S03B03 - Close Encounters of the Third Kind

It began, as so many scientific breakthroughs do, with a series of strange lights and several people who definitely should have gone to bed earlier.

The year was 1977 — the same year humanity flung two golden LPs into the void aboard the Voyager spacecrafts, as if to say, *"We're intelligent, we promise — please call back."*

And while NASA was sending Bach and whale song into deep space, Steven Spielberg was doing something arguably bolder: he made a film where aliens didn't invade, disintegrate, or demand to be taken to our leader.

They communicated — using light, sound, and what can only be described as the universe's catchiest five-note tune.
Close Encounters of the Third Kind didn't just change how we imagined contact with extraterrestrial life — it changed how we imagined communication itself.

Because, for the first time, the aliens didn't speak in riddles or ray guns.

They spoke in music.

A conversation conducted entirely in major keys.

A meeting of minds conducted entirely in frequencies.

And for once, the human race didn't panic — it harmonized.

You're tuned into *The Multiverse Employee Handbook*

Today we're celebrating a film that taught us something astonishing: That science, like music, is best when it's a duet.

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To understand Close Encounters of the Third Kind, you have to understand 1977 — a year when humanity seemed unusually preoccupied with the sky.

Voyager 1 and 2 had just launched, each carrying a Golden Record — a phonograph of human civilization, complete with diagrams, greetings in fifty-five languages, and Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode."
A message to any passing intelligence that might own, say, a cosmic turntable.

Meanwhile, down on Earth, something was stirring.

The Apollo era had ended, the Space Shuttle was still a sketch, and SETI — the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence — was just learning to pronounce its own acronym.
Science was listening, but not much was answering.

Culturally, the Cold War hummed in the background, disco glittered across the foreground, and somewhere in between was Steven Spielberg — a 29-year-old director who had just terrified the planet with Jaws, and decided his next logical step was… benevolent aliens.

It's easy to forget now, but Close Encounters was a radical idea:
that maybe contact wouldn't come through catastrophe, but through curiosity.
That the unknown wasn't something to fear — it was something to understand.

The film didn't just mirror the optimism of the late seventies; it amplified it.
After all, this was the decade of Skylab, of Carl Sagan's Cosmos, of scientists earnestly wondering if maths could be a universal language.

In a time of static and suspicion, Spielberg made a film that simply asked: "What if the universe isn't hostile… just trying to say hello?"

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Spielberg called it Close Encounters of the Third Kind — which, incidentally, sounds like an interdepartmental form you'd have to fill out after seeing something unexplainable.
"Please tick the box that best describes your encounter: lights in the sky, mysterious humming, or direct contact with luminous beings who seem oddly into synth music."

But underneath the title was something refreshingly human.
This wasn't a story about astronauts, generals, or governments.
It was about ordinary people — a lineman, a mother, a child — drawn together by something extraordinary they couldn't name.

Richard Dreyfuss played Roy Neary, a man whose encounter with a UFO leaves him sculpting mashed potatoes with unnerving conviction.
Across the world, the French scientist Claude Lacombe — played by actual film director François Truffaut — chases reports of strange phenomena with the delighted expression of someone who's just discovered aliens and doesn't have to deal with the grant paperwork.

Their paths converge at Devils Tower, Wyoming — a volcanic monolith so striking that it promptly became America's most famous rock formation, narrowly edging

out Mick Jagger.
There, humanity finally meets its visitors face-to-face — or, more accurately, face-to-soundwave.

The film's pacing is patient, almost reverent.
No dogfights, no doomsday. Just people trying to understand.
It's as if Spielberg took all the noise of 20th-century sci-fi and turned the volume down until we could finally listen.

And in that listening, something remarkable happened:
cinema found its first truly scientific form of wonder — curiosity without conquest.

When Close Encounters premiered in November 1977, audiences didn't just watch it — they experienced it.
It was cinema that hummed. Literally.

John Williams composed the film's now-iconic five-note melody — a simple, ascending sequence that somehow managed to sound both mathematical and strangely emotional, like Pythagoras learning jazz.
It became the lingua franca between two civilizations, proving that even across the cosmos, everyone appreciates a catchy tune.

Critics were awestruck. Scientists were intrigued.
And the general public, who'd been conditioned to expect aliens with heat rays and questionable dental hygiene, found themselves weeping at glowing lights in the Wyoming night.

The film grossed nearly three hundred million dollars worldwide — a staggering figure for the time — and earned Spielberg both critical reverence and complete creative freedom, which he immediately used to make E.T., because apparently one emotional alien wasn't enough.

But Close Encounters wasn't just a movie — it was a cultural pivot.
It took the language of science fiction and re-tuned it to the key of wonder.
For the first time, aliens weren't metaphors for invasion, ideology, or radiation.
They were something else entirely — they were possibility.

