

Let All the Children Boogie:  
Occult Presences through the Musical Performances of Sun Ra, David Bowie, Magma, and Janelle  
Monáe

By

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Let All the Children Boogie: Occult Presences through the Musical Performances of Sun Ra, David Bowie, Magma, and Janelle Monáe

Thesis Directed by Professor Deborah Whitehead

This thesis project is an interdisciplinary study of four popular musicians: Sun Ra, David Bowie, Christian Vander, and Janelle Monáe. These four performing artists work within science fiction and religion through the stories, music, and fantastic personae they create, making space for religious thought and experience. These artists make an occult world present not just through their lyrics, but through their music, their personae, and their bodies, all wrapped up in an “occultural boogie.” This thesis traces a lineage shared between Western esoteric traditions, metaphysical religions, and science fiction, placing the four artists in that same line of “occulture.” This project is also concerned with how each of the four artists make the paranormal present in the world. I chart the material, corporeal, and sonic worlds these artists create for their listeners. By placing these science fiction musicians in both a historical lineage and a physical space, this work demonstrates the religious work science fiction and popular music conducts in individuals’ lives. To understand how people enchant their world, we must look towards popular culture.

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Consider utilizing my Thesis Playlist, either to reference tracks or to have relevant music playing as you read.

It is available at:

<https://open.spotify.com/user/1298779696/playlist/0xvS2ViXuF0z9LYXHTTQjK>

Spotify is free to download and free to use with commercials.

#### Track Listing:

1. Starman from *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars...* David Bowie
2. Along Came Ra from *Paris 1983...* Sun Ra
3. Space Chant (Third Heaven) from *The Soul Vibrations of Man...* Sun Ra
4. The Antique Blacks Suite from *The Antique Blacks...* Sun Ra
5. Space Oddity from *Space Oddity...* David Bowie
6. Moonage Daydream from *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars...* David Bowie
7. Ziggy Stardust from *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars...* David Bowie
8. Ashes to Ashes from *Scary Kids (And Super Creeps)...* David Bowie
9. Blackstar from *Blackstar...* David Bowie
10. Naü Ektila from *Kobaia...* Magma
11. Kobaia Iss De Hüändin from *Mëkanik Destruktiv Kömmandöh...* Magma
12. Hortz Fur Dehn Stekehn West from *Mëkanik Destruktiv Kömmandöh...* Magma
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18. Mushroom and Roses from *The ArchAndroid...* Janelle Monáe
19. Q.U.E.E.N [Feat Erykah Badu] from *The Electric Lady...* Janelle Monáe
20. Yoga from *Wondaland Presents the Eephus...* Janelle Monáe

## 1. Introduction: Pop Stars, Space Invaders, Messiahs

I took my motivating inspiration for this thesis from the moment David Bowie's alien alter-ego appears in the sky and on the radio and announces "let all the children boogie," immortalizing in the minds of the world this extra-terrestrial rock star as a "leper messiah."<sup>1</sup> Thus religion, science fiction, and music were all brought together by one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's biggest celebrities. Following in that vein, this project is a study of four different artists, Sun Ra, David Bowie, Christian Vander, and Janelle Monáe, who intertwine music, science fiction, and religion to create new worlds for their listeners. First chronologically is Sun Ra (1914-1993), a jazz musician and father of the Afrofuturist movement. David Bowie (1947-2016) was a pop-rock singer and actor and creator of the Ziggy Stardust character. Christian Vander (1948-) is a drummer and founder of the band Magma, whose twelve part discography tells the story of the Kobaïans, and is sung entirely in a language constructed by Vander. Janelle Monáe (1985-), the most contemporary artist treated in this project, is a singer, actress, and creator of the character Cindi Mayweather who is also the topic of most of Monáe's solo projects.

Neither religion nor music are ever merely abstract thoughts contained in theories, books, or scores. These four artists demonstrate the practiced aspect of an occult science fiction world view where occultism isn't merely something that exists in their lyrics, but is something enacted by them through their music and through their bodies, which become occult and paranormal as they perform. Each artist fits into the framework of a metaphysical Western esotericism and occultism that reports a gnostic goal. Equally, these artists embody the fantastic beings central to their musical

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<sup>1</sup> David Bowie et al., "Starman" on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, RCA Records, 1972, Spotify. Track 1 of Thesis Playlist.

sci-fi cosmos. This gives their fans a chance to encounter sacred and paranormal beings, occupy sacred sonic spaces, and “boogie” to their music in this space. Music is not just the performed carrier of the message, but is part of the message and central to its effectiveness. For all these artists, music becomes a central aspect of their universes and the way they and their fans interact with their religious worlds.

I have chosen the term “boogie” to capture this subversive message wrapped in “impolite” music. I am indebted to David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust for the theoretical framework of “boogie.” By the time Bowie sang this line, “boogie” was already a nostalgic term for an earlier sort of black jazz style, acting as a more up tempo relative to the blues. It had also become a playful slang term in the 1970s lexicon covering a crop of meanings from “let’s go” to a euphemism for sex. “Boogie” is a fascinating word to me because it carries a pop-subversive quality. It is not the polite high society music of a classical mass setting nor typical of the assumed proper behavior of hierarchical church leadership. Instead it is loud, played on folk instruments, it inspires dancing, and the players don’t come out of a music conservatory. The listeners, likewise, are dressed casually, they do not sit quietly, and their behavior is not reserved, at least in the boogie-ing environment. Boogie belongs simultaneously to individuals, fan communities, even entire cultures. This is equally true of both the music, lives, and philosophies of Sun Ra, David Bowie, Christian Vander, and Janelle Monáe.

This concept of boogie directly correlates with these artists’ positions as religious thinkers. They are not trained and ordained in any religious tradition, whether mainstream or occult. Rather, they are self-taught thinkers, encountering and expanding on occult and science fiction worlds on their own. Boogieing, as a new musical concept, pairs well with the ubiquity of “occulture.” “Occulture” is a term pegged by British scholar of religion Christopher Partridge. It is a fusing of “occult,” evoking the hidden, esoteric, and forbidden; and “culture,” which is necessarily accessible,



exoteric and popular.<sup>2</sup> It is through modern “occulture,” rather than older initiatory sects, that occult and metaphysical thought, belief, and practice reach the public. This stream of Western religion, once the domain of the “lunatic or aristocratic fringe,” enters the mainstream through many popular musicians, especially the four discussed throughout this project.<sup>3</sup> Their corpus of lyrics, liner notes, poetry, interviews, public statements, and tweets reveal a mythology and gospel imbued with gnostic and occult ideals that can be viewed as having a soteriological aim. After doing the work to understand their message and experience their music the characters in their stories, fans, and society as a whole can come out on the other side transformed and perfected.

These artists were so steeped in an accidental occulture that they were not just well versed sci-fi occult theorists, but became, if only briefly, new occult beings. They did not need to join the Theosophical Society or the Ordo Templi Orientis to become occult thinkers. It was already immediately available in the culture. Thus, occulture and boogie pair well together, as they both push at margins but remain approachable and accessible even as they are intended to offend a powerful controlling class who would like to be perceived as more educated and more polite. These artists and their fans enter an occulture that boogies.

Expanding Partridge’s theory of occulture, these four artists carry popular messages of occult potential not only through their lyrics and music, but even their bodies as they move from performers to supernatural beings. Each of these four artists take on the role of heavenly messengers, carrying new myths and philosophies for earth. Sun Ra and David Bowie (as Ziggy Stardust) are both aliens who have come with musical messages for the world. Christian Vander of

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Partridge, "Occulture Is Ordinary" (lecture, First International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism, Stockholm University, Stockholm, August 27, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 244.

Magma serves as a prophet and musical medium of the super humans from the planet Kobaia. Monáe, as Cindi Mayweather, is not from space; her religio-sci-fi persona instead is the fabled ArchAndroid. This is a messiah figure who will free her people from the human oppressors.

Because these four artists work through the occulture, they are necessarily popular musicians and products of their time, even as they also react against aspects of their epoch. This thesis takes as its scope more than forty years of pop music history. The first three artists I consider, Sun Ra, David Bowie, and Magma, were all in their prime riding the waves of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture. Jazz and rock 'n' roll marked a period of wild and uncontrolled countercultural music that was matched by equally raw dancing, or "boogie." Musically, Sun Ra, Bowie, and Magma were very much part of a large community of musical peers making similarly raucous music, music descended from boogie woogie. They were not the polite elite of conservatory classical music. They forged their own paths and their own elitism.

At the same time these artists are counter-cultural musicians, they are also science fiction writers. As Jeffrey Kripal has shown in *Mutants and Mystics*, science fiction and the counter-culture grew up together. A sense of otherness and expectations of super human powers, mixed with explicit and implicit references to occult theories, fueled pulp science fiction stories and superhero comic books as much as it motivated aspects of the hippie movement. As Kripal puts it, "the simple truth is that 'American counterculture' and 'Silver Age superhero renaissance' are more or less (mostly more) the same thing."<sup>4</sup> The same fusing of alternative occult and Eastern religions can be seen both in hippie religious sentiments and in comic books and space opera. These artists also had to contend with a fear of the bomb and a series of unpopular wars. This led to very outspoken peace

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), Kindle, loc 2549.

movements with musicians often serving as their most public mouthpieces. All of these countercultural streams—music, alternative religion, and protests—meet together in Sun Ra, Bowie, and Magma.

Janelle Monáe wasn't born until 1985, however the counterculture can be felt throughout her music, lyrical themes, and her adopted persona. There is a vintage soul and funk quality to her sound evoking a spread of black artists from Billie Holiday to Marvin Gaye to Erykah Badu. Additionally, her persona and the world she builds in her music are modeled after Bowie's Ziggy Stardust era and are deeply indebted to the Afrofuturism of Sun Ra. She represents the same message of musical liberation of the other three artists but in the era of #blacklivesmatter.

My project is deeply invested in tracing the theologies and mythologies created by Sun Ra, Bowie, Vander, and Monáe. As I delve into each individual, I show how their position as musicians and performers moves them past mere authors and thinkers and into the realm of science fiction practitioners and paranormal beings. They live science fiction stories and take on science fiction characters in ways that sci-fi authors like Octavia Butler or Gene Rodenberry do not. They are also different from actors in science fiction movies and television shows. Leonard Nimoy is Spock only as long as he is on camera. He goes home as Leonard Nimoy, and is not an alien. Sun Ra, Bowie, Vander, and Monáe go home and are still paranormal entities layered with their mundane being. Moreover, these beings are clearly related to the messiahs, angels, and prophets of religions past. They have gone beyond science fiction writers and into the realm of paranormal actors.

For each of the artists discussed, music is not only something performed, but is central to their missions and doctrines. Sun Ra's entire cosmos is imbued by vibration, sound, and music. Cindi Mayweather's and Ziggy Stardust's roles as pop stars are wholly connected to their paranormal and messianic roles. Magma delivers their message through *Zeuhl*, or "celestial music." Music is not

only how they invoke the paranormal but is key to understanding their doctrine. For all four of them music is metaphysically, even cosmically, significant. The music, actually performed, not just theorized, marks a meeting point where their metaphysics and their metaphysical teachings meet.

## 2. Religion and Occulture in the Realm of Ideas

### Apocalyptic Seers and Astronauts: A Religion-as-Science Fiction Lit Review

Religion and science fiction is still a nascent and growing field. More and more theorists in religion, media, and popular culture studies are beginning to think about science fiction and comic books as religious in a variety of ways. These include scholars such as James McGrath, Rudy Busto, Laura Ammon, Bruce Sullivan, and Jeffrey Kripal. Building on their work, I argue that Sun Ra, David Bowie, Magma and Janelle Monáe should be included in the religion and sci-fi canon because their work taps into the same streams in which more prominent science fiction authors operate. Building off that sci-fi base, though, they add important innovations by bringing music, performance, and the body into the science fiction world.

James McGrath, editor of the seminal volume *Religion and Science Fiction*, lays much of the groundwork for why science fiction should be imagined as religious. He eloquently places the themes and functions of science fiction in line with more antique religion: “Before the modern era, the heavens were the domain of religion, and stories about humans traveling there feature apocalyptic seers rather than astronauts. We need not look very far in order to encounter a point of intersection, where on the one hand science fiction takes on religious overtones, and where on the other hand religion takes on an aura of science fiction.”<sup>5</sup> He goes on to find obvious parallels between science fiction and the ascension narrative of gnostic apocalypses like the apocryphal *Ethiopian Enoch*.<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Kripal and The Reverend Canon CK Robertson also place science fiction in

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<sup>5</sup> James F. McGrath, "Introduction: Religion and Science Fiction," ed. James F. McGrath, introduction to *Religion and Science Fiction* (Eugene: Pickwick Publisher, 2012), 2.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, 1.

an ancient lineage, seeing parallels between today's sci-fi heroes and the great heroes of past myths. Robertson comments, "Where it was Beowulf, Odysseus, or the Knights of the Round Table....whether it is Spiderman, the X-men, or Iron Man....these are iconic personages that are at once both transcendent and touchable."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, in *Mutants and Mystics*, Kripal sees no difference between the Vedic term "*mahavira*," traditionally translated as "great hero," and the contemporary "superhero."<sup>8</sup> McGrath, Robertson, and Kripal all see a consistent lineage between ancient legendary heroes and our science fiction and superheroes of today.

Sarah Connor's theorizations of religion and science fiction are in line with McGrath, Robertson, and Kripal but she takes a slightly more ahistorical approach: "The impulse behind both religion and speculative literature is the same. Each offers a conception of reality that inclines toward different explanations not just of human behavior but of divine (supernatural) behavior, and each suggests differing ideas about how to respond."<sup>9</sup> For her, both science fiction and religion are about conceiving of reality in relationship to the supernatural, an understanding of religion supported by scholar of religion and popular culture David Chidester. According to Chidester, religion constitutes "discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be a human person both in relation to the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman."<sup>10</sup> In science fiction, including the science fiction discussed in this project, there is a heavy mixing of superhuman characters (aliens, enlightened humans, and an ArchAndroid) with human characters. Sometimes

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<sup>7</sup> C. K. Robertson, "Sorcerers and Supermen: Old Mythologies in New Guises," in *Religion and Science Fiction*, ed. James F. McGrath (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publ., 2012), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, loc 1524

<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Rae Connor, "The Speed of Belief: Religion and Science Fiction, an Introduction to the Implicit Religions of Science Fiction," *Implicit Religion* 17, no. 4 (2014): 370.

<sup>10</sup> David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2010), vii-viii.

one body holds multiple identities, both super and mundanely human. Subhuman characters come into play as well, especially the state of the androids in Monáe's work. In Connor's understanding, bolstered by Chidester, religion and science fiction do the same work. Likewise, Kripal finds that these science fiction stories reflect a sense of awe and mystery, the same as is carried by more conventionally accepted religions.

Laura Ammon and Lynn Schofield Clark link religion and science fiction, but from the viewpoints of fans, rather than through historical comparison. Ammon finds that *Star Trek* "functions as a religion for many of its fans, both dedicated and casual, though the [*Star Trek*] universe itself is explicitly humanistic and secular."<sup>11</sup> Clark's *From Angels to Aliens* likewise follows how both teen and adult audiences use science fiction and fantasy to shape their worlds as much or more than traditional religions. While speaking to a family about their TV viewing habits, the father discusses how *Star Trek* informs his world. He says, "I don't think *Star Trek* is something that really pulls any weight on paranormal existence, I just think that it might offer some ideas on why it takes place..."<sup>12</sup> This father doesn't believe in the literal existence of Captain Kirk the way he likely believes in the existence of Jesus Christ. For him, the biblical story of Christ carries more weight than the television stories of Captain Kirk do in terms of literal truth. At the same time he still admits that it shapes his metaphysics. Science fiction informs his views on the superhuman as much as his religion.

Finally, music is not an intuitive place for scholars or fans to look for science fiction ideas.<sup>13</sup> They look towards the great authors like Arthur C. Clark or Octavia Butler. They look at movie

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<sup>11</sup> Kimberly Rae Connor, "The Speed of Belief: Religion and Science Fiction, an Introduction to the Implicit Religions of Science Fiction," *Implicit Religion* 17, no. 4 (2014): 373.

<sup>12</sup> Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), Kindle, loc 1951.

makers like George Lucas, or TV writers like Gene Rodenberry. Part of my project then, is to draw attention to these musicians' discography as not just pop/rock music but as sci-fi. And, like science fiction, it is full of explicit references to existing religions, as well as an implicit religion all its own. The work of Sun Ra, Bowie, Vander, and Monáe, like all science fiction, is replete with the specter of Enoch's mystic gnosis and Beowulf's legendary heroism.

### "Before There Was Science Fiction, There Was Theosophy": Sci-fi and the Occult

Keeping with Partridge's theory of occulture, Sun Ra, David Bowie, Magma, and Janelle Monáe create their religious worlds in line with Western esoteric and metaphysical traditions. Western esotericism is defined by Arthur Versluis as "inner or hidden spiritual knowledge transmitted through Western European historical currents that in turn feed into North American and other non-European settings."<sup>14</sup> Versluis is describing a long, countercultural, loosely affiliated European religious practice that existed alongside Christianity, reacting against its hegemonic theology and practice. Often used synonymously with the word "occult," it's a broadly conceived religious tradition that encompasses alchemical and ritual magic, interest in ancient Egypt, a fascination with Eastern religions, and/or a reclaiming of Europe's pagan past. The two Western esoteric traditions that will be most pronounced throughout this project are Thelema, created by Aleister Crowley, and the Theosophical Society, founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and General Henry Steel Olcott.

Christopher Partridge finds that Western esotericism, as "occulture," is heavily present throughout popular music. He explains, "this testing of boundaries has... frequently been done with references to the resources of occulture. Rejected knowledge and behaviors have been very

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<sup>14</sup> Arthur Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 1.



important within the history of popular music.”<sup>15</sup> He continues: “I was very aware of a widespread and vibrant interest in the paranormal [in popular culture], the pursuit of experiences of transcendence, a fascination with the acquisition of rejected knowledge, and the development of some form of inner-life spirituality.”<sup>16</sup> He concludes with specific Western esoteric characters he finds musicians are frequently evoking:

darkly charismatic figures such as John Dee and Aleister Crowley, whose contemporary reputations have been organized around occult constructions of them as profane celebrities, the magic of rejected knowledge, have continually fascinated Western imaginations—not least because of their open transgression of sacred forms. It should not surprise us therefore that, we will see, such figures and ideas have intrigued liminal minds within popular music...<sup>17</sup>

Partridge sees a disproportionate representation of traditional occult figures in popular music and links it to a subversive impulse. Popular music, music which boogies, embodies the impolite and non-hegemonic spirit that also runs through these occult Western esoteric traditions. But even more, it shows these music fans are looking for transcendence but not through mainstream churches and their music. They needed a different cocktail to enchant their world and it is the blend of western esotericism and popular music that delivers.

These four artists are indebted to occult and Western esoteric characters and thought, but equally important is the metaphysical religious current. Occult traditions and metaphysical traditions certainly have a lot of overlap. Like a rectangle and a square, it is correct to say that all occult religions are metaphysical, but not all metaphysical religions are occult. Metaphysical religions do not depend on secret or forbidden knowledge, rituals of initiation, or subversive behavior. However, the

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<sup>15</sup> Christopher H. Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

two do share in several important epistemological points. Catherine Albanese outlines the four aspects of American metaphysical religion as: 1. “a preoccupation with mind and its powers”; 2. An expectation of “macrocosmic-microcosmic equivalence” or “correspondence”; 3. An emphasis on “movement and energy”; and 4. “Salvation understood as solace, comfort, therapy, and healing.”<sup>18</sup> All of these themes are equally present in the musical works treated in this project.

One aspect that marks many Western esotericists, and appears frequently in the work of Sun Ra, David Bowie, and Magma, is an interest in ancient and mythic Egypt.<sup>19</sup> In *The Occult Mind*, Christopher Lehrich engages with the imagined Egypt, which he stylizes as “Ægypt,” of so many Western esoteric thinkers. This is “not the Egypt of modern geography, nor the dynasties recognized by archeology, but a special place and time, distant but perhaps not so alien as one might think.”<sup>20</sup> This Ægypt is a place where “the secrets of the cosmos were known to priests and poets and magicians, who manipulated spiritual powers to achieve mighty ends,” Lehrich argues, and “with this magical technology they built pyramids, magic mountains that connected heaven and earth.”<sup>21</sup> Both Western esoteric and American metaphysical thought often depend on an imagined “orient” to give their teachings and practices credence.<sup>22</sup> Their East, like Ægypt, was imagined as

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<sup>18</sup> Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), Kindle, loc 225-253.

<sup>19</sup> This is less a theme of metaphysical traditions. I would argue that metaphysical religions that do care about Egypt, i.e. the Mormons, should also be described as Western esoteric. Consider also the explicit esoteric character of the Temple rite.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher I. Lehrich, *Occult Mind: Magic in Theory and Practice* (Cornell University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> This fascination with the East is well-outlined in Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religions* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007), and is picked up again in *Magia Sexualis*. See also Albanese, 277. This will be explained further as Blavatsky and Crowley’s particular orientalism is brought out.

more spiritual. It was a place of enlightened yogis, benevolent lamas, and magical medicine men. It is this fascination with the East in Western esotericism that fueled the various hippie and New Age religious movements that remain so pervasive and formative in our popular cultural to this day.

With its metaphysical and occult themes, the Theosophical Society is a key influence on the development of science fiction. Founded by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and General Henry Steel Olcott in 1875, the Theosophical Society relies heavily on the mythic and spiritualized view of Ægypt, India, and especially Tibet. This “society” of God’s wisdom was organized “to diffuse information concerning those secret laws of Nature which were so familiar to the Chaldeans and Egyptians, but are totally unknown by our modern world of science.”<sup>23</sup> Albanese describes Theosophy as “a vehicle for the synthesis of Western and Eastern metaphysical categories (with a strong tilt toward the Eastern) intending to enhance the powers of an elite and spiritually advanced cadre of humans.”<sup>24</sup> Quite the bricoleurs, theirs is a religion that exemplifies the metaphysical drive to bring scientific laws and metaphysics together, to mix East and West, and to create a holistic view of the wisdom of God.<sup>25</sup> While relatively few ever joined the Theosophical Society or its schismatic relatives, it brought a heavy occultural stream to the US, Europe, and even India.

