

John Cage Meets Sun Ra: The Complete Concert

John Cage / Sun Ra

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This live album documents the meeting of two avant-garde legends, but it is not exactly a "super duo." The curious chemistry these two share is subtler and possibly more rewarding than that.

John Cage was a quotable artist. On the subject of albums, he once remarked that "records ruin the landscape." Elsewhere, in a treatise collected in his 1961 book *Silence*, the composer offered some opinions about jazz. The genre "derives from serious music," he wrote, "and when serious music derives from it, the situation becomes rather silly." Given those harsh judgments, it makes sense to venture an opening question about Cage's one-off appearance alongside swing-and-improv icon Sun Ra. If Cage himself thought jazz unsuited for "serious" contexts and recordings lame, why should this document of their 1986 shared bill be anything other than a curiosity?

John Cage Meets Sun Ra: The Complete Concert has an answer for that wariness—and the album gradually emerges as something greater than a footnote. That's not because the pairing results in an "avant super duo." As it happens, the two artists tend to trade off soloing, and only play together audibly at one point during this hour-plus set, recorded at Coney Island. Yet despite the arms-length embrace, the overall concert has a surprisingly seamless quality.

The entire show, released here in full for the first time, shows how Cage's own performances and improvisations were capable of more supple surprise than his most attention-grabbing pronouncements. The composer of "4'33" talked a lot about his ideas—in particular his insight that there is "no such thing as silence"—but the spare, tender nature of his wordless vocal solos here creates a stronger impact than many theoretical explanations. This newly complete representation of the show also draws strength from the flexibility and invention of Ra's playing.

Ra focuses on one synth here—the then-new Yamaha DX7. Though the instrument's timbral range is limited, Ra manages to whip up a wealth of approaches during his portions of the show. "Untitled Keyboard Solo 1" opens with some sci-fi movie tones; eventually, Ra accelerates into sprightly figures, before steering into dense chords and drones. His third untitled solo makes psychedelic use of the DX7's effects, with chords sounding sampled and spun in real time.

Ra's solos can be sequenced into a compelling EP on their own. But it's his ability to meet Cage more than halfway that helps hold the entire gig together. He provides the sparest wisps of accompaniment imaginable during his one collaboration with Cage, on the track "Empty Words and Keyboard." And on tracks like "We Hold This Myth to Be Potential" and "The Damned Air," Ra provides poetry recitations to go with his playing. His voice is off-mic—the physical editions of the album helpfully give his texts in full—but the way this recording limitation can focus a listener's attention works perfectly next to Cage's contemplative silences and delicate mumblings. Likewise, a short duet with singer and frequent Ra collaborator June Tyson is beset by amplification problems, though the noise-damaged result works, in context.

John Cage Meets Sun Ra: The Complete Concert isn't an ideal entry point into either artist's catalog. For Ra, you'd first want to explore early albums such as *Jazz in Silhouette* and *Angels and Demons at Play* (as well as gonzo triumphs like *Other Planes of There*). Cage's key works have been interpreted by elite classical performers like Joseph Kubera and Third Coast Percussion. But this minor addition to both oeuvres has a quietly mind-blowing feel—particularly since another meeting between Cage and a jazz luminary, Joseph Jarman, was never documented. Instead of ruining the landscape, a recording like this one contributes to it. By contradicting one of Cage's rhetorical excesses, the album gently improves our understanding of the valid connection between divergent careers in American experimental music.

