

ASU astrophysicist instrumental in naming asteroids in honor of Tom Lehrer and 'Weird Al' Yankovic

Both musicians' comedic songs appeal to the nerd community

By Kim Baptista, ASU News
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Thousands of asteroids have been named after people, but not just anyone can garner that honor.

[The International Astronomical Union](#) (IAU) governs asteroid naming and sets the rules. The asteroid discoverer has priority to nominate a name. Mythological or geographical names are allowed, but to name it after a person, the person must be a scientist or engineer recognized for major contributions, or an artist, writer or musician with established influence.

Thanks to efforts begun by Arizona State University astrophysicist [Steve Desch](#), two asteroids — (14330) Tomlehrer and (14331) Alyankovic — have now been named for the well-known musicians [Tom Lehrer](#) and ["Weird Al" Yankovic](#).

Lehrer is famous for his comedic songs beloved by scientists, such as "Wernher von Braun," "Poisoning Pigeons in the Park" and especially "The Elements." He also taught mathematics as a professor at University of California, Santa Cruz for 29 years and, around 1956, is credited with inventing the Jell-O shot. He died in July 2025 at age 97.

Yankovic has written many famous parody and other comedic songs that figure prominently in nerd culture and are loved by scientists, such as "It's All About the Pentiums," "White and Nerdy" and "The Saga Begins."

Last August, Desch conceived the idea of naming asteroids after these two artists.

"I heard about Tom Lehrer's passing and thought he should be honored. And then I read a news article in which Weird Al praised Tom Lehrer as one of his musical heroes," said Desch, a

professor in ASU's School of Earth and Space Exploration. "In fact, I later learned he wanted Daniel Radcliffe cast in his movie because [he could sing 'The Elements.'](#) Admiring both of these musicians, I thought it would be a great honor to both to have two consecutively numbered asteroids named after them."

Many asteroids are named for musicians, including (3834) Zappafrank, named for Frank Zappa. The number denotes the order in which the asteroid was discovered and cataloged. Under IAU rules, the name must be a single word: either a last name or an amalgamation of the first and last name. All four Beatles received this honor: (4147) Lennon, (4148) McCartney, (4149) Harrison and (4150) Starr. Giving their names to consecutively numbered asteroids like that takes a bit of extra planning during nomination, but it means these names will appear together in a catalog of asteroids. It's a higher honor.

After Desch had the idea, he made the request through meteoriticist Tim McCoy at the Smithsonian to the now-retired astronomer Bobby Bus, who discovered many asteroids in the early 1980s and could nominate names to the IAU. Fortunately, he was enthusiastic about the idea, which astronomers Allison McGraw of the Lunar and Planetary Institute and Melissa Brucker at the University of Arizona also supported.

On Sept. 7, the IAU accepted the nomination, and it designated two asteroids discovered by Bus on March 2, 1981, from an observatory in Siding Spring, Australia: (14330) Tomlehrer and (14331) Alyankovic. Bus also discovered asteroid (9926) Desch the same day.

The timing of the announcement was perfect because Yankovic was performing in Tucson on Sept. 20. McGraw and others contacted his agency and arranged for Desch and McGraw to deliver certificates and a meteorite to Yankovic in person before the concert. According to Desch, he was intensely interested, humbled by the recognition and said he was "deeply honored."

Desch says his favorite part was explaining the connection to Lehrer: "I said to Al Yankovic that he might have to accept the certificate for Tom Lehrer because he never married or had children, and I was unaware of any family to contact. So he went into his dressing room and came back out with his laptop to show me the email address of the person overseeing Tom Lehrer's estate! I got to experience what a nice and thoughtful guy Al Yankovic is and was able to make contact with those who knew Tom Lehrer."