The Theosophical Society introduces a whole cast of cosmic characters, including humans, super-humans and proto-humans, whose impact will be felt throughout late Western esoteric, New Age, and science fiction thought. One such group is the “ascended masters,” or “Mahatmas.”<sup>26</sup> These otherworldly cosmic beings secretly rule the world, and elect and prepared humans can have access to and learn higher knowledge from them. Naturally, Blavatsky places these Mahatmas in

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<sup>23</sup>Albanese, loc 4124.

<sup>24</sup> Albanese, loc 4133.

<sup>25</sup> Albanese, loc 4157.

<sup>26</sup> Albanese, 4175.

Tibet, an imagined spiritual hub of the exotic orient. Theosophy also revolves around the belief that there has been a succession of races on the earth, progressing towards a super race. We are a fallen fifth race. The great Lemurians were the third, the Atlanteans the fourth. This belief would fuel fantastic stories for generations.<sup>27</sup> Similar superhuman characters will serve as teachers throughout Sun Ra, Bowie, Vander, and Monáe's work.

Jeffrey Kripal argues in *Mutants and Mystics* that science fiction's claim to Western esotericism is primarily through Theosophy. Kripal states, boldly, that "before there was science fiction, there was Theosophy."<sup>28</sup> Science fiction and Theosophy are both tonally similar as well as directly related.<sup>29</sup> The Theosophical Society's blurring of "ancient wisdom" and "science," and the way it challenges materialism even as it uses scientific vocabulary are all hallmarks of science fiction. Partridge and Albanese are in agreement that the ascended masters of Blavatskian Theosophy follow a path through other Theosophists such as Charles Leadbeater and Guy Ballard, where the Mahatmas go from living in Tibet to living on Venus. Partridge explains how Theosophist Guy Ballard claimed to meet "twelve Venusians who revealed Venus to be home to a race of technologically and spiritually advanced beings."<sup>30</sup> Kripal also traces the myths of Lemuria popularized by the Theosophical Society, including an understanding that the evolution of human beings (from Lemurians) was facilitated by different worlds.<sup>31</sup> This anticipates the UFO narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in both science and science fiction. Kripal details the tendency in early 19<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>27</sup> Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, loc 1152.

<sup>28</sup> Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, loc 1141.

<sup>29</sup> Many do explicitly rely on Theosophy. The one most familiar to today's audience is probably the *Doctor Strange* franchise.

<sup>30</sup> Partridge, *UFO Religions*, 8. See also Albanese, Loc 7190.

<sup>31</sup> Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, loc 1137.

proto-science fiction to place humans, “Lemurians,” and dinosaurs in the same place. He quips that this “may be bad science, but it is good Theosophy.”<sup>32</sup> Science fiction today has this same impulse. Most sci-fi does not hold itself accountable to the rigors of science, but it does use the same scientific-meets-religious vocabulary of the Theosophists in Blavatsky’s lineage. This is especially true of Sun Ra, Bowie, Vander, and Monáe.

The other important esoteric tradition to this project, especially to Bowie, is Thelema. Thelema is a system of Magickal thought produced by Aleister Crowley beginning in 1904.<sup>33</sup> Thelema, along with its affiliated organizations like the Golden Dawn and the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO), are all dependent on notions of Ægypt and the orient as well. Crowley received his revelation of the *Book of the Law*, the foundation for Thelema, while living in Cairo. This book speaks in the voices of Egyptian gods such as Nuit and Hadit. In it, Crowley announces that the world is now in the Aeon of Horus and announces the law of this Aeon: “Do what thou Wilt.” An Ægyptian aesthetic dominates Crowley’s central rite, the gnostic mass. In this Freemason derived ritual, the priest wears an Ægyptian inspired head dress, and Crowley’s hieroglyphic Stele hangs over the ritual chamber.

Equally important to Crowley’s system of sex magick is his orientalist imaginings of Indian Tantra. Crowley effectively took over the OTO in 1912, reshaping it in his own image. Even before then, its previous leader Theodor Ruess claimed he had learned his system of sex magick from the “Tantric Masters of the Orient.”<sup>34</sup> Crowley went even farther in combining Hindu Tantra, or at least

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 1119.

<sup>33</sup> Urban, 288. Urban explains that “magick” was Crowley’s preferred spelling, differentiating his practice, “the art of changing nature in accordance with one’s Will,” from more common uses of the term. I will use “magick” throughout anytime I am describing a practice or worldview linked with Crowley and Thelema.

something he called Hindu Tantra, with European sex magick.<sup>35</sup> Hugh Urban observed that Crowley knew very little about Hindu Tantra while at the same time referring to him as “a key figure in the transmission of Indian traditions to the west,” which follows Partridge’s logic of occulture in so far as he established a belief and vocabulary that felt spiritual, regardless of its actual relationship to anything believed or felt in India. This is an affective occult, more than a learned one.

Crowley, and those thinking in his lineage, are also implicated in the tradition of metaphysical religion. Along with Albanese’s four themes of metaphysical religion comes an engagement with “science.” When Albanese calls a religion “metaphysical,” she is pointing to a religion interested in “facts,” “hypotheses,” and “evidence.”<sup>36</sup> This blurring of science and religion can also work in reverse, which is how she describes chiropractor H. Stuart Moore’s “impulse to reinvent science with spirit.”<sup>37</sup> Nineteenth and twentieth century metaphysical theorists were most interested in putting material and non-material worlds together, and never understood them as separate. This is totally in line with how Crowley and subsequent occultists, science fiction authors, and scholars have thought of the occult. Urban, working through scholar of Western esotericism Wouter Hanegraaff, sees occultism as “these older esoteric traditions” having to transform “in the context of modern science, technology, evolutionary theory, and psychology.”<sup>38</sup> This is to say that modern occult thought has the same goals as older esoteric and gnostic traditions but uses a scientific vocabulary. Scholar Henrik Bogdan explains: “In Crowley’s view, contemporary science

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<sup>34</sup> Urban, 98.

<sup>35</sup> Urban, 111.

<sup>36</sup> Albanese, loc 200.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., loc 6187

<sup>38</sup> Urban, 5.

and revealed religion had failed to answer their own questions because of their inherent methodological limitations; the ultimate truths were to be found only in a union of their epistemological strengths. Crowley chose as the motto of his occult journal, *The Equinox*, “The method of science; the aim of religion,” reflecting his own definition of occult.<sup>39</sup> This understanding of the occult easily welcomes all of science fiction into the occult, Western esoteric, and metaphysical fold.

An engagement with science becomes especially pronounced in the New Age movements that these four artists are tied into. Albanese explains that as the nineteenth century metaphysical traditions became the twentieth century New Age, there was a growing interest in God as “motion.”<sup>40</sup> At the same time that new scientific developments leaked into the vernacular, an energetic understanding of God became more and more common. The four artists discussed throughout this paper will show that a music-inflected understanding of God and the cosmos belongs to this new understanding of God as energy and motion. This will be especially apparent in my discussions of Sun Ra’s “vibrations” and Magma’s “celestial music” that imbue our cosmos.

Western esoteric traditions are secret-based traditions that often rely on orientalist religious understandings and scientific vocabularies. Additionally, Western esoteric traditions often posit gnosis as their end goal. This concept, derived from the late antique gnostics, centers on gaining secret wisdom. Gnosis, a Greek term, is the etymological ancestor of the English word “knowledge,” but is better linked to the French “*connaitre*” or the Spanish “*conocer*.” These words stand in contrast to “*savoir*” and “*saber*.” The latter translates to “knowing a fact or skill” as in “*je ne*

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<sup>39</sup> Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, "Introduction," introduction to *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism: An Anthology of Critical Studies*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>40</sup> Albanese, loc 6027.

*\*sais\* pas parler Kobaïen,*” “I do not know how to speak Kobaïan.” The former has more to do with familiarity: “*Je \*connais\* avec Christian Vander,*” “I am familiar with Christian Vander.” This is an experiential knowledge.<sup>41</sup> So whilst both the ancient gnostics and the modern esotericists put great emphasis on the study of texts, the gnosis they’re looking for is not a simply a memorization and understanding of facts, but an experience-based knowledge. They were aiming to become one with a transcendent and totally spiritual god, often referred to in the scholarship as “nous,” or “mind.”

For the artists discussed throughout this project, it is through dancing and experiencing “boogie” that a transformation and a gnosis could happen for the believer-listener. For my purposes, I apply the label of “gnostic” to any perspective that views knowledge as “the way of salvation.” This is consistent with how scholars of esoteric and occult movements use it. Not everyone is ready for the knowledge, which is why it is kept secret, or esoteric. Scholar of Western esotericism Christopher McIntosh describes a gnostic worldview this way: “the human spirit is trapped, as it were, under water, living a kind of half-life, ignorant of the fact that the sunlight and air of the true spirit are overhead. If knowledge (or gnosis) can make people aware of this, they will make the effort to swim upward and be reunited with their real element.”<sup>42</sup> Attaining gnosis is awakening to a new way of viewing the world, transforming the individual in the process.

Interestingly, it seems to be more of an etic term than an emic term. Crowley uses the word “gnostic” to describe his mass, but he’s largely relying on an older European tradition of the word “gnostic,” where it was used pejoratively against an imagined set of late antique heretics, who were defamed by claims that their rituals were nothing more than orgies.<sup>43</sup> Crowley’s own uses of

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<sup>41</sup> Elaine Pagels, “The Secret Gnostic Gospels” (lecture, The Secret Gnostic Gospels, University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, April 12, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> Found in Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, loc 929.



“gnostic” thus have less to do with knowledge, and more to do with affirming the sexual, and indeed his mass revolves around a naked woman on the altar. However, it is through familiarity with the ritual and fervent study of his Thelemic system that you can gain magical powers and realize that “there is no part of you that is not of the gods,” as the climax of his mass proclaims. Thus gnosis, as an experiential awakening, can be read back into to aspects of Thelema.

Blavatsky serves as a better lineage to follow when looking for esoteric understandings of gnosis, though it’s still not a word she uses often. That said, recall that “theosophy” means “wisdom of god,” so is evoking the same concept as “gnosis.” However, Blavatsky only scantily used the word “gnosis.” Later Theosophists, like Blavatsky’s private secretary GRS Mead, would speak more explicitly about gnosis as “the faith that man can transcend the limits of the duality that makes him man, and become a consciously divine being.”<sup>44</sup> Mead was intrigued by the dualism of the ancient gnostics but clearly was equally invested in the wisdom aspect as transformative and achievable. Rudolf Steiner, another in Blavatsky’s lineage, also picks up “gnosis,” editing a journal entitled *Lucifer-Gnosis*, tracing the transformative powers of secret knowledge connected to the character of Lucifer.<sup>45</sup>

Historian of religion Ioan Coulianu provides justification for using gnosis as an ahistorical descriptor for a range of religious and cultural movements. In his book *The Tree of Gnosis*, he claims to show that “the ideas of the different trends of dualistic gnosis—from Gnosticism to the Cathars to Romantic poets and XXth-century philosophers and biologists—hold together by virtue of

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<sup>43</sup> Urban, 100.

<sup>44</sup> G. R.S. Mead, "Gnosis of the Mind," in *Echoes from the Gnosis*, vol. 1, 45, accessed May 04, 2017, [http://www.gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/grsm\\_gnosismind.htm](http://www.gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/grsm_gnosismind.htm).

<sup>45</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. *Lucifer-Gnosis: 1903-1908: Grundlegende Aufsätze Zur Anthroposophie Und Berichte: Aus Den Zeitschriften "Lucifer" Und "Lucifer-Gnosis"*. Dornach: Steiner, R, 1987. Print.

belonging *to the same system*, generally by similar premises....But is this not what a structuralism means by saying that ideas are ‘synchronic.’”<sup>46</sup> Couliano is adequately convinced that if it quacks like a duck, we can call it a duck. To drive this point home, Couliano doesn’t start his book with the ancient Christian or Jewish gnostics at all, but instead with musings on special relativity and the Reverend Edwin Abbot’s thought experiment *Flatland*.<sup>47</sup> *Flatland*, an analogy Kripal turns to as well, is a parable on how a society of two-dimensional beings would experience and respond to the interference of the third dimension. Those who can begin to grasp that what happened might belong to a third dimension would be experiencing gnosis.

Tech writer Erik Davis’ update of gnosis, as “techgnosis,” is especially useful in imagining these four performers I discuss as religiously significant. Davis traces the importance of technology to the gnostic quest, starting with the purported originator of the Hermetic Corpus, Hermes Trismegistus, through the nineteenth century mesmerists, before landing in Silicon Valley. From talking statues in ancient Greek temples to the role of cybernetics in the trans-human movements, he shows how technology has always been tied to religious aims.<sup>48</sup> This is apparent in both the practices and stories of the four artists of this project. Music and recording technologies are central to both the creation of their music and the logic of the stories. Likewise their stories are riddled with spaceships and robotics, which are all key components to the gnostic process of transformation through knowledge. While all four of these artists theorize about the role of technology in bringing

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<sup>46</sup> Ioan P. Couliano, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), xi.

<sup>47</sup>Couliano, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, & Mysticism in the Age of Information* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

about a better future, they are at the same time expanding our understanding of the power of dance and music. Technology and music are co-equal in these sci-fi gnostic processes.

Throughout the following four chapters, I will show how Sun Ra, David Bowie, Magma, and Janelle Monáe evoke past Western esoteric figures, reference and expand on their metaphysical teachings, and operate in the realm of “occulture.” My characters are part of a large trend in pop culture to take the formerly hidden and make it public, even as it keeps a certain “affect” of the forbidden. That is to say that even as all of this music is readily available for streaming, it continues to give the impression that it is underground, subversive, that you are special and changed for having listened to it. Throughout this project, I will show that Western esotericism and metaphysical ideas are by no means stagnant and dead. They are being expanded by, among others, these popular musicians who are making music an integral part of western and metaphysical traditions in our “occulture.”

### 3. Religion and Occulture in the Realm of Practice

#### Sacred Aliens performing Sublime Melodies

The stories Sun Ra, David Bowie, Christian Vander, and Janelle Monáe tell, and the beings they become, are wrapped up in larger understandings of the sublime and the sacred. Jeffrey Kripal demonstrates how the sacred appears in contemporary science fiction in *Authors of the Impossible*. I take his definition of “the paranormal” as my own to understand these artists’ alien and cyborg personae. Kripal’s “paranormal” is an update of Rudolf Otto’s “numinous” and Mircea Eliade’s “sacred.” Otto is most famous for describing the “numinous” and sacred as “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.”<sup>49</sup> For Otto, the sacred is something experienced as mysteriously tremendous, or frightening, and fascinating all at once. When Kripal uses this concept to define “the paranormal,” he frames it as “the sacred in transit from the religious and scientific registers in a parascientific or ‘science mysticism’ register.”<sup>50</sup> That is to say that the “paranormal” uses scientific vocabulary rather than religious vocabulary to express the feeling of “*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.”

Music is central, not incidental, to all four of these musicians’ religious worlds, both in content and form. Musicologists, thinking in line with their colleagues in comparative literature, are very interested in the concept of the sublime. The Burkean concept of the sublime is one of “delightful horror,” where one experiences an absolute horror, a fear of death. After that fear

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<sup>49</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*; Translated by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), Kindle, 9.

subsides and death does not come, that is when the subject is then filled with delight.<sup>51</sup> Otto is in conversation with Burke as he creates his “numinous,” which is “terrifying and fascinating.” Moses Mendelssohn fills out this connection a bit by adding the “immense” to this delightful horror. To quote Mendelssohn at length:

If the boundaries of this extension are deferred further and further, then they ultimately disappear completely from the senses and, as a result, something sensuously immense emerges. The senses, which perceive things insofar as they are homogeneous, begin to ramble in an effort to comprehend the boundaries and end up losing themselves in a trembling or shudder that comes over us and then something similar to dizziness that often forces us to divert our eyes from the object.<sup>52</sup>

To an extent, this understanding of the sublime serves me better than Burke’s “delightful horror.” The numinous for Otto, and perhaps the paranormal for Kripal, is not exactly “scary,” just so hard to comprehend, so immense or tremendous, to the point that it impacts you mentally and physically. Kripal, in his own crass way, redefines the numinous as “really fucking scary.”<sup>53</sup> This colors his definition of “the paranormal.”<sup>54</sup> However, he moves past the scary part in defining the paranormal as “physical or quasi-physical events, often of an outrageous or impossible nature.”<sup>55</sup> Even more important for my project, he describes the sacred and paranormal as “meaning events.” This is to say that they are events, they can be experienced, and that they change the way we understand our world in “impossible” and perhaps “terrifying”

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<sup>51</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), Kindle, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Moses Mendelssohn: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 193.

<sup>53</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 9.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 8.

ways.

Otto uses music as an analogy when explaining his theory of “the numinous.” Christopher Lehrich explains Otto’s position, “Music evokes a reaction because we experience something musical, but the emotional content of this experience requires cues or theoretical frameworks to be consistent. In other words, we experience something in music and only subsequently label the experience in emotional or other terms.”<sup>56</sup> Music evokes a mysterious response that then must be captured in words. This parallels the raw experience of “the numinous” which Otto feels is then captured in religious systems. Musicologist Kiene Brillenburg Wurth compares how the sublime manifests in music, as opposed to literature, describing the musically sublime as “an unresolved simultaneity rather than an alternation of pain and pleasure.”<sup>57</sup> In other words music, when it seeks to evoke “the sublime” as described by Burke, manages to hold the immense and delightful together at the same point, rather than using horror to lead to delight. This use of the sublime plays out differently through the music of each of my four musicians, and leads to the sacred affect central to their embodied messages. But for all the sublime terror and fascination, there is also a playfulness and whimsy to this music, which is why I continually return to the Bowie line “let all the children boogie.”

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<sup>56</sup> Christopher I. Lehrich, "The Unanswered Question: Music and Theory of Religion," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 26, no. 1 (2014): 27, doi:10.1163/15700682-12341266.

<sup>57</sup> Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability* (Ashland, OH: Fordham University Press, 2009), 2.

#### 4. Religion and Occulture as Encountered Through the Body

##### Popular Music is Present

Throughout this thesis, I refer to these musicians as pop musicians, but really I'm describing artists that represent four different styles. Sun Ra is firmly a jazz artist. David Bowie is best described as pop-rock. Vander's music is such a complicated fusion of jazz, progressive rock, and Stravinsky that he made up his own genre, *Zeuhl*. Finally, Janelle Monáe is a mix of rock, jazz, R&B, and hip hop, which she describes as "cybersoul." Partly, my use of "popular" as a category simply relies on precedence in the field of musicology. If it is not classical, it is popular. The *Chronology of American Popular Music* uses "popular" to describe styles as disparate as tin pan alley, ragtime, Dixieland jazz, small combo jazz, big band, bebop, cool jazz, free jazz, smooth jazz, "commercial folk music," the blues, rhythm and blues, soul, funk, black contemporary, country and western, prog rock, punk rock, new wave, disco, postpunk, alternative rock, and rap/hip hop.<sup>58</sup> The word is so broad as to be meaningless in actually describing a sonic style.

This same reference goes on to describe popular music as "all genres that place a greater emphasis on mass acceptance and commercial success as opposed to overriding aesthetic considerations or single-minded self-expression."<sup>59</sup> This Adorno-derived definition does not fit the understanding of popular music in this thesis. David Bowie and Janelle Monáe certainly sell well but Magma and Sun Ra do not and never intended to. Yet somehow all four are lumped together as "popular." Additionally, I do not operate on the basis that they are all popular music artists because

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<sup>58</sup> Frank W. Hoffmann, *Chronology of American Popular Music, 1900-2000* (New York: Routledge, 2008), i.

<sup>59</sup>Hoffmann, ii.

they are in any way less skilled than “classical musicians.”<sup>60</sup> I consider these four examples to all be exemplary musicians and bold thinkers. Likewise, they are also not “popular” because they are literally popular, as only one or two of them ever were. Pop, as the overarching style here, is neither a pejorative nor literally descriptive.

Instead, it makes sense to imagine them as working within the same genre because of the type of religious work being done with this music. Different from classical music, the popular styles such as jazz, rock, hip hop, and R&B are centered on the performer. Departing from classical music, which is centered on an absent composer, these popular styles are cults to a very present performer. The centrality of the performer holds these four styles together even as they are sonically only partially related. The “presence” of the pop artists is central to my argument that Sun Ra, David Bowie, Magma, and Janelle Monáe are not only great musicians but also paranormal figures and religious thinkers. At the same time, the fact that they chose music as their medium ties them back to classical definitions of the sublime and the sacred.

### A History of Presence between Heaven and Earth

As many of the scholars I discussed above have already established, Western esotericism is surprisingly prevalent in popular culture. While I gladly add my case studies as further proof of this, this project moves into a more lived and corporeal understanding of the Western esoteric religious tradition. Likewise, it realizes music not just as an abstract, but as something performed by real bodies in real places creating real vibrations. This project explores paranormal presences embodied and performed by Sun Ra, David Bowie, Magma, and Janelle Monáe. I rely on Jeffrey Kripal’s

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<sup>60</sup> Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, 31.



arguments in *Authors of the Impossible* to imagine how scholars can and must account for the paranormal breaking into the mundane. To understand these musicians as science fiction paranormal beings, it is useful to put Kripal in conversation with Robert Orsi's work to explore relationship with, and the presence of, supernatural beings in the lives of fans. All four of these performers are more than sci-fi religious writers and thinkers, they are paranormal performers. That is to say that they are both performers who are paranormal, as much as they are performers performing the paranormal.

