

Across the universe



Nerdy and proud, bluedot and its organisers From the Fields look to the stars as they prepare for year two

ON 14 February 1990, as it flew through the outermost fringes of our solar system, the Voyager 1 spacecraft turned for one last look homeward.

About four billion miles away from Earth, the spacecraft captured an image of our planet—appearing in the photograph as a tiny blue dot—that shattered any lingering perception that the human race was the centre of the universe.

“Look again at that dot,” wrote American astronomer

Carl Sagan, who had suggested that Voyager 1’s NASA operators instruct the probe to take the photo. “That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives.

“The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our >>

WORDS: EMMA HUDSON

stand.”

Those words, written in 1994, are more relevant today than ever. So much so that they inspired one of the most genuinely original festivals to launch in the past few years: bluedot.

For those who spent the last festival season under a rock, bluedot entered the landscape with a mission: “To inspire and entertain. To explore the frontiers of human advancement. To celebrate science and the exploration of the universe. To explore the intersections of science, culture, art and technology. To highlight the fragility of planet Earth”.

The immediately iconic festival has more than just a clearly defined mission, though. It also happens to be staged on probably one of the best festival sites ever: Jodrell Bank, with the Lovell Telescope looming large over the 12,000 attendees.

From the Fields, the organisers behind Kendal Calling, are the event geniuses behind bluedot. They got the idea, From the Fields’ Jamie Smith tells *Access*, over the course of six years working on the Jodrell Bank site putting on the Live from Jodrell Bank concert series.

“2017 is in effect our sixth year working at Jodrell Bank,” he says. “I think from the first event there with the Flaming Lips in 2010, a seed was planted that we could expand on this format and make it into a three-day event that encapsulated all of the science, culture and arts aspects into one.”

Although they had experience on the site, as the team prepared in 2016 to launch bluedot, they realised that it was bigger than anything they had ever worked on.

“It was interesting,” Smith laughs. “We couldn’t go at bluedot in a small way in its first year and build towards what we eventually had; we had to go the whole hog and do it right, with a full bill of 300 scientists, talkers and thinkers, as well as the musical side as well.

“With a music festival, you can dip your toe in a few different genres of music and have a few stages, and then each year you grow a bit more and you add another stage. But this had to be the



A humbling view,
The famous image
of Earth as a pale
blue dot, viewed
from Voyager 1

whole package right out the gate. It was quite a challenge—especially as we managed to put Kendal Calling and bluedot on back to back.”

From the Fields enlisted festival production company Ground Control to help them make bluedot a reality. Being familiar with the site, working with a trusted company to produce the event and just a bit of luck for good measure all made the festival a smash success.

It’s a success that must also be credited to From the Fields’ relationship with the Jodrell Bank team, which stretches back to when they first came up with the idea for the Live from Jodrell Bank series.

“We thought the Jodrell Bank site would be a good venue to have some music on, so we talked to a few people about it who all just laughed and said no way,” Smith remembers. “We went to ask

“It was very cool to wake up in the morning when it was still just about dark; you’d stick your head out of the tent and this giant telescope with artwork was there”

– Jamie Smith

Jodrell Bank the question anyway, and they said yes. It was as simple as that.”

When the team decided to go ahead with bluedot, essentially an expanded, three-day version of the Live from series, that six-year relationship came in handy, lending credibility to the bluedot programme.

“The two key people at Jodrell Bank are Tim O’Brien and Teresa Anderson, who are both heavily involved,” says Smith. “They do all the programming for the science side of things; they come to a lot of the meetings and they’re interested in the music and arts side. It’s great for us, because they want to help and make sure that everything works.

“Having bluedot on the Jodrell Bank site also >>

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gives the festival genuine credibility: to be there rather than just doing a science festival in a field. It would still be a great event no matter where it was, but Jodrell adds that x factor; it's a fantastic venue."

The looming Lovell Telescope gave the organisers an obvious point to revolve the festival around. Much like our solar system circles the Sun, bluedot expanded from the awesome telescope at its site centre.

"It makes a great centrepiece every night as an art installation that was a commissioned piece by Brian Eno," says Smith. "It was an ever-evolving piece of artwork, so no two things turned up twice. It was very cool to wake up in the morning when it was still just about dark; you'd stick your head out of the tent and this giant telescope with artwork was there. It was wonderful."

The telescope, with its projection mapping by longtime Jodrell Bank collaborators Bluman Associates, is not just there to look pretty. It puts the scientific talks in perspective, and also inspires the musicians, band and artists to push themselves further for their sets.

One such band is 2017 headliners Orbital, who Smith tells *Access* will be doing something this summer that truly brings bluedot full circle.

"This year, Orbital are going to utilise the telescope, which we normally use for projections, but they also want to beam their set into space in real-time, so they're playing for anyone that may or may not be listening up there. They're also keen on doing a *Doctor Who* special that they've not done before and won't be doing again, purely because of the venue.

"We're incredibly lucky to have the Lovell Telescope there, because it automatically offers something amazing that you won't see anywhere else. You walk on-site and the telescope is vast and

awe-inspiring. Artists come down for a site visit maybe thinking it's just another show, but once they see it, they are blown away. They'll come back with some amazing piece of artwork or ideas for the telescope. They're doing new things that they wouldn't necessarily do anywhere else."

"The only home we've ever known"

It feels strange that in 2017 we should be celebrating an outward looking vision and a commitment to hearing from experts—but, here we are.

There is something quietly revolutionary, and slyly political, about bluedot's mission to 'cultivate a unifying celebration for citizens of the world'.

Access wonders to Smith if he feels bluedot has inadvertently launched in a time where it couldn't fit into the cultural zeitgeist more perfectly.

"I think so. Our mission was always clear from the name and being inspired by Carl Sagan's 'Pale Blue Dot'. Looking out was the idea. I do think that is more relevant now than ever, to push the realisation of how small our planet is and the vastness of space. It really opens people's minds. With the last couple of years, people are paying more attention to this sort of thing, and I think it's a good platform for the science and the arts.

"It all started with that very first Live from Jodrell Bank show—we realised we had an audience for something like this when we had a crowd of a few thousand people in 2011 all chanting, 'Science! Science! Science!'"

It seems incredibly necessary, revolutionary even, that—in the age of post-truth, alternative facts and Michael Gove's 'The British people have had enough of experts'—a festival could celebrate so joyously its nerdy roots, aiming to educate and inspire rather than terrify and bully.

"We want people going away from the event

with the thirst to want to know more," Smith says. "Having learned things over the weekend, going away from that with the quest for discovery. There's a lot of stuff going on with science and the arts, and bluedot gives those areas a platform to shine, and hopefully people take a bit of that away with them and go even further."

Ultimately, it all seems to swing back round to that Sagan essay and the photograph of Earth from Voyager 1, a tiny blue dot in a vast ocean of space and time:

"It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

Access mentions this to Smith as our conversation is coming to an end; he responds with an anecdote.

"Last year on the Sunday night, Caribou were on stage, and they were playing their track 'Mars'. We were stood there watching them, and just to the right of the stage was a little red dot in the sky. We called Tim O'Brien over and asked if it was Mars and he said, 'Yes, it is'. That was it for me, something that will never be recreated: watching Caribou play 'Mars' and looking up at Mars."

The little red dot from the pale blue dot, *Access* says.

"Exactly! We were looking from the other side." **AAA**

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– Carl Sagan

