

review music

this week's essential reading

'Vicarious exhaustion: FKA Twigs' Soundtrack 7 reviewed' by Sophie Coletta, The Quietus

'Obliterating the notion of the contemporary pop star as a vacant ice tray waiting to be filled with ideas ... twigs instead pursues a relentless streak of creative autonomy'

Earth's mixtape

Golden Record, the album of sounds that accompanied Nasa's ambitious 1977 Voyager probe as a way to connect with aliens, can now be heard online. [Andy Battaglia](#) journeys into the selection and its symbolism

Any wise person on Earth would stand to reason that if aliens should chance upon a contraption of ours flying through deep space, they would be quick to wonder, perhaps before all else: "What kind of music do these things called 'humans' listen to?" It would be a matter of simple curiosity and intergalactic importance, maybe even with the potential – who knows? – to bond us across extra dimensions or warring worlds.

It is also a subject that the American space programme took up, with at least some degree of seriousness, in the 1970s. Back then, to go along with plans for launching a pair of probes as part of the *Voyager* programme, Nasa embarked on a project to create a *Golden Record*. The result would be just that: a shiny record, like so many others on more boring and ordinary black vinyl, coated in gold and pressed with sounds from the planet Earth into its grooves. It would be attached to a probe and shot up into space, waiting for a chance to strike up a tune in the whirring cosmic jukebox.

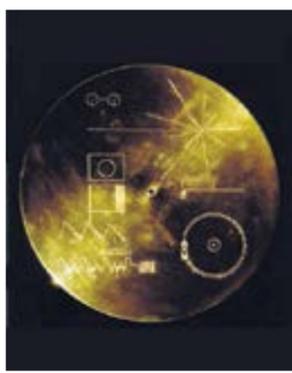
For aliens, the *Golden Record* came with elaborate instructions on how to play it back, including diagrams and explanations in pictorial code, meant to communicate with extraterrestrial beings whose English might not be so advanced. It was treated for durability through intense stretches of travel between hot and cold, and it had a special cartridge, with a needle that could be placed directly on the surface to encircle the signals for sounds. It was a real, workable record – decidedly more than a lark. Maybe the chances of it getting played were slim, but why not make it up to the task if the occasion should ever come?

The task of representing the entire human race and the whole of planet Earth was no small responsibility, and it fell upon the imaginative shoulders of science-fiction writer and noted ponderer of the stars Carl Sagan. He, along with a group brought together for the project, selected 115 images from our picturesque planet and, more evocatively, an assemblage of telltale sounds. Some were naturally occurring, such as wind, rain, surf, crickets, frogs and a chimpanzee. Others were mechanical, such as a tractor, bus, car, riveter and train. Many more were short bits of spoken word, including greetings from human beings in 55 different languages, from the nearly 6,000-year-old Sumerian tongue known as Akkadian to Arabic, Cantonese, Farsi, Swedish, Vietnamese and more.

Having worked through all that, the curious alien could turn his or her (or its?) attention to the real bounty of the *Golden Record*: the music. About the entire project, Sagan once declared: "The spacecraft will be encountered and the record



Nasa's Golden Record, below. Head of the project, Carl Sagan, said it exemplifies something very hopeful about life on this planet. AdStock / Universal Images Group



played only if there are advanced spacefaring civilisations in interstellar space. But the launching of this bottle into the cosmic ocean says something very hopeful about life on this planet."

Hopeful – and beautiful too, then as well as now. This summer, decades after the *Voyager* probes were sent aloft in 1977, Nasa uploaded some of the *Golden Record's* aural contents to the music-sharing website, SoundCloud, where they can be heard by any earthbound being with an internet connection. The sanctioned release focuses

on the weird noisy parts, such as the track labelled *Life Signs, Pulsar*, which opens the whole thing: it's skittery and strange, a bit of hapless static with some creaky, crunching sounds. After that comes *Kiss, Mother and Child*, with the cry of a baby, followed by a parent cooing: "Oh come on now". Next up are engine sounds, a dopplerised locomotive, a horse and cart, Morse code and ships.

Many avant-garde sound artists while away countless hours in unconvincing attempts to evoke so much with so little. But again, the music is where the real charms are. Hearable in the official Nasa batch is an eerie, abstract realisation of the age-old notion of the Music of the Spheres, a projected idea of what the universe sounds like with planets spinning at different intervals like so many keys in an enormous cosmic instrument.

The idea goes back to the mystical Greek mathematician Pythagoras and later Johannes Kepler, a 17th-century astronomer who theorised ambitiously about planetary motion. The manifestation of it on the *Golden Record* was realised by Laurie

Spiegel, a pioneering computer musician who just a few years later released a fantastic and still-startlingly advanced album called *The Expanding Universe*. How's that for serendipity?

For the most resoundingly musical parts, the enterprising listener can venture online to hear unsanctioned uploads (one presumes that licensing would be a cross to bear, even for Nasa) of the full *Golden Record* playing on for more than five hours. The tracklist is worth the journey, beginning with Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No 2* and swerving, thrillingly, from there to Javanese gamelan music. Worldly sounds abound, with Senegalese percussion leading into a pygmy children's tune, songs by Australian Aborigines and a Mexican mariachi band. There's also Chuck Berry's *Johnny B Goode*, a blazing example of early electric rock 'n' roll and a song that would, by chance, feature in the 1985 sci-fi classic film *Back to the Future*.

It's a wondrous and humbling experience to listen to all these sounds of the past in a future so far progressed in time yet in many ways regressed and re-

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mote. With prospects for space travel hindered – Nasa still does mind-boggling work but, in terms of funding and scope, is a shell of its former self – it's difficult to think of a programme so ambitiously off-the-charts as *Voyager*. (Others exist, and actively, but the spirit behind them has surely changed.)

But the prospect of travelling forward and outward through sound remains an option, and the *Golden Record* remains a good means to do so. After more of its music plays – through Mozart and Peruvian pan pipes, past Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and jazz by Louis Armstrong – there's a spooky old blues tune by Blind Willie Johnson, with the priceless title *Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground*. It was recorded in 1927, a half-century before *Voyager's* time, and it features what sounds like a wizened old soul in a spell of wordless moaning.

That's a kind of human any alien can understand.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, Frieze, The Paris Review and more.

▶ the playlist three albums of ethereal sounds

Electric Enigma
Stephen P McGreevy
(Irdial-Discs, 1996)

For sounds travelling the other way, from deep space to Earth, check out these strange recordings of naturally occurring radio signals from the cosmic magnetosphere. The sounds of veritable space weather can be captivating, for sure.



The Expanding Universe
Laurie Spiegel
(Unseen Worlds, 2012)

This reissue of a computer-music classic resurrects ideas from 1980 that wowed even today. Composer Laurie Spiegel was interested in both future music and folk – and she did a fine job of blurring the need for such distinctions.



The Conet Project
(Irdial-Discs, 1997)

Closer to home but no less ethereal are these short-wave radio transmissions made by humans but otherwise mysterious in their origins. Some suspect the bizarre recitations of numbers in different languages contain codes for spies, but who knows?

