

Interviewee: Jeff Usher

Interviewer: Annie Rolfe

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Transcript

Annie: Can you tell us a bit about yourself? What do you think we need to know about who you are, where you're from, and what experiences have helped you become the person you are today to help us understand your work in arts industries.

Jeff: Okay. Right. So to start with, everybody knows me as Jeff. So Jeff Usher, but I was, my full name is Jeffrey William John Usher. I was born at Ipswich in the mighty state of Queensland on the 3rd of December 1957. My family actually had come down from from Proserpine in north Queensland at that point because two of my sisters, I am the youngest of four siblings, three of my three sisters, two of whom are also blind like me. We all had infantile glaucoma, infantile glaucoma. And that's a very unusual thing to get. The doctors have no idea where it came from. But in any case, my parents moved down to get closer to the doctors down here, to be able to sort of get, you know, sort of get some operations and so forth. You know, while I was there, while I were down here, I was born. So, so anyway, I was born at Ipswich. We moved to Brisbane just before I turned two. I spent the next, I spent the next decade there and then went to boarding school in Sydney for six years, commencing in 1970 because my mum and dad moved up to where dad was working in Papua New Guinea and Mum moved up there to keep an eye on him. And as I always tell people, the best part of my six years of boarding school was the six months of holidays I had in Papua New Guinea. That was fun. I just loved the place, loved the people, you know. I learned so much from being there and if it's a backtrack slightly, I started playing music at the age of three because one of my youngest sister, all my sisters are older than me and by a considerable amount of time, my younger sister is actually ten years older than me.

Jeff: But when she did her eighth grade scholarship year in 1960, the last year that you had to do a scholarship to get into high school, one of her teachers gave her an upright

piano, which is highly unusual. So anyway, I'm the principal beneficiary of that in terms of, you know, I sort of started messing around on the piano when I was three, started taking lessons at the age of six, and I'd continued classical lessons right through till I was 18 at high school down in Sydney. Yes. And so that was, I almost quit music and was second, my second year at high school in Sydney. Unfortunately I landed in the middle of a very badly run music program down there.

Annie: Right.

Jeff: But they changed teachers in the second year I was there and she managed to persuade me to not quit music as I wanted to do, and that was it. I'll talk about a bit more about her later. And so that was that. And then when I came out of when I came out of school, I went and studied law for three years. I wasn't making a go of that and then I decided to become a musician instead. And I've been at this. That was in 1979. My dad played a very key role in persuading me that I would make a career as a musician. And I've been a musician ever since it was 1979.

Annie: Wow. So did you continue music as a hobby while you were studying law?

Jeff: Not really. I was messing around with it a little bit, but I just didn't have time. You know, I eventually. But I was always listening to music, you know. And about that time, that's when I'd already discovered jazz when I was a young kid. It was when I was, oh, three or four or five years old. I started hearing jazz on the radio. But when I was a teenager, I really got, 15, 16, 17, I really started to get interested in jazz and especially jazz piano. And so I was listening a lot, started really listening a lot to people who were still my heroes in jazz heroes to this day Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Herbie Hancock, all kinds of and some of the older musicians like Fats Waller and Art Tatum and people like that, Duke Ellington. I was listening to everybody, basically, and, you know, then but but I just didn't have the time to devote to the piano when I quit law school and I did suddenly have the time. And that was really good.

Annie: So so this will be some of what you've already talked about but are there experiences, events or people that stand out in your memory as really formative in terms of getting you interested and involved in the arts?

Jeff: Definitely. Definitely. The lady that I just mentioned before that stopped me from quitting music when I was 13, a lady called Kathleen Kerr. Okay. And she was my, my music teacher at high school for she was my only my theory teacher the first year. But the second year, the school finally came to its senses about how badly their music program was working and made her the full time music teacher. And we stayed friends for 27 years from when I first met her in 1970. When she came to, we started we started at this same, at this school at the same time as each other, right through to when she died in 1997. And we just, you know, continued to correspond and visit each other after I left school. And that was wonderful. So she lived long enough to see me put out my first albums and.

