

## ON SCREEN



**Sun Ra: Do the Impossible (by Christine Turner)**  
**Sun Ra and His Arkestra (Firelight Films)**  
 by Paul Gaita

When asked, “How do you decide what’s going to come out on Saturn Records?” Sun Ra, pianist, composer, big band leader, avant garde pioneer, Afrofuturist and mercurial emperor of the galaxy, replied: “Whatever I think people aren’t going to listen to.” At first blush, the statement sounds another indication of his eccentricity—a label slapped on Sun Ra throughout his career, and one that that the documentary *Sun Ra: Do the Impossible*

seeks to contextualize (though not dispel entirely). But as he later says in the interview clip, he wasn’t making music for the here and now—those concepts didn’t really exist in his interplanetary philosophy, anyway. Sun Ra’s music was for people to discover decades later, once they had freed themselves from preconceived notions about their history and destiny. Consider producer-director Christine Turner’s excellent exploration, which aired on PBS’ “American Masters” series, your ticket to the spaceways.

*Do the Impossible* is, in one sense, a traditional documentary, detailing Sun Ra’s transition from pianist Herman “Sonny” Blount to sonic Afonaut and eternal pharaoh through archival footage and interviews. Plenty of his fellow travelers in various iterations of his big band, the Arkestra, fill out the latter, including centenarian Marshall Allen (Sun Ra’s successor as longtime Arkestra leader), Ahmed Abdullah and Cheryl Banks-Smith, as well as a host of scholars and authors (among them Ishmael Reed) and musicians such as DJ Spooky. Through them, we follow Sun Ra from Alabama to Chicago, where he

sowed the seeds of his unique perspective—a mix of ancient mythology, Black activism and scholarship, and futuristic aspirations that he would carry over into his music with the Arkestra and daily life, which at times orbited a cult-like ethos. But Turner also follows Ra’s lead and lets the music take her film and the viewer beyond simple history. The film is ripe with stunning visuals and animation, much of it evoking the Pop Art science fiction imagery of Ra albums and his Arkestra’s remarkable stage costumes. These moments allow the viewer to, quite frankly, coast the spaceways with the music, to soak up the fusion of past and present, myth and fantasy, and hopes and dreams that coursed through his vast body of musical work.

For longtime admirers, *Do the Impossible* gives Sun Ra an appropriately cosmic scope and grandeur. For first-timers, this is the first-class ticket they need to explore the awe and mystery of his work.

For more info visit [firelightfilms.to/films](http://firelightfilms.to/films). Marshall Allen is at *Grounds for Sculpture (Hamilton, NJ)*. See *100 Miles Out*.



**The Analects of Confucius**  
**Misha Mengelberg/Sabu Toyozumi**  
**(NoBusiness-Chap Chap)**  
**Sun's Blessings**  
**Sunny Murray/Sabu Toyozumi (NoBusiness)**  
 by Kurt Gottschalk

The Lithuanian label NoBusiness has made a basement industry releasing works by drummer Sabu Toyozumi, whose catalog includes titles with Lol Coxhill, Barre Phillips, Fred Frith, Wadada Leo Smith and members of the ICP Orchestra. NoBusiness’ releases pair the drummer (who turns 83 this month) with Derek Bailey, Peter Brötzmann, Mats Gustafsson and Paul Rutherford. He has, of course, worked with a host of musicians from his native Japan as well, but the work with European players has brought him international attention.

Toyozumi’s connection with the members of the longstanding Dutch dada-jazz Instant Composers Pool (ICP) seems to be a special one. *The Analects of Confucius*, recorded in 2000, opens with the 40-minute “my guru MM” (about half the album’s run time), a dedication to his duo partner, ICP co-founder Misha Mengelberg (1935-2017), eight years his senior. The set could certainly have been subdivided; it’s surely impromptu but nicely sequential. Each takes solo passages, and together they discover unpolished ballads and jagged stillness and dive headlong into headstrong tumult. Mengelberg’s solo “song for AMY” is surprisingly somber, but played in a sort of Chopin syncopation. The repose is broken by a percussive snap, initiating a rowdy rag and the 20-minute “teremakashi to forest of KEYAGU”. But Toyozumi is a restless percussionist and they’re soon off on another suite-of-consciousness, a bit more gelled this time and incorporating a lovely motif. There’s no other way to conclude, if you’re Mengelberg, than Monk. The duo spends a joyous four minutes with “Off Minor”, Toyozumi hitting such a commanding stride that Mengelberg all but drops out, adding sparse, single notes.

