

THE MANY LIVES OF LINDY MORRISON

by Toby Creswell*

Feminist, activist, musician and Go-Betweens drummer Lindy Morrison was a tumultuous force in the Australian music industry from the very beginning. This article appeared in The Saturday Paper on October 7, 2023. It can be read there at <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/music/2023/10/07/the-many-lives-lindy-morrison>



Lindy Morrison at the drums... PHOTO CREDIT MARK HOPPER

Apocryphal story: Lindy Morrison once lost her drums for six months. She took her full kit to a pro-choice rally in Brisbane and the police confiscated them. It was a Ludwig kit, just like Ringo played.

Music and political activism have always been entwined for Morrison. For ten years she thumped away with the critically acclaimed but starving The Go-Betweens, but this was bracketed by decades of activism and social service. “I’m very forthright. And I say exactly what I think,” says Morrison. “People call me aggressive. I don’t think I’m really aggressive. I just think I’m being passionate.”

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“Even when you’re annoyed at her, you love her,” says singer-songwriter Alex the Astronaut. “She’s got electricity just running through her bones. She’s got no filter. She’s got no sense of what’s appropriate or inappropriate, but she’s got a very, very strong sense of justice. She asks the questions people don’t wanna hear.”

Born in 1951 in Brisbane, the third child of a doctor and a housewife, Morrison felt both unrestrained and abandoned. “I had a very, very privileged upbringing. My dad was a very eccentric man, who became increasingly conservative as I grew more radical. He was an allergist. My mother was unbelievably conservative. She was a woman of her time. She had been a nurse. Of course. She looked after the family and she would have wished that I marry. I must have just been such a disappointment to her.”

She recalls a happy enough childhood, left to her own devices, playing in her Coke-bottle glasses in a world of her own. As a teenager she became intensely interested in the world around her. Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen and a corrupt police force took over the state in 1968 and violently crushed any progressive cultural or political movement. The sharp end of Queensland politics was the open war on Black people. Indigenous people were still subject to “the Act” (*Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*), which meant that many were incarcerated on reserves without access to their own money and had to ask permission to travel or to marry.

After completing a degree in social work, Morrison worked for a time with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service. It was here she met and became involved with Denis Walker, son of the poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal and leader of the Australian chapter of the Black Panther party.



Indigenous leader Denis Walker: so angry about the injustice to Indigenous people he couldn't see through that wall... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

“He was an extraordinarily intelligent, brilliant man who was so angry about the injustice to Indigenous people he couldn’t see through that wall,” says Morrison. “He was totally fucked up by the hostility he received from white people. He could lash out at anyone around him.

“I was particularly working with families and especially with women, making sure they were getting the right benefits. A lot of the work was done in the field, driving up to remote towns to encourage people to use the service. There were pig patrols at 10 every night. We’d be around the pubs at nine to make sure people weren’t arrested. We’d walk them out and put them in cars and drive them home. The cops were always around. They’d stop and talk to you but because I was white, I was treated differently.

“I’d be doing home visits going from one house to another. I was very fond of the old Indigenous women. The women wanted their rights to be looked at. You know, feminist issues. But the men argued and would get quite aggressive about it – that the revolution had to happen first, then women’s rights would be looked at. That was a big point of contention.

“A higher standard was expected of you because you’re a woman. It was just sad, and I often felt like, because you were the ‘other’, if something went wrong, you were more likely to be blamed. You’re just less likely to be believed by men.”

“The work was just exhausting because the problems were so complex and you just couldn’t solve them. There was a home for Indigenous kids on the way to the Gold Coast. I’d be taking out mothers to see their kids in that institution and attempting to get kids back.”

At the time, Morrison shared a house with actors Geoffrey Rush and Bille Brown. Brisbane was a hive of subcultural activity just below the police radar, especially guerilla theatre and experimental music. The work life, the activism and the artistic ambition collided for some months. Once she took half a dozen kids home to avoid them being taken by child welfare.



