

MOON

The Apollo 11 astronauts: Commander Neil Armstrong, the first person to step on the lunar surface; command module pilot Michael Collins; and lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin, who stepped onto the Moon nineteen minutes after Armstrong.



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Documentarians marking the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing struck it rich. The director of CNN's *Apollo 11* scored large-format films from Cape Kennedy. And the director of *American Experience*'s *Chasing the Moon* got boxes of 35mm film that had sat in an astronaut's basement for nearly fifty years. So even boomers who think they saw it all in 1969 are in for some surprises.

BY GRAHAM FLASHNER

FIFTY YEARS AGO, ON JULY 20, 1969, ASTRONAUT NEIL ARMSTRONG UTTERED PERHAPS THE MOST FAMOUS WORDS IN AMERICAN HISTORY. AN ESTIMATED HALF-BILLION TELEVISION VIEWERS AROUND THE WORLD HEARD HIM SAY, "THAT'S ONE SMALL STEP FOR MAN, ONE GIANT LEAP FOR MANKIND," AS HE DESCENDED FROM THE LUNAR MODULE OF *APOLLO 11* AND STEPPED ONTO THE SURFACE OF THE MOON. IT WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY CLIMAX TO THE DECADE-LONG SPACE RACE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND THE SOVIET UNION.

Although the moon landing has since been exhaustively documented, 2019 will bring a flood of TV specials that explore the monumental achievement. Two of the most engrossing are *Apollo 11*, a ninety-minute CNN Films documentary directed and edited by Todd Douglas Miller that will air on CNN June 23, and *Chasing the Moon*, a three-part, six-hour documentary series for *American Experience*, written, produced and directed by Robert Stone. A companion book of the same name, written by Stone and Alan Andres, will be released June 4; the docuseries will premiere on PBS July 8.



The Apollo 11 astronauts head for the van that will take them to Launch Complex 39A at Kennedy Space Center on July 16, 1969; top: the Saturn V rocket that would carry the men into space in position on the launch pad.





HAVING EMIGRATED TO THE U.S. FROM ENGLAND IN 1963, STONE WAS JUST TEN YEARS OLD WHEN APOLLO 11 LANDED ON THE MOON. NOW AN EMMY- AND OSCAR-NOMINATED DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER (*AMERICAN EXPERIENCE*, *RADIO BIKINI*), HE WANTED TO RECREATE THE SENSE OF WONDER AND OPTIMISM THAT CAPTIVATED HIM AS A BOY.

"My goal was to try to impart to a contemporary audience what it was like to live in a time when the entire country was coming together to do this audacious goal," he says. "This is more about us, and less what it was like for an astronaut going to the moon."

Chasing the Moon starts in 1957, when the Soviets stunned America by putting the first man in space. It chronicles NASA's obsession with making good on the promises President John F. Kennedy made in a 1961 speech, when he said he aspired to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

From the early days of the Soviet V-2 rocket, through NASA's Gemini and Mercury missions, and culminating with the Saturn V rocket that powered Apollo 11's triumphant mission and beyond ("Most people don't realize that there was a second Moon landing only six months after the first," Stone says), *Chasing the Moon* is a space aficionado's dream.

Part historical documentary, part Cold War thriller, Stone's film suggests that the greatest technological accomplishment of the twentieth century was motivated as much by America's fear of being outmaneuvered by the Russians as by a burning desire to explore new worlds beyond Earth.

The documentary, Stone's eighth project for *American Experience*, came to life when he approached PBS with a pitch for a ninety-minute film commemorating the moon landing.

Once investors were in place, he had time to explore characters and footage that hadn't been seen before. He viewed thousands of hours of news reports and archival footage, both American and Russian, and constructed narratives for the twelve participants he interviewed. We hear their voices but never see their present-day, older selves.

"I wanted the film to be timeless," Stone explains. "I wanted everyone to be young, having the time of their lives, and I wanted the audience to experience this adventure without thinking, 'This is some ancient thing that happened in the past.'"

Once PBS saw the first hour, "They said, 'This is a four-hour film,'" Stone recalls.

It soon became clear that even four hours weren't enough. Mark Samels, executive producer for *American Experience*, "allowed this to expand to whatever size it needed to be," Stone says. "I had no script and no road map. Working with six hours was a revelation for me."

