MY BLACK PAGES

Greg Tate co-founded the Black Rock Coalition and emerged as the pre-eminant critical voice of contemporary African-American music. Now he's employing Butch Morris's Conduction concepts to link the sonic worlds of the Sun Ra Arkestra and Miles Davis's Bitches Brew with the Burnt Sugar Arkestra Chamber.
Story by Thomas Stanley, Photos by Libby McLinn

Champion of abstract expressionism Clement Greenberg observed in his groundbreaking essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to 'experiment', but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Written in 1939 on behalf of a daring generation of white American painters, the directive could also rightly be applied to the leading edge of the musical omniverse built by and in the image of black folk in the New World. All along our trail of tears, our most steadfast project has been the construction of a musical lifeline/time capsule/spaceship that has simultaneously inspired and ultimately eluded imitation and replication on a global scale. And the solemn mandate to keep this culture moving in the midst of more than any race's fair share of ideological confusion and violence has been the heart pushing blood through the magnificent edifice we have all come to know (and need) as Black Music. Evidence of the beating of this heart and the life of its body has always taken the form of a series of cataclysmic and renewing involutions and revolutions in the music that have reconstituted not just how music is made, but perhaps more importantly, how music is heard and felt. Until recently, this chain of quantum thrusts into daring new incarnations had been assumed to be endemic to the music itself. But something has happened. Something grim and foreboding has erupted in the physiology of that musical body. It is as if at some point fairly early in the Reagan administration, we found ourselves frozen between heartbeats.

As Greenberg was, Greg Tate has become a critical colossus of his own time. Tate's writings on topics that tend to revolve tightly around the thematically rich domain of African-American music helped to establish an entirely new literary voice and bracket. As an educator, I've taught from his work. As a writer, I'm always conscious of walking on a trail that Greg is still blazing. Like Greenberg, Tate is an unapologetic partisan. His investments in the outcome of the story have resulted not in distortion as much as an analytic stance solidly about keeping this culture moving.

As if Tate's writing about music (in the *Village Voice* and elsewhere) wasn't enough of a contribution to Black Atlantic cultural advancement, he has also keptactive on the bandstand. In 1985, with Vernon Reid and Konda Mason he formed the Black Rock Coalition "as an organized proactive response to the constrictions that the commercial music industry places on black artists". Tate plays the guitar, although these days, less and less. "It's such a diffusion of energy. If I'm playing I lose the concentration that keeps things flowing from one thing to another." In addition to his work with the BRC, he has

been instrumental in founding bands and forging collaborations. But Burnt Sugar the Arkestra Chamber is the one. A tireless and prolific young ensemble, Burnt Sugar has offered its music as defibrillator for the faint-hearted and in the process made their own bid to keep this culture – as John Africa's followers in Philadelphia would say – on a move.

Audio Drama

Understanding Burnt Sugar requires a triangulation between three trumpet players – one deceased, one living, and one fictional. And although the fictional occupies the mythic gap between life and death, it is with his destruction that we must begin our story. This is how Tate breaks it down:

"I went to the library and got all these books on music one summer when I was about fourteen basically as research for this comic book I wanted to do about a trumpeter in the twenty-first century who stood at the top of this glass city. That was my thing before I got into music – comics and wanting to be a comic book artist. That's all I vaguely remember. I remember that the cat was standing at the zenith of the city about to play his horn and the city was built of these high glass skyscrapers. That was the first image and something just told me you should go to the library and get some books on music. And its weird because the comic book thing just ended right there.

"I got Baraka's *Black Music* [1968]. I got Ralph J. Gleason's book on the San Francisco sound [*The San Francisco Scene*, 1968]. I got the *Rolling Stones* record reviews. I got a book on the physics of acoustics. I got the Frank Kofsky books, the ones he edited – they were these anthologies, one was on rock and one was on jazz, really smart writing about both, a lot about free jazz. And that's where it all began. I read those books and the next week I went to the record store and the first two joints I bought were *In a Silent Way* [Miles Davis, 1969] and Pharaoh's *Thembi* [Pharoah Saunders, 1970]. Those were the first records I ever bought. Before that I was really into Sly and the psychedelic Temptations stuff. I loved the extended nine-minute "Runaway Child" – love that audio drama shit man.

