



Songs of Space and Nuclear War, Volume One

By Mark Stout

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In a fascinating juxtaposition of old and new, the world recently observed the 51st anniversary of Sputnik, the event which marked the dawn of the space age. Almost concurrently, the U.S. Air Force announced that reinvigorating its nuclear enterprise is now its highest priority. What do these two events have in common? Well, practically nothing, other than an opportunity to examine the effects both space and nuclear war have had on our culture, specifically the culture of popular music.

While the most prevalent theme in popular music is without question love, there are a number of other common topics. Space and nuclear war are not among them. However, they are interesting topics indeed and deserve exploration. So without further delay, journey into the *Songs of Space and Nuclear War, Volume I*.

Track 1: "Rocket Man (I Think It's Going to Be a Long, Long Time)," Elton John, released 1972. Highest Chart position #6, U.S. This melancholy gem, penned by the extraordinary team of Elton John and Bernie Taupin, opens the compilation as the greatest space song of all time. The dreamy, stylized, receding-Doppler effect of Davey Johnstone's slide guitar, presented as a departing rocket, matched with lines like "Mars ain't the kind of place to raise your kids," is simply without compare. Five stars (so to speak). Add the Rocket Man ringtone to your Christmas list.

Track 2: "You Dropped A Bomb On Me," Gap Band, released 1982. Highest chart position #2, Billboard R&B. This is an ostensibly dance-focused somebody-done-somebody-wrong-song, but shows its true colors with clarion lyrics and the familiar whistle of an incoming weapon descending through the atmosphere. In the end, it's pretty obvious the Gap Band's love lives have been destroyed beyond repair. Perhaps an effective early warning system would have been useful, eh fellas? Three stars.

Track 3: "Satellite of Love," U2, released 1992. Using the themes of love and betrayal against the backdrop of a televised satellite launch, one-time Velvet Underground front man Lou Reed penned this space sonnet, which was first released in 1972. However, the U2 version is a great example of a cover improving an original work. U2's soaring final chorus moves the song from the realm of the ordinary to the superior. Does "Satellite's gone way up to Mars/Soon it will be filled with parking cars" reveal Bono's support for planetary missions or is it more analogous to "they paved paradise and put up a parking lot"? Four stars.

Track 4: "Radar Love," Golden Earring, released 1973. Highest chart position #13, U.S. The Dutch rockers created this much covered and practically ubiquitous hit with its lyrical themes of wireless messaging. Sonically, the song is made complete with musically superior tempo changes, percussion, and soaring horns. While the title itself implies some sort of forbidden passion at the Clear Air Station, Alaska missile warning site, the title's slight misnomer is totally forgiven. A true rock classic--five stars.

Track 5: "99 Luftballons," Nena, released 1983. Highest chart position #2, U.S Billboard Hot 100. Every compilation has to have a throwaway (or two) and this neatly falls into that category. "Blowin' In The Wind," it ain't. This Cold War-era protest effort is most comical in its English language version, which calls to mind the kind of freaky new-wave angst that can only be conjured up by a bad trip on Tab cola and cough syrup. Example: "Ride super-high-tech jet fighters/Everyone's a superhero/Everyone's a Captain Kirk." Bones, Spock: lyrically, this should have either been smothered at birth, or alternatively, given to a fifth-grader for rewrite. Two and a half stars for the less-awful German language version (which gets a pass on the lyrics, whatever they are). One star for the more-awful English language version.

Track 6: "Space Oddity," David Bowie, released 1969. Highest chart position #5, UK. What is it with these English guys? Their country doesn't even have a manned space program! Released shortly before the Apollo 11 moon landing, Major Tom's story offers plenty of insight into the risks associated with manned spaceflight and the challenge of a hearing impaired astronaut ("Can you hear me, Major Tom?"). Perhaps Major Tom should have been a part of the Verizon network. Three stars.

Track 7: "Space Truckin'," Deep Purple, 1972. Released off their superb Machine Head album and recorded near the smoky Lake Geneva shoreline, Space Truckin' evokes hybrid images of interplanetary travel and surreal R. Crumb "Keep On Truckin'" black-light posters. Few songs known to mankind can drop the words Venus, Mars, Milky Way, Borealis, moon shot, and solar system in approximately sixty seconds. In addition to the fascinating space images, Purple vocalist Ian Gillan's awesome pipes provide a superb example of rock craftsmanship. Five stars.

Track 8: "Lost In The Ozone," Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, released 1971. This is really a country-fried drinking/love song with a lot of atmospheric and space sounding nomenclature in the title and chorus. Of course, the song's 1971 release predated GPS, perhaps explaining the band's misplaced sense of direction, and confirming the need for jam resistant navigation and timing signals. A fusion of western swing, country, blues, and rock, CCAHLPA is most famous for the 1972 quasi-novelty song "Hot Rod Lincoln," which was released off the same album. Check out the fantastic 1950s space-themed art work on their 1975 studio album Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen. Three and a half stars.



Track 9: “Radioactivity,” Kraftwerk, released 1976. Highest chart position #1, France. Kraftwerk is to electronic music as Isaac Newton is to math and physics. In this stylized e-sonnet, we learn that Madame Curie discovered radioactivity, that radioactivity is in the air, and that radioactivity is there for you and me. Well, that about covers it, doesn’t it? By the time Kraftwerk remixed the song for a 1991 re-release, the song had assumed a distinctive anti-nuclear power and anti-nuclear weapon pose, and perhaps Kraftwerk will someday run their synthesizers on solar power. Three and a half radiogenic nuclides.

Track 10: “Guns In The Sky,” INXS, 1987. Musically, a fine piece of work. Lyrically, weak, lame, and lazy. With the belief that rock and roll can really change the world, INXS has a plan to kick the darkness until it bleeds daylight. First, they’re going to stop the world. Next, they’ll let off the fools. Finally, they’ll let them go live with their guns in the sky. OK then, thanks for your help, guys--we’re all squared away. While many of us are familiar with the concept of soft power, INXS introduces flaccid power. One and a half stars.

Track 11: “New Frontier,” Donald Fagen, released 1983. Highest chart position, #34, Adult Contemporary. Displaying the slick trademark studio sound made famous with Walter Becker as the group Steely Dan, Fagen opines on his dad’s bomb shelter and post-apocalyptic life, including a Dr. Strangelove-ish reference to underground living with a woman with the right dynamics for life in the new frontier. Thankfully, the reds haven’t decided to “push the button down,” but if they do, Fagen has provisions and lots of beer. Four mushroom clouds.

Bonus Track: “Fly Me to The Moon,” Frank Sinatra, 1964. Although the song had been first recorded in 1954 and was then titled as “In Other Words,” the decade-later Sinatra cover is the only version that really comes to mind. While Frank is perhaps really crooning about love, you just can’t get away from all the talk about those heavenly bodies, that is, the Moon, Jupiter, Mars, and the stars. In 1969, the song was played during the Apollo 11 mission. It has also been featured in a number of movies, and was the sing-over for the ending credits of the 2000 Clint Eastwood movie *Space Cowboys*. Four stars.

So, exactly what can we learn from these songs and what do they really mean? Well, that depends. Space itself has been inspiring man for thousands of years, and war has invoked fear for just as long. In effect, these are ideas everyone has written on. Much of the music in the *Songs of Space and Nuclear War* compilation calls out allegorically complimentary ideas, with inspirational love leading the way. Conversely, the thematic stimulus associated with nuclear war (where responses range from smarmy dismissal to paranoid schizophrenia) should not be waved off out of hand. After all, no one wants to catch an “Atomic Tan.”

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