

AirSpace Season 5, Episode 6: The Revolution Will Not Be Televised

Music up and under

Nick: Welcome to AirSpace from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, presented by Olay. I'm Nick.

Matt: I'm Matt.

Emily: And I'm Emily.

Matt: Back in the summer of 1969, a lot of Americans were preoccupied with three men who were about to strap themselves to a rocket and take off to the moon.

Emily: But other Americans looked at the poverty, hunger and racism around them and saw the massive effort and billions of dollars that went into the moonshot as America with its priorities on backwards.

Nick: Today, we're taking a look at the effort to put a person on the moon and how it intersects with other movements towards social and economic equality that were building in the 1960s, just as NASA was building rockets.

Music up and out

Matt: Back in 2019, around the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing, we did an episode called Rock on the Moon and in it we talked about the music that went to the moon with the astronauts as well as the music that was inspired back on earth by Apollo. And one of those songs is actually a spoken word poem by Gil Scott-Heron.

Gil Scott-Heron: We have a poem here. It's called Whitey on the Moon. *laughs* And it was inspired, it was inspired, by some whities on the moon. So I want to give credit where credit is due.

Matt: Whitey on the Moon is essentially at its root, a list of challenges that are related back to America's priorities and money going to space exploration, while at the same time other challenges that were very important to people's lives on earth, especially lives within Black communities around America, were not being served or not being solved.

Gil Scott-Heron: (with rhythmic drumming) Taxes taking my whole damn check. The junkies make me a nervous wreck. The price of food is going up. And as if all that crap wasn't enough. A rat done bit my sister, Nell. With Whitey on the moon. Her face and arms...

Nick: The idea that the United States had the wherewithal to do all of the complicated things necessary to get to the moon and spend all of the money that it was

going to take, highlighted the idea that we were perhaps choosing not to fix these other issues, poverty being just one of the problems that was facing the nation in the overlapping Space Race and Civil Rights eras.

Matt: Yes. If you look at public opinion polls from the time, throughout the 1960s over the course of Apollo, and historians have done this work, you know, what you see is an American public that by and large was positive about NASA and about NASA's ability to do things, but pretty negative most of the time about the amount of money that was being put into Apollo.

And at the heart of the argument that the Apollo boosters were making was this rah-rah! technocracy! argument that what Apollo was proving was that if you put your money and your resources into solving big technological problems, and if you put the experts in charge, then you will get good results. And I think the criticism of that was, well, will that work for every problem? And even if it does, are we even beginning to take on these other problems or are we all just throwing all of our eggs into this one basket?

Emily: Right. And I think one of the big distinctions about this story is that general sentiment for and against the space program and putting humans on the moon, this wasn't an issue that only one community felt one way about, another community felt a different way about it, right? This wasn't, Black Americans are against going to the moon and white Americans are for going to the moon. This is a sentiment that was felt across those communities. And there was a lot of people facing the same challenges towards poverty and other social issues that were really struggling with the notion of an entire country getting behind, financially and otherwise, a project that really didn't serve the needs of the people at the time.

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Emily: So let's put some numbers on it. So how much money were we spending on Apollo and how much of that money would've covered some of the other programs that were in existence or how much money could have been available to some of these other social programs if they weren't being put towards Apollo?

Nick: So, yeah, that's one of the entry portals for this conversation, has directly to do with money. That we spent all of this money on the Moon and that we should have been spending it here on Earth. The Apollo program at the time cost about \$28 billion, which is a lot of money now, was more money then. That's roughly the equivalent of \$288 billion. Both of those numbers are billion with a B. And by contrast food stamps, or SNAP as it was later renamed, was authorized in 1964. And it was expected to serve four million people at a cost of, eventually, \$360 million annually. That's 360 million with an M.

Matt: And that sounds like a lot, right? Serving four million people. Until you start to think about the fact that in fact, 15 million people in the United States at that time were food insecure. So this wasn't even covering the, you know, even half of the people who were going hungry at the time.

Emily: Right. And to put that number into context, Matt, 15 million people were food insecure at the time. The population was just over 205 million. So we're talking just under 10% of the population.

