

JAMES MORRISON: COME FLY WITH ME

by Nicholas Adams-Dzierzba*

This article appeared in The Weekend Australian on May 4, 2019, with the sub-heading “Jazz maestro James Morrison is as comfortable on stage as he is in the cockpit of his Piper”. It can be read there at this link

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/come-fly-with-me/news-story/d880c4e6f9381aab85eefb692533feda>



John Morrison (left) and James Morrison, in their Morrison Brothers Airlines uniform... PHOTO COURTESY BLOWING MY OWN TRUMPET

The journey

James Morrison steps out into the gloom, a camping lamp on his forehead lighting the runway at Bankstown airport in Sydney's west. Then the world-renowned trumpeter stows his precious cargo of jazz instruments into the wing of his other great joy, the light aircraft he's about to pilot to Coffs Harbour, 500km away.

Having played jazz for more than 30 years, Morrison, 56, has figured out how to have his cake and eat it, too. He loves music. He loves flying. And so he flies himself to gigs around Australia.

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Today his cargo includes his trumpet, trombone, and flugelhorn. Already on board are bandmates: co-pilot, drummer and brother John Morrison along with John's wife, jazz singer Jacki Cooper. She sits in one of four passenger seats, rugged up in a red puffer jacket.



Co-pilot, drummer and brother John Morrison (right) pictured here with John's wife, jazz singer Jacki Cooper...

The last to board is this journalist, who's never been in a small plane. "You're going to need to sit diagonally opposite me for the right weight distribution during takeoff and landing," Jacki says.

After a run-through of evacuation procedures there's the addendum. "In the unlikely event of an emergency, go off the back of the wing, away from the propellers."

“Seat belt,” Jacki prompts. She pulls some Tupperware out of a cooler bag and offers an in-flight breakfast of nectarines and plums.

Despite a forecast of possible storms and probable fog, the 90-minute flight aboard the Piper PA-31 Navajo is smooth. The windows of the plane are broad, and a welcome way to watch the sunrise over the Pacific. James and John, the sons of a preacher man — their father, George, was a Methodist minister who also spent time in the air force — have been pilots almost as long as they’ve been musicians. It’s in their blood. Their banter is rich with references to aircraft makes and models, aviation stories about cropdusting at night and Joh Bjelke-Petersen. (Queensland’s longest serving premier was corrupt, but apparently knew his way around a cockpit.)



James, pictured here with his Dad George Morrison in 1967... PHOTO COURTESY BLOWING MY OWN TRUMPET

In rural and remote parts of Australia, being a fly-in, fly-out worker can get a bad rap. But James doesn’t see it that way. “The more places I can fly into and fly out of, the more connections I can make with people,” he says. The Royal Flying Doctor Service, providing an essential service to towns cut off by the tyranny of distance, may be a better analogy. Music as medicine.

The flight plan is an imposing brief: wheels up by 6am, touching back down at Bankstown airport after 1am, with two workshops and a performance at Bellingen High School in between.

The town

We touch down and are greeted by Bruce Stephen, 60, an anaesthetist who made the move from Sydney to Bellingen with his wife Sonja and children Xavier and Rosie a decade ago.



Bellingen’s population is about 3,000. A round of golf costs five bucks on Mondays. The area often floods, and news reports declare “Town cut off”, Stephen says. “Everybody knows everybody and everybody’s business. You’ll run into four or five people you know at IGA. It’s really nice, actually.”

Bellingen is an artistic town, an old dairy and timber hub that turned hippie, and now yuppie. “Lots of potters, painters and musicians,” Stephen says.

Landmarks along the main strip oscillate between quaint and kitsch: St Margaret’s Church; a yellow Volkswagen kombi, one of two in town; a fairy shop.

Notable residents here include veteran interviewer George Negus and cricket great Adam Gilchrist — there’s even a bronze bust of the wicketkeeper in the town centre. David Helfgott, the piano prodigy whose life was depicted in the film *Shine*, lives in nearby Gleniffer, also known as the Promised Land. The Never Never Creek runs through it. Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* — the book as well as the screen adaptation — was set in Bellingen.

