

## RECORDS

*john cage  
meets sun ra*

Lao-Tse meets Confucius, Voltaire meets Rousseau, Ali meets Frazier. Every now and then, the paths of giants cross, and the earth trembles a bit. On June 8, 1966, the sands were shaking at Coney Island, New York, when Sun Ra and John Cage shared the stage. For followers of alternative music, this was history in the making. Both men have cast long shadows across the avant-garde terrain, Ra taking jazz as his starting point, and Cage stemming more from the classical tradition. On philosophical as well as musical levels, each has had an enormous impact on new music. Yet they had never met, and to their followers the possibilities of their encounter were tantalizing.

Their meeting is recorded without editing on this release, the first for the avant-garde Melt-down label. In a sense, you'll find no surprises here, but of course that is a surprise in itself. On the other hand, since Cage's and Ra's work is based on the unexpected, the fact that their performances are unpredictable is also predictable. Clearly, I could dribble on for several pages in this vein, so let's skip ahead to the music itself.

Ra and Cage enter the Side-shows By The Seashore concert space to a buzzing fanfare that is either played on some electronic gadget or sung by a jumpy mosquito through a very sensitive sound system. What follows is a series of solo improvisations by Ra on Yamaha DX7, interspersed by unaccompanied moanings and long silences from Cage. Both performances are remarkable. Ra pushes the synth through all kinds of programs, conventional as well as bizarre, and works brilliantly with the idiomatic suggestions of each one. A stringish patch toward the end of side one, for

example, yields some relatively consonant lines, while siren sounds a few moments later shriek and plummet into a nightmare of crackling fire effects and whirling tornado roars. The show ends on side two with a throbbing oscillation that rises like a Hellicopter, bobs and weaves, and then theatrically stops. In this performance, as in his many ensemble recordings, Ra proves his mastery of the traditional contours of tension and release in music, though translated to the vocabulary of the avant-garde.

Cage's mumbled recitatives are equally characteristic of his views: obscure, more space than substance, playful, and quite maddening to those who choose not to follow his muse. The whoops and hollers that follow from the audience seem almost hysterically incongruous; a single fan bellowing "rock and roll!" would likely have brought down the house. But then, at one point, and one point only, Ra steps in and creates an accompaniment to Cage. His quick understanding of Cage's presentation really is a surprise. Without a hint of his usual bravado, Ra summons a few small bell-like tones as echoes to his colleague's strangled cries, perfectly illuminating Cage's exploration of sound in space with a few delicate space sounds. It is a brief, but magical, episode. We'll be looking forward to more from both men, and from the label that had the foresight to capture their moment together on vinyl. Melt-down (130 W. 42nd St., #551, New York, NY 10036), MPA-1. —BD

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