

DAVID JONES: THE SPIRIT FLIES

by John Shand*

This article appeared in the magazine "Australasian Jazz & Blues", Volume 2, No. 1, 1995.

Perhaps it came about as a rebuttal for the endless drummer jokes that flow around in musical circles. Things like, "How many musicians in a four-piece band? Three and a drummer." Boom boom. Whatever the cause, drummers have often been more obsessed with technique than other musicians. Perhaps the world at large has tended to judge drummers more on their "thrill" value than their musical value. However, balanced against this is the fact that an aura of magic surrounds great drummers and percussionists.



David Jones: the sticks move in fluid, circular motions, striking glancing blows on cymbals and drums, drawing out the warmest resonances...

**John Shand's author credit in 2019 reads as follows: He has written about music and theatre since 1981 in more than 30 publications, including for Fairfax Media since 1993. He is also a playwright, author, poet, librettist, drummer and winner of the 2017 Walkley Arts Journalism Award.*

To see the likes of Nana Vasconcelos, Mehmet Ozan, Don Moye, Max Roach, Andy Newmark, or Akira Tana in action is to witness a wizard weaving spells. They generate a feeling of the impossible being achieved. And this in addition to all they are generating musically. The above list of names, can, of course, be expanded considerably, but not ad infinitum. These drumming necromancers are a breed apart. They are the drummer's drummers. David Jones is one of them.

A performance by Jones is as remarkable visually as aurally. He looks as natural, as right playing the drums as Miles Davis did playing his horn, or as Luciano Pavarotti does singing. The sticks move in fluid, circular motions, striking glancing blows on cymbals and drums, drawing out the warmest resonances. A grin permanently adorns his face: not the smirk of the inane, but rather the blissed-out immersion of the child making sandcastles.



Jones: I've always had that very strong attitude of theatre, of drama, of surprise, of comedy, of silliness, whatever... PHOTO COURTESY MANDY HALL MEDIA

His gift was apparent as a boy in Melbourne. He would play along with whatever came on the radio, in the days before rock had a virtual monopoly on the airwaves. By the age of fourteen, he was playing three gigs a week in a variety of contexts. Work in pit orchestras soon followed.

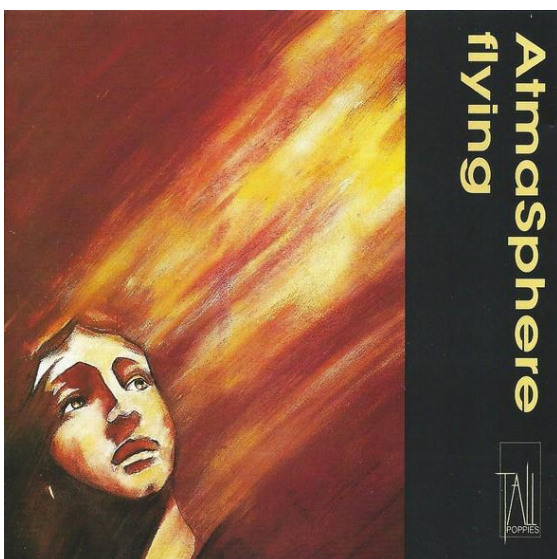


Jones on drums in 1970 on the front lawn of his home with sister Carolyn (left) and brother Kevin (right)...

"The first theatre show I was involved in was called *Hats*. It was actually one of the last vaudeville-type shows that I know of. It was just two people, with bass, drums and piano. It was wonderful for me at the time - I was 17 going on 18, I think. It was all the woodblocks, cowbells, splash cymbals, swanee whistles, all that sort of thing. And it really did give me such a beautiful grounding in reacting to what was happening on stage, supporting that, and also being part of that; rather than just a musician providing music, sometimes quite separately to what's happening.

"So I was very intimately and actively involved in the show, and every night was a little bit different. Maybe from that time, and even earlier - playing dances, school concerts, and lots of other things where it was very interactive with drums and dancers and singers - I've always had that very strong attitude of theatre, of drama, of surprise, of comedy, of silliness, whatever."

Which brings us to the bunnies. The last time I saw Jones's primary band, AtmaSphere, perform, his main drum solo of the evening became a performance for percussion trio when he produced two wind-up drum-playing rabbits in what was their world debut performance. These were set in motion to the general hilarity of the audience, and David set to work behind the kit, improvising over the top - in both senses - of the bunnies. At the conclusion of the piece, the bunnies bowed stiffly, and Jones launched himself upon fresh percussive adventures.



AtmaSphere's album for Tall Poppies, "Flying"...

His major solos - and David has now embarked upon a process of doing entire concerts by himself - are always a clever mixture of all the qualities he spoke of above, along with the most important one of all: musicality. This was swiftly appreciated by producers of albums and jingles, and Jones had begun a healthy studio career in relation to the latter as early as the age of 15. By his mid-20s he had taken things as far as they could go: constant recording and relentless touring, as well as a creative involvement with that famed facilitator of the Melbourne scene, Brian Brown, in a band with Bob Sedergreen and Jeremy Alsop.



