



Commentary

Flying Carpet

Vulture's prey

"Good news, Dad! We put money down on a band bus. Now we're set for the Seattle tour!" It was my son, Hannis, whose jazz hip-hop band, Lobe, has been well received on tours through the West. Their climb to the top, however, has been hampered by geography. It's a long way to *anywhere* from Flagstaff, Arizona.

Until now, Lobe's touring had been accomplished by car caravan. Along the way, band members camped or bunked with friends. This new tour bus would transport musicians and equipment and provide sleeping quarters when necessary. But tour buses are costly — I wondered how the band could afford one.

"Congratulations!" I said with forced enthusiasm. "What sort of bus is it?"

"I don't know the details, Dad. Matt and Phil found it in California. The next few Lobe gigs should pay the balance, and then we'll pick it up."

"Sounds great, Hannis. How much is this bus, anyway?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"For the down payment?"

"No, for the whole bus."

I was astonished. It's tough to find a reliable used car for \$2,000, much less something to haul seven musicians plus equipment and hangers-on across the country. I couldn't imagine a happy ending to this story. But such is the optimism of youth.

"Can the band afford to operate such a vehicle?" I asked diplomatically.

"Sure, we'll convert the bus to bio-diesel and run it on filtered cooking oil. We're already collecting jugs of free grease from nearby restaurants." I'd seen this conversion on smaller vehicles — the exhaust smells like a deep fryer — but couldn't fathom the implications for a bus. I pictured stranded musicians begging quarts of cooking oil from roadside restaurants to fill their 80-gallon tank.

Such concerns, however, were quickly displaced by memories of my own youthful "bus" — a Corvair van purchased unbeknownst to my parents with a high-school buddy. We'd invested countless hours resuscitating the decrepit vehicle, only to hitchhike home penniless when the engine blew near Princeton, Illinois. What was then a painful loss, however, is now a treasured memory worth at least \$2,000. I resolved to squelch my skepticism while the bus deal played out. Weeks passed, and I forgot about it.

Then came a late-night phone call. **Who do we know in Barstow, California?** I wondered. It was Hannis. "Dad, I need some advice. I drove Matt and Phil out here to pick up the bus, and already it's broken down."

"Where is it?"

"On the shoulder of Interstate 40. Matt stalled the bus while shifting gears and can't start it again. What's more, the seller isn't answering his phone. Where should we get help at this time of night? And what would it cost?"

"Good question," I said. "What kind of bus is this, anyway?"

"It's a '61 Greyhound."

I gulped, then visited my truck-driver neighbor for advice. "Have they ever driven a big rig before?" asked Tom, chuckling. "The transmissions have no synchro." He detailed the requisite skills of double-clutching and clutchless shifting. "Wait until morning to request a service call," he said. "That'll run about 80 bucks. But whatever the kids do, tell 'em *not* to tow it, because that'll cost a fortune."

I shared Tom's counsel with my son and suggested he notify the state police of the bus's whereabouts. "Now if I can just convince the guys to spring for a hotel room," said Hannis, wondering if the proud new bus owners could afford it.

"Guess what," I informed my wife after hanging up. "The adventures of parenthood never end."

After no news for two nail-biting days, I called Hannis. To my relief he was back in Flagstaff. "Where's the bus?" I asked.

"It's back at the seller's. We had it towed."



I winced. "What did that cost?"

"Five hundred dollars," he said after a pause. "We charged it to Matt's credit card." Hannis felt the breakdown might have been caused by his friend's lack of bus-driving experience. "Matt couldn't shift above second gear," he said, "meaning our maximum speed on the Interstate was 12 mph. I thought we'd all get killed. Anyway, the seller wants \$100 a month to store the bus, so we need to retrieve it immediately. I work this week and can't drive eight hours each way to pick it up. Would you fly the guys to California if we find someone to drive it back?"

"Sure," I said. "But what if it breaks down again, and they have no car?"

"You could always circle the bus on its way back, like a vulture," he quipped. "Seriously, that's up to Matt and Phil. They're handling this."

