

MUSIC VIDEO MICHAEL SHORE

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□ SUN RA
A JOYFUL NOISE
★★★★½

Rhapsody, 1982, 60 minutes
PRODUCED BY: Robert Mugge
DIRECTED BY: Robert Mugge
MUSIC FROM: 1980 film; various Sun Ra albums.

SELECTIONS: "Astro Black," "Along Came Ra/The Living Myth," "Mister Ra/Mystery," "Discipline 27," "Discipline 27-11," "Calling Planet Earth," "Space Loneliness Blues," "Requiem for Trevor Johnson," "'Round Midnight," "Ankh," "Ancient Egyptian Infinity Lightning Drum," "Rock-Si-Chord Solo," "Organ Solo," "Spaceship Earth (Destination Unknown)," "We Travel the Spaceways."

Sun Ra is a venerable titan of the jazz avant-garde, a bandleader/keyboardist/composer/arranger/philosopher/shaman of considerable talents, accomplishments, and self-determination. The flamboyantly unique Ra has, since the mid-'50s, led a kaleidoscopically eclectic Afro-psychedelic jazz "Arkestra" that pioneered free improvisation and African polyrhythms; Ra was among the very first in any kind of music to use electronic keyboards; and he transduced ancient Egyptian mythology and ahead-of-its-time space-age philosophy into an outlook all his own, dead serious and deadpan-funny at the same time.

According to what Earthly records there are of this mysterious genius, Ra

arrived on this planet in Alabama around 1915, though you'd never know it to see the energy of this roly-poly little old man in performance; Ra himself claims to be an ambassador sent here against his will from outer space by the Creator of what he calls "the Omniverse," and that he was born millennia ago on Saturn. Considering all he's done over the years through thin and thin, as well as the inarguable, innate dignity he projects through his glittery rainbow-hued dime-store-psychedelic garb, I'm not about to argue.

Trying to cover all there is to say about this most flamboyantly unique artist is a daunting task, especially in an hour, but Robert Mugge's *A Joyful Noise* does a darned good job. More personal portrait than actual comprehensive musical documentary, it presents a good range of Ra's many musical moods, from heraldic horn fanfares ("Discipline 27") to funky seriocomic chants and jingles ("Astro Black," "We Travel the Spaceways"), from free-form outbursts and African-inflected tone poems to more traditional fare ("Round Midnight"). There are also revealing interviews with some of Ra's longest-standing sidemen/acolytes, including John Gilmore, another noble and dignified warrior/musician who happens to be right up there with Sonny Rollins among the best tenor saxophonists in all of jazz—though, because he's remained with Ra, few know it. But *A Joyful Noise* is best at showing Ra's whimsical yet stern personality, his playful gifts for phonetic/syntactic/philosophical punning; it shows Ra leading his band in a variety of indoor and outdoor locations, catches Ra rehearsing the band for a while, and lets him sermonize outside the White House and, most felicitously, in the Egyptian Antiquities wing of a museum in Philadelphia (where Ra has resided since the early '70s). "They say history repeats itself," says Ra in his beguiling cat's-purr of a drawl, "but that's *his* story, not *my* story. My story is endless. *My* story is more a *mystery*." Indeed. What a guy. What a movie.