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Matt: Apollo in 1969 is coming right in the wake of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which in some ways was the cap to the Civil Rights Movement, although we know that didn't mean the end to racial and economic inequities. When you look at editorials and letters to the editor that were being published in the major Black newspapers of the time, we've talked about the *Chicago Defender* in this podcast before, there was also the *Philadelphia Courier*, you see a mix of sentiment that some readers of those papers were very positive about Apollo and what it said for what the country was capable of and the types of life that their children might have.

But others were still very wary of, you know, whether or not there was actually going to be change and progress in America, looking at it just in this immediately post Civil Rights Act era. And I think you see that coming through in the editorials that really took Apollo to task. But yeah, it's not really out of line with the general sentiment of America, which was that Apollo's great, but what is it really worth to us on the ground?

Emily: One article that questioned the Apollo spending was a New York Times piece by Thomas A. Johnson, a pioneering Black journalist. And the headline of this article that he had written is, "Blacks and Apollo, Most Couldn't Have Cared Less." And this article starts out by saying "many Black Americans found ways in recent days to ignore the Apollo 11 moonshot, an effort, they say, that ignored them."

And this was one of the sentiments at the time that wraps up a lot of what we've been talking about here, which is this challenge a lot of Americans we're seeing in the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and there's a lot of people struggling while we're doing this great big, expensive technological demonstration.

Nick: The article in the New York Times that we referenced talks a lot about jazz festivals and baseball taking precedence over watching a rocket headed for the moon. One person was quoted as saying the whole thing uses money that should have been spent here on Earth. Another notable quote is from Benjamin W. Watkins, known at the time as the mayor of Harlem, "the world doesn't stop just because a trio of astronauts got off of it."

And the article contains another really great insight from someone that was interviewed at the time that goes beyond the economic disparity between what was being spent on social issues and social challenges and the money that we sent rocketing to the moon.

Sylvia Drew, an attorney for the NAACP legal defense fund is quoted in the New York Times in July of 1969 as saying, "it proves that white America will do whatever it is committed to doing. If America fails to end discrimination, hunger and malnutrition, then we must conclude that America is not committed to ending discrimination, hunger and malnutrition. Walking on the moon proves that we do what we want to do as a nation."

Sylvia Drew is now Sylvia Drew Ivie, and she lives across the country from New York City where she was speaking to us in 1969 and across from us here in Washington, DC.

Sylvia: My name is Sylvia Drew Ivie and I am the special assistant to the president of Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles, California.

Matt: Sylvia was exactly the kind of person that the New York Times article was talking about when it said most Black people didn't care about Apollo.

Nick: (from interview) They say that everyone knows where they were during the moon landing. Do you remember where you were when people landed on the moon?

Sylvia: No. I'm the exception to your rule. I don't remember at all.

Nick: So in addition to being in the NAACP legal defense fund in 1969 and quoted in this article about Apollo, Sylvia has been involved in science, health and medicine based communications for most of her career and she comes from a science heavy family. Her grandfather, Charles R. Drew, was a doctor who basically invented modern blood banking. And her cousin, Frederick Gregory, was one of the first Black astronauts during the early shuttle era, which is to say that the criticisms that Sylvia and all other voices were leveling at the space program in 1969 were not anti-science or even necessarily anti-space.

Sylvia: The accomplishments in space are astounding. They were then, and they are now, and it's unbelievable what our scientists have been able to do, what our astronauts have been able to do. It just makes you feel that the human race is limitless in its capacity and its desire to keep learning and to keep growing and expanding what we know of the universe. So I share the excitement of the world when these advances are made, but I'm very locally focused. I'm an Earthling and I worry about, *laughs*, I worry about all things local in what's happening to people on the ground who haven't had the benefit of the billions and billions of dollars that have gone into the advancement in space exploration.

Emily: True to her current job and causes and service record, Sylvia used a really interesting example of food deserts, which are places where people don't have access to grocery stores, as an example of a problem that could have been fixed in 1969 and still really needs to be fixed today. And it really is something that can be fixed if only policymakers and scientists and funders and corporate America came together in the way they came together to make the moon landing happen.

