

## Planet and Sky, Part I



[Opening theme music]

### **Joel McKinnon**

Back to Seldon Crisis with a twist. Today I'm going to go off track from our main emphasis a little bit and talk about original science fiction story written by yours truly and set to my own music. I'm eager to introduce you to this story, but before that, I'll have to provide some context. It all started in the waning days of the last millennium. NASA was about to celebrate a glorious achievement, the first probe sent to the south pole of Mars, where it would analyze the composition of the ice pack there. I took my then three year old son to San Jose, California's Tech Museum of Innovation, where the staff was focusing on the occasion and expecting to show the first incoming telemetry after the landing.

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Unfortunately, it wasn't to be. We arrived just a little after the first signals should have come in and went to the area of the celebration instead. There we were confronted by a lot of rather glum faces. The probe had failed to report in. It turned out that it had crashed after shutting off its descent engines too soon and plummeted to the surface, likely becoming a mangled mess of metal and very expensive instruments. There was a booth at the event crewed by several volunteers of the Mars Society, an international organization advocating for the human settlement of that planet.

They were listlessly giving away books by the president of the Society, Robert Zubrin, entitled "The Case for Mars," so I gladly took one. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that reading it changed my life. I'd always been a Mars fan, and somehow I found that this dreadful NASA setback, along with the incredibly inspiring book about a practical means of sending a series of crude missions to the Red Planet, effectively re-stoked my interest in Mars and the quest to eventually send humans there.

I joined the Mars Society shortly thereafter and began meeting some amazing people, like Dr. Zubrin himself, Kim Stanley Robinson, the author of the Mars trilogy, which I've since devoured multiple times, Frank Drake of SETI and the famous Drake Equation, and many NASA planetary scientists and science fiction writers along the way. I even met Elon Musk and did a small web project for him, which I've described in a previous episode. Robinson's book was probably the most influential because it vividly imagined the first human settlements, the efforts to create a new government and society, and most ambitiously of all, the effort to terraform the planet to enable humans, plants and animals to live upon the surface without special gear or protection. My involvement with the Mars Society fell away over the years, but the ideas I'd encountered found a home deep within my imagination.

It was only a few years later that something new began to germinate there. One day I was on a solo hike near my home, and I found myself pondering my legacy as a human being, advancing in years as a software developer. Nothing I had produced for various e-commerce startups and such was going to last more than a few years. So really, what could I feel I had created that might be remembered by anyone? After my passing, I'd been a big opera buff for a while so I decided then and there to try to write and produce a rock opera about Mars.

The idea grabbed hold of me in a big way and morphed a bit over the next few days. No, it wouldn't be about Mars itself, but about a Mars-like small planet in an unspecified time and place in the cosmos. It would share a lot of characteristics with Earth's neighbor, though. Uninhabited, hostile and arid, too small to have retained an atmosphere and no signs of active life until the story begins when a scientific exploration ship detects a signal emanating from beneath the surface, a strange form of radiation that seems to hold coherent information. This was basically the setup for the first song, which I entitled "Something Is Dreaming."

That's all I had to go on. As I pondered that simple phrase and that core idea, a chorus came to mind and I began to place it in a B minor chord progression mapped out on my bass guitar. Later, I suppose, I'll have to go back in time a bit and explain how I came to enjoy composing on the bass, but that's a whole different story. So the tale started to take form. The scientists land on the planet and send an expedition to investigate the mysterious signal. A man and a woman descend into a cavern and become overwhelmed by an unknown force which begins to transform them physically.

The signal becomes magnified, catalyzed by their presence and the scientists at the base station succeed in decoding it. It's a creation myth, a story of how the planet was formed and became the host of life forms that arrived from a distant star system embedded in ice. The man and the woman become transformed into the principal figures in a drama that plays out over eons of time. The man takes the form of the planet itself and the woman an emerging atmosphere high above the planet's surface. These two transformed entities evolve a new consciousness and the atmosphere heretofore referred to by the name Sky, determines to seduce the planet, henceforth known as Planet, into a loving, long term relationship.

Like really long term, as in the full duration of the life of the planet. This duet formed my second song, "Round." Next, I had to bring in the seeds of life. This is where it starts, or maybe I should say continues to get a little weird. A few years earlier, I had seen a lecture by none other than Robert Zubrin himself on a theoretical concept for how life could have begun on Earth known as panspermia. This is the idea that life migrated in microscopic form, embedded in some kind of substrate that left one star system and became captured by our own and eventually crash landed on our home planet, still in viable form.

