

## A rare insider's account reveals the inner workings of Sun Ra's Arkestra

By Matthew Blackwell

### *A Strange Celestial Road: My Time In The Sun Ra Arkestra*

Ahmed Abdullah with Louis Reyes Rivera

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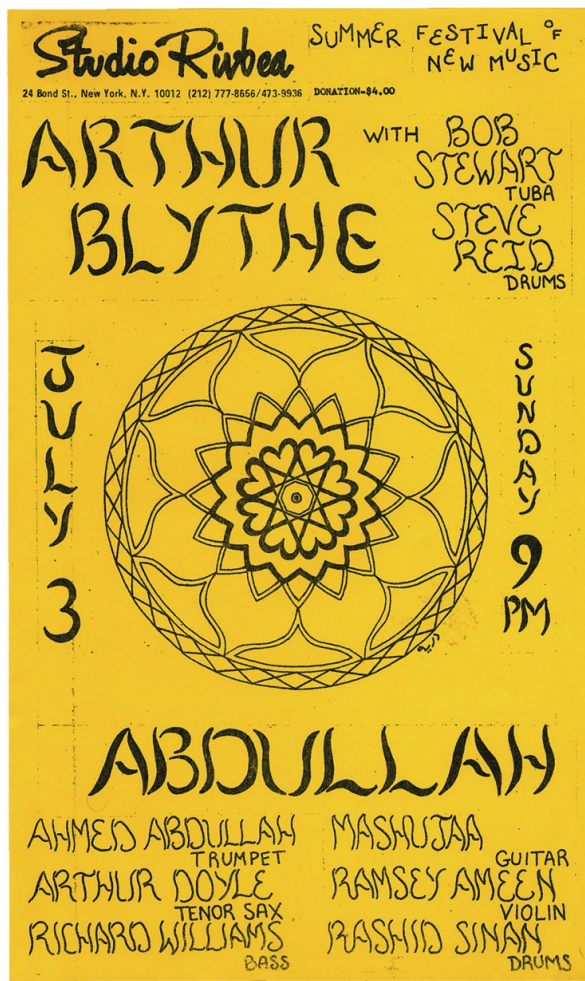
Ahmed Abdullah's time in The Sun Ra Arkestra began with an unexpected phone call. Ra himself was on the other end, summoning Abdullah from New York to Philadelphia to rehearse with the band. Such was Ra's reputation in 1975 that Abdullah immediately acquiesced, leaving his pregnant partner at home for the 90 mile journey and the eight-hour session. This opening anecdote to *A Strange Celestial Road*, Abdullah's memoir of his life in The Arkestra, introduces the fundamental tension of his 20 years with the group. The intense dedication that The Arkestra required pulled at, and sometimes snapped, private ties.

Abdullah played trumpet for Ra on and off until the latter's death in 1993. His account of these years provides a useful counterpart to the standard biography of Sun Ra by John Szwed. Anecdotes about Ra's whims abound: it would sometimes take him an hour or more to assign hotel rooms to each of The Arkestra's members based on the "vibrations" therein. He was particularly controlling with regard to drugs and sex, leading his band members to sneak behind his back like teenagers. For all this, the respect that Abdullah has for Ra is absolute, as a mentor and as an African-American who determined his own path through the fiercely racist postwar US. The difficulty of leading a band of that size and calibre across four decades is staggering, and made even more apparent by the disappointing intra-band conflict that Abdullah recounts after Ra's passing.

Though the main interest of *A Strange Celestial Road* is in Abdullah's insights into Ra as a bandleader and a person, his account of the broader network of musicians and institutions in which The Arkestra operated is essential. His diary must have been immaculately kept throughout these decades and carefully consulted while writing, for the exact dates, locations, and line-ups of dozens of concerts are given in detail – at times slow reading for the merely curious, but a goldmine for jazz fans, scholars and historians. Of particular importance is the loft movement centred around New York in the mid- to late 1970s. Abdullah's portrayal of organisers like Sam Rivers of Studio Rivbea provides overdue attention to a scene that is sometimes neglected in histories of the genre.

Abdullah's own story is a chaotic one, derailed again and again by drug abuse and womanising. His lowest point came in a jail cell after a disturbing incident of domestic abuse. Opening a copy of *Time* magazine to find an article on Wynton Marsalis, poster child for everything wrong with jazz in the 80s, Abdullah saw the gulf between his position and his potential. He worked to redeem himself through a combination of literature written by women, personal therapy and Buddhist practice. Working as a cab driver on the side, Abdullah slowly made a reputation as a bandleader himself in The Group, The Solomonic Unit and Diaspora. Returning to The Arkestra in 1988, he played a prominent role as Ra's health failed and as leadership was passed from John Gilmore to Marshall Allen in the mid-90s.

As dozens of musicians passed through The Arkestra, it's surprising that Abdullah's is the first full-length memoir recounting a musician's time with the group. The sprawling scale of Sun Ra's band in size, duration and influence means that any single account can only be partial, but *A Strange Celestial Road* is the more valuable for this as a rare personal glimpse into the life of one of the 20th century's most monumental and imposing figures. ○



Poster advertising performances by Arthur Blythe and Abdullah at the Summer Festival of New Music, Studio Rivbea, July 3, 1977, designed by Dorrie Ameen.