

DOUBLY GIFTED

The Annual Bell Jazz Lecture, 2004

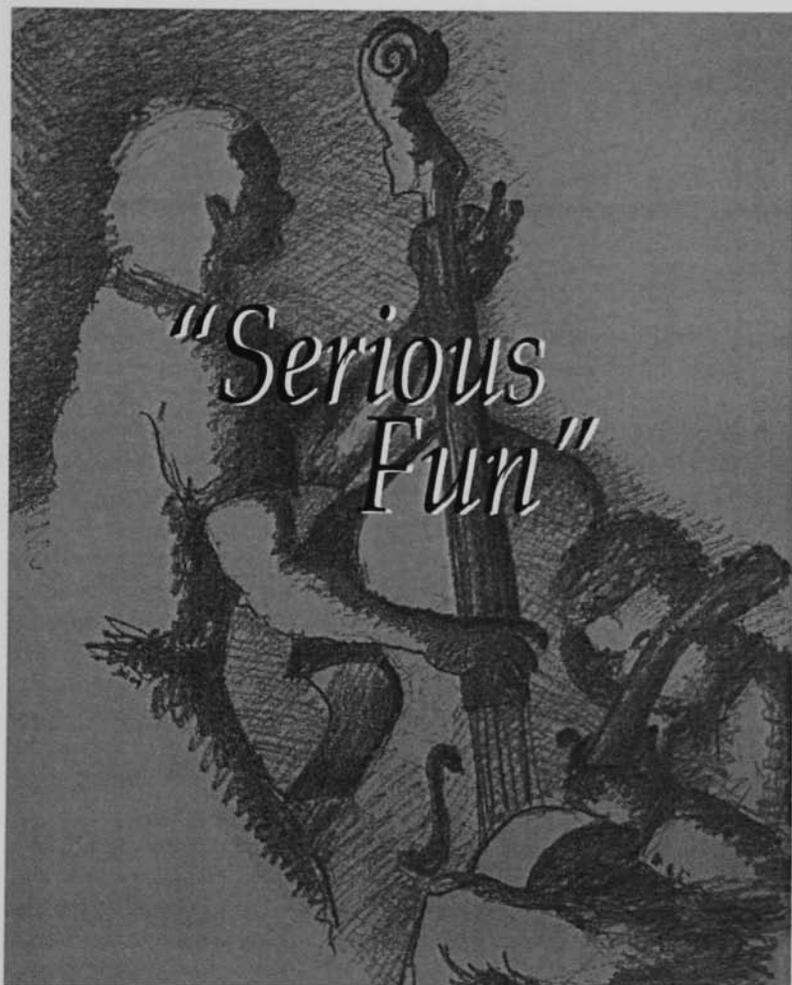


ILLUSTRATION JIRI KRIPAC

John Morrison

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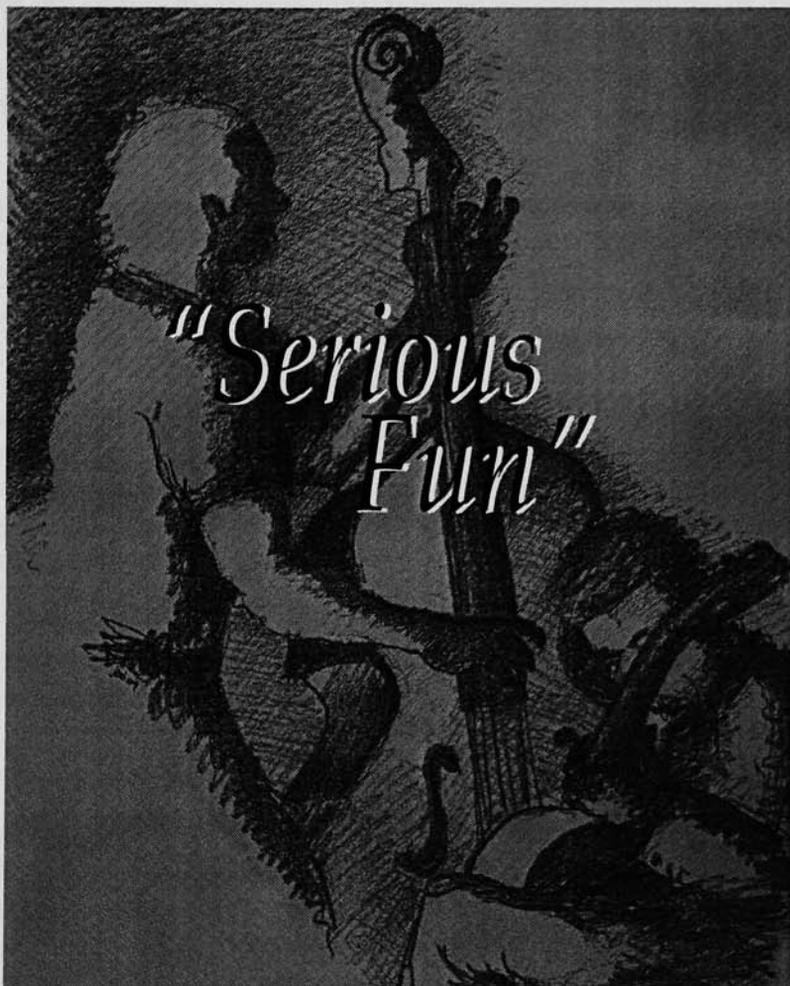


