

Three Decades of Making History - Voyager 1 and 2

By Wendy McCorry, Science Communicator

An important anniversary in the history of space exploration takes place this month. On 20 August 1977, the NASA spacecraft Voyager 2 was launched. This event marked the beginning of an amazing journey which has lasted for thirty years, and which is still continuing today.

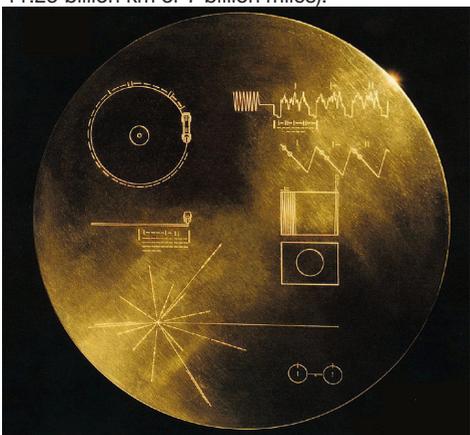
Voyager 2 is an unmanned interplanetary space probe which, along with its twin Voyager 1, has been relaying data from the outer region of our Solar System for the past three decades. Unlike its twin, which has conducted flybys of Jupiter and Saturn, Voyager 2 has passed by all of the gas giants, including the previously unexplored worlds of Uranus and Neptune. Both spacecraft have now left the Solar System, and are continuing to send back valuable information from this mysterious region of space, despite their considerable age and vast distance from Earth (over 11.25 billion km or 7 billion miles).



Image Credit: NASA

Robot Hero The Voyagers are identical in appearance. They are based on the earlier Mariner design dating back to the 1960s. Originally Voyager 1 and 2 would have been Mariner 11 and 12.

Onboard Voyager 1 and 2 is a phonograph record containing sounds and images which represent the diversity of life on Earth. Known as the Golden Record, it serves as a time capsule which could potentially be played by extra-terrestrials to find out more about our home planet. The cover of the record consists of a number of diagrams which explain how to play the record, the location of our Sun and an illustration of a hydrogen atom. Sounds on the record include thunder, a baby crying, animal noises, and greetings spoken in 55 different languages. A 90 minute eclectic mix of music includes, among others - Chuck Berry, Mozart, Senegalese percussion and Peruvian panpipes. Images include a silhouette of a man and a pregnant woman, diagrams of continental drift and the structure of DNA, photographs of an astronaut, a violin and the Great Wall of China.



A gift from Earth This is the sleeve of the Golden Record. You can find details of its content at <http://re-lab.net/welcome/index.html>, however the best reference is the book 'Murmurs of Earth' by Carl Sagan et al. Sadly this is long out of print. If you find a copy, grab it!

Image Credit: NASA