



BLACK WAX
SUN RA: A JOYFUL NOISE
 DIRECTED BY ROBERT MUGGE (MVD Visual)



The films of Robert Mugge engage crucially not only with

the sounds but also the philosophies of the artists whose work they explore, and it is difficult to imagine two more philosophically engaged artists than the incendiary songwriter/vocalist Gil Scott-Heron (1949-2011) and the exploratory keyboardist, composer and bandleader Sun Ra (1914-1993). In two classic documentaries, newly remastered for Blu-ray and DVD by MVD Visual, Mugge mounts the stages on which these ineffable creators plied their deeply felt trades.

In 1982's *Black Wax*, Mugge captures a Washington, D.C., performance featuring Scott-Heron and his Midnight Band (under the guidance of bassist and "Secretary of Entertainment" Robert Gordon), interspersed with casually graceful scenes of the vocalist guiding the viewer on a "tour" of the nation's capital. Scott-Heron puts caustic verbal thumbscrews to iconic figures of the American past and, in poetic verse, excoriates the poverty thriving in the inner cities while "Whitey's on the moon." Scott-Heron is leftist in his views, but he declares himself merely a member of the "Common Sense Party," his cultural role that of a "bluesologist."

As Scott-Heron weaves masterfully



▶ "Caustic verbal thumbscrews to the American past": Gil Scott-Heron, as seen in Robert Mugge's 1982 documentary *Black Wax*

evocative word pictures on the anti-drug "Angel Dust," the subliminally furious "Winter in America" and the still too-sadly-relevant "Gun," the Midnight Band, powered by Gordon, percussionist Larry MacDonald and keyboardist Glenn "Astro" Turner, weave plush, inviting grooves, deftly complemented by Mugge's butter-smooth camera. (*Black Wax* was one of the first films to make extensive use of then-new Steadicam technology.) The film clarifies and strengthens Scott-Heron's identity as a revolutionary thinker who was also a potent, captivating entertainer. It's a shot of bitter medicine that goes down silky smooth.

While Scott-Heron was slugging it out at ground level, Sun Ra's music always sought to transcend petty

concerns like money, politics—even the fate of the planet on which its composer was born. In 1980's *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, Mugge again interlaces live performances of Ra and his Arkestra with sequences in which the bandleader expounds on his wildly cosmic visions of humanity, space and the true meaning of music. "Whatever man thinks is the greatest thing," Ra declares, "I have to rise above that, because I have to judge a tree by the fruit."

The fruit Ra bore is present in the film's performance excerpts, fusing free-jazz conceptions with Ra's deep understanding of the totality of black music. The bandleader's mandating of a regimented performance and

rehearsal style, onstage wardrobe and lifestyle for his musicians might lead one to mistake Ra for a cult leader. But the proof of the creative freedom Ra afforded those musicians, a freedom that belies the very nature of a cult, is exemplified in interview segments with Arkestra tenor saxophonist John Gilmore, who praises Ra for introducing him to “higher forms of music,” and drummer James Jacson, who says Ra’s guidance led him to achievements he never could have imagined, such as building a drum from the trunk of a lightning-struck tree. But really, all the proof one needs is in the faces of Ra’s musicians, who beam with genuine gratitude as they join their leader in communal audiovisual adventures like the exultant performance of Ra’s iconic “We Travel the Spaceways” that concludes the film.

A Joyful Noise is a more abstract experience than *Black Wax*, fitting the esoteric nature of its subject. (No Steadicam here; the concert footage is handheld, fast-moving, as if trying to capture the creation of every note.) But with both Ra and Scott-Heron, Mugg’s films honor the singular worldviews of their subjects and the important sounds through which they expressed their hearts and minds. **MATT R. LOHR**

JACO

DIRECTED BY PAUL MARCHAND AND STEPHEN KIJAK (MVD Visual)



It’s hard to overestimate how eagerly fusion fans anticipated *JACO*, the first full-length documentary on Jaco Pastorius, the game-changing electric bass virtuoso and gifted composer.

Directed by Paul Marchand and Stephen Kijak, the film—nearly six years in the making—became a reality thanks to its producer and cowriter, Metallica bassist and Pastorius superfan Robert Trujillo.