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John Morrison
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Introduction

This year, 2004, The Bell Lecture in jazz is to be delivered by John Morrison and he will be introduced by the 2003 lecturer, Len Barnard.

The Bell Lecture in Jazz was initiated by the late Harry Stein and its continuance pays tribute to both Harry Stein for his basic work in its establishment and also to the great Australian jazzman Graeme Bell who celebrates with us, his 90th birthday this year.

The lecture has now reached a twelfth year and we extend our thanks to the Staff of Waverley Library, to the Waverley Council and to the Friends of Waverley Library for their support over this long period thus making the Exhibition and Lecture possible.

John Morrison is one of our younger jazzmen and with his great sense of fun promises to deliver a very entertaining lecture. Since his school years when he formed a first band, he has shown a natural ability plus a willingness for hard work. Today he leads the Morrison Bros Big Bad Band, one of the most popular bands working.

His music reflects his personality - bright, cheerful, entertaining - always seriously funny and always seriously talented.

Kate Dunbar
Co-Convenor
Doubly Gifted Committee



John Morrison

John Morrison believes Jazz has a magic that makes people want to smile. "The Cat in the Hat" has delighted audiences in Australia and abroad with his humour and dedication to sounds that swing.

John is one of the most recognizable and sought after jazz drummers working in Australia today. Equally at home in a small group or big band setting, John's musical facility runs the spectrum from traditional jazz, to swing, to funk and commercial jazz rock. In 1998 John was awarded the best big band drummer in Australia.

John Morrison is the eldest of the Morrison family and has spent most of his musical life playing with his younger brother James Morrison. At age 8, John began playing many of the instruments in the school brass band and at age 10, had built his first drum set from kitchen pots and pans. In his formative years he played a variety of musical styles, however, jazz was the music that he would become best known for playing.

After two study trips to New York, John and brother James formed Australia's premier jazz big band "The Morrison Bros Big Bad Band". John also widened his exposure and experience playing with a variety of other jazz greats including James Moody, Scott Hamilton, Richie Cole, John and Jeff Clayton, Garry Dial, Jimmy Whitherspoon, Eartha Kitt, Don Burrows, George Golla, and Bob Barnard.

Further to his playing schedule, John is a musical director for Pan Pacific and heads highly successful high school music camps. He is known for his work in the recording studio both as player and producer and hosts his own "Jazz at Five" radio show on Sydney radio station FM 99.3

Flying has also been a big part of the Morrison family and John has gained many hours as a professional pilot. Over 5000 flying hours in more than 50 different aircraft means John has the dual role of pilot and drummer when the band travels.



Graeme Bell

The Doubly Gifted Committee and Waverley Library have named this lecture series on jazz, the Bell Jazz Lectures, in honour of Graeme Bell's outstanding contribution to jazz in Australia and abroad over the last fifty years. He is an outstanding pianist, excellent band leader and composer of note. Graeme is also a talented artist who has exhibited in the Doubly Gifted exhibitions of visual art works by jazz musicians, as well as contributing to other exhibitions.

