

ARTURO SANDOVAL: FROM HAVANA TO MIAMI



# JazzTimes

FROM  
POP  
TO BOB:  
**BRUCE  
HORNSBY**

**SEAN  
JONES**

**Before &  
After  
DONALD  
BYRD**

**Overdue  
Ovation  
AHMED  
ABDULLAH**

**At Home  
GRAHAM  
HAYNES**



**Nate Chinen  
on Trumpeters  
in Education**

**David R. Adler  
on Jazz in Iraq**

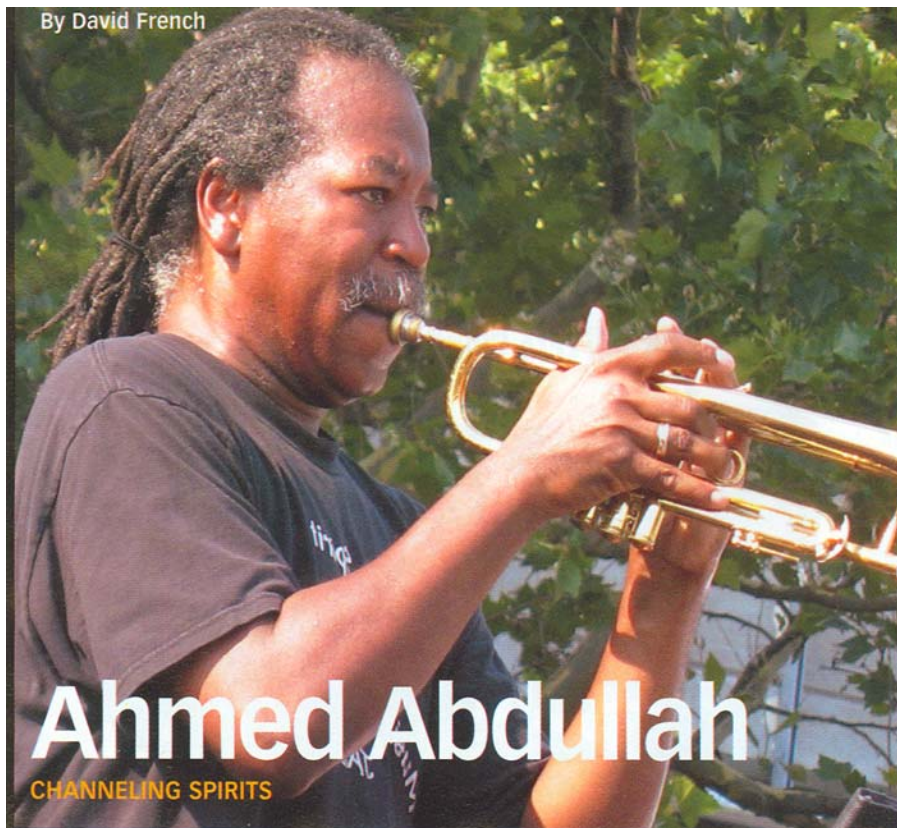
**Nat Hentoff on  
Unsung Scenes**



OCTOBER 2001



By David French



## Ahmed Abdullah

CHANNELING SPIRITS

**T**rumpeter Ahmed Abdullah celebrated his 60th birthday playing at Sista's Place, the cafe, political center and performance space in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant, where he has worked for a decade as musical director and a frequent performer. His 12-piece band, *Diaspora*, included longtime collaborators like violinist Billy Bang and guitarist Masujaa, young powerhouses like tenor saxophonist Salim Washington, and three vocalists: tenor Miles Griffith, poet Louis Reyes Rivera and Abdullah's wife, singer and poet Monique Ngozi Nri. The group swung the packed room into the small hours, revving up classic Sun Ra compositions like "We Travel the Spaceways," "21st Century Suite" and "Enlightenment."

Abdullah, a big-toned trumpeter whose growling, exclamatory solos can suggest both Louis Armstrong and Don Cherry, has been a part of the New York avant-garde for more than 40 years. As a leader he has always had a distinctive sound, a joyful mix of free jazz over driving grooves with hints of African music and the swing era. But for many he will always be associated with Sun Ra, with whom he worked for close to 20 years. A few weeks after his birthday gig, in another Brooklyn cafe, Abdullah talked about his life, the art form he calls *Music of the Spirit*, and nighttime visitations from a certain celestial pilgrim.

"Sun Ra came to me in a dream," said Abdullah, describing what was actually the second life-altering dream he had involving the master tone scientist. "Clear as a bell, he said, 'Diaspora is an acronym for Dispersions of the Spirit of Ra. Play my music.'" This was around 1998, five years after Sun Ra had left the planet. For Abdullah and *Diaspora*, it was both a duty and a pleasure.

"I love it. His music does something for me that nobody else's music has done. Many writers don't get it. They don't understand the richness of the lyrics. ... [Sun Ra was saying that] we have the

ability to create a spiritual reality through our art that transcends the reality of what we are in. That was his basic message. When he was talking about space travel it was a metaphor."

