

Graded on a Curve: *John Cage Meets Sun Ra*

BY JOSEPH NEFF | APRIL 18, 2013



John Cage and *Sun Ra* are two of the most important figures in the music of the last hundred years. By the start of the 1950's the careers of both were well underway, but it took them nearly four decades to cross paths in collaboration. They did so in Coney Island NY, and thankfully a recording of the occasion was released. While the historical value of that LP outweighs its musical achievements, *John Cage Meets Sun Ra* does hold its share of worthwhile moments. It's far from the first record a person should buy from either party, but it'll definitely provide insight and enjoyment to fans of each artist's work.

While I was never a huge comic book junkie as a youth, I did hold a healthy interest in the form, and I can still clearly recall the enjoyment I'd experience while loitering around the revolving metal comics-rack in my local supermarket.

Often my pleasure was transformed into unbridled excitement after discovering that the latest installment in the labyrinthine story of some highly regarded representative of justice contained the addition of another well-loved champion of the cause, the pair joining up to obviously combat some sort of nefarious plot as set in motion through sinister forces.

So, it was inevitable that a little hard-earned lawn-moving coin would get dropped on just that very issue. And sometimes the storyline proved a doozy, providing unexpected twists and turns of all kinds, but more often came a sense of disappointment, my youthful mind craving a little more nourishment than simply the bang for the buck (actually, it was something like thirty-five cents in those days) that was promised by those slick color covers.

Flashing forward roughly a decade, a similar feeling of exhilaration overcame my being after discovering the existence of an LP shared by John Cage and Sun Ra. It shouldn't be hard to deduce that I held both figures in high esteem; in fact a person could rightly say that I considered them both to be superheroes of the American avant-garde.

Said record was ordered with haste, though ominously two wholesalers didn't have it listed in their catalogs. Thankfully, the third time proved a charm. Upon waiting for it to arrive, there was a pang of curiosity over why the album, then only around three years old, wasn't more celebrated, but any doubts were quickly wiped from the mind; this just had to be one of those chocolate and peanut butter situations.

But after a half-dozen or so spins upon my turntable, I was somewhat underwhelmed. Unquestionably, a large part of this had to do with impossible expectations. But a portion of my reaction did derive from the album's very matter-of-fact premise; it served up in *vérité* style the recordings of a performance that took place in Coney Island NY on June 8th 1986 under the banner "Sideshow by the Seashore."

Now a cynical person might absorb the meeting of these two practitioners of very distinct avant-garde traditions in such a seemingly lowbrow locale as little more than a carnival-esque gimmick, perhaps even conjuring visions of some old-school cigar-chomping wrestling promoter braying over the innovation of the tag-team match: "Don't ya' see, we deliver four stars for the price of two! We'll pack 'em to the rafters!"

Such a skeptical view is inappropriate in this case however, mainly because Cage and Ra were both disinterested in playing a role in any sort of stuffy, highfalutin, academic-minded scenario. If the pair were accurately assessed as eccentric outsiders, they were each ultimately closer to the rumblings of a restless proletariat than any elite high-art standard.

To elaborate, Ra and his Arkestra were free jazz extenders of the classic big-band conception as exemplified by Fletcher Henderson and of course Duke Ellington, the troop's shows justifiably legendary for their marriage of exploratory music and engaging theatricality.

Additionally, Cage was a lifelong rule breaker and experimenter, exuding a denim-clad earthiness in later years (and it's enlightening to note that Woody Guthrie was amongst the fans of his work), continuing to confound expectations even as his earlier breakthroughs were slowly accepted into the Classical tradition.

It's true that a large segment of the population (then and now) would quickly dismiss the work of both participants as nothing more than Weirdo Music. But instead of getting all huffy about it they just shouldered those kneejerk reactions like misunderstood but munificent kings, going so far as to undertake their one and only shared performance in a building adorned by posters advertising Snakeology, Asian Flesh-Eating Fish, and a Mermaid Parade. Yeah, I'd really like to see that last one, too.

And frankly, I would've much rather caught a live performance from Ra or Cage in an amusement park or fairgrounds than in some antiseptic concert hall stuffed full of tuxedos and gowns. Recordings might be the main route to appreciation of the Arkestra in the here and now, but as stated, a big part of their bread was buttered through festivals, club gigs, and ground-level touring. Subsequently, if you didn't bring the goods the crowd would let you know, and you certainly wouldn't be asked back.