'Serious Fun' John Morrison

A wise man once said to me that "real" fun could be described as getting paid for something you love doing. I told him "I have a problem. There were two things in my life that I get paid for that I love with a passion". His response was, "You call that a problem? I would call that SERIOUS FUN". The wise man was the late John Pearce from radio 2GB fame and his words have stayed with me for twenty-five years.

My interest in aviation goes back to early childhood dreams of flying to the moon, and during the Gemini and Apollo Missions, I travelled with the American astronauts every step of the way. James and I were keen to launch our own mission to the moon in 1969 believing that we could get there, but would need a lift to get back home.

We planned to meet the Apollo astronauts on the moon and come home with them. We had a plan. James was two and a half years younger than I and at the age of six, he had complete faith in his wise old brother's idea to build a rocket and began to help me gather all of the necessary materials for a trip of this magnitude.

A tea chest was found for the command module, large plastic bags and elastic bands for storing oxygen, heavy-duty tracksuit pants and gum-boots which we had fashioned together to make what must have looked like something out of an early science fiction movie.

The final and most critical element was the propulsion system, which was to blast me into orbit and beyond. We had emptied our piggy banks and convinced most of the other kids in our street to give us money to purchase nearly sixty large sky-rockets from the local store. These were on sale for the Queen's Birthday weekend in June and we bought the biggest ones we could get.

After securing the rockets to the outside of the tea chest, we began going through all the final preparations for the launch. I had also built a launch ramp for the rocket and in mid July 1969, only six days before Apollo Eleven's launch date, we stood back and admired our magnificent work.

At this point James noticed that the ramp was not pointing towards the moon and was concerned that I might miss the target. I explained to him that it would take me around four days to get to the moon and by the time I arrived, the moon would have travelled the necessary distance and I would land successfully. I'll never forget the look in his eyes at that point. He looked at me as though I was the cleverest person in the world. If only he knew what was about to happen.

Even as he secured me into the wooden tea chest and nailed it shut along with the plastic bags full of air (and one over my head of course) he never doubted that lighting nearly fifteen pounds of gunpowder underneath me was going to launch me into history.

Yes folks, I was about to become history.

Many of the kids who had contributed their pocket money were there to see it (and me) go up in smoke. As the countdown went down and the flames licked upward I began to feel a warm orange glow around the rocket which meant I was either approaching escape velocity and leaving the earth's atmosphere, or the whole machine was on fire and I was leaving earth in a more biblical sense.

The rocket shook violently and I could hear the approaching sound of my father's unusually high-pitched voice. At this point I realised that perhaps all was not going to plan. My father did a quick head count and instantly knew that if he couldn't see me standing around holding a box of matches, then I would certainly be inside the burning box in the middle of our backyard.

And so it came to pass that Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon and if he knew how close I was to beating him, perhaps his famous words would have been.....

"One small step for a man, one giant lesson for a nine year old boy."

These days if you aren't interested in flying or music, then dinner table conversation in the Morrison house isn't going to inspire you much. Eventually talk turns to things aeronautical and family members take turns with their arms outstretched, reliving some daring manoeuvre or escape from certain death. This is called "hanger flying" and we still entertain each other for hours with exaggerated stories of daring and courage.

There we were, at ten thousand feet, snow all around, all the engines have failed, nothing on the altimeter but the maker's name. Never get in the way of a good story!

Jazz and flying have some similarities and the term serious fun again seems to describe these similarities well. Flying is definitely fun. Being able to slip the surly bonds of earth and soar around with the eagles is not the way many people think of modern air travel but let me tell you being able to strap four hundred horsepower onto the front of a highly manoeuvrable single seat Russian built aerobatic aircraft and point it towards the heavens will put a smile on your dial that only a dental appointment will break!

Although not everybody will agree that flying is fun, most people will tell you that flying of any kind is serious. It can and often does kill people who forget this small point and I think some of the disciplines required to master flight are mirrored in the mastering of a musical instrument.

