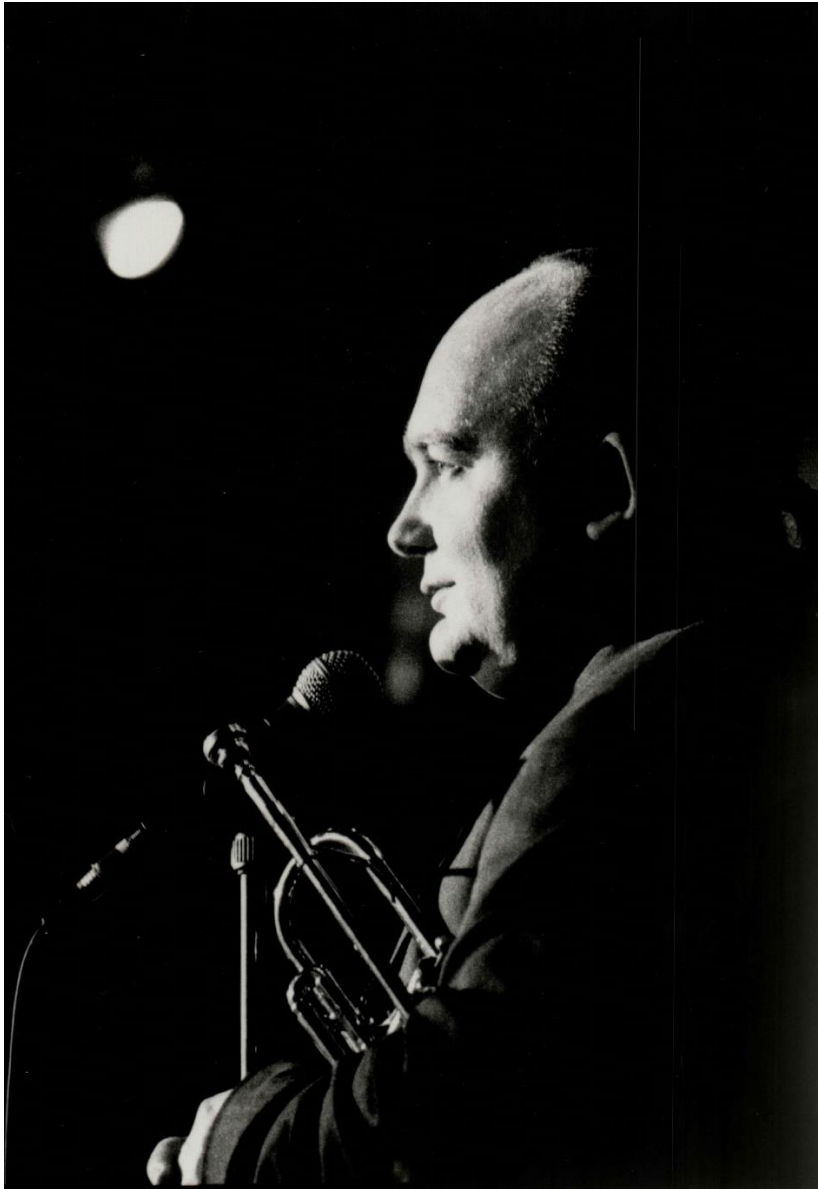


JAMES MORRISON'S INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS

by Eric Myers*

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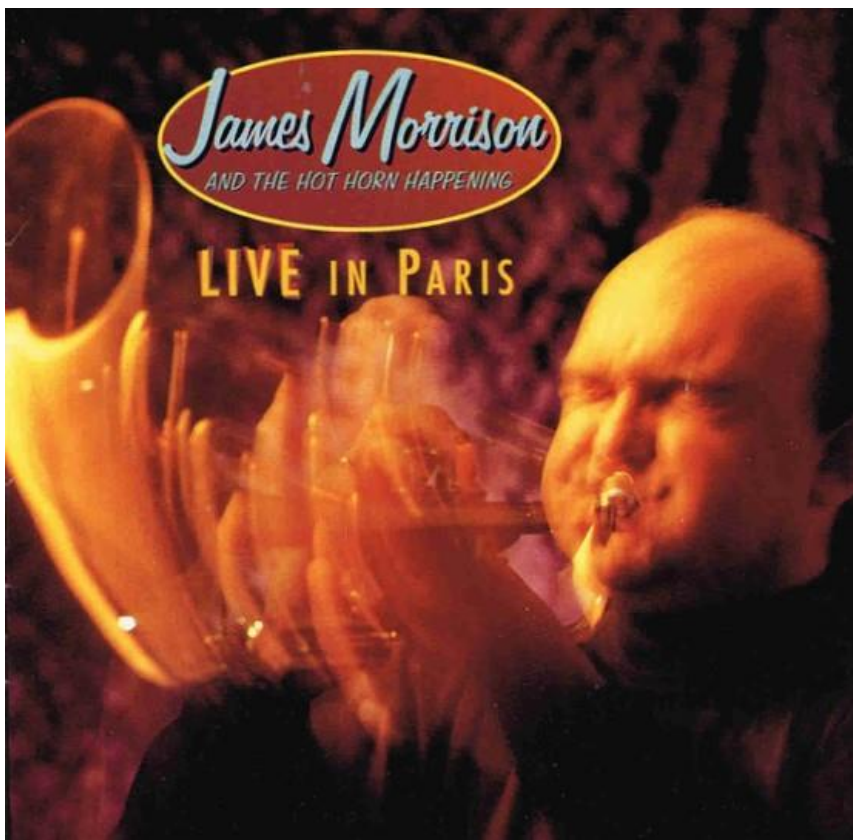


