

Spirit in the Sky

For other uses, see [Spirit in the Sky \(disambiguation\)](#).
For a deity whose portfolio includes or is limited to the sky, see [Spirit of the sky](#).

"**Spirit in the Sky**" is a song written and originally recorded^[3] by [Norman Greenbaum](#) and released in late 1969. The single sold two million copies from 1969 to 1970 and reached number three in the U.S. Billboard chart (April 18, 1970) where it listed for 15 weeks in the Top 100. *Billboard* ranked the record as the No. 22 song of 1970.^[4] It also climbed to number one on the UK, Australian and Canadian charts in 1970. *Rolling Stone* ranked "Spirit in the Sky" No. 333 on their list of the *500 Greatest Songs of All Time*. The song was featured on the 1969 album of the same name. Cover versions by [Doctor and the Medics](#) and [Gareth Gates](#) have also made the number 1 spot in the UK.

1 Original version by Norman Greenbaum

Greenbaum had previously been a member of psychedelic jug band [Dr. West's Medicine Show and Junk Band](#). When they split up he won a solo contract with producer Erik Jacobsen, who had previously worked successfully with [The Lovin' Spoonful](#). He was inspired to write the song after watching [Porter Wagoner](#) on TV singing a gospel song. Greenbaum later said: "I thought, 'Yeah, I could do that,' knowing nothing about gospel music, so I sat down and wrote my own gospel song. It came easy. I wrote the words in 15 minutes."^[3]

"Spirit in the Sky" contains lyrics about the afterlife, making several references to [Jesus](#), although Greenbaum is [Jewish](#). (In a VH1 episode about famous one-hit wonders, [Alice Cooper](#) said that he was surprised to hear someone with a Jewish-sounding last name performing a song that seemed to be about Jesus). Greenbaum recorded his first solo album with Jacobsen for [Reprise Records](#). The song's arrangement came together in the studio in [San Francisco](#) where lead guitarist [Russell DaShiell](#), bass player [Doug Killmer](#) from the band [Crowfoot](#) and drummer [Norman Mayell](#) worked with Greenbaum. According to one source^[3] and to DaShiell, Greenbaum used a Fender Telecaster with a [fuzz box](#) built into the body to generate the song's characteristic guitar sound. Moreover, DaShiell^[5] explained how he created the song's distinctive "beeping" fills:

"I actually played the lead guitar parts on Spirit, using a 61-62 SG Les Paul, a 68 Marshall Plexi 100w half stack and a home-made overdrive box in front of the Marshall. Regarding the 'beep beeps' as I call them, when the producer asked me to play some fills in between the verses, as a joke I said how about something spacey like this and I did the pickup switch/string bending thing. I saw him stand up in the control booth and he said "that's it! let's record that!" so we did. (There was no slide involved, just my fingers, and I used the bridge humbucker and the pickup switch). The fuzz part is Norman with a built-in overdrive circuit built into his Tele pickguard."

"I've been asked a lot over the years how I did the 'beep beep' guitar parts on Spirit, so for any guitar players out there who would like to learn how, try the following: Using a 2-pickup Gibson, set the neck pickup volume to zero, bridge pickup volume to max, with the pickup switch in the middle position (with Gibson wiring this gives you silence in the middle position). Do a string bend, picking the B & E strings together with one hit, just ahead of the beat, then use the pickup switch to kick in the bridge pickup in triplets (6 per bar) as you let the B string bend down two frets."

"I mainly used two positions on Spirit, which is in the key of A. For the low position, fret a stationary C note (8th fret) on the E string while bending the B string up to an A note for your starting-position, then pick the two strings together once while the guitar is silent and work the pickup switch as you let the A note bend downwards to a G. For the high position, do the same thing at the 15th fret holding a stationary high G note on the E string while bending down from E to D on the B string."

"I must give credit to Jimi Hendrix as my inspiration for this technique (as well as for the double-string riffs I did at the beginning of the Spirit solo tail section). I saw him perform live in a small club in Madison, Wisconsin and loved the way he used his Strat pickup switch to create staccato feedback on songs like Voodoo Child. The difference is, on a Gibson you can start from silence and create the on/off effect, which worked well with the downward string

bending thing I did on Spirit.”

