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TRUMPETING TRUTH: JAMES MORRISON GOES GOSPEL

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 DAVID ADAMS

“Inspirational” is the word jazz musician James Morrison chooses to use to describe Gospel music, the subject of his latest album.

“There’s a great energy to it and it’s uplifting and inspirational and I think we could use a bit more of that no matter who we are or where we are...” says the 42-year-old Sydney-sider.

“I can think of some examples of even musicians I have worked with that have been drawn in unsuspecting to playing some Gospel music when we’re doing some secular music - doing another sort of concert or project - and I’ll pull out one of these songs and they’ll end up playing it.

“And (I can’t count) the number of times we’ve had the comment that said ‘Wow, that’s just feels really different to play, that’s great, it’s really inspiring’. Even without having made a conscious decision, they’re being moved along by and I think it’s the same for the audience. Without even stating a belief or even agreeing with you, they just can’t resist, they just can’t deny the feeling that is there.”

It’s been a long time coming but Morrison has finally put together an album of Gospel music - *Gospel Collection* - in a project that was clearly a labour of love.

“Over the years I’ve recorded a track or two of gospel on all sorts of albums that I’ve done and each time I do, people say ‘Oh, I love that you should do a Gospel album’.” he explains.

“And of course I always say, ‘I will, I want to, I’ll get around to it’...and then you look back about five years later and it’s still on the list. But fortunately - with a bit of pushing from a couple of people - I’ve finally got this one done. I should have done it years ago because we had an absolute ball.”

Morrison says selecting songs for the album was easy - “I said ‘What do I feel like hearing on a Gospel collection?’” - and he included many of his own personal favorites, including two songs by Andre Crouch.

“I grew up listening to Andre Crouch...(I)t’s Gospel music that draws heavily on soul and on the blues. It’s right up my alley being a jazz musician. I’ve always loved listening to that sort of music.”

Morrison says that while he loves any kind of music (and in particular, jazz), Gospel, for him, has a special significance.

“You can do a great version of a heart-breaking love song then yes, you reach everyone with that feeling and you can reach them just as well as you can with a Gospel song but when you’ve reached them, the message you’re delivering is the heart-break love story. I guess that’s the difference here - when you reach them with the message (in Gospel music), it’s a little more important.”

Born in the town of Boorowa in western New South Wales in 1962, Morrison grew up in a Christian home as the son of a preacher (in fact his father is still a preacher, now at Wesley church in Pittswater). His family lived in several small country towns before finally settling in Sydney when he was about seven-years-old. It was then that he first discovered his love for jazz.



James Morrison playing the trumpet. PICTURES: Courtesy of James Morrison

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"I'd heard plenty of music up to then but it was all sitting on the organ stool next to mum..." he recalls. "The church we came to Sydney (Mona Vale Methodist), the minister there (Neil Gough) played the trombone and they had a Gospel band. This was all new to me, all of a sudden it wasn't just the organ, there was drums and bass. I was immediately hooked and wanted to be part of the whole thing."

Morrison started his first band - a traditional Dixieland jazz band - at about the age of nine.

"Each week was full of music," he says. "Church wasn't just a Sunday morning or Sunday evening thing. There were several bands and they had rehearsals through the week and choir rehearsals and the young people's group had a band. It was just a week of making music and it pretty much centred around the church."

Morrison describes his training as being "pretty much on the job" (although he did graduate from the NSW Conservatorium of Music with an associate diploma in jazz in 1980). Not bad when you consider that as well as the trumpet he can also play the trombone, euphonium, flugel horn, tube, saxophones and piano.

"That came from I guess, being in that environment too. They'd be putting together a number and they'd say 'We need someone to play the bass or we need someone to play some organ here or do that' and I'd be there. So I very quickly gathered whatever skills will necessary to do the job."

Morrison says his Christian walk didn't have any "epiphany" moments such as that of Paul on the Damascus road. Rather, he says, Christianity was for him a gradual awakening.

"It was part of life and yet it wasn't unquestioned. It wasn't like you don't question it because you are part of a Christian family. In fact, quite the opposite. There was great encouragement to question it all the time and to validate it all the time and perhaps because of that, it wasn't the case of getting to on great moment - there was a constant series of them."

Asked what God means to him, Morrison says his thoughts are probably best summed up in the song 'His Eye Is On The Sparrow' (which, along with the likes of 'Amazing Grace', 'Just A Closer Walk With Thee' and 'Down By The Riverside' one of the songs on his new album).

"Just that awareness - which is something that we seem to need very much as humans - that you're not alone and it isn't meaningfully. That you're not just here for 70 or 80 years and that's it, but that this is all part of something much bigger. That's got to be the best realisation."

Morrison was playing professionally in nightclubs by the age of 13 and his first big international break came shortly after he turned 16 when he debuted in the United States with a concert at the Monterey Jazz Festival. Twenty-five years of touring has followed.

These days Morrison is careful to balance his touring commitments with family life at home on Sydney's northern beaches where he lives with wife Judi and their three sons - Sam, 12, William, 9, and Harry, 7.

Where he would once go on tour for four months at a time, now he'll come home every week or so no matter where he is to spend some time with the family.

"Sometimes it gets quite ridiculous. A couple of weeks ago I flew in early in the morning - at about nine and then went out on the boat for a few hours with the boys and then flew out overseas again at midday. So I had three hours at home but it was better than not coming home for a few hours."

Morrison says while he doesn't know many musicians who enjoy the lining up at airports to catch the next plane to where-ever, he does still love the feeling of playing in front of people. Despite having played with the who's who of today's jazz musicians - Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Charles, Ray Brown, B.B. King and Wynton Marsalis to name a few ("most of my record collection" is how he puts it) - Morrison says he still feels like it's just the beginning.

"I always feel like this is just the warm-up, wait till we get to the real stuff. And it's always been like that and then, sure enough, you do get the next stage, it keeps going to something bigger."

He says he is looking forward to watching some of today's younger jazz musicians reaching their potential and being part of that. To that end, he funds a jazz scholarship each year and is part of an organisation called Generation Jazz which holds a national stage band competition each year.

"We had 25, 60 piece bands all competing this year and to get that many young people - all high school kids, all together - making music is an amazing feeling. Just to sort of have contact with them all and to inspire them hopefully and watch the ones that are really obviously headed somewhere and to see them develop each year is very exciting."



GOSPEL COLLECTION: Morrison's first Gospel album includes renditions of 'Down By The Riverside', 'Amazing Grace' and 'Just A Closer Walk With Thee'.