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The No. 1 planet for alien tourists

When mankind is kaput and extraterrestrials arrive here, they might find 'Earth (The Book)' of use — for a giggle

BY JANET MASLIN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Earth (*The Book*) is a mock textbook by writers for *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* — or “the authors of the popular television program *The Daily Show*,” as they put it in a fake Wikipedia blurb on the book’s back cover. It is conceived as a handy guide for extraterrestrials who arrive on this planet after humanity has become extinct, in case those extraterrestrials want to know what they’re missing. It explains everyday details about how we live (d), from our use of the fork (“a way to hurt food one last time before eating it”) to our wearing of pants.

“We put these on one leg at a time,” it says. “You may require a different approach.”
Earth adopts a faux-scientific tone to explain the planet, its life forms and their quantifiable characteristics. Like the *Daily Show*, this parody delivers wittily framed absurdities in a sweetly deadpan way. So there are statistics. (“Length of day (in days) — 1.”) There are charts. (Time We Were Willing to Wait for a Baked Potato: from 8 hours in 1900 to 1 second in 2010. Lifetime Food Consumption of First Slices of Wedding Cake: 2.1.)

There is a handsomely illustrated Periodic Table of the Synthetic that includes such elements as Wo (Wite-out), G (Gummi), Jq (Je ne sais quoi), DD (Silicone) and Li (Listerine). And there is a set of FAQs (“Future Alien Questions”) for each topic covered here. For instance:
Question: “How many different living beings existed on Earth when you were there?”
Answer: “3,000 quintillion.”
Question: “How rough an estimate is that?”
Answer: “It is the exact number.”

That happens to be a perfect example of what Charles Seife’s new book calls “proofiness”: an exact-sounding number that represents the antithesis of knowledge. And although such numbers can be as funny as *Earth* makes them, they are dangerous too. Seife identifies a phenomenon that we see all around us, whether in advertising claims, crowd estimates, voter polls, economic analyses and warnings about the extent of global warming. “If you want to get people to believe something really, really stupid, just stick a number on it,” Seife succinctly claims.

We all know what he means. So in some ways “Proofiness” is just stating the obvious. But it’s one of those books that validates pre-existing perceptions, making them more egregious and much easier to see. After all, Seife has dug up a pair of articles from *The Associated Press*, one with the headline “AP Poll: Americans Optimistic for 2007” and the other with “Poll: Americans See Doom, Gloom for 2007.” Since these reports ran on Dec. 30 and Dec. 31, 2006, and were based on the same survey, a closer look at manipulative number crunching is surely in order.

Proofiness, subtitled “The Dark Arts of Mathematical Deception,” can be seen as part of the life cycle of *The Daily Show*. It owes its title to the “truthiness” of Stephen Colbert, who was once a twinkle in the eye of *The Daily Show*, though he might not put it that way. And the same kind of sneaky logic that is nailed by *Proofiness* is regularly spotted by the eagle-eyed staff of *The Daily Show*. Incidentally, Seife takes care to make his politics sound neutral, or rather, to make himself appear equally enraged at number fakers whatever their political leanings may be. Inflating the size of a crowd to 1 million is the same offense, whether perpetrated about Glenn Beck’s “Restoring Honor” rally (Representative Michele Bachmann) or a Million Man March (Louis Farrakhan).

Beware an exact-sounding number, even if it’s more credible than 3,000 quintillion. According to Seife, nice round numbers convey an automatic message of exaggeration. So do precise-sounding measurements of concepts that are ill-defined, and so do voter polls, thanks to systematic and statistical errors. Those are different kinds of mistakes, and this indignant, excitable book is eager to explore

PUBLICATION NOTES

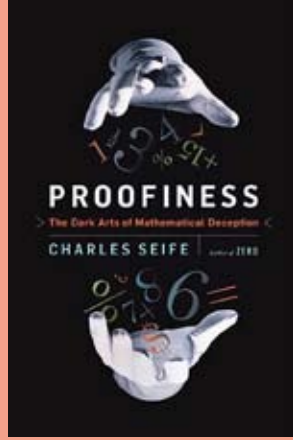


EARTH (THE BOOK): A VISITOR'S GUIDE TO THE HUMAN RACE

WRITTEN AND EDITED BY
JON STEWART, DAVID JAVERBAUM,
RORY ALBANESE, STEVE BODOV
AND JOSH LIEB

244 PAGES
GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING

PUBLICATION NOTES



PROOFINESS: THE DARK ARTS OF MATHEMATICAL DECEPTION

BY CHARLES SEIFE

295 PAGES
VIKING

them. It also pays particular attention to the 2008 Senate race in Minnesota, with its heated legal argument over one ballot full of write-in votes for “Lizard People.” Really.