In my story, there were three small communities of microbes embedded on a giant ball of ice. The three travelers, as I referred to them, manifested different attitudes. One was positive, ambitious and determined to thrive against all odds. Another was its opposite, living in constant fear and expectation of an inglorious end to everything at any moment. The third was neutral and accepting of whatever might happen. These three ideas, personified in the cosmic travelers play out their perspectives throughout the rest of the story. At the end of the third song, entitled "Travelers," the ice ball approaches the planet and appears bent on a violent collision.

For the musical backdrop of this very weird transformation, I wrote a simple repeating bass melody which formed the structure to allow the microbes to introduce themselves and converse about their unknown fate. The fourth song is entitled "Eons of Joy" and describes the planet coming to life. It also represents the maturation of the relationship between planet and sky as they discover each other's nuances and special capabilities. It's a very powerful and dynamic time, with asteroids crashing into the planet, oceans and mountains being formed, with vigorous atmospheric storms ongoing. So the music had to really rock out in this one.

Along with the two major protagonists forming a marriage, the travelers, having become embedded in the planet's crust after a violent collision, emerge as Planet and Sky collaborate to form habitats upon the surface

suitable for life. The microbes evolve into more complex life forms and form a true biosphere while still retaining something of their peculiar personalities.

A little more about the music before I describe the next song. It's good to have talented friends and I had some very special ones available in my old bandmates from a group called Jupiter Sheep - that backstory I owe you some day. The lead singer and lyricist of that band, a guy named Byron Bellamy, took on the dual role of the chief scientist who sings the prologue *Something Is Dreaming* and the first of the three travelers, that being the ambitious and positive one.

Another Jupiter Sheep alumni, singer and supremely talented keyboardist Melissa Olsen took on the dual roles of Sky and the trepidacious second traveler, and I, with my trusty bass guitar and a scary microphone before me, took on the remaining roles of Planet and the third, equanimous Traveler. Melissa is a wonderful musician and she became a crucial compositional and performance ally. Byron took on the likewise critical role of recording engineer and host to a free studio space for our recordings. My greatest challenge was in learning to sing, both to demonstrate the parts for the others and to voice my parts as Planet.

I had never done anything like this before and I took voice lessons and practiced like crazy. In the end, I feel that I was barely acceptable as a singer while Byron and Melissa were established pros and delivered their parts beautifully. The second song, *Round*, was a duet between me and Melissa. The third, a three part conversation among the three microbial travelers voiced by the three of us. And in *Eons of Joy*, Planet and Sky trade verses, so that's another duet with Melissa. For the fifth song, I posed a significant challenge for myself. It's a love aria sung by Planet to his beloved Sky.

Not just a love song, but a statement about what love means in all its aspects. I had just finished reading a lengthy exposition on the topic by the psychologist Rolo May entitled "Love and Will." In it he describes four aspects of love; sex, eros, philia and agape. Sex is the purely biological combination of the male and female aspects. Eros is the creative spirit, Philia is the bondage in friendship, and Agape is the love and care for what has been created by the partners - children, home, etc. The lyrics of the song Planet sings, Such is Love, spell out all of this, while also exclaiming the deep intensity of his romantic passion for Sky.

You might think this opera is lacking in one critical element, and you'd be right. So far, everything is just going way too well. Planet and Sky are in love and building a family. They're sort of mellowing out. The biosphere is comfortable, life is thriving, etc. There is a clue, however, near the end of Such is Love that things might begin to turn in a different direction. Let me quote an intrusion in Planet's love aria from his paramour; a note of caution perhaps. "Lover, draw me close to thee. Against the blackened cold of night. We hold the key to life within us. Fail not your precious hold on me."

There are four more songs after this one, and I'd love to tell you what they're all about, and I surely will before long. I'm going to stop here for now, though, and give you a chance to hear the whole story for yourself. It's available on Bandcamp and I'll provide the link in the show notes. You can also find out a lot more about the project at the official website [planetandsky.com](http://planetandsky.com). If you go there and check it out, you'll also discover that there is a companion podcast that explores the rather cryptic lyrics in a lot more depth.

I suggest you listen to the album first and conjure the details from your own imagination. Afterwards, you might be interested in the extra material professionally delivered in podcast form by the brilliant narrator Doug Metzger. He has his own incredible podcast on the history of anglophone

literature called Literature and History, which I cannot recommend highly enough. It's my favorite podcast by a wide margin. The story of how I was able to collaborate with him on Planet and Sky will have to wait for part II. I'm going to end this one here and sign off in a different manner than I ordinarily do.

First, let me thank you for indulging me and sharing a little bit of this labor of love with you. And I hope you'll be intrigued enough to listen to the album. To give you a teaser, I'm going to substitute such is love for the traditional end theme of Seldon Crisis. I hope you find it enjoyable.

[Song, "Such is Love," plays]