In *Authors of the Impossible*, Kripal pushes for scholars of religion to allow themselves to think outside of the linear and the material. Quoting Harvard psychiatrist John E. Mack, he ponders: "we have a kind of either/or mentality. It's either literally physical, or it's in the spiritual other realm, the unseen realm. What we seem to have no place for—or we have lost the place for—are phenomena that can begin in the unseen realm, and cross over and manifest and show up in our literal physical world."<sup>61</sup> I don't rely on this quote to show that David Bowie or Sun Ra were unequivocally aliens; that would place me too much in the realm of emic theologian. Rather, I am arguing that it is useful for us, as scholars, to consider what happens when fans believe that the artists are the science fiction made flesh, or at least can be interacted with that way. Just as Kripal is "not asking us to know more. [He is] asking us to imagine more," I am exploring the ramifications of imagining Sun Ra and David Bowie as alien messengers, Christian Vander as a prophet, and Janelle Monáe as a savior-android.<sup>62</sup>

Using the work of Robert Orsi, the following sections will demonstrate how these artists are not merely story tellers or preachers talking about these superhuman characters, but actually embody these paranormal beings and allow their fans to interact with them through their music, their performances, their Twitter accounts, and even on the street. Orsi's theories of religion aim to work

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<sup>61</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*, 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

past understanding religion as a system of meaning making, and view it instead “as a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together.”<sup>63</sup> Orsi is departing from a notion of religion as equivalent to theologies, belief, systems of symbols, or meaning making, and instead views religion as interactional and personal.<sup>64</sup> This model of religion as a network of relationships helps push past questions of whether their fans are also “believers” in any protestant-creedal sort of way. Fans interact with these performers as paranormal beings; literal belief is not the right question. Within this relational network Orsi is concerned with “the intersubjective nature of particular social, cultural, and religious identities, and indeed of reality itself.”<sup>65</sup> This is an “intersubjective” relationship where the fans, the performers, the narratives, the lyrics, the music, the dancing, the community, and the individual interpretations all inform who is relating to whom, how, and why.<sup>66</sup>

Orsi expands this work in *History and Presence* as he works towards an academic study of religion which must acknowledge that many religions are concerned with the “transcendent” breaking into time, and becoming “literally” present.<sup>67</sup> He recommends that “the duty of religious

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<sup>63</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), Kindle, 1.

<sup>64</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 5. Throughout this book Orsi implicates the scholar as part of this intersubjective religious relationship. I don’t think this will have direct bearing on my work, but in the spirit of Orsian self-reflection, part of my motivation for choosing these four musicians is that I like their music an awful lot, yes even Sun Ra and Magma. I don’t know if I believe that any of them are aliens or cyborgs, but if I were to meet Janelle Monáe for the first time, I’m quite certain I would be ecstatic as the great Archandroid stands in front of me. I have an emotional relationship with Cindi Mayweather that is facilitated by her occupation of Monáe’s body. I am implicated in that relationship too.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), Kindle, loc 928.

studies is or ought to be the study of what human beings do to, for, and against the gods really present—using ‘gods’ as a synecdoche for all the special superhuman beings with whom humans have been in relationship....”<sup>68</sup> Orsi’s argument, and title, come from the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, where the bread and wine are not symbols of Christ, but really are him. He is “literally present” in the material reality of the Eucharist. To Orsi, modern (synonymous with Protestant) religion deals in symbols, whereas Catholicism and “tribal religions” deal with the “really real.”<sup>69</sup> He understands these religions to have “lived with the gods really present to them on earth.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, applying Orsi’s concept of presence to my own work, I argue that David Bowie is not an actor representing Ziggy Stardust, but he makes Ziggy Stardust “literally present,” even as he keeps his “accident” that is his David Bowie body. It’s this literal presence that allows for the intersubjective relationship between Bowie, Stardust, and listeners.

The music, and these artists’ positions as pop musicians, lends to this presence. Popular musicians are present in a way that classical musicians are not. These artists bring their paranormal personae on and off stage. It is the persona that causes them to create the music they do. Compare this to even a famous classical musician who is merely interpreting the work of many different composers. That each of the musicians treated here are pop musicians, then, is not simply incidental to their paranormal role, but empowers it. Singing is not just a different way to tell stories, rather music and musicianship change the meaning of the message, creating literal presence in its wake. There is more going on here than just lyrics inflected with Western esotericism. The reliance on Western esoteric thought to inspire transcendence becomes mapped on to the bodies and aural experience of their music.

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<sup>68</sup> Orsi, *History and Presence*, loc 96.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, loc 59.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 81.

It is important to understand that the four artists treated here are not just lyricists, they are composers, singers, and performers as well. Partridge's *The Lyre of Orpheus* certainly considers lyrics but is more concerned with how music, performance, and pre-existing social conditioning work together to impact mood and create affective spaces where the sacred, or paranormal, and profane can be encountered. Partridge leans on affect theory to describe "music's relationship to emotion and the significance of that relationship to a range of phenomenological and existential features of social life relating to constructions of the sacred and the profane."<sup>71</sup> Therefore, my interaction with music throughout this thesis must be concerned with the internal logic of the works, but this will serve to show how the music then creates the "intersubjective" relationships Orsi theorizes, here understood as relationships between performer, music, lyric, listener, and even scholar. Thus, when I describe these four performing artists as creating sacred or paranormal space, I am thinking of a space that is material: there are real bodies on and off stage creating measurable vibrations. Combined with this materiality though, the "transcendent enters time," when the scientifically understood but otherwise mythic alien or android is in the room performing their music.

Understanding musical and religious space as affective can help elucidate how practitioners end up in intersubjective relationships with the "gods really present." Affect is conceived of as something that precedes, and perhaps also supersedes, cognition, including emotion and logic.<sup>72</sup> Emotion is an aspect of this affect, but that's not it completely, in fact many scholars including Deleuze describe affect as a sort of pre-cognitive emotion. Scholar of religion Donovan O. Schaefer is especially focused on the body and affect as it helps define religion. This emphasis on the body is

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<sup>71</sup> Christopher H. Partridge, *The Lyre of Orpheus: Popular Music, the Sacred, and the Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle, "Introduction: Somewhere Between the Signifying and the Sublime," introduction to *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian D. Biddle (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

useful when thinking of listening and dancing as religious and gnostic actions. He explains, “Affect theory, in this reading, is about thematizing power outside of language. Animal bodies—our bodies—are invested in fields of power that are not mediated by language.”<sup>73</sup> Following Schaefer, I will mostly use affect to think about the non-linguistic aspects of this project, namely the role of music, dance and the performer’s paranormal body.

However, there is also an affect to the lyrics, which I will explore more as I deal with this music as “occultural.” In brief, when Partridge describes an aspect of pop culture as occultural, this means it evokes the secret occult tradition even as it is literally popular by keeping the mood of being secret. Even as everyone is listening to David Bowie, listening to him sing about Crowley for instance, and even as those lyrics are easily google-able and explainable, there is still the impression that this is somehow underground and subversive.

Like Schaeffer, musicologist eldritch Priest is also concerned with the body’s role in affect. Rejecting the notion that some music is more affective than others, he explains “the perception of all music entails some level of somatic comportment.”<sup>74</sup> Listening to music necessarily engages the body. These four bodies have become paranormal, impact the bodies of the listeners, and create a sonic and religious affective space. Keeping up with Orsi’s Christological analogy, when I say bodies that have become paranormal I mean something akin to “the word made flesh.” However, this is sort of an inversion of the incarnation, where fleshy bodies become sacred and paranormal because a scientific language is used, following Kripal’s definition.

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<sup>73</sup> Donovan O. Schaefer, *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), Kindle, loc 270.

<sup>74</sup> eldritch Priest, "Felt as Thought (or, Musical Abstraction and the Semblance of Affect)," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian D. Biddle (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 47.

Priest goes on to describe music as “abstraction.” He sees music as revelatory, where language is explanatory.<sup>75</sup> This is to say, music exists relatively referent-free compared to language, showing sensation rather than naming it. Media theorist Dean Lockwood ties these two concepts together as he conceives of music as a form of thinking that involves a “concrete, imminent sensory orientation.”<sup>76</sup> Returning to the idea of the sublime and sacred in music, music’s (non)-relationship to language gives it both an emotional and a sensorial weight beyond meaning. All this comes together to show that, were I to focus merely on lyrics and liner notes, I would miss most of what these musicians are doing. Thus, the following chapters investigate how Sun Ra, David Bowie, Christian Vander, and Janelle Monáe participate in occulture through evoking Western esoteric themes, as well as how they integrate it into the sublimity of their music and the paranormal personae that become present in their bodies.

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<sup>75</sup> Priest, 53.

<sup>76</sup> Dean Lockwood, "Spread the Virus: Affective Prophecy in Industrial Music," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian D. Biddle (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 121.

## 5. Sun Ra, The Living Myth

Sun Ra, chronologically the first of these science fiction musicians, enters this blending of the occult, metaphysical religion, science fiction, and music in what scholar Graham Lock calls the “Astroblack mythology.” Lock, borrowing from Sun Ra’s piece “Astro Black,” uses “Astroblack myth” to refer to “Sun Ra’s self-conscious creation of a mythology” including the “astro of the outer space future and the black of the ancient Egyptian past.”<sup>77</sup> Sun Ra was born as Herman P. Blount in Birmingham Alabama in 1914. He was a withdrawn and shy child whose preferred means of emotionally sharing was the piano.<sup>78</sup> He became a very proficient player and improviser at a young age, and was particularly skilled at laying down a boogie woogie bass line. By his twenties, Sun Ra was gigging frequently, playing mostly jazz standards but also writing his own arrangements and compositions when he had a chance. In a very indirect way, the “black” of the “Astroblack Myth” was already developing as Sun Ra, still going by Herman or Sonny, played black music in the company of other black musicians.<sup>79</sup>

Throughout the 1940s Sun Ra, still touring under various variations of his earthly names, was beginning to collect his own entourage of musicians around him. His apartment would become something like a twenty-four hour rehearsal space as different musicians would come in and out to

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<sup>77</sup> Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), 14.

<sup>78</sup> See also Kerry James Marshall, "The Legend of Sun Man Continues," in *Sun-Ra: Traveling the Spaceways: The Astro Black and Other Solar Myths*, ed. John Corbett, Anthony Elms, and Terri Kapsalis (New York, NY: WhiteWalls, 2010), 57. Intriguingly, but with little support, Kerry James Marshall hints that Sun Ra might’ve been gay. The most we know about his sexuality is that he claims to have lived a celibate life.

<sup>79</sup> All biographic information is from John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and times of Sun Ra* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

play his music. Slowly but surely this unconventional rehearsal practice jelled into his cohesive “Arkestra,” the name he chose for his orchestra. During these early jazz days, Sun Ra was a very early adopter of the electric keyboard, and preferred it to the end of his life. He used it to make all sorts of buzzes and squeaks, some more melodic and tonal than others, but always evocative of the computers of his contemporary sci-fi films. The “astro” is present in his music before he ever realized he was an alien.

At the same time as he was getting some local attention in the jazz scene, Sun Ra was self-initiating himself into the Western esoteric tradition through occultural thought that was already moderately accessible in the larger culture. Christianity never much interested him. While never rejecting the Bible outright, he began to reimagine the “good book” as the “code book,” full of secret meanings that had been hidden by white religious authorities over the years that needed to be drastically reinterpreted for the good of black people and the entire world.<sup>80</sup> The Theosophical Society served as an occult gateway for Sun Ra. Blavatsky and her followers, especially Rudolph Steiner, were formative influences on Sun Ra as a young adult trying to crack the mysteries of the universe. Both the Theosophists and Crowley also had an interest in Kabbalah.<sup>81</sup> This mystic brand of Judaism is, among other things, concerned with words, their relation to other words, and especially their numerological value that carries cosmological weight.<sup>82</sup> This Kabbalistic strain in the Theosophical Society would help foment the importance of codes, rhymes, and word play Sun Ra was already developing. It’s an Astroblack mixture of Kabbalistic *gematria* and “the dozens.”

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<sup>80</sup> Lock, 77.

<sup>81</sup> Albanese, 4178.

<sup>82</sup> Versluis, 61.



Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society were one outlet for Sun Ra to look to Africa, specifically the mythic Ægypt, as a source of divine knowledge. However, Sun Ra became especially invested in black authors writing in occult and alternative historical veins who were making similar observations as Blavatsky, but with black nationalist aims. Many of these were fringy, underground self-published books and pamphlets. By this time Sun Ra had moved himself and his Arkestra to Chicago, a hotbed of black nationalist thought and notably the origin city for both the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple of America. Thus, in this religion-scape, Sun Ra was exposed to a lot of religiously-inflected black nationalist literature, particularly a book by Theodore P. Ford indulgently titled: *God Wills the Negro: An Anthropological and Geographical Restoration of the Lost History of the American Negro People, Being in Part a Theological Interpretation of Egyptian and Ethiopian Backgrounds*.<sup>83</sup> Along with that was a much shorter pamphlet called *The Children of the Sun* by George Wells Parker, founder of the *Hamitic League of the World*. In his pamphlet, Parker suggests that “Egypt was the first great civilization and that the whole of humankind descended from so-called Negroes.”<sup>84</sup>

Paul Youngquist sees Sun Ra’s engagement with Theosophy as a “unique contribution to black nationalism,” going so far to say that it “could be called ‘political theosophy,’ a radicalism combining the spiritual imperative of esoteric wisdom with a social agenda of black advancement.”<sup>85</sup> Just as the Theosophists were linking the origins of humanity and divine wisdom to, variously, the moon, Atlantis, Lemuria, and eventually outer space, Ford and Parker assigned it to an imagined black Ægypt. Theosophy and particularly the works of Ford and Parker led Sun Ra to make Ægypt

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<sup>83</sup> Szwed, 65. Szwed suggests that Theodor P. Ford was actually Wallace D. Ford, one of the founders of the Nation of Islam. This theory realizes on the similarities of the name and the similarities of the thought, but there is no other hard proof.

<sup>84</sup> Szwed, 66.

<sup>85</sup> Youngquist, 37.

and Egyptian myth central to Sun Ra's own identity. This became another layer of his message for African Americans and the world. Ægypt, for him, was a mythical kingdom, the beginning of civilization and, most importantly, it was a black nation.

Another important theosophical influence on Sun Ra was the Russian occultist Pyotr Deminaovitch Ouspensky. His book *A New Model of the Universe* furthered Blavatsky and Olcott's attempts to blur science and "ancient wisdom." As Sun Ra read Ouspensky, he began to see limitations with scientific reason.<sup>86</sup> This, in part, is what led him to embrace a certain science fiction infused religious teaching, where a scientific vocabulary is used, even as he insists he has actually accessed the world of myth. Ouspensky provided translations of another nineteenth century mystic thinker, Georgei Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff sees "man" as asleep and in need of waking up.<sup>87</sup> They need a gnostic experience, and Gurdjieff prescribed music and dancing as the means to gnosis.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, Sun Ra saw African Americans as "spiritually dead" and in need of being "shocked awake." Gurdjieff's influence is clear as Sun Ra develops his own belief that "the love of beauty is the beginning of wisdom" through the late 1940s.<sup>89</sup>

Sun Ra took his interest in Ægypt and combined it with his interest in space age science, creating a twentieth century Afro-futuristic occult system. Here we see a complete move from consumer of occulture to producer and conduit of occulture. This culminates in his name change in 1952, when his Egyptian and science fiction beliefs collided and it was revealed to him by the "creator" that he must change his name. He tried out several variations on the sound "sun" before

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<sup>86</sup> Szwed, 107.

<sup>87</sup> Szwed, 105. This is consistent with Nation of Islam founder Elijah Mohammed as well.

<sup>88</sup> Szwed, 108.

<sup>89</sup> Found in Youngquist, 60.

settling on L'Sonnyr Ra legally and Sun Ra professionally and personally. Thus the sun as an astronomical reality met the mythic reality of the Egyptian Sun God, Ra.

Youngquist maps a theory of music and myth throughout Sun Ra's teachings and music. As Youngquist introduces his own project, he sums up Sun Ra as having a belief "that music can take its players to a better world—at least by measure of joyous sounds."<sup>90</sup> As Sun Ra grows more and more into his own "Astroblack myth," he postulates that the Astroblack music "is my music playing the kind of world I know about."<sup>91</sup> His music functions as a mythic representation of his world of Blavatsky-inflected myth. Youngquist explains, toying with Sun Ra's worldview, that "like myth, music does not exist. It resembles Zeus more than it resembles Newton's apple. It possesses no substance. It lacks a medium. It dissipates as it happens, coming to presence in the midst of its passing."<sup>92</sup> This view of music as myth also informs the way Sun Ra engages with science: "'Myth-science' describes the form that knowledge takes as space music. The Arkestra creates knowledge running counter to normal science and its positivist presumptions. Music as science and science as myth."<sup>93</sup> His music, this boogie that follows his own rules, is both an example of myth and the scientific means by which his listeners can both figuratively and literally (the difference between those words is no longer important) enter into Sun Ra's mythic world.

Sun Ra is the least story-focused of the four musicians treated in this project. In contrast to the other artists treated in this project, Sun Ra's music generally does not have lyrics. Thus there is no epic in need of exegesis. He suggests space through the sounds rather than lyrics. He is the hero

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<sup>90</sup> Youngquist, 1.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-191.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

playing the space music. He doesn't need lyrics that tell of harrowing adventures in space. But beyond just writing the music, Sun Ra makes his music-infused mythic-cosmos present by being a performer. He preaches about a mythic universe accessible through music, and then he performs that particular cosmic boogie. The music, like his costuming, is inflected with references to traditionally black and African musical styles, and with an eye towards the future of music. The Astroblack myth as an occult metaphysics musically performed marks Sun Ra's entire life.

By the 1950s, Sun Ra was claiming he had been abducted by aliens twenty years before. His abduction narrative, his embrace of space-inflected lyrics, and his outlandish costumes all yield to a B-movie sci-fi flick update of Blavatsky's pursuit of the "secret laws of nature which were so familiar to the Chaldeans and Egyptians." Here, at length, he recounts his abduction story that he dates to at least twenty years before:

These space men contacted me. They wanted me to go to outer space with them. They were looking for somebody who had that type of mind. They said it was quite dangerous because you had to have perfect discipline....I'd have to go up with no part of my body touching outside of the beam, because if I did, going through different time zones, I wouldn't be able to get that far back. So that's what I did. And it's like, well it looked like a giant spotlight shining down on me, and I call it transmolecularization, my whole body was changed in to something else. I could see through myself and I went up. Now, I call that an energy transformation because I wasn't in human form. I thought I was there, but I could see through myself.

Then I landed on a planet that I identified as Saturn. First thing I saw was something like a rail, a long rail of a railroad track coming out of the sky, and landed over there in a vacant lot...Then I found myself in a huge stadium, and I was sitting up in the last row, in the dark. I knew I was alone. They were down there, on the stage, something like a big boxing ring. So then they called my name, and I didn't move. They called my name again, and I still didn't answer. Then all at once they teleported me, and I was down there on that stage with them. They wanted to talk with me. They had on little antenna on each ear. A little antenna over each eye. They talked to me. They told me to stop [teacher training] because there was going to be great trouble in schools. There was going to be trouble in every part of life. That's why they wanted to talk to me about it. "Don't have anything to do with it. Don't continue." They would teach me some things that when it looked like the world was going in complete chaos, when there was no hope for nothing, then I could speak, but not until then. I would speak, and the world would listen. That's what they told me.

Next thing, I found myself back on planet Earth in a room with them, and it was the back room of an apartment, and there was a courtyard. They was all with me. At that time, I wasn't wearing robes. I had on one of theirs, they put on me. They said, "Go out there and speak to them." And I looked out through the curtain and people were milling around in the courtyard. And I said, "No, they look like they're angry. I'm not going out there." So they pushed me through the curtain, and I found myself on a balcony, people milling around in the courtyard. They said, "They aren't angry, they're bewildered."

All of a sudden, the people were turning around, looking up to me on the balcony. (I was living in Chicago at that time.) I saw that I was laying down on a park bench, a stone park bench, in some park, near a river. There was a bridge. I knew it was New York City. I had done very well in Chicago and I thought that was one thing that could not happen. I looked and saw that the sky was purple and dark red, and through that I could see the spaceships, thousands of them. And I sat up to look, then I heard a voice: "you can order us to land. Are conditions right for landing?" I think I said yes.<sup>94</sup>

This story is obviously "astro" in that Sun Ra is abducted by space aliens. However, as Szwed observes, it also reads like an African American Baptist conversion narrative, making it "black" and "mythic" as well. Sun Ra comes away from the heavenly messengers with a calling, a mission to tell the world a message from the heavens.

By the time Sun Ra became Sun Ra he was also identifying not just as an abductee, but in fact as an alien or angel from Saturn. The specter of Theosophy paints this new addition to the "astro" myth. As Szwed observes, Sun Ra would have been especially attracted to Theosophical theories that some of earth's "root races" from which humanity had fallen would have been from the Moon or Venus.<sup>95</sup> This would certainly appeal to a man who would claim Saturn as his home world, as would the idea that some of Blavatsky's Mahatmas may have been from Saturn.<sup>96</sup> While Sun Ra never says it explicitly, it seems like a safe speculation that Sun Ra, in part, imagined himself as a kind of "mahatma" spoken of by the Theosophical Society.

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<sup>94</sup> Szwed, 30-31.

<sup>95</sup> Szwed, 108.

<sup>96</sup> Younquist, 130

This occultural science fiction world view is pronounced in his poem “The Sound of Infinity.” Continuing in a direction likely traceable to the nineteenth century Romantics, he produces a devotional poem. But where references to God or heaven are expected, he instead speaks of “the universe” and “the future” as the points of absolute significance. The ending stanzas are the most interesting in terms of sci-fi mimicking religion: “I spoke to someone, some being/a herald of mythic prophecies not yet/told yet to be/spoke of the pioneering power of the/evolution of the multi-mind.”<sup>97</sup> By the late 1950s and into the 1960s, Sun Ra had a well-developed occult religious system that was also recognizable as science fiction.

Once Sun Ra was Sun Ra, he presented himself as an alien from Saturn at all times. He didn’t just write and sing about an enchanted Astroblack universe, he placed himself in it. His music is about himself. This is an identity he would claim until his death, misdirecting if anyone asked him about his alleged birth in Birmingham in 1914. Once Sun Ra became his chosen, or revealed, name he lived wholly as that being on and off stage. His very name puts you in contact with both outer space, “Sun,” and ancient Ægypt, “Ra,” at once. The instant you say Sun Ra, you are pulled into the practice of the Astroblack myth. In an Orsian reading of Sun Ra, he becomes something that in previous generations would have been described as “savage.” Orsi explains: “From early modernity forward, men and women in other parts of the world and with skin colors other than white who lived with the gods really present to them on earth were termed ‘savage’ and ‘primitive.’”<sup>98</sup> Their religions were dismissed as “savage” and “primitive” by white Protestants so they could elevate their own religion. Thus, Sun Ra would not be considered a “modern” subject according to this

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<sup>97</sup> Sun Ra, "The Sound of Infinity," in *This Planet Is Doomed* (New York: Kicks Books, 2011), 25. The editor and compiler could not be bothered to date any of these poems, but my guess is that this poem falls into the later 1950s as he was becoming more established but still in touch with his early occult days.