The *Daily Show* writers deal with political craziness like the “Lizard People” fight nightly. And the previous *Daily Show* book, *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction*, more than covered politics and government. So *Earth* doesn't go there, concentrating instead on civilizations, structures, artifacts and physiology. A photo that purports to show half of a naked Larry King wearing only one red suspender is used as a gruesome anatomy lesson, a la the naked United States Supreme Court in “America.” The rest of this book's illustrations are a whole lot better than that.

The early sections are dependably great looking and sporadically funny. (Planet Earth, the aging hottie: “Despite a pronounced equatorial bulge and receding polar iceline, she still stubbornly maintains a jaunty 23.4-degree axial tilt that belies her 4.5 billion years.”) The mock-textbook style gives the writers an easy template, even if they seem to be supplying filler from time to time.

But this book, like the show, is best when it takes on subjects of real substance. (Masturbation jokes don't count.) That's why the funniest material is about religion and science. Take special note of the tippy-toeing around Islam (“a beautiful harmless happy daffodil”), the calendar of December religious holidays for all persuasions (“Mission Impossible IV” premiere for Scientologists, “Charmoukka” for “Blues Judaism”), the claim that the word Torah is “German for ‘kindling,’” and the map of Jerusalem. That map includes “Holy Missile Attack Rubble” that “burned for eight nights, despite only one night's worth of explosives.”



Loh Tsui Kweh Commune (濁水溪公社)
Loh Tsui Kweh Commune 20 Years Project
Himalaya Records

You never know what to expect from Loh Tsui Kweh Commune (濁水溪公社), also known as LTK. After 20 years and five albums — which include classic recordings that have influenced several generations of Taiwanese punk and indie musicians — the band has released an album of full-on electronica dance music that oozes 1980s nostalgia.

I didn't know whether to laugh or dance when I first heard this record. There is not one trace of extreme guitar noise or any of the bizarre and vulgar obscenities that have made the band one of the most notorious — and beloved — indie groups in Taiwan.

Instead, *Loh Tsui Kweh Commune 20 Years Project* takes the band's music to the other extreme. The music is slick and disco smooth, and the lyrics, mostly sung in Mandarin, are about romance and heartbreak.

But all eleven tracks are unmistakably LTK. Bandleader Ko Ren-chien (柯仁堅) has made an art out of celebrating *taikoe* (台客), which used to be a derogatory term referring to Taiwanese working-class culture. The 40-year-old has outdone himself in writing the songs for this album, which begins with an instrumental titled *Taikno Music*.

Ko says this collection was inspired by the music he grew up listening to, particularly bands like Depeche Mode and Duran Duran.

Eternal Love treads dangerously close to parody when Ko croons “Stay with me” in English — you could almost picture him with his hand on heart and a mock wince. But the hooks are relentlessly catchy and for the most part, never let up for the rest of album. Other standout tracks include *Aerolady* and *Girls on the Avenue*, which are pure 1980s cheese, from the reverb-drenched snare drum smacks to endless flurries of synthesizer arpeggios.

Indie-pop producer Ciacia (何欣稚) provided most of the backing female vocals and her lush harmonies are the perfect foil for Ko, who sounds like he has just hijacked an unsuspecting karaoke party and is having the time of his life.

At LTK's 20th anniversary concert earlier this month, the band didn't perform any of these new songs, but they didn't need to. During a set break, they hired professional dancers to perform a racy strip tease with the album as their sound track.

— DAVID CHEN



Extreme (極限)
Hsu Chia-ying (徐佳瑩, aka Lala)
Asia Music

One Million Star (超級星光大道) champ Hsu Chia-ying (徐佳瑩) proves she is the show's only alumnus who is capable of shaping her own musical persona with *Extreme* (極限), her highly anticipated follow-up album.

Having composed and coproduced all 10 of the album's tracks herself, Hsu shows she is an all-round musician who calls her own shots. Written in the aftermath of Hsu's very public breakup with her *One Million Star* beau, *Extreme* is full of existential contemplation and morose imagery, which makes it a most daring and unconventional Mando-pop album.