Cage is often lauded for his early prepared piano sonatas (in the words of Guthrie: "not only did I feel that this sort of piano music was really a keen fresh breeze, but a welcome thing in the way of a healthy change from the old ways you hear the average piano played.") and his I Ching-inspired chance-based compositions, but a large portion of his oeuvre was also devoted to music for dance, surely a performance medium if ever one was. And Modern Dance might be thought of presently as a rather lofty pursuit, but in the middle of last century it was very much the expression of artistically-inclined strugglers looking for a new way to interpret their relationship to the world.

These intrinsic links to performance are really the main factor in *John Cage Meets Sun Ra's* modest level of success. While the Coney Island milieu does add an atmosphere of the unusual, the major reason for the event was to corral two men who had essentially transcended the limitations of their designated disciplines, specifically "new music" for Cage and "free jazz" for Ra. And the reality is that the two schools rarely intersected during their heyday; in fact, there was occasionally even a little friction between the camps.

A group named Meltdown Performing Arts, Inc., the artistic directors being Bronwyn Rucker and Rick Russo, decided to host the collaboration of these two distinct yet flexible figures, and if the results were absolutely worthy of preservation, they were also almost entirely directed to the needs of the moment. Or to put another way; to get the full effect, you really had to be there.



JOHN CAGE MEETS SUN RA
UNEDITED SEGMENTS OF
THE HISTORIC CONCERT
 June 8, 1986 Sideshow By The Seashore Coney Island, NY

Concert and Album produced by Meltdown Performing Arts, Inc.
 BRONWYN RUCKER & RICK RUSSO, Artists Directors

Concert presented in cooperation with Coney Island USA, Inc.
 Concert Recording Engineers: Bob Goldberg and Tom Taylor
 Album mastered by Fred Vargas, Varese Recording Studio, NY
 Photography: Marlene Beronius (front), Thomas Hunter (back)
 Jacket by Marc Kahan and Thomas Alper (back)

Guest Artists: Howard Frankel, Coney Island of the Beach, Robert Rouse of the Republic, etc. etc.

MELTDOWN RECORDS is a program of MELTDOWN PERFORMING ARTS, INC.
 © 1987 Meltdown Performing Arts, Inc. Executive Producer: Rick Russo

Coney Island is a cornucopia of a beach, a garish amusement park and weathered boardwalk, up against the ocean at the end of New York City subway lines. "Hurry, hurry, get your tickets—John Cage meets Sun Ra, live, music," the indicators by the beachside barker bellowed, attracting the casual passerby. More than 250 people gathered for Meltdown Records' benefit to love, but if it came less for the sound and self-reliance of their specialty in one two famous leaders, thinkers about sound get together, even though the collaboration was promoted.

If Ra and Cage had previously shared time and space only in the mixed collections of creative composer and arrangers like Meltdown's Rick Russo and Bronwyn Rucker, their ideas long ago intersected to form that dimension where "new music" and "new garage rock" exist as one, beyond genre. Like source before space ship, command and launch from different planets, Cage and Ra carry their own traditions and hold to their own convictions, but they've approached a common musical terrain, and launched it. Thus, Cage pursues the open-air jazz state, while Ra is well versed as a heretofore dropout. Can openness to the world as it is and without attempt to mold it, or at the least, you otherwise find to describe life in parallel universes, leading each other from afar.

Photos of old Coney Island live one of the latest that's "Sideshow By The Seashore," one more gathering (Seaside), the Adam Fink Eating Fish, a Midger Garden, and a Memorial Parade being from the stage. People waiting on holding chairs, munched popcorn, while a few kids barked Meltdown bellow. Russo brought a drum for vintage, and a bare-chested black man with a flame-glyphic-marked forehead, towel wrapped around his middle, walked onto the stage, draped stage holding a bowl of smoking perfume in one palm, an ash in his other, his right behind him was Marshall Allen. Ra's longtime accompanying keyboardist, he found an obscure black metal wind synthesizer to his lips and blew a word electronic texture through it. Then came Ra, a purple haze with silver hair

