

MAGAZINE SECONDS

SECONDS #37, 1996 • interview by George Petros

CAPT. ROBERT “HOOT” GIBSON, U.S.N.



CAPTAIN ROBERT L. “HOOT” GIBSON, UNITED STATES NAVY is an astronaut who has served as pilot and spacecraft commander on five Space Shuttle missions, including the June 1995 rendezvous and docking with the Russian Space Station Mir. When he’s not soaring through Outer Space or racing Formula One aircraft, he plays guitar for MAX Q, a Pop cover ensemble comprised entirely of astronauts (not to be mistaken for a late-80s British Electro-Pop outfit of the same name featuring INXS superstar Michael Hutchence).

On each of his Space flights, Hoot’s taken along a homemade cassette compilation of Moody Blues classics. His interest and participation in Rock Music is not something one would expect from an astronaut, but it points out how thoroughly Rock has shed its stigmas of rebelliousness and immorality (except for those few acts who still try to shock and disgust us). Popular songs of any genre, when repeated enough times, become part of our Folk Music, available as family entertainment and light-hearted mating anthems, and can be played by all.

“We go from sitting at rest on the launch pad to orbital speed in eight-and-a-half minutes, and orbital speed is 17,500 miles an hour.”

SECONDS: *Congratulations for all your efforts in the cosmos on behalf of us Earthlings.*

GIBSON: Thank you. I’ve had a real enjoyable time doing all that.

SECONDS: *Some of us expected there’d be a more highly developed commercial use of Space by now. I thought I’d have stayed at an orbiting hotel —*

GIBSON: Us too, George. When you look at what people were projecting fifteen years ago, saying, “Here’s what we’re going to be doing in fifteen years” — we haven’t quite got there. We haven’t made it to where we hoped we would be. I think we’ve learned an awful lot and I think we’ve progressed an awful lot, but we’re not where we thought we were gonna go.

SECONDS: *When you were young and developing interests in science, what did you imagine the technological state of the world would be now?*

GIBSON: When I was growing up, it was in the late Fifties. At that point we had not even sent a human into Space; that didn’t happen until ’61. Many of us read the book *1984* and that was so far into the future that a lot of us pictured cars that levitated and bases on the Moon and Mars. I think we underestimated how much work and how difficult it is to move people from the Earth up to the Moon. It really was

a lot more difficult — and a lot more expensive — than we thought. I thought we’d be doing things like in cartoons where you had a big round Space Station orbiting, and you had people on different planets and vehicles going back and forth all the time. That’s where I thought we’d be.

SECONDS: *Are you disappointed that there has not been a Space-borne scenario such as the one described in Kubrick’s *2001*? Did you think that at least that would come to pass?*

GIBSON: Well, that was out around ’68, ’69, and that seemed semi-reasonable at that point. When you look at it from the perspective that we were trying to get to the Moon before the end of the Sixties — and in fact that’s what we did — *2001* looked like a decent projection. But, as we all know, we didn’t keep going after we reached the Moon; we got to the Moon and said, “Okay, we did it. Now we can quit.”

SECONDS: *Why was that?*

GIBSON: I guess that was budget-driven. It’s true, the proportion of the national budget that went to Space when we were trying to go the Moon was much greater than it has ever been. Something like four to six percent of the national budget was going to Space. Ever since then it’s been less than one percent. We scaled back in the way of



CAPT. ROBERT "HOOT" GIBSON, USN

fund expenditures — and you work with what you've got left.

SECONDS: *What technological development has surprised you the most?*

GIBSON: If I were to say what's impressed me the most technologically over the last thirty years, I'll tell you one that's Earth-shaking and I'm not sure we're even appreciating it today: the development of Global Positioning Satellites. What that does for you in the way of navigation has revolutionized the way we do everything. Cars with a GPS receiver in them can tell you what road you're on. What's happened in the way of going to Space, there has been a gradual increase in what we can accomplish, a slow gradual increase in efficiency and capability. The Space Shuttle, for example, was not so much a result of a technology breakthrough as an incorporation of a number of technologies that had been developing

slowly over many years. Suddenly you said, "We choose to incorporate all these different technologies in one vehicle," and that was the Space Shuttle.

It was a marvelous accomplishment and it still is. Even today, it's still the state of the art in going to and from Space. We take it for granted and say, "Well, it's very old technology," but there's nothing close to it possessed by anybody else. Nobody else can bring anything back from space except for us with the Shuttle.

SECONDS: *You must be pretty proud to have piloted it.*

GIBSON: Absolutely, George. If you look at the history, there was no big breakthrough, just a number of slowly developing technologies that you had

to integrate together. I guess you could just say the Shuttle has been employing itself. We've been operating it and doing things that it was originally designed to do.

