

to risk their whole lives, the whole structure of their lives." Elsewhere she writes that her one true love was nature.

The revelation that Hemingway was no good in the sack has been gleefully quoted by several reviewers. But to me, what is more of interest here is that Gellhorn pursued him to Spain the way she would pursue a story, managing, once she arrived, to look sexy during the bombing and artillery fire. But writing—not sex—was clearly the main connective tissue between the two. Gellhorn became less enamored of Hemingway's penchant for drinking and reading aloud pieces of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and she spent less time in Cuba over the next several years. Her domestic life with Hemingway was an entr'acte to a play about war in which she had the leading role.

Yet as even a nice Midwestern girl should know, when you are married to a legend, you cannot be the lead. In 1944, going behind Gellhorn's back, Hemingway landed his own deal to cover the war with *Collier's*—the magazine she wrote for. Shortly after that, they divorced.

Still, it's a mistake to assume that with Gellhorn everything was work or acrimony. "I the undersigned guaranty also that after marriage I will not leave my present and future husband not for nothing," she playfully wrote to her first husband, whom she also called "Mr. Warp Dimpy Gellhorn Bongie Hemmy," in 1940. More than a decade later, Gellhorn married a second time—for companionship, not love, she claimed. Husband number two was Tom Matthews, the former editor of *Time*. He and Gellhorn lived together in London, and things seemed fine until she discovered that he had been cheating on her, at which point she became outraged. But the outrage seems like an ornament to the ambivalence she felt toward domestic life. "I was not feeling at all predisposed to marriage," she had written shortly after marrying Matthews.

One person Gellhorn did fall in love with was David Gurewitsch, a doctor and companion of Eleanor Roosevelt. But her most successful romance was the one she began in the 1960s with Laurence Rockefeller,

brother of David and Nelson, whom she trusted with a few times a year in hotels in New York. Besides these diversions, what Gellhorn seemed to like most was, as she often puts it, quoting François Mauriac's maxim, "*travail, opium unique*." But she never lied about the cost of that opium—especially for women, and especially as she got older. "You have to stop living in order to write," she writes. And, "'Freedom' is the most expensive possession there is; it has to be paid for with loneliness."

The letters reveal Gellhorn to be a shrewd observer of how times change. "I am practically an original liberated woman," she wrote in 1977, at the age of sixty-nine. At their best, the letters, which have a lot to say about women and men, and a lot to say about Gellhorn and men, are amusing, wise, and sometimes heartbreaking by turns. "Men, they seem to me on the whole confused and feckless creatures," she wrote, "who are necessary, for a variety of reasons, but who are certainly not reliable."

Bad, sad, mad, glad Martha roamed from one country to another, watching the

world destroy itself. She never had a great bedside manner, and even less so in her old age. As Leonard Bernstein, whom she had known for decades, was dying of cancer, she scolded him for being a wimp.

She experienced a queenly comeback in the 1970s. (The second act.) Her letters continue to be full of sly wit about writing and life. To Bill Buford, who was publishing some of her essays in *Granta*, she wrote: "They [publishers] promise a girl the sun and the moon, feed her caviar and champagne . . . until she signs on the dotted line. After which they are out to lunch."

She preferred the company of journalists to literary people and outrage to nuance, the way some people prefer scotch to Campari. Was she an opportunist? She often sounds like another tough-talking dame of the era, Katharine Hepburn, whom she much admired. "I've gotta move or fall on my sword." □

Rachel Shteir is a Chicago-based writer and the author, most recently, of *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (Oxford University Press, 2004). She is currently at work on a book about kleptomania.

JESUS' SUN

BEN RATLIFF

THE WISDOM OF SUN RA: SUN RA'S POLEMICAL BROADSHEETS AND STREETCORNER LEAFLETS

COMPILED AND INTRODUCED BY JOHN CORBETT

CHICAGO: WHITEWALLS. DISTRIBUTED BY UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS. 144 PAGES. \$20.

Most artists want their work to be understood. In retrospect, it seems that the jazz bandleader Sun Ra, born Herman Blount, wanted not so much to be understood as to be needed. He seemed to have a Messiah complex, perhaps from being a smart young man in a miserable place and time: Birmingham, Alabama, in the 1920s and early '30s. He didn't think much of other human beings, and he eventually wrote himself into a fantasy of being teleported to Earth by Saturnians. He stuck to the letter of that story, never giving the game away.

How could you not want to know more? How could you resist buying a ticket to see a hard-shell isolationist who also believed in the full sensual experience of prewar black-variety-show entertainment? Consummate showman that he was, Ra remained one step ahead of you. "I'm not no human," he often said to interviewers. It always seemed he might be leaving himself an out in that double negative.

The swarm of possible meanings surrounding the Egyptian pyramids: This was what Sun Ra wanted for himself. He preferred to be identified not as a pianist, bandleader, arranger, or composer—his early heroes Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, and Fletcher Henderson prided themselves on such terms—but, rather, as "Cultural Minister of the Omniverse." His baseline training was in blues and swing; he mostly leapfrogged over bebop into the avant-garde jazz of the early '60s. But through his orchestra, he busied himself with a ludic, shocking, shifting, dislocating music that couldn't be associated entirely with any of those styles. He wanted to lead people toward multiplicity, away from the sort of restrictive slotting that defined him in his

early years as black, poor, bookish.

