

## **Josh Nelson**

### **“Exploring Mars” - album reviews**

<http://www.smooth-jazz.de/Woodrow/Nelson/ExploringMars.htm>

Instrumental music can inspire the imagination. Whether the soundtrack of a favorite movie or jazz, music without words can take you places that can be any combination of a wonder, amusement, adventure, romance or relaxation. For pianist Josh Nelson, the wonder is the Red Planet. *Exploring Mars* (Origin Records, 2015) is inspired by the fiction of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. It's also a follow-up to Nelson's *Discoveries* (2011).

In addition to piano, Nelson plays trumpet and Nord Electro 3. Also on this date are John Daversa, trumpet and EVI; Larry Koonse, guitar; Dave Robaire, bass; Dan Schnelle, drums; Kathleen Grace, vocals; Alan Ferber, trombone; and Brian Walsh, bass clarinet.

“Bradbury's Spirit” includes a spoken-word excerpt of Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. The music plays softly underneath Nelson's reading from a section of the book that depicts a Martian jam session. Koonse, Robaire and Schnelle enjoy a light jam as Nelson speaks. The piano is subtle.

Grace sings lead on the ballad, “How You Loved Me on Mars.” Larry Goldings adds Hammond B3 organ accompaniment. The first half of the song is mostly voice and piano. The other instruments eventually come in, adding depth, majesty and a haunting mood.

“Curiosity” is a combination of ambient piano music and science fiction-inspired

electronics. Daversa's EVI (electronic valve instrument) is largely responsible for the latter. The song is an ode to a Martian rover that inspired the overall project.

During Daversa's middle solo, it's difficult not to visualize the homicidal robot in the movie *Red Planet*. The a tribute to the actual rover, this could also be the fictional menace's theme song. The rhythm trio's contributions are solid.

Nelson is developing visual components for this music, which he plans to play in concerts. "A lot of it uses NASA footage, which includes some amazing color and composite images that the rovers have sent back to Earth," Nelson says. He composed all 10 songs on *Exploring Mars*.

**<http://www.birdistheworm.com/josh-nelson-exploring-mars/>**

*Exploring Mars* is pianist **Josh Nelson**'s ode to the Red Planet, inspired by science, stories and space travel. Opening track "Bradbury's Spirit," gets right to the heart of the matter. Gentle but urgent guitar and brushwork is set to a reading from Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, reflecting the undercurrent of tension and fear united with the free-spirited adventurism of space exploration. That Nelson marries fictional text with instrumentals mirroring the abstract, but very real big-picture emotions associated with the subject of space and space travel is an impressive feat. It's also a method that he uses to great effect throughout this excellent recording.

There's a giddy anticipation to "Sojourner," an emotion that surrounds every aspect of the satellite's life. Isn't that what the engineer who built Sojourner must have felt during its construction? And what about those at NASA control as it launched up and out of Earth's orbit, the joy and awe they must have felt? And those of us who sit at our computer screens and pour over the photos sendt back to Earth... is it not the same for us, too?

Nelson utilizes a deft mix of solo, small & large ensemble, instrumental and vocal pieces. Solo guitar, piano, and drums & cymbals interludes create varying degrees of ambiance, from unsettled to serene, of glittering stars and red shifting sands.

The love song "How You Loved Me On Mars" is the reminder of the humanity that guides us no matter how far out we venture into space. This is further accented by Nelson shifting between the spacey sound of electric keyboards and the organic soul of

piano.

Considering the subject of space travel is the theme of the recording, it's especially refreshing to see Nelson use restraint and subtlety as his tools rather than a more clichéd approach of grand, melodramatic statements. The fleet-of-foot "Opportunity" digs into a thick groove, but keeps its motion wound up in a tight focus so that it doesn't begin to flail wildly and uninhibited. Closing track "Spirit" is a reprise of the opener, and its catchy skipping cadence is delightfully nuanced.

And then there's the simple piano & vocals of "How You Loved Me On Mars," which keeps to the size of a candle flame but resonates as strongly as it would on the darkest of starless nights. And the solo piano piece "Mars, the Bringer Of War" expresses both joyful and ominous tones in a way that gives the sense of one long continuous breath.

It's an album with a huge thematic scope and a quirk personality. Those are two qualities that don't often work so well together, and rarely does their combination result in a piece as exhilarating as *Exploring Mars*. Count it amongst the best released thus far in 2015.