The Toyozumi/Sunny Murray duo *Sun's Blessings* (recorded in 1999) comes off something like a four-handed

solo. The players aren’t hard-panned left/right, making the recording both literally and figuratively out-of-sight. They tumble and roll with momentum and finesse, as if expanding under pressure. My ear-read of the first half dozen minutes is that Murray plays a fine if unsurprising solo and, at some length, Toyozumi comes in with a low tom roll. This sets up a division of personality, Toyozumi actively accentuating, not restrained, but offering supportive commentary on the pronouncements of the master, 15 years his senior. As on the Mengelberg meeting, the dynamic comes together after an extended opener. After the 50-minute “Mischievous Saga”, the 15 minutes of “Brave Warriors” establishes a groove. They pound away at it quite convincingly.

The Sabu subseries albums are room recordings with reasonably good sound and nicely designed covers with a common, calligraphic design. The sound quality is less than stellar but more than merely acceptable. On the trap duets, however, the thin fidelity becomes a small liability. The low end is muffled, the snare snaps harsh—nowhere near the point of unlistenability, but still skimming off the pleasure factor. But NoBusiness is in the business of preserving some vital history; dedicated listeners will reap rewards.

For more info visit [nobusinessrecords.com](http://nobusinessrecords.com)



**Kind Of Now: The Pulse of Miles Davis**  
**Gregory Hutchinson (Warner Music)**  
 by Jeff Cebulski

Among the recorded tributes to Miles Davis in his centenary year, *Kind Of Now: The Pulse of Miles Davis*, led by the estimable drummer Gregory Hutchinson, offers striking new versions representing Davis’ modern career (plus three originals) that move the tradition forward. Hutchinson deftly formed an ensemble of versatile musicians who display great rapport while capturing the spirit of the originals and

casting interpretive light upon them.

The core trio here shines, impressively interpreting and extending the drummer’s ability to hold the center. Bassist Joe Sanders’ compatibility with Hutchinson provides a crucial pocket and pianist Gerald Clayton’s harmonic counterpointing, both acoustic and electric, recalls Herbie Hancock’s presence. Guests include: Ambrose Akinmusire (trumpet), taking on the various forms of Miles with aplomb; Ron Blake (tenor, bass clarinet), creating a keen partnership with Akinmusire that leads to some striking interplay; and two genius additions in postmodernists Jakob Bro and Emmanuel Michael (guitars), each applying their angular, atmospheric styles to compositions from Davis’ late ’60s output.

On “Ah-leu-cha”, the horn players dig in for the theme before Sanders makes his presence known with a crisp solo that heralds an intervallic rhythm portion, an arrangement philosophy Hutchinson applies: a musician leading off with an opening refrain before arriving at the melodic point. Clayton’s intro to “Fran-Dance” is exquisite, and he is given rein over the trio rendition. An abstract, electronic guitar duet intro anoints Wayne Shorter’s “Fall”, which rides the elongated lines from Akinmusire’s horn and understated electric comping from Clayton, with Blake uncannily channeling Shorter. “Orbits” is led by the trumpeter’s frenetic solo, as the band delivers an animated ride, highlighted by Sanders and Hutchinson’s deep pocket. The guitarists open Shorter’s spooky “Feio”, maintaining the original’s atmospheric keyboard ambiance, while Akinmusire and Blake punch in truncated and elastic comments. Bro’s echoed chords give “Water Babies” another chromatic layer, and Michael’s dreamy intro to “Circle in the Round” presages a John McLaughlin-ish display before a typically lyrical Clayton solo leads to a horn refrain supported by Hutchinson’s Tony Williams-like counterpoint. And when the jazz returns to post-bop, the ensemble cooks on “Seven Steps to Heaven”, where Blake does his George Coleman best atop Clayton’s marvelous comping.

On *Kind Of Now*, Gregory Hutchinson’s leadership produces that rare tribute album that encourages the listener to go back to the originals, to find the music that inspired such a unique effort.

For more info visit [facebook.com/gregoryhutchinsonmusic](http://facebook.com/gregoryhutchinsonmusic). The album release concert is at 92NY’s “Jazz in July” Jul. 18. See *Calendar*.