<sup>98</sup> Orsi, *History and Presence*, loc. 80.

perspective. He asserts himself as a paranormal being, a literal alien, rather than just a story teller or even a symbol of the Astroblack. That he lived as an Egyptian pharaoh from Saturn demands an epistemology of us that is either pre-modern, or very post-modern; an occultural worldview comfortable in dwelling with what-ifs rooted in alternative religious currents. Being a follower of Sun Ra was not a creedal affair, but a matter of authentic presence. He was there to be related to as an alien presence and this supersedes any biological realities.

Putting Orsi's and Kripal's work in conversation with each other allows for elucidation of how Sun Ra as alien messenger can exist in the material and linear world. This quote from *Mutants and Mystics* helps show how believer and skeptic can both still have an experience of the paranormal through popular culture: "whether they were believers or skeptics or somewhere in between, those who have experienced psychical phenomena have been entertained...And aren't these precisely the emotions we want to experience when we attend a play or see a movie or got to a ballet?"<sup>99</sup> Kripal goes on to describe paranormal phenomena: "They are about the irruption of meaning in the physical world via the radical collapse of the subject-object structure itself. They are not simply physical events. They are also meaning events."<sup>100</sup> So when Sun Ra describes himself as "the living myth," he is not just the myth teller, but his very existence as an alien from Saturn disrupts our physical world and imbues it with meaning. Sun Ra is literally present to perform and lead his music. This gave his Arkestra and fans the means to experience outer space and Ægypt. He allowed them to enter the mythic.

Sun Ra was not just an alien though, he was a musician who was ever interested in sound. His was a gospel not just of extraterrestrial beings, but of music, sound, and puns. He doesn't only

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<sup>99</sup> Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, loc. 276.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

boogie in his music, but he boogies language, making it at once playful, metaphysical, and subversive. Szwed outlines how Sun Ra was interested in “the effects of the *sounds* of word (beyond their meaning).” Consider the occult way he can play with his chosen name, Sun Ra. Ra is the Egyptian sun God, which can also be spelled “Re.” Re is also ray, as in “a ray of light,” but at the same time is also the second note of the musical scale. Sun Ra concludes this line of thinking stating, “I have many names. Some call me Mr. Ra. Some call me Mr. Re. Some call me Mr. Mystery.”<sup>101</sup> And thus his name becomes “mystery,” which is only a short jaunt to “myth,” and he becomes the living myth.

To Sun Ra the universe is entirely infused by vibration, and thus music.<sup>102</sup> It was his presence not just as an alien but a musician that allowed him to bring this self-conscious vibration and music to his followers. Sun Ra views music as a microcosmic model of the macro-universe, or even a “mirror to the universe.”<sup>103</sup> When humans tap into this vibration through music, they can bring themselves in line with the cosmos, not just through the vibrations, but by the communal behavior musical performance demands. The this-worldly and the otherworldly are brought together in correspondence through music, aligning with classical American metaphysical movements and the belief of a microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondence.

Importantly, it had to be worthy music and the correct sounds for Sun Ra’s goals to be reached. He warned his Arkestra that playing the wrong note could “do incalculable harm to the universe.”<sup>104</sup> To this end, Sun Ra viewed his vast oeuvre as “the private library of god.”<sup>105</sup> These

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<sup>101</sup>Szwed, 83.

<sup>102</sup> Interestingly, he’s in agreement with certain Tantric groups on this point.

<sup>103</sup> Szwed, 324.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 114.



were compositions written for people's "specific vibrations."<sup>106</sup> Sun Ra was known to pick his Arkestra members not for their musical prowess, but because of spiritual compatibility with him and the current members of the Arkestra. Of course, musicality was important, lest the universe be destroyed. What this process shows is that Sun Ra inhabited a metaphysics where the spiritual and the vibrational were totally intertwined. Building on the gnostic and esoteric currents Sun Ra belongs to, this was elect music for elect people who are ready to experience a new way of mythic knowing, to experience an Astroblack gnosis.

By the 1960s and 70s the Arkestra had a strong enough reputation in jazz circles that they could make a modest living touring, performing, and recording in line with the Astroblack myth. The Astroblack myth is blatantly outlined in album titles like *The Nubians of Plutonia* (1966) and *Astro Black* (1972). Or, consider the art of albums like *God Is More Than Love Can Ever Be* (1979) that depicts the pelican-headed Egyptian god, Thoth. Musical aspects of *The Nubians of Plutonia* are evocative of Africa in an almost orientalist way. He uses African drums in rhythms that evoke Africa, but interestingly, in the same way white big band composers were evoking an exotic Africa. His track "Afrika" from that album could conceivably have served as the soundtrack to *King Kong* at points.<sup>107</sup> It is very interesting that Sun Ra plays off the affective power of music to take his listeners to this imagined exotic Africa, with music seen as playfully "savage" by a white Protestant hegemony. Perhaps it is the sonic match to his occult Ægypt, which is still inflected with a certain amount of white orientalism. This imagined "Afrika," this time Nubia instead of Ægypt, was also

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 122.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 120.

<sup>107</sup> Sun Ra, "Afrika," on *The Nubians of Plutonia*, Saturn Records, 1966, vinyl recording.

placed in outer space. The noble Egyptian heritage was also a fantastic alien heritage, and Sun Ra saw music as the best means to communicate this.

His use of jazz as the medium for his Astroblack myth served as a perfect way to wed astro and black, as he landed on an experimental form of jazz, inherently avant-garde and futuristic but rooted in a traditionally African American genre, the same musical family that produced boogie-woogie. He evokes African American church music at various points in his career. This is most obvious in the piece “Space Chant,” a call and response song where references to heaven are given a space age twist, and Jesus is conspicuously missing.<sup>108</sup> Instead, Sun Ra and his Arkestra call back and forth every planet in our solar system, and describe them as “heaven,” all while announcing “the space age is here to stay.” Despite the non-Christian lyrics, this song is very evocative of call and response worship music as it would have been performed in churches, instead of the cleaner style of professional performers. The affect here instantly places a listener in a black history, even if they don’t have first-hand experience of a black-church call and response. The affect and the lyrics hold a dichotomy of black history and black future together into one cohesive event. The listener is brought into older traditions through the sonic-affect, even as the lyrics then push you into the new Astroblack myth.

“The Antique Blacks Suite” from *The Antique Blacks* (1974) uses the electric keyboard and the electric guitar to great effect (affect even) as it moves between motives that are more recognizably melodic and those more sound-effect-esque.<sup>109</sup> The overall impact is to invite listeners into a

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<sup>108</sup>Sun Ra, “Space Chant (The Third Heaven),” on *The Soul Vibrations of Man*, Sun Ra and His Arkestra, Saturn Records, 2016, MP3. This piece is difficult to date, as it’s only available on a posthumous album. It’s less traditionally jazz style places it after “*The Nubians of Plutonia*.” Track Three on “Thesis Playlist.”

<sup>109</sup> Sun Ra, John Gilmore, and Marshall Allen, perfs., “The Antique Blacks Suite,” on *The Antique Blacks*, Art Yard, 1974, vinyl recording. Compare the opening the opening 0:00-2:00 where

futuristic affect, marked by sounds you know are space-age, even as they are so clearly tied to musical ideas of the 1950s and 60s.

“The Antique Blacks Suite” is also a good reminder that Sun Ra was still tied to a tradition of Western esotericism, even as he innovated on it. This song prominently features the character Lucifer. Lucifer, as “light bearer,” shows up in occult thought not as an evil devil character, at turns tempting and punishing humans, but instead as a wisdom giver. His role in esoteric thought has precedence in ancient gnostic readings of the Genesis story, but was also heavily popularized by Romantic poets, especially William Blake and Lord Byron.<sup>110</sup> He has a role in some strains of Theosophy, and some presence in Thelemic thought. Rudolph Steiner, theosophist, founder of the Waldorf method, and editor of the journal *Lucifer-Gnosis*, is an important conduit for modern occult Luciferianism, though Lucifer features in Blavatsky’s work as well. This wisdom stream greets Lucifer as a wisdom giver, responsible especially for acts of creativity. People assumed Crowley talked about Lucifer/Satan all the time, and he did take “the great beast 666” as his personal moniker, but by and large his writing is void of references to either Satan or Lucifer. He does appear in one poem though, “Hymn to Lucifer,” as present at creation breathing disobedience, “the key of joy,” into the world. Here, Luciferian wisdom also takes on a diabolical mood. Sun Ra was almost certainly aware of the gnostic, Romantic, Theosophical, and Thelemic works on Lucifer.

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the electric piano plays a recognizable set of smooth jazz piano arpeggios. After two minutes both the piano and the orchestra then begin play music that is not recognizably melodic. 3:46 returns to much more palatable jazz, chord based jazz. See 12:14, and more pronouncedly 16:20 for another moment where the electric piano changes from playing chords to playing sound effects. Track four on “Thesis Playlist.”

<sup>110</sup> Ioan P. Coulianu, *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 253.

In “The Antiques Black Suite,” Sun Ra sees in Lucifer a refuge for black people from the white world. He chants “Black men are so rare. I plan to place them in Lucifer’s care.”<sup>111</sup> Sun Ra describes Lucifer as “that dark angel, bronze black blue has no equal anywhere.” He goes on “all black men are his brothers rare.” Here, Sun Ra is claiming Lucifer for blackness. If the white man worships “God,” he will honor the opposite. It’s a reversal of a strain within the Nation of Islam to call white men “devils.” Sun Ra instead embraces a diabolical figure in Lucifer. Steiner’s understanding of Lucifer as inspiring creative acts also fits into Sun Ra’s world view when he conflates black men and spiritual men in this piece.<sup>112</sup> Sun Ra’s is a world view that sees black people as more spiritual and mythic because of their engagement with the arts. In some ways, though, he’s aligned with Crowley too. Crowley evokes Lucifer as a symbol of disobedience. For Sun Ra nothing was more disobedient than being black, boogieing, and entering the world of myth.<sup>113</sup>

The most obvious way the Astroblack myth becomes present through Sun Ra’s body, besides his blackness, is through costuming. The two pictures below show the different types of costuming Sun Ra and his Arkestra employ to capture the Astroblack myth. In figure 1, the figure on the right is Marshall Gilmore dressed in Egyptian headdress, capturing a noble African heritage. Likewise the robes the band members are wearing are shiny, evoking at once royalty and the chromed and shiny future of *Lost in Space*. The portrait of Sun Ra (figure 2) shows him in regal African-inspired robes. His reference to outer-space is even more on-the-nose as he wears a model

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<sup>111</sup> Sun Ra, “The Antique Black Suite.”

<sup>112</sup> See also Youngquist, 90. Sun Ra takes a common slur for black people “spook” and creates an Astroblack mythology where Spook=ghost=spirit=god. Thus African Americans become gods in Sun Ra’s black Kabbalistic word play.

<sup>113</sup> Another counter-cultural figure, Anton LaVey, takes on Satan, not specifically Lucifer, as his own symbol of subversion against hegemonic culture as he writes his *Satanic Bible* and founds The Church of Satan.

of the solar system as a hat. There's a cartoonish-ness to it all, which in some ways matches the playfulness of Sun Ra's message rather than undermining it. Sun Ra wants humanity to live in the mythic world of possibility provided by pulp fiction. This is a world that laughs as much as it also carries heavy metaphysics, and this was captured by Sun Ra's character and by much of his music.



*Figure 1: Marshall Gilmore of the Arkestra in Egyptian inspired costume.*



*Figure 2: Sun Ra wearing a model of the solar system.*

The costumes, the music, and the spectacle of the Astroblack myth was in many ways more important than the literal message. A quick study of two of Sun Ra's most tenured bandmates from his heyday reveals that their engagement with the Astroblack myth was more through interacting with Sun Ra as their band leader than it was through any creedal commitment. John Gilmore, Sun Ra's tenor saxophonist, was very invested in Sun Ra as a musician. In a 1980 interview he praises Sun Ra's theories and practices surrounding music, noting that "his knowledge of intervals and

harmonies, [were] very highly advanced.”<sup>114</sup> Neither Egypt nor outer space feature in this interview. However, music and sound were equally important principles for, and performed music was inseparable from, his Astroblack mythology. Gilmore exhibits a certain amount of pick-and-choose belief here. He doesn’t speak dismissively of the other aspects. He, of course, wore the dress and sang the lyrics, but it doesn’t seem to have otherwise been important to him. The music was enough. The question of whether or not Sun Ra was truly an alien was unimportant. This selective reading of Sun Ra probably wouldn’t have bothered Sun Ra. He explains at one point his stance towards his doctrines and his musicians: “I had to give my musicians some understanding of what I was talking about. Not that they had to believe in it, but they had to know what I was thinking.”<sup>115</sup> Interactional understanding outweighed belief. He engaged in the boogie; everything else was there to serve the music.

Like Gilmore, most of alto saxophonist Marshall Allen’s interviews about Sun Ra focus on Sun Ra’s music. Here he speaks about his first impressions of Sun Ra: “When I heard the music, the music got me, before I even met Sun Ra. It was the music. They had this demo record and he had one or two tunes on it along with other artists. I heard it and I heard the sound and the way he was swinging and I said, ‘Yeah, I like that.’”<sup>116</sup> When he was first faced with some of Sun Ra’s teaching he reports that “it was kind of strange for me, but it was intriguing, but I loved that band and then I wanted to play in it.” He calls it strange, tries to backtrack from that value judgement, and then quickly redirects back to the music. Towards the end of this same interview, Allen does finally address Sun Ra as something like a prophet. He readily admits that Sun Ra predicted space travel

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<sup>114</sup> *Sun Ra -- Make a Joyful Noise*, dir. Robert Mugge, perf. Sun Ra, John Gilmore, Marshall Allen (1981).

<sup>115</sup> Szwed, 101.

<sup>116</sup> Fred Jung, "Interviews," A Fireside Chat with Marshall Allen, accessed December 11, 2016, <http://www.jazzweekly.com/interviews/allen.htm>.

before it was in anyone else's mind, at least as Allen understands the 1940s and 1950s. This is a far cry from affirming his extraterrestrial origins as a scientific fact, but it is an acknowledgement that he experienced the paranormal in the presence of Sun Ra.

The Astroblack Myth is in full force in Sun Ra's 1972 film *Space Is the Place*. The opening scene alone is a perfect culmination of Sun Ra's metaphysical, occult, and nationalist doctrine, wrought with both a musical and visual boogie. This film stars Sun Ra as Sun Ra, an alien jazz musician from outer space. In the opening of the film we see Sun Ra in full Ægyptian regalia on a verdant alien planet, unfamiliar technology floating around him. Visually, this movie is already "astro" and "black." The music in the beginning finds Sun Ra at his most avant-garde. The score is a dense wall of electronic sounds and wailing trumpets, more "astro" than "black," and yet those two become so hard to separate in his work. He muses that this planet is much more peaceful than earth: "the music is different here, the vibrations are different. Not like planet Earth. Planet Earth sounds of guns, anger, frustration."<sup>117</sup> To Sun Ra the universe is entirely infused by vibration, and thus music. Following Gurdjieff and Ouspensky down to the vibrational level, changing vibration will transform individuals, societies, and even entire species. The "black" aspect of Astroblack becomes apparent when he opines, "we'll set up a colony for black people here, see what they can do on a planet all their own without any white people there." As he continues his opening monologue, music comes up again. He wonders aloud how he'll get people to this planet, then suggests "isotope transportation, transmolecularization, or better still transport the whole planet here through music." The this-worldly and the otherworldly are brought together in correspondence through music, aligning with classical American metaphysical movements. In this scene he also announces that time

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<sup>117</sup>Sun Ra, *Space Is the Place*. Until very recently the entire movie was available for streaming in whole. You can now find the entire thing in 15 minute chunks at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4s8VZz-ERO0&list=PLO8jGuXDijv-aknC\\_bIjM6wa8\\_pCzrflA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4s8VZz-ERO0&list=PLO8jGuXDijv-aknC_bIjM6wa8_pCzrflA)

is officially ended. A manipulation of vibrations can impact real change, even transport the entire earth.<sup>118</sup>

Part of Sun Ra's desire to claim alien identity and declare that "Space Is the Place" was actually fairly practical. At times, "Space Is the Place" means that space is a refuge for the black community. Space served a very practical solution. When faced with the issue of finding a geographical location for African Americans to form an independent nation, following in the tradition of Marcus Garvey, Sun Ra suggests outer space. There are no people there to displace. It would be a very efficient way to start over freed from the burdens of white colonialism. In addition, music is the means by which humans enter Sun Ra's version of space. In *Space Is the Place*, this takes on a very literal form. Sun Ra's space ship is run entirely by music. Where you might expect a *Star Trek*-style control panel, there is instead a keyboard.

As the movie progresses, it jumps through time (which Sun Ra has announced "as officially ended") and Sun Ra is now Sonny Ray, a jazz musician at a jazz bar in 1943. Here, Sun Ra/Sonny meets a character known as "The Overlord." He's a diabolical pimp character, who makes a wager with Sun Ra over the fate of the black race. Time shifts again, and Sun Ra comes to earth in his music powered space ship and attempts to recruit members for his mission into outer space. This movie also exemplifies a variation on the elitism and initiation of the Western esoteric traditions. For example, there is a scene where Sun Ra is running an "Outer Space Employment Agency" to recruit for a company called "Spaceways, Incorporated." Sun Ra turns away all three people depicted applying for work. The first man, a white NASA scientist, is turned away directly because of his race and then, to seal the deal, he cannot handle the way Sun Ra speaks of space travel. He is too trapped in his scientific (white) epistemology and is not ready for Sun Ra's mythic (black) way of knowing.



The next man is an unemployed black man. Sun Ra asks him what he can do, to which he replies “nothing.” Sun Ra offers to let him do that for Spaceways Incorporated. The man asks, “How much does it pay?” Sun Ra responds “nothing,” and the man leaves. Blackness alone does not qualify you to join Sun Ra’s rank. He expects more. He needs engaged and spiritual people to go to space and join in the Astroblack myth with him. The final applicant is a white woman, high on marijuana. Sun Ra tells her that “space is not only high, it is also low. It’s the bottomless pit.” Needless to say, she is not good enough for Sun Ra either.

Who would Sun Ra want on his paradise planet? The answer doesn’t stay the same throughout his career. *Space Is the Place* was designed to be a Blaxploitation film, so Sun Ra’s black nationalist feelings are over exaggerated. Sun Ra is looking for people who are willing to step out of time and into his world of myth. The white NASA scientist’s true sin was being too attached to his own white myth, in this case physics. Sun Ra wants people who will embrace their “alter destiny” of a better tomorrow. He wants a spiritual elite, like the Western esotericists before him. Sun Ra carries together the black spirituality of Elijah Muhammad with the occult esotericism of Aleister Crowley.

*Space Is the Place* concludes with a final showdown with The Overlord joined by a group of NASA scientists against Sun Ra. This is framed as white vs. black but also science vs. myth. Sun Ra comes out victorious, but decides to leave the planet. He chooses the black people that will join him in space and leaves the planet, to the shock and awe of those left in his wake. They were not ready for the mythic actions Sun Ra brought to the planet.

Sun Ra continued to record and perform through the 1980s. The character of Lucifer appears again to lend his name to an entire album called *A Fireside Chat with Lucifer* (1982). This album features what might be his most famous work, “Nuclear War.”<sup>119</sup> Commenting on this song,

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<sup>119</sup> Sun Ra, “Nuclear war,” in *A Fireside Chat with Lucifer*, Saturn Records, 1984, CD.

Sun Ra once stated that if he could get 10,000 musicians to all play together they could realign the earth and “melt all the atomic bombs.”<sup>120</sup> Music is not just a means to enter into myth, but also has a quasi-magical purpose. In the same way music can power his spaceship, Sun Ra is once again evoking an occult expectation that his metaphysics don’t just serve an otherworldly gnostic end, but can have an immediate, dare I say magical, impact.

Sun Ra died in 1993, but his Arkestra continues to perform to this day. Marshall Allen is the current leader of the Arkestra. Under his direction since 1995, the Arkestra has stayed on brand. The band continues to wear the same Egypto-sci-fi costumes and continues to publish a monthly newsletter called *The News from Saturn*. On the website, the Arkestra continues to use sci-fi language. For example they use the term “departed the earth” as a euphemism for death. Here we see a devotion to the brand of Sun Ra. It’s important to Marshall Allen that they continue to practice the Astroblack myth like Sun Ra.

Sun Ra demonstrates an alien presence inspired by metaphysical and Western esoteric currents. As he takes his theosophically inflected beliefs and channels them through mid-century science fiction, he takes these marks onto his body, giving his bandmates and his fans a physical-but-paranormal body to be present with and relate to. At the same time, he asserts an African American sensibility onto his sci-fi occult doctrine that of course matches his own race and racialized body. All of this is channeled through his complicated jazz that is at once spiritual, futuristic, and Afro-centric, a solid melding of occulture and boogie as a countercultural religious whole.

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<sup>120</sup> Szwed, 243.

## 6. David Bowie, The Starman Waiting in the Sky

When conceptualizing of Bowie's life, career and death, his unique and very popular boogieing performances are pivotal for framing his perpetual paranormal presence. Kathryn Johnson, assistant curator of the exhibition *David Bowie is....*, views Bowie's approach to performance as an "aspiration to not only use rock as a medium of expression, but to become a medium himself."<sup>121</sup> Consider how this works out for Ziggy Stardust in the logic of the album. Ziggy Stardust is not just an alien messiah sung about in songs, nor a messiah who is incidentally also a musician. His role as pop star is absolutely pivotal to his place as a "leper messiah." He cannot save without his counter-cultural boogie. He is a pop star turned messiah. This was equally as true for Sun Ra and, as I will show in subsequent chapters, describes Christian Vander and Janelle Monáe.