"The record store for brothers buying music was at Dupont Circle and there were two brothers there Tom Paul and Mel. As soon as you walked in they connected with you as a young brother who was into this stuff. It came to define my adolescence in a way I wasn't expecting. I turned a corner from comic books. We had moved to DC in '71-'72 from Dayton, Ohio and it was really on a trip back to Dayton that I encountered all those books. That's when the whole thing kicked off. I think the way hip hop heads are into hip hop now is the way my generation of cats were into all the music. And going to see live shows – that was such a big part of the whole thing. There was so much live music coming through DC on a weekly basis. Like all the funk stuff we went to I mean they practically lived up in DC. It was like the haze of reefer smoke and everybody was bringing their own percussion, bells, and whistles. I was very exploratory; I was reading Rolling Stones so I just be buying anything that folks said was interesting. Records were so cheap then. You could pull anything out of the dollar-ninety-nine/ninety-nine cent bin. By the time I got out of high school, I probably had about five thousand records. It was pretty typical of cats who were into the music. It was really like a Black Cosmopolous of sound that you really got to experience in DC in that particular era. I mean just think about it: you got the go-go thing happening man, and then the punk thing blows up really big and that becomes a part of the flavor too. I mean, 9:30 Club [formerly on F Street] – that's where I met Vernon, playing with Joe Bowie's Defunkt."

Tate's immersion in the wildly mongrelized music scene that characterized radio, concerts, and record collecting in and around Washington, D.C. in the 70s is imprinted in the choices that have shaped his amply productive life. He's not the only product of that time and place that went on to make marks in musical Blackadelica. Like Greg, Paul D. Miller a/k/a DJ Spooky also graduated from DC Public Schools, albeit several years later. Closer to the mark generationally, myself and the two other co-authors of George Clinton and P-Funk's Oral History all grew up in Chocolate City (or its vanilla burbs). I can't say it was in the water, but there was a pervasive musical energy that you could almost reach out and touch. As an African-American teen, for whatever reason, race always functioned as a passport and not a passbook when it came to musical choice. I could move from James Brown's hardest funk to Zappa's most operatic character-driven shit and never felt like I had left home. Tate can trace the range of textures and rhythms in Burnt Sugar's music to those heady boundary-busting days in the nation's capital. Listening to a mixdown of their latest studio work, he compared the experience to "nostalgically waxing on what radio was like when I was in DC."

Tate was also active in DC radio. As "Ironman" his program "Strange Vibrations from the Hardcore" showcased a mix of free jazz and funk at Pacifica affiliate WPFW in the late seventies when all of its operations were crowded into two rooms. "A little storefront operation man. That's when I came in and started doing some stuff. I was there about three years, but I was also doing stuff at HUR before that when I was at Howard. In a sense, that was my musical education, interacting with those cats at the time I did. From the time I got seriously into collecting and listening to music, that's when I intersected with this whole community of cats who were serious about the music many of whom wound up at PFW, people like Art Cromwell and Tom Porter. It was a really interesting time. Bobby [Hill] came in as I was going out. Man, the amount of musical experiences I had in DC in the 70s were just rich and profound and just so varied. The stuff I saw at Crampton [Auditorium]– like Black Uhuru, Steel Pulse, Muhal Richards Big Band. Tom Porter brought that in. He did a three night series called Night of the Purple Moon where Sun Ra played one night, Muhal played one night and Art Ensemble [of Chicago] played one night."

