James Morrison's musical message

When James Morrison was seven years old, he decided he wanted to be a musician.

Not just any musician, either, but someone who would play in front of vast crowds in the company of the music industry's elite.

Over 30 years later, he is one of Australia's best known musicians and has performed in front of worldwide audiences, members of the royal family, US presidents and with many jazz legends. He was awarded Australian Performer of the Year in 1990 and the Order of Australia in 1997. He has also just released his first album exclusively dedicated to gospel music.

James began playing in a brass band when he was seven, after falling in love with jazz at a church he attended with his family in Sydney.

"The minister played the trombone and they had a gospel band and a jazz band and all sorts of things. It was there that I first heard it. I was hooked right away," he says.

"It was the way it made me feel. Right away I said, 'This is for me!'."

By the time he was 17 he was touring around Australia and South East Asia with the Don Burrows Band, after meeting Don while attending the Conservatorium in Sydney. His future as a musician seemed certain, although he briefly considered taking on another profession.

"In my late teens I thought I might be a preacher. I did a lay preaching course. I could be found, on a Sunday night, in the pulpit," says James.

James' father was a preacher and a great inspiration to him. He grew up in the church, encouraged by his parents to question his faith. It was while seeking the answers that he became a Christian.

"There [wasn't] one of those moments or great epiphanies, like Paul on the Damascus Road, where you suddenly know the moment. It was a gradual awakening."

James seriously considered entering the ministry, but eventually realised that he "had more of a chance of effecting people with a trumpet in my hand".

Since then he has played with jazz greats such as Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, BB King and Ray Charles, and has released several albums. For years he had thought about releasing a gospel album, and often included one or two gospel tracks on his releases.

"People would respond to that and go, 'I love that track! You should do a gospel album, a whole album'. And I'd say, 'Yes, I must. I'm going to.' But there are always other things calling for attention and needing to be done," he says.

Finally, "with a bit of help and push from a few people", James has just released his first gospel album. *Gospel Collection* features classics such as *Joyful Joyful*, *Amazing Grace* and *Blessed Assurance*, as well as one or two songs he has written.

James invited friends such as Emma Pask and The Idea of North to contribute to the album, which was a great experience, he says.

"I've known the Idea of North for a number of years and 'guested' on a couple of their albums. We've done a couple of gigs together. It was great that they said they'd do this because what I was asking them to do, in a way, was something outside what they normally do. Apart from the fact that they're essentially backing singers here, but [they] also overdub themselves, so that what you're hearing on the album sometimes is three or even four times the Idea of North. They're making a gospel choir. And they had a lot of fun doing it, which is great!

"Emma Pask works with me most of the time. We've toured together and she works in my regular band. But this was an opportunity for her to sing some gospel, which she loves to do. People who've got her other jazz albums will hear this - it's recognisably Emma - but in another way it sounds quite different. And I'm thrilled. I think people are really going to love it."

Deciding what to put on the album and what to leave out was a difficult process, says James.

"We approached it in the way you approach choosing material for any album, which is a bit scientifically. How many songs? How long are they and what type of tempos? All that sort of stuff. That was all a bit unsatisfying.

"We came up with a list of tunes, but it wasn't necessarily inspiring, and then finally I said, 'No, forget all that. I don't care how many there are or what tempo they are, I'm just going to grab the songs that mean something to me and that I think are a gospel collection for me.' And that was fine.

"It was what each song was about that matters, instead of the musical sound being the deciding factor."

While the songs on *Gospel Collection* present a direct message about faith in God, James is aware that all his music is capable of presenting the same message more subtly.

"I travel all around the world all the time playing music to people and uplifting them. But at the same time, doing it in such a way that hopefully shows them [life] doesn't have to be done the way it's often done. There's another way to live."

by Lynne Stringer