

## Pharoah Sanders - The Impulse Story (2006)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt* 16:16 2. *The Creator Has a Master Plan* 32:45 3. *Astral Traveling* 5:48 4. *Spiritual Blessing* 5:40 [play](#) Personnel: **Upper Egypt and Lower**

### **Egypt:**

Sanders-tenor saxophone, piccolo, percussion, vocal; Dave Burrell-piano; Sonny Sharrock-electric guitar; Henry Grimes-bass; Nat Bettis-percussion; Roger Blank- drums

### **The Creator Has a Master Plan:**

Pharoah Sanders-tenor saxophone; Julius Watkins-French horn; James Spaulding-flute; Lonnie Liston Smith-piano; Richard Davis, Reggie Workman-bass; Nat Bettis-percussion; Billy Hart-drums; Leon Thomas-vocal, percussion.

### **Astral Traveling:**

Pharoah Sanders-soprano saxophone, percussion; Michael White-violin; Lonnie Liston Smith-electric piano; Cecil McBee-bass; Clifford Jarvis-drums.

### **Spiritual Blessing:**

Pharoah Sanders-soprano saxophone; Joe Bonner-harmonium; Calvin Hill-tamboura; Lawrence Killian-bell tree; John Blue, Jimmy Hopps-percussion; Michael Carvin-drums.

Pharoah Sanders began his recording career as a fully paid-up, card-carrying member of the extreme fringe of the mid-'60s new wave. His first album, in 1964, was for ESP-Disk, a tiny but influential independent run by sonic ninja Bernard Stollman, who was also an early champion of Albert Ayler (he recorded Ayler's world-changing *Spiritual Unity* and *Bells* albums in 1964 and 1965).

In 1965, John Coltrane began regularly calling on Sanders to augment his late-period outer-reaches band. Sanders is one of the saxophonists frightening the horses on *Ascension*, *Live In Seattle* and *Meditations* (recorded in 1965) and *Live At The Village Vanguard Again!* (1966). He's also heard (though poorly, due to the sound quality) on *The Olatunji Concert: The Last Live Recording* (1967).

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But all this while, Sanders was developing his own, more conventionally lyrical, world music-drenched—and, frankly, caned and out of its tree—take on the new wave, sometimes leading his own band, sometimes playing with pianist/harpist Alice Coltrane. After John Coltrane's death in 1967, Sanders and Alice Coltrane continued to follow their tripped-out modal path, creating something which—for want of a better phrase—could be called astral jazz.

Sanders' astral jazz retained his signature sound from the John Coltrane band—harmonics, multiphonics, vocalisations, giddy leaps in pitch—and applied them to a more mellifluous, vamp and ostinato-driven style packed with African and South Asian percussion instruments, world rhythms, bells... and a lot of incense.

In 1966, Impulse! producer/A&R man Bob Thiele offered Sanders his own contract, and a river of outstanding music began to flow. The first album, *Tauhid*, is probably the finest Sanders/Thiele collaboration, and its mesmeric, slow-burning sixteen-minute opener, "Upper Egypt And Lower Egypt," begins this compilation. Guitarist Sonny Sharrock is memorably featured up front. "The Creator Has A Master Plan," from 1969's *Karma*, follows in all its blissed-out 33 minutes of glory.

Pharoah Sanders: *The Impulse Story* is one of ten single-CD artist samplers released as part of the *The House That Trane Built* project. Ashley Kahn, the compiler of this album—and the overall box set and book project—was never going to keep everyone happy. I'd have found room on this album for the berserk drums and whistles romp of "High Life," from 1972's *Wisdom Through Music*, even if meant dropping "Astral Travelling" (from 1970's underwhelming *Thembi*). But the closer here, "Spiritual Blessing," from 1973's *Elevation*, with its concord of harmonium, tamboura and bell tree, deserves inclusion. ---Chris May, [allaboutjazz.com](http://allaboutjazz.com)

Like the Archie Shepp and Alice Coltrane volumes in the *Impulse Story* series, the Pharoah Sanders issue is one of the flawless ones -- despite the fact that it only contains four tracks. Ashley Kahn, author of the book the series is named after, wisely chose tracks with Sanders as a leader rather than as a sideman with John Coltrane (those were documented quite well on the John and Alice volumes). The set begins with "Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt," recorded in 1966 while he was still a member of the Coltrane band. Featuring Sanders on tenor, piccolo,

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percussion, and vocals, it also contains a who's who of the vanguard: pianist Dave Burrell, guitarist Sonny Sharrock, bassist Henry Grimes, percussionist Nat Bettis, and drummer Roger Blank. Sanders could take a disparate group of players like this one and wind them into his sound world. Burrell is the most automatically sympathetic, and lends a hand in creating a series of call-and-response exchanges with Sanders so Sharrock and Grimes follow suit -- not the other way around.

This is also the place where the listener really encounters Sharrock's unique (even iconoclastic) playing -- he performed on Miles Davis' seminal Jack Johnson album but was mixed out. At over 16 minutes, it is barely a hint of what is to come. This cut is followed by Sanders' magnum opus, "The Creator Has a Master Plan." Based on a simple vamp, it unravels into an almost 33-minute textured improvisation that sounds like it could move heaven and earth because it almost literally explodes. Recorded for the Karma album in 1969, "The Creator" also features the late great Leon Thomas on vocals, providing his eerie, deep, and soulful "voice as improvisational instrument" approach that sends the tune soaring. Other sidemen here are bassists Richard Davis and Reggie Workman, James Spaulding, Julius Watkins, pianist Lonnie Liston Smith, Bettis, and drummer Billy Hart. This is where this track belongs, not on the box where it took time and space away from other artists. "Astral Traveling," from the 1970 platter Thembi, follows, with the great violinist Michael White serving as foil to the lyric Pharoah.

The last two tracks really chart Sanders' development not just as an improviser and composer but as a bandleader and in his mastery of the soprano saxophone -- only Steve Lacy and Coltrane did it better. The sprawl is tightened -- this cut is less than six minutes long -- but mainly in the way he leads the band with his approach to the saxophone and its dynamics. Cecil McBee plays bass here and Clifford Jarvis is on drums, and Smith uses an electric piano to fantastic effect. The final cut here, "Spiritual Blessing" from the Elevation album in 1973, is widely regarded as another Sanders classic with the man himself on soprano. He is accompanied by a group of percussionists, including Michael Carvin, Jimmy Hopps, John Blue, and Lawrence Killian. Sanders uses the percussionists as a counter to the featured drone instruments (with Joe Bonner on harmonium and Calvin Hill on tamboura). At just under six minutes, it's a song that perfectly fuses Eastern and Western musical improvisational traditions. Listening to this volume of the course of an hour is literally an aurally expansive and spiritually enlightening experience. If you can only have one of the CDs in this series, this may be the one to snag -- along with Alice Coltrane's chapter, this is spiritual jazz at its very best. ---Thom Jurek, allmusic.com

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