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The Cosmobiography Of Sun Ra: The Sound Of Joy Is Enlightening



Synopsis

Caldecott Medalist Chris Raschka shares his love of jazz great Sun Ra, just in time to mark the centennial of the musician's birth. Jazz musician Sun Ra (1914–1993) always said that he came from Saturn. Being from another planet, he was naturally intrigued by everything earthly – especially music, because music is the one thing on Earth most like the stars. Earthlings themselves confused Sun Ra, the way they sorted themselves by color and fought wars against one another. So he made music. And he traveled with other musicians and singers, calling themselves the Sun Ra Arkestra, playing, singing, and dancing for people all over the planet. Because music, he said, is what holds us all together. Join acclaimed author-illustrator Chris Raschka in celebrating a legend of the jazz world who was truly one of a kind.

Book Information

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Age Range: 6 - 9 years

Grade Level: 1 - 4

Customer Reviews

Gr 3–6 • Raschka's proven ability to convey in words and images the musical essence of composers or traditions as diverse as Sergei Prokofiev, John Coltrane, and Shaker hymnody now extends to the avant-garde jazz of Herman "Sonny" Blount. Carefully selected details respect subject and audience: "Sun Ra always said that he came from Saturn. Now, you and I know that this is silly. And yet. If he did it would explain so much. Let's say he did." Readers learn that this "intergalactic boulevardier" was born in Birmingham, had an

early aptitude for music, and enjoyed reading about philosophy. They discover his views on race and war, meet the "Arkestra," and follow his global footprints. It is the art, however, that transmits the showman's spirit and eclectic sound that featured big band elements, synthesizers, improvisation, and percussion. Raschka pulls out all the stops in what may be his finest work yet. Strong, black outlines define richly layered, multi-hued watercolors. The artist captures both the focused intensity of a composer's face in an intimate close-up and the verve of a musician playing through celestial cityscapes. Wet and dry brush strokes create a lively but fluid dynamic, while stars and motion lines electrify. Musical composition paper is cleverly integrated into particular page designs, including the cover, in which the musician, arrayed in his dazzling robe, is one with the staff and hand-lettered title. Endpapers display album titles; a selected discography is available. Pull up a YouTube recording, and enchant a new generation with this ode to transcendental joy.

—Wendy Lukehart, District of Columbia Public Library

Raschka has given us *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop* (1992), *Mysterious Thelonious* (1997), and *John Coltrane's Giant Steps* (2002)—so why not *Ra*, whose sci-fi tendencies might be especially interesting to kids? Perhaps not musically interesting to kids (the audience for such books is debatable), but certainly biographically. Raschka's chief metaphor is a rich one: Sun Ra (born Herman P. Blount) fancied himself as Saturn born, and thus his quizzical questioning of the world is depicted extraterrestrially. "The earthlings insisted on sorting themselves into two varieties: the white variety and the black variety." Ra had a working band before he was out of high school, but being from Saturn, he did nothing the usual way: he barely slept, made his own space-age clothing, and was an early adopter of musical electronics. The art here is less interstellar than you would think; Raschka's trademark blotches excel at gritty cityscapes even while *Ra*'s own personal style is harder to discern. As a biography, this is a bit clouded. As an experience, though, it definitely swings. **HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY:** Everyone has an eye on Caldecott medal winner Raschka. **OUTRAGE:** subject notwithstanding, there will be plenty of interest. Grades 1-3. --Daniel Kraus

What a great book. I remember hearing a children's book about Sun Ra was being written. I was very curious to see how that would be done. I can tell you it was done well. I don't have any kids but this book is great. The illustrations are bursting with colors and ideas, and Sun Ra's story is perfect for kids. I have found him very inspiring in my life. I would think a lot of his ideas would be great to teach to children.

This is a wonderful 'childrens book'! It has the playfulness and color that really described Sun Ra. Buy it for an adult or child or an adult that never grew up. Thurn someone onto Sun Ra or make the day of a fan. Great gift.

This is a great little introductory biography for Sun Ra. I got it for my son, who is just beginning to get into Sun Ra's music. Sure, my son is 22, but you're never too old for a lovely picture book.

Wonderfully written with outstanding illustrations. The book tells about the life and music of Sun Ra on planet earth. It is enlightening and should be required reading in school.

I have lived in Philadelphia long enough to have actually

experienced a live concert by Sun Ra and his Arkestra (actually there were many names for the group of musicians but the word Arkestra was in all of them). That performance as atonal was it was and the costumes worn by the leader and members of the musical aggregation were unlike any I had seen before (or since), and the same can be said for the music. To honor the Centenary of Ra's birth in 1914, children's book illustrator Chris Raschka has not only filled this slim 40-page hardbound children's book summarizing the facts of Ra's life and comparing Ra's feeling that he was from Saturn with being an African American in America before civil rights legislation. The illustrations will appeal to children as

Rashka's work is colorful but they may be confused some of the text. This is a book that a parent probably needs to read to a child and then discuss the issues raised. Both race issues and musical styles are prime for discussion. Of course any adult fan of Ra and his music will probably want this book too to place alongside the many vinyl record albums that Ra recorded always on independent labels since 1956. Ra died in 1993 two days short of his 79th birthday. I hope you found this review both informative and helpful. Steve Ramm

“Anything Phonographic”

Biographies are hard to get right in picture book form. Too often the writing is dry, recounting the facts about a person's life. Not so here! Raschka writes from the premise that musician Sun Ra was 100% correct when he claimed to be from Saturn. After all, writes Raschka, "it would explain so much." What follows is a fascinating tale even if you don't know the first thing about Sun Ra or his

music. Raschka picks interesting details instead of following a straight biographical line of key events, and the book is stronger for it. A great place to start learning about Sun Ra, African-American musicians, or just to enjoy.

Wow, this is great. I'm giving it five stars, the illustrations are superb, the story accurate, thorough and thoughtful. Truly captures the meaning and message of Sun Ra for a young audience. This (and the associated recordings) belongs in every kindergarten class everywhere! The publisher's rating is grades one to four, and that's about right although I think the younger kids would appreciate the story too; it touches on Sonny's pacifism and his attitudes towards race, money, and devotion to art, and these are important concepts that are all too often omitted from elementary education materials. The caricatures of famous band members and contemporaries are delightful, they really carry that Sun Ra sense of balance between the myth and reality, the fantastic and the true. For whatever reason, there are not many ways available to teach children about Sun Ra. At the Toronto concert for the Daniel Spectrum in Regent Park, the Arkestra (under the direction of Marshall Allen) was marched into the hall by a parade of children and many kids sat ring-side at the edge of the stage, captivated by the show -- in many ways, Sonny's concept is a child-like concept, and the kids do get it when it is presented in the right way. Before *Cosmobiography*, the best we had was the VHS edition (*not* the DVD blaxspoitiation edition) of "Space Is The Place" and even in that, the Producers left us with a record that's at best PG13, and that limits the audience to teens and above, so it is refreshing to now have this book for the younger audiences; for the kids caught in between, I'd recommend giving them this book and asking them to read it to the youngsters!

After reading this biography of Sun Ra, I am curious as to the music he wrote and performed . I would love to be able to listen to some of it. The author said his music was often not understood by many people. He was definitely an innovator in the field of music. Some famous musicians like Dizzy Gillespie appreciated his music and encouraged him to continue. The author Chris Raschka is a well known children's author and illustrator. He has won awards for his writing and illustrations.

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