

Points on a Space Age: The Sun Ra Arkestra

Score: **90%**
 Rating: **Not Rated**
 Publisher: **MVD Entertainment Group**
 Region: **A**
 Media: **DVD/1**
 Running Time: **60 Mins.**
 Genre: **Documentary/Musical/Live Performance**
 Audio: **Dolby Digital Stereo Sound**
 Subtitles: **English**



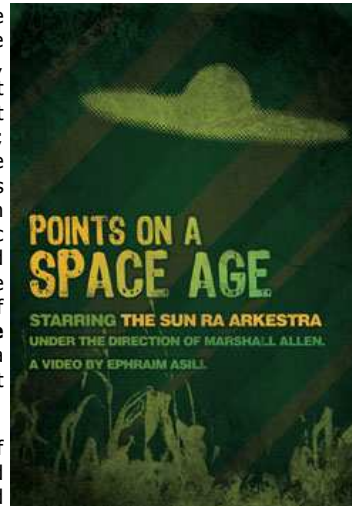
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Jazz music is actually filled with characters, so the individuals that stand out from the crowd have to be extra special. Sun Ra was more than just a character, because that label assumes a certain posturing that wasn't part of Sun Ra's character. His history is almost equally the history of jazz music in the post-WWII era; ironically, at a time when big bands were on the decline, Sun Ra was forming a large group. This ensemble would stay with him through his death in 1993, making some of the most vibrant and enigmatic music heard from any jazz artist. The personality and mythology of Sun Ra had everything to do with the cohesion of his so-called "Arkestra," so what became of the group after Ra's death? **Points on a Space Age** doesn't try to shine a deep, critical light on the Arkestra in recent years as much as it celebrates the legacy that Ra left.



What's here is tantalizing and brief, with snippets of live performances and interviews with some band members. There isn't anything that feels fake or staged in the dialogue with Ra's musicians about his legacy.

They acknowledge at various moments that he was flawed and surrounded himself with flawed people, that he passed his mission on to current bandleader Marshall Allen, and that the relevance of the group is as strong today as it ever was. Listening to the music, one recognizes truly original work. The execution looks like a kind of effortless synchronicity that could have come from any classic bandleader like Ellington or Basie, combined with a raw emotional quality that reminds one of the sound experimentation of John Zorn's *Cobra*. There are interludes where bits of Sun Ra's writing are read, and frequent references to the launch of the "space age" under Kennedy. Sun Ra's declaration that "Space is the Place" feels woven through the fabric of something like Kennedy's (and by extension, the country's) fascination with space.


Points on a Space Age doesn't bring out anything new or interesting about the man behind the Sun Ra persona, focusing instead on the group of musicians he left behind after his passing. The group seems grounded and perhaps more sedate with age. A few old film segments underscore how far out their costumes and behavior must have appeared 40 years ago; even now, there's nothing quite like the Arkestra. It would have been nice to hear at least a few pieces in their entirety, but we instead just get snippets. Some longer segments showcase the musicianship in the band, which is tremendous. If the mark of a great leader is the quality of people he has behind him, Sun Ra holds up well. His ability to inspire from beyond the grave is a testament to the profoundly different approach to music and life he espoused. The documentary format isn't as satisfying as a longer series of interviews or performances. Nothing in the way of special features is available, so this bite-sized gem is a fairly limited morsel that is no less sweet or desirable to the collectors and fans of progressive jazz.

-Fridtjof, GameVortex Communications AKA Matt Paddock

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