self of words  
Is energy for thought—If it is a reality.  
The idea that words  
Can form themselves into the impossible  
Is through the words.

—Sun Ra, “Words and the Impossible”

[Prelude]

## KINGDOM OF THUNDER [YEAR OF THE SUN, part 0]

*Individual tones from an electric organ.*

*Tone. Tone. Tone.*

*Shafts of side light.*

*A sense of a low-ceilinged passage in a train station.*

*Upstage and slightly out of focus,*

*A man, who will turn out to be ALTON, pushes a wheelchair across the stage as if it has the weight of someone in it.*

*But there is no one in it.*

*Sound of static.*

*Static.*

[Part 1]

## SUNOLOGY

*Spotlight. A delicate prodigy in his room. He wears a draped sheet and sandals. This is an incantation, starts quietly, gets stronger. There's a sly pleasure to this word game.*

SON

There's no such thing as a wrong note.

There's no such thing as a wrong

as a wrong

as a wrong note

No such thing as

No such thing as

No such thing as

No

No such

No there's no

No there's no

No there's no

No there's no

thing as a wrong

thing as a wrong

thing as a note

no such

There's wrong  
There's wrong  
There's a wrong thing  
A wrong such  
A as such  
A such as  
A such thing  
A such note  
A note thing  
A thing as a wrong  
There's  
a note  
a wrong  
a such  
a thing  
such a thing as a no  
such a note  
such a no note  
there's a note  
there's a note  
there's a wrong note  
such as  
such as  
such as  
such as

*Another light. SONNY, in a shirt and jacket, speaks from the middle past,  
while SON continues in the far past:*

SONNY  
What I'm trying to know  
What I want to discover...

SON  
Not many people will understand this...

SONNY  
What I want to discover...

SON  
...but I really prefer MYTHocracy to DEMocracy.

*Beat in which their thoughts align, for a moment.*

SONNY  
Since everything that's possible

SON  
Has been tried

SONNY  
We need to try the impossible.

SON  
We need to try the impossible.

SONNY  
We need to try.

SON  
We need to try.<sup>1</sup>

*A change to Showtime:*

SONNY  
Ladies and Gentlemen:  
Thank you all for coming out tonight!  
We have a great show here for you.  
And to start it all off  
I'm going to tell you something you gotta know  
about the Planet Earth.

*The idea of applause ...*

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<sup>1</sup> Son and Sonny quotes from Szwed, Space is the Place.

## INTERSTELLAR LOW WAYS

*An enormous veteran bandleader in a faded galactic headdress makes an entrance from all the way at the back of the space.*

*At first, only some glints from his robe catch our eye under the low light. Slowly he comes into focus, his serious head, his ample body, his arms and legs obscured beneath a floor-length golden lamé robe.*

*After taking a moment to simply arrive in our presence, SUN RA begins to approach.*

*There is still no sound.*

*It might seem like something is off.*

*Is something off?*

*Is something wrong?*

*Is something wrong with him?*

*We suspected he was strange – but is this it?*

*He comes closer.*

*SUN RA can't decide if he wants to be here with us.*

*But he's never been one to turn down a show.*

*So here he is.*

*And here we are.*

*Here we are. Together.*

*SUN RA has found his light, and basks in it a moment, in full view. Making sure everybody sees. He takes a moment to expand.*

*His presence seems to channel millennia past and future at once.*

*We really look at him.*

*He makes his way to the keyboard at one side of the stage.*

*He hunkers down behind it, a task made difficult because of his flowing robes and arthritic joints.*

*Once he arranges himself, he casts his eyes out over the audience.*

*We can't quite make out his mood. He stares us down.*

*He is about to begin.*

*He lets us know that.*

*We get it.*

*He lets us get it.*

*We sit there getting it.*

*He gives that to us, just that.*

*He's gonna play.*

*We're gonna get it.*

*It's going to be like that.*

*In a second.*

*In a moment.*

*In a half-intergalactic pin drop.*

*Now.*

*He plays a key on the keyboard. It's an electronic tone.*

*Hear the reverb.*

*Rest.*

*He plays another key.*

*A drum beat.*

*Rest.*

*And another key. A horn. Rest.*

*As you just heard, the keyboard's keys are linked to play a wide variety of instruments, including strange sounds from other parts of the universe – and including RA's own voice. He has had a stroke. In a way, he's back from the dead. Back from space. Just landed. Just in from Saturn. And this is how he's communicating. For now. Some of RA's text will be voiced by the keyboard. Keyboard-voiced lines will be italicized under his name. Any other sounds that he plays will appear in brackets also under his name.*

*RA plays an electronic tone.*

RA  
[Electronic tone.]

