Culture



Pharoah Sanders plays at the Deutsches Jazzfestival in Frankfurt, Germany in 2013. (Wikimedia Commons/Oliver Abel)



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Over 55 years ago, legendary jazz musician Pharoah Sanders recorded a spiritualist masterwork that remains a critical piece of art in 2026.

"The Creator Has a Master Plan," a collaboration with vocalist and poet Leon Thomas, is a 32-minute performance with a liturgical structure and a soaring, spiritual vision. Like St. John of the Cross' "Dark Night of the Soul," the journey — not just the destination — is the catharsis here. But just as a missal can help a newcomer appreciate and make sense of the Mass, "The Creator Has a Master Plan" is most impactful when one knows what to expect and has a guide.

In an interview for The New Yorker in 2020, Sanders, who died in 2022, said he’s "always trying to make something that might sound bad sound beautiful."

Born Ferrell Lee Sanders in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1940, Sanders played clarinet in church as a child before picking up the saxophone in high school. But the racism in Little Rock was unbearable. In an interview for Pollstar, he describes having to play from behind a curtain because "they didn’t want to see black people." So, in 1959 he moved to Oakland, California to live with relatives, where he briefly studied art and music before hitchhiking to New York City in 1961.



Pharoah Sanders plays with Reggie Workman and an unidentified drummer in 1978. (Wikimedia Commons/Einar Einarsson Kvaran)

Like an itinerant friar, Sanders arrived in New York penniless and homeless, with no friends or relatives; only his saxophone. He found a clinic where he could get $5 for donating blood, so he rolled up his sleeves day after day, taking the money to buy food and matinee movie tickets, sleeping in theaters during the day. At night, he would wander in and out of clubs with his saxophone and play small gigs.

As his reputation grew, Sanders took the stage name "Pharoah." Three years after arriving in NYC, he signed his first record deal. In 1988, he won a Grammy Award. In 2016, he received the National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master fellowship, the highest honor for a jazz musician in the U.S.

A master plan indeed.

From the first note of "The Creator Has a Master Plan," you can feel Sanders' intensity, his yearning for God. It feels like an invitation. Then, two minutes in, the tone shifts. The saxophone relaxes as a percussive melody breaks through, followed by a flute before the saxophone returns. This extended theme returns at different points throughout the piece and serves as an anchor, both musically and spiritually.

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At around the seven-minute mark, we hear Leon Thomas assuring us, like a mantra, that the creator has a master plan: "peace and happiness for every man" (changed to "everyone" in later performances). Then, like a koan, he adds that the creator "makes but one demand," that of "peace and happiness throughout the land." Thomas' famous jazz yodelling follows, then gives way to a cry from the heart that brings to mind the Confiteor in its humble declaration of our need for God.

At about 15 minutes, the music begins to come in waves, which get bigger and bigger until it becomes almost impossible to distinguish individual instruments or a discernible pattern. It starts to resemble a chaotic celebration, with more yodelling and a bright, joyous cacophony of sound. But then it turns darker, scarier and more confused than ever, full of sounds almost like screaming: the dark night of the soul, Sanders-style. The contemplative listener will feel their own pain and distress in a

profound way.

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And then, by the 28-minute mark, the piece returns to the grounding melody we remember from the beginning. It’s at that point that I often feel tears drying on my cheeks, like God has broken through the noise and is telling me through the music that, even if I can’t see exactly how, everything is going to be ok. "All things work together for good," as Saint Paul writes. The Creator has a master plan.

In a video tribute to Sanders, the contemporary jazz musician Kamasi Washington says listening to Pharoah is "like taking fried chicken and gravy to space and having a picnic on the moon." It certainly is an out-of-this-world experience. But it can also be an immensely grounding experience, one that reassures us of God's nearness to the listener, right here on ordinary earth.