<http://blogcritics.org/music-review-josh-nelson-exploring-mars/>

<http://www.seattlepi.com/lifestyle/blogcritics/article/Music-Review-Josh-Nelson-Exploring-Mars-6081296.php>

Pianist-composer Josh Nelson's follow-up to his 2011 science fiction-inspired album *Discoveries*, *Exploring Mars* delivers everything you would expect from an album with that title. Taking inspiration from actual science as well as science fiction, Nelson takes the listener along on a journey of musical exploration of variations on his Martian theme. There are tracks devoted to the exploratory rovers. There are tracks devoted to Martian geography. There are tracks devoted to earlier imaginative explorations in music and literature.

He opens the 10-track set with "Bradbury's Spirit," a composition that in a real sense bridges the scientific and the imaginative. Over an understated evocative waltz, Nelson reads a passage from Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, a passage that describes a mystifying musical performance and its effects. It is a quite effective prelude to the album's programmatic concept combining Spirit and Bradbury.

"Sojourner" follows featuring guitarist Larry Koonse and Nelson on piano as it like its namesake takes its exploratory journey. Koonse and his solo guitar handle the first of the

geographically inspired pieces, “Memnonia Quadrangle,” leading to a haunting ballad, “How You Loved Me On Mars” with a pure and sensitive vocal interpretation from Kathleen Grace. Larry Goldings adds B3 accompaniment.

“Opportunity” is an otherworldly uptempo piece which gets some exotically strange sounds from Nelson on the Nord Electro 3. Drummer Dan Schnelle takes over for a percussive rhapsody in “Solis Lacus, The Eye of Mars.” This leads to “Mars, The Bringer of War,” the one piece on the album not composed by Nelson. Instead it is his adaptation of the first movement of Gustave Holst’s *The Planets* for the piano that creates what he calls an arrangement “sort of like a Bill Evans *Conversations with Myself* approach to overdubbing.” Interestingly, Larry Goldings (in the liner notes) uses the phrase “converse with himself” to describe Nelson’s work on “Opportunity,” trading solos on the piano and synthesizer as well.

“Curiosity” and “Syrtis Major, The Hourglass Sea” highlight the EVI (the Electro Valve Instrument), which, like the Nord, gives the pieces that spacey other worldly sound. For those of you (like me) unfamiliar with the EVI, an interesting explanation of how the instrument is played and its range is available from [John Swana on YouTube](#). The set closes with a reprisal of “Spirit,” this time without the spoken word passage, focusing attention on the music where indeed it belongs.

For the timid souls among us unlikely to be exploring anything at all, let alone Mars, Josh Nelson’s *Exploring Mars* offers a welcome taste of what we’re missing.

**<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/exploring-mars-josh-nelson-origin-records-review-by-dan-mcclenaghan.php>**

Mars, the forth planet from the sun—that blood red star arcing across the sky—has been investigated by many in the arts. Before NASA landed four rovers on the red planet’s surface, science fiction writers took up the task of exploring our planetary neighbor: Edgar Rice Burroughs with his fantastic Barsoom series, beginning with *Princess of Mars* (1917), Ray Bradbury with the poetic *Martian Chronicles* (1950), and Kim Stanley Robinson with his superb, adventurous and scientifically fact-based *Red Mars*(1993 are

three examples that just scratch the literary surface of the planet's ruddy soil.

Pianist [Josh Nelson](#) brings his own personal fascination with our planetary neighbor to fore with *Exploring Mars*, a science fiction/science fact/jazz follow-up to his *Discoveries*, that delved into the work of seminal writers Jules Verne and H.G. Wells (whose *War of the Worlds* (1898) documented malevolent Martians invading the Earth.)

Nelson opens *Discovering Mars* with "Bradbury's Spirit," a reading from Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*, describing the music of the Red Planet—strange and beautiful and unbidden sounds invading the art of Martian musicians and singers, featuring a spare and "silvery" accompaniment by guitarist [Larry Koonse](#).

Four robotic rovers have landed on a traversed the Martian landscape. Nelson nods to each—"Sojourner," "Opportunity," "Curiosity," and "Spirit." These are mainstream compositions with otherworldly tints imbued in no small part by the use of the EVI (Electronic Valve Instrument) of [John Daversa](#).