One day a young Prince, who loved to fly in HIS Air Force, was stepping out of an F-16 fighter jet and was asked by a journalist "Why do you spend so much time in your fighter jet when you could be back in the palace living like a King" His response was this. " This aeroplane doesn't know I am a Prince. It treats me the same as any other man or woman and will kill me just as quick. For the time I am in the air, I am an equal with the rest of mankind. It's a luxury. Flying helps me keep my feet on the ground!"

So it is with a musical instrument. It doesn't know or care who you are or how much money you have. It only knows the hands of hard work and experience. All the money in the world can't buy you the ability to play an instrument but if you decide to make it you're living, and you need to feed a family of four, then starvation might just kill you as quick as the aeroplane will.

I often use examples like this to educate and inspire young musicians who feel they want to make music their life. Here is another little idea that young musicians identify with.

Playing in a saxophone or trombone section is like flying in a formation team. The leader's job is to articulate every move and turn so that the wingmen (or supporting players) are able to follow as one. The common perception is that the leader's job is more difficult and important than the other players (or wingmen). The truth is the opposite. The focus and skill required to play "second" alto or trombone or trumpet in a big band, as part of the section, will demand a strength and maturity, which is often overlooked.

Trumpet player John Hoffman taught me this, years ago, when I was lucky enough as a young drummer to play occasionally in a big band with him. Although John was one of the finest lead trumpet players I have ever heard, he would be very quick to put his hand up to play the second trumpet part in the band especially if there was a younger player keen to play the lead part. He told me he loved the challenge of the chase in playing the supporting parts and it was more fun!

After we had played the first sixteen bars he could stop the band and tell you everything about the lead player. What bands he had in his record collection, who his favourite trumpet players were, what he had for breakfast! It was amazing.

Playing in a large jazz ensemble is an example of teamwork of the highest order and the challenge and chase of doing it well will mean there will always be big bands and although I love playing all types of Jazz, it is this aspect of big band playing that I find most appealing.

It has the "fun" and feel of great jazz and yet blends beautifully with the "Serious" business of disciplined ensemble playing. Yes folks – playing big band music is great fun - "Serious Fun".

Although there are many other interesting tips and tricks where flying and playing music cross paths, it's time to move on to other things. My introduction of these concepts was to give you an idea of what makes me tick, rather than a lesson on principals of flight.

A question often asked of musicians (other than "What's your real job?") is "What is your most memorable gig?" This has many answers because it depends on what made the gig memorable.

An unusual venue might make a gig memorable.

You may be strapped onto the back of a moving truck with three jugglers, a fire-eater and a midget, whilst playing endless choruses of the Saints Go Marching In. That might be considered something you won't forget, (although I am trying), or it may be a pure musical memory or experience. Most people think the best gigs would include the Opening Ceremony of the Olympics or playing for Presidents, Kings or Queens, but real musical memories are far more special.

A few years ago, at a Thredbo Jazz Festival, we set the rhythm section up around a nice log fire and settled in to a relaxed evening of jazz and Shiraz. Errol Buddle dropped by and sat in. He slowly and calmly adjusted his reed, looked around the room and gave everyone a big smile and then played a fifteen minute solo on Sweet Georgia Brown that put the fire out! Man, I mean, he was AMAZING.

When he finished his solo the band just stopped and got to their feet (as did everyone else in the room). Natalie and I looked at each other and we knew that although we have played thousands of gigs together, we might never have a moment like that again. And it was just one solo! Only fifteen minutes! But in that solo, everyone in the room was flying! Yep – he had us soaring with the eagles.

Music. It's a powerful thing and it really does move people. Strangely it is often misunderstood and the fact that we even try to understand it, intellectualise it, break it down into different styles and tastes means we miss the point I think.

I love watching children listen to jazz. They jump around with pure delight and look right into your eyes while you are playing. It's an instant connection. They don't listen with prejudice or favour. The music just lifts them up and they start jumping around. It's a primal urge if you like and I think we lose this as we grow older and feel we need to have things more "organised" in our mind. What a shame!.

In the early days of The Morrison Brothers Big Bad Band, we drove to Bathurst to do a gig in the bar area of Mitchell College. No one knew we were coming or knew who we were and the room was half full of twenty years olds just hanging out. James decided to get their attention and kicked off the night with a high G.

