

Soundtrack to the space race

MUSIC

In an age when astronauts routinely tweet photos of themselves dangling from the International Space Station some 400 km above the Earth, it's hard to believe there was ever a time when we didn't have people in space. Yet, the space race was not really so long ago. The late 1950s to the early 1970s was a period

of incredible technological development and exploration; a time of adventure and excitement, full of milestones and fresh vistas, all set against the backdrop of the Cold War.

It's this thrill and energy that Public Service Broadcasting attempt to rekindle with their second album, *The Race For Space*. As with their first outing, *Inform-Educate-Entertain*, the London-based duo mix archive recordings with modern instrumental arrangements to bring new perspectives to historical moments. This time around, the samples are all drawn from key points in the early days of space exploration, from the launch of Sputnik in 1957 up to the final Apollo mission in 1972, while the music uses a diverse array of styles to enhance and heighten them. The result is an intriguing concept album that is by turns exhilarating and solemn.

Eschewing chronology in favour of emotional heft, the titular opening track is

centred around John F. Kennedy's inspiring 1962 speech at Rice University, in which he made his case for going to the Moon. Tracking with Kennedy's rhetoric, the sole accompaniment is a choir that builds slowly to a euphoric climax. It's a great opener that makes clever use of space and silence to broadcast the hopes of the past to us in the future.

Skipping back five years, 'Sputnik' is a Krautrock-style number that employs the signal beamed back from the world's first satellite as its driving pulse, while various announcers describe both the vessel and its implications for the unsuspecting populace below. The music is propulsive, bringing progress in Sputnik's wake, yet the synths contain an edge of fear and mechanical coldness.

Elsewhere on the album, funk jam 'Gagarin' reminds us of the rockstar status afforded early space explorers, while the whirling guitars and synths on 'E.V.A.' give us a sense of the disorientation and thrill of Alexei Leonov's first walk in space in a way that the emotionless translations of Leonov's own messages fails to. There's also a nod to the first woman in space, cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, on 'Valentina'. Sadly, this is a weak point on the album, lacking focus and any real sense of purpose, perhaps largely because of the limited availability of female archive voices.

Other tracks provide interesting new takes on momentous events, viewing them almost exclusively from the perspective of NASA's Mission Control Center in Houston. 'The Other Side' follows Apollo 8's first manned lunar orbit, with the music acting as a stand-in for the spacecraft: growing as it nears its destination before cutting out as it passes behind the heavenly body, only to fade in again as it re-emerges. The tension then jubilation in the room as the astronauts come back into contact is palpable. Meanwhile, 'Go!' is a pacy, adrenaline-fuelled back-and-forth between the Apollo 11 ground personnel as they tick off the checks necessary for the lunar module to undertake its descent. It's an intoxicating electro-rock reminder that many people needed to take many small steps before one man could take that pivotal one.

The space race wasn't all thrills, of course. These were dangerous undertakings and there were disasters along the way. These are hauntingly recalled in post-rock-inspired 'Fire In The Cockpit', a lament for those lost in Apollo 1 in 1967. The mournful cello and static-heavy report of the accident are a chilling reminder of the toll of such endeavours.

Combining musical elements from across the album to wonderfully atmospheric effect, album closer 'Tomorrow' echoes the hopefulness of the opener, using broadcasts from the last manned lunar mission, Apollo 17. A coda even hints, somewhat hopefully, at our possible return to the Moon.

The Race For Space is an interesting and engrossing record — a testament to a remarkable period and to those involved in it. The music isn't always inspiring in its originality, leaning heavily on its influences, and it doesn't quite capture the political struggle often at the heart of the historical narrative. Nonetheless, Public Service Broadcasting have woven the various melodic and historic strands together into a conceptual whole that warrants repeat listening and the music paints a much more emotional picture than the archive recordings can by themselves, conveying a strong sense of feeling of this remarkable time. As we face the prospect of new manned missions to the Moon and beyond, *The Race For Space* offers us a reminder of the emotional highs and lows accompanying such odysseys. We can't do it for the first time again, but it's a joy to have such optimism renewed and refreshed. □

REVIEWED BY NICKY DEAN

Nicky Dean is Chief Editor of Nature Energy.