"Memnonia Quadrangle" showcases, again, Larry Koonse' reflective guitar work, and "Solis Lacus, The Eye of Mars," put drummer [Dan Schnelle](#) front and center with an expansive drum kit orchestration. If there were Martian music—if Bradbury's concept were real—it might sound like "Syrtis Major, The Hourglass Sea." These are alien sounds from Daversa on the EVI—deep rumbles and Martian bird (or bat) tweets, as beautifully odd and out-of-this-world as it gets.

Nelson brings in one non-original to the set: "Mars, The Bringer of War," from Gustav Holst's popular classical piece, *The Planets*. Nelson goes solo on the piano for this one, but overdubs layers of the instrument for his own distinctive take on the tune.

In the middle of all this sits what amounts to the most gorgeous of pop songs: "How You Loved Me On Mars," co-written by Nelson and vocalist [Kathleen Grace](#). Produced and arranged to perfection, it sounds like something that might have been written by Joni Mitchell teamed with Paul Simon: smart, dreamy and off-kilter with a heartfelt vocal by Grace, with a thoroughly engaging melody, this should be on the radio racking up the sales. In the 1960s it would have had that shot. Now, sadly, the powers that be in that arena are just too conservative. Their loss.

<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/exploring-mars-josh-nelson-origin-records-review-by-dan-bilawsky.php>

*Exploring Mars* is fueled by a love of science fiction, intellectual inquisitiveness, and musical inventiveness of the highest order. Pianist Josh Nelson, initially inspired by the landing of the Curiosity rover on Mars in the summer of 2012, put together a project that's musically expansive and wholly unique: It's safe to say that he's the first person to tie together author Ray Bradbury's writings, original music that ranges from the friendly to the far-out, tributes to four rover landings, and the work of composer Gustav Holst.

This particular space odyssey begins with Nelson's spoken word recitation of material from Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (Doubleday, 1950) over a 5/4 musical backdrop ("Bradbury's Spirit"). From there, it's off to a number that starts with the focus on Nelson's piano, artfully expanding and ripening as it goes ("Sojourner"). Then there's an

engrossing look at the guitar work of [Larry Koonse](#) ("Memnonia Quadrangle"), an oddly endearing love ballad delivered by vocalist [Kathleen Grace](#) ("How You Loved Me On Mars"), and a quirky and fusion-y trip ("Opportunity").

The second half of the album is populated by an equally wide variety of material. "Solis Lacus, The Eye Of Mars" — a dark tom-and-cymbal meditation from drummer [Dan Schnelle](#) — leads to Nelson's overdubbed take on "Mars, The Bringer Of War," the best known piece from Holst's *The Planets*, Op. 32, and "Curiosity," a synthesizer-centered number that excites and inspires. Nelson's space mission then comes to its end with "Syrtis Major, The Hour Glass Sea," which finds [John Daversa](#) speaking in tongues with his EVI, and "Spirit," a reprise of the music on the album opener.

A fertile imagination and strong musical skills have given birth to a remarkable work of art here. *Exploring Mars* is a world unto itself.

<http://www.axs.com/it-s-time-to-explore-mars-with-jazz-pianist-josh-nelson-38548>

[Nelson](#)'s known in L.A. as an in-demand sideman and session player for jazz vocalists like Sara Gazarek ("Blossom & Bee") and Kathleen Grace ("No Place To Fall"). He often takes over the show, suspending vocal animation, with his imaginative comps and classically induced solos that seek to beautify the story without over-embellishing. But he is also a surprising solo artist with a universal language all his own, as fans of his albums understand quite well.

After what seemed an eternal wait, Nelson's back on the scene with a follow-up to his

dreamy, 2011 *Discoveries*, an album of original thought inspired by sci-fi writers Jules Verne and H.G. Wells, their themes of exploration and time travel, as well as steampunk imagery.

Nelson's *Exploring Mars* comes out on [Origin Records](#), February 17, with a two-night CD release show at L.A.'s artsy [Blue Whale](#), February 20-21, 9 p.m. Like *Discoveries*, this is a concept album but more in the real science realm, focused on the possibilities of life on Mars. Inspired by NASA's car-sized Curiosity rover exploring Mars' Gale Crater on August 2012, Nelson went on his own musical expedition, throwing in his interest in the other three rovers, as well as sci-fi author Ray Bradbury's seminal "The Martian Chronicles," dated 1950.