After everybody picked their ears up off the floor, the band charged into a wild version of "A Night in Tunisia". It was an impressive moment and I don't think too many of these kids had seen an eleven- piece Be-Bop outfit like this, but they just went nuts! It went primal. That's the only way to describe it.

The power of the rhythm grabbed them and for an hour (non-stop) they all circled around us and jumped around like maniacs. I mean, it was scary and we couldn't stop. We didn't want to. Yes indeed - that was a memorable gig!

As the music finally climaxed and the audience (and us) fell into a heap on the floor, one of them said to me "What kind of music was that" and I said "Does it matter?"

Let's take a trip back in time and find out something about who we are and where we come from. This is where the word "tradition" in jazz has its "roots".

Science tells us through DNA testing that modern man (Homo-sapiens) has a common ancestry that began on the east coast of Africa about 150,000 years ago. It doesn't matter if you are an Eskimo or a highlander in Papua New Guinea, there is more variation in genetic make-up inside a single colony of chimpanzees than exists in the entire human race.

Yes, we were once black and hairy and we have all come from that same small area on the African continent. It only took 6000 years for the skin colour to change in those that moved way from the equator. Makes you wonder why we are still trying to kill each other.

During man's incredible journey to move out of Africa and populate the rest of the planet, it is language, being able to communicate with each other, that has shaped much of what we are.

Music was man's first language.

Drumming, dancing and singing were our way of telling stories, way of celebration, way of worship – a way of life. Indeed there was no word for music amongst early Homo-sapiens. It just was.

At the end of a successful day of hunting and gathering, the tribe would sit around and celebrate with rhythms of joy, dancing and singing. They would "improvise" around the various rhythms taking turns one at a time. Sound familiar? Yes, the true tradition of the African word Jazz is not one hundred years old; it's tens of thousands of years old.

The Bembe was a rhythm that was played as a celebratory dance to make everyone feel good. It is the origin of the swing feel. Surprise surprise. I wonder if swing makes anyone here feel good.

It makes EVERYONE feel good. It's a primal thing!

There were also rhythms used for anaesthetic purposes, healing, meditation, and prayer.

Wait a minute - how did we ever end up with "Australian Idol"?
Do you think we might have got off the track a little?

Jazz is a music that ties humanity with its primal roots – its first language. A young child can't speak but when it hears jazz it looks you right in the eye and gets up and jumps around. You connect. You communicate.

To my way of thinking, this makes the tired old debate about whether jazz is an art form or not, ridiculous.

JAZZ IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST AN ART FORM TO ME.

Those who constantly push the idea that jazz is only jazz if it is cutting edge and searching for something new diminish the essence of what it really is.

The students at Bathurst University didn't know we were playing a 1950's be-bop tune. The two-year old child doesn't know or care if they are dancing around to Louis Armstrong or John Coltrane. It doesn't matter. It just is.

Jazz has an amazing diversity of styles and we should celebrate this diversity. Indeed, Jazz is as diverse as humanity itself and perhaps we should celebrate that diversity too.

We forget that a long time ago we were all black and hairy. We all have common ancestry and so does all music.

I take great pride in my big band, Swing City. I haven't mentioned it up to now because I feel it is difficult for you to understand this pride without first explaining why jazz moves ME.

When Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa let fly with "Sing Sing Sing" in Carnegie Hall and began the Swing Era, people in that audience got up out of their chairs and went nuts!

It was the primal thing!

No one cared if it was cutting-edge jazz or "new" music. They just got up and went nuts like kids!

This is what I love to do. I play swing because it moves people. I don't need to look for the lost chord or debate if I am only rehashing old arrangements from a past era. I don't care. Someone else can do it.

I just want people to get up and go nuts and a swing big band will do it every time! It's works because it's been happening for tens of thousands of years. It's our forgotten language.

Perhaps this thought may help.

Next time you go to the airport, pay an arm and a leg for parking; wait longer than the flight will take, to check in; drag your bags behind you during the process; get half undressed and then get blasted with radiation to get through security; pay the other arm and leg for a sandwich and a cup of coffee, while you wait for a plane that is going to be late, while a conveyer belt is busy crushing your luggage and then sending it to the wrong city – have a think about the passion of flight! Take a deep breath, stretch out your arms, and imagine being lifted up into the heavens and soaring with the eagles.