Annie: Wow, right.

Jeff: That's that was one. But definitely my family, my sisters were all musical. My mum was a good singer. A couple of my sisters could play the piano. One of them still does. She's right. She's a church organist up a little place called Mundubbera. Yes. And and the other sister was pretty good singer and stuff. I mean. Yeah. And my dad was, he was a bush musician, but he was a multi-instrumentalist and he played the trumpet for a number of years. He played the mouth organ, he played the button accordion and the piano accordion, and he did it all by memory.

Annie: Wow.

Jeff: But then in 1961, for some reason or another best known to himself, he just stopped. He didn't do he didn't play another note for the rest of his life, which was another half century or so.

Annie: Wow. That's really interesting.

Annie: Yeah. So you were saying before that your father convinced you to make music your career?

Jeff: Yeah.

Annie: What was it that he said to you? And what was it that led him to say that if you had given it up?

Jeff: I'll tell you precisely. It was I'd I'd come out of law school and I really was hanging around the house for three or four months and not really being able to make up my mind at the age of 21, what I wanted to be do. I wasn't convinced about being a musician because I knew how hard that could be. As my father finished up saying to me one day, he said, You know, he said he said, "You play it. You said you played classical music for all those years and you're like, you know that you're not going to make a living out of that. Nobody, you know, nobody wants to hear that stuff". But he said, "You love jazz". He said, "Why don't you go and learn some boogie woogie, become a professional musician, play some boogie woogie". Yeah, well, I did that. And I mean, I don't know, like a year later, you know, Dad was, Dad was happy because I'd learned to play some boogie woogie and then progressed into playing jazz. And then, you know, like thereafter when Dad retired, he spent more time running me around from job to job, right? Then, you know, then he could have imagined. Yes. And he was you know, dad was always very supportive. Okay. And so was my mom. You know, the whole family's been you know, my sisters are all still alive. And, you know, we get on like a house on fire. This is so fabulous to have heroes like that in your life, you know? And they really were, you know. Yeah. Yeah.

Annie: And any other experiences or events of about getting you interested and involved in the arts?

Jeff: Well, definitely. I think, you know, once I decided to become a musician, you know, there was a series of things that sort of happened from there on. There was a, you know, I hooked up with with a bunch of jazz enthusiasts around Brisbane here in 1980 who had a thing called the Jazz Action Society going. Unfortunately, it fell apart about five years later because of people trying to be politicians instead of music enthusiasts. Yeah. And, you know, that was that was very sad. But I met I met some people through that that I'm still friends with. Yeah. And. You know, if I'm not still friends with them something because they passed on.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: But, you know, people that I stayed friends with for donkey's years. And that was very that was very good for me. And then I remember in 1981, our Brisbane was visited by one of the then one of the greatest saxophone players in the world, as he then was a man called Joe Henderson. I didn't get to meet him. I sat ten feet in front of him when he played down at the old Adelaide Street Cellar. And that was a light bulb moment for me as a jazz musician, as a young up and coming jazz musician. I'm still good friends with the man who brought him here, a guy called Greg Quigley.

Annie: Okay.

Jeff: Greg is Greg's kind of like the brother I never had, you know? Yeah.

Jeff: And we're still mates. And I met him just a couple of years after that, and we're still friends. He he's famous for kicking off the Jazz Music Institute here in Brisbane in the late 1990s, and his family still teach there. The whole family's involved and he was the guy that brought Joe Henderson out to Australia and I mean he was doing jazz clinics every year where he'd bring cats over from America, you know, to teach. You know, he brought some really famous musicians over and yeah, we're still good mates. And I finished up in it playing his big band for seven years and

Annie: yes,

Jeff: oh, all sorts of things, you know. And he, he was and he was the guy that convinced me that I could that I ought to become an arranger. I was already composing. He said, you know, said, you could you could you could really do something here as an arranger. He said, yeah, you know, and he he was the guy that showed me how to that explain to me how the stage system worked in print music because I knew Braille music, which is useless to everybody else except me. Yes. And but I didn't understand how the how stage writing in print music works. And Greg was the man who explained that to me and and got me it got me interested in writing for all the other instruments to the to the point where I love writing for every other instrument except the piano.

