

## The Odd Number

You've practised so long on the black and white keys that you forget the journey from brain to fingers to keys, and the music just flows from your brain and out of the keyboard.

You join your music to the other two musos, Brian and Fiona, entraining the beat, getting into their groove, and your bodies begin to move together. To signal the beginning of a phrase or the *rallentando* before the big finish you make eye contact and smile at each other.

You sing the second vocals behind Fiona's lead, and it feels like your larynx touches hers and both are soaked in sandalwood oil. Such is the warmth of your music-making that your brains generate oxytocin, the intimacy hormone. But there's sadness in our smiles, even some guilt in those glances.

And then there's the pulse of the punters, their approval, their moving in time as they dance. As the oxytocin increases, so do the dopamine and endorphins.

Our band, Bravo Foxtrot Tango, with Brian on sax and clarinet, Fiona doing the vocals and drums, and me on keyboard and piano – Bravo Foxtrot Tango, Brian Fiona Tony – are good at our job of stimulating these happiness hormones on the floor and on the stage.

There's an old rule for dance bands: you start the evening with fast numbers and end with a slow waltz to allow the dancers to linger over their leave-taking. Our band followed these conventions, usually starting with a Quickstep like 'Side by Side', then a Jive. Our version of Christina Aguilera's 'Candyman' with Fiona donning a navy captain's hat and adopting her husky voice, usually got the floor swinging. We would often end the night with a schmaltzy version of Nora Jones' 'Come Away With Me.'

In the first set we always included, without announcement, 'Indescribably Blue'. This was an odd number for us, the only Elvis cover we did. Technically it's not Elvis': the writer of the 1953 'Indescribably Blue' was Darrell Glenn (who made his name 'Cryin' in the Chapel'). It's one of those songs that sounds simple, but the 12/8 time-signature means I must keep perfect synchronicity with Fiona's funky drum beat, while Brian plays the melody on his sweet-toned old B & H clarinet.

You could see Brian's wedding ring on his fourth finger as it moved over the 'G' opening. It flashed in the stage lighting. You could see Fiona's matching ring too flashing above the cymbals on the upbeat. Of course, I had known Fiona long before she met Brian.

Fiona and I went back to my third year at Uni. Planning a car trip south for a few days after exams I asked around for someone to keep me company. Fiona, a blue-eyed brunette from my English Honours seminar, said she would like to come. I was a little diffident: I had expected a bloke to accept. In those days a man and a woman travelling together would likely be an item, but Fiona was then just an acquaintance.

Despite my diffidence, the trip went surprisingly well. We stayed in the ramshackle Youth Hostel on a farm near Denmark. The host, an eccentric Dutch woman, put us in a little room squeezed above a hay-shed. We had to climb a rickety ladder to get there, but the room was surprisingly spacious, and the bed was comfortable.

During the day, we explored the tingle forest and the beaches. The nights, we slept in the bed, each keeping to our own sides, first taking it in turns to turn our backs and change into our pyjamas.

We went to William Beach on an unusually warm day. We dipped in the cold Southern Ocean as it swelled in after breaking outside against the rocks which protect the little bay. Still in our bathers we hiked along the beach. We clambered over a large granite boulder. I took Fiona's hand to help her down. We landed in a secluded area out of the wind between the boulder and the sea, just virgin sand warmed in the blue sky.

Our hand-holding led to an exploration of each other's bodies. Fiona was, and still is, a stunning looking woman with warm silky skin. Our hands mirrored each other sliding over each other's legs and arms, and then I thrilled as she stroked my chest and I her small soft breasts. Soon our bathers slipped off and I was lying on top of Fiona, her hand helping me find my way into her. The cool breeze played its melody over our skin as our bodies warmed to each other. As we came to a *crescendo*, I was surprised to hear her gasp my name, 'Tony! Tony!' Afterwards, we lay side by side on the warm sand, happy to breathe a ragged 2/4 time in the same air from the cool sea breeze.