James Morrison, pictured in 1995: he is to perform Lalo Schifrin's "Rhapsody For Bix" on Bix Beiderbecke's own cornet... PHOTO CREDIT FRANCE KEYSER

**When this was written in 1996, Eric Myers was editor of the bi-monthly newsletter "JazzChord", and NSW and National Jazz Co-ordinator, funded by the Australia Council, the Commonwealth Government's arts funding and advisory body, and the NSW Government's Ministry fore the Arts.*

James Morrison is more than just a major jazz artist in this country. He's now a national celebrity, who is as well-known to the general public as many commercial television stars. Suspicious of such conspicuous success, some critics find it difficult to regard him as a serious musician.

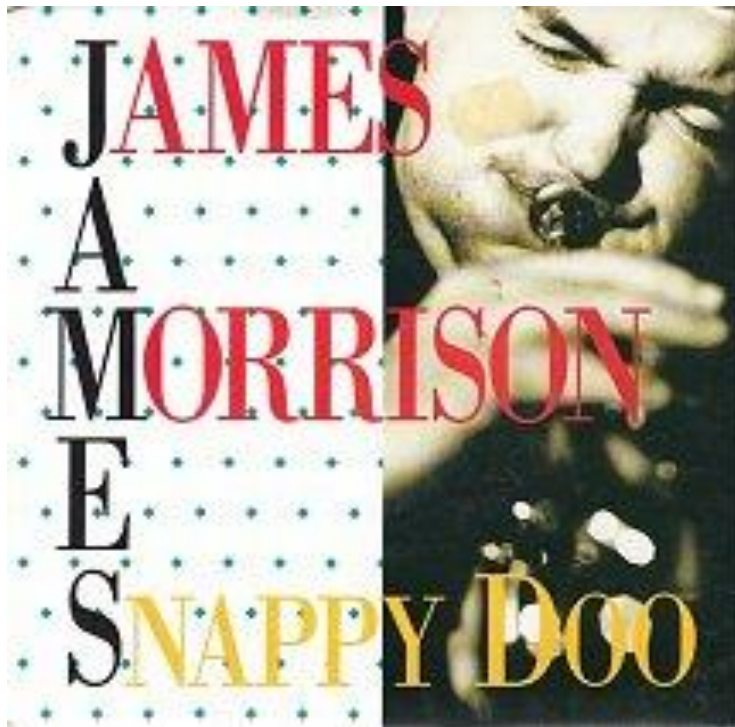
As a result, James's fans in the jazz world have often defended him from charges that he is merely an entertainer. In a recent edition of *24 Hours* Jim McLeod, reviewing the CD *Live In Paris* by James's international septet The Hot Horn Happening, observed: "In a sense it might be regarded as James Morrison's first real jazz album, completely away from attempts to entertain above all, and to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. That's not to say that this isn't entertaining, but it should be free of accusations of 'circus tricks'."



Overseas, however, there is accumulating evidence that things are a little different. In Europe, where James Morrison has been performing regularly on the festival and jazz club circuit for about eight years, he has had extraordinary success as a serious musician; up to now his international accomplishments have been a well-kept secret.

James's international manager Burkhard Hopper, in Germany, says: "Contrary to some comments I hear about James's reputation in Australia he is recognised as a very serious musician over here, and stays in direct competition with the trumpet greats like Wynton Marsalis, Jon Faddis and Roy Hargrove... If money is any indication at all, he received fees in 1995 that were in the category of Wynton Marsalis, and he not only played but headlined some prestigious festivals last year."

Firstly, consider the success of his CDs. In 1993 *Snappy Doo*, a multi-instrumental tour de force on which James overdubbed the various big band parts himself on trumpet, trombone and the various saxophones, received the prestigious Vierteljahrespreis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik (the quarterly prize awarded by Germany's most distinguished music critics).



The more recent *Live In Paris* CD has had excellent reviews in the same sector, with the group being compared to the Art Blakey Jazz Messengers group at its prime, and with groups led by legendary giants such as Frank Wess and Frank Foster.

