Celebrating 100 Years of Visionary Jazz Artist's Influence

Photos: (from top) Sun Ra, Craig Harris. Courtesy of the artists.

HANOVER, NH—The visionary Sun Ra (1914-1993) had an extraordinary six-decade musical career as a composer, arranger, keyboardist, poet, philosopher and bandleader—including, Upper Valley jazz fans recall, a memorable, sold-out 1990 performance with the Hop's Barbary Coast Jazz Ensemble. Hailed as "one of the great big-band leaders, pianists, and surrealists of jazz" (New York Times) and as "the missing link between Duke Ellington and Public Enemy" (Rolling Stone), he led his "Arkestra" in a career that ranged from boogie-woogie and swing to free jazz, "space vamps," selected jazz standards and Disney tunes.

The Coast marks the centennial of his birth with "Celebrating Sun Ra," a program of his powerful and groundbreaking music on Saturday, October 25, at 8 pm, in Spaulding Auditorium. The concert features former Sun Ra sideman Craig Harris, a gifted trombonist, composer, conceptualist and educator.

Since bursting onto the music scene in the 1970s, Harris has performed with a who's who of creative jazz artists, including Cecil Taylor, Abdullah Ibrahim, Henry Threadgill, Lester Bowie, The Roots, RAKIM and others—including playing for five years in the Arkestra in the 1970s. As is true of all guest artists with the Coast, Harris will be in residence the week prior to the concert to rehearse with the Barbary Coast, teach Dartmouth classes, and mentor aspiring student musicians on campus and beyond.

"For many of us in the Barbary Coast in February 1990, Sun Ra literally changed our lives," said Barbary Coast director Don Glasgo. "There has never been—and likely will never be—a more eclectic and diverse ensemble than Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Arkestra. They could stop on a dime, pivoting from the rollicking swing of Sy Oliver and Fletcher Henderson to select jazz standards by Ellington and Monk and into the brilliant universe of Sun Ra's compositions: stomps, romps, ballads, love songs, space vamps, chants, Afro-funk and all-out conducted/collective improvisations. Sun Ra taught me to say less and play more. He taught all of us in the Coast then to expect the unexpected: to ask what lies beyond the boundary of the last possibility." A visionary musician himself, Harris is well equipped to "share his conceptions of Sun Ra's Universe with us," Glasgo wrote.

Eclectic, outrageous, at times mystifying but always imbued with a powerful jazz consciousness, Ra's music has withstood its skeptics and detractors for nearly three generations. His Arkestra included some of the finest musicians of the time. He was the first jazz musician to perform on electronic keyboards and to pursue full-scale collective improvisation in a big-band setting, and he was far ahead of other artists in using space travel as a compositional subject. He cultivated an otherworldly persona, claiming to have been born on Saturn. He was quoted, "I never wanted to be a part of planet Earth, but I am compelled to be here, so anything I do for
It was through his five-year stint with Sun Ra that Harris emerged as a major figure in progressive jazz. Raised in Hempstead, on New York's Long Island, Harris began playing the trombone at age 10 and graduated with a degree in music at SUNY Westbury before joining the Arkestra in 1976. He followed that with a world tour as a member of Abdullah Ibrahim's band, which fed his interest in world music, and went on to a busy slate of collaborations as a performer and composer. In recent years, he has focused on integrating text, music, movement and imagery, including the writing of Amiri Baraka and W.E.B. Du Bois, and a dance/multimedia tribute to champion boxer Muhammad Ali. Wrote The Newark Star-Ledger in 2013, "Harris' skillfully manipulated trombone embodied the sultry rasp of a keyed-up blues singer, with the occasional colorful addition of a croak in its lowest register and a creak in the highest."

Born Herman Poole Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, Sun Ra showed early talent for the piano and he began performing professionally as a teen. Moving to Chicago in 1945, he gained important experience working with a growing number of blues and jazz singers, composers and bandleaders, including Wynonie Harris, Fletcher Henderson and Coleman Hawkins. In 1952, he legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra (he would also perform under the names Sonny Lee and Le Sonra) while continuing to compose and work with a wide range of jazz musicians.