Bowie did not merely sing about the paranormal, he allowed himself to become paranormal, fully manifesting an occulture. As a pop artist, he was ever present in his music and performances. Compare this to a science fiction authors, like Octavia Butler. Her novels are the medium by which her paranormal views are expressed and can be interacted with. She, however, is largely absent from that process. There is nothing paranormal about Octavia Butler. Conversely, even ignoring all the gnostic and messianic themes on *The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, there is still a religious affect to what Bowie was doing when he became Ziggy Stardust. By being present as the Martian Ziggy Stardust, he carried the weight of the occulture he infused in his lyrics.

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<sup>121</sup> Kathryn Johnson, "David Bowie Is," in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J. Power (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 15. "David Bowie is..." is an exhibit built around Bowie artifacts, curated by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2013 and is currently touring museums around the world.

His chosen medium of music helps to manifest real presence in a way a book or even a film cannot. His music “creates an embodied but imaginary space that mediates our internal space (feelings, desires, dreams) with external space (the physical, experienced),” according to Toija Cinque, who continues, “...Music takes us outside our bodies and place while simultaneously reminding us of our location and what it means to live there.”<sup>122</sup> Here, we see a move towards the affective space created by Bowie’s paranormal music. There is a very materially real set of vibrations the body is interpreting in the form of Bowie’s music.

David Bowie was born David Jones in London in 1947. Throughout his childhood he was involved in many musical ventures, allegedly having some skill with the recorder. In the meantime he also picked up the ukulele, saxophone and piano. By the age of fifteen he was organizing and playing in local bands. His first foray into commercial music came in in 1967 with his album *David Bowie*, which was unfortunately a flop. It was after this release that he began acting in commercial and short films, and also touring as a mime.

Bowie broke into both the musical world and the science fiction world with his second album, also titled *David Bowie* (1969), and the breakout single, “Space Oddity,” capturing the space age zeitgeist and referencing Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), gently accessing the occulture. Bowie penned and performed a folk song about an erstwhile astronaut, Major Tom, who experiences the sublimity of seeing the earth from outer space. The skeleton of a science fiction religion is already present in this song. It’s in space that Major Tom has a transcendent and existential moment. He waxes poetic: “Here am I sitting in a tin can far above the world. Planet

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<sup>122</sup> Michael Mooradian Lupro, "Keeping Space Fantastic: The Transformative Journey of Major Tom," in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/time/body/memory*, ed. Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3.

Earth is blue and there's nothing I can do."<sup>123</sup> Bowie writes about an experience of the sublime, as Mendelssohn understands it. He feels small in the face of the immense universe that dwarfs not only him, but his planet. As the song goes on something goes horribly wrong, and this sublimity turns to resignation in the face of the inevitable. Major Tom becomes trapped in space.<sup>124</sup>

A direct reliance on occulture emerges on the album *The Man Who Sold the Earth* (1970). It's most blatant in the song "Afterall," where Bowie croons, "Live till your rebirth and do what you will," reflecting the Thelemic maxim "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law."<sup>125</sup> Here, Bowie is making a very direct reference to Aleister Crowley, who will flavor Bowie's religious world throughout his career. This is a plodding waltzing folk song, with a menacing circus feel and a Moog synthesizer sounding as much like a calliope organ as it can. The sinister feel captures Crowley's self-given reputation of the most wicked man on earth.

"Life on Mars" from *Hunky Dory* (1971), the album immediately preceding *Ziggy Stardust*, is also perceived as a science fiction song although it's hard to say if this song is really about anything. The character in the song is kicked out of her house by her parents and then is stood up by a friend, though why we never learn. She can be perceived as placing her hopes and aspirations into outer space as she wonders "Is there life on Mars?"<sup>126</sup> Otherwise, the lyrics have nothing to do with space. People hear the words "Mars" and connect this song to the science fiction genre.

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<sup>123</sup> David Bowie, "Space Oddity," on *Space Oddity*, with Tony Visconti, Philips, 1969. Track 5 on the "Thesis Playlist"

<sup>124</sup> Lupro, 21. Most people read this as an accident, however Michael Mooradian Lupro suggests Major Tom commits suicide.

<sup>125</sup> David Bowie, "Afterall" on *The Man Who Sold the World*, Mercury Record, 1970.

<sup>126</sup> David Bowie et al., "Is There Life on Mars?," on *Hunky Dory*, RCA, 1971.

Crowley returns, evoked by name, on *Hunky Dory*, in the song “Quicksand.” Bowie sings, “I’m closer to the Golden Dawn, immersed in Crowley’s uniform.”<sup>127</sup> Following this song, the photo on the right of figure 3 was taken between *Hunky Dory* and *Ziggy Stardust* (1972). It is an image of Bowie in Egyptian ware that closely resembles Crowley and the OTO’s ritual “uniform,” on the left.



Figure 3: Bowie channels Crowley in 1971.

It seems Bowie was spiritually invested in aspects of Crowlian thought and was channeling that into a glam-rock photo op. This song also demonstrates Bowie’s many flirtations with fascism through the 1970s. In the next line, he sings that he is “portraying Himmler’s sacred realm of dreamed reality.” Occultism and fascism are not strangers to each other. Himmler and the Nazi Party’s racial views were largely based on a certain racist reading of Blavatsky, and indeed Blavatsky and the Nazis both seemed more interested in Hinduism and Buddhism than they did in Hindus or Buddhists. Himmler, especially, longed for a pre-Christian pagan Europe. Additionally, in World War Two Crowley had first attempted to pitch his Tantric sex magick to Hitler as a weapon to end the war before trying with Winston Churchill.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, there is something fascist about the whole esoteric enterprise. It divides the world between elites who can handle the secret wisdom and those who cannot. It was this milieu Bowie was tapping into. Bowie would go on to praise fascism in

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<sup>127</sup> David Bowie, et al., “Quicksand,” on *Hunky Dory*, RCA, 1971.

<sup>128</sup> Urban, 118.

1976, going so far as to openly admit to *Playboy* reporter that he believes “very strongly in fascism” and holds that “Adolf Hitler was one of the first rock stars.”<sup>129</sup> He would eventually walk back these beliefs and apologize, attributing it largely to his drug use.

*The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) remains David Bowie’s science fiction magnum opus. The album follows Ziggy Stardust and his band, The Spiders from Mars, as they become famous and head to earth. However, the album does not really contain a linear story. Instead it includes songs seemingly about Ziggy Stardust and songs sung by Ziggy Stardust. His many misadventures are accessed indirectly from different points of view. In this album, the diegetic line is blurred, as some songs seem to exist to tell a story but others exist simply to showcase the sort of music Ziggy Stardust would sing.<sup>130</sup> To some extent, it can be conceived of as a musical about a musician. There are diegetic songs sung in the logic of “the story,” though there is not a cohesive plot, as well as non-diegetic songs that tell the story. Sometimes they do both at the

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<sup>129</sup> David Bowie, "Playboy Interview: David Bowie, 1976, " interviewed by Cameron Crowe in *Playboy* Sept, 1976, Playboy Enterprises, 11 Jan. 2016. Web.

<sup>130</sup> It’s important to explain the concept of diegetic and non-diegetic music, so please indulge this lengthy footnote. A good starting place is considering movie soundtracks. The famous opening piece of *Star Wars* is non-diegetic. There is not an imperial orchestra playing the work, the characters cannot hear it, thus it has not impact on the plot. Compare this to the “Cantina Song” at Mos Eisley. This work is diegetic. There are characters on screen playing the music, the other characters can hear it, and in fact, the plot impacts the music. The line becomes blurrier in musical theater. Take for example Broadway’s longest running musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*. This musical takes place within an opera house, thus many of the songs are diegetic. They stage three fictional operas: *Hannibal*, *Il Muto*, and *Don Juan Triumphant*. These songs are song by characters who are opera singers, they can be heard by all other characters in *The Phantom of the Opera*, and are impacted by plot events (i.e., a chandelier falling on the audience ends the performance of *Don Juan Triumphant*). Compare this to “All I Ask of You,” a song sung by Christine and Raul on top of the Paris Opera House. There’s nothing in the plot that suggests these characters had rehearsed this song together, nor is there an orchestra on top of the opera house. This song is non-diegetic. The logic of the plot is suspended so that the emotion of the scene can be expressed through song. You might consider that the music in that scene actually exists on the other side of the fourth wall, it is perceptible to the audience but not the characters on stage. This line is fuzzy for Bowie and, as we’ll see, Monáe.

same time. “Moonage Daydream” is clearly sung by Bowie-Stardust, using first person pronouns to refer to himself as Ziggy Stardust (“I’m a space invader...”).<sup>131</sup> This is a song sung by Ziggy about himself. While it is reasonable to believe that in the logic of the story this song was sung, it also carries the story. We learn who Ziggy is in his own words. He’s “a space invader,” a “momma papa coming for you,” and a “rock’n’rollin’ bitch.”

The song “Ziggy Stardust,” also sung by Bowie with no vocal tricks to mark a different character, is about Ziggy in the third person. If there is a character singing it, it’s actually one of the Spiders. And yet, when it’s sung live, it’s clearly Bowie-Stardust singing it. On the album, this song is sung from the perspective of one of the Spiders from Mars. It starts the story when Ziggy was just one member of the Spiders from Mars, who quickly becomes the breakout star with a “god given ass.”<sup>132</sup> The Spiders then become “his” band. The Spiders don’t like being reduced to a collective second fiddle, and wonder if maybe they should “crush his sweet hands.” Eventually, Ziggy’s ego becomes too big and he falls into the role of “leper messiah.” His fans become so obsessed with him that they kill him.

In “Starman,” Ziggy Stardust is “a Starman waiting in the sky.”<sup>133</sup> This song is sung from the perspective of an earthling, and brings out a different aspect of Ziggy Stardust’s career. Only the elect can hear his “cosmic jive,” but for those who are ready for it, they can receive the message: “let the children use it, let the children lose it, let all the children boogie.” Though this singer never refers to Stardust as “a leper messiah,” you see the character treating him as a messiah character

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<sup>131</sup> David Bowie et al., “Moonage Daydream” on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, RCA Records, 1972, Spotify. Track 6 on “Thesis Playlist”

<sup>132</sup> David Bowie et al., “Ziggy Stardust” on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, RCA Records, 1972, Spotify. Track 7 on “Thesis Playlist.”

<sup>133</sup> David Bowie “Starman.” Track 1 on “Thesis Playlist.”



described in science fiction and musical language. This “Starman” is a super-human character with a special message that might just save humanity, though from what, it’s not quite clear. Many listeners would say he’s trying to stop an impending apocalypse, citing the first song off the album, “Five Years,” which declares that the world is going to end in five years. As for how this song fits into the album-story, I’m inclined to say this song is non-diegetic. It tells the story of Ziggy Stardust, but at no point in the loose story told does it imply an earthling character who would sing about Ziggy Stardust. But then, because Bowie was not concerned with telling a story from start to finish, nor with creating clear delineated characters, this is blurred.

Despite the lack of explicit reliance of Western esoteric traditions in *Ziggy Stardust*, the album relies on a gnostic logic, in fact a techgnosis principle, placing it firmly in the esoteric current. It is “Starman” that lends its lyrics to my title. The Starman reveals to us his message, “let all the children boogie.” In this song, we learn that Ziggy Stardust “would like to come and meet us, but he thinks he’ll blow our minds.” Bowie-Stardust evokes “mind,” the seat of knowledge. Moreover, whatever knowledge he has could be dangerous as it might “blow our minds.” Western esoteric and gnostic traditions are initiatory sects where you learn the secret knowledge as you progress. Learning esoteric facts before you are ready is viewed as dangerous by many groups. So it is with Stardust’s message. This song describes a world that might not be ready for Stardust’s message. It would be too much for them and would “blow” their minds.

The song explains that only the elect are able to hear and understand Stardust’s message. The singer of the song, who can hear the message, goes on to call a friend who is also tuned into the message. They both agree that it would be best not to tell the narrator’s father, who would likely just “lock them up in fright.” This father character is not ready for Stardust’s divine knowledge. This is a hidden, esoteric wisdom. This is also an example of Erik Davis’s theory of techgnosis. Ziggy Stardust doesn’t proclaim his message by means of a heavenly voice. He works with the science and

technology of the day. The song's narrator turns on the radio which is then taken over by "some crazy cosmic jive." Finally, this Starman is going to "land," implying a spaceship. In many ways Stardust resembles a biblical angel character, but his trumpet has been replaced by a speaker, his wings replaced by a UFO. His message is one of techgnosis wed to a musical performance of boogie.

This message serves as an acclamation of the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, which was primarily a youth movement and also one that was religiously inflected, with the occultural shadow of Blavatsky hanging over it.<sup>134</sup> The command to "lose it" can be read as a proclamation to drop social conventions and inhibitions. To "use it" is a pretty clear allusion to drug use, while "boogie" connotes raucous dancing, and perhaps even sex. This is consistent with Bowie's own life as a musician who first cut his teeth in 1968 as the hippie and mod movements were really gaining steam, and then as he turned to pretty serious drug use throughout the 1970s. To an extent he's validating himself, placing his own lifestyle into the mouth of a heavenly messenger that is also him. Ultimately, if a human wants to experience and understand the "Starman," they must boogie. It is a familiarity with this embodied, enjoyable subversion that is a metaphysical goal to strive for.

Other songs have nothing directly to do with the Ziggy Stardust story, but instead serve to demonstrate the sort of music Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars would perform at a Martian show. For example, "Soul Love" is a rumination of love and loss that in no way engages with outer space. "It Ain't Easy" is another song, in fact a cover, which Ziggy Stardust assumedly sings but doesn't otherwise describe Ziggy Stardust, his band, or his time on the planet Earth. What this album offers overall is a set of descriptions of Ziggy Stardust as a gender-bending rock star

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<sup>134</sup> By this I mean Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society's drive to mix East and West, Religion and scientific language can be seen in the way the Beats and hippies began to embrace aspects of Eastern religion.

messianic messenger, with a mission to let the children boogie, who is eventually killed by his own fans.

After the great success of *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie's second album, initially titled *David Bowie*, was rereleased as *Space Oddity*. It became directly connected to the Ziggy Stardust character in the mind of the public. The title song became a song performed by Ziggy Stardust, part of the paranormal canon that held that character at its center. "Life on Mars" also was resurrected for Ziggy, complete with a music video of Bowie-Stardust performing in full glam drag. Whatever is going on through this era musically, David Bowie is never just David Bowie in thought, word, or deed. There is a playful affect afoot where identities can bleed into each other, disappear and be rearranged at different times, always invoking an overarching paranormal affect. His body, personality, even his gender boogie just as much as his music.

Bowie scholar Ian Chapman refers to Ziggy Stardust as an "alien hermaphrodite messianic pop deity."<sup>135</sup> Bowie takes all of these descriptions as marks on his own body, bringing this heavenly Starman into our linear and material plane. Consider these images of Bowie touring as Ziggy Stardust (Figures 1 and 2):



Figure 4: Bowie-Stardust in performance.

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<sup>135</sup> Ian Chapman, "Ziggy's Urban Alienation: Assembling the Heroic Outsider," in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/time/body/memory*, ed. Toiija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37.



Figure 5: Bowie-Stardust Publicity Photo.

Here, we see Bowie move from author of the Ziggy Stardust stories and songs to performer of Ziggy Stardust. With his bizarre, thin body, his pale skin, and permanently dilated eye, "his performative look made the perfect alien outer-body."<sup>136</sup> But then, he goes on to dress the part, with his strange bright red mullet, and the androgynous and "Japonaise" clothing pictured above. His postures too, suggest a certain effeminacy, especially in the second photo where his shoulders are up and uneven, and his legs are spread. This is conventionally a more feminine posture to assume in a photograph. Ziggy Stardust, the "rock 'n' roll bitch" who is also Lady Stardust, is also David Bowie. However, Shelton Waldrep resists the idea that this was a sort of drag, "solely a performance of a woman."<sup>137</sup> Rather he thinks "Bowie called into question the limits of our definitions of gender and sexuality, creating not transvestitism or camp, but the defamiliarization of the body."<sup>138</sup> There's a

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<sup>136</sup> Toija Cinque, "Keeping Space Fantastic: The Transformative Journey of Major Tom," in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/time/body/memory*, ed. Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 260.

<sup>137</sup> Shelton Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 18.

<sup>138</sup> Waldrep, 18.

queerness to the Ziggy Stardust character that has taken on Bowie's body that moves it in a post-gender, perhaps post-human, alien, and paranormal direction.

One less obvious aspect of Bowie's body that Ziggy Stardust impacts is Bowie's voice. While sharing what Waldrep calls the "grain" of Bowie's voice,<sup>139</sup> the *Ziggy Stardust* album is written at a consistently higher pitch than the albums preceding or following. Consider that in "Space Oddity," Bowie's first foray into science fiction lyrics, the lowest note is sung at an e3, a fairly low note for the male voice, and his voice stays primarily in this range.<sup>140</sup> The highest note is a g4, moderately high for a man, but this is a thinly sung harmony note. "Life on Mars" has a similar vocal range. "Five Years," the first album on *Ziggy Stardust*, is sung in basically the same range, with climatic moments sung prominently at g4, however, his signature warble is absent. He's using a different vocal approach. In "Moonage Daydream," a song clearly sung by Ziggy Stardust, referring to himself in the first person, the song is much higher, consistently sung around an f4, one note off what used to be a note reserved for special occasions. He is now hitting notes that are fairly high for a male pop vocalist. "Lady Stardust" is equally as high. His voice begins to lower through his two subsequent albums, *Aladdin Sane* (1973) and *Diamond Dogs* (1974), both still sung by the touring Bowie-Stardust. By *Young Americans* (1975), when Stardust is clearly gone, Bowie's voice is back to the warbling low baritone of the pre-Ziggy era.

On *Ziggy Stardust*, the fact that all characters are voiced by David Bowie confuses what is diegetic and what is not. This becomes even more confusing when he tours, as all songs from the album as well as "Space Oddity," and "Life on Mars" are all being sung by the same Bowie-Stardust body. Even in our linear and material world, the line between David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust is

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<sup>139</sup> Waldrep, 101.

<sup>140</sup> I believe all of my audience is fairly musically literate. Middle C is c4. It's a little low for sopranos, great for altos, comfortable for tenors, and attainable for basses.

never clear. That line is caught up in the subversive dance of boogie. They are assemblages constantly creating each other. The personae, characters, bodies, even timelines fuse in complicated and supernatural ways. Tanja Stark explains, “The multiple (sub)personae...are a fusion of caricatured masks and an underlying psyche that appear a mix of deliberate and unconscious creation, enabling a plethora of public and private projections, transference and countertransference to abound.”<sup>141</sup> This is to say that Ziggy Stardust was not merely a character Bowie wrote a few lyrics about. Nor is he just some costumes inspired by those writings. Stardust became a way for Bowie to live, both on and off stage.

Ziggy Stardust depended on the more fleshed out persona of David Bowie to exist. If there was not an explicitly Ziggy-way to do something, Ziggy would use the Bowie-way. Ziggy shared Bowie’s mom, his friends, and his religious beliefs, for example. This helped make Stardust a literal presence, or “the transcendent breaking into time.” By using Bowie’s body and personality, there was a more real character that truly felt relatable to fans. As essayist Laura Fyssinger once bemusedly told Bowie in an open letter, “If they [Bowie fans] didn’t smell a person inside the fashion spectacle and musical melodrama, you would have been declared a dead lizard years ago.”<sup>142</sup> Bowie’s glamorous but mundane presence was central to the successful paranormal presence of Ziggy Stardust.

Ziggy Stardust is literally present in a way Spock never was. You could meet Leonard Nimoy at conventions, but Spock was just a character on a TV show. During the Ziggy Stardust era, you could meet Stardust. However, Stardust also existed differently than Sun Ra. Herman P. Blount essentially ceased to exist as he gradually realized himself as Sun Ra. Sun Ra died as Sun Ra.

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<sup>141</sup> Tanja Stark, “Crashing out with Sylvian: David Bowie, Carl Jung and the Unconscious,” in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J. Power (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 90.

<sup>142</sup> Laura Finger, “Letter,” in *Creem*, (1983), Found in Kathryn Johnson, 2.

Throughout his life Sun Ra's human and alien body, personality, and beliefs were aligned so there really was no Herman P. Blount. It's hard to say Herman P. Blount even ever existed. He was simply misnamed at his earthly birth. The amalgam of Bowie-Stardust is different. While Bowie and Stardust bleed into each other, there are still two different personae to be pointed at. To return to Orsi's Eucharistic comparison, Ziggy Stardust keeps and depends on the accidents of David Bowie whereas Sun Ra totally consumes Herman P. Blount. For this reason it makes sense to only refer to Sun Ra as Sun Ra, regardless of whether I'm thinking of him as musician, performer, or theologian. However, at times it becomes necessary to parse out if I'm only talking about David Bowie, only Ziggy Stardust, or at times the assemblage of Bowie-Stardust.

Looking back on the end of the Ziggy Stardust era, Bowie hints at just how total the takeover of Ziggy Stardust was. "That fucker would not leave me alone for years," he said, "my whole personality was affected....it became very dangerous."<sup>143</sup> Bowie is suggesting that there were two separate personae sharing a body and a life and that Stardust transgressed the line between them. Stardust had many personality traits in common with Bowie, and many of those remained even after Stardust died. Likewise they shared the same "god given ass," literally, not just metaphorically. Ziggy Stardust became a character that could be interacted with by fans and media on and off stage.

Just as Stardust changed Bowie's body and dress, he also impacted Bowie's behavior and personality. This is very pronounced in the lasting impact on Bowie's sexuality. Leading up to the Ziggy Stardust album, Bowie had played with some androgyny, especially on the cover of *The Man Who Sold the Earth*. However it was after the Ziggy Stardust persona was invoked that Bowie-Stardust began saying in interviews that he was "gay."<sup>144</sup> Indeed, lyrics throughout *Ziggy Stardust* demonstrate

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 91.