shines, a star-studded-dish cap on his head so that only a fringe of orange-dyed hair peeked out over his eyes, a full of newly trimmed orange beard decorated his second chin. And with him, Cage as usual, in faded blue jeans and grey jacket over a blue denim work-shirt. Cage sat at a table behind a microphone, while Ra began to play with his Yamaha DX7.
 "Impassioned, but frequently depressed, not on the work you have to do, the composition you're playing, that depends more on your taste and memory, and your likes and dislikes," Cage is quoted by Don Ihara in a Contemporary Artist's interview from 1981. "It doesn't lead you into a new experience, but into something with which you're already familiar..." Sun Ra is a hermit, not a well-known, but a brilliant composer, his social skills seemed an artifice in rhetoric, and his music developed in any form of the 1950s, and he appeared to glimpse to discover what he'd brought with such Chicagoan indifference as Cage to experience to life, Chasin, Ra, the ornamental, dense influence, and to come complexity. With his Duck-and-Thomas (and, I'd-behind those in "disappear from you" as an artist and let work spring forth unbidden as a musician, Cage questions the very foundation of jazz, which equates some form of music, psychologically urgent needs to freely express themselves only an individual participants of anarchically democratic, rough and ready exorcism. Of course, Ra is beyond such needs, as he apparently is beyond memory or taste. He acts as free as any god. With his attention given, primarily over his shoulder, he conveyed elemental sounds for a few minutes. Cage looked on, unmoved if impressed, and when Ra chose to stop, Cage groaned and applauded like everyone else.

Cage read without any ritual more elaborate than putting on his glasses. His witness may have been a moment, his discovery of which he's told Ogunyuan Shan Hachuan, "but it's not with any meaning or quality except for occasional acts of all kinds." Whatever writings he derived from the "frequency and frequency" of Ra's digital things had a meaning effect. Perhaps he was another an-

plished, but he low volume and long pauses between syllables quieted the crowd, drew them to consideration of the ambient sounds—the steady whoosh of air from a circulating fan, the subsequent interpolation of a tooth-bite, laughs or fragments of conversation from the boardwalk nearby, melodic strivings from the folding chairs—probably in keeping with his intentions. He regarded Cage with respectful attention. There was some applause when Cage stopped, then Ra played again.
 "During Cage's next time, he played throughout of his self-published pamphlets to select some poems. Accompanying himself with one hand on the keyboard, Ra wailed of nuclear fallout and encouraged humans to create an alternate future, one no longer based on the past. The obvious variation on Cage's performance from section to section was in the duration of his pauses. While sounds faded he was he considering the "Sun Ra" "where?" "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 dazed smile; his eyes were filled with deep wrinkles. He's always been beautiful, since the mid-'60s, his smiling concert sites with his colorfully striped fringe, dancing his habits with an impetuous wave of his hand. I've seen him twinkle the tough jazz club at the end of a busy party village, watched him lead some of the bands of Chicagoans in chanting "We are the children of the Sun," inquired times of his eyes at the Egyptian pyramids. These happenings weren't followed by Cage's Black Mountain performance set, any more than Ra's indifference to work profited musical craftsmanship and perfection for the unadorned physical gesture, such as Cage's simple, unadorned, and unadorned presence in the West-ern classical tradition. He accepts "mistake" because they don't impede the momentum of truthful expression, that the calculating it slippy at check of his memory (Richard Howard's big hand), indeed, they're technical. Ra's unassuming, quasi-ritual programmatic derives from his experience—single, solo sites in a low-cost Chicago night club, but deeply contained spectacle. Ra's behavior

part of his message of transcendence.
 Whether Cage's theatricality meant as a distraction, whether he wanted a series of ritual maneuvers dedicated to Thomas with the use of a jet plane passing overhead, or inducing someone to reading random words in a moment, or instilling musicians to keep going full 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 audience about some 20 years ago. To engage the challenging forms of "artistic" music, Cage followed Satie, Crumb, and Schoenberg in their reorganization of sound. For both Cage and Ra, the sending aspect of musical creation isn't the unknown, the uncharted—what's threatening to humans on earth is how narrow a slice of his and thought-oriented wisdom and artistic creation.
 The real end of Sideshow By The Seashore was not back to let some sunlight in, while all, this time, "I'm using 'Intelligence,' one of Sun Ra's more familiar anthems. "Heard, my attention, I do invite you, enter our space world." Along with the walk-man and a chrysalis-skulled, well-matched young man, the three bent into some body-shifting dance moves. Then Ra rose to cross the small stage and center with Cage. Cage nodded approvingly and again mouthed his stretched-out words. Ra grins, sporadically added more than words, delicate crystalline notes. There was a silence, or next silence, during which Ra and John Cage could be no answer. Everyone waited, situated to the next show. The next word? Then Cage and Ra relaxed their attention, the collaboration was done. Applause was prolonged, because we all realized we'd been listening to what's really in the air, not the odd music of our time, but the reality of sound's possibility.
 Fans remained 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.

