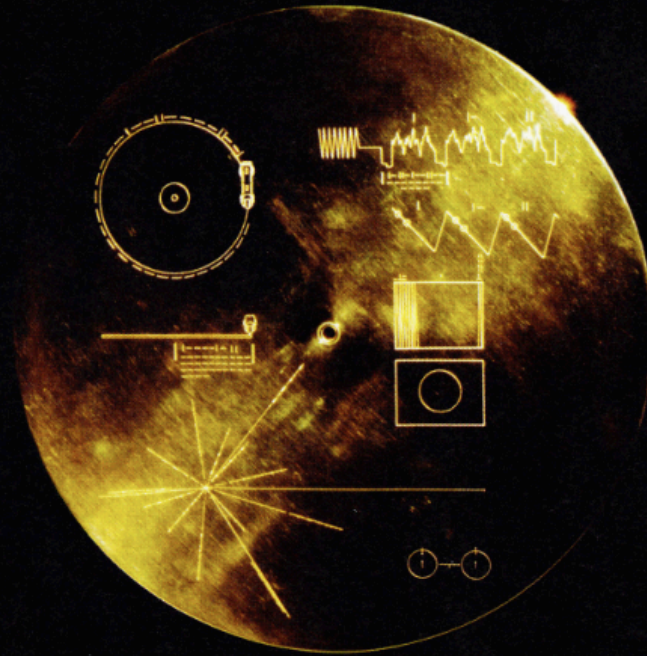


The Inner Sleeve

Artwork selected this month by Stefan Helmreich



The Sounds Of Earth aka The Voyager Interstellar Record

Various

NASA 1977

Unknown designer(s)

Some time in late 1980, after viewing an episode of astronomer Carl Sagan's popular science TV programme, *Cosmos*, I fell under the spell of *The Voyager Interstellar Record*. Affixed by NASA in 1977 to the Voyager spacecraft and sent on a trajectory that would, by 2008, take it outside our solar system, the gold-plated phonograph album, engraved with sounds and music of Earth, was intended as what Sagan called a "message in a bottle cast into the cosmic ocean". As a 14 year old science fiction fan, I could not help but join Sagan in his hope that "beings of an interstellar civilisation" would find and listen to the disc. Maybe they would even send back melodies of their own, something like the five-note motif that soundmarked *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*.

While the audio contents of the Voyager record are ripe for analysis – and aside from

Timothy Ferris's explanatory essay in Carl Sagan's 1978 book *Murmurs Of Earth*, and a dryly critical 1993 treatment in the *Journal Of Applied Communication Research*, there isn't much – I am more interested in the record's golden cover, a plating designed to protect the record from interstellar dust and to instruct aliens in how to access the information stowed in the disc's grooves, on the other side.

The spare design of the face of the record is an arresting demonstration of rationalist optimism, an expression of faith that minimalist scientific representation can serve as a kind of universal language. The upper left quadrant contains an iconic representation of the record itself, encircled by a coded clue about the time it should take for one rotation of the record: 3.6 seconds, written in base two, in units of 0.70 billionths of a second. That's "the time period associated with a fundamental transition of the hydrogen atom": a representation that even Earthlings familiar with physics, binary numbers and 16 rpm records may have difficulty grasping. (Here

on Earth, the 16 2/3 speed was developed for playing in Chrysler cars, as part of its ill-fated 1956 project for 'Highway Hi-Fi'. There is something to be said about the revival of 16 2/3 rpm for a cosmic roadtrip.)

The other icons on the record plating have a similar level-headed brusqueness. The upper right portion gives instructions about how to decode images encoded in the audio spectrum. The lower right diagram is of a properly translated image of a circle. The lower left, according to NASA, "defines the location of our sun utilizing 14 pulsars of known directions from our sun", which more or less gives extraterrestrials a map of where to find us (which fact was used as a plot point in *Battlefield Earth*, in which hostile aliens use the record to locate Earth). In many ways, the iconography of the Voyager record is an attempt to forward-engineer a user-friendly archaeological artefact – perhaps ironic, since fusions of archaeological symbology and astronautics were pioneered by Carl Sagan's 'evil twin', Erich von Däniken, who made the outrageous claim in 1973's

In Search Of Ancient Astronauts that the pyramids of Mesoamerica and Egypt contained hieroglyphics revealing their construction by visiting extraterrestrials (Belbury Poly's *From An Ancient Star* sports a cover haunted by the aesthetic of old von Däniken paperbacks).

All this said, deflating the golden record's emergence from 1970s dreams of a universal language is perhaps too easy. *The Sounds Of Earth* has a unique, bizarre aura that analysis only amplifies. Its golden cast is thick with symbolism of beaming wealth and health, of benevolent as well as acquisitive political power, of reflected light and solar energy, of divinity and idolatry. With its friendly greetings to future aliens, the Golden Record is a call to enact the Golden Rule, to live in Golden Ages. Flying now through interstellar space, an unattainable object, *The Sounds Of Earth* has become the most Platonic form of the gold disc. □ *Scrambles Of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record Remixed By Extraterrestrials* is out now on Seeland. Stefan Helmreich is a Professor of Anthropology at MIT