

Flying Carpet

Music To Our Ears

"No way I'd work at an airport," says my son Hannis with irritation, as we get into the car. "It'd be totally boring."

"Really?" says his brother, Austin. "I think it would be awesome, watching all those planes take off and land."

Austin and I have just deplaned at Flagstaff to attend Hannis's weekly jazz gig, and conversation has opened with summer jobs.

"All that noise," says Hannis. "I wouldn't be able to stand it."

"Louder than playing in bars?" I ask.

"That's different," he replies. "That's music and people - not like listening to airplane engines all day long. Besides, I hate the smell of gasoline."

Funny how people learn to appreciate even the mundane things associated with their passions. While the sweet rumble of a radial engine draws me outside to look, my neighbors likely grumble and grit their teeth. I doubt they appreciate the distinctive whines of jets and turboprops either, nor the drumming of helicopters.

"Hannis, as a musician, do you actually learn to like the smells of old cigarette smoke and stale alcohol?" I ask my son.

"It's part of the atmosphere," he dryly replies.

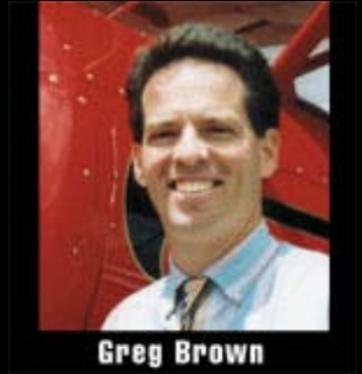
"How about you, Austin? Being a runner, do you enjoy breathing sweat in the cross-country team locker room?"

"Don't know if I'd use the word 'enjoy,'" he laughs. "But you do get used to it after awhile. Kinda goes with the sport, I guess."

My nostrils fill for a moment with the remembered aroma of warm oil on a dipstick, followed by the acrid smell when a few drops splash onto the hot engine. What pilot doesn't savor the fragrance of cockpit leather, warmed by the sun? Even aging plastic and mildewing seats have their charm in an old airplane; but like the scents of beloved pets, only people with longtime familiarity can appreciate them.

Soon we arrive at Macy's Coffeehouse, where colorful strains of Ellington, Coltrane, and Mingus sail from the instruments of young musicians. Tight and powerful melodies fly from this rough-and-tumble bunch, and I find myself intrigued by the way unkempt strings poking from Hannis's guitar contrast with his rich mastery of chords. Parallels come to mind in the stop-drilled cracks and sheet metal patches found on old airplanes - their crudeness renders flight all the more miraculous.

The music continues in a very different form when we cruise home later that night. Usually I plan my concert-going around the lunar calendar, the full moon being such a precious wingman over remote terrain at night. This evening, however, the moon has abandoned us, so we follow freeway lights instead. Taxiing out in darkness, we're soothed by friendly tunes from the creaking windshield and rattling control cables so familiar to small airplane pilots. The engine's warm rumble on takeoff sings of an uneventful flight home.



In an instant, we are severed from Earth. Stars mingle with lights from the ground, and together they jumble into space. No ups or downs here, just embers glimmering randomly in a void. We settle into cruise, and the abstract world outside gradually becomes familiar and comfortable.

Some pilots like to brighten their cockpit lights at night, to defend themselves from the nothingness outside. Others prefer to revel in the blackness. Either way, with the weather good and the engine humming baritone, night cruise is nirvana.

I turn down the instrument lights, adjusting them ever lower as our eyes acclimate to each level of darkness. Eventually, this dimming renders the cockpit below the level of starlight (except for some errant instrument that's always brighter than the rest), thereby directing our consciousness outside. We hurtle in our capsule through space and comprehend no reality beyond it. The cockpit is, after all, the head, eyes, and brain of an airplane. Just as one rarely thinks of feet or arms while walking, the cockpit is the total universe of consciousness at night. The wings, the engine, the tail, and even people riding in the back seat cease to exist.

Austin notes flashing lights on the horizon. It's another Earth-origin projectile, bound in the opposite direction a thousand feet below us. Red and green navigation lights soon materialize among the strobes, signifying other souls approaching at a combined speed of 300 miles per hour. They are kindred spirits, perhaps, so we flash our landing light...a friendly wave at 9,500 feet.

Like kids plunging our arms at a passing truck, craving a toot from the air horn, we wait. Maybe the occupants of that other craft haven't seen us. Perhaps they're busy setting radios or reading charts. Or maybe that cockpit is occupied by the other kind of pilot - the sort who doesn't hear the music or see the colors.

Two bright lights suddenly wink, one after the other. A most elementary communication, yet surpassing in richness all but the most intimate conversation. Other ships flash by as we approach home; they are bound for exotic places like Las Vegas, Cheyenne, and Newark. Some are distant worlds I've never visited, and therefore hardly less curiosity-inspiring than Mars or Saturn.

It's late when we land. The airport glows blue in starlight as we taxi in, and parked airplanes loom silhouetted around us like hulking animals deep in sleep. Exhausted, Austin and I pause for a moment while securing our airplane, savoring the warm-oil smells and percussive creaking of the hot engine. Plaintive scales from gyros winding down sound softly in the background.

Who says there's no music played by airplanes?

We pat the *Flying Carpet* on her spinner, breathe the night air, and turn silently to drive home.

By Greg Brown

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