The eclectic cast of characters includes Sergei Khrushchev, son of former Soviet prime minister Nikita Khrushchev; rocket pioneer Wernher von Braun, who relocated to the U.S. after World War II; Poppy Northcutt, the first woman to serve in the boys' club of Mission Control; and astronauts Valerie Anders and Frank Borman. "I tried to pick astronauts who've not been interviewed that much, but had important roles," Stone says.

His biggest found-footage coup was boxes of 35mm film that had sat untouched in Borman's basement for nearly fifty years. That footage comprises one of the documentary's most compelling, dramatic scenes: a gathering in the Borman living room — shot with the intimacy of a home movie — to watch the launch of Apollo 8, on which Borman served as commander. The camera stays with his wife, head in hand as she anxiously watches the launch countdown.

Stone came across other fascinating historical tidbits:

- In 1961, Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev were close to an agreement on bi-national exploration of the moon, but that dream died with JFK's assassination in 1963 and Khrushchev's ouster in 1964.
- NASA recruited and trained Ed Dwight, an Air Force pilot selected by the Kennedy administration, who was in the running to become the first black astronaut.
- The Russians, as NASA discovered much later, "didn't really have a moon



President John F. Kennedy (with sunglasses) is briefed by NASA officials at the Saturn rocket pad at Cape Canaveral.



Officials of NASA and the Manned Spacecraft Center celebrate the success of Apollo 11 with flags and cigars.



program," Stone notes. "We were racing against ourselves. It was a master bluff on their part. They were never able to make a successful moon rocket."

But the Russians did try one last, desperate gambit to steal the Americans' thunder, which gets prominent play in part three of the series. As *Apollo 11* headed to the moon, the Russians sent up an unmanned robotic launcher, *Luna 15*, which was supposed to land on the moon, scoop up soil samples and then beat the Apollo astronauts back to Earth.

"This is a huge drama that's been completely lost," Stone says. "It was Russia's Hail Mary."

Luna 15 did in fact touch down on the moon, a mere 200 miles from where the astronauts were making history, but it crashed and never made it off the lunar surface.

The *Apollo 11* landing itself is a riveting drama that plays out in fifteen minutes of real time. The series cross-cuts between the lunar module being expertly guided to a landing spot by Armstrong; the media spectacle back on Earth; the fraught reactions of Mission Control, where some fretted audibly about an imminent setback; and shots of ordinary Americans glued to small black-and-white TV sets across the country.

The anxiety-stricken faces of the white-shirted, black-tied men inside Mission Control are a stark reminder of how close NASA was, at any given moment, to a catastrophic failure. "History is often told with twenty-twenty hindsight, but I wanted to walk us through without the benefit of hindsight," Stone says. "It was not preordained that this would succeed."

In 1967, after the tragic *Apollo 1* fire that killed three astronauts during a launch rehearsal, "public opinion and the media turned against NASA," Stone relates. "A lot of issues came to the forefront: Vietnam, the Civil Rights movement.... The big turnaround was the successful launch of the Saturn V rocket.

"At this point," he continues, "the whole idea of going to the moon kind of echoes Camelot — JFK's America in 1969. It was a moment out of time from the moment it happened. Which is why people lost interest in it so quickly; it was kind of an aberration. It's only in looking back at it now that we start to see what an incredible thing it was."

I F CHASING THE MOON PROVIDES A SCHOLARLY HISTORICAL OVERVIEW, *APOLLO 11* IS MORE OF A TECHNO-GEEK THRILL RIDE, FOCUSED EXCLUSIVELY ON THE NINE-DAY JULY MISSION AND THE STAGGERING TECHNICAL COMPLEXITIES IT ENTAILED.

Todd Douglas Miller, the Emmy-winning documentary director of *Dinosaur 13*, had just completed *The Last Steps* — a digital documentary short on *Apollo 17*, the final manned moon mission — when he was approached by Courtney Sexton, vice-president of CNN Films. CNN president Jeff Zucker had expressed interest in doing a film to mark the fiftieth anniversary of *Apollo 11*; Sexton asked Miller if he'd be interested.

