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FROM JARS TO THE STARS

How Ball Came to Build a Comet-Hunting Machine

By Todd Neff

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“From Jars to the Stars is an amazing and historically accurate account of the space program we take for granted today.”

- Charles Pellerin, PhD, author of *How NASA Builds Teams* and former NASA director of astrophysics

“Science journalism at its best: real, exciting and inspirational”

- Ben Bova, author, editor, President Emeritus of the National Space Society, Fellow of the AAAS

“This is the inside story, and it’s fascinating.”

- Alan Stern, PhD, principal investigator of the New Horizons mission to Pluto

How did a company best known for its glass jars hit a comet 83 million miles away? The answer involves technical expertise, heroic dedication, an industrial giant’s push to modernize, Hitler’s V-2 rocket, speakers destined for a Hall & Oates summer concert tour, and the search for life’s origins.

In *From Jars to the Stars: How Ball Came to Build a Comet-Hunting Machine* [Earthview Media; \$24.95 trade paperback], author Todd Neff presents an inside look into the backgrounds, character and motivations of the men and women who actually create the spacecraft on which the American space program rides.

A timeless story of science, engineering, politics and business strategy intertwining to bring success in the brutal business of space, Neff’s is a lively account of one of mankind’s great modern achievements. It is a story about people, foremost those on the \$330 million Deep Impact mission, which smashed an impactor spacecraft into the comet Tempel 1 on July 4, 2005 when the icy wanderer was as far away from Earth as the sun.

Yet Deep Impact is only part of the story. *From Jars to the Stars* puts the mission into the greater context of humanity’s continuing search for its origins via the senses of scientific spacecraft. Neff

explores the improbable beginnings of Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corp., which built the comet hunter, and the evolution of the American space agency that funded it. Based on interviews with more than 100 people and exhaustive documentary research, the book breaks new space-historical ground with the story of a group of University of Colorado students who built a “sun seeker” for the noses of sounding rockets studying the home star. The device set precedent for nearly all modern spacecraft, and sparked the creation and development of both Ball Aerospace and the University of Colorado’s formidable Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics.

From Jars to the Stars also tells the story of how Ed Ball, scion of the Ball Brothers Company of Muncie, Indiana, ended up owning a space business in Boulder, Colorado, through a combination of strategic intent and serendipity. *From Jars to the Stars* explores both the personalities and the technologies behind Ball’s pioneering spacecraft, the Orbiting Solar Observatory launched in 1962. The Ball orbiter prepares the ground for Deep Impact, showing readers how much—and how little—changed across four decades of American space exploration.

From Jars to the Stars goes on to show how Ball Aerospace evolved into an organization capable of building seven Hubble Space Telescope instruments as well as the comet hunter at the center of the story. Neff describes the development of the American space enterprise as it went from emphasizing big-budget “gigabuck” missions to “faster, better, cheaper” spacecraft of the sort Ball specialized in. Neff pays special mind to NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, the world leader in interplanetary space exploration and Ball’s partner on Deep Impact. It was often a rocky marriage. Throughout, Neff succeeds in showing that robotic space missions are indeed manned: the people just happen to stay on the ground.

The Deep Impact team nearly faltered: NASA was twice on the verge of scrapping the mission as technical and money problems mounted. But against the odds, and with a primary telescope that came up blurry in space, Deep Impact met its mark. The surviving flyby spacecraft sent home images and data of an explosion that shed new light on comets, which, scientists believe, are a key to understanding how the solar system evolved and where we came from. And the spacecraft’s work isn’t done.

Todd Neff is an award-winning science and environment writer based in Denver. He covered Ball Aerospace and its Deep Impact mission while science and the environment reporter for the *Daily Camera* newspaper in Boulder, Colorado. He serves on the advisory board of the University of Colorado’s Department of Astrophysical and Planetary Sciences and has a master’s degree from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.