Name: _____ Date: _____

Voyager's Golden Record

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 872 words

In 1977, a small group of people were given a strange job: say hello to the whole universe. They had less than six weeks. They had room for one record. A scientist named Carl Sagan led them, and the first question was the hardest one. What do you say about an entire planet, to someone you will never meet, who may not have ears, or a word for “hello,” or even a way to play a record?

The record was a disk of copper, twelve inches across and covered in gold. One copy rode on each of the two Voyager spacecraft. Both were launched in the late summer of 1977. The cover was marked with drawings that showed how to play the record, and where Earth was, and how long the record had been traveling. The whole thing was a message in a bottle, with the instructions taped to the bottle.

The hellos were Linda Salzman Sagan’s job. She and her helpers hunted for people to speak, many of them at Cornell University and in the towns around it. The speakers were told only that it was a greeting, and that it should be short. A speaker of Akkadian, a language people used thousands of years ago, said, “May all be very well.” A speaker of Amoy said, “Friends from space, how are you all? Have you eaten yet?” In the end there were hellos in fifty-five languages.

Not every hello made it. Some people had promised to come to the recording session and then could not, and there was no time to find anyone else. Swahili was one of the languages that was left out. One speaker talked in Swedish. He did not pick a grand speech. He said that he was a computer programmer in the little town of Ithaca, on the planet Earth, and he sent greetings from there. His hello is on the record, and Swahili’s is not.

Then came the sounds. The team gathered wind, thunder and the crash of the surf, and crickets, frogs, birds and a whale, and even the bell and whistle of an old steam train. Then they added the sounds that people make: footsteps, laughter, a kiss, a mother and her child. Tucked in among them is a line of Morse code, tapped out in dots and dashes. It is an old Latin saying, and it means “through hardships to the stars.”

Next came the music, ninety minutes of it, from all over the world. A young girl in Peru sang a wedding song, which two researchers had recorded years earlier in the town of Huancavelica. A man in Azerbaijan played a balaban, a small reed pipe. And Chuck Berry played “Johnny B. Goode” on his guitar. The team mixed old classics with folk songs and rock and roll, from the East and the West.

A record can only play sound, so how do you put pictures on it? The team turned more than a hundred pictures into signals that sit in the record’s grooves, and the cover shows how to turn

them back into pictures. There was a family, a snowflake, dolphins, an old man with his dog, a dinner party in China, and a mountain climber. Someone had to choose what to show of a whole planet. Many of the pictures show people doing ordinary things.

One more thing went on the record, and it is the strangest. Ann Druyan, the project's creative director, went to a hospital laboratory in New York and was wired to a machine. It turned her heartbeat and her brain's signals into sound. For an hour she thought on purpose about the history of Earth, about the troubles of people, and, at the end, about what it feels like to fall in love. The hour was squeezed into one minute on the record.

President Jimmy Carter wrote a message for the record, too. So did Kurt Waldheim, who led the United Nations. "This is a present from a small, distant world," Carter began. He called it "a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings." He added that the people who sent it were trying to survive their own time. They hoped to live on into the time of whoever found it.

Voyager 1 left the Sun's bubble of space in 2012, and it is now in the dark between the stars. No spacecraft has ever gone farther. It is about sixteen billion miles from home, a distance that light needs a whole day to cross. Even so, it is still sending messages to the big dishes on Earth. But it will be about forty thousand years before it or its twin comes close to another planetary system.

Before the record flew, Ann Druyan asked Carl Sagan a question. Could anyone, a billion years from now, make sense of a human brain? A billion years is a long, long time, he said. So why not try? Nobody knows if the record will ever be found, or played, or understood. But it is out there tonight with a laugh and a kiss and a hello in fifty-five languages. If you could add one more sound, what would it be?

Questions

1. What was the record made of?

A. Gold-covered copper
B. Plain paper
C. Clear glass

2. Why was Swahili left off the record?

A. The speakers did not make it to the recording in time
B. Nobody speaks Swahili
C. It was too long

3. Why did the team put drawings on the record's cover?

A. To show whoever found it how to play it
B. To make it pretty

C. To hide the music

4. In this story, what is a balaban?

A. A small reed pipe
B. A kind of drum
C. A music book

5. What did Ann Druyan think about while the machine listened?

A. Earth, people, and what it feels like to fall in love
B. Her breakfast
C. A math test

6. Why did Carl Sagan say, “Why not try?”

A. Nobody could be sure it would fail, so trying was worth it
B. He was sure aliens would answer
C. He wanted to finish early

Words to know

record: sound disk
copper: reddish metal
spacecraft: ship for space
Akkadian: ancient language
balaban: reed pipe

Answer key: Voyager's Golden Record

1. A. Gold-covered copper
2. A. The speakers did not make it to the recording in time
3. A. To show whoever found it how to play it
4. A. A small reed pipe
5. A. Earth, people, and what it feels like to fall in love
6. A. Nobody could be sure it would fail, so trying was worth it