"I was a bit hesitant," the director admits. "We had done one space film and were finishing up another... but it did sound intriguing." Miller was further

intrigued when he became aware of a treasure trove of rediscovered NASA audio recordings. Independent British archivist Stephen Slater had compiled the audio and meticulously synched it to silent 16mm footage shot by NASA cameramen at Mission Control. (Slater later became the archive producer for *Apollo 11*). But nothing could prepare Miller for the thrilling discovery that came next.

He'd been working with the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), trying to ascertain how much *Apollo 11* footage was available, when he received an uncharacteristically breathless email from NARA supervisory archivist Dan Rooney. "They relayed to us that they had this collection of large-format films, 65mm reels," Miller recalls, "and would we be interested in transferring that?"

It was like asking James Cameron if he'd be interested in lost home movies from the *Titanic*. Rooney held a quick screening for Miller at his post facility in New York, "and the first images we saw left our jaws on the floor," he says. That first, never-before-seen sequence — of the hulking Saturn V rocket being moved to the launch pad on an enormous crawler transporter — became the opening shot of *Apollo 11*.

What also floored Miller is that "it wasn't just in large format, it was an aerial shot. They had put a large-format camera on a helicopter. It was," he says, "a pretty speechless moment."

The footage had been shot in Todd A-O, a format popularized in the 1960s for projecting Cinerama, a now-obsolete widescreen process. Some of it had appeared in the 1972 cult classic *Moonwalk One*, a documentary NASA commissioned in 1969. The footage, some thirty to forty hours of it, "was absolutely pristine, as if it was shot yesterday," Miller says.

The NARA footage includes pre-launch activities, the launch itself, the recovery of the astronauts on the USS *Hornet* and candid shots of the men inside Mission Control, as well as one future NASA engineer: JoAnn Morgan, the only woman permitted in the firing room. Most striking are the panoramic aerial shots in and around Cape Kennedy (now Canaveral) on the morning of the launch. They capture the wonder-struck faces of spectators — including celebs like Johnny Carson — who had made the trek to witness history.

"From the start, this story is one of the greatest things humanity has ever done," Miller says. "The thinking was, if you just show it, people will be amazed."

He applied the same creative approach he'd employed on *The Last Steps*, telling the *Apollo 11* story as it happened, sans narration and interviews — though Walter Cronkite's pre-launch newscasts do provide some narrative setup. "My preferred style is to let the subjects, whether archival or something we photograph, speak for themselves," Miller says.

In recreating the mission from scratch, he relates, "the thing that got me the most was doing the research on the individual characters themselves, particularly in and around Mission Control. It was the privilege of my life to show a scene to Michael Collins or Buzz Aldrin and ask, 'Did we get this right?' and then to be able to go back and fiddle with it until we got it right."

"Todd was most successful in conveying a story that both satisfied a

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commercial and a technical-scientific audience, and doing it in a way that's both artistic and engaging on a commercial level," CNN's Sexton says.

Source material included industrial films made for NASA, the aforementioned *Moonwalk One* and *Carrying the Fire: An Astronaut's Journeys*, a 1974 book by Michael Collins, the Apollo 11 command module pilot. "He encapsulates the spirit of the mission and gave us great insight into having a first-person account of what went on," Miller says.

From the moment Apollo 11 sets off on its 240,000-mile journey, viewers have a front-row seat through all phases of the launch, the moon landing and the return to Earth. The immersive nature of the experience led Miller to refer jokingly to the film as "Dunkirk in space." "You're dropped into the mission, and you go until they return home safely," he adds.

Along with the large-format footage, Miller peppers the film with graphic animations, split screens and archival closed-circuit TV vignettes.

He also availed himself of 70mm still photos that the astronauts shot using Hasselblad cameras. "One of the things I wanted to highlight was how amazing the photography was," he says.

One especially memorable shot — taken on the moon and used for the IMAX poster — is a close-up of Aldrin right before he heads up the ladder to the lunar module, with Armstrong and the Earth reflected in Aldrin's visor. "Probably the most famous photo Neil ever took," Miller says.

Apollo 11, a presentation of Neon and CNN Films, premiered at Sundance in January. Miller and partner Todd Peterson produce through Statement Pictures; Sexton and Amy Entelis are executive producers for CNN Films.

Miller admits to being humbled by the experience of making the film. "It really renewed my hope in things," he says. "It opened my eyes to how, if a great number of people get together, they can truly accomplish something amazing." ☺

Ed White was the first American to walk in space, on the Gemini 4 mission in 1965.

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