"I knew then that I wanted to write something about [the Curiosity rover] and eventually I decided that I wanted to write pieces for each of the four rovers," Nelson explained in a January 27th release by [Michael Bloom Media Relations](#). "So I studied each rover and its life span and its tools on board, and tried to reflect that musically as best I could, with kind of a different instrumentation featuring [John Daversa](#) playing on EVI on a lot of it. [Kathleen Grace](#) and I co-wrote a song together and it just kept growing."

It all makes for a wonderful blend of multi-media in the presentation of the original music on his sixth recording as a bandleader. An early description of the album has Nelson combining "a sense of whimsy and wonder about what's 'out there' with pieces ranging from thoughtful introspection to surging fusion bristling with frantic unisons to a faithful solo piano reading of the classical piece 'Mars, The Bringer of War' from Gustav Holst's *The Planets*."

Nelson appears at the Blue Whale with his band, guitarist Larry Koonse, bassist Dave Robaire, drummer Dan Schnelle, vocalist Kathleen Grace, and Walter Smith (sax) on

Friday and John Daversa (trumpet/EVI) on Saturday. They'll have art/video to enhance the music, put together by Claudia Carballada, Travis Flourney, and Jesse Ottinger.

<http://www.scpr.org/programs/offramp/2015/03/13/41953/pianist-josh-nelson-on-exploring-mars-performing-l/>

What does Mars sound like on a piano? Pianist Josh Nelson came up with one answer on his latest album: Exploring Mars.

Nelson has performed and collaborated with musicians like Jeff Hamilton, Peter Erskine and vocalist Natalie Cole. When performing live, the pianist and composer often includes a live videographer to collaborate with his band.

Off-Ramp contributor Sean J. O'Connell went to Nelson's home to talk about the newest album. Here are some highlights:

On writing an album about Mars:

Mars is awesome, lets just start with that. Second, it's been in the news quite a lot. For me, it was the landing of the Curiosity rover in August 2012 that kind of seeded the project. And then with all of the Space X stuff going on, with trials of people hopefully populating that planet someday... it seemed like an apropos time to release something with that subject matter.

It all started with "Martian Chronicles" — Ray Bradbury and his vision for the Martian fantasy world definitely got me going before that.

I really love the romanticism, the idea of musically reflecting upon the planet. But at the same time, paying homage to someone like Gustav Holst, who took Mars and the astrological meaning of the planets, and putting my own spin on it.

On translating the concept of Mars to music:

For this record, I would take other records — or also films, like "Invaders from Mars" from the 1950s — and just put it on and just start playing. Solo piano wise, [it sounds] romantic and kind of other worldly. But I really love the idea of just kind of improvising, especially with the films of Mars, or the JPL/NASA stuff that they've been putting out from the Curiosity rover landing — that's super inspirational to me as well.

On performing live with a videographer:

I love film, I love theater, and I just wanted to marry the two with my music. Growing up a Disney kid, my dad was an Imagineer with Disney. My brother and I got to be the first guys to ride on a lot of rides at Disneyland, testing them out. And we were fascinated by the theatrics that go into it. And the mechanics, but also the resulting art — the feeling that you get from seeing something like this.

So, yeah. We have the [Discovery Project](#). I'm surprised more jazz artists don't do it, actually. Because there's a serious visual component that I think a lot of them deal with. It's really fun for the band. It's fun for the audience. It's a really fun journey from beginning to end.

On the impact video has on the musicians' performance:

Absolutely, there's different performances, yeah. They respond visually and then it manifests different sonically when they perform it. I actually like really hearing the tunes performed with video and without to see how they're different and to see if the guys are, in fact, reacting.

<http://www.examiner.com/review/josh-nelson-explores-mars-with-every-form-of-expression-at-his-disposal>

**Josh Nelson “Exploring Mars” album • February 17, 2015 • Origin Records  
Rating: 5 stars**

At L.A.’s **Blue Whale** as far back as 2012, jazz pianist and composer **Josh Nelson** previewed parts of his highly experimental *Exploring Mars* album project with sound and visual imagery, culminating in a two-night, multi-media CD release show last month. At times during the listening-only portion of the album, you want to frequently refer back to those visuals of a bleeding red sunset over a lonely isolated Mars horizon, the rovers, NASA engineers readying for another launch, scenes from a b/w sci-fi movie about astronauts in planetary space, knobs on a control board... something to make a lot of this technical sensory motion fit into an earthly, human dimension.