Unlike theorist Greenberg, who got stuck in one moment of radical painting and helped to institutionalize its bohemian rebellion into high-brow hegemony, Tate identifies with the momentum underlying and energizing the great music of the 70s – that last gasp of a certain kind of creativity before the machine ate our big black records and shit them back on us in the form of meticulously packaged and thoughtfully annotated box sets of little silver wafers. Rather than fetishizing the accomplishments of that era, Tate's aesthetic goals are reflective of an overstanding of the need to look not so closely at Jimi or Sun Ra or Miles or Trane as in the direction they were pointing. The vector – energy directed along a path through the living matrix of cultural history – won't allow us to revisit its source point even though we are able to view its position in ever increasing bit depth and resolution as we race away from it. The music that Burnt Sugar pulls out of this deep acquaintance with a particular slab of popular music history isn't a retrograde vision of musical progress at all. And it's only ahead of its time to the extent that this time is a little bit retarded. At its best, it is a perfectly logical musical present. That is, if the future of music hadn't been hijacked back in the eighties, the sound sense that the Burnt Sugar family arrives at would constitute not the periphery but someplace near the center of black ensemble music making in the early twenty-first century. Their music channels its history through a logic of organization and interpretation that does not support rote recapitulation of old school riffs. Burnt Sugar can fill a stage with multiple voices and instrumentalities and sound them all with that elusive resonance that confirms a new musical language.

"You're exactly right on a certain level: It's almost like Burnt Sugar kind of picks up where jazz would have gone in 1980 if there were cats around to push it. It's hard to even talk about. It's not like Wynton shut something down. You had really two generations of cats. You had the cats who put together the great funk bands of the seventies and they did their thing. They did what they were supposed to do through the seventies. And then you had David [Murray], and [Julius] Hemphill, and [Henry] Threadgill and all those cats and they did exactly what they were supposed to do in terms of advanc-

ing the language. What happens is that music departments get run out of Black high schools nation wide. Nobody's got a band anymore. Funk gets run out by disco and crossover R&B. The chittlin' circuit disappeared. There's a transition in terms of the economics of making a hit and touring. As black people became more entrenched in the record industry, then we became the new purveyors of an artificial scarcity of talent. Cats ain't trying to have a movement of individuals out there. They're trying to make a record next month that sounds like the record that was hip the week before. Disco comes in and that's really where a lot of that technology that hip hop uses was originally developed. You had a lot of factors that basically killed the development of experimental Black popular music that had pretty much been the norm through about '77-'78. You know the cats that were the leaders took their thing as far as they could commercially. The only musician who actually represents what black pop music was going to be in the eighties was Prince. What differentiates the seventies from the eighties is that we had twenty Princes in the seventies. It's that weird thing where when there's no money, there's a million Black geniuses running around and as soon as money comes around there can only be one. The industry is not set up to support Black individuality. Thank God for hip hop because that's where the individuality came through in our music in the eighties. It just wasn't instrumentally based."

You Need a Stick

Downstairs at Baldwin Theater, trumpeter Lewis "Flip" Barnes led Burnt Sugar in a benediction prior to a performance that would wrap-up a conference celebrating Duke University Press. (Notably, Duke has recently published *Right to Rock*, an ethnographic history of the Black Rock Coalition written by Maureen Mahon and is set to release *Flyboy 2, The Greg Tate Reader* in 2006.) Barnes is a valued member of New York's creative improvisation community who in addition to blowing with Burnt Sugar, is currently also making brilliant music with bassist William Parker's quartet. As we stood together in a circle, hands clasped, smiling, Flip, the elder member of the band reminded the others in the ring of childhood punishments long past. "They whipped you because they wanted you to understand that there was an order." It wasn't intended as a joke, but some within the band held back a laugh. He's known Tate since the two of them were at Howard University together and he understands that there is indeed a specific order within the operational dynamics of Burnt Sugar. In its inception, Tate chose to ground the ensemble's collective improvisation in varying amounts of the Conduction system developed by Lawrence "Butch" Morris – the second and very much alive trumpet player in our trilogy.

"The interesting history to that was I knew I wanted to use some variation on that system when I put the band together," Tate recalls, "I went to the first conduction at the Kitchen in '85. I knew Butch even before then. I met him when New Music America came to DC in 1984. We've known each other for a long time."

Conduction has figured prominently as an organizational philosophy throughout the life of Burnt Sugar, but it has only recently been implemented as a performance practice. In 2002, the band worked under the direction of conduction's architect, Butch Morris, to produce a rearrangement of Stravinsky's "Le Sacre Du Printemps". The resulting recording *The Rites* yielded some of the most interesting structures the group had produced, but there was nothing easy about bringing Burnt Sugar's easy-going camaraderie under Morris' uncompromising discipline. "When Butch conducts the band, when he's done, people pack their instruments and leave and not a word is said." Tate concedes that the band might have wore Butch out a little. "It's a mutual intimidation factor going on to a certain extent. Sometimes I can see a look in his eye like, 'I got to go to work now'. Actually some of the best work Butch has done with the band has been in the rehearsal studio. Something happened in terms of the band solidifying around the whole conduction concept once he came in."