*Beat. RA hits another key and his voice comes out of the keyboard.*

RA  
*I.*  
*I.*  
*I –*

*I just got back –*  
*I just got back –*

*I just got back –*  
*I just got back –*  
*I just got back –*  
*I just got back from space.*

*A moment to enjoy. And does the audience buy it.*

*I –*

*I just got back from space. I –*  
*I just –*

*Another key.*

*Ou*  
*Ou*  
*Outer*

*Ou*  
*Ou*  
*Outer*  
*Spaaaaace.*

*A check around the room. Satisfied.*  
*Another key.*

*So.*  
*So.*  
*SoSoSoSoSoSoSo.*  
*So I c*  
*So I c*  
*So I can't really talk that well.*

*Another key.*

*Stroke.*

Stroke.  
Stroke.  
Stroke on one side  
Strokestrokestrokestroke.

*Then in his real speaking voice, crackly from disuse:*

Mar-

MARSHA OFFSTAGE  
I'll be right there.

RA  
[One clashing chord tumbles into another]

*Hold, expecting her to barge in. Expecting her. But she doesn't.*

RA  
Except.  
Because.  
Everything.

Everything sounds.

Except my sister.  
Except.

Because.  
My life in this room.

Except. What sounds.  
This is why.  
What sounds.  
This is why.

*So I can't really talk that well.*  
*Outer Space.*

*Frustrated:*

What sounds.

*I just got back from space / [Foghorn]*

*It should be said, briefly, that RA's keyboard occupies a kind of tech corner where props, effects, and supplies are stored. For the next scene, SONNY might borrow a mic from RA's area to play an INTERVIEWER. RA watches from his keyboard seat.*

## YEAR OF THE SUN, part 1

*Birmingham, Alabama. A feeling of the press waiting outside MARSHA's door and following her quickly down the street.*

SONNY as INTERVIEWER

A few questions –

MARSHA

I'm in a rush.

INTERVIEWER

It won't take long, I promise.

MARSHA

Fine.

INTERVIEWER

Birmingham's prodigal son, Sun Ra, has made landfall.

He's just returned home after a stroke. I'm here with his sister, Marsha.

Tell us, Marsha: Is he aware he's back in Birmingham?

MARSHA

He knows he ain't in Kansas anymore.

INTERVIEWER

And by "Kansas" you mean, a big city up north?

MARSHA

Right.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever see him perform?

MARSHA

No I did not have the pleasure.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

MARSHA

He was up there and I was down here!

INTERVIEWER

Did you get along as kids?

MARSHA

If you count fightin'.

INTERVIEWER

Ha ha ha. [*Quick switch in tone:* ]

Time and time again he would tell people that he was from Saturn.

MARSHA  
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Well, you're his sister. Is it true?

*She stops.*

MARSHA  
He ain't from no Mars.<sup>2</sup>  
I peeped him  
being born  
outta our mother  
on the kitchen table.  
Bloody and screamin'  
like everyone else.  
And his real fool name is Herman.  
Herman Poole Blount.  
Named after some  
traveling musician.  
Magician.  
Who came through  
Birmingham.  
Which is also called  
you know the Magic City.

Mr. Poole wanted some child  
to bear his name.  
But ain't no  
magic  
about that.

HERMAN.

He ain't.  
From no Mars.

*Meanwhile, back in his room, a key on the keyboard:*

RA  
*Mar marmarmarmar*

*She's still not there. A relief?*

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<sup>2</sup> Szwed, *Space is the Place* p. 7.