Asteroid (14330) Tomlehrer is about 10 km in diameter, and (14331) Alyankovic is about 2 km. You can track their orbits using these links for [Tomlehrer](#) and [Alyankovic](#). They pose no risk of hitting Earth or stomping weasels. But the musical impact of their namesakes is undeniable.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



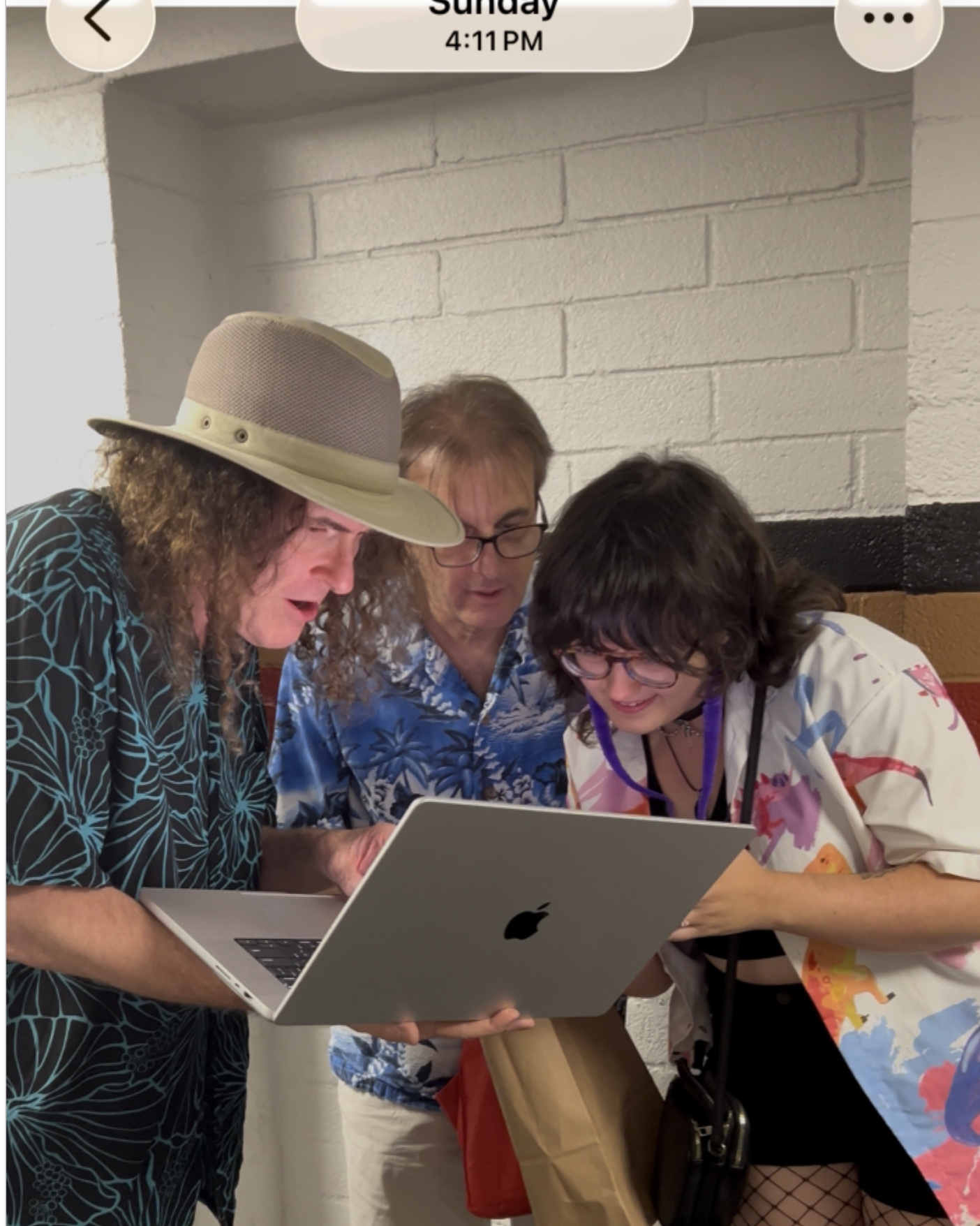
From left: Allison McGraw of the Lunar and Planetary Institute, “Weird Al” Yankovic and Professor Steve Desch from ASU's School of Earth and Space Exploration present the official asteroid naming certificate from the International Astronomical Union. Courtesy photo

Gallery

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“Weird Al” Yankovic, ASU Professor Steve Desch and PhD candidate Lana Tilke in Tucson on Sept. 20. Desch says when he told Yankovic that he didn't have any family contacts of the late Tom Lehrer — the other asteroid-naming honoree — Yankovic pulled out his laptop to share the email of the person overseeing Lehrer's estate.



Professor Steve Desch and “Weird Al” Yankovic at the “Bigger & Weirder” show in Tucson on Sept. 20.



A group gathers to celebrate the naming of an asteroid after “Weird Al” Yankovic (in hat).