

Despite this viewer's familiarity with Sun Ra, *Space is the Place* re-injects strangeness into his work and persona. The peculiar sounds that swirl in his music, from adventurous saxophone squeals to electronic bleeps, find visual analogues in this film. From the elemental forces that Ra releases with the club piano to the laser-eyed ship that carries his crew, the special effects render this project more fanciful than the usual jazz movie. Like his music, not even the set design remains in the background, as a colorful jungle, an arid plane, and flashy futuristic arenas pop on and off the screen. Meanwhile, the messianic plot and literally explosive conclusion promulgate Ra's status as a figure both on the cultural fringe and, to some listeners, musically on the friz.

Yet the film also supports his legitimacy. Most of his music seems untamed, but his boogie-woogie-playing in the club hints at his roots in the popular jazz tradition of arrangers like Fletcher Henderson. The rough, documentary-like cinematography boosts the film's sheen of realism. Institutional factors add to this "authenticity." The media's presence at his cosmic landing implies the validity of that event. When the cop figures wire his phone, kidnap him for interrogation, and shoot at him onstage, the weight of Ra's contributions becomes clear. Granted, the quasi-devil's interest in his fate tips the scales toward fantasy. Nonetheless, when someone plasters Ra's poster on the concert building, he rises to the ranks of the black icons whose images drape the walls of the youth center. Some might say he ascends a little too high, what with the intergalactic allusions that buttress his reflections. The film does reveal their metaphorical nature, though. When Ra asserts that blacks "don't exist in society," he equates his sartorially, philosophically, and sonically alien nature to the alienation of his race. Conversely, his indulgence in Egyptian culture elevates marginalized blacks by celebrating their glorious past. With such a grounding in history and contemporary issues, Sun Ra's spacey musings and music help spark awareness—and perhaps sociopolitical action—in his earthly brethren.