

Door to the Cosmos

The great Sun Ra (1914–'93) touched down on planet Earth 100 years ago. In decades past, this milestone would have meant labels assembling tasty box sets filled with classic material, session outtakes, hopefully a remastering job, rare photos and some insightful liner notes.

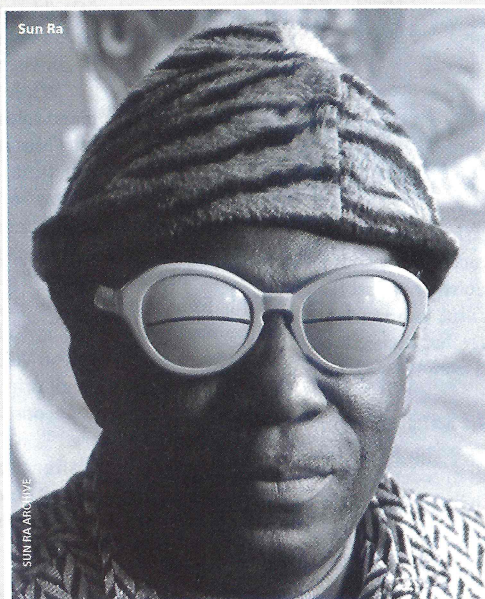
But the Sun Ra Music Archives' central outlet for partaking in this celebration—namely, a place for you to buy the music—is not Impulse (which released classic material in the '70s), not Evidence (which reissued material on CD for the first time in the '90s), not even Sun Ra's own El Saturn label. Instead, it's iTunes, which, at launch, gave Sunny a plum spot in its jazz section carousel alongside campaigns for Miles Davis, Blue Note's 75th birthday and some other high-profile new releases. Grouping the albums and books together in one place, this platform also notably presents 21 new reissues—release dates range from 1956 to 1974—with 24-bit transfers from original analog master tapes of classics, rarities, new mixes and unreleased material. This is a first batch with a promise of more to come.

It's a well-deserved spotlight on one of the most eccentric personalities in the jazz universe—the composer (real name Herman Sunny Blount), who famously claimed to hail from Saturn instead of Birmingham, Ala.—but the colorful personae and music were only part of this solar equation.

The iTunes campaign also organizes one of the most complicated catalogs in jazz—due to size, the bandleader's blasé approach to accurate documentation of personnel and dates, not to mention uneven sound quality of the recordings issued. This is further mitigated by the fact that he recorded, released and reissued (possibly with a different title, album art or a substituted song) hundreds of albums spread across a dozen labels, sometimes in pressings as few as 50–75 copies to sell at live shows.

Even experts have a hard time keeping it straight, although the liner notes on the reissues are brief but informative and iTunes included a short set of its own on each album's page. Perhaps to the chagrin of the collectors out there, this new arrangement simplifies matters greatly and there's the plus of the improved sound. Here's a sampling of three albums included in the first batch.

Recorded in 1956 but released in 1957, **Super-Sonic Jazz (49:00 ★★★½)** is generally regarded as Sun Ra's first LP (and first for his El Saturn label), although material was culled from different sessions and some of it was first released on singles. At this time, the Arkestra was still known for playing relatively conventional swing ("Blues At Midnight"), bebop ("Kingdom Of Not") and early r&b ("El Is A Sound Of Joy") for



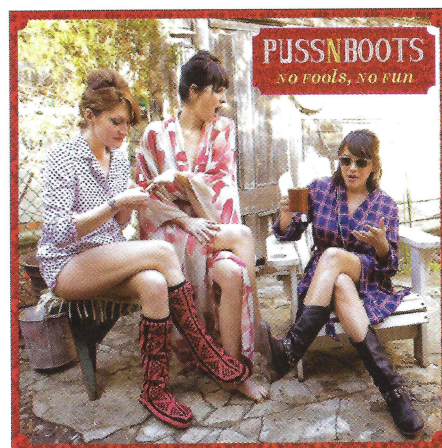
folks around Chicago to dance to. But the exotic sounds of "Portrait Of The Living Sky" and "India" reveal the direction the bandleader was taking his band, which during this era included the great trombonist Julian Priestner, legendary Chicago drummer Robert Barry as well as charter members like tenor saxophonist John Gilmore and saxophonist Laurdine "Pat" Patrick, among others.