Two days later I winged westward in the *Flying Carpet*, joined by Phil, Lobe's sax player, and Kelly, "a friend of a friend." Kelly claimed truck-driving experience and carried as credentials two small but impressively heavy toolboxes. Both young men had previously ridden in light airplanes — Phil with his dad, and Kelly as a summer fly-fishing guide on Alaska's Kenai Peninsula. Our cockpit filled with lively conversation about airplanes, the band bus, and Lobe's new album. By the time we crossed the Colorado River I felt for these guys. "Aren't you worried about getting stranded driving the bus home?" I asked. "I am now," said Kelly, upon learning from Phil that there'd been no pre-purchase inspection by a mechanic.

Leaving the desert sands of eastern California, we cleared high mountains near Palm Springs and plummeted for landing at Perris Valley Airport. I radioed ahead to coordinate arrival with the field's busy skydiving operation. Parachutists swirled around the *Flying Carpet* on rollout, while de Havilland Twin Otters and a bulbous Shorts SkyVan toted additional jumpers aloft. More soon-to-be skydivers milled around the adjacent jump complex with its swimming pool, restaurant, and pro shop. Alongside the runway a DC-9 awaited conversion for mass parachuting. Towering over it all was a vertical wind tunnel where skydivers hone their freefall technique.

The bus seller soon arrived. A gruff man, he drove us with few words to a yard full of derelict buses. There waited Lobe's dream machine, a peeling, battered 45-passenger GM diesel last used as a Wyoming mine shuttle. One headlight and the spare tire cover had been victims of the recent towing fiasco, while renegade body panels flopped loosely near the engine. Inside were rows of brittle benches. The seller started the bus, backed it into the road, and brusquely walked away.

Without further guidance, Kelly, Phil, and I climbed aboard. Kelly took the driver's seat, and with magnificent crunching and grinding, gingerly selected first gear. Second gear came easily, but mastering third and fourth took longer. "The speedometer doesn't work," said Kelly. "Not sure about the windshield wipers, either. And I wish the seller had shown me how he started this thing. Hey, where's the fuel gauge?"

"It's back by the filler," said Phil. "but I'm not sure it works." The engine ran smoothly, however, and already we were exceeding the previously attained 12 mph. When Kelly answered his cell phone while still successfully negotiating gears, I felt my first glimmer of hope that these guys might actually conquer the 450 miles to Flagstaff. Back at the airport we paused for photos in front of the skydiving wind tunnel. Then, with a lump in my throat, I waved goodbye as my friends disappeared in a puff of diesel smoke.

Homeward bound in the *Flying Carpet*, I peered down at Interstate 10, the very road Phil and Kelly would drive. My journey to Phoenix would take two hours; with luck, theirs would take eight. Periodically, I calculated their progress assuming the bus was still running, and imagined their situation if it was not. Palm Springs would offer haven, and many miles later, Blythe, California. But there'd be little else until reaching Phoenix. Remembering Hannis's vulture joke, I resisted the urge to circle back and look for them.

Not until the 10 o'clock news that evening did our phone finally ring. Cringing, I answered. "We're in Phoenix!" said Phil. "The bus is running fine, so we'll collect my car from the airport and continue on to Flagstaff." That would be an uphill, mountainous drive, but the old bus was nearing home. I went to bed worry-free, but the story wasn't over.

Without a working fuel gauge, the bus apparently ran dry near midnight and coasted downhill to the Cordes Junction exit. Phil retrieved fuel in his car, but Kelly couldn't restart the vehicle without investing \$50 for a mechanic to reprime the diesel engine. At 7 o'clock next morning the Lobe tour bus motored triumphantly into Flagstaff, 16 hours after leaving Perris, California. By supertime band members were already tearing out seats in preparation for the big Seattle tour.

They will need every penny to sustain that old beast through the upcoming tour, but never underestimate the power of youthful enthusiasm in fueling a band and a bus — one way or another they'll make it. Reminds me of another young bus owner, who dreamed of becoming a pilot.

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include Flying Carpet, The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, Job Hunting for Pilots, and You Can Fly! Visit his Web site, www.paperjet.net

By Greg Brown

©2005 Gregory N. Brown, first appeared in "AOPA Flight Training"





Kelly and Phil prepare to depart for the long drive back to Flagstaff.