Stardust's queerness, especially the song "Lady Stardust." In the later 1970s, he would describe himself instead as bisexual. However, by the early 1980s, he's quoted as saying he was a "closet heterosexual."<sup>145</sup> His sexuality remained fuzzy after that, though reports generally indicate he was having plenty of sex with women, and very little with men. David Bowie had two wives in his life. He married his first wife, Mary Angie Barnett, in 1970 and they were together until 1980. He then married supermodel Iman in 1992. They were together until his death. There are whispers of a long-term relationship with Mick Jagger, but these are unconfirmed. All of this sexual ambiguity is a prime example of the effect Ziggy Stardust had on David Bowie. Stardust was more than just a creation of Bowie's. They formed each other, and lived together, the identities of both always blurring. Because Ziggy Stardust was also Lady Stardust, a queer "rock 'n' roll Bitch," Bowie had to be too, and remained such well after Ziggy Stardust was retired.

Of course, Bowie wasn't only playing with gender, he was playing with religion. Different from Sun Ra, David Bowie never had a pronounced occult philosophy of his own. It's hard to pinpoint what he was reading besides the basics of Crowley, and he didn't pontificate at length as Sun Ra did. He seemed to be more a popular conduit of occulture than a full-on producer of it like Sun Ra. Quotes from Bowie about religion are few and far between outside of his music. In a 1973 interview with the BBC's Russell Harty, Bowie (in casual Stardust drag) is asked if he believes in God. He gives a very quick answer, with precedent in the nineteenth and twentieth century metaphysical movements, and also very typical of 1970s religiosity: "I believe in an energy force. I'd rather not give a name to it."<sup>146</sup> His religious world comes out only in his albums, and only as he mediates and invokes different science fiction characters.

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<sup>144</sup> Melody Maker and Michael Watts, "Flashback: 22 January 1972," *The Guardian* (London), January 22, 2006.

<sup>145</sup> Kurt Loder, "David Bowie: Straight Time," *The Rolling Stones*, May 12, 1983.



*Diamond Dogs* (1974), released two years after *Ziggy Stardust*, marks another science fiction concept album for Bowie-Stardust. This one is more straightforwardly written like a musical, which is to say most of the music is non-diegetic and there is a clear and linear story. This follows a character named Halloween Jack and his gang “the Diamond Dogs” as they experience love and loss in a post-apocalyptic nightmare.<sup>147</sup> Originally planned as a musical based on George Orwell’s *1984*, it exists somewhere between *1984* and *Clockwork Orange*, with a tinge of anticipation for the *Mad Max* world. Technically, Bowie had already ended the Ziggy Stardust era on stage, however he’s still rocking the red mullet throughout this album. It seems the shadow of Stardust is still present in this post-apocalyptic sci-fi work.

Aleister Crowley returns two years later in the song “Station to Station,” from the album *Station to Station* (1976). Bowie sings about a Crowlian understanding of Kabbalah.<sup>148</sup> He suggests, “Here are we, one magical movement from Kether to Malkuth.” Kether and Malkuth are the first and last sephirot in Kabbalah, and Crowley uses them throughout his Thelemic system as well to represent wholeness and unity.<sup>149</sup> In Bowie’s lyrics, they’re used to create an affect that is both romantic and tragic. Their esoteric lineage is hidden in plain sight, perfectly in line with Partridge’s theorization.

After his life as Ziggy Stardust, Bowie was careful to never give Stardust his body again, but Ziggy Stardust continues to be present sonically every time that album is played. Bowie, of course, kept many of the Stardust songs in his repertoire but he sang them as Bowie. However, Bowie

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<sup>146</sup> Russell Harty, prod., "David Bowie," in *Russell Harty Plus*, BBC, January 1973.

<sup>147</sup> David Bowie et al., *Diamond Dogs*, recorded January/February 1974, Jones/Tintoretto Entertainment, 2017, MP3, Spotify.

<sup>148</sup> David Bowie, “Station to Station,” on *Station to Station*, RCA Records, 1976, vinyl recording.

<sup>149</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Wine of the Graal: Little Essays towards Truth* (London: R. Reid, 1938), 28.

doesn't totally abandon the overarching science fiction presence that is central to his religious appeal. As Bowie goes on to sing autobiographically about himself, it is not Ziggy Stardust he resurrects, but instead Major Tom. It's this larger-than-life hero that Bowie decides to keep present in our minds. The character is resurrected eleven years later in the song "Ashes to Ashes" from *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* (1980). This time Tom's poetic side is downplayed. Instead, Bowie sings "Ashes to ashes, funk to funky, we all know Major Tom is a junky."<sup>150</sup> Here, the David Bowie of the 1970s is totally mixed with a persona from 1969. Michael Mooradian Lupro see this as an opening of "more narrative possibilities" by "confusing Bowie's self and his character from 'Space Oddity.'"<sup>151</sup> It was in fact Bowie who was a junky. Lupro explains, "As Bowie molts his last fully formed alternate self [the Thin White Duke] he revisits Major Tom, only this time Tom is more clearly standing in not only for humanity generally, but for Bowie the rock star as well."<sup>152</sup> Major Tom becomes a science fiction scapegoat onto whom Bowie can project his own sins, as listeners share in the process.

Space comes up again in the largely forgotten 1995 track "Hallo Spaceboy."<sup>153</sup> This song is interpreted, largely because of a 1996 remix with the Pet Shop Boys as being about Major Tom. However, this song never evokes Major Tom by name, and it could just as easily be a response to Ziggy Stardust. In fact, the lyric "Do you like girls or boys/It's confusing these days" seems to be more a reference to Bowie's queer identity that was launched by Ziggy Stardust since there's no reason to think Bowie-Tom was anything but straight and cisgender. Whether it's Major Tom or

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<sup>150</sup> David Bowie et. al., "Ashes to Ashes," on *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, RCA Victor, 1980, MP3, Spotify. Track 8 on "Thesis Playlist."

<sup>151</sup> Lupro, 23.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>153</sup> David Bowie, "Hallo Spaceboy," on *1. Outside*, by Brian Eno and David Richards, BMG/Arista/RCA, 1995, MP3, Spotify.

Ziggy Stardust, this Spaceboy is another example of Bowie using a space-age hero as a stand-in for himself. The audience is once again fully immersed in a science fiction world both lyrically and through the heavily electronic production of the song.

Like Major Tom and Ziggy Stardust, religious iconoclasm would follow Bowie throughout his career. In a 2002 interview with French talk show host Guillaume Durand, Bowie discusses his views of religion and modernity: “We have no spiritual lives to speak of...there is no direct sense of what our purpose is anymore. Now that might be a good thing because it might show that we don’t have a purpose. Are we big enough, mature enough to live like that?”<sup>154</sup> Bowie is mapping out a void of meaning in the modern “secular” west, a void that occulture fills. His religion would come up a year later in an Ellen DeGeneres interview from his 2003 *Reality Tour*. He quickly and humorously accounts for his own religious journey: “I went through Nietzsche, Christianity, Satanism, and pottery, and ended up singing.”<sup>155</sup> It’s of course said with jest, though in many ways it’s very accurate. Music became his meaning-making force, augmenting the occultural streams he was privy to.

Major Tom, the stand in for both Bowie and Stardust, appears on Bowie’s final album, *Blackstar* (2016). The video for the titular song depicts a sort of Bowie-meets-Crowley black mass.<sup>156</sup> There is a wealth of esoteric imagery that Bowie and the director, Bo John Renck, draw on but never makes explicit. It’s thus the job of believers and conspiracy theorists to bring them to light. Major Tom has an important visual presence in the music video for “Blackstar.” The video opens with a

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<sup>154</sup> Guillaume Durand, prod., "David Bowie," in *La Grande Édition*, France 2, September 17, 2003.

<sup>155</sup> David Bowie "David Bowie/Tina Fey," interviewed by Ellen Degeneres on *Ellen*, NBC, 23 November 2004.

<sup>156</sup> *Blackstar*, dir. Johan Renck, perf. David Bowie, Youtube.com. The song is Track 9 of Thesis Playlist.

close-up on what is quickly shown to be an Apollo-style space suit, abandoned on an alien planet, evoking the Major Tom character one last time. An alien woman walks up to the space suit, opens the helmet and removes a glamorous jeweled skull. This becomes an interesting conflation of the folksy hero Major Tom and the glam-rock hero of Ziggy Stardust. At the end of the video, the skull returns, as a set of women gather in a circle around it and begin to conduct some sort of ritual with the glam-skull of Major Tom at the center. In this song and video, Bowie writes his own occult requiem, a fitting death of a pop star-alien-theologian-auteur. It was a near perfect blending of his personal boogie and personal occulture.

## 7. “Kobaïa Iss de Hündin:” The Celestial Music of Christian Vander and Magma

The “occult” of occulture is more consistently and explicitly fleshed out in the work of Christian Vander and his band, Magma. More indebted to Sun Ra than David Bowie, Western esotericism motivates the music and story of Christian Vander’s *Kobaïa* stories, as does a continual reliance on gnosis. Vander’s story focuses on a group of humans leaving the earth, ascending into the cosmos, and coming to a state of peace that is realized on the planet Kobaïa. Compare this science fiction account of traveling into space to late antique accounts of prophetic figures ascending through the cosmos as they meet God/Nous such as in *The Book of Enoch*. Both Enoch and the proto-Kobaïans are transformed by the process of ascension as well as the final destination. In line with McGrath’s argument about the common themes of religion and science fiction, there is a family resemblance here. This comparative framework grounds my understanding of Vander as creating a story in line with occulture that must be understood as religious.

Christian Vander was born in France in 1948. He was the stepson of jazz pianist Maurice Vander, putting him within a literal lineage of boogie woogie, even if faintly. Vander began playing drums at a young age, making his public debut when he was thirteen. Throughout the early 1960s he toured with different jazz and rock groups. In 1969 he founded the band Magma, which continues to tour to this day, though Vander has been the only consistent member. Vander is also the sole inventor of the constructed language Magma sings in, Kobaïan.

The band Vander founds, the music he writes, the language he invents, and the story he tells with it are prime example of 1970s occulture. Even if you take away all of the pharaohs and

techgnostic space ships, Christian Vander's work is esoteric in that word's most literal meaning. The constructed language of Kobaïan makes it inaccessible to most. It is a language that exists somewhere between Star Treks' Klingon and pure vocables. The knowledge it conveys is hidden to anyone who cannot speak Kobaïan. While the lyrics do carry literal content, a word for word translation is not possible, as the writing process is such that the words and music happen together. Vander explains, "when I wrote, the sounds [of Kobaïan] came naturally with it—I didn't intellectualize the process by saying 'Ok, now I'm going to write some words in a particular language,' it was really sounds that were coming at the same time as the music."<sup>157</sup> That said, self-initiated fans are willing to do the work to learn the language, and fan-created Kobaïan-English dictionaries can be found online.<sup>158</sup>

The music of Magma is equally wrapped up in the *Kobaïa* mythos, allowing a futuristic paranormal to enter our world through a cacophonous boogie. Vander gives his unique style of progressive rock-jazz fusion a Kobaïan name, *Zeuhl*, which is also a religious name. Vander translates *Zeuhl* into English as "Celestial Music," or, in an even more paranormal vein, as "the spirit that traverses materiality."<sup>159</sup> It is a complicated and heavy style of music inspired by the more experimental works by John Coltrane, the bombacity of Stravinsky, and also a certain fascist aesthetic. This is not easy listening, and those who like it pride themselves on that fact, proudly separating themselves from those who like more popular genres. While it still has the subversive quality of boogie, and is still within the lineage of boogie woogie, Vander's celestial boogie is not as

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<sup>157</sup> "Magma," Lyrics.com, <http://www.lyrics.com/artist/Magma/535203>.

<sup>158</sup> "Kobaïan-French-English Dictionary," Reocities, accessed May 05, 2017, <http://reocities.com/SunsetStrip/Alley/8366/MAGMA-KOBAIAN-dictionary.html>.

<sup>159</sup> Christian Vander and Christophe Rossi, *Christian Vander: À Vie, À Mort, Et Après: Entretien Avec Le Fondateur De Magma* (Paris: Nàive Livres, 2013), 141. "Zeuhl=l'esprit au travers de la matière." All Translations done by author.

popular or accessible as Bowie's. Understanding and enjoying the Kobaïan mythos takes work and creates a tight community of "elite" initiates. It was never intended to play to a Top 40-centered audience.

Christian Vander's Kobaïan mythos tells the most linear story of all the artists considered in this project. Likewise, the divide between diegetic and non-diegetic is the most clear of the four performing artists treated in this paper. The music serves like an epic poem telling the story of the Kobaïans. Unfortunately, all of this straightforwardly linear story telling takes place in a language no one speaks, and with only scant translated liner notes. Thus, his audiences have to piece it together from brief plot summaries, stray Kobaïan words they have learned, and sometimes just imagination. I rely largely on such fans' interpretation, at least for larger and more obvious plot points.

Heavy study has long been a defining practice of Western esoteric traditions. The vernacular was deemed inappropriate for the sacred. The unlettered could not be trusted to interpret sacred texts. This all plays into an elitism that is important to Western esotericism as well. Similarly, one must have a rigorous enough education, and ample free time, to understand Vander's work. It is gnostic at the level of interpretation as well. Vander explains that the lyrics will and should be interpreted differently by different people at different levels of maturity.<sup>160</sup> Layers of meaning, at various layers of initiation, with different truths, are common to esoteric traditions.

The first album, *Kobaïa* (1970), which Vander does explain in French liner notes, traces a community of earthlings as they leave the planet.<sup>161</sup> In fact, they're very angry at the Earth as they

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<sup>160</sup> Vander, *Christian Vander*, 52. "Le Kobaïan est une langue qui deliver des images qui peuvent être interprétées selon le degré de chacun." Or "La perception de chacun évolue en son niveau de maturation."

<sup>161</sup> Christian Vander and Magma, *Kobaïa*, Laurent Thibault, 1970, MP3. I relied on this website for an English translation of Vander's Liner notes: Christian Vander, "Kobaïa," *Mythes Et Legendes: Kobaïa*, May 3, 2008, accessed May 05, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20080503080314/http://myhome.hanafos.com/~jangminsu/magma/MAGMA-MYTHES-kobaia.html>.

leave, and Vander depicts them as spitting at it in disgust while they fly away. They eventually arrive on Kobaïa. Vander explains in the liner notes that the song “Naü Ektila” depicts an untamed Kobaïa where “Nature” is at first hostile to the new Kobaïans, seeing them as “intruders.” He continues, “We exhort her with our songs to open herself and to reveal her marvels. She accepts with benevolence.”<sup>162</sup> Here, similar to how Sun Ra thinks of the power of vibration on his planet, music has immediate paranormal effects on the surrounding environment. This places Vander in line with European occult traditions whose goals were magical and immediate as much as they were mystical, gnostic, and transcendent. At the end of the first album, another band of humans arrives begging for help.

Ægypt doesn’t feature in this first story. However, it motivates Vander outside of the story. He imagines the Magma logo (figure 5) as a sort of Egyptian sigil that a pharaoh might wear. This sigil was meant to be “a strange thing” that “arrives from the cosmos,” perhaps “clinging to earth,” even though it doesn’t belong to it.<sup>163</sup> Since the first album, this symbol is worn by the band during performances, a very subtle way to invoke both the alien and the occult in the physical performance space.

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<sup>162</sup> Christian Vander and Magma, “Liner notes” on *Kobaïa*, Laurent Thibault, 1970, MP3. See also Track 10 on “Thesis Playlist.”

<sup>163</sup> Christian Vander, *Christian Vander*, 48. “...]’imiaginai une chose étrange, innommable, arrivant du cosmos, enserrant la terre.”





Figure 6: Magma's logo meant to be a magical "Egyptian" sigil.

The story is picked up in the second Magma album, *1001° Centigrade* (1971). The Kobaïans return to the planet Earth, and are initially greeted with open arms. The earthlings are intrigued by their advanced spaceship and enticed by the world peace they have managed to establish. However, once the Kobaïans begin preaching the “need for purification” of “men,” the humans become hostile and imprison the Kobaïans on Earth.<sup>164</sup> Breaking with their doctrine of peace and love, the remaining Kobaïans threaten to use their “ultimate weapon” if the humans do not release the Kobaïans.<sup>165</sup> The Kobaïans are released, never to return to Earth.

The third album, and their most popular, *Mëkanik Dëstruktiv` Kömmandöh* (1973), hereafter referred to as *MDK*, keeps this same plot trajectory. This time it is not a Kobaïan that comes to preach their message of peace, but an earthling who remembers the teachings of Kobaïa. This man, Nebëhr Gudahtt, spreads the same message as the Kobaïans, and is met with the same suspicion. This time, enough earthlings have listened to the enlightened Nebëhr Gudahtt that “The Universal Consciousness” comes and speaks to the elite earthlings.<sup>166</sup> Vander explains, “Consciousness now

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<sup>164</sup> Christian Vander, “Liner Notes,” on *Mëkanik Dëstruktiv` Kömmandöh*, Magma, Seventh Records, 1973, MP3. The American release of *MKD* included a summary of the first three albums.

<sup>165</sup> This dissidence between peace and war will be explored a little more when we deal with Christian Vander as fascist.

knows that they are ready to sing the songs of the universe, those that help them find the utmost purity, those that lead to a state of grace.”<sup>167</sup> Vander then outlines the sung “commandments” of the universe as these select listeners-turned-singers in the story “are taken in the whirlwind of the universe.”<sup>168</sup> In the story, Vander’s peculiar brand of boogie carries deep gnostic and cosmological significance.

While different from the specifically dance-based musical gnosis of Ziggy Stardust, this music-based gnosis is better fleshed out theologically than Bowie-Stardust allows. Vander is creating a world with very direct ties to ancient gnosis. The way he evokes “Consciousness” as a divine character has precedence in most gnostic thought. Vander completes the liner notes for *MDK* with another very direct allusion to ancient mythic Judaism. Once Nebëhr Gudahtt’s followers achieve their state of grace and ascend disembodied into space, they are honored even by the “angels and seraphim.” He uses an explicitly Hebrew term to evoke a particular kind of sacred being.

The fully realized Zeuhl-style on *MDK* can be illuminated by a case study within the anthology *Sound, Music, Affect*. Clara Latham uses the psychological theories that went into creating Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) to theorize affect in music.<sup>169</sup> She quotes Albertine Zehm, Schoenberg’s soprano: “The words that we speak should not solely lead to mental concepts, but

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<sup>166</sup> Christian Vander, “Kobaia Is De Hündin” on *Mekanik Destruktiv Kommandöb*, Magma, Seventh Records, 1973. Track 11 on “Thesis Playlist”

<sup>167</sup> Christian Vander, “Liner Notes,” on *Mekanik Destruktiv Kommandöb*, Magma, Seventh Records, 1973, MP3.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> *Pierrot Lunaire* is Arnold Schoenberg iconoclastic 1913 song cycle based on that Commedia dell’arte character. It is an atonal work, meaning there is no home note for the ear to latch on to, as most western music does. It utilizes a melodic singing style he invented called “Sprechstimme.” Literally speech-voice, it is an unholy mixing of the operatic singing voice with a spoken style. All of this is to say it is an odd sounding work.

instead their sound should allow us to partake of their inner experience.”<sup>170</sup> According to Latham, “Zehm wanted the voice to be freed from both the semantic content of the words spoken or sung, and the codified musical objects that the singing voice predictably recreated through accurate technique.” What results from the combination of her performance and Schoenberg’s music is a very unique sound that departs from the art music before it, and doesn’t spawn many progeny. The text is made up mainly of lovely ruminations on the moon. The music is what makes it manic.

The same musical affect, at the expense of the linguistic signifier’s signified, is at play throughout Magma’s work, and *MDK* is the strongest example. The story moves back and forth between angry moments, the Kobaïan disgust for Earth, and the Earth’s perception of Kobaïans as tyrannical. However, this all leads to a moment of gnosis for many earthlings, including a conversation with the universe itself. Side one of the album thus culminates in the recitation of the Universe’s sacred commandments. Musically though, the anger never lets up. The universe speaks in the same voice as both the peaceful (but disgusted) Kobaïans and the militant humans.

The affective space Magma creates is the most fascinating of all these artists, as the split between message and sonic experience are the farthest apart. That is, the sort of music Ziggy Stardust plays matches his message, look, and lyrics generally. Sun Ra has the most developed metaphysics of vibration, sound, and music, so it follows that much of his performances rely primarily on those first two aural productions. Magma, however, has a bipolarity between the boogie of the music and the boogie of the lyrics. Remember, the gist of the mythos revolves around a colony of humans who leave the violent planet Earth and achieve world peace on Kobaïa. Their music, however, is loud, with driving rhythms. This is a sort of musical esotericism. This music, departing from Bowie and Monáe, and directly indebted to Sun Ra, is not written in a top forty style.

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<sup>170</sup> Clara Latham, "Listening to the Talking Cure: Sprechstimme, Hypnosis, and the Sonic Organization of Affect," in *Sound, Music, Affect: Theorizing Sonic Experience*, ed. Marie Thompson and Ian D. Biddle (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 105.

The average western ear is conditioned to hear this music as angry, even militant, the opposite of what the Kobaïans are. Magma's audience reflects the mood of the music, rather than the liner notes. These are not long haired hippies with flowers in the hair. Rather, they wear leather jackets, black jeans, and studded belts.

Magma wants us to experience the divine through this "celestial music" that doesn't obviously reflect the peace and wisdom of Kobaïa. On *MDK*, the musical affect afoot is one attempting to communicate the artistic sublime and the sacred *mysterium tremendum*. There is something beautiful and transformative happening, but equally terrifying. It is delightful and horrible at once. The music is meant to capture that mood and impact listening bodies accordingly. Thus the lyrics, regardless of their literal meaning, serve the larger goal of being "really....scary," to copy Kripal.<sup>171</sup> They hold the two together in a way unique to music.<sup>172</sup>

There is another interpretation of the bombastic nature of Vander's music that would be reckless to ignore, and that is its ties to fascism. There are whispers on the fan sites of Vander's possible Nazi sympathies. There are claims from Vander's contemporary musician Daevid Allen that Vander's apartment was decorated with swastikas. Equally incriminating is an alleged conversation that a former bandmate, Emmanuel Borghi, had with an unnamed Magma fan, where he decoded some of the Kobaïan lyrics as referencing Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. There is also a published interview where Vander describes Indians as "degenerate."<sup>173</sup> Like his contemporary, David Bowie, Vander shows that occultism, rock music, and fascism are often found together. Just as Blavatsky and subsequently the Nazi party appropriated aspects of Hinduism, Vander speaks glowingly of

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<sup>171</sup> Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, Loc 1111.