Actors Bille Brown (left) and Geoffrey Rush, appearing in a production of Mozart’s “The Marriage of Figaro” in 1980... PHOTO COURTESY QPAC MUSEUM

“I wasn’t fulfilling the role of a professional social worker by that stage,” she says. “I was far too involved. I’d become a participant – no longer on the outside. I thought, ‘I’ve got to move into the world of art’. For me, that seemed to be the only salvation.”

Morrison joined an all-female band, Shrew, and then later a more punk-style outfit named Zero. Around this time, about 1979, she met and fell in love with Robert Forster, whom she brought to Zero rehearsals. Later they spent hours playing music together. She had found her salvation. Forster and his partner, Grant McLennan, invited Morrison to join The Go-Betweens.



Morrison on drums, at a time when she was with The Go-Betweens... PHOTO COURTESY LINDY MORRISON

I first met Morrison in the dingy underground bar at the Rock Garden in Sydney sometime in 1980. She and Forster were touting the recent single “I Need Two Heads” and their forthcoming live dates. They were a glamorous pair. Tall. Rakish in the literal sense.

They were then overnight legends in the inner-city music scene, based on an independent single and a smidgen of interest from boutique international record companies. The couple were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, keen to shake off the chains of Oz rock and embrace the post-punk zeitgeist. The Gang of Four were mentioned more than once. The possibilities were endless. The wildcard, however, was the drummer.

Peter Milton Walsh, a sometime Go-Between and singer/songwriter for The Apartments, recalls her in an essay: “Lindy Morrison. Her great, upending, tumultuous, machine-gun laugh. SHE SPOKE, IF NOT LIVED, EXCLUSIVELY IN CAPSLOCK, a Klieg light in a roomful of 40 watt bulbs. Describing her quickly exhausted all possible weather metaphors. Gales of laughter, gusts of enthusiasm, a

storm of personality that broke in every room. For years to come, in so many places and for so many people who adored The Go-Betweens, she would recast perceptions of the band and add to the love people felt for them.”



*Peter Milton Walsh: Lindy Morrison spoke, if not lived, exclusively in capslock ...
PHOTO CREDIT ANASTASIA KONSTANELOS*

Right from the start, Morrison’s role was controversial. There were very few women instrumentalists in the 1970s and ’80s and their roles were almost exclusively in support of the man at the front – either as backing vocalists or on the bass. The drums were to provide a groove over which the poetic champions could compose. That’s not how Morrison saw it. Her beats were placed to embellish the words, to



The Go-Betweens, L-R, Grant McLennan, Robert Forster, Amanda Brown, Lindy Morrison, John Willsted... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

highlight them. They had watches to keep time, but Morrison had a higher purpose. She wasn't demure either.

"People never say it to my face, but I hear about things second-hand," Morrison says. "I've had the worst stuff said. You know, someone even said it to a teacher at a TAFE College – that the drums to *Cattle and Cane* were a machine. If that were a fucking machine, it sped up. My Wikipedia entry was attacked in a really vicious way. You know, 'all her tracks are drum machine supported'. It was just so much bullshit. You can tell when I'm playing, it's just so specific to me. Unbelievable."

In 1983, The Go-Betweens delivered on their early promise with the *Before Hollywood* LP and the single *Cattle and Cane*. Part of the power of that song is Morrison's unique time-keeping, but that's often overlooked on all their material. Rock'n'roll was a man's world and The Go-Betweens' audience had a large faction of unpublished rock critics at the back of the room nursing beers and grudges.

BEFORE HOLLYWOOD



THE GO-BETWEENS

"If you're aware of how people resent you, then you just decide to get on with it. I'm really comfortable with the fact that my playing is limited. I know exactly what I am capable of," says Morrison. "I also know that what I do is pretty and supports a song, and every now and then is unusual and idiosyncratic."