It’s mostly worth the wait, as viewers get a clear understanding of how the fretless bass monster came by his musical influences and gained jazz-world stardom. But there are probably few revelations here for anyone who

read the definitive biography by Bill Milkowski (interviewed in the film) or closely followed Pastorius’ work.

From the get-go, the film thrusts us into the initially enchanting world of the man who “changed the rules of what’s possible on the bass,” as Red Hot Chili Peppers bass player Flea puts it near the start of *JACO*. Growing up in the tropical climes of South Florida, Pastorius heard the swanky big-band music of his dad, Jack, listened to late-night AM broadcasts from Cuba, saved paper-route money to buy his first set of drums, and as a teenager played R&B in local outfit Las Olas Brass and with blue-eyed-soulman Wayne Cochran and the C.C. Riders. Then came his astonishingly assured 1976 self-titled debut album, produced by Blood, Sweat & Tears drummer Bobby Colomby, who says, “My goal was to bring Jaco to as many people as possible.”

Jaco himself took his music to Joe Zawinul, who engaged in creative and personal sparring with the younger man as he watched him evolve into one of three equals in Weather Report, along with saxophonist Wayne Shorter. *JACO* faithfully follows the bassist’s rapid rise, his brilliance as a player, writer and arranger and, inevitably, his struggles with bipolar disorder and addiction. During one of those down-and-out periods, in September 1987, Pastorius was brutally beaten into a coma by a nightclub manager and died.

The film itself is short on interview footage featuring its subject; the most meaningful conversation with Pastorius comes from his landmark instructional bass video of 1985, hosted by R&B session ace Jerry Jemmott. Still, *JACO* is packed with sometimes insightful interviews with Pastorius’ musical colleagues and collaborators—Zawinul, Shorter, Peter Erskine, Joni Mitchell, Mike Stern (but, oddly, not Pat Metheny)—as well as family, friends and admirers. The abundant personal photos and rare performance footage, not to mention one especially affecting phone recording, are a bonus. The DVD/Blu-ray’s second disc offers even more interviews and concert video. Trujillo’s labor of love is impossible not to like.

PHILIP BOOTH

PAT METHENY

THE UNITY SESSIONS (Eagle Rock)



The Unity Sessions strives to capture the connections, both musical and extramusical, shared by the members of guitarist Pat Metheny’s most recent working group, the Unity

Band: saxophonist Chris Potter, bassist Ben Williams, drummer Antonio Sanchez and keyboardist/vocalist/multi-instrumentalist Giulio Carmassi. Metheny wanted to document the musical and human rapport developing within the unit, but he wanted the viewer to experience that dynamic up close, rather than through the distant lens of a traditional concert film.

Shot at a New York City theater at the end of the group’s 2014 tour, *The Unity Sessions* presents the band performing a two-hour-plus set without an audience, on a dark stage illuminated by dramatic lighting. The cameras alternate between full-band angles and tighter shots that enable the viewer to gain an intimate perspective: focusing on Metheny’s hands, say, or offering close-ups of Sanchez as he listens and responds to the music around him.

Much of the material is drawn from the group’s two albums, 2012’s Grammy-winning *Unity Band* and 2014’s *KIN* (← →), and the melodically and rhythmically kaleidoscopic compositions offer each band member ample opportunities to shine. Potter in particular serves as primary counterpart to Metheny, a role similar to the one keyboardist Lyle Mays played in the Pat Metheny Group. Metheny and Potter drive the escalating “Roofdogs,” strum guitars on “Rise Up” and wax lyrical on “This Belongs to You.”

The set also reaches back to earlier points in Metheny’s career. Potter puts his own stamp on “Police People,” from the Metheny/Ornette Coleman collaboration *Song X*; the band jams on the folk-jazzy “Two Folk Songs,” from *80/81*; and Metheny and Sanchez turn “(Go) Get It,” from *Trio 99* → 00, into a fiery rock-edged duet. Metheny closes the show quietly, with a medley of Metheny Group favorites performed solo on acoustic guitar. An interview with Metheny and company is offered as bonus content. **LUCY TAUSS**