

Brian Cox once toured as a keyboardist in major rock and pop bands. Now he's a particle physicist on a new world tour with a dazzling show he designed in an era of science disinformation and denial.



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**By Stefano Montali**

Stefano Montali traveled to Redditch, England, in November to attend a warm-up show for Prof. Brian Cox's coming world tour.

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Prof. Brian Cox flashed a wide smile toward the crowd, picked up an iPad, looked up at the enormous screen behind him and started to write out a complex equation. “This is what I call a live math solo,” he said.

The audience chuckled. Many in the packed theater that night last month in the small English town of Redditch seemed to be in on the joke.

Because before he became Brian Cox, the particle physicist renowned for his adroitness in explaining the intricacies and magnificence of space, he was Brian Cox the rock star.

His first professional gig, in fact, was playing keyboards in the opening band on a tour with Jimmy Page, the lead guitarist of Led Zeppelin. His second band, D:Ream, had a song that hit No. 1 on the British pop charts in 1994.

Now, Professor Cox is the star of his own show, albeit one about science.

He has sold out venues often reserved for sports and pop stars, like Wembley Arena (not the stadium) and the O2 in London. His coming tour, “Emergence,” will take him to places like Singapore, Serbia and Australia, before arriving in the United States in late 2026.

“If you believe, as I do, that science is one of the necessary foundations of society, alongside the arts and politics,” Professor Cox said in an interview, “it has to be there with them on an equal footing.”



Mr. Cox onstage during his “Universal: Adventures in Space and Time” world tour in 2019 in London. Nicky J. Sims/Getty Images

With his geniality, Beatles-esque haircut and a dazzling show that explores black holes, galaxies and the significance — and insignificance — of human beings in the universe, Professor Cox, 57, has reached mainstream audiences, when many scientists cannot.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, the astrophysicist and popular science communicator, said in an interview that Professor Cox, whom he has known for years, “has a force of rationality, and a force of reason, and a force of science.” He added, “Society needs all three, lest we regress back to the caves whence we came.”

In an era when science denial and disinformation are common, Professor Cox, who teaches particle physics at the University of Manchester, has sought to make science accessible through Peabody Award-winning BBC documentaries and podcasts, books and appearances on other media, like “The Joe Rogan Experience.”

This year, the United Nations named Professor Cox its Champion for Space, a role in which he will work with the organization to promote space as a “force for progress.”

As a child, Professor Cox spent many Saturday mornings at the Manchester Airport, near his hometown, Oldham, England, spotting planes with his father. “I liked the engineering, the big machines,” he said. “The Apollo moon landings, astronomy, science fiction — I wanted to see ‘Star Wars,’ ‘Star Trek,’ ‘Alien,’ all of it.”

Eventually, Professor Cox’s interests expanded to include music.

At 18, he deferred going to university for a year to join the band Dare, founded by a member of Thin Lizzy who lived nearby. The band recorded its debut album with A&M Records in Joni Mitchell’s private studio.



Mr. Cox, second from left, in the band Dare in the 1980s. Pictorial Press Ltd., via Alamy

After one London show where Dare opened for Jimmy Page, Professor Cox said he found himself having a drink backstage with George Harrison.

Even while touring, Professor Cox read popular science books.

He left Dare at 23 — after a bar fight with his bandmates in Berlin, he said — to study physics and astronomy at the University of Manchester. He soon joined D:Ream, whose No. 1 pop anthem “Things Can Only Get Better” was later appropriated by the Labour Party.

Eventually, he left that band to shift his focus to science. Stints at particle accelerators in Hamburg, Chicago and Geneva followed.

In 2001, Professor Cox met Gia Milinovich, a TV presenter and writer, whom he married two years later at her mother's house in Duluth, Minn. The pair started writing documentary ideas "with the sole aim of 'making science part of popular culture,'" she told The Guardian in 2010. Today, they live in London with their 16-year-old son, George.

Still, the draw to the stage never truly left Professor Cox, who eventually found his way back to it.

The show in Redditch, about 45 minutes south of Birmingham, was the beginning of a slate of warm-up performances. For Professor Cox, they are a chance to work out new material. The show changes night to night.



Working before one of his warm-up performances in Redditch last month. Andrew Testa  
for The New York Times

Professor Cox's enthusiasm is as much a character in the show as the planets and the stars. He kept the audience captivated, even on topics that might seem out of reach, like the origin of space and time or quantum entanglement.

David Attenborough, whose nature documentaries on the BBC helped carve out a place for science presenters on television, said in 2013, “If I had a torch, I would hand it to Brian Cox.”

But the worlds in which Mr. Attenborough first rose to fame and in which Professor Cox works now couldn't be more different. Disinformation on social media has contributed to a growing skepticism of experts.

“Our instinct, which is a good instinct,” Professor Cox said, “is to say, ‘I want to listen to as many voices as possible.’” Still, he stressed that there needed to be a weighting to people who have expertise.

But his expertise has been poached by hyper-realistic deepfakes. Days before the Redditch show, several appeared online depicting him falsely claiming that the 3I/ATLAS comet, which was passing through the solar system, was an alien spacecraft.

The mother of a friend of his was so convinced by the deepfake that she was “starting to hoard things,” Professor Cox said the friend told him.

With the deepfakes multiplying and looking increasingly realistic, the effort to take them down can feel like a full-time job, he said.

Earlier in his career, Professor Cox made light of conspiracies.

While he was working in Geneva at CERN on the Large Hadron Collider, or LHC, several doomsday theories circulated online claiming the accelerator could cause the end of the universe by creating microscopic black holes.

“My first instinct was to laugh it off,” Professor Cox said. He told the The Daily Telegraph that “anyone who thinks the LHC will destroy the world” is a fool, though he used a word that many find offensive.



Mr. Cox at CERN in 2007. Elroy Emin/Alamy

It caused an uproar. “It’s probably my most famous quote,” Professor Cox said. But he says he came to understand of conspiracy theories that it’s important to be sensitive that even if people believe in something that isn’t true, the strong emotion that belief can evoke — panic or fear, in the case of the collider — is real. “If people are getting information that’s saying that there’s a chance that the world will be destroyed,” he said, “it’s not silly to be worried about that.” He has appeared three times in the past decade on Joe Rogan’s podcast. While he acknowledges that Mr. Rogan and his guests have indulged in conspiracy theories or denial about climate change and other accepted science, Professor Cox regards the appearances as an opportunity to reach an important new audience.

At the start of his show in Redditch, Professor Cox appeared in front of a projection of the Charles Bridge in Prague on a snowy night, and he told the story of how the astronomer Johannes Kepler pondered the physical makeup of a six-pointed snowflake. Eventually, the visual zoomed deeper and deeper into one of the falling snowflakes, revealing its intricacy.

As he stood to the side of the stage in the dark, Professor Cox described how Kepler's bridge walk, along with Galileo's discovery of Jupiter's four largest moons, contributed to a revolution in science — a refocusing away from the reliance on ancient knowledge and toward the modern method of observation and questioning.

That drive for discovery, Professor Cox said, lies at the center of his show and at the heart of his questions. How do we acquire reliable knowledge? How do we remove our opinion and biases?

“Certainty is kind of a brutish thing,” he said, “it doesn’t really get you anywhere.”

As for the music world, Professor Cox still has a toe in. He reunited with D:Ream, onstage at the Glastonbury Festival in 2024. And at another event, he said, he was approached by a fan who expressed his awe at a show Professor Cox had done about Enceladus, one of Saturn's moons.

The fan was Paul McCartney.

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