As we walked back to my car, hand in hand, Fiona asked me, her eyes sparkling, 'What was that? Love, or lust?'

I whispered, 'I feel exhilarated and beautiful. That was the first time I've had sex, and I am so glad it was with you. I wish I had discovered how delightful it is much earlier, so I feel a bit sad with what I have missed. I am overwhelmed by how powerful today's

experience is, and I know that of course it was partly lust, but it was mainly about the joy and music you brought to my body.'

Well, that's what I might have said if I had had the maturity to answer her question honestly.

Instead I laughed, 'Just lust,' but the memory of our enjoyment on the beach contradicted me. Fiona's blue eyes went dark, as if masked in sun-glasses. I knew I had lied.

That evening back in the loft room of the Youth Hostel, we talked of anything else except what had happened on the beach. Because it seemed a safe subject, I gave a long soliloquy on my love of music. I learned that night that Fiona had a drum kit and loved singing. We even talked about us starting a band, and, armoured in our pyjamas, we went to bed each on our own side.

Fiona recalled our plans five years later when she and Brian were starting out in marriage and in music and, searching for a keyboard player, she remembered me. It was the first time we had met in that time, but we quickly found that we were still in harmony. Brian accepted me on keyboard, happily, it seemed.

Bravo Foxtrot Tango soon had success, with regular gigs at the Jazz Club in Fremantle, at the Mundaring Tavern – we often met David Helfgott there with his random conversation and wise hints for piano players – and in that little box of a night-club, the Metronome, in Northbridge. It's so small you probably haven't heard of it. These three together paid us \$3000 a week, so with weddings and community festivals and other occasional gigs, we were making a living from music.

After a year we put down an album and toured WA, but we always came back to the Jazz Club, the Mundaring Tavern and the Metronome. We found an agent and started planning a tour playing the East Coast. We were making each other rich, if modestly so.

I was renting in Ascot and Brian and Fiona were buying a terrace house in trendy Shenton Park. Fiona encouraged me to visit, and I was there most days after our gigs, and on Sundays for dinner. Brian and I were good friends. Many times, he'd clap me jovially on the shoulder and push me out to my car. 'Time to go home,' he'd say, '*We've* got to get to bed!' We were all three 28 years old.

I had several girlfriends, but none of these relationships lasted. This may well have been because all this time I kept the memory of that afternoon on William Beach like a treasure box. I brought it down most weeks and polished it, like a piano piece that I played every few days to keep it in repertoire.

That piece of repertoire was hard to forget each time we play our odd number. Fiona and I absolutely needed eye contact at the first repeat and again at the end when she slowed the rhythm to sing those incredibly deep notes of 'Indescribably Blue'. We absolutely had to smile at each other – for the punters of course, as part of the show. Brian usually had his back to us. It's hard enough while facing them to keep eye contact with the crowd playing the clarinet.

Sometimes at the end of rehearsing 'Indescribably Blue' when we were all in eye contact, Brian had joked to me, 'I'd like my wife back now, if that's OK,' and I'd laugh dutifully.

That last night in the Metronome, Fiona changed the final lyrics to 'Indescribably *You*' and held that last note. It was written as one beat, a crotchet, but on this night, she pulled it out to three beats, then four, before her eyes signalled me to wrap up with the last chord, the upward flourish of an *arpeggio*. Brian turned around to see why the change of word and why the long note. What he saw was our eyes meeting, smiling, holding each other's regard.

The clarinet came down hard on my keyboard, doing some damage to his C key and dragging from my keyboard a screaming dissonant chord and rattling the machine viciously. Then Brian's fist smashed my cheek, drawing blood. It felt like my whole face was broken.

'You're out of the band, Tony. Fuck off now or I'll hit you again.'

Fiona had started shaking.

'And you too, bitch! Our marriage is over. And so is our little band.'

The punters were staring at us. Fiona's blue eyes brimmed with tears; they could not meet mine.

The odd number had come to a crashing close, and I've no idea where those last few notes had come from.