

JAMES MORRISON INTERVIEW

James Morrison is undoubtedly one of Australia's best known musicians.

Besides the trumpet, this multi-instrumentalist plays trombone, euphonium, flugel horn, tuba, saxophones, and piano.

He has played with many of the legends of jazz - Dizzy Gillespie, Cab Calloway, Woody Shaw, Red Rodney, George Benson, Ray Charles, B.B. King, Ray Brown and Wynton Marsalis to name a few.

But Morrison says that his introduction to the genre was through what he calls 'gospel jazz'.

"I first heard jazz music performed by a minister playing the trombone in a church. That was Neil Gough in Sydney when I was seven years old," Morrison says.

Now more than 30 years later James presents his first album of gospel classics - *Gospel Collection* - masterful renditions of *Down by the Riverside*, *Joyful Joyful*, *Amazing Grace*, *Blessed Assurance*, *The Old Rugged Cross*, *My Tribute* and two new songs including *There A Place*.

Morrison is ably supported by stellar vocals from Emma Pask, The Idea of North, and Neilson Gough, plus a choir on several tracks.

In this exclusive interview with James, Wes Jay asks him about his faith and the background to the *Gospel Collection*.

WJ James, you have recorded a gospel collection. Why?

James I grew up in the church. Dad's a preacher and Mum played the organ in church. She still does. And my whole introduction to music was gospel music. That was the first music I heard, and the first music I played.

I first heard jazz music performed by a minister playing the trombone in a church at Mona Vale Methodist. That was Neil Gough in Sydney when I was seven years old.

I get inspired when I'm playing jazz in a jazz festival and I'm inspired when I'm playing gospel music.

You put the two together and it's a very powerful thing.

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.

WJ What was the catalyst that made the Gospel Collection happen?

James I think it was as simple as Alan Kennedy from Kennedy International coming up after a gig and saying "It's time. Make me a list of tunes now!"

That's how things happen with me. I sat down after the gig and got out a bit of paper.

Together we made a list of possible songs, and almost none of them are on the album!

But it was the act of starting that got it going.

Alan set a deadline and before I'd even finished the list or committed to a recording date, he started placing advertisements that the album was coming.

That makes it sound like I was a bit reluctant in some way to do it. Not at all. Every album I make happens this way because a record company demands it. But in this case there was no record company to demand a gospel album so a distributor did instead.

WJ *How did you approach choosing the songs?*

James When I'm choosing songs for a mainstream album, it's not nearly so important what the songs are. It's important that I like the sound of them; and that musically they fit together on an album. But if one song happens to be a love song and one song happens to be about something else – well it doesn't really matter.

But here what the songs are about is the whole purpose.

It switches the emphasis. Instead of the musical sound being the deciding factor, what the songs are about is the deciding factor.

You've got a song with a message like *Amazing Grace*, and you've got another like *His Eye Is On The Sparrow*. It's what they had to say that was important.

WJ *Many performers choose songs to particularly demonstrate different aspects of their voice or instrument. Did you consider any of those musical aspects for this recording?*

James When I'm doing a jazz album, yes! I look at whether that's a good song for me to play trumpet, or that's a good song for me to play piano or trombone.

Here, that was an afterthought.

The song had to say the right thing. It had to have the right groove, the right feel for the song musically, and the right arrangement.

And finally after we'd recorded the choir or the vocal I'd say what instrument will I play on this?

And being a multi-instrumentalist, I'm playing as many as eight different things at once with the magic of over dubbing. So it wasn't like, this will be a great trumpet song. It had to be the right song first.

So for instance when we did *Amazing Grace* – after we recorded it there was a space in there for a 'James solo', so it said on the recording sheet.

So everyone asked, what instrument are you going to play on it? I had

a listen through and then said I think I'll play trumpet.

I'd already played organ on it, two trombones, a couple of saxes and something else in the ensemble parts. It was just deciding which to play the solo.

WJ *Were there other songs that had a similar process?*

James Yes. *There's a Place* is one of my new ones. It was very important to have it sung the right way and to have Neilson Gough because of his voice, have the choir with him, and get just the right sound on the keyboards. I was very particular about it.

When it was all finished and someone said, "But you're not on it".

I said, "I wrote it, I directed it and I arranged it, so it can still go on my album". Then I said "perhaps I should play something on it". So we put a trombone solo in at the end.

WJ There's almost a sense here that virtuosity is less important to you than what it is the songs are saying.

And in once sense, with *The Idea Of North*, Emma Pask and Neil Gough on there, that you're subservient on your own album.

James Yes. I acted primarily on this album as artistic director choosing songs and arranging them, and as producer in the studio doing more takes because I knew how I wanted it to sound. Often with a jazz album that's not how I'll be at all. You collect a lot of great musicians and you let them have their voice too. That's what jazz is all about.