Sylvia: When you talk to the suppliers of food in Los Angeles, they say "we can't set up one of our stores in South LA because there's no room for our big trucks to turn around." And they've been saying this as long as I've lived here, which is, uh, over 40 years, and we can go to the Moon but we can't figure out a way to deliver fresh groceries. So this is a problem that could be solved, if there were a will and a partnership.

If you look at space and the number of different kinds of disciplines that have to be brought together to make that happen, we can't just leave this problem to the grocery stores. Others have to come into it and say, "let's sit down with the healthcare providers. Let's sit down with the banks. Let's sit down with the foundations. And let's solve this problem together for the good of all of us, as well as for the people who live in South LA."

Nick: It's particularly apropos that Sylvia used the examples of big trucks not being able to turn around in some neighborhoods as an excuse for not building grocery stores. Memorably in 2012, 400 trees were cut down, power lines were moved, all to facilitate the Space Shuttle Endeavor getting from the airport in Los Angeles to its new home.

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Matt: In addition to the disinterest in the fervor of the space race, a group of Black protestors that were affiliated with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the group that was headed by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. before his assassination, marched at Cape Kennedy, which is now called Cape Canaveral, on the day before Apollo 11 was set to launch.

Nick: The group was led by Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and they carried signs that read, "\$12 a day to feed an astronaut. We could feed a starving child for eight." And, "moonshots breed malnutrition." Now, there were about a million people on the Cape for the launch and Reverend Abernathy spoke to those who would listen. A recording of his speech was found and included in the PBS documentary, *Chasing the Moon*.

Reverend Abernathy: (From PBS, music underneath) I have not come to Cape Kennedy merely to experience the thrill of this historic launching. I'm here to demonstrate in a symbolic way, the tragic and inexcusable gulf between America's technological abilities and our social injustice.

Music and chanting continues underneath

Matt: One of those who heard Abernathy's speech was then NASA administrator, Tom Payne, who responded. And again, this clip is from the PBS documentary, *Chasing the Moon*.

Tom Paine: (From PBS, music underneath) If it were possible for us, tomorrow morning, to not push the button and to solve the problems to which you are concerned, believe me, we would not push the button.

Music fades

Emily: So, as we know, they did push the button, right? We all know that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon and a group of protestors, including Abernathy, were invited by NASA administrator, Tom Paine, to watch the launch from the VIP stands.

And of course, inviting Abernathy to watch the launch wasn't a solution to the societal injustices Abernathy and protestors were rallying against but their exchange is an important reminder that real change, real innovation, takes a lot more than one decision or one person.

NASA Archival Audio: [inaudible] and running. Lift off. We have a lift off. 32 minutes past the hour. Lift off on Apollo 11.

Nick: And the poverty Sylvia and Reverend Abernathy and others were protesting against in 1969, still plagues our country today. Approximately 35 million people experienced hunger in America in 2019, that's about 10.6% of the population. And 40 million people live in food deserts where there is not a grocery store accessible to them.

Matt: And I think that parallel between now and the late 1960s, it's really why, to many people, it may ring hollow when someone like Richard Branson during his suborbital flight says, 'if I can accomplish this, imagine what we can accomplish as a society' when it's like, well, we've been here before.

Emily: To your point, Matt, we started talking about Gil Scott-Heron's *Whitey on the Moon*. That song has had a resurgence in the last year, last two years, as the Black Lives Matter movement has grown because the same issues as you just mentioned; racial and economic inequality, poverty, food insecurity, food deserts, none of those numbers are better if you compare the numbers that we quoted for the most recent times.

They're the exact same issues people are talking about now that they were talking about in the 1960s. And we are doing it at the exact same moment that we're really focused on sending humans into space. And the fact that we're sort of going around this merry-go-round again, to me is really poignant in that we

have the capability to be intelligent and smart with solving big problems, but these aren't the problems that we put our energy behind.

Music up and under

Matt: AirSpace is from the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. It is produced by Katie Moyer and Jennifer Weingart, mixed by Tarek Fouda. Special thanks for this episode to Sophia Soto Sugar. AirSpace is presented by Olay and distributed by PRX.

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