Two children busk on either side of the entrance to the historic Hammond and Wheatley building, a heritage-listed commercial emporium built in 1909 as a one-stop shop servicing the town, which sprang up around a cedar mill. Today it’s a

clothing store and cafe. A boy plays *Cantina Band* from *Star Wars* on saxophone, competing with a girl on violin playing a classical tune.



Notable residents of Bellinghen include veteran interviewer George Negus, cricket great Adam Gilchrist and David Helfgott (pictured above in 1997), the piano prodigy whose life was depicted in the film “Shine”...

The school

There’s a rich musical culture in Bellinghen, James Morrison muses. “You can see by the number of young people playing music and the standard to which they’re playing it,” he says. “That’s not everywhere. There are places that stand out. But potentially it’s everywhere. There’s usually a champion in town, like Annie here, who drives it and gets behind it, supported by a lot of other wonderful people.”

“Annie” is Ann Phelan, 64, the Bellinghen High School music teacher, and she conducts the jazz band that will hold a workshop as well as perform tonight with James, John and Jacki.

“One of the beauties of living in a country town — the kids are just waiting to catch the opportunities they get,” Phelan says. It’s taken years of negotiations to organise this day. And now, it feels as though the whole town has swung into action to make it a success. On his day off, Stephen is designated driver. His wife, Sonja, bakes scones for lunch. Vats of pumpkin soup are prepared for the young musicians ahead of the performance.

Music in Bellinghen is thriving, but outgrowing its shell. The Bellinghen Youth Orchestra started with 15 people and now boasts more than 90 musicians.

“We want to build a cultural performance centre, a \$2.5 million project. But that amount is beyond this community,” says David Neville, 49, a teacher at Bellinghen High. He says the success of the music program is that kids envisage themselves becoming musicians, not just learning an instrument.

A committee has formed to apply for grants. There is a feeling that calling it the David Helfgott Cultural Performance Centre might attract the wider public’s attention. The pianist plays concerts at the school. There’s already a sculpture in the centre of town dedicated to Helfgott’s musical genius and his contribution to the community. His wife, Gillian, is involved in discussing the next steps.

The workshop

In the film *Whiplash*, a tyrannical jazz teacher — an Oscar-winning performance from J K Simmons — pushes his students past breaking point. As an educator, James Morrison hits a very different note.

Capable of being soft and validating with his words, he can also be loudly encouraging with his accompaniment, jamming along with the Bellinghen High School Jazz Band, or demonstrating a solo, showcasing the high notes a musician at the top of their craft can hit.



James Morrison plays with the Bellinghen High School Jazz Band... PHOTO CREDIT NICHOLAS ADAMS-DZIERZBA

A cluster of older students gathers around the musician and asks for career advice. One is Finn Lawson-John, 17, who plays bass. Another is Rosie Stephen, 18, a trombonist and singer. She isn’t sure whether she wants to be a musician or follow in her father’s footsteps by training as a doctor.

The affable trumpeter's advice is to follow their passions. "Mine was music. I love flying. I flew today to get here, I'm flying home tonight."

The concert

The school's gymnasium is packed. The audience of 430 represents 14.3 per cent of Bellingham's population. The kids in the band look the part in jazz ensemble black. Instruments tuned, they await their conductor, Phelan.

John, Jacki and James are introduced. John distinguishes himself as the joker of the evening. From the outset of the performance the tone is playful, and student drummer Ziggy Taylor holds his own against the veteran percussionist's jive. "How old are you, Ziggy?" John asks after a drum duel. "Forty-three." Ba dum tss.

The banter between John and James is a key component of the performance. They're maestros of the riff. They command their instruments. They play for laughs. They play on each other's nerves.