Secondly, the Hot Horn Happening group has given James Morrison increased stature as a live performer. Other than James (trumpet, flugelhorn) the septet features Jeff Clayton (US, alto sax); Rickey Woodard (US, tenor sax); Mark Nightingale (UK, trombone); Brian Kellock (UK, piano); Martin Wind (Germany, bass); and James's brother John Morrison (drums). This group performed first in early 1994, and has now done more than 70 concerts on the international circuit. In 1996 it tours Germany in May, before hitting the big festivals in the July/August summer peak period.

James believes that he has established himself internationally in the same way as other leading jazz artists have gained a foothold - by showing audiences that he has mastered the playing of standards, ie the classic repertoire of American jazz music. But, beyond a certain point, he says, sophisticated audiences overseas want to hear a musician presenting his own music - which is why The Hot Horn Happening is

playing original compositions, mostly by James himself, but also written by other talented com-posers in the group.

But thirdly, the real highlight of James Morrison's 1996 may well be the concert on October 12, 1996 in Davenport, Ohio, when James will be part of the world premiere of the suite *Rhapsody For Bix*, now being written by the Argentinian composer Lalo Schifrin. James will perform the cornet part, as a tribute to the legendary cornetist Bix Beiderbecke. As readers of *JazzChord* well know, Bix was a superb musician but a tragic personality; he died in 1931 at the age of 28 as a result of pneumonia, caused by his alcoholism. In October James will perform Schifrin's work on the original cornet that belonged to Bix.

James's involvement with this project arises out of his now substantial association with Lalo Schifrin. He has been included on two Schifrin albums of jazz and symphonic music recorded in 1994 and 1995. Yet to be released in Australia, they were called *Jazz Meets The Symphony: The Firebird* and *More Jazz Meets The Symphony*. Featuring jazz soloists with symphony orchestra, the performers included, other than James, jazz greats such as Slide Hampton (trombone), Jon Faddis (trumpet), Paquito D'Rivera (alto saxophone), Ray Brown (bass) and Grady Tate (drums).



Already James has performed this music live in orchestral settings several times with Lalo Schifrin, but in 1996 there is a heavy schedule of performances planned for some of the world's great concert halls: Munich (May 5), Luzern (May 12), Salzburg (November 10), and Nuremberg (November 6) with the Munich Rundfunkorchester;

Tel Aviv (May 16 & 17), with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra; Glasgow (June 28) with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra; and London (November 8) with the London Philharmonic.

Lalo Schifrin is probably best known in the wider music industry now for his writing and arranging for the legendary *Three Tenors In Concert* projects, with Jose Carrero, Placido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti - first in Rome in 1991 and, in 1994, in Los Angeles. He is also well-known as a film composer, and has written a number of scores for the films of Clint Eastwood. But it may be less well-known that Lalo Schifrin's twin passions have always been symphonic music and jazz. In 1946 as a 14-year-old in Buenos Aires, he heard a 78rpm recording by Bix Beiderbecke, which turned him on to jazz and changed his life. Later, when studying in Paris, he played piano in local nightclubs with the trumpeter Chet Baker. When Baker's pianist died suddenly after a drug overdose, Baker offered Schifrin the piano chair for a European tour. Schifrin, wanting to complete his music degree, turned down the offer. But, in 1968, he was ripe for the picking when another American trumpeter, this time Dizzy Gillespie, invited him to the US as his pianist and arranger.



The 1977 album "Free Ride" featuring Dizzy Gillespie (left) and Lalo Schifrin (right)... PHOTO COURTESY YOUTUBE

The Bix Beiderbecke project may well capture the imagination of jazz lovers the world over. Lalo Schifrin has wanted to write such a symphonic tribute to Bix Beiderbecke for most of his life. Commissioned by the Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Society and the Quad City Symphony Orchestra Association. *Rhapsody For Bix* is also part of a documentary film which is the brainchild of Schifrin, Clint Eastwood (a jazz buff who produced and directed the film on Charlie Parker called *Bird*), and the

Italian filmmaker Pupi Avati (who already has a film to his credit on Beiderbecke, called *Bix*).



*James Morrison: runs on the board in the competitive world of international jazz...
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On the face of it, it is extraordinary that James Morrison, a non-American, should be selected to play the part of Bix Beiderbecke, who came to be regarded by many as the greatest jazz trumpeter of the 1920s outside of Louis Armstrong. But this indicates how far jazz has been internationalised in today's world; jazz is no longer a specifically American art form. But, it is also food for thought for those within Australia who have tended to dismiss James Morrison as merely flashy and technical, with shaky jazz credentials. In view of James's runs on the board in the competitive world of international jazz, is it time for those critics to reconsider?

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Eric Myers, "James Morrison Quartet with the SSO", November, 2018, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/miscellaneous-postings-22>

Eric Myers, "Don Burrows Tribute Concert", The Australian, November 4, 2020 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/theaustralian-2015-18>

Eric Myers, review of the Kurt Elling/James Morrison album "Live in New York", The Australian, June 1, 2019, at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-22>

Nicholas Adams-Dziersba, "James Morrison: Come Fly With Me", The Australian, May 4, 2019 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-110>