The resulting sound was an innovative and compelling combination of gospel and **psychedelic rock** music, with loud drums, distorted electric guitar, clapping hands, and tambourines. The production team brought in **the Stovall Sisters**, an Oakland-based gospel trio, to sing backing vocals. Because of its unusual lyrics and style, the record company was initially reluctant to issue it, but was finally released as a single after two other singles from the album had poor sales. “Spirit in the Sky” became a worldwide hit, and was at the time the best-selling single ever for the Reprise label.

Of the song, Greenbaum observed: “It sounds as fresh today as when it was recorded. I’ve gotten letters from funeral directors telling me that it’s their second-most-requested song to play at memorial services, next to ‘Danny Boy’.”^[6]

2 Cultural impact

During John Lennon’s scathing 1970 *Rolling Stone* “Beatles break-up” interview with Jann S. Wenner, while highly critical of the recent work of many of his peers, including **Bob Dylan** and ex-band mate **Paul McCartney**, Lennon professed to liking the then-current radio single, “Spirit in the Sky,” stating that he “always liked simple rock and nothing else.”^[7]

The song has been featured in the several films, tv shows and video games including *Rock Band 2*, *This is the End*, *Apollo 13*, *Miami Blues*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *The Longest Yard*, *House*, *Contact* and *Michael*.^[8]

“Spirit in the Sky” was ranked No. 85 in *VH1*’s 100 Greatest One-hit Wonders.

It was included on the list of songs deemed “questionable” by Clear Channel following the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The song is used to introduce the starting lineup of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim for home games at Angel Stadium.

In the **Ron Howard** movie *Apollo 13*, the Fred Haise character opened the TV broadcast to earth from the Odyssey Command Module with “Spirit in the Sky” instead of the planned theme from *2001 A Space Odyssey*.

The song appears in the second trailer for *Guardians of the Galaxy*.^[9] as well as the soundtrack album, but is not heard in the film. The song also appears in the movie *Remember the Titans*.

3 Chart performance

4 Cover versions and samples

Elton John covered “Spirit in the Sky” in 1969.^[24]

Bauhaus covered “Spirit In the Sky” on their 1983 single “Sanity Assassin”.^[25] In 1986 the group **Doctor and the Medics** reached No. 1 in the UK singles chart with their version of the song, while the same year **punk** band **Fuzzbox** released their own less successful version. A humorous version of the song recorded to raise money for the charity **Comic Relief** by **The Kumars** with **Gareth Gates** also reached No. 1 in 2003 becoming the third version of this song to top the UK singles chart.

Christian band **Stellar Kart** covered the song on their 2010 album, *Everything Is Different Now*.^[26] In 1991, **The Kentucky Headhunters** covered “Spirit In the Sky” on their album, *Electric Barnyard*.^[27] The song was covered by DC Talk for *Jesus: Music from & Inspired by the Epic Mini Series* soundtrack and was released as a B side with LeAnn Rimes’ song “I Need You”.^{[28][29]}

Howard Stern and his in-studio band **The Losers** performed the song in 2002 as part of a Battle of the Bands with actor **Corey Feldman**’s band **Truth Movement**.

Goldfrapp sampled the song for their single “Ooh La La”.^[30]

4.1 Doctor & the Medics version

4.2 Gareth Gates (with the Kumars) version

“**Spirit in the Sky**” served as the first single from Pop Idol runner-up **Gareth Gates**’ second studio album, *Go Your Own Way*. The single was released on March 14, 2003, and was the official **Comic Relief** charity single for 2003. The song features guest vocals from **The Kumars**. The song peaked at number one on the **UK Singles Chart**, becoming Gates’ fourth number one single.

4.3 Tracklisting

UK CD1

1. “Spirit in the Sky” – 3:29
2. “Dance Again” – 4:06
3. “Spirit in the Sky” (Gareth Only Version) – 3:25
4. “Spirit in the Sky” (Video) – 4:00

UK CD2

1. “Spirit in the Sky” – 3:29

2. "Will You Wait for Me?" – 4:13
3. "Interview With Gareth" – 5:00

UK DVD

1. "Spirit in the Sky" (Video) – 4:00
2. "Dance Again" (Video) – 4:06
3. "Spirit in the Sky" (Making of the Video) – 3:25

5 References

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6 External links

- Full lyrics of this song at MetroLyrics

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7.1 Text

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7.2 Images

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