



BUZZ ALDRIN

By **Ernst Betterman**

Photo By Aaron Farley

Buzz Aldrin is the most verbal and visible of all Apollo astronauts. Of the 24 individuals who either circled the moon or landed on it, he is the one we most easily recognize. The Toy Story character, Buzz Lightyear, was modeled after him. And in September 2007, when Google co-founder Larry Page wanted to make a media splash with his company's \$30 million Lunar X-Prize—an award to be split between the first two private sector teams that can soft land on the Moon, robotically roam for at least 500 meters, and transmit a Mooncast back to Earth—he had Buzz stand at the podium to sell the idea. Buzz has written novels, scientific papers and worked on screenplay treatments. He was an ace fighter pilot in the Korean war, earned a doctorate from MIT seemingly in his spare time and he is the second man in the history of the human species to set foot on a celestial body other than earth.



With all this activity, public presence and PR savvy, you'd think we'd know Buzz better. After all, he is unflinching in allowing his human side to be seen by the general public. He talks openly about his three marriages. The tabloids tell us he has had cosmetic surgery, which at 77 years of age, he does not deny. Indeed, he is one of the fittest and most vigorous septuagenarians you are likely to meet. He is also extremely forthright in explaining his personal history of depression, alcoholism and recovery. So we feel a sort of facial familiarity with Buzz. Except for that extraordinary moment when he was on the moon, he seems a lot like us. He's had his failed relationships. Cosmetic surgery represents 14% of all healthcare expenditures in the United States. Some form of addiction has directly or indirectly impacted 63% of all Americans. And when it comes to depression, it is at least as common as cosmetic surgery.

So why do I have the sense this open, intelligent and gregarious person has been holding out on us all these years? Why do I have an odd expectation, an absurd hope, that I might learn something from Buzz that I haven't learned from other famous individuals?

It is quite simple, really. I want to learn something new from Buzz about being human. He walked on the moon. He did something so fundamentally unearthly, so beyond the experience of Earth's other 6 billion inhabitants, that it must have completely changed him. It must have given him a completely different take on what it means to be human. It must have been a profound, cathartic, spiritual experience. I want him to confirm this for me. I want to believe this is what would have happened to me, if I'd been in those moon boots instead of him.

But that is not the way it was—either for Buzz or, as far as we can tell, his 11 fellow moonwalkers. If anything, the lunar experience brought them down to earth. As he explains, “My mother committed suicide one year before I went to the moon. And I grew up in a drinking household. Combine that with the fact that NASA trained all the emotion out of us, and I eventually had to pay the piper with depression and alcoholism. But I eventually turned it around and I now have 28 years of sobriety. You know the Johnny Cash story? That's me. In fact, there's a screenplay in the works about it, and my wife and I are hoping it gets produced.” Turns out Buzz really wasn't holding out on us all these years.

But he was still a central figure in an amazing moment in time. For those of us who weren't alive then, it is difficult to imagine what the evening of July 20, 1969, was like, when Buzz and Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. It was a tumultuous world. Richard Nixon was just six months into the first term of his presidency. He and his administration were quite comfortable with indiscriminately dropping napalm on Vietnamese rice paddies and villages to clear landing areas for helicopter gunships. Every 18-year-old male in America had the military draft on their minds, whether they welcomed military service or hoped to avoid it. And while the moonwalk happened in outer space, inner space would get a shot in the ass just three and a half weeks later, when Richie Havens opened Woodstock and got called back for seven encores. Our attention had shifted from the bright side of the moon to Max Yasgur's farm, and it never really shifted back.

But while most Americans cannot recall where they were on the first day of Woodstock—unless, of course, they were there—they have no problem at all recalling where they were the night Neil and Buzz took their lunar stroll. People sat in front of their television sets, Kodak Instamatic cameras in hand, taking snapshots of those grainy black and white images sent back from the moon. A surprising number of people set up telescopes in their backyards, vainly hoping to catch a glimpse of the Apollo capsule or the lunar landing. Children lay on their backs in gardens and fields all across America, staring up at the half moon that night, marveling at the idea we

were up there, and fantasizing about when their first trip to the moon would take place. In 10 years or so. 20 at most.

It didn't turn out that way. The last landing on the moon was made on December 11, 1972 by Apollo 17 and I doubt that one American in 10,000 can name the astronauts on that flight. There was just so much happening at home. Nixon was under siege in the White House as the result of Watergate and would resign from the presidency in disgrace in four months. The war in Vietnam had gone from bad to worse and a majority of Americans had forever lost the belief that our political institutions would ever again be capable of setting lofty and inspiring goals—a belief we've never recovered as another senseless war ravages Iraq, and New Orleans remains on its knees as the result of systematic and seemingly deliberate government incompetence. So when George W. Bush announced in his January 2004 State of the Union address that we would return to the moon, there was a collective yawn of disregard and disbelief. Rightly so, it turns out, since there has been an obvious lack of funding to make such a goal possible.

NASA, too, has taken numerous hits over the years. It has lost its mojo in the public eye. They have lost two space shuttles and their crews in accidents that could have been avoided with better attention to detail. Meanwhile, the International Space Station languishes without public or political support. If there is any one reading this article that can name all the countries involved, count yourself among a very elite group of knowledgeable Americans.

This is not to say we believe space is now unimportant. In fact, from a commercial standpoint, it is more important than ever. Modern telecommunications could not exist without satellite technology. And space tourism has already begun. The Russians are happy to take you for a ride, to the tune of \$20 million. "Less, if you are a good negotiator," says Buzz. And the further commercialization of space is all but inevitable. That is part of what Google's Lunar X-Prize seeks to stimulate—a private sector race to the moon.

And what of our Apollonian heroes Buzz, what are your views here? "You know, when it comes to the Apollo astronauts, the government didn't look out for us very well. We all had to put our military careers on hold to join NASA. And when NASA was done with us, we'd lost all those years of seniority and accrued retirement income from the military. This is why I'm a big supporter of naming all 24 of the Apollo astronauts as Lunar Ambassadors, and giving them adequate recognition."

They deserve it, those 12 men who walked on the moon, and the 12 who orbited and never got to the lunar surface. They are our forbearers in space. They literally went where no man had gone before. Their 24 names should not be harder to recall than the name of the last person to win American Idol.