Tate's assumption of the mantle of conductor has also at times been uneasy. "I didn't feel like I had license to really use his thing. I almost felt like I was kind of crossing a boundary just saying I was doing Conduction but after he worked with us on the *Rites* project, he gave me a baton. He said, 'you need a stick'. You know, the funny thing about New York too, is I was definitely hearing little whispers like, 'he's stealin' Butch's shit'. But once Butch said 'it's cool' -- it is his thing. It's as much his thing as Trane's sound is Trane's sound or Miles sound is Miles sound. That is something he singularly developed."

Tate uses a subset of the key conduction gestures to steer the ensemble through extended improvisations, adjusting their density and moving phrases around to advance the narrative structure of the music. He also augments Morris's patented hand signals by introducing material orally, humming, whistling, or scatting new melodic lines or rhythms. In his student's application, Morris' method takes on both a different social and musical significance. Tate doesn't pretend to be the dominating presence that Morris is on the bandstand. "Butch is the all-seeing eye. He knows when you're sleeping; he knows when you're awake," ponders Tate. And if you are caught asleep? "You're gonna get your head cut off by an optical sword." Flip is one of several members of Burnt Sugar who have also experienced conduction through performance in Morris's own ensembles. He backs Tate up like a schoolboy talking about a mean teacher: "Butch gives you a look, jack. And he always has a knack for that one moment when you turned away just for a second. The whole night I've been looking at you. I just turned away and this is the one time when I turn back around – oh, shit, I'm busted."

Morris is on record saying that he views his system as a "supplement" that can be used to extend the possibilities of any musical situation. As the only place outside of himself where his brand of conduction is in use on a consistent basis, Burnt Sugar does Morris a valuable service. It confirms the utility of his strategy outside of the iconoclasm of his personal presence. In Tate's hands, the conduction baton carves out an entirely different listening experience than what Morris has achieved with his tight reign over innumerable, often highly talented, and in some cases, hastily prepared ensembles. Morris's conduction music often validates itself as fascinating jeweled bubbles of a largely alien intelligence existing somewhere just beyond reach of historical predicates. When things fall in place, a Butch Morris Conduction can rise to the level of sonic thaumaturgy. In contrast, Tate has found a way of using conduction to recombine the more terrestrial traces of his eclectic musical upbringing into novel structures that manage to make sense within frames of reference that are much closer to the street and the social world of everyday people. Obviously and thankfully, this is not an either/or situation.

Like Barnes, pianist Vijay Iyer has navigated the two conduction environments. "Actually I'm not great at taking directions, so I chafe at it sometimes," admits Iyer, "often I do the opposite of what Greg tells me, and keep playing until he gives me the evil eye! I think I'm not alone in this type of behavior. Burnt Sugar's incorporation of not just authoritative order, but also its negation or subversion – actually adds to it, and is part of what gives the band its edge, if you ask me. Sure, Greg is the nominal frontman, but there's always the possibility of him being eclipsed by some eruption from the ranks. And he embraces that possibility, which is a good thing – he's pretty self-effacing as a conductor. Mostly he sets things in motion, rather than micromanages." It would be too easy to try to paint Morris as the compulsive authoritarian. The truth is that Conduction would have never survived for twenty years to offer its uniquely demanding path towards authentically new music if Morris had not insisted from its very beginning on the highest level of adherence. "It's one of those things where Butch has made it so serious for everybody, musicians and audiences alike," Tate allows, "that you can't take it for a joke and you know that even if you don't like the results, he's made it an intense experience; it has a legitimacy that he has created around it."