<sup>172</sup> Wurth, 2.

<sup>173</sup> See Marc, "Some Words About the Recent Controversy With Vander and His Beliefs," Kohntarkosz - The Blog for Magma and Zeuhl Music, November 8, 2009, accessed May 03 2017.

certain black musicians and has described African American music as especially spiritual.<sup>174</sup> This however can be read as more of an occult appropriation of black spirituality rather than a championing of their culture and rights.

In this interpretation, the reason the music is so angry and so prominently features speeches yelled in German gibberish is to create a fascist affect at the expense of the peaceful linguistic message. Listeners are drawn into a world of violence musically, despite the story of a peaceful extra-terrestrial civilization.<sup>175</sup> Remember that Hitler saw his violent regimes as the means to a more pure and ultimately more peaceful society. There is precedence for the peaceful message of Kobaïa being delivered by violent and racist means. The music keeps the viral masculine violence of spiritual fascism present, while the lyrics suggest something more utopic.<sup>176</sup> The sacred, the fascist, and the peaceful all exist together in each musical moment.

Regardless of motives, by *MDK* Christian Vander began imagining himself as a prophet named Zebëhn Straïn dë Geustaah, placing himself in the Kobaïan world. Under this new persona, he is able to channel revelations and stories from Nebëhr Gudahtt, the main character of the album. As with my other case studies, we see Vander-Geustaah identifying as a fantastic character. However, he is not the sci-fi otherworldly messenger that Sun Ra, Bowie-Stardust, and Monáe-Mayweather are. He is an earthly messenger, a prophet more akin to Isaiah or Joseph Smith than

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<sup>174</sup>Vander, *Christian Vander*, 97.

<sup>175</sup> It should be acknowledged that the fans of Magma by and large do not read, or do not want to read, fascism into their music. When rumors of Vander's possible Nazi sympathies work their way through fan forums, they are never enthusiastically accepted. Some fans are absolutely shocked, and most either refuse to believe it or claim the beauty of the music supersedes the composer's alleged politics and racial beliefs.

<sup>176</sup>See minute 4:40 of Christian Vander and Magma, "Kobaïa" on *Kobaïa*, Laurent Thibault, 1970, MP3 or the beginning of Christian Vander and Magma, "Hortz Fur Dehn Stekehr West," on *Mekaniik Destruktiv Kommandöh*. Tracks 12 and 13 on "Thesis Playlist."

Gabriel. His body is the least fantastic of the four, merely a conduit for the paranormal channeled from another source.

Through *Zeuhl*, Vander aims to actuate a goal, fascist or progressive it is hard to say, very similar to that described by Nebähr Gudahtt in *MDK*. For Vander, “the music of Magma offers the possibility of bringing out that part of your “self” that cannot be brought out through other means...”<sup>177</sup> Zeuhl, separate from the literal content or the Kobaïan story, is on its own “a musical style with a message.”<sup>178</sup> For Vander, at least, he and his listeners have the same opportunity for gnosis through his music as Nebähr Gudahtt’s followers had in *MDK*.

The subsequent albums are poorly explained by Vander. A fan, known by the moniker “Shakespeare” on progarchives.com, traces a story that begins with an ancient Egyptian pharaoh and prophet who is eventually murdered for preaching the same message of peace that the Kobaïans will teach in the future.<sup>179</sup> Again in line with Western esoteric currents, Vander has an enduring interest in Ægypt. The Pharaoh character, Ëmähntëht-Ré, enters the Kobaïan mythos in the 1974 album *Köbntarkösz*. This pharaoh character, reminiscent of the legendary Hermes Trismegistus, had unlocked many secrets of life and the universe, and was hoping to attain immortality before being murdered.<sup>180</sup> He becomes the basis for much of the learning the Kobaïans rediscover after they leave the earth.

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<sup>177</sup> Vander, *Christian Vander*, 85. “La musique de Magma offrait la possibilité de fair sortir de so ce que l’on ne pouvat exprimer nuller part ailleurs, une certain folie.”

<sup>178</sup> Vander, *Christian Vander*, 49. “Magma était pour moi une quete pas un musique à message.”

<sup>179</sup> Shakespeare, "The Mythology of Magma," Progressive Rock Music Forum, February 19, 2008, accessed May 03, 2017.

<sup>180</sup> At least, this is how Progarchivist Shakespeare describes it.

Baphomet, a familiar Luciferian character in Western esotericism popularized by Eliaphas Levi and used by Crowley and especially Anton LaVey, makes a visual appearance in the Kobaïan mythos. The album art for their 1976 album *Üdü Wüdü* prominently features a statue of Baphomet to the left of an obelisk with the Magma sigil at its base. To the right is a male angelic figure. They blur into a crisp star-scape. *Üdü Wüdü* is one of the most mysterious Magma albums in terms of plot. There are no liner notes in Kobaïan, French, or English. Progarchivist Shakespeare suggests it may be about a war between Kobaïa and the people of Ork.

Ægypt remains important to Vander throughout his Magma career. He recounts a vision of Egypt he had in 1986, in which he sees a moving statue among the sands. Interacting with this Ægyptian statue allowed him to see where he was “physically, musically, at every level.”<sup>181</sup> He then finds himself split in two and then elevated and filled with the same breath that inspired his idol, jazz musician John Coltrane. Egypt returns to the music in an explicit way with their 2006 release *Ëmëbntëht-Ré*, an album assumedly devoted entirely to the Ægyptian wisdom character first introduced in *Köbntarkösç*.

Magma serves as an interesting foil to Sun Ra in terms of Sun Ra’s use of voice to evoke blackness. Both musics can get very cacophonous, creating a sense of alien disorientation for the listener. However, the voice is used very differently. Harkening back to my discussion of the African and African Americanness evoked musically through Sun Ra’s jazz, his voice is equally black. When Sun Ra sings or chants, he is clearly singing as a black man with a Southern black accent. As much as he insists he’s from Saturn, his voice also marks him as a black Alabamian. June Tyson, his woman

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<sup>181</sup> Vander, *Christina Vander*, 131. “Cett vision m’a montré où j’en étais physiquement, musicalement, à tous les niveaux.” “Je me suis senti happé dans les deux sens, en m’élevant et en descendant. Un respiration intérieure comparable à ce que joaut Coltrane...”

vocalist, also brings an apparently and traditionally black vocal style to his music. The voice remains affectively human and black throughout, bringing out the “black” of “Astroblack.”

The humanity of the voices used in Magma is wrapped in in the cacophony, this time serving other-worldly goals. The voices are very often screaming and yelling, having little to do with human styles of singing, at least as their potential listeners usually hear it. Of course this is all very Euro-centric. Plenty of non-western music styles do involve screaming, especially African styles. The interesting difference is that when Sun Ra uses black musical styles, he uses them in a way that roots his otherworldliness into something human, at the same time tying that black humanity to something otherworldly, thus building the Astroblack myth. Magma, on the other hand, utilizes black styles to create music totally alien.<sup>182</sup> Vander sees in Coltrane the peak of spirituality, which he can only root in another world. The humanity of Coltrane is more abandoned than elevated. Whiteness is implicitly present in the music, and not just through the fascist yelling. The Magma vocalists, especially the women, sing with a classical vibrato, a style linked to an elite western, cultural production, a mark of hyper whiteness, consumed by an alien cacophony as it dissolves into dissonance and screaming.<sup>183</sup>

What truly pushes Magma into the realm of Western esotericism is the literal cult that grew up around Vander and the Kobaïa mythos. This group, which existed briefly around the year 2000 was called the *Ordonnateurs du Rituel Kobaïen*. There were bound to worship Kreuhn Köhrmahn, the god of the Kobaïan universe, and accept Christian Vander’s claim to be a prophet.<sup>184</sup> This devotion to secret writings not meant for the whole world, at least not yet, puts this cult safely into the world

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<sup>182</sup> For more discussion of Magma and black music, see Kevin Holm-Hudson, "Apocalyptic Otherness: Black Music and Extraterrestrial Identity in the Music of Magma," *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 4 (2003).

<sup>184</sup> Holm-Hudson, 492. Unfortunately L’O.R.K.’s website is no longer available. An archive of it is available here: <http://web.archive.org/web/20010210113403/http://listen.to/ork>.



of Western esoteric traditions. Even Sun Ra never had followers who so self-consciously imagined themselves as a discrete religion. For the short time that the *Ordonnateurs* existed as a body, occulture went full circle, moving from a quasi-secret form of esoteric thought moving through consumer culture and back into an organized group akin to the more historical occult orders like the Freemasons and the OTO.

8. “She Is an Alpha Platinum 9000 and She Is Jamming”: Janelle Monáe as Cindi  
Mayweather

Janelle Monáe’s body of work represents an updated sci-fi-musical occulture. Blavatsky’s Theosophical science fiction influence can be seen motivating the entire premise of Janelle Monáe’s multi-album *Metropolis Suite*, a sign of underlying occulture. Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*, which outlines the various “root races” that have led to humans, who are currently part of the fifth root race, anticipates a sixth root race. Blavatsky explains that “occult philosophy teaches that even now, under our very eyes, the new Race and Races are preparing to be formed, and that it is in America that the transformation will take place, and has already silently begun.”<sup>185</sup> Kripal traces this expectation of a new super race throughout *Mutants and Mystics*. According to Blavatsky, superhumans will be more spiritual, but also more powerful, exhibiting clairvoyance and telepathy among other occult skills.<sup>186</sup> This describes Janelle Monáe’s android mythology almost perfectly. Her androids, certainly the ArchAndroid, were born into techgnosis. Blavatsky is never explicit on what this sixth root race will be, leaving room for Monáe-Mayweather and her android kin to fill that role. These androids are in touch with all sorts of mythic worlds, like “Shangri-La,” “Mushroom and Roses,” and “Wondaland.” Following a trans-human line of reason, these androids should already have powers humans do not, if only they were allowed to live up to their potential. Occulture allows androids to be the next, more spiritual root race.

Janelle Monáe was born in Kansas City in 1985. From a very young age she showed an interest in singing, frequently performing at local talent shows. She relates an amusing anecdote

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<sup>185</sup> Found in Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics*, loc. 1073.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, loc 1057 and 1119.

from when she was very young, when she started belting out Michael Jackson's "Bad" in the middle of church.<sup>187</sup> After graduating from high school she attended the American Music and Dance Academy. From there, she began gigging and eventually caught the attention of Big Boi from Outkast. She then released an EP called *The Audition* (2003), which was not released widely, but allowed for the themes and story that will be explored through the rest of her discography and set her up for a much more successful release with her second EP.

Like all of her sci-fi musician progenitors, through her albums Monáe-Mayweather doesn't just tell you to dance, she provides the means. In fact, Monáe-Mayweather's oeuvre is the most consistently up-tempo of all the artists considered in this project. When you listen to her sing in "Tightrope" about "dancing up on them haters" it's hard to not actively dance up on your own haters. Likewise "Come Alive" is as wild and "schizo" as the lyrics suggest you should be in order to "come alive." Because listening to music is such an embodied proposition, it forces you into that liberating and gnostic act. It's all the more liberating when it's resistant music that boogies.

Her musical style, dubbed "cyber-soul," equally puts her audience into an affectively black sonic space with a direct lineage to boogie woogie. Sun Ra was overt in stating that his music was the key to entering the world of the Astroblack myth. The same principle seems implicit in Monáe's work. Listeners directly experience the racialized struggle of Mayweather, who is at once pop star and messiah, through her music. Her musical choices do a lot to play with time, which also informs the story she tells. Nabeel Zuberi, in his article "Is this the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse" outlines how many black musicians use technology and styles to evoke the past and the future at once.<sup>188</sup> Monáe-Mayweather spans many different traditionally black genres in each of her

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<sup>187</sup> Isoul H. Harris, "Out of This World," *American Way, Celebrated Living*, Nexos, January 29, 2017, accessed May 04, 2017, <https://americanwaymagazine.com/out-world>.

three albums, calling upon rap, contemporary R&B, doo wop, and jazz crooning, all progeny of boogie woogie, and all of which boogie. She then musically projects herself into the future the same way musicians have been doing since Sun Ra, through the use of synthesizers. Additionally, she often will have her voice digitally altered to sound purposefully computerized, driving home that we are listening to performances by an android. There is a futuristic affect afoot here, related to Sun Ra. Though Monáe never evokes the term “Astroblack,” she is using the same tools to get her listeners to a similar world of what could be called a “Cyberblack mythology.” This is a technostic music in the same vein as Sun Ra.

More like Bowie than Magma or Sun Ra, Monáe’s religious world is expressed almost entirely through her lyrics. Sun Ra spent much of his time expounding on his musical Astroblack metaphysics in tracts and interviews separate from his music. This is not Monáe’s preoccupation. Religion does not come up in interviews she gives. We know she grew up going to a Baptist church, and this certainly had an impact on her music, but is conspicuously absent in her own religious life.<sup>189</sup> When asked on Twitter about her religious beliefs, she responds shortly and vaguely. Like Bowie’s conception of “an energy” in lieu of “god,” Monáe prefers to refer to “the Universe,” as in “I allow the universe to rearrange and reinvent me.”<sup>190</sup> When tweeted at specifically to explain her religion, she borrows an innocuous phrase from 1 John 4:8, “God is Love.” She goes on to say, “religiously, I love all people.”<sup>191</sup> She allows the *Metropolis* story to spin its own religion, engaging in an act of occulture. Separate from *Metropolis*, she doesn’t have to explain.

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<sup>188</sup> Nabeel Zuberi, "Is This the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse," *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (July 2007): 285.

<sup>189</sup> Harris.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

Monáe's science fiction saga, *The Metropolis Suite*, is told over five parts through the course of three albums (it's unclear if there will be more). The basic trajectory of the story surrounds the character of Cindi Mayweather, an android model Alpha Platinum 9000 number 57821. The story is told slightly out of order. Albums one and two, *Metropolis Suite 1 (The Chase)* (2007) and *The ArchAndroid* (2010), by and large flow linearly. However, the third album, *The Electric Lady* (2013) tells a parallel story that Monáe explains is a prequel to *The ArchAndroid*. The first album, *The Chase*, is marked by non-diegetic music until the final two bonus tracks. The first two tracks, "March of the Wolfmasters" and "Violet Stars Happy Hunting" describe how Mayweather has fallen "desperately in love with a human, Anthony Greendown."<sup>192</sup> Thus she is scheduled for immediate disassembly. In the songs, she details running from the "Wolfmasters," bounty hunters trying to deactivate her. These songs are sung as the action happens, rather than reflecting on them in an in-world performance, thus they are non-diegetic. The third track, "Many Moons," continues to be a reflection on her predicament, but is removed from the immediate action and could be listened to as diegetic.

Throughout this album, dancing is conceived as a means of peaceful resistance. There is more Martin Luther King Jr. than Malcom X in Monáe-Mayweather. On "Violet Stars Happy Hunting" the rap duo the Skunks sing "All my cyboys and cybergirls! /Get up if you gon' get down! /Citizens, pull your pants UP/and cyborgs pull your pants down! /Down yo' ankles and show yo' rust. / Shake yo' chain - you know it's a must!"<sup>193</sup> From the very first song of the saga, boogieing, or "getting down," is set up as a playful but peaceful way to fight oppression. It has a very immediate and practical end. It is not yet a transcendent gnostic act.

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<sup>192</sup> Janelle Monáe, "March of the Wolfmasters," *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, by Big Boi, Bad Boy Records, 2008, MP3.

<sup>193</sup> Janelle Monáe, "Violet Stars Happy Hunting" *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, by Big Boi, Bad Boy Records, 2008, MP3. See Track 14 on "Thesis Playlist."

Monáe follows in Western esotericism's footsteps when she evokes an exotic East in her lyrics. This orientalist strain is first introduced in "Many Moons." This song marks the first time Monáe-Mayweather sings in her messianic "ArchAndroid" voice. She ends the song with an invitation: "Just come with me and I'll take you home/Shang Shang Shang Shangri-La/Na na na na na na na na na." Here she fulfills a more otherworldly soteriological goal. If you follow her, you don't just get freed from servitude, but you can go to a paradise imagined in orientalist terms.<sup>194</sup>

In *The Chase*, the issue of race has a downplayed role, which will become more pronounced in subsequent albums. On the cover of *The Chase Suite* (figure 7), Mayweather appears as literally white. She does not have a human skin color at all.



Figure 7: Album Cover for The Chase Suite where Monáe appears with white android skin.

In fact, in the music video for "Many Moons," she is initially shown as that white metallic character until she flips a switch, turning on her black skin.<sup>195</sup> Throughout the first two albums, the form of

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<sup>194</sup>Shangri-La is not actually a Buddhist term at all, but comes from British author James Hilton's 1933 novel Orientalist adventure novel, *Lost Horizon*. It is a mythical, mystical "lamasery," likely modeled on "Shambhala," which is a true Buddhist heavenly realm.

<sup>195</sup> *Many Moons*, dir. Alan Ferguson, perf. Janelle Monáe, Youtube.com, October 3, 2008. Song is track 15 of "Thesis Playlist."

oppression she takes on is socio-economic, with lines like: “don’t you know when you take off your clothes, all your dreams go down the drain, girl.”<sup>196</sup> This is really a critical suggestion given to her own poor androids. In the music video, the central conflict of the Metropolis story is not coded as black and white. The video depicts a sort of slave auction where the buyers, sellers, and slave-androids are all depicted as black. Through this album, Mayweather actually seems most focused on saving the androids from themselves.

When conceiving of *The Chase* as something performed, rather than a story told, similarities to David Bowie become more pronounced. Like Bowie and Ziggy Stardust, the line between Janelle Monáe and Cindi Mayweather is not clear. In fact, Monáe has stated in interviews that Mayweather is actually made of her DNA, a sort of android-clone. She explains to a bewildered Kurt Andersen in 2010 on *Studio 360*: “Oh yeah. This is real truth. Janelle Monáe in 2719 worked in a superhero surplus store and she was thrown back to 2007. But before they threw her back, the snatchers cloned her body, and Cindi Mayweather has her DNA.”<sup>197</sup> Describing the affect here is complicated. Andersen treats this claim as goofy before and after, even as Monáe answers with a deadly seriousness, with only a nervous laugh after Andersen says, sarcastically, “let me write that down just to keep that straight.”

Of course, this story is absurd and makes no sense. Just before that quote, Monáe was explaining that a song from *The Chase*, “Sincerely, Jane,” was inspired by a letter her mother sent her in 2007, presumably not from the future. There are a few affects at play here. First, like Sun Ra, she’s willing to play with the campiness of this character. And like Sun Ra, rather than undermine the

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<sup>196</sup> Janelle Monáe, “Sincerely Jane,” *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, by Big Boi, Bad Boy Records, 2008, MP3.

<sup>197</sup> Janelle Monáe, "Janelle Monáe, Back from the Future," interview by Kurt Andersen, *Studio 360*, January 1, 2010, accessed May 03, 2017, <http://www.wnyc.org/story/janelle-monae-back-from-future/>.

entire endeavor, the absurdity creates a playful affective space for her religious actions to play out in character with my theory of boogie. The paradoxical, non-sensical trajectory of the story forces the listeners into a sci-fi world of time travel, a religious world of myth where making linear sense is neither necessary nor desirable, and is in fact a form of resistance. She forces her audience into the presence of a new boogieing-sci-fi-mystical logic. Even if they do not buy into the story, they are living in Monáe's own cyberblack myth, to extend Sun Ra's logic.

Monáe is not only indebted to Sun Ra and his myth-building, she also must be juxtaposed to David Bowie and his character-building. Recall that when David Bowie became Ziggy Stardust, or the amalgam Bowie-Stardust, there was a marked change of voice. Bowie-Stardust sings higher than David Bowie. Thus Stardust was mapped onto Bowie's body. The opposite is at work with Janelle Monáe and Cindi Mayweather. Monáe-Mayweather has the same voice as Janelle Monáe. Moreover, it is first through Monáe's body and her voice that we code Mayweather as black. The human voice Mayweather sings with is Monáe's voice, which belongs to a black woman and sings in a black R&B style.<sup>198</sup> Bringing music videos into the *Metropolis* canon, Monáe's body is instantly put into that world, thus when she performs in ours, she carries the coded-black Mayweather. This is an example of Monáe impacting Mayweather, not the other way around. While Monáe-Mayweather closely parallels the Bowie-Stardust relationship in many ways, Monáe's body remains largely unchanged, and this includes her voice. The biggest difference between Stardust and Mayweather is that Mayweather, though separate from Monáe, is a clone of Monáe. Stardust is an alien that shares the

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<sup>198</sup> I'm cautious to assert that there is such a thing as a black voice, lest it appear I am making a claim towards race as a biological reality, thus claiming black voices inherently sound different from other races. Rather, I mean to say her voice is culturally located in black styles of singing. Simply put, she sounds more like historical black singers, especially Ella Fitzgerald, as well as today's black singers. Take for example the track "Dorothy Dandridge Eyes" which she sings with black jazz singer Esperanza Spalding. If you're not specifically listening for it, it's hard to hear when the singers trade off singing. Importantly, she sounds less like her white contemporaries.



accidents of Bowie. Thus, the relationship between Monáe and Mayweather is even stronger.

Mayweather's presence in our world is therefore marked differently from Ziggy Stardust's. It's as if Orsi's theory is working in reverse on Monáe-Mayweather's body and voice, such that a mundane presence (Monáe) is disrupting the supernatural (Mayweather and the city of Metropolis), rather than the supernatural disrupting our time.

As Monáe's presence is mapped onto Mayweather by offering up her black body and identity to the character, so Mayweather maps onto Monáe through her clothing. Monáe and Mayweather both wore a tuxedo from 2008-2014, marking the first three albums of *The Metropolis Suite*. Monáe was never seen in public without her tuxedo and her pompadour, as seen in figure 8.



Figure 8: Monáe in her "black and white" that she wears in "Many Moons" from *The Chase*.