His audiences—especially after the introduction of LSD to college campuses—loved him for the fun and games, for the grooves of his drummers, for his saxophone players, and perhaps above all for his bravery; they didn't particularly care where each part of his Sun Ra-ness derived from, whether it was Ellington, Ouspensky, Blavatsky, Gurdjieff, or a book like George G. M. James's *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, but the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians*. (Thanks to Ra's biographer, John F. Szwed, we know what he read in the early years.)

The music is one thing, but the stuff around the music—philosophy, history, esoterica, bullshit—is another. Ra's elaborate outer-space mythology really started in the late 1950s, after the Soviets launched Sputnik. But in the early and mid-'50s, when he was a recent arrival to Chicago, Ra's obsessions were with Egypt, the Ethiopians, the Negro race, and the Bible. And for a time during that period, he preached his philosophy on Chicago street corners and handed out printed versions of it. Forty-six of these broadsides are reprinted in *The Wisdom of Sun Ra*. Except for the faded typewriter ink and yellowed paper, the reproductions are the preferable way to read them (as opposed to the transcriptions that follow) and quite legible: He often typed in all caps, and he ran a fairly tight game with spelling and grammar.

Ra was not a Black Muslim—as he never would be a doctrinaire anything—but as an urban proselytizer he was surrounded by them, and he borrowed from their literature, just as his literature was borrowed by their spokesmen. His essays

were pointedly written to interest urban blacks, and they were provocatively titled: "The Negro Is a Burden to the White Man!" "The Bible Was Not Written for Negroes!" Or, more truculently, "Wake Up! Wake Up! Wake Up!"

What did he believe? It's hard to boil it down, but there are recurring themes. He apparently believed that Satan and Jesus were one. He believed that Negroes were the children of Satan, as well as the people of the God of Israel. He believed in marginal theories of etymology, such as the one claiming that the word *Negro* comes from the Greek *nekros*, meaning "dead body." He believed that the Bible had been misinterpreted: Earth, he felt, was not the right place to find a savior. He also believed that the Bible was not applicable to black people: It was a guidebook that kept them confused, and this was something that they had better figure out quickly. "WHITE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN TAUGHT THAT IF THE NEGRO EVER FINDS OUT THE MEANING OF THE BIBLE, THE WHITE RACE WILL BE DESTROYED," one piece reads. "HOWEVER, TO THE CONTRARY THE NEGRO RESURRECTED FROM HIS STATE OF IGNORANCE IS THE ONLY MEANS OF SALVATION LEFT FOR AMERICA."

Further, Ra felt black people were utterly complicit in their own misery. Nor were they getting any help from "Negro leaders," whether spiritual or political: He found them "hypocritical." In two of these pieces, he mentions the phrase "the white man's burden," but he writes with full sympathy for white people—as in, when the black man understands that he should not trust the Bible, the white race will be freed of its burden.

Some of this looks shocking. It is also a very effective bid for attention—hard-core street business, the art of playing a mark. Every one of these essays has the right balance of shocking pull quotes and elliptical statements to make you keep reading. There are weird reversals, or, at least, seeming reversals. Not long after you read Ra writing off all of humanity as evil, you come upon something like this: "IT IS TIME FOR NEGROES IN AMERICA TO ABANDON ALL EASTERN RELIGIONS AND CLING TO THE WEST, BECAUSE THE WEST IS THE

GOLDEN KINGDOM OF THE SUNSET AND IT IS HERE THAT YOU CAN LIVE AND BE HAPPY, IF YOU DROP YOUR HYPOCRISY."

Beyond philosophy and history, the book contains much of what Ra called "the mathematics of words." He found the Bible a big word game; he was obsessed with reinterpreting its words and phrases. These were phonetic games, but he was ultimately interested in meanings, not just sounds. So he manipulated words until they drove toward a meaning he liked.

In "Johnny One Note," one of the book's most sustained arias of word-ology, he writes: "JOHNNY ONE NOTE IS 10 . . . THE ONE NOTE IS DO . . . JOHNNY ONE NOTE'S LAST NAME IS DOE . . . HE'S JOHN DOE. . . THAT'S A HELL OF A NOTE, ISN'T IT. . . JOHN PLAYS DOE ALL THE TIME. . . johnny one note is a noted person. HE'S HELL-NOTED . . . HE'S NOTED IN HELL. . . HE'S THE WORD. . . JOHNNY ONE NOTE IS THE WORD OF GOD. . . HE'S THE SON OF GOD . . . HE'S JESUS CHRIST . . . HE'S THE LOGOS . . . HE'S FAMOUS. . . HE IS THE NAME. . . THE NAME IS SHEM . . . JOHNNY ONE NOTE IS SHEM . . . THE ETHIOPS ARE THE DESCENDANTS OF SHEM. . . HE'S 10 . . . 10 is one 0. . . one 0 is zero . . . zero is nothing . . . SHEM is nothing. NEGROES ARE NOTHING."

How does this relate to Sun Ra's music, or to jazz of any era? It doesn't even remotely anticipate the prideful rhetoric of the early-'60s Black Arts movement. There is very little in here about music at all, except for Ra's assertions that the unique properties of jazz prove that the American Negro is irreconcilably different from all other people.

But it's still revealing. After all, underlying what became the sweet, black-hippie circus of Ra's shows was a good deal of paranoia. The message of his most famous number, "Space Is the Place," wasn't, Let's go there, look around, and come back; it was saying, We ought to go there because we don't belong anywhere here. This book is not groovy. It is not asserting that self-expression will free you, or that black people are beautiful, or that jazz is the way to truth. Its message is that the Bible is a dangerous book. □

Ben Ratliff is a jazz and pop critic for the *New York Times*.