Preparing to Unprepare

The car in the next lane isn't even that close – maybe a car length ahead. It's a amazing that anything that far away could be loud enough to rattle my bones through the asphalt without liquefying the human behind the wheel. I turn down my radio and hate – hell, that's what I get for trying to listen to NPR. The distance filters out the lame self-aggrandizing vocals, sequenced dance tracks and canned synth pads so that all I'm left with is a low frequency sinew of body-penetrating thuds. Then it hits me. That's a 'dun-dun' pattern synthesized through an 808 and redacted just a touch to fit its 6/8 African essence to a 4/4 syncopated hip hop loop, but this intrusive stream of ghetto noise still knows its African bloodline. The 'dun-dun' section of the djembe orchestra of the Mande people of West Africa plays the polyrhythmic guts of the music. At the core, the biggest drum – the 'dun dun ba' – plays the bass line. When Tate eulogized Miles Davis in 1991, deep bass was one of four distinct elements that he ascribed to the alchemical science of the third and final trumpet player in our story. Whereas Tate may have turned to conduction for the structural schema for Burnt Sugar it was his lifelong fascination with the music of Miles Davis that provided its aesthetic template. Specifically, *Bitches Brew*, Miles's artful, if unwieldy electric project, laid down the guidelines for a kind of small scale orchestration best achieved through an improbable redundancy of instrumentation. Following Miles's cue, Tate formed Burnt Sugar with double doses of keyboard, guitar, drums, and bass and plenty of vocals.

In the small Harlem walk-up he has called home since 1984, Tate plays me the latest studio output from the group. Due to be released early next year, *More than Posthuman, Rise of the Mojosexual Cotillion* is arguably the best in a series of double CDs extruded from Burnt Sugar's seemingly bottomless Arkestra Chamber. Or perhaps I should say bottom-full, with most of the selections anchored on double helpings of deep bass, played by longtime BRC and Burnt Sugar member Jared Nickerson, acoustic bassist Jason DiMatteo, and Tate. "Well Greg is very interested in bass," notes Nickerson, who also plays in the Yohimbe Brothers, co-led by Vernon Reid and DJ Logic. "On various tunes, he actually composed the bass lines which the rest of the band could build their improvisations on top of. The bass parts had to be engaging harmonically and rhythmically. It's not so much that my concept is different in the Burnt Sugar environment, as I'm allowed to produce all the different styles my fingers have garnered over the years."

From Miles, Tate has also taken an extremely important lesson on the relation between musical progress and musical ability. According to Davis, the only way you can get anything truly new to happen is to surround yourself with the best available musicians and force them to play beyond what they know. If nothing else, Burnt Sugar is a concentrated node of hypertrophic ability. It's mélange of voices and traditions, styles and genres is continually being pushed towards the unknown and through the veil. Sometimes there is resistance to that push, as when trumpeter Barnes describes as a "point of frustration" Tate's tendency to spend hours rehearsing material that is then overlooked in performance. Well, it is an Arkestra and the apparent disconnect between rehearsed and performed repertory was a standard feature of Sun Ra's cosmic praxis. "Prepping you to unprep you," Barnes calls it. "We already know what we can do. It's more to prepare you for what you didn't know you could do or you didn't think about doing." The payoff for this apparent profligacy is a freshness that unites Sugar's audiences with the cre-

ative process as much as its terminal product. "The biggest irony of the band," Tate reveals, "is that the tightest stuff we do is always the most unrehearsed. The stuff that sounds like it's the most orchestrated and organized is probably something that came together on the fly.

Like Barnes, Iyer is one of several players within Sugar who has established his own independent identity in jazz. His quartet's latest disc on Savoy, *Reimagining* puts his formidable leadership abilities on display. Within Burnt Sugar, he has often been called on to forward-translate all those luscious splintering electric piano clusters that were played by Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, and Joe Zawinul on Davis' original session. "Seems like I've known Greg forever, but I guess I must have met him in spring 1998 on a visit to New York from Oakland. I moved to New York that December. I've been in Burnt Sugar since its inception in the summer of 1999 as a studio project that was conceived by Greg as an update of *Bitches Brew*. They'd been shopping the idea to different labels. As I recall, this session was sort of pre-conduction for Greg – it was largely improvised by the group, with a few simple cues to play or not play. *Blood on the Leaf* was the resulting album, which wound up being a lot more piano-heavy than I'd anticipated!"