Emma Pask is just wonderful here. To people who haven't heard her sing like this they'll think it's very out of character because in her jazz albums she tends to be much more gentle in her singing. She sort of swings along, but it's not too in your face.

Here she's doing the real gospel singer and by gospel I don't mean Christian singer because Christian music can have a folk, a country, a pop, a rock, a jazz, classical, it can be Christian music. She's singing gospel here.

WJ *You mean gospel a la Mahalia Jackson.*

James Exactly. The real thing. I knew she could do this but she's never done it on a recording of hers before, or as a guest on my albums. She always sings a-la-Sarah Vaughan, but I knew she could sing like this and that's how I told her I wanted her to sing on this album. The songs demand it and away she went.

But people say, who's that?

When I say 'Emma', they say 'Emma Pask?' And these are people who've got her albums and know her. So it's great to see another side of her.

WJ *The message that you present on the album is pretty obvious on the songs. But how do you convey the faith element in an instrumental?*

James The instrumentals on this album are few.

 When we play a tune like *Down By the Riverside*, you know the lyrics. 'Gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside'. And 'we're gonna study war no more' and we're going to be happy. The reason why is understood, and it's because of this faith. It's not a complicated message. The song is a celebration. It has a very simple straight ahead message.

WJ *Some people who have deep faith might wonder whether you're making a political statement on war, particularly the war in Iraq, by including this tune.*

James Probably not in that one, although it would be a good idea (laughs).

 But in a song like *Jesus is the Way*, the verse asks the question - how do we go on with all the hate and pain when all the bad news just keeps coming. I think one of the lines says like never ending rain.

 That's how it feels to me, because you turn on the news and it's not 'will there be any bad news?' or 'will anything dreadful have happened on the other side of the world?' today. It's not if, it's which particular thing. We'll find out now how many are killed today, not *if* anyone was.

 So after a while sitting in the part of the world we do and leading the lives we lead, it does have a bit of remoteness to it, but it can start to become like 'rain'.

 After 10 days of grey days and rain, it becomes a kind of weight on you. It's not something you specifically get up and focus on, but there is the absence of sun, a bright day. It starts to make people feel a bit hopeless.

 So I put that in the song and asked the question, how do we go on? How do we get over this? How do we have hope? And then of course the chorus, and the name of the song, *Jesus is the way*, is the answer.

 So it's a commentary, though not specifically on Iraq. And if it's not Iraq, it's Rwanda or Sudan. No matter where you go, there always seems to be something and no one seems to find a solution.

 So I say in the liner notes, if you weren't sure what the answer is before this, listen to the song. You'll know afterwards.

WJ *Do you give a lot of thought to world issues or is that something which you try to compartmentalise from your everyday musical life?*

James I think there's a 'yes' to both of those.

 I do have a lot of thoughts about it and yes, I do segment it away from my musical life unless there is something to say that's worthwhile. And that song, *Jesus is the Way*, is a worthwhile thing to sing about.

 If I'm asked to comment on world issues, that's what I think is a reasonable comment from someone like me.

 I don't think it's a great idea when celebrities who are celebrities

because they play a trumpet well or they sing or act in a soap opera or they're movie stars are asked what they think about something like a war.

The trouble is people take so much more notice of what they say because they're a movie star or a great celebrity or singer or whatever.

Being a great singer or being talented at playing a trumpet doesn't endow you with any more clues or authority as to what is going on in a situation like the Middle East than anybody else.

So, I think it's misleading to comment publicly, because people start to think, I'd better take notice of that because it's so-and-so speaking.

I think someone with a lot of knowledge about that area and someone with a lot more wisdom than most entertainers, including myself, would be someone we should be listening to.

So I steer clear of making specific comments about that because I don't want people to listen to me with that sort of depth that they might because I can play the trumpet. It's ludicrous. People do. They listen to anyone who is well known more than someone who's not.

Unless it's a message I'm absolutely certain is 'on the money', no.

And besides, *Jesus is the Way*, so I'll back that one.

I don't think I can be wrong there because it's not my message. I got it from somebody else, if you know what I mean.

So I'm happy with that one.

WJ *You certainly have opportunities to go into many countries that have conflicting ideas.*

James Yes, and I can be asked what do I think about this or that, and if they're looking for a political answer, not an answer of faith, then I tend to say to them, 'I'm not a politician, I don't know enough about it'. If all I know about an issue is what I see on CCN, I consider myself extremely uninformed, as I think we all should.

WJ *We all hope Gospel Collection will be a commercial success for you, but what milestones of success are you hoping for in this CD?*

James Success is the effect it has on each individual.

If only one person ever heard this album how would we measure that success?

If after hearing it, did they get the message, did they get the inspiration, did they feel what I felt and all the other musicians felt when we played and sang it? And if they did, then that's a success.

So far, the people who've heard it and spoken to me, look and sound inspired. So we're doing well.