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For a decade The Go-Betweens struggled, touring the world, making records that always promised to be hits but never quite were. The band toured internationally as guests of REM, but the breakthrough never came. Robert Vickers joined in '83 and in '86 the line-up expanded again with Amanda Brown. In 1987, John Willstead

replaced Robert Vickers on bass. Willstedt, who had played with Morrison in Zero, was not a fan of The Go-Betweens or Morrison and, for a year, making and touring the *16 Lovers Lane* album, he undermined Morrison's contribution.

On a sweltering evening just before Christmas 1989, Forster and McLennan broke up the band. For Morrison, it was a visceral, gut-punching shock. The dream, however prickly at times, evaporated in minutes. It was so personal she couldn't maintain a friendship with Forster – she and McLennan never really got on. There were years of lawsuits and acrimony. Morrison was 38 and out of a job.

In many ways, the end of The Go-Betweens launched the most meaningful phase of Morrison's life. Morrison and Amanda Brown formed the musical combo Cleopatra Wong, named after an Asian kung fu heroine. A debut ELP, *Egg*, followed by the EP *Cleopatra's Lament*, failed to take off. By then both women were mothers.



Lindy Morrison & Amanda Brown: they formed the musical combo Cleopatra Wong... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Motherhood was the final test for the feminist in Morrison. Marriage was out of the question and romance had not always been good. "I don't think I'm loveable," she told me. There was an affair with John Needham, a music entrepreneur. Needham has a dour demeanour and a sense of humour as dry as the Nullarbor Plain.

"John's a lovely man, but he's a misanthrope. Everyone who knows him would say the same," says Morrison. "We made a conscious decision [to have a child together]. He said, 'No one will have me and no one will have you.' That's exactly what he said to me. And he was dead right. I was 40. I'd been on the road all the time. I'm not going to fall in love. No one was going to fall in love with me.

"The last thing I ever want to do is imprison a man. That is my whole problem. As soon as I feel that they feel imprisoned by me, then that's it, it's over. That's why I would never marry, because I always thought men and women were imprisoning each other.



Lindy, with daughter Lucinda Needham, and John Needham... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

“I was a shambolic mother. We had absolutely no money for many years. I was working all the time, so I was very dependent on John to provide care. I just had so many jobs, like, you know, two hours at Campbelltown, two hours at Blacktown, five hours at Gymea at TAFE, Bondi WAVE, every Sunday morning looking after the Junction Band. Then I’d get eight weeks at Mount Isa or eight weeks in South Australia or four weeks in Rockhampton directing shows. I just had to keep on plugging on.

“I didn’t wash the sheets regularly. We had a rule that everything in the fridge had to be finished before we did any more shopping. We would swim down the beach all the time, until she got to 13 and didn’t want to swim with me anymore.”

Morrison’s daughter, Lucinda Needham, recalls those days. “Mum never encouraged me to do extracurricular sports because her ideal Saturday morning was drinking coffee on the verandah. We spent every single weekend down at Gordons Bay. Mum loved swimming nude. I was always embarrassed by nude swimming.

“She didn’t quite understand the concept of discipline. I would say it was a very feminist household. When I was a very small girl, she would tell me that I can never wear high heels in case a man attacks me and I have to run. There were a few things that she was really strong about, like making sure that you were physically strong and fit and able to protect yourself. She was probably surprised when I started taking a liking to make-up and the colour pink. I don’t think she was really a big fan of that. The one time I remember she got really mad, she picked up my prized Barbie doll collection and put them in a bag and dumped them in the big red bin outside.”

When The Go-Betweens broke up in 1989, Morrison was incensed that she and Brown, as instrumentalists, had fewer rights or income streams than the songwriters. The Go-Betweens recorded for many labels in different territories with different contracts. Morrison took it upon herself to sort out the labyrinth of deals and get the

legacy into a shape where they could make some money and keep the catalogue alive. It involved quite some discomfort fighting record labels.

“I had to fly over [to London], and I was taken into a dark room. I was sweating and anxious. It was most uncomfortable. No one liked me,” says Morrison. “Everybody thought I was a troublemaker. Well, I was mad, but in the way people who are obsessed become mad. I probably acted like an arsehole at times. I certainly acted unprofessionally. I learned how to behave as time went on.

