

Planet X

by Christine Lavin

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[This was originally recorded in 1997, inspired by an article in USA Today written by Sal Ruibal and published March 4, 1996; the lyrics below reflect how I sing it now -- a few changes -- Clyde Tombaugh has died, *The NASA Pluto Express*, originally scheduled for 2003, then 2004 calling it *The Pluto Kuiper Express*, is now scheduled for 2016 and is named *The New Horizons Express*.]

In Arizona at the turn of the century,
astromathematician Percival Lowell
was searching for what he called "Planet X"
'cause he knew deep down in his soul
that an unseen gravitational presence
meant a new planet spinning in the air
joining the other eight already known
circling our sun up there.

But Percival Lowell died in 1916
his theory still only a theory
'til 1930, when Clyde Tombaugh
in his scientific query
discovered "Planet X"
3.7 billion miles from our sun
a smallish ball of frozen rock,
methane and nitrogen

It joined Mercury, Venus,
Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus,
and Neptune
our solar system's newest neighbor
two-thirds the size of our moon
a tiny, barely visible speck
Cold! Minus 440 below
Not exactly Paradise
they named the planet Pluto

That same year, 1930, Walt Disney
debuted his own Pluto as well
but a cartoon dog with the very same
name as the CEO of Hell
was not your normal Disney style
most thought he was riding the coattails
of Pluto-mania sweeping the land
(not unlike our modern love for manatees
and whales)

For the next five decades mysterious Pluto
captivated our minds
as late as 1978 its own moon Charon
was seen for the very first time

but now telescopes and satellites
and computer calculations
say that Pluto may not be a planet at all,
creating great consternation

Some scientists say that Pluto is a
"trans-Neptunian interloper"
swept away by an unknown force
or a remnant of a wayward comet
somehow sucked off course
others say that Pluto
is an asteroid
in the sun's gravitational pull
but if you asked Clyde Tombaugh
he would have told you "That's all 'bull'"

"I get hundreds of letters from
kids every year," he said,
"It's Pluto the planet they love.
It's not Pluto the comet,
It's not Pluto the asteroid
they wonder about above"
And at the International Astronomical
Union Working Group
For Planetary System Nomenclature
They too say that Pluto is a planet*
reinforcing Clyde Tombaugh's view of
nature

Norwegian Kaare Aksnes* *
professor at the Theoretical Astrophysics
Institute
He too says that Pluto is a planet
and a significant one, to boot

**Not any more. In 2006 they changed their opinion,
calling Pluto a "dwarf planet."*

***In 2006 Dr. Aksnes says it's with a heavy heart he
accepts Pluto now being called a "dwarf
planet," but points out that at least the word*

"planet" is still in Pluto's official description.

(OVER)

But at the University of Colorado
Astronomer Larry Esposito said,
"If Pluto were discovered today
it would not be a planet.
End of discussion. Finito!" * * *

He says that Pluto was definitely not spun
off
from solar matter
like the other eight planets we know
By every scientific measurement we have
is Pluto a planet? No!
and now astronomy textbooks
refer to Pluto as less than a planet
I guess if Pluto showed up
at a planet convention
the bouncer would be forced to ban it

St. Christopher is looking down on this
and he says, "Pluto, I can relate.
When I was demoted from sainthood
I gotta tell you little buddy,
it didn't feel real great"
and Scorpios look up in dismay
because Pluto rules their sign
*Is now reading their daily Horoscope
just a futile waste of time?*

It takes 248 earth years
for Pluto to circle our sun
It's tiny and it's cold
but of all heavenly bodies
it was Clyde Tombaugh's favorite one.
Til he was 92 he worked every day
in Las Cruces, New Mexico
determined to maintain the planetary
status of his beloved Pluto

But how now do we deal with this:
scientists think they have proof
that Pluto was *never* a planet
how do we handle this truth?
Some Ph.D's still disagree
who is wrong? who is right?
but wherever you are, whatever you are,
Pluto, we know you're out there tonight

And in the year 2016
you're going to see
the New Horizons Express
fly by and take pictures
of your way cool surface
to send to this web page address:
**h t t p colon slash slash d o s
x x dot colorado dot edu slash
plutohome dot h t m l**
(<http://dosxx.colorado.edu/plutohome.html>)

You've got your own web page?
For a little guy,
you've made quite a splash!

Yes at the turn of the 20th century
astromathematician Percival Lowell
in his quest for "Planet X"
started this ball to roll
but here in the 21st Century
we think he may have been a little off base
so we look at the sky
and wonder what new surprises
await us in outer space

We look at the sky and we
wonder . . .

**** In 2006 I contacted Dr. Esposito, asking him if
he'd like to add "I told you so!" to his original
statement, or gloat in any way, but this is what he wrote
back: "I stand by my original position. I decline to
gloat." I appreciate your taking the high road, Dr.
Esposito.*

Christine Lavin

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