And in that glowing, melodic exchange at Devils Tower, humanity seemed to ask not, "What do they want?" but rather, "Can we join the orchestra?"

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At the heart of Close Encounters lies a question that's both artistic and scientific: how do you talk to someone — or something — that doesn't share your language, biology, or concept of Netflix?

Spielberg's answer was disarmingly simple.
You don't translate — you resonate.
Music and light: two things that obey the same physics no matter what planet you're from.

The aliens in the film don't use words — they use tones, patterns, frequencies.
It's communication built on the most universal constant there is: vibration.
And while that sounds very New Age, it's also very Newton.

Real scientists had been thinking along similar lines.
Just three years earlier, in 1974, astronomers sent the Arecibo Message — a stream of binary code beamed toward a distant star cluster, containing everything from atomic numbers to a stick figure of a human being who, frankly, did not get final approval from marketing.

And then, the same year Spielberg's film was released, NASA launched the Voyager Golden Record — sounds of Earth pressed into copper and gold, from greetings in ancient tongues to the crackling laughter of children.
Essentially, a mixtape for the galaxy.

It's hard not to see the parallel.
While Voyager was whispering "hello" into the cosmic void, Spielberg was showing us what it might sound like when someone whispers back.

Because at its core, Close Encounters wasn't about aliens at all.
It was about the act of reaching out — of assuming that meaning could exist beyond our own syntax.
It was science as empathy, expressed in a major key.

Before Close Encounters, alien stories had a fairly rigid formula:
they arrived, we panicked, someone in a uniform shouted "fire," and a city went missing.

The 1950s and '60s were full of them — metallic saucers reflecting Cold War anxieties, thinly disguised metaphors for communism, radiation, or whatever the morning's newspaper was worried about.
Even friendly aliens, when they appeared, were usually armed with sermons about

human folly and suspiciously good hair.

Spielberg's film changed that.
Here, the extraterrestrials weren't monsters or moralists — they were curious.
They came in light, in music, in play.
They were scientists in their own way, testing communication, not weapons.

It was, in essence, the first optimistic contact story on a global scale.
Not invasion — invitation.
A collaboration between species conducted entirely without a treaty or a translator, which, given humanity's track record with both, was probably wise.

This shift rippled outward.
After 1977, Hollywood cautiously began allowing aliens to be interesting again.
Without Close Encounters, there might be no E.T., no Contact, no Arrival — all films that inherited its central faith:
that curiosity and compassion are better survival strategies than fear.

Spielberg, it turns out, reprogrammed our expectations of the cosmos.
He took our Cold War reflexes and replaced them with a single scientific impulse — the willingness to listen.

Those five notes — da, da, da, daaa, da — did more than summon the mothership.
They became a cultural shorthand for curiosity itself.
You can hum them almost anywhere on Earth and someone will smile, look up, and expect something luminous to happen.

Real scientists noticed too.
SETI researchers, linguists, and signal engineers have cited Close Encounters as an early pop-culture model of how first contact might actually unfold: not through conquest, but protocol.
Frequency, modulation, call-and-response — the basic grammar of the universe.

In that sense, the film predicted something profound.
Modern astrobiology and interstellar messaging projects — METI, the continued work of SETI, even the design of the James Webb data protocols — all rest on a single question: how do you communicate meaning across unimaginable difference?

And while we still haven't had a confirmed reply, we've gotten better at asking.
We've learned that listening is its own form of intelligence.
That the act of reaching out — even if no one answers — is an experiment worth

running.

It’s also one of the few experiments where a catchy melody helps.
Because in a universe ruled by vibration, perhaps the first true sign of life isn’t a signal at all… it’s rhythm.

So yes, Close Encounters gave us awe, hope, and a tune that lodged itself permanently in humanity’s collective cortex.
But more than that, it taught us this:
that science and art are just two halves of the same equation — one asks the question, the other hums the answer.

Nearly half a century later, Close Encounters of the Third Kind still feels less like a film and more like a hypothesis — a beautifully cinematic thought experiment that asked: what if first contact isn’t about arrival, but understanding?

Because what Spielberg captured wasn’t just a meeting of species — it was a meeting of intentions.
The desire to connect.
To bridge the void between minds with nothing but curiosity, mathematics, and the occasional brass section.

That’s the legacy of those five notes.
Not proof that aliens exist, but proof that we exist — that we’re capable of reaching outward, of imagining communication before we have anyone to communicate with.

Maybe one day, across the deep background hum of the universe, someone will send a signal back.
And if they do, I hope it sounds something like that melody —
a reminder that science, at its best, is a love song to the unknown.