SECONDS: *We were promised the Space Age and didn't get it. People were raised expecting marvels to unfold before them and now there's a disappointment. Do you sense that when you're talking to people?*

GIBSON: What I see when I go out and talk to people is that they're fascinated by what we're doing. The American taxpayer really does support what we're doing. They're pleased to have their tax dollar doing what it's doing with NASA.

SECONDS: *What will be the next nation to have a significant presence in space?*

GIBSON: The one closest to it, although they've been very quiet about it, is China. China is interested in flying their own astronauts aboard their own vehicles. If they do so, they'll be only the

third nation to do that. No one but the US and Russia have launched into space and brought people back from space. China has their own rockets and launch their own satellites and have a pretty good success record, so it wouldn't surprise me to see them there within the next ten years.

SECONDS: *How about the Europeans? Haven't they had some of their Ariane rockets blow up?*

GIBSON: They've had a success record with the Ariane that would

be totally unacceptable for a human-carrying vehicle. In fact, it's running around a ten percent failure. I'm not sure they'll ever get there. You're not going to get me on board one of their rockets.

SECONDS: *I'll bet you were a Science*



“I haven’t had any moments in Space where I looked at what was happening and said, ‘We may be in big trouble.’ I have had moments where I’ve said, ‘For heaven’s sake, how can we be in this position?’”

Fiction fan.

GIBSON: I wasn’t a Science Fiction nut, but I certainly went to the movies when

Forbidden Planet was playing. Of course, I was always fascinated by Space movies and rocket ships and those kind of things. I was a fan to the greatest degree of real airplanes. The X planes were all flying out of Edwards Air Force Base — the X-1, the X-2 and the X-15. I was really enthralled with those.

SECONDS: *What kind of music were you listening to in those days?*

GIBSON: I guess it was high school where I became conscious of music. I gained awareness of music just in time for The Beatles to burst onto the scene. I started learning how to play guitar when I was in ninth or tenth grade, early Sixties — a lot of the music I’d learn and practice on the guitar was things like Peter, Paul & Mary, who were real big then. It was easy to play on guitar so I could sound good playing.

SECONDS: *So music was a relief from the rigidity and discipline of the sciences?*

GIBSON: Absolutely. That’s the most enjoyable thing about playing. I took a guitar with me on cruises aboard aircraft carriers. At the end of the day, it was a good feeling to sit back, relax, and

just play. For me, it was relaxation and there’s an intellectual challenge about being able to play and improve.



SECONDS: *You were a Top Gun at the Naval Fighter Weapons School —*
GIBSON: I’d gone through it during the Vietnam War. It was a very different place from what you saw in the movie. At the time I went through, there was no Top Gun trophy, which of course was a central conflict

in the movie *Top Gun*. There was a competition, but the competition was the students against the instructors, who were the bad guys. They were the MiGs and we were out to get them.

SECONDS: *You went on to fly combat missions in Vietnam?*

GIBSON: Actually, I had flown combat in Vietnam before that and *Top Gun* was in between deployments on the carrier. We were going back to Vietnam in 1973 and then the war ended.

SECONDS: *After that, you began doing flight testing.*

GIBSON: Well, I went into the Navy’s first F-14 squadron. After that was when I went into the flight-test world and went to Navy test-pilot school and then on to to the test center.

SECONDS: *Then you became an astronaut and joined NASA in ’78.*

GIBSON: That’s right. I was picked in

“Your average speed computes out to be 2,000 miles an hour. It reminds me of a catapult shot off the front end of a carrier — but that catapult shot takes two seconds and this takes eight-and-a-half minutes.”

CAPT. ROBERT "HOOT" GIBSON, USN

the first group of astronauts selected for Space Shuttles. I've been working here since then.

SECONDS: *Were you the Chief Shuttle Pilot?*

GIBSON: I was head of all the astronauts. I was the Chief Astronaut from the end of '92 until the end of '94. I had to step down as Chief Astronaut to go train to do the Mir flight.

It may be that I will resume as Chief Astronaut, depending on what transpires. I've already been asked if I'd like to come back to that job.

SECONDS: *What was your most harrowing moment in Space?*

GIBSON: I haven't had any moments in Space where I looked at what was happening and said, "We may be in big trouble." I have had

some moments where I've said, "How can we be in this position?" But I didn't have any moments where I've said, "There's a chance we're going to die here in a few minutes. This might be the end for me."