While his corporeal body was based in New York for much of the '60s, he really started traveling the spaceways with a series of albums that alternated by avant-garde, swing, exotica, bop and maybe (depending on whom you ask) performance art.

Generally regarded as the pinnacle of the Sun Ra catalog, **Atlantis (49:58 ★★★★★)** has been previously issued by El Saturn, Impulse and Evidence, but has never sounded better. Recorded in 1967–'69, this album's first side is a mix of Ra's "Solar Sound Instrument" (the recently released Hohner Clavinet keyboard) and the band playing a variety of drums. The 20-minute title track takes up the album's second half with cataclysmic music of what Sun Ra envisioned as the flooding and destruction of Atlantis.

Released in 1972, **Universe In Blue (63:22 ★★★★★)** is a classic Sun Ra rarity. The LP saw small-run releases by El Saturn with two different album covers and then slipped into obscurity, never released digitally until now. The album likely came from a Monday-night residency at Slug's Saloon in New York, though this can't be confirmed. As the cover text indicates, the original cassette recordings were done in "Galacto Fidelity," with a microphone placed on each side of the stage. The setup works pretty well until the terrible-sounding final track, whose only redeeming quality is the strength of the playing. Highlights include a version of "Calling Planet Earth" with June Tyson at the center of the storm. **DB**

Ordering info: itunes.com/sunramusic



Puss N Boots No Fools, No Fun

BLUE NOTE 2080402

★★★★½

There are an abundance of affinities among Norah Jones, Sasha Dobson and Catherine Popper, the singer and multi-instrumentalists who make up Puss N Boots. Eclectic by nature, they've all moved among jazz, country and rock on their own, and each of them has had varying levels of contact with Willie Nelson. On the trio's first recording, they offer novel versions of songs from the likes of Johnny Cash, Wilco and Tom Paxton, along with a few solid originals. They usually come across like they're having a low-key and inclusive good time. But surprising bits of tension creep in, too, and their thoughtful arrangements suggest that *No Fools, No Fun* is not just supposed to be a diversion from their main gigs.

Dobson and Jones have a similar approach on their vocals. Drawls and hesitancy are emphasized as they stretch out such songs such as Dobson's "Sex Degrees Of Separation," highlighting the tune's humor as much as its eroticism. (This group doesn't take itself too seriously: One of its earlier names was Shitstorm.) Puss N Boots' vocal strengths are not just in the three-part harmonies, but also in how they assemble alternating lines in Rodney Crowell's "Bull Rider." The group also kicks up the tempo at the right moments, such as on Jones' rocker "Don't Know What It Means," one of the few tracks here that includes drums.

Puss N Boots doesn't shy away from the dark stuff, such as on Neil Young's murder ballad, "Down By The River." Jones has an affinity for such noir themes, like her "Miriam" on her 2012 album, *Little Broken Hearts*. But she also reworks Young's signature fragmented electric guitar attack. Popper's "Pines" is also endearing, if unsettling, with minor-key fiddle staccato notes complementing the odd vocal lines. Even though Jones, Dobson and Popper have their own successful careers to run, *No Fools, No Fun* shouldn't be the only recording these three release as a team.

—Aaron Cohen

No Fools, No Fun: Leaving London; Bull Rider; Twilight; Sex Degrees Of Separation; Don't Know What It Means; Down By The River; Tarnished Angel; Jesus, Etc.; Always; GTO; Pines; You'll Forget Me. (42:22)

Personnel: Sasha Dobson, vocals, acoustic guitar, bass, drums; Norah Jones, vocals, electric guitar, fiddle; Catherine Popper, vocals, bass, acoustic guitar.

Ordering info: bluenote.com