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JOHN CAGE MEETS SUN RA

CONEY ISLAND OF THE MINDS

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Coney Island is a crossroads of a beach, a garish amusement park and weathered boardwalk up against the ocean at the end of New York City subway lines. "Hurr-ay, hurr-ay, get your tickets—John Cage meets Sun Ra, live, inside," the Sideshows By The Seashore barker bullhorned, attracting few casual passers-by. More than 150 people gathered for Meltdown Records' benefit in June, but they'd come less for the sand and salt-watered air than specifically to see two famous, fearless thinkers-about-sound get together, even though no collaboration was promised.

If Ra and Cage had previously shared time and space only in the record collections of creative composers and enthusiasts like Meltdown's Rick Russo and Bronwyn Rucker, their ideas long ago intersected to form that dimension where "new music" and "avant garde jazz" exist as one, beyond genre. Like science fiction space ship commanders launched from different planets, Cage and Ra carry their own traditions and hold to their own assumptions, but they've approached a common musical frontier, and breached it. True, Cage pursues the ego-less Zen state, while Ra is as self-indulgent as a benevolent despot. Can openness to the world as it is and willful impulse to recast it co-exist? At the border, yes; otherwise these individuals live in parallel universes, hailing each other from afar.

Photos of old Coney Island line one wall of the faded shed that's Sideshows By The Seashore; canvas posters heralding Snakeology, the Asian Flesh-Eating Fish, a Midget Kangaroo, and a Mermaid Parade hang from the ceiling. People waiting on folding chairs munched popcorn, while a few kids batted Meltdown balloons. Russo banged a drum for attention, and a bare-chested black man with a hieroglyphics-marked terrycloth towel wrapped around his middle walked onto the orange-draped stage holding a bowl of smoking incense in one palm, an ankh in his other fist. Right behind him was Marshall Allen, Ra's longtime alto-playing lieutenant; he raised an oblong black metal wind synthesizer to his lips and blew a weird electronic fanfare through it. Then came Ra, in a purple tunic with silver foil sleeves, a star-studded cloth cap on his head so that only a fringe of orange-dyed hair peeked out over his ears; a tuft of neatly trimmed orange beard decorated his second chin. And with him: Cage as usual, in faded blue jeans and grey jacket over a blue denim workshirt. Cage sat at a table behind a microphone, while Ra began to play with his Yamaha DX7.

"Improvisation frequently depends not on the work you have to do[i.e., the composition you're playing], but depends more on your taste and memory, and your likes and dislikes," Cage is quoted by Tom Darter in a *Contemporary Keyboard* interview from 1982. "It doesn't lead you into a new experience, but into something with which you're already familiar..." Sun Ra is a whimsical, not a self-consciously fastidious improviser; his initial solo seemed as arbitrary in rhythmic and harmonic development as any toss of the *I Ching*, and he appeared as pleased to discover what he'd wrought with such Olympian indifference as Cage is to acquiesce to life, Chaos, nature, the irrational, divine influence, and/or cosmic complexity. With his Duchamp-and-Thoreau-linked, Zen-based desire to "disappear from view" as an artist and let work spring forth unbidden as a mushroom, Cage questions the very foundation of jazz, which arguably arose from musicians' psychologically urgent needs to freely express themselves, if only as individualistic participants of anarchically democratic, rough-and-ready ensembles. Of course, Ra is beyond such needs, as he apparently is beyond memory or taste. He acts as free as any god. With his attendants peering solemnly over his shoulder, he conjured elemental sounds for a few minutes. Cage looked on, interested if impassive, and when Ra chose to stop, Cage grinned and applauded like everyone else.

Cage read without any ritual more elaborate than putting on his glasses. His utterance might have been a mesostic, his discovery of which he's told Oregonian Jhan Hochman, "had to do with my wanting to satisfy requests for occasional texts of all kinds." Whatever writings he derived them from (he's frequently used *Finnegan's Wake*), Cage's diphthongs had a soothing effect. Perhaps he was under-amplified, but his low volume and long pauses between syllables quieted the crowd, drew them in to consideration of the ambient sounds—the steady whoosh of air from a circulating fan, the infrequent interpolation of a boom-box, laughs or fragments of conversation from the boardwalk outside, restless stirrings from the folding chairs—probably in keeping with his intentions. Ra regarded Cage with respectful attention. There was some applause when Cage stopped, then Ra played again.

During Cage's next turn, Ra paged through one of his self-published pamphlets to select some poems. Accompanying himself with one hand on the keyboard, Ra warned of nuclear holocaust and encouraged humans to create an alternate future, one no longer based on the past. The obvious variation in Cage's performance from section to section was in the duration of his pauses. While seconds ticked by, was he considering the flux in "silence"? Letting the echo of his syllables end? Awaiting another impulse to speak? He removed his glasses, a signal he'd finished.

Ra's face, at rest, had a doleful smile; his eyes were circled with deep wrinkles. He's always been theatrical, since the mid '50s invading concert sites with his colorfully ragged troupe, directing his Arkestra with an imperious wave of his hand. I've seen him transform the tough jazz club at Slug's into a steamy jungle village, watched him lead tens of thousands of Chicagoans in chanting "We are the children of the Sun," enjoyed films of his rites at the Egyptian pyramids. These happenings weren't influenced by Cage's Black Mountain performance art, any more than Ra's indifference towards polished musical craftsmanship and preference for the unmediated physical gesture result from Cage's emphatic employment of indeterminate processes in the Western classical tradition. Ra accepts "mistakes" because they don't impede the momentum of truthful expression (hear the exhilarating if sloppy air checks of his mentor Fletcher Henderson's big band); indeed, they're truthful, too. Ra's entertaining, quasi-mystical pageantry derives from his experience (as Sonny Blount) staging entr-actes in a low-rent Chicago night spot, but cheaply costumed spectacle has become part of his message of transcendence.

Neither is Cage's theatricality meant as a distraction. Whether he's ending a series of atonal miniatures dedicated to Thoreau with the roar of a jet plane passing overhead, or inducing drowsiness by reading random words in a monotone, or instructing musicians to toss ping-pong balls from the stage, he intends to reflect our focus back on our own perceptions and reactions.

To address the significant issues of contemporary life, Sun Ra took leave of the mundane world some 30 years ago. To explode the stultifying former limits of "legitimate" music, Cage followed Satie, Cowell, and Schoenberg in their reorganization of sound. For both Cage and Ra, the terrifying aspect of musical creation isn't the unknown, the uncharted—what's threatening to humans on earth is how narrow a slice of life and thought conventional wisdom and artistry confronts.

The rear wall of Sideshows By The Seashore was rolled back to let some sunlight in, while tall, thin June Tyson sang "Enlightenment," one of Sun Ra's more familiar anthems: "Hereby, my invitation, I do invite you, enter our space world." Along with the ankh-man and a shaven-skulled, well-muscled young man, she threw herself into some body-distorting dance moves. Then Ra rose to cross the small stage and confer with Cage. Cage nodded agreeably, and again mouthed his stretched-out vowels; Ra gently, sparingly, added music-box sounds, delicate crystalline notes. There was a silence, or near silence, during which Sun Ra and John Cage eyed the audience. Everyone waited, attuned to the next moment, the next sound. Then Cage and Ra relaxed their attentions; the collaboration was done. Applause was prolonged, because we all realized we'd been listening for what's really in the air: not the odd music of two men, but the reality of sounds' possibilities.

Fans swarmed about Cage and Ra as Rick Russo and Bronwyn Rucker served beer, wine, soda pop, juice, and pizza to their guests. Meltdown Records was born.