Pyramid, with L-R, David Hirschfelder (keyboards), Bob Venier (trumpet), Jeremy Alsop (bass), David Jones (drums): this group, probably Australia's most acclaimed fusion band, was Jones's main focus for some seven years through to 1983... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ MAGAZINE

He then co-founded Pyramid, probably Australia's most acclaimed fusion band, which was to be his main focus for some seven years through to 1983. The traumatic break-up of Pyramid proved to be a catalyst for change on many levels in David's life. He moved to Sydney, and began an association with Don Burrows that continues sporadically to the present day, as well as taking up a position teaching jazz drumming at the NSW Conservatorium, which he maintained for a decade.

The most significant change, however, was his embracing of the meditation philosophy of Raja Yoga. "It was exactly what I was looking for," Jones recalls. "I could see the value in terms of music and personal living skills, and getting on in the business side of things, too. I was 26, and I'd got to a point where I'd played the circuit many times over in Australia: virtually every style; great creative groups, as well as doing all the commercial things."

David considered choices as extreme as stopping altogether, or moving to the USA to crack the big time. Raja Yoga allowed him to find a middle ground, which involved him cutting back his activity for a considerable period of time.



Jones embraced the meditation philosophy of Raja Yoga and he says, “the proof is in the pudding”...

"The proof is in the pudding. Even my health is so much better than ten years ago. I was starting to look like a 40-year-old when I was 26. I'm just having that love for myself to take proper rest and eat good foods. I wasn't really a smoker, but the drinking was a problem at different points. I'd been into the depths of the wild life, and the luxurious life, too - wasting money. I was making a lot of money at different points, doing the commercial thing as well as different projects, and had nothing to show for it. I really had to get a balance." Clearly, meditation has been an aid to David's focus and concentration when he is playing. But the benefits to his musicianship go deeper than this.

"I know there's a higher purpose to everything I do now, and that is to inspire and uplift. Now, if that doesn't happen, I don't feel responsible. But I do feel a duty to share the God-given gifts I have. And it's fun, anyway. I enjoy it. And I do feel it as being passed on in various ways, whether it's people coming up with the feedback that, ' You made me happy', or, ' I had a laugh at the drum solo'. Not that the drum solo is the whole feature of the night, but it does include humour and being silly. I'm really enjoying poking fun at myself, which I've always done, on different levels. But it was more egotistical in the past; more, ' Cop this!' rather than inviting people into an experience."

Currently, David conducts workshops and clinics world-wide, as well doing solo performances, occasional gigs with the awesome Playdiem - "thrash-jazz", as he calls it - and even more occasional work with Burrows. His main project is his beloved AtmaSphere, though it, too, performs all too rarely. The band's material - most of which Jones has a hand in writing - explores complex polyrhythms in odd time signatures, over which are laid relatively simple melodies.

It had initially been conceived as a meditation programme involving music. What eventually emerged was more a "concept band with elements of spirituality," he explains. "So it was much more subtle than wanting to beat people over the head with it. There are two members who are not doing Raja Yoga [Daryl Pratt, midi vibraphone, and Adam Armstrong, bass]. Carmen Warrington [vocussion] has been meditating for about the same period of time - ten years now. The other two members were chosen for not only their great playing, but as people: very receptive and open... and clean-living, to be quite direct," he laughs.



Two members of AtmaSphere not doing Raja Yoga, Daryl Pratt (left, midi vibraphone) & Adam Armstrong (bass)... PHOTO COURTESY SONIC FICTION



Two members of AtmaSphere doing Raja Yoga, Jones (left) and Carmen Warrington (vocussion)...

Pratt, who runs the percussion department at the NSW Conservatorium, is a master-musician, whose vibraphone can be used as the trigger for sampled sounds. Adam Armstrong is simply one of the most sensitive, accomplished and versatile bass players around. Warrington became involved as a result of the existing band being used to lay down backing tracks for one of her many meditation- commentary tapes.

"I'd already been admiring her work," says David, "because her voice is so clear and beautiful, and even kind of rhythmic." Her "vocussion" contributions comprise meditation-inducing spoken word, voice as percussion instrument, as well as more conventional singing. Together, they create that magical sense that "anything could happen". Their debut album on the Tall Poppies label, *Flying*, is an extraordinarily original and diverse achievement. It shows off Jones as something beyond being a virtuoso percussionist: a man with a unique musical vision, and an unforced way of melding it to the spirituality that lies at the core of his life. □

David's Equipment

Personalised Sabian cymbals: 14" hihats, 8" splash, 10" bell, 20" China, and (all hand-hammered), 15" crash, 18" crash/ride, 20" ride. Some heavier cymbals are used with Playdiem. David's favourite instrument is a 20" Wuhan splash gong. The drums are Premier, with toms (in order): 8", 12", 10" 16"; 22" x 18" bass; 7 1/2" and 5 1/2" snares; 6" roto-tom. Oz Beat sticks. Willow rubbish tin!