“I started getting on every fucking board I could. It was about getting to know the industry in every single way. Any conference, I’d be sure to be there, and I’d be asking questions. Whenever there was something to volunteer for, I’d do it. I thought, *I am gonna get to know this industry inside out, and then no one will refuse me a meeting and I’ll be able to do some of the things I wanna do.*”



L-R, Grant McLennan, Lindy Morrison, Michael Chugg: when Support Act needed a welfare officer, Chugg pushed for Morrison... PHOTO COURTESY LINDY MORRISON

In order to be taken seriously in a room full of music men, Morrison completed a master’s in legal studies, focusing on intellectual property law. Her fanatical obsession with tooth-and-nail reading of contracts really sharpened up the return to the musicians. As a consequence of her work on The Go-Betweens’ catalogue, she was elected as the artists’ delegate on the board of the Phonographic Performance Company of Australia, which is the collecting society that represents record labels.

In 1997, a group of music industry executives launched the charity Support Act to help workers in the music industry who were down on their luck. The initiative had lots of goodwill but little in the way of cash. It needed a welfare officer, and the promoter Michael Chugg pushed for Morrison.

“It wasn’t all flowers and fucking wine, that’s for sure,” Chugg says. “Lindy had to fight for a lot of the help that we gave different people. She was always banging [the board’s] heads on applications for things. Decisions were made sometimes to not

give certain people money. It was a hard thing to do. She was going out on the streets talking to people. And, you know, she would upset members of the board because she'd tell the truth. But it was needed. We couldn't have done it without Lindy Morrison in those early days. Trust me.”

Morrison remembers meeting a singer who had been successful in the 1960s but was severely incapacitated, unable to look after herself, living in desperate, unhygienic conditions. Morrison not only had to find new appliances and public housing but physically get the artist back on her feet. There were clients with hepatitis C who needed medical attention. There was someone who had lost all their teeth. Morrison arranged implants. “There was never money,” says Morrison. “I was doing bucket collections, driving home with buckets of coins.”

She spent two decades plugging away at Support Act, buttonholing people at functions, at gigs, spruiking the cause to anyone who would listen. She gradually raised awareness of the charity. When Covid-19 struck, the music industry was devastated. Support Act came into its own and received \$30 million in government largesse.



Alex the Astronaut (aka Alexandra Lynn): she looked up to Lindy Morrison...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

The blossoming of Support Act coincided with Morrison's desire to get back to her art. In 2020, she joined Alex the Astronaut (aka Alexandra Lynn) as drummer. It proved to be enlightening for both parties, despite a 44-year age difference.

“I looked up to her,” says Alex the Astronaut. “My manager knew her. Because I was just starting, I was looking for someone that would be able to help me learn the ropes. Lindy does everything her own way and I love that about her. She adds her own personality to the music. She is always trying to learn new things and try new things on stage. And she still does lessons with different kinds of drumming. I think it's amazing how much time she's dedicated to drumming over her life.”

There have been other gigs, some recording here and there and various special occasions. A casual band, The Girl With the Replaceable Head, invited Morrison to play on their most recent album and tour in Britain this year.

However, the main show has been the SnarskiCircusLindyBand. Rob Snarski is a singer-songwriter from Perth who came east in the late 1980s. He is perhaps best known for his place with Melbourne cult heroes The Blackeyed Susans. He was happily crooning one night when Morrison upbraided him for being so melancholy.



The SnarskiCircusLindyBand: it is encouraging Lindy Morrison to write lyrics...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

From this brief encounter was born a duo, which grew organically with the addition of some of the best musicians Melbourne has to offer – Shane O’Mara, Dan Kelly and Graham Lee. A mini-album, *Someone Said That Someone Said*, was released this year. Another album is planned for the autumn. Unlike other bands Morrison has been in, Snarski is encouraging the drummer to write lyrics.

Now in her 70s, she is finally starting to make an income playing music. As Alex the Astronaut says: “There’s always something amazing that happens when you’re around Lindy.”