

For my friends Sigi + Hartmut

EVENTS

Ben

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Photo by Dr. Anton Kuchelmeister

From left to right: Suso Navarrete, Hartmut Geerken, Ben Franklin, Detlef Thiel, Bernhard Hefe blowing something similar to a tuba, The beret is Malcolm Green.

THE 2003 SUN RA CONFERENCE HERRSCHING, GERMANY

By BENJAMIN FRANKLIN V

For admirers of Sun Ra, Herrsching is the place to be in late May, the time of his earthly death. There, for the past decade, Hartmut Geerken and Sigrig Hauff have hosted an annual conference focusing on the music, writings, and life of Sun Ra. The legacy of the man from Saturn is in good hands.

The conference has an impressive history. The first gathering, in 1994, coincided with the publication of Geerken's *Omniverse Sun Ra* and celebrated the eightieth birthday of the book's subject. Discussion at the fourth focused on Sun Ra recordings listed in the Impulse catalogue but not released. In 1998, poet Robert Lax read his "Sun Ra: Notes and Numbers," with John Gilmore providing musical accompaniment. The next year, Trudy Morse (backed by Geerken playing Sun Ra's own sun harp) read some of Sun Ra's verse. Videos of Sun Ra performances in Venice (1976) and Rome (1988) were fea-

tured in 2000, while the Arkestra's appearances in Berlin (1970) and Paris (1983) were analyzed in 2001. The most unusual conference was that of 2002, which was held in three different places: Herrsching, Amsterdam, and the village of Sanyang in Gambia, West Africa. Discussions in the first two venues concerned John Szwed's book *Space Is the Place* and Sun Ra and women. In Sanyang, local musicians played Sun Ra's music and children sang some of his songs; this music was recorded and distributed to interested parties.

So the 2003 conference built on a significant past, with participants coming from England, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States. Although most of them have attended many of the conferences and know each other well, they welcome newcomers warmly.

The group is cohesive because of the conferees' dedication to everything relating to Sun Ra. This year, during all waking hours, either music was played and discussed, texts were read and examined, videos were watched and analyzed, tales were told and enjoyed, or memorabilia were shared and admired. And while the waking hours were long—from around 8:30AM to approximately 4:00AM, for some—no one's interest or energy waned.

The conference made maximum use of Geerken's Sun Ra collection, which is probably the most comprehensive of all such collections. From among his audio tapes of

approximately 500 unreleased Sun Ra concerts, those from Helsinki (1971) and Portland, Oregon (1978) inspired lively discussion, as did visual images, including Geerken's 8mm film of Sun Ra and some Arkestra members at Egyptian pyramids in 1971. Geerken's collection of original Saturn recordings (he lacks but one, *Pathways to Unknown Worlds*, which might not even have been issued on Saturn, though it was released on Impulse) impressed everybody, as did his complete run of *The Immeasurable Equation* (twenty-five identically titled pamphlets of Sun Ra's poetry), at least one with Sun Ra's handwritten emendations.

Adam Abraham's book *The Immeasurable Equation* (the collected poems of Sun Ra) was to have been discussed but was not because of delayed publication. The availability of Sun Ra items on eBay, "the major auction site on the world wide web," generated much interest, and at least one conference participant related his positive experiences in buying some of them.

Geerken led some of the group in creating music in a manner not unlike that of the Arkestra. Each person selected a stringed instrument from a table. Following Geerken's unspoken lead, for fifteen minutes they joined in a free-form jam session of rhythmic texture. After this performance, the participants listened to a recording of Sun Ra's "Strange Strings," comparing their effort unfavorably to that of the Arkestra in a similar endeavor.

A spirit of camaraderie prevailed. When asked, participants agreed to copy rare printed material about Sun Ra. Some provided conference keepsakes, such as commemorative t-shirts, their own recent essays about Sun Ra, and postcards featuring photographs of the Arkestra and quotations from Sun Ra. Everyone shared, eagerly, as much information as possible in order to increase knowledge about and generate understanding of Sun Ra.

Hartmut Geerken and Sigrig Hauff will host the 2004 conference in Herrsching, although it might also be held elsewhere, as in 2002. Whatever the venue, many of the Sun Ra devotees who participated in the 2003 conference will doubtless attend, sharing their current thoughts about Sun Ra and learning from the research and musings of others. ■