According to Monica L. Miller, Monáe has at various times described her tuxedo as a "superhero uniform," a "weapon," "armor," and essential for her "time travel."<sup>199</sup> For Monáe, the tuxedo carries

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<sup>199</sup> Monica L. Miller, "All Hail the Q.U.E.E.N.: Janelle Monáe and a Tale of the Tux," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2015, no. 37 (2015): 63.

a paranormal weight, linking it to Mayweather, even as Monáe wears it in our world. Miller also projects the ArchAndroid's causes (which are also Monáe's) onto the tuxedo: "the tuxedo seems, above all, to be a vehicle for promulgating progressive ideologies of race, gender, and sexuality."<sup>200</sup> Miller explains how the tuxedo is wrapped into black working class culture. The tuxedo is the uniform of both the upper class and those that serve them, blurring the castes together. So when Monáe-Mayweather appears in our world in her signature tuxedo, we are faced with the image of something both very black and in its own way very futuristic at once.

Shana L. Redmond explores how the tuxedo and costuming is, in Monáe's words, "essential to time travel." Redmond observes: "this uniform refuses periodization as it incorporates the high collars and puffed shoulders of Victorian women's wear with the saddle shoes and mod, slim-cut slacks of the 1950s, thereby demonstrating Monáe's Afro-materialist ability to blur the aesthetic conventions of history and dismiss the trans-historical expectations of the female body by commenting on multiple past moments through one ensemble." Just as she sonically bends time, Monáe's outfit also invites listeners into the presence of a mythology outside of time through material clothing that has been coded black and timeless.

The tuxedo also serves to blur gender boundaries. A tuxedo is a man's formal suit, after all. Likewise, Monáe-Mayweather's hair is done in a tall stiff pompadour, neither particularly masculine nor feminine. Monáe-Mayweather plays with gender and romantic expectations throughout her albums. Mayweather falls for Anthony Greendown, a male human, which is forbidden, and a form of queer love in its own right. Monáe is vague about her own sexuality. When pressed, she answers that she "only date[s] androids."<sup>201</sup> This is not a homosexual response, but still queer as it removes

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<sup>200</sup>Miller, 64.

<sup>201</sup> "RnB Sensation Janelle Monáe Is Here Because We Need Her," Evening Standard, April 10, 2012, accessed May 14, 2017.

her from conventional procreative sex. This queerness is projected through her tuxedoed body as well. Through the tuxedo, Monáe takes on the marks of Cindi Mayweather, but also broadly of many who might be considered “the other.” Her body, which exists in our realm, carries the full mystical, mythical, and pragmatic aspects of Cindi Mayweather.

Her next album, *The ArchAndroid*, continues the trend set up by “Many Moons.” None of the songs detail actions as they happen in a story, but instead tell the story at a remove. Thus the story can be followed if you are willing to connect the dots, but the songs can also be listened to with no reference to Mayweather’s life. On all of the *Metropolis* albums, but especially *The ArchAndroid*, Monáe purposefully obscures the line between Monáe and Mayweather. This is evident in her albums, where it is never clear who is singing any given song and whether the song is diegetic or non-diegetic. There are times when it seems Cindi Mayweather may be singing about herself. Far from undermining the story or even the affect, it drives home a play with time and space central to science fiction and Afrofuturism, and mimics the play of boogie.

Through this album, we learn more about Mayweather’s romance with Anthony Greendown, who we learn is her “maker,” as she sings a love song to him. It’s blurry how diegetic this song is. Later in the album, he replies, but still in the voice of Monáe-Mayweather. In this album, Mayweather deals with her role as “ArchAndroid.” In the song “57821,” it is revealed by Anthony Greendown that she was made with a messianic purpose: “I will show you the ways that I love you/I saved you so you'd save the world/Cause you're the only one.” This is when it’s most explicitly explained that Mayweather is a chosen, even “anointed” one, who can save the world.

The song “Dance or Die” from *The ArchAndroid* expresses the same sentiment of dancing in the face of violence that was introduced in *The Chase*. Monáe-Mayweather sings, “There's a war in all the streets and yes the freaks must dance or die.” All of her lyrics so far depict dancing as means of community liberation. In “Dance or Die,” where music has already been set up as resistance,

dancing is also described as an act that leads to the coming of the ArchAndroid: “We'll keep on dancing till she comes.” “Tightrope,” possibly a diegetic song, serves as a motivational protest song.<sup>202</sup> It prescribes boogieing as a means of individual resistance. Monáe-Mayweather sings, “They love it or they hate it/You dance up on them haters/Keep getting funky on the scene/While they jumpin' round ya/They trying to take all of your dreams/But you can't allow it.”<sup>203</sup> In the face of opposition, she tells her listeners to “dance up on them haters.” Boogieing, in this instance, has a very immediate and practical impact. This serves as more of an anthem to individual difference rather than collective resistance. One should dance in the face of their “haters” as a means to express self-pride. However, her role as the ArchAndroid is suggested when she sings lines like “but I'm another flavor/something like a terminator/I fight for what I believe.”

In a few songs throughout *The ArchAndroid*, dancing takes on a more cosmic and gnostic significance, detached from immediate and material concerns. In the song “Come Alive,” dancing is the act that brings about the titular goal.<sup>204</sup> In this case, boogieing belongs to a metaphysical, self-help form of religion where dancing can cure your of mental hang ups. However, this song can also be understood in a gnostic vein. Compare the line “when everything is wrong I dance inside my mind/that's when I come alive” to McIntosh's definition of gnosis where people are living a “half-life” until they achieve a new level of awareness. In the occultural *Metropolis* universe, dancing can lead to just such a realization.

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<sup>202</sup> Janelle Monáe, “Tightrope,” *The Archandroid*, Bad Boy/Wondaland, 2010, MP3. Track 16 on “Thesis Playlist.”

<sup>203</sup> Janelle Monáe, “Tightrope,” *The ArchAndroid*.

<sup>204</sup> Janelle Monáe, “Come Alive [War of Rose]”, on *The Archandroid*, Bad Boy/Wondaland, 2010, MP3. Track 17 on “Thesis Playlist.”

There are a few varieties of paradise described on *The ArchAndroid* as well. One such place is a mythical club called “Mushrooms and Roses.”<sup>205</sup> It’s within this mythical land that “all the lonely droids and/lovers have their wildest dreams.” The song goes on: “The golden door of our emotions opens here/we’re all virgins to the joys of loving without fear.” It’s within this paradise that the oppressed droids are safe to explore love and sex, important cultural aspects of boogie. The music reflects the lyrics, evocative of a drug trip, and at home in the New Age. This dance friendly heaven is enhanced by a psychedelic feel, courtesy of the slower tempo, 1960s organ, Grateful Dead-esque guitar solos, and the echoing cyborg-produced vocalization from Monáe-Mayweather. A similar notion is expressed in “Wondaland.” In this mythical land androids can dance, and indeed must dance lest they anger the “fairy gods.” Musically, “Wondaland,” evokes a more funk-discotheque descendent of boogie woogie through its particular style of percussion and use of chorus girls. This is a heaven where you boogie, where “you dance to come alive.” Through this version of dancing, religion explicitly enters *The Metropolis* saga.

The occult-inspired mystic orient is evoked again in the *Archandroid* song “Say You’ll Go,” which is peppered with Buddhist references. She sings, possibly to her lover-creator, “Say you’ll go to nirvana /Will you leave Samsara? /In the words of Dhammapada/Who will lead? Who will follow?” These words carry more affective than literal meaning. In the Buddhist tradition, you don’t really “go” to nirvana, it’s not a place. Moreover, she doesn’t explicitly mention anything said in the text of *The Dhammapada*. She is relying on the audience having equal investment in the notion that the East is more spiritual, creating occultural stirrings in her listeners.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Janelle Monáe, “Mushroom and Roses,” *The Archandroid*, Bad Boy/Wondaland, 2010, MP3. Track 18 on “Thesis Playlist.”

<sup>206</sup> See also Partridge’s discussion of the use of the sitar in Western music through the 1960s and 1970s. Adding the sitar is an instant way to make your music feel more “spiritual.” Partridge, *Lyre of Orpheus*, 41.

In *The Electric Lady*, all of the songs are diegetic. The album is comprised of Cindi Mayweather's pop songs that she as a character would actually perform in that world. On this album, the plot of *The Metropolis Suite* is instead revealed through a new character, DJ Crash Crash, and his radio show *Good Morning Midnight*. This is a framing radio show that is playing music for listeners in the *Metropolis* world, as our world listens through Spotify. This album fits into the story's timeline at a time before *The ArchAndroid* when Mayweather is only known as The Electric Lady. There are whispers that Mayweather may be the Archandroid, hinted at by a listener who calls into the radio show. He asks "...if you guys in the android community truly believe that Cindi Mayweather is not just, like, the Electric Lady and all but also the Archandroid."<sup>207</sup> The caller in question, who is human, is instantly shut down by DJ Crash Crash for even suggesting it. On this album, Mayweather is a racial dissident, being hunted by the police, but her cosmic role is not discussed in either the music or the radio show. The role of the Archandroid is too sacred, and thus too dangerous, a "*mysterium tremendum*," to be applied lightly.

The Metropolis world is hinted at obliquely in the lyrics. Her identity as an android is suggested when she sings lines like "Will he approve the way I'm made? /or should I reprogram, deprogram and get down," but only if you are already familiar with the story. Otherwise the line is negligible, easy to ignore. Songs, like "Primetime" and "Look into My Eyes," are straightforward love songs, which work equally as well totally decontextualized from the *Metropolis* saga.<sup>208</sup> "Primetime's" relationship to the android world is more explicitly brought out in the music video

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<sup>207</sup> Janelle Monáe et al., "Our Favorite Fugitive," on *The Electric Lady*, by Roman GianArthur, Kellindo Parker, and Nate "Rocket" Wonder, Bad Boy Records, 2013, MP3, Spotify.

<sup>208</sup> The Metropolis mythos is explicitly read back into "Primetime," in the music video where we see Mayweather working at a club staffed entirely by cyborg women. She is depicted going home with a man, Joey Vice. In the description of the official YouTube music video, Monáe explains that this marks an early romance in Mayweather's life, before she fell for Anthony Greendown.

where Monáe is depicted as a waitress at a sleazy bar who enjoys a relationship with one of her more respectful customers.

The theme of boogieing as peaceful group resistance continues on this album. Consider this line from *The Electric Lady*, spoken not by Mayweather, but by DJ Crash Crash. In a break between songs, a listener calls into the show planning a violent attack on his human oppressors. DJ Crash Crash instantly shuts down that “nano-thinking nonsense,” and instead speaks in agreement with Cindi Mayweather, telling his listeners “don’t throw no rock, don’t break no glass, just shake yo’ ass.” Monáe-Mayweather’s revolution is won through non-violent protest.

“Q.U.E.E.N” shows Monáe-Mayweather at her most culturally and politically potent. Up to this point in *The Metropolis Suite* boogieing had been geared towards self-actualization through individual subversion. “Q.U.E.E.N” is committed primarily to group liberation and collective subversion. The prelude to this song as heard on the music video drives home Monáe-Mayweather’s dangerous subversion which could completely upset the cultural-political norm. The video depicts Monáe (not referred to as Mayweather) as a “legendary rebel.”<sup>209</sup> She has been locked up by the time council for founding “Project Q.U.E.E.N,” a “musical weapons program” and “a freedom movement.” It is a reminder that Monáe-Mayweather’s role as messiah is rooted in a social movement. Boogieing serves the goal of the movement. Had Monáe-Mayweather not been viewed as a threat to the social order she would not have been arrested by the time council. Her boogie does not exist in a vacuum. Monáe-Mayweather’s closing rap expands on her mission to her community as a unit. Her goal is no longer to help individuals “come alive.” She now makes references to her “people,” with an emphasis of them as group. She creates her music not to free the few, but “to free

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<sup>209</sup> Janelle Monáe et al., “(Q.U.E.E.N),” on *The Electric Lady*, by Roman GianArthur, Kellindo Parker, and Nate "Rocket" Wonder, Bad Boy Records, 2013, MP3, Spotify. Track 19 on “Thesis Playlist.”

Kansas City.”

It’s not until *The Electric Lady* that Monáe-Mayweather’s lyrics directly evoke blackness. It is most pronounced when a caller to *Good Morning Midnight* tells potential bounty hunters looking for Cindi that they can “kiss the left and right cheek of [her] black metal ass.” Moreover, dancing becomes a way to express racial pride, tying it to both individual and group resistance. In “Q.U.E.E.N,” from *The Electric Lady*, Monáe-Mayweather asks, “is it peculiar that she twerk in the mirror?”<sup>210</sup> Here she evokes a popular African American form of dancing, which is often tied to roots in African tribal dancing. It’s an update to the boogie, as it is also a joyfully subversive dance rooted in black culture. In that same song, featured artist Erykah Badu continues to champion twerking, proclaiming: “The booty don’t lie.”

In “Q.U.E.E.N,” there are references to the same black nationalist Ægypt that Sun Ra evoked. First, Erykah Badu refers to Monáe-Mayweather and her squad as “Pharaohs.”<sup>211</sup> Then, Monáe-Mayweather goes on to rap “My crown too heavy like Queen Nefertiti/Give me back my pyramid, I’m trying to free Kansas City.” Like Sun Ra, an imagined Ægypt is evoked for its links to African greatness. Moreover this is a heritage that has been stolen from her. She is demanding her pyramids back. With Monáe’s Ægypt, there is less of an emphasis on esoteric and gnostic knowledge than it held for Blavatsky or Crowley. Rather this is a uniquely African American occulture, furthering the black “political theosophy” that Youngquist evokes when describing Sun Ra’s religion. Monáe has no direct interest in the Ægyptian lineage of Western esotericism rooted in the character of Hermes Trismegistus. She has chosen Egypt as a seat of mystic power emphasizing its African-ness more than the arcane aspect that motivates European occult traditions.

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<sup>210</sup> Janelle Monáe et al., “(Q.U.E.E.N).”

<sup>211</sup> Erykah Badu has her own long history of engaging with Nubia as a place of black pride. See this Vice article to explain her Afro-centric religiosity: Clover Hope, "'Baduizm' and the Birth of Erykah Badu the Philosopher," Vice, February 10, 2017, accessed May 04, 2017.



To further the black pride statement of *The Electric Lady*, she brings on many established black artists like Prince and Erykah Badu, as well as more up and coming black artists such as Solange Knowles and Esperanza Spalding. Through these musical choices Monáe evokes a black past and present. Were a listener to be totally ignorant of who the ArchAndroid is, the listener would still be able to hear the culturally African American themes through the music. The listener is brought into the presence of the ArchAndroid, her race, and her message aurally, separate from any direct appeal to narrative logic.

There is one instance on *The Electric Lady* where Monáe strays from a consistent racial visual. Monáe-Mayweather is always seen in a tuxedo through all of her music videos until “The Electric Lady,” where she is instead dressed in a letterman sweater for her sorority “Electro Phi Betas.” She wears other non-tuxedo costumes in subsequent videos. The tuxedo, which was a means for Monáe to connect to a history of race and class struggle, is downplayed throughout this album. At the same time, she wears her hair down in the videos for “The Electric Lady” and “Dance Apocalyptic,” which codes her more clearly as a woman, rather than the androgynous queer-coding of the rigid quaff.

Many of her non-*Metropolis* songs also fit into her metaphysical science fiction world. Her single “Yoga” (2015) brings a Theosophical slant to a western understanding of yoga that has become nothing but stretching in an American context. She opens the music video by levitating in the lotus posture.<sup>212</sup> This is just the sort of spiritual phenomenon and white magic Blavatsky anticipated from “the Eastern adepts, and their powers,” which they developed through yogic

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<sup>212</sup> *Yoga*, dir. Dave Meyers, perf. Janelle Monáe, Youtube.com. Song is Track 20 of “Thesis Playlist.

practice.<sup>213</sup> On its surface, the video is just a flirty work out song, but this song is also part of the occultural stream.

Fans of Monáe are almost always faced with a science fiction world. A 2017 duet with singer Grimes, “Venus Fly,” finds Monáe playing a different paranormal character, this time a bug-like alien. Furthering her sci-fi pop credentials, she sang David Bowie’s “Heroes” for the 2014 FIFA World Cup. Even her 2015 duet with Duran Duran, “Pressure Off,” can’t escape the larger science fiction world, since Duran Duran takes their band name from a *Barbarella* character. Finally, her 2016 appearance in *Hidden Figures* finds Monáe playing a NASA scientist, Mary Jackson, who is pushed to the margins because of her race and gender. Cindi Mayweather is not distant from this marginalized and technologically-savvy character.

Monáe no longer wears her tuxedo. In post-*Electric Lady* music videos, she wears a variety of clothing, whimsical but not as gender-less or time-less. Her hair is no longer the signature androgynous quaff. It seems that, physically, Monáe is separating from the body of Cindi Mayweather, and yet the character is still present. Though she hasn’t released a *Metropolis* album or toured since 2014, during the Women’s March on Washington on January 21<sup>st</sup> 2017, Monáe performed for a cause in alignment with the ArchAndroid’s goals. Monáe appeared on stage with several black mothers whose children had been murdered by police. In a very emotional display, Monáe led a call and response between the mothers and the audience, shouting with the mother the name of the fallen child followed by “say his/her name!”<sup>214</sup> It is at once powerfully relevant and incredibly moving, and it musically and culturally boogies as well. Here, Monáe boogies a dominant white culture that continues to devalue black lives, and implicitly trusts any police action. This is a

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<sup>213</sup> Albanese, loc 4102.

<sup>214</sup> *Janelle Monáe at Women's March: "I March Against the Abuse of Power"*, perf. Janelle Monáe, Youtube.com, January 23, 2017.

cause near and dear to Monáe's heart, separate from Mayweather, and yet it is also the cause of Mayweather. Monáe would not have been in the position to lead this very striking and emotional performance at the Women's March without the fame of Cindi Mayweather. Thus her presence is ever near, even as Monáe moves on to other characters.

## 9. In Relation to the Superhuman

Throughout this thesis I've demonstrated a variety of ways that a science fiction religious worldview can manifest in music. The engagement with science fiction was an important framework to hold Sun Ra, David Bowie, Christian Vander, and Janelle Monáe together. It was important that I tackle four different artists that span different eras, countries, races, and musical styles in order to demonstrate that the mixing of religion, science fiction, and music is not an isolated incident. In fact many more performing artists combine music and science fiction into a religious mode. It was also important to me to show that this was not just a religiosity that exists in an abstract literary way. None of my artists simply wrote religious themes into their work, rather they exist in an occultural way. The study of religion and science fiction is only recently beginning to look at science fiction as a lived religious practice. I have shown that science fiction, and the occulture it contains, has functioned to shift the culture's understanding of what is possible and experience-able. The point was never that Sun Ra, for example, really was from Saturn, only that we know he occupies a space where it makes sense that a jazz artist might need to be from Saturn. This project primarily focused on the religious worlds created by these science fiction creators and performers. One direction this project needs to go from here is towards ethnography of their listeners and fans.

The strains of pop music, science fiction, and occulture holds these four artists together. However it is their differences that make their juxtaposition most striking. Sun Ra's religious worldview manifests as an Astroblack mythical-musical metaphysics. He existed in a cosmos that was infused and enchanted by sound and vibration. This mythic cosmos was accessible to him and others through his music. His was also a cosmos specifically imagined as a safe and transformative space for black people. The music he composed and performed was inflected by blackness at

multiple levels and served to elevate his black community. Sun Ra's is the most fleshed out religious system intellectually. He was the most theologically studied of them, and occult and early black nationalist thought influenced his teachings and his music, and his teachings about music, in important and fascinating ways.

David Bowie breaks from Sun Ra in several ways. He was only an alien for two or three years. But during that time he infused an occult message into a glamorous and strikingly popular medium. I'm not sure if Sun Ra ever wanted to be a global superstar. However, for David Bowie being a rock star was absolutely pivotal to Bowie-Stardust's message. At the end of his life, consider how being a super star was subsumed by the underlying occult beliefs in his life. He sings in "Blackstar" that he is not a "film star," "porn star," "gangster" nor "pop star." He is a "blackstar," a reference to occult understandings of Saturn. Being a popular musician, a "rock 'n' roll bitch" with a "god given ass," was how he lived his occult beliefs, and how his fans were invited to participate in them too.

Magma has the tightest ties to Western esoteric currents. Bowie's direct interactions with historical occultism were generally hidden, bubbling up in only a few of his lyrics over time. However, Vander tells the most cohesive story, and that story is replete with allusions to Ægypt and a Universal Consciousness, tying it to post-Enlightenment esotericism and a much older form of gnosticism. His alleged fascist beliefs only tie him tighter to twentieth century currents of occult esotericism. At the same time, his is the most formally esoteric. The music is dense, its language invented. His fans seem to derive purpose simply out of enjoying the music. They've built a tight community of followers who view themselves as elite.

Janelle Monáe shares a pop star status with David Bowie. Both Cindi Mayweather's and her efficacy depend on popularity. At the same time, she has an explicitly racial telos more in line with Sun Ra's Astroblack myth. She shares with Magma a clearly drawn out story. And like Magma, it is

through this story that her story of racial liberation and personal gnosis is told through her music, which is “Jammin’.” Mayweather’s emphasis on racial pride is continued in Monáe’s life separate from this character. As she bears the physical marks of her ArchAndroid counterpart, she also fights for black women and men, and many other minority groups.

I am fascinated by the way implicit and explicit religion plays out in our pop culture and media sphere. This occulture shapes the content and motivation of the books we read, shows we watch, and the music we listen to. Moreover, if you’ll indulge my Kripalian hyperbole, so much of this pop culture is infused with the occult and with a taste of Madam Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley. It’s a mix of some Christian symbols, tacked onto an exotified “East” with messengers from outer space, just like Blavatsky’s Theosophical currents and Crowley’s Thelema. While a good deal of the world’s population continues to go to church, synagogues, mosques, and temples of our more traditionally conceived world religions, at the same time people are constantly engaging in a culture that is shaped so heavily by occult streams. When fans listen to these four artists or so many other rock, pop, and jazz musicians playing today, they are engaging in another set of religious worldviews. People do not enchant their lives by Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism alone. Our science fiction and our popular music build our cosmos as well. It puts the supernatural into our presence. It’s through these media that people “negotiate what it is to be a human person both in relation to the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman.”<sup>215</sup> Sun Ra, Bowie, Vander, and Monáe have shown how religious philosophies and paranormal presences are brought into people’s lives through science fiction and music.

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<sup>215</sup> Chidester, ii.

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