Iyer couldn't make the September concert at Duke. Bruce Mack, Sugar's synthesist was there to bend melodies around rhythmic ideas and harmonic substructures as fast as they were thrown at him. Or he could plant harmonic and rhythmic seeds using unrepentant synth voicings that kept the music from becoming a dated stereotype of "fusion". Mack has been down with Tate from the beginning and has served as president of the BRC and invests considerable energy into mentoring young people.

Voices and text figure prominently and the collection of vocalists that chant, rap, solo, harmonize, and soar, and do all this within the constraints of conduction provide a warmly specific point of human articulation within the aural experience of Burnt Sugar. Lisala Beatty commands soul from a place of personal experience and craft. Her voice has enough color to cut through Sugar's funk without losing its sweetness. Justin Dilla-X is a mercurial stylist whose edgy stage presence stakes out as much theatrical space as his meanly-honed howl claims sonic space. Jeremiah is an incredible young tenor whose living joy shines through an accurate voice that revels in swells inflected with subtle rememberings of Andy Bey, Philip Bailey, and Luther Vandross. Omega Moon is the shadow MC of this so-called jazz project, dipping when called forth into a bucket of sticky cipher that has certainly had its ghetto pass stamped, and its galactic pass too. Not to be forgotten is poet and processed vocalist Latasha Nevada Diggs who stuttered scientific simulacra through a maze of delays and gated distortion at their last Kennedy Center performance. Violinist Mazz Swift can also be heard prominently in Burnt Sugar's broad chorus of bad-ass vocalists. Her interests outside Sugar span Bach, Country, and Irish folk and inform both her playing and choice of song material.

Swift, in combination with cellists Okyung Lee and Julia Kent, give this conduction ensemble the benefit of a very sharp string section. Across the stage, there's a horn section as well. The trumpet of Barnes is often flanked by tenor saxophonist Micah Gaugh, usually seen wearing his trademark oversized bug-eye sunglasses, designed by the same guy that did the shades used in *The Matrix*. I was a bit backed up by Gaugh's input on "Final Daze", a long Ornettish vamp from the new collection that twists a stable (if off-center) pulse, into a branching descent into altered states. Gaugh, who has worked in Cecil Taylor's Big Band, and Barnes have been joined by alto saxophonist Matana Roberts. Her collaboration with bassist Josh Abrams and drummer/percussionist Chad Taylor was one of the of last year's more noticed cds. "It's funny how there's certain roles that I find in the experience of Burnt Sugar that are kind of reversed," observes Barnes of conduction's synergist dispersion of the compositional impulse. "For example, even though I'm a trumpet player I tend to set up different rhythmic directions within my solo that end up being the next idea that Greg will give the c-sign, which means copy and disperse it amongst the band. My role here is I'm much more proactive in being a rhythm motif establisher than a soloist, because I know its going to be utilized, spread around. The intelligence is then shared."

London-born Satch Hoyt plays a beautiful flute, but spends a lot of time laying in the pocket, punctuating the flow percussively from a table of drums, rattles, and other tools. Hoyt is also an acclaimed visual artist, the kind of guy that will crawl around in other people's junk to find the eight track tapes or other material he needs for his installations. The night I caught the band in North Carolina, Trevor Holder was on the drum kit, but Qasim Naqvi often shares that assignment. Rene Akan was the lead guitarist for Faith, another founding band of the BRC and his sound has been a consistently large portion of this Arkestra Chamber's sonic tissue. Morgan Craft can sometimes be heard playing stunt guitar – real time sampling, shortwave, technique extended into hyperspace. And, of course, Greg still picks up the axe from time to time, at least in the studio. In addition to Jared, Jason DiMatteo is available when the band wants an acoustic bass to speak fluently in a vernacular closer to the center of jazz. Not all of these voices are likely to be on stage at any one time, but it's clear that the mission that drives this ensemble is carried forward by an extraordinarily well-heeled community of players.