Title track *Extreme* (極限) is an electronica-infused number that explores a man's ability to face extreme challenges, while *Time Master* (時間大師), also dance driven, probes how today's decisions might be proven wrong in the future.

Hsu's songs are mostly melancholic and exhibit self-doubt. *Fear of Height* (懼高症), the album's infectious second single, is a folksy ballad in which she questions her ability to overcome vertigo to climb the blissful heights of romance again. The morbid *Ruined Love* (殘愛) depicts a ruined love that both parties have decided to abandon.

Disco (迪斯可), a sarcastic and funky track, portrays a brokenhearted girl who must feign happiness to continue dancing at a disco.

The ballads here don't have the catchiness of Hsu's previous output, such as *I Ride a White Horse* (身騎白馬) and *Humming a Love Song* (哼情歌), nor are they as exuberant or joyous as her debut album.

Perhaps the album's most prophetic track is song *Oasis* (樂園), which sees an oasis in the future where flowers bloom. With this musically complex and metaphorically rich album, Hsu is well on her way to finding that spot.

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG

Hawking and Mlodinow's new theory is about life, the universe and everything — except God

BY TIM RADFORD
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

For those who have spent the past few weeks on a caving holiday or who have been on a visit to the glaciers of Svalbard, the news that Stephen Hawking has published a new book — his first in a decade — may come as a surprise. For the rest of humanity, however, the information will by now seem as stale as a day-old pizza. Certainly, the blizzard of front-page stories that has greeted publication of the first extracts from *The Grand Design* has been extraordinary and, over the past three weeks, has given the scientist the kind of coverage that modern authors would sell their souls for.

“Hawking: God did not create universe,” the London *Times* announced on its front page, a splash story that was followed up for several days with as much

furious religious reaction as the paper's writers could muster. Other media outlets followed suit — “Bang goes God, says Hawking,” a tabloid announced — while rabbis, archbishops and religious historians filled letters pages and comment slots with waves of apologetic outrage.

It has been a dispiriting experience. Setting religion against science, as the media has quite deliberately done in this case, achieves little for our attempts to understand the complexities of modern cosmology, the specific aim of Hawking and Mlodinow's book. Worse, the furor suggests that at the beginning of the 21st century, in our apparently rational, secular society, the declaration by a leading scientist that God was not involved in the universe's creation is deemed to be newsworthy and deserving of front-page headlines in national newspapers.

Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. Like most other physicists, Hawking has never expressed a need for God in his equations and has only made previous mentions to tease his readers. Fortunately, most of them have had the wit to appreciate this point. In fact, there is hardly a mention of

a deity in *The Grand Design*. In the opening pages, there are a few mentions of clerical attempts in the middle ages to make philosophical sense of the heavens and that is about it — until we reach the last chapter. “Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist,” Hawking and Mlodinow announce at this point. “It is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going.”

And that is just about it. The rest of the book is an attempt to account for the strange nature of reality as revealed by astronomers and physicists; to reconcile the apparent absurdities of quantum mechanics with the mind-stretching features of special and general relativity; and to explain why the forces of nature are apparently fine-tuned to allow the evolution of complex creatures such as ourselves. As Hawking and Mlodinow note, only the tiniest altering of the constants that control nuclear synthesis in stars would produce a universe with no carbon and no oxygen and therefore no humans.

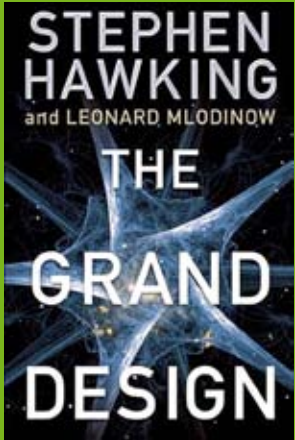
“Our universe and its laws appear to have a design that both is tailor-made to support us and,

if we are to exist, leaves little room for alternation,” they state. “That is not easily explained, and raises the natural question of why it is that way.” The answer, the authors say, lies with M-theory. (The M apparently stands for “master, miracle, or mystery.” The authors are unsure which.) The vital point is that M-theory allows for the existence of 11 dimensions of space-time that contains not just vibrating strings of matter but also “point particles, two-dimensional membranes, three-dimensional blobs and other objects that are more difficult to picture.” Simple, really.

Crucially the laws of M-theory allow for an unimaginably large number of different universes. Thus we exist because the laws of our particular universe just happen to be tuned to the exact parameters that permit the existence of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and other key atoms and which also generate laws that allow these entities to interact in ways that build up complex chemical combinations. Other universes are not so lucky.

