

John Casani, Voyager project manager, 1977



As above: the Voyager Golden Record prompts an exploration of alien listening. By **David Rothenberg**

Alien Listening: Voyager's Golden Record And Music From Earth
Daniel K L Chua & Alexander Rehding

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I've always thought it unbelievable that NASA sent a golden phonograph record out of the solar system as part of the Voyager mission in 1977. How did Ann Druyan, Carl Sagan and their team decide what our faraway fellow lifeforms would want to listen to? A little Bach, Navajo chanting, a wedding song from a young girl of Huancavelica. "Jaat Kahan Ho" by Kesarbai Kerkar, and "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground" by Blind Willie Johnson. Some Beethoven, "Sokaku-Reibo" from Goro Yamaguchi's shakuhachi. "Barnumbirr" by Tom Djawa on clapsticks and Mudpo on didgeridoo. Louis Armstrong's "Melancholy Blues". Not to mention whale songs, "hi there" in many human languages, and the howls of wolves.

Could anyone imagine any nation's space agency would think so boldly and out of the box today? They didn't have the benefit of endless data on listening habits to project whether our sounds would help the aliens sleep or study better. They just went on instinct, with no shortage of ceremony, affixing that famous shining golden record to the outside of that interstellar space probe. We no longer value the physicality of recorded music enough to care about such objects any more; we'd probably just stuff an intergalactic time capsule with flash cards or USB drives containing the sum total of human music ever recorded, and when they decoded all that the aliens might value music as little as we consumers do here on Earth. More free stuff!

All the more surprise that Daniel Chua and Alexander Rehding, two very free-thinking music professors, could write a book as unique and inspiring as this, based upon this strange historical anomaly. A great book on music must twist our heads in new ways around this subject, and this one does that by making the hardest part of it the first, where our two interplanetary adventurers ask the simple question, "Who is music theory for?" Surely not for musicians, who just wanna play. Certainly not for composers, who just want to tell us what to play. And listeners always know what they like and dislike. No, say Rehding and Chua, music theory has always been primarily for aliens, for those citizens of the galaxy who have no idea what music is or why anyone would want to care as much about it as humans do.

With such a bold opening they have produced a book as radical and inspiring as John Cage's *Silence*. I do not say that lightly. This is one of the few music books that excites me on every page. The second section of is probably the most conventional, where the Golden Record is introduced as an interstellar mixtape that might "signal something deeply human to any alien who might care to listen. It is not so much the tones as the genre that seeks a connection. In the 1970s, mixtapes were highly personal home-spun compilations; they were a form of self-curation... Mixtapes were the first portable genre that fashioned music as the sound of personal identity on the go. They defined how humans moved in time and space. They literally sonified a distinctive way of being in the world."

Along their path our authors ask if you too wish to become an 'exomusicologist' and prepare yourself

to jam with the aliens. Exomusicology dreams of "exposing the underlying glissandos in the data to rebuild the possibilities of alien reception... The Golden Record is the wormhole that delivers the data... We only need to get the aliens to fall in love with us... Mission impossible accomplished."

The third part of the book presents as eloquent a series of six definitions of what music is as I have seen anywhere: music is a disclosure. A piece of music is an event. Music's space-time event is measured in frequency. Music is information. Music is a network. Music is alien, it estranges. "Music blinks because it sees us first... We've come in peace, so now tune in, mind the gap, and make some noise. It's over to you."

The end of the book suggests no end, but says: repeat, start again, read some more. This is a work that will take many readings to fully digest. (And I haven't even said anything about the transparent moiré screen that is included to slide over the trippy pattern artworks of Takahiro Kurashima, but that's part of the story too.) This is the worthiest heir to John Cage's Zen questioning of music's shape and form, without the old master's fear of pop music or jazz.

Alien Listening is the best example we've yet seen of what 21st century music theory can be. It explains to us why music can be about everything without reducing its subjects to the numb face of data of any kind. Chua and Rehding celebrate an idea of music as vast as the universe itself. The aliens have been with us all along... in this strange thing called music that we can never define but always want to share... as far as our reach can go. □