Don't ever bog down with the rest of mediocrity and get into debate about what is or what isn't jazz. Take a deep breath, stretch out your mind and feel it swing!

Let me take you on a flight.

After all, the Morrison family musical history about growing up and playing in Church is well documented through James' popularity and, remember, my sister Kathryn and I were sitting there alongside James in the very early years, so his story is very much ours too, but today I am going to tell you some things that have not been told and I think an occasion like this is the perfect time.

First some background. I learnt to fly at Bankstown airport when I was fifteen years old. I had my first solo flight in July 1976, one month after my sixteenth birthday and only seven short years after jumping in a wooden box and getting James to ignite my failed attempt at reaching the moon. Now that's scary.

At high school I decided to skip the curriculum that they had in mind for me and to study for my pilots licence so, on leaving high school, I had a commercial pilots licence and was ready to make a career in aviation. Mum and Dad could not afford the many thousands of dollars required for flying lessons but I had been playing club gigs each weekend since I was fourteen and although I couldn't drive a car yet, I was a "self funded teenager".

Not long after leaving school I was offered a job by a company called Aerial Agriculture and as the name suggests, it was a crop-dusting business. I was teamed up with a colourful character called Bob Long who was a gifted mechanic and my job was to fly him all over NSW in a little Cessna, with his toolbox and spare parts, and land in paddocks where the crop-dusters were working.

He could fix anything. Some flights would involve delivering a new gearbox for the loader truck, or a new engine. These are HEAVY items and the little Cessna would stagger into the air and off we would go out into the bush somewhere and land on a dirt road, or whatever. I was growing up real fast.

After I got more experienced the company asked me to start ferrying the big crop-dusting planes. Each six weeks a plane would need to be returned to Bankstown for maintenance and my boss thought it was more productive to have me take a freshly serviced aircraft out to where the Ag pilots were working and swap the aircraft over, so the pilots could continue without downtime.

So, here I was jumping in these enormous old bug smashers that had been out in the bush, working hard with pieces falling off them, taking off from paddocks and roads. I can't believe I got away with some of those flights but of course when you are nineteen, you are indestructible anyway.

I soon made friends with many of the Ag pilots who I had met in my travels and they used to call me "little Johnny" (Tom Baker knew this and often called me by this name too.) These men became my flying mentors in much the same way that people like Bobby Gebert, Len and Bob Barnard, George Golla, Allan Turnbull and many other equally interesting and talented characters mentored my music.

One such pilot was Clary McCarthy. He had a property in Bombala in Southern NSW and I was sent to him to learn the skills required to fly "single seat" aircraft. I'll say the word "single seat" again because you need to understand that the first time you get to feel how a particular single seat aircraft flies, you are on your own!!!

I flew the Cessna down to Clary's property and landed in his backyard, as you do, and after shutting down the aircraft, walked up to the back door and began knocking. On the third knock the door swung open and I found myself looking down what appeared to be some kind of long metal pipe. A man with cold eyes was at the other end of the pipe staring into my surprised face. Surprised because I realised I was looking straight into the barrel of a VERY large shotgun!

Man, I must have turned white because I felt the blood instantly drain from my head and I couldn't speak. A moment passed (which seemed like forever) and he calmly said to me "Do you know what fear is Little Johnny?" I gathered what saliva I could to pry my lips apart and managed just one word as he steadily held the muzzle right between my eyes. "Yes", I said.

He lowered the gun and said, "Good, I don't want to send a young cocky kid out to fly some of these single seat machines unless he knows how to shit himself properly". I said, "No problem. I think I've just done it".

Over the next three days I lived with him and he actually taught me to fly. Yes I had a commercial licence, but I didn't REALLY know how to fly. I had all the qualifications but, like a young musician coming out of the Con, I didn't really know how to play "Jazz". I had a licence to learn, I had the basic tools needed, but there is much more to real mastery than having a degree.

Clary baptised me in much the same way that getting onto the stage for the first time with Scott Hamilton or James Moody does. He had over 35,000 hours flying experience of which 8000 hours was spraying cotton at NIGHT!