Massive Paintings

As Tate sees it, the musical advantages of all this excess virtuosity are obvious and the implications of its accretion in one socio-temporal moment are potentially world-shifting. "All the great soloists have that thing of creating these rhythmic schemes that seem to be like popping off from different angles at the same time. It's very quantum," says Tate, an avid science fiction head. "You think the time is over here and then it's moved over here and then its moved ahead here and then it's moved behind the beat. I think that's fundamentally become the way that people who've experienced Afro-Diasporic music in the twentieth century have come to expect their other sensory experiences to unfold. There's something about that that prepared people to play video games. Or that prepared them to channel surf, to expect that kind of variety and novelty, it happened here first. It got in the mind through the ears. Cartoons was the idiom where you begin to dynamically see the impact of jazz on the way that experience was structured, the way that narrative was structured. There's a way in which cinema took a much longer time to escape the rationality of the theatrical unfolding of time. Certainly you had people like Eisenstein and Vertoff that realized that what made cinema was the relationship of the cut to time, to narrative storytelling. The way you could advance or loop back on a story with a cut, the way it allowed you to restructure time. That quality was already in black music in the nineteenth century. That's in Scott Joplin's music."

As I held hands in the basement with the members of Burnt Sugar, I could feel that their solidarity was grounded in a mutual respect and joy in collective work that is rare in any undertaking requiring a large group of people. Much of what is most attractive about this self-consciously theoretical project is an unpretentious humanness, an acceptance among gypsies that wraps their idealism around each other and projects it onto the audience.

"In a way," reflects Iyer, "conduction is the part that's easy to talk about and witness. I admit that it accounts for the grosser structural aspects of the music – the sudden changes, dropouts, shifts, and unlikely synchronies. But the subtler elements are more interesting to me: the way that we've all grown and adapted and learned to listen to each other over these six years, and the way that we've become a kind of community that can accommodate these radically diverging perspectives on modern music. The Sun Ra Arkestra's way of fashioning a community around musical activity has definitely inspired Burnt Sugar's overall approach – not just sonically, but in this particular path. In both Sun Ra's and Burnt Sugar's ensemble musics, you hear evidence of a multitude taking collective action, and the vastness of it can sometimes make your jaw drop."

Tate draws a portion of his inspiration from a black Guyanese painter named Frank Bowling who has strong connections to the expressionist tradition that Clement Greenberg championed. "I remember going out to his studio. It was in Williamsburg. Huge studio – it had about twenty-five years of these massive paintings," Tate recalls. "Frank's work is an interesting combination of his roots in abstract expressionism; his roots in the sensuous qualities of the Guyanese landscape; you know, a Caribbean sense of color; and he is also a huge fan of the music, particularly the music of Coltrane and Pharaoh and Sun Ra. So when you look at his canvases you really see a visual analog to that music and to the cosmological leanings of that music as well. Seeing his work made me realize that we used to make records like this, that were twenty, thirty, forty minutes long, exploring a whole astral soundscape."

"That's something that's definitely been lost," says Tate. "Boldly going where no music has gone before and staying there, going on the journey across metaphorical galaxies and not really caring much about destination or hooks or even musicality at a certain point. It's about how epic can we make this star quest? How much of all that space out there can we catch a glimpse of?"

"I used to romanticize and mythify black music and black musicians," he continues. "What I romanticize now is that energy I feel watching Harlem on a bus coming uptown. That particular thing that animates and electrifies jazz is such a product of the African spirit in the American crucible. And I really couldn't understand this until I moved to Harlem and [started] watching folks deal with the grind of whatever it was that was going to come at them. The amount of pressure and information that black people in the hood are processing on a daily basis; its Katrina everyday on a certain level. Because you don't know where catastrophe is coming from, but catastrophe is lurking. Having to psychologically deal with four generations of your family in the same space just trying to make sure the lights are on; there's food on the table; kids got to school and got home safely; somebody's blood pressure's up; somebody's heart condition kicked in; this one got cancer; this one needs some legs amputated. And the parentheses around that is white supremacy. It's police brutality, you know what I mean, it's the checking and policing and institutional cordoning off of Black folks...Once you understand that the music is not some transcended angelic representation of the life force of Black people. Once you understand that it is just the concourse and discourse of 125 and Lennox Avenue at any given moment – that's where the soul is. The irony is that it's not in the music now to the degree that it is in the people."

Thomas Stanley interviewed Marshall Allen and the Sun Ra Arkestra in STN#13