

Laraaji: Bring On the Sun/Sun Gong

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Daniel Bromfield

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Bring on the Sun belongs firmly in the camp of the self-consciously silly “pop” albums Laraaji makes between his lengthy ambient excursions. This is a man who pays the bills music can’t with workshops on the healing power of laughter, and much of this material—especially the explicitly new age-oriented stuff—would fall flat if not for the old man’s flat-out refusal to take any of it seriously. “*Change by any other name is still change*” might not mean shit to you, but you can still delight in the way Laraaji fits his voice around the words, finding new ways to say each syllable like a blissed-out Young Thug.



Born Edward Larry Gordon in 1943, Laraaji is best-known as a cohort of Brian Eno during his earliest excursions into ambient. He was the star of *Ambient 3: Day of Radiance*, credited to both artists but a Laraaji album in all but production. Save for that album, he languished in healing-shop bargain bins for years before finding himself smack in the middle of the recent new age revival. He’s recorded new albums with Sun Araw and Blues Control, remixed hip samba singer Elza Soares, enjoyed several deluxe reissues and appeared on Light in the Attic’s *I Am the Center* comp, which was largely responsible for the re-evaluation of new age in the first place.

This is the first album since his infiltration into hipster playlists, and what’s amazing about it is how little of his personality has been tempered. Though the new age revival often smooths out the actual new age elements of the music, Laraaji offers them warts and all. No one seems to have told him to tone it down for the jean-jacket crowd. *Bring on the Sun* will not be enjoyed by anyone who’s not already sensitized to this stuff, but it’s a pretty good example of its genre even if Laraaji’s ambient work is usually his best.

His guilelessness is enviable. He delights in the simple sounds of language. On “Open the Gift,” he uses a metaphor about unwrapping the layers hiding the inner light—or something—as an excuse to play with the word “*ribbon*” and bounce his “b” sounds like a ball. “Reborn in Virginia,” a stunning portrait of a summer day in the rural South, uses storyteller language. A “*riggedy-raggedy wagon*” rolls through the landscape, and as he describes eating ripe watermelon, his voice thins to an appreciative whisper. It’s engrossing, and the images are sharp and strange, like his brother wearing a salamander on his head for a laugh (he seems to particularly remember the animals).

There are a few instrumental pieces here, and even they share a certain goofiness. On “Harmonica Drone,” Laraaji enthusiastically puffs on what sounds like a cheap harmonica from a kids’ toy box. The aptly named “Enthusiasm” pairs portentous organ and what sounds like a plucked violin; it’s interrupted halfway through by Laraaji’s yodel, and if you’re planning on falling asleep to this stuff, be warned, Laraaji sings whenever he wants. And “Laraajazzi”—how could Laraaji possibly resist a pun like that?

The album is bookended by two ambient tracks, similar to what he puts on his ambient releases but a little more complex. “Introspection” pairs his trademark zither with a wind chime that seems to sparkle in midair, creating the convincing illusion of suspended motion. “Ocean Sun Zither” is also zither-centric but aided by a tambura drone and distant waves of guitar that crest and splash. They’re fine, but anyone who’s familiar with his great tapes like *Unicorns in Paradise* and *Essence/Universe* might find them a bit short, which brings us to a concerning development in the Laraaji discography.

Laraaji initially worked in tape, the first medium to really allow the kind of uninterrupted long form pieces he made his specialty. His tapes were usually issued on C46, C60, or C90 tapes, each named for the number of minutes they held, and Laraaji took the opportunity to sprawl out. The pieces on *Unicorns in Paradise* and *Sun Zither* stretch to

nearly forty-five minutes each. Vinyl doesn't allow such indulgences, and it's worrying that as his popularity grows in a market that consumes vinyl as its primary physical medium, he may find himself inordinately restricted by the format.

Sun Gong, released a few weeks in advance of *Essence/Universe*, compounds this problem. It's only physically available on vinyl, but in structure, it apes his tapes: two tracks, each minor variations on each other, dictated by a strict instrumental palate. Here, it's a gong, and the first track mostly traffics in the instrument's vibrations, while the second is a bit more percussive and adds a cymbal tap for texture. Together they add up to less than half an hour—a comfortable length for an LP, but hardly long enough to get lost in. Laraaji's music works best when it's given enough room to stretch out to infinity. Even his C90s seem short, to say nothing of what's here.

- Label:
All Saints
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