

50 years after Concorde, US start-up eyes supersonic future

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Boom Supersonic aims to slash journey times by half

Luxury air travel faster than the speed of sound: A US start-up is aiming to revive commercial supersonic flight 50 years after the ill-fated Concorde first took to the skies.

Blake Scholl, the former Amazon staffer who co-founded Boom Supersonic, delivered the pledge this week in front of a fully-restored Concorde jet at the Brooklands aviation and motor museum in Weybridge, southwest of London.

Boom Supersonic's backers include Richard Branson and Japan Airlines and other players are eyeing the same segment.

The company aims to manufacture a prototype jet next year but its plans have been met with scepticism in some quarters.

"The story of Concorde is the story of a journey started but not completed—and we want to pick up on it," Scholl said.

The event coincided with the nearby Farnborough Airshow.

"Today... the world is more linked than it's ever been before and the need for improved human connection has never been greater," Scholl said.

"At Boom, we are inspired at what was accomplished half a century ago," he added, speaking in front of a former British Airways Concorde that flew for the first time in 1969.

'Very unattractive'

Boom Supersonic's aircraft, dubbed Baby Boom, is expected by the company to fly for the first time next year.

"If we can't continue where you left off, and build on that, then the shame is on us," Scholl said, addressing himself to an audience that included retired Concorde staff.

"Our vision is to build a faster airplane that is accessible to more and more people, to anybody who flies."

Boom Supersonic is making its debut at Farnborough and hopes to produce its new-generation jets in the mid-2020s or later, with the aim of slashing journey times by half.

The proposed aircraft has a maximum flying range of 8,334 kilometres (5,167 miles) at a speed of Mach 2.2 or 2,335 kilometres per hour.

If it takes off, it would be the first supersonic passenger aircraft since Concorde took its final flight in 2003.

The Concorde was retired following an accident in 2000 in which a Concorde crashed shortly after takeoff from Paris, killing 113 people.

Some analysts remain sceptical over the push back into supersonic.

"Supersonic is not what passengers or airlines want right now," said Strategic Aero analyst Saj Ahmed, stressing that many travellers wanted cheap low-cost carriers instead.

Ahmed said supersonic jets were "very unattractive" because of high start-up development costs, considerations about noise pollution and high prices as well as limited capacity.

'Untried and untested'

Independent air transport consultant John Strickland also noted supersonic travel was unproven commercially.

"Business traffic, on the face of it, is the most lucrative for airlines," Strickland told AFP.

"But if there is an economic downturn or something happens where the market for business class traffic drains away, then you have nothing else left to do with that aircraft.

"I think it's going to be some time before we see whether it can establish a large viable market... in the way that Concorde never managed to do."

These concerns have not stopped interest from other players.

US aerospace giant Boeing had last month unveiled its "hypersonic" airliner concept, which it hopes will fly at Mach 5—or five times the speed of sound—when it arrives on the scene in 20 to 30 years.

And in April, NASA inked a deal for US giant Lockheed Martin to develop a supersonic "X-plane".

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