*NASA and courtesy of Josh Nelson, used with permission*

Inspired by the first Mars rover, Curiosity, landing on August 2012, science buff Nelson set about putting his own soundtrack to the foreign premises. In his February 17, 2015, **Origin Records** release, Nelson manages to astound with a tectonic grasp of the mechanical in the personification of rovers, knobs of metal and radioactivity, and a dead planet far from here, as well as an impossibly human romanticism despite the barren odds in one accessibly melodic love song. He also concentrates his musical grasp of so many various styles in the 10 original compositions: the classical, the avant-garde, and his vast experience animating a vocalist’s soul while somehow able to animate themes, and ideas, and things far removed from his life.

“Syrtis Major, The Hourglass Sea” is a complete score conjuring up a machine and all its parts, perhaps a rover investigating the Mars landscape in the actual Syrtis Major Planum,

a dark spot (or volcano) between the northern and southern plains of the planet. There's nothing human in the coils and tinny registers of such a score — imagined well by [John Daversa](#), who plays EVI and trumpet on the record — save the vibe of a curious, mischievous R2D2 poking and prodding, trying to play in an empty, natural sandbox.

But then, the motors of the inanimate disappear at the first sound of her voice, human, woman, tender, wistful, singing an actual love story about this new planet and her sweetheart. Written by Nelson and vocalist [Kathleen Grace](#), “How You Loved Me On Mars” seems musically separate from the rest of this detached scientific progress report, however cleverly made — acting as the sci-fi movie's hit-making single in the closing credits, the radio-ready adult contemporary hit people rush to download after the popcorn and the curtain call, like they did with the James Bond series.

Nelson embodies a vast range of studies: the volcanoes of ice, the finality of that red landscape, tragic love on Mars, a tangible forestry of gypsy jazz mapping the “Memnonia Quadrangle,” an eerie and inevitably fatal, sci-fi wordless “Spirit” vocalese that would probably fit with the ending of *Logan's Run* when almost everyone over 30 dies, or the moment Thorn discovers that *Soylent Green* really is people.

Nelson is able to project what a rover or a woman in love might sound like with equal aplomb, yet remain a mystery himself. His style of play splinters and distributes according to his subject matter, and for now, it's all about the science out there.

With just a few choice musicians at hand — also guitarist [Larry Koonse](#), bassist [Dave Robaire](#), drummer [Dan Schnelle](#), B3 organist [Larry Goldings](#) on “How You Loved Me On Mars,” trombonist [Alan Ferber](#), bass clarinetist [Brian Walsh](#) — and himself on trumpet, piano, and the Nord Electro 3, [Josh Nelson](#) fulfilled his fascination with the Red Planet. As if today was the year 2025 and he'd returned from the first [Mars One](#) colony to tell the tale, better than anyone.

<http://www.jazzweekly.com/2015/03/universal-josh-nelson-exploring-mars/>

UNIVERSAL! Josh Nelson: Exploring Mars

by [George W. Harris](#) • March 30, 2015

LA-based Josh Nelson is one of the go-to guys for either a swinging jazz date or for tastefully backing vocalists such as Natalie Cole and Sara Gazarek. He's got a touch born with the blues that is both sensitive and bopping. This latest album of his is a stroke of genius-The Great Mars Songbook!! What does that mean? Its songs about and dedicated to the famed Red Planet. Hey, it works!

The album starts off by Nelson reading from Ray Bradbury's classic "The Martian Chronicles" with a coffee shop gentle guitar building up to a full combo before "Sojourner" takes us to sleek chamber jazz with some tasty electrical guitar by Larry Koonse." Kathleen Grace brings her voice to a lovely and longing ballad on "How You Loved Me On Mars" as well as the lithe "Spirit." A couple of the tunes get electrical and spacey; hints of Return to Forever are felt when Nelson plugs in on "Curiosity" and a dash of Headhunters get funky on "Opportunity." Even better is when Nelson brings out Gustav Holst's "Mars, The Bringer of War" and turns it into a hipper than hip jazz bolero. The mix of originality, style, harmony and a good old groove makes this a total gas, if there is gas on that planet. How is this guy going to pull this off in concert?

**Origin Records**

[www.originarts.com](http://www.originarts.com)