SECONDS: *The silver lining to the dark cloud of the Challenger tragedy was that the safety factors have been greatly increased.*

GIBSON: I gave a briefing on that awhile ago. My assessment was that we were going to have that accident, it was just a question of time; it was going to occur.

SECONDS: *Based on a flaw with the O-rings?*

GIBSON: It was a design that didn't

have enough margin. At some point, that was going to happen.

SECONDS: *Tell me about a launch. Are you conscious?*

GIBSON: Absolutely. It isn't quite as bad as what you've seen; it doesn't distort your face. We only see as much as three G's.

SECONDS: *What about when they were launching people in Gemini and Apollo?*

GIBSON: Gemini, I think, was the worst. I think they saw six G's during launch. Each person got put in a special couch molded to their body because you can't tolerate those kind of G's in a flatback seat. What we're launching in is a plain old seat. I tell you, the three G's is pretty uncomfortable — it almost hurts.

It's only eight-and-a-half minutes, so you can stand it for that amount of time. It

compresses your chest so that it makes it hard to inhale. It's like someone sitting on your chest. There's quite a bit of vibration, especially for the first two minutes when the booster rockets are burning. It's a good ride. We go from sitting at rest on the launch pad to orbital speed in eight-and-a-half minutes, and orbital speed is 17,500 miles an hour. Your average computes out to be 2,000 miles an hour. It reminded me of a catapult shot off the front end of a carrier — but that catapult shot takes two seconds and this takes eight-and-a-half minutes.

SECONDS: *You've piloted five Shuttle missions?*

GIBSON: That's right, I've been co-pilot



“We underestimated how much work and how difficult it is to move people from the Earth up to the Moon. It really was a lot more difficult — and a lot more expensive — than we thought.”

for one and commander of four of them.

SECONDS: *And you have taken a Moody Blues tape with you?*

GIBSON: Yes. On the first four, I took a tape that had two of their albums on it. One side had *Days Of Future Passed* and the other side was *Seventh Sojourn*. I gave them that tape in 1993. It's in the Beverly Hills Hard Rock Cafe. On this last flight I flew, I took one of their CDs, *Legend Of A Band*. I'm planning on giving it back to them at some point.

SECONDS: *So you're a Moody Blues fan.*

GIBSON: Yeah, I have been for quite awhile.

SECONDS: *Do other astronauts bring music along?*

GIBSON: Pretty much all of us take music of some form because we can carry a Sony Walkman or Discman. The only time I ever get a chance to listen to it is at night when you're putting yourself to bed. You're so charged up and the adrenaline's running kind of high, so it's hard to get to sleep. The music is a big help.

SECONDS: *How does the zero-G affect the cassette or CD playback mechanisms?*

GIBSON: It doesn't seem to have affected them too much. We've had some trouble with some of the videotapes; those can be problematic because they'll tend to unwind themselves.

SECONDS: *Let me ask you about the band. Max Q is composed of yourself and other Shuttle astronauts?*

GIBSON: That's right. We've always been a group right out of the astronaut office. Originally, it was three guitarists and a drummer.

SECONDS: *What are some of the songs Max Q covers?*

GIBSON: “China Grove,” “Money For Nothing,” “Satisfaction,” “Hold On

Loosely” by .38 Special, “Gimme All Your Lovin” by ZZ Top — it's kind of a cross-section. We didn't do any Blues, we don't do much Heavy Metal, but we do “Jump” by Van Halen. We used to do “Teach Your Children” by Crosby, Stills & Nash, but we haven't done that for awhile. We do “Take It Easy” and “Tequila Sunrise.”

SECONDS: *So you're the band that's the furthest traveled, the best educated band on the planet, and the band that got the highest.*

GIBSON: The band that got the highest — yeah! In terms of miles traveled, just my fifth Space flight covered three million miles. Yeah, we've got quite a few miles behind us. We probably look like it, too.

SECONDS: *Can you divorce yourself from the drug-addled origins of some of that stuff?*

GIBSON: None of us have ever been close to that world. You'd never catch us playing “Cocaine” by Eric Clapton, for example — although I love Eric Clapton. In fact, we play “Wonderful Tonight,” one of his tunes. Most of our songs I don't associate with Drug Culture. That would be a little out of character for us and something we wouldn't want to imply we were endorsing.

SECONDS: *What's next for you?*

GIBSON: I'm not really sure. I've flown five times, I'm not sure I need to fly again. Having said that, I'll also say that I'm not tired of it by any means. I guess I'm looking around thinking, “Should I do another flight?” I've been told if I want to fly some more, I can certainly do that. I'm thinking, “Where do I have the most potential? Where can I contribute?” — and it may be more of the same. ●●●