M-theory is the unified theory of physics that Einstein was hoping to find, state the authors, and if it is confirmed by observation, it will be the

PUBLICATION NOTES



STEPHEN HAWKING and LEONARD MLODINOW

THE GRAND DESIGN

THE GRAND DESIGN: NEW ANSWERS TO THE ULTIMATE QUESTIONS OF LIFE

BY STEPHEN HAWKING AND LEONARD MLODINOW

199 PAGES
BANTAM

successful conclusion to a search that was begun by the ancient Greeks when they started to puzzle about the nature of reality. “We will have found the grand design,” Hawking and Mlodinow conclude.

CD Reviews: Taiwan



Suming (舒米恩)
Self-titled/Debut Original Album
(舒米恩首張創作專輯)
Wonder Music

Suming (舒米恩) continues to impress with this brilliant debut solo album. The 32-year-old Amis Aboriginal, best known as the front man for the indie-rock group Totem (圖騰), has set out to push Taiwanese indigenous music beyond its traditional borders.

The Taitung native is not the first to apply a modern pop twist to Aboriginal folk, but his songwriting skills clearly stand out among the rest.

Throughout this eleven-track album, listeners will hear the familiar chants of “Naruwan” and “Ho hai yan” (吼海洋) backed by breezy bossa nova chords and electronica beats.

But it's not just the drum machines and catchy pop hooks that make the music sound fresh. Suming brings a sense of nuance to the stories of his heritage on songs like the uplifting *Kasasetek no mita* (Our Promise).

The lyrics to *Kapah*, which translates from the Amis as “young men,” read like a traditional courting song, with lines like “Are there any guys who are good in school? Are there any guys who are good at making money? Are there any guys who are good at spearing fish? Are there strong guys?” Suming's smooth-driving, funky electronica groove adds humor and playfulness to this display of machismo.

And it's just plain fun to hear Suming get away with using auto-tune on his voice on another ice-cool dance track, *Kaojing* (Beautiful Girls). He doesn't sound cliché and the effect works well with the Amis lyrics.

Despite the dance-floor vibe that dominates the record, Suming gives a clear nod to his roots with *Vlad* (Moonlight), a beautiful instrumental composition performed on the reed flute and an a capella tune sung by a chorus as the final track.

With this album, Suming has clearly brought his music to a new level, and is one to watch if you haven't started yet.

— DAVID CHEN



It's My Time (夢想啟航)
Lin Yu-chun (林育群)
Sony Music

Lin Yu-chun (林育群), aka Little Fatty (小胖), released his first full-length album, *It's My Time* (夢想啟航), a mere five months after his appearance on Taiwan's blockbuster pop idol competition show *One Million Star* (超級星光大道) singing *I Will Always Love You* went viral across the world. Lin's story as an overweight, underappreciated child who overcame a mountain of ridicule to realize this moment of glory no doubt invites good will.

On this debut album, Lin follows in Susan Boyle's footsteps by singing mostly covers of familiar tunes.

Showing unrelenting ambition, and probably aiming too high, Lin tackles four female superstars on one disc: Whitney Houston's version of *I Will Always Love You*, Celine Dion's *My Heart Will Go On*, Mariah Carey's *Hero* and Christina Aguilera's *Fighter*.

Lin's performance is a note-by-note imitation of the original stars' phrasing, right down to their breathing. He's a gifted impersonator with an impressive vocal range. But the album's producers cranked out watered-down accompaniment music that sounds like that found in KTVs.

With *Fighter*, the album's only up-tempo track, Lin displays a never before seen spunk and defiance.

The undisputed highlight is the album's sole original track, *Under Your Wings*, written and produced by Carey's Grammy-winning producer Walter Afanasieff expressly for Lin. The song expresses Lin's gratitude to his mentor, and shows he is capable of crafting his own interpretation of a song with grace.

Lin's cover of Lionel Richie's *Hello*, a track included on his previous EP, was omitted. That's a shame as Lin breaks into an unusually playful improvisation towards the end.

Though lacking innovation, *It's My Time* does hold together as a cohesive album that drives its inspirational theme of perseverance home.

Whether or not Lin's 15 minutes of fame will fizzle out like his predecessor William Hung's did, depends on whether the rising star can parley his vocal talent and amiable personality into credible music of his own. The album's only original track hints he has the potential to do just that.

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG

No deity, but many universes

Hardcover: UK