The Morrisons have been comic performers since childhood, playing their first paid gig out the front of Coles in Sydney's Mona Vale. Technically, James clarifies, it was not busking: the supermarket chain paid them a dollar each. (By the time he was a teenager, James was playing in nightclubs.) Jacki leads the singing with crowd-pleasers *Georgia on My Mind* and *Sway*. Stephen's son Xavier, 15, plays a saxophone solo. His daughter Rosie accompanies James on trombone. Then sings a breathy duet, *Baby, It's Cold Outside*.



Morrison hits a high note.. PHOTO CREDIT EUGENE HYLAND

During the show James flits between instruments: from trumpet to trombone, flugel bugle, bass and piano (he can play the tuba, too).

“I didn’t really have a lot of formal lessons when I started out,” he says. “So that turned out to be a good thing. Because I didn’t know what you couldn’t do or what you shouldn’t do. And when I like the sound of an instrument, I would want to play one of those, too.”

The concert ends on a high note with *MacArthur Park*. Stephen gets to play bass, accompanying his children, Xavier and Rosie, and James. It’s not the first time he’s played music with his kids. “They’ll sit in with band stuff,” he says, packing up after the concert. “It’s a lovely thing to share with your children, really special.” The good doctor beams. Physicians playing instruments is no anomaly. James has played concerts with The Australian Doctors Orchestra. Rosie could take either path: a doctor who plays music, or a jazz musician who flies. “If you’re passionate about music, you will get work,” James tells her. “I’ve heard you play. You’re not going to struggle to find work.”



Members of the Australian Doctors Orchestra, a national fellowship of medical professionals who are also classically trained musicians, which has been in existence since 1993... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

The concert over, the trumpeter who has played with such luminaries as Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, Woody Shaw, Ray Charles, B B King and Wynton Marsalis, among others, departs with a “call me any time” to the young musicians.



In the past Morrison has played with many luminaries such as the legendary Cab Calloway (pictured above, far right, with unidentified saxophonist from Calloway’s band) and Dizzy Gillespie (pictured below, far left, with L-R, pianist Benny Green, and drummer Jeff Hamilton, recording in LA in 1994... PHOTOS COURTESY BLOWING MY OWN TRUMPET



“What you get is how you make a living, what you give is how you make a life,” he says. “And if you’ve got music in you, and you want to share that with the world, that’s your main thing, that’s what you’re going to do.”

The homecoming

Jacki and the Morrison brothers consider attending an after-party but decline, and within an hour of the concert’s conclusion we’re driving back to Coffs Harbour airfield.

In a matter of hours James will be jetting off from Sydney — with someone else at the yoke — to perform in Paris. Then it will be back to the cockpit for a domestic tour, performing with jazz legend Herbie Hancock, then with American jazz vocalist Kurt Elling.



Morrison and the American singer Kurt Elling (left) will be touring Australia...

At the airfield the gate is locked, and I’m the designated fence-jumper. They promise to visit me in jail.

John takes the controls for the flight back to Sydney and talk turns to the former Sydney jazz venue The Basement, reopening under a new name: Mary’s Underground.

James is nostalgic about the old jazz bar. He first went there when he was too young to get past security, and instead found himself a spot in an adjacent alley from where

he could listen to the band playing through a window. He went on to perform at The Basement across three decades, until its closure last year. He would happily play there again: “It’s all about what happens on the night, not about what the club’s called.”

When contacted, Mary’s co-owner Jake Smyth is buoyant. “James and his generation, they made this place an institution. Any time he wants to come down, he’s welcome.”



Mary’s Underground co-owner Jake Smyth (left), pictured with other co-owner Kenny Graham: Any time James wants to come down, he’s welcome...

As for James Morrison’s work with those kids in Bellingham? It worked. The following day, bassist Finn Lawson-John decided to apply to study jazz at university next year.

James Morrison and Kurt Elling play Hamer Hall in Melbourne on Monday, then travel to Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Sydney.

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, “James Morrison Quartet with the SSO”, November , 2018, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/miscellaneous-postings-22>

Eric Myers, “Don Burrows Tribute Concert”, The Australian, November 4, 2020 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-18>

Eric Myers, review of the Kurt Elling/James Morrison album “Live in New York” at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-22>