Yes, because of the hot temperatures during the day in the cotton growing areas, (and you know air rises if it is heated), spraying dangerous chemicals must be done at a height of six feet at night!!!

Clary used to say to me, "Kid, if you are going to stuff this up you are only going to go twelve feet. The six that you started with and the six foot hole they are going to bury what's left of you in".

On the second day of my training a young loader driver arrived and Clary told me that this guy had been sent to him because he told the boss he hated flying. The company told him he only had to do one flight - ever - and he could keep his job. I wonder why they sent him to Clary. (Grin)

Clary told me he was going to cure this guy's fear of flying. "After this guy flies with me", he said, "he will either love flying or he will never fly again."

I found out later the guy decided to work in a mine in Broken Hill. He told me that while the aircraft was barrelling down the runway on his first and only flight - ever - Clary opened the door and started to climb out on the wing strut. This guy instinctively grabbed the stick as the fence started looming closer he hauled back. The airplane leapt into the air with Clary screaming over the roar of the engine "Don't crash or I will jump before you hit the ground". This guy actually managed to keep it in control long enough to be thoroughly baptised. (And I don't need to tell you what he was baptised in.)

After my time with Clary, I never wanted to fly in the airlines. "Boring boring boring" he used to say. "You want to be crop-duster kid. Where else are you going to have fun frightening the shit out of people and get paid for it?" I suppose I was hooked on REAL flying and like jazz if someone has to explain to you what it is, you are never going to understand it.

This prepared me for the many other flying jobs I drifted in and out of in my early twenties. I flew aerial mapping and survey for the CSIRO. Mineral exploration flights through the Simpson Desert for a South African diamond company. I flew big twin-engine night-freighters all over the country in the middle of the night and believe it or not, I also flew around - chickens!

I was contracted as a pilot to fly chicken hatchlings across to Perth from Quirindi in NSW. We would load 15,000 baby chicks, only six hours old, into a specially modified freighter and transport them non-stop across the entire country. The chicks were sensitive to air pressure so we had to fly at low level (4000 feet) for the entire 15 hours and I did many of these most memorable and interesting trips.

Two pilots were required because of the lengthy duty time involved and to pass the time away we used to play chess. Chess is a great game to play on long flights and MANY pilots play just to stay awake enough to glance at the autopilot do its thing. You do a type of tag team thing where whilst one pilot is flying the other is making a move. This is quite safe of course because at least you are awake and SOMEONE is flying the aeroplane.

Every 45 minutes we had to go back into the cargo area and inspect our little darlings and see how they were travelling. I would grab one or two, bring them up to the cockpit and we would fill in a data sheet on eye colour, well being, general condition etc etc.

One day I brought a chick up and placed him on the chessboard while I grabbed my pen and he started pecking around looking at all the chess pieces. My co-pilot laughed and said why don't we leave him here on the chessboard and he can be part of the game. I made a little hat for him and we called him "Wildman". We had invented "Chicken Chess". The chick was like a wild card in poker and as you played the game he would wander around and knock over some of your pieces. The rules were, if he knocks over a piece you, lose it until he walks over the same square again. If he takes a dump on a square, you are not able to use that square as part of the game. Only the horse can jump over it. We were mad!!!!!!

I still fly and although the music is perhaps the more public part of my life, I love them both with equal passion.

Natalie and I have a young family now and a new world has opened up that gives real meaning to every flight and every bar of music I have ever played. It's a great thing to place opportunity in front of your children so they may have experiences that they will treasure too.

Flying is much more than going from A to B and Jazz is much more than a style of music. They both have primal elements that lift our imagination.

If music is the first language of man, and Jazz is one of its first dialects, surely the great hope of jazz is to bring us together where words have failed.

By enjoying music in a primal way like a young child, you can BE that child.

Now doesn't THAT sound like fun?

For more information
The film (about Bell) will be presented by
Jim Field
Washington Jazz Orchestra
September 2002

For more information of further information
please contact the author
The author is Dr. Jim Field
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Don't forget.....

**The 13th Annual Bell Jazz Lecture
will be presented by**

Jim McLeod
Australian Jazz Broadcaster

September 2005

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