Abdullah always understood that message. Born and raised in Harlem, where music "was just in the air," he was turned onto jazz by an older sister who collected records. After she died suddenly, when Abdullah was 13, he sought a new reality in music. "I didn't know what to do," he said. "I picked up a trumpet."

He taught himself to play the instrument and eventually found like-minded musicians at Queens College, where he was part of a band called the *Master Brotherhood*. In 1966, he heard Sun Ra's *Arkestra* at the legendary club *Slug's*.

"He wasn't doing anything like anybody else. What we were listening to at that time in New York was hard-core stuff. Music was really flying, cats were really taking chances. And Sun Ra was

there right there at the forefront of it."

As young black musicians in the '60s, Abdullah and his friends, like Sun Ra, saw jazz as inseparable from the context of struggle they were living in.

"We were very understanding of the fact that what was considered the avant-garde was the music that was dealing with the political and social realities of change and that was the music we should be experiencing and learning how to develop. ... [The *Master Brotherhood*] did lots of performances at political rallies, lots of things associated with the nationalist movement. We were very much part of a pan-Africanist, revolutionary movement."

Abdullah immersed himself in the scene, joining the musicians' organization the *Collective Black Artists*, participating in jam sessions at the *Muse* and the *East* in Brooklyn, taking trumpet lessons with Ra trumpeter Chris Capers and later studying theory with trumpeter/composer Cal Massey.

By the early '70s he was playing with saxophonist Charles Brackeen in the *Melodic Artet* in a style "somewhere between Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler." He also formed his own band, *Abdullah*, which at various times included musicians like Bang, Masujaa, David Murray, Arthur Blythe and Oliver Lake. They played in the musician-run lofts of SoHo, and the trumpeter made his recording debut as a leader on the seminal 1976 loft-scene document, *Wildflowers*.

But by then he had also received the call to join the *Arkestra*. "The first gig I played was April 1975. Everything about it was complete wonderment. I just loved it," says the trumpeter.

Abdullah spent the next three years learning from Sun Ra.

"When I joined him, the people I was listening to were basically bebop trumpet players or avant-garde trumpet players. He made me go back to listen to people like Henry 'Red' Allen, which meant

## OPENING CHORUS Overdue Ovation (Cont.)

that I had to relisten to Louis Armstrong. ... Sun Ra would say, 'You think you're avant-garde? You need to listen to Henry 'Red' Allen—that's avant-garde.' He made me conscious of the whole history of the music.

"I learned a ton of music from [Ra], and the more I learned from him the more I knew I needed to learn," he says. After three years, Abdullah cut back to just doing shows in New York and occasional overseas tours so that he could focus on his own music and go into the conservatory program at Kingsborough Community College.

By the mid-'80s he was playing in a cooperative band called the Group with Bang, Marion Brown, Andrew Cyrille and Sirone. That ensemble never recorded, but it attracted enough attention that Abdullah was asked to do two recordings as a leader for the Silkheart label.

Though he'd done other recordings as a leader, 1987's *Liquid Magic* and *Ahmed Abdullah and the Solomonik Quintet* were powerful and distinctive efforts that created a buzz around the trumpeter. However, just as his career as a leader seemed to be taking off, in 1988 Abdullah received his first nighttime communication from Sun Ra.

"I had a dream that he was a major teacher for me and I was supposed to be with him to learn everything that I could," he says. Abdullah went back on the road with Ra for five years, until the icon's death in 1993.

What did he come away with?

"Understanding that music is a spiritual endeavor, that something is required of us as artists, that it's a special calling. It's not just making the gig. ... We are put here to try and change reality in some way. When people come to you after the gig because they are opened up by the music, what is your role then? What do you have to give them? Sun Ra was able to give people something because he had studied all these philosophies ... and because he was really a very, very wise man. I understood that artists are supposed to be doing that."

The time with Ra also led him to Music of the Spirit, a concept of improvised, spiritual music rooted in the African diaspora. "It's the one thing we have been able to bring with us, whether we've gone to Haiti or Jamaica or America or Europe," says the trumpeter. "It's the one thing that we can never be robbed of, the spiritual essence."

Without Sun Ra, the Arkestra began to drift and eventually Abdullah left to lead a number of projects, often with Bang and/or baritone saxophonist Alex Harding, including Nam, and what are now his two primary groups, Ebonic Tones, a small group, and Diaspora. In 2004, Diaspora released a CD of Ra's music on the Planet Arts label. Two other recent collections have included originals and compositions from sources like Miriam Makeba, Ornette Coleman and Brazilian folk songs—as well as Ra.

Abdullah also continues to try to connect the music to real change. He leads a Sun Ra ensemble at the New School, which he hopes will perpetuate the music—and the message—of Sun Ra, but believes his real work is in the black community, bringing Music of the Spirit to Sista's Place and opening young minds to jazz in the public schools.

"I'm teaching at P.S. 3, which is right down the street from Sista's Place, and trying to get young kids into this music, hoping that somewhere down the road they might be able to do something. ... So many people have forgotten what this music is about. It's wonderful what they're doing up at Lincoln Center. But if you don't have music in the communities—where you have people struggling on a daily basis and you're trying to do something to empower those people—then you're missing a certain point. The music needs to be embedded in our communities so it will grow." **JT**