It's not like Meltdown Records can be accused of making false promises, for the back cover of the release plainly states "unedited segments of the historic concert." That's exactly what the listener gets, two untitled side-long pieces, each a little over twenty-one minutes in length. It's Ra that fares best on the LP, even as he willingly steps outside of the jazz realm for which he's best known. His sound is far from unfamiliar though, utilizing the Yamaha DX7 keyboard for swirling celestial outbursts befitting of a being who claimed to hail from far-off Saturn.

After a wicked little mouth-synth fanfare from Arkestra-member Marshall Allen, this is the sound that begins the record, Ra engaging in roughly seven minutes of loose improvising, the results coming off far more like snippets from the soundtrack to an ultra-low-budget '50's sci-fi film than anything pulled from a recognizably jazz-like place, though the proceedings do start getting nicely wild at around the five minute mark.

Appreciative applause signals the end of Ra's opening section, which is followed immediately by Cage. He stays much closer to his late-career specialty, performing vocal work that draws from his text *Empty Words*. Derived from Thoreau's *Journals*, Part I of the book avoids sentences, Part II phrases, Part III words, and Part IV syllables, with only letters and sounds remaining. On this evening Cage read excerpts from Part IV.

The sounds that follow for around ten minutes shape up as an intriguing listen, consisting only of relaxed enunciations interspersed with long intervals of quiet. Intriguing but only partially successful on record, as this segment of the event really seems to necessitate a complete immersion into the performance environment to achieve its full effect. Others may obviously disagree, and in fact all four segments of *Early Works* were released in a 2LP set in '87.

Cage remains notorious for his piece "4'33'", which many mistake as nothing but silence (and by extension, as a provocation). It's really meant to be the sounds of the environment experienced during a performance. This is a major element in this section of the album, and the album's liner notes by Howard Mandel describe the audience engaging with the sound of a spinning fan, short interjections from a boom-box, and voices from the boardwalk outside and even the movement of the attendee's folding chairs.

Sadly, almost none of this comes through on the LP, barely audible even at extremely high volume. What transpires instead is the environment of the room the record is being heard in, which, depending on the circumstances of course, could very likely bring a sense of deep familiarity with everyday surroundings. This might blow your mind, but it's just as liable to not. As part of the documentation of a one-time only concert shindig, it is pretty cool, but it's also a far cry from sitting in that building and soaking it all up firsthand.

Side one finds Ra back at the Yamaha for a short spell, and he's carried over briefly on the beginning of the flip. The sci-fi vibe is even deeper this time out, conjuring the sounds of launching rocket ships that are quite possibly taking off for the planet Venus. Hearty applause again follows, and maybe it's that little kid in me, but I can't help but be warmed by the sound of Cage clapping along in appreciation.

As Cage takes his second turn, his readings come at a much closer interval and are given subtle but welcome accompaniment from Ra. In no way do they enter into a mind-meld, but it is very clear that each participant is open to other's aesthetic, and this realization is one of the album's best attributes. The long stretch of quiet that comes after this segment is actually pretty striking, mainly for the intense level of devoted attention that's paid to these two irreplaceable musicians on the part of the audience, and not out of politeness but from a sincere interest in their singular forms of expression.

The rest of side two provides a wealth of that space-bound Yamaha, the progression getting quite heated at times, particularly in the last two minutes. And it's great to read that afterwards the performers and audience mingled, noshing on pizza and a choice of beer, wine, soda pop, or juice.

But a little disappointing is the fact that June Tyson, who danced and sang "Enlightenment" during the show, is absent from the recording. More Marshall Allen would've been welcome, as well. But no matter; *John Cage Meets Sun Ra* is a raw document of a very momentous occasion, and the fact that only a portion of the event's specialness could be encompassed by two circular grooves is less a fault than an unavoidable consequence.