His more radical compositions and arrangements found their way into his own groups (including his Arkestra, a play on the word "orchestra"), which featured exotic costumes and unusual instruments. It also boasted a number of musicians who have contributed much to jazz, including saxophonists John Gilmore and Marshall Allen, bassist Richard Davis, trombonist Julian Priester, drummer Clifford Jarvis, and reedman James Spaulding. He pushed these already great talents to hear and play more: In A Joyful Noise, a 1980 documentary film about Sun Ra and his music, Gilmore told the interviewer, Ra "was the first one to really introduce me to the higher forms of music."

Begun as a "hard bop" outfit, the Arkestra soon was incorporating free improvisation—becoming a major influence on such later avant-garde jazz musicians as Muhal Richard Abrams, Henry Threadgill, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

In 1960, Ra moved to New York and then, in 1968, to Philadelphia, to an affordable space where he could live and work with his band. An insomniac, he worked at all hours, relieved by naps.

Throughout the 1960s, he continued to record on Saturn Records as well as various European labels, while touring widely and continuing to spread the fame of his live performances.

"In the Arkestra's performance I heard New Orleans jazz, blues, gospel, swing, be-bop, funk, Afro-beat, and the classical avant-garde," wrote Lavelle Porter in his blog, The Over-Educated Negro. "The performances included a melding of other art forms including drama, opera, poetry, the sermon, spoken word, dance, and fashion."
He toured with the Arkestra until his death at age 79; in the latter decades, his music steadily returned to the standards and jazz classics he grew up with, although reinterpreted through his distinct musical voice. Since his death, John Gilmore, then Marshall Allen, who turned 90 this year, have led the Arkestra, which still rehearses in that same modest row house in Philadelphia.

Ra’s art asserted a notion of African American creativity far removed from stereotypes, Porter wrote. "The Arkestra’s long, arduous practice sessions were legendary, and by emphasizing the notion of discipline, Sun Ra was cleverly exploding the...condescending idea about jazz that was popular among white beatniks, that anyone could perform black music by simply sloughing off one’s Western rationality and getting in touch with the wild, untrained, primitive self. On the contrary, Sun Ra preached that discipline and precision were necessary to operate at the highest levels of any art form...without that discipline there would be no art."

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**CALENDAR LISTING:**

"Celebrating Sun Ra," a concert by the Barbary Coast Jazz Ensemble

The visionary and catalyst Sun Ra (1914-1993) had an extraordinary six-decade musical career as a composer, arranger, keyboardist, poet, philosopher and bandleader (including a sold-out 1990 performance with the Coast). Now, in celebration of the centennial year of Sun Ra's arrival on Planet Earth, the Coast is joined by trombonist/composer/arranger, a major figure in creative music since the mid-'70s—playing alongside Cecil Taylor, Abdullah Ibrahim, Henry Threadgill, Lester Bowie, The Roots and RAKIM—and a member of the Sun Ra Arkestra for five years. Don Glasgo, director.

Saturday, October 25, 8 pm
Spaulding Auditorium, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hanover NH
$10, $5 Dartmouth students
Information: hop.dartmouth.edu or 603.646.2422

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Founded in 1962, the Hopkins Center for the Arts is a multi-disciplinary academic, visual and performing arts center dedicated to uncovering insights, igniting passions, and nurturing talents to help Dartmouth and the surrounding Upper Valley community engage imaginatively and contribute creatively to our world. Each year the Hop presents more than 300 live events and films by visiting artists as well as Dartmouth students and the Dartmouth community, and reaches more than 22,000 Upper Valley residents and students with outreach and arts education programs. After a celebratory 50th-anniversary season in 2012-13, the Hop enters its second half-century with renewed passion for mentoring young artists, supporting the development of new work, and providing a laboratory for participation and experimentation in the arts.