

Jazz ... and all that faith

By BRUCE BEST

Australian jazz trumpeter James Morrison makes many journeys, mostly to reach all those places around the world where he performs as an international star. But one of them is a faith journey.

Often the journeys overlap. For example, he wrote one of the songs on his newly released CD, *Gospel Collection*, while waiting in an airport lounge. It's called "Jesus is the way".

"I was sitting waiting for a plane and flicking through a newspaper," he recalls. "With each headline there were all the usual problems – the same stuff as yesterday, just the details different.

"I thought, 'How do people go on reading this on their way to work, and have any hope?' And the answer came to me: 'Jesus is the way.' I thought, 'That's got to be written.' It was something I wanted to express."

It's now one of two songs by Mr Morrison of the 14 on his first album of 'gospel classics'. The CD includes "Down by the riverside", "Joyful, joyful", "Amazing grace", and "The old rugged cross".

"Over the years, I've recorded gospel tracks on many of my albums, if not most. People kept saying, 'When are you going to do an album of just gospel music?' And I said, 'I must, I must.' So I have," he says.

There's more to it than that, of course. James Morrison's story includes growing up in the church – his father is a minister in Sydney – together with some serious biblical studies ... and that faith journey.

It may look like a simple trek. After all, it produces lyrics such as "Jesus is the way, He will see you through the strife ... Jesus is the way, He gives eternal life" and, from his other song on the album, "There's a place that I will be / In God's heaven Christ Jesus waits for me."

In fact, some of the songs on the CD are a reminder of the old spirituals: slaves with no hope of justice in this life, singing of the prospect of finding glory in a life after death. Or they're testimony to the simple faith.

But travel as much and as widely as this man of music does, and you soon encounter "the influences of many other people's faith and realisations along the



Above: Australian jazz trumpeter James Morrison: on journeys of music and faith. At left is the cover of his CD, *Gospel Collection*.

way", as he puts it.

For example, he spent some time working as a soloist with Israel's national orchestra. "It was fascinating talking about what they [orchestra members] think of Jesus," he recalls.

Later, he spent time with a group of musicians in India, and that produced another "illuminating conversation" about Jesus.

"People on a faith journey, no matter where they started, have almost a similar story to tell," says Mr Morrison.

Have these encounters changed his own faith? "You have to be prepared to call things into

question," he says. People can be diligent about their faith, but not wanting to change can also be laziness: "You just keep thinking the same things."

That's not his style, and we might see the results of that in music some day.

He acknowledges that almost all "those songs [on *Gospel Collection*] are from my theology of growing up" (although he doesn't think "Down by the riverside" sounded quite like his jazz version when he sang it in Sunday school).

So, will there be a *Gospel Collection Volume 2*, and will it be

different from the simple faith of the old spirituals? Perhaps. "In future [with faith music], I'll be carrying on from where I left off," says Mr Morrison.

And it's been a faithful, but complex, journey for him since the days of "Blessed assurance" and "Jesus loves me".

One last note about "There's a place", the other song he wrote that's on the album: it came to him, words and music, while he was driving. Fortunately, his mobile phone has a 'record' function. He dictated the chords and words. It's another journey song.