Jeff: I hate writing for the piano. Why should I? I can play the damn thing, you know, but I can write for the trumpet all day and write for the trombone all day and write especially the bass. And I've got I can write basslines out my left ear. Yes. And you

know, but I mean, I just love writing for the other instruments and can't stand writing for piano. Yes, it's really interesting. Yeah. So that was a great Quigley's, you know, was was a big a catalyst. I think it would be a good I was calling the catalyst, you know and in my career once I got once I became a professional, he was a catalyst for getting me interested in arranging. And I'm a good arranger. I became an arranger for big bands. I have just recently written for Symphony Orchestra, and it's a piece that's going to get played next year at the Conservatorium.

Annie: That's amazing

Jeff: That's an amazing project that I'm doing for the Queensland Institute, me and a whole bunch of other people. Yeah. And so I wrote a piece for symphony orchestra and it's there's a story. There's a story there too, you know. Yeah, yeah. So yeah.

Annie: So what motivates your work today and has your motivation or your style changed over time?

Jeff: I, i, i actually. Self-motivation is very important for me, and I haven't composed very much in the last couple of years, but I've still been doing arrangements and and, you know, obviously the last couple of years have been been, you know, have been ridiculously difficult for everybody. Yes. With this wretched pandemic and series of pandemics, it's it's been it's been a wretched time for us all.

Annie: Yes

Jeff: I've actually found it very depressing practising by myself. So, you know, it was really good. I hadn't seen Greg, my friend, for a few years until 2019. I hooked up for his 75th birthday and and then we started. He said, Hey, man, we're doing jam sessions with Jimmy every week. How would you like to come down and be involved in that? And I said, Yeah, sure. You know, so, so, you know, and then not long after that, six months after that, the pandemic happened. Yeah. And but we still kept up as long as much as we were able to we still kept up having every Sunday afternoon and jam session and. That was really I actually really enjoy doing that. I find it very depressing sitting and playing on my own, which I never, ever experienced before. Yes, I and I think that was

just I just feel very lonely. You know, it's just like there's no gigs, you know, why am I beating my head against a brick wall here for?

Jeff: Yeah. So I hardly play the piano at all at home now, which is really kind of sad. That's not going to last. I'll get back to it. I mean, it'll happen as well as I stay alive. It'll. It'll happen at some point or another. Yeah. You know, but I mean, I'm still playing pretty good piano, but, you know, my self motivation is very important to me to keep, you know, just realising that. I'm realising that, yes, I've worked hard to be as good as I am and I am good. And, you know, I've worked hard at being good.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: At being a good musician. You know, even being a, you know, turned myself into a reasonable studio musician back in the 1990s and stuff like that. You know, I've recorded several albums of my own and and I but my motivation is still pretty much the same as it always was. It's just to be as good as I as good as I can possibly be. Yes. Yeah. You know, I'm not I'm not going to be a I'm not going to be a world star at this point in my life. I don't think so. Although Buena Vista certainly became famous in their seventies and eighties and nineties.

Annie: That's true.

Jeff: You know, and then they deserved to be. Yeah, yeah. May I say there's still hope for me. There's still hope for me yet. Yes.

Annie: And so has your style changed over time?

Jeff: I think I've well, certainly has changed since when I was in my twenties, because when I was in my twenties, I just wanted to focus on jazz and blues because that's what I really wanted to get good at. Right. And I hated playing rock and roll. I didn't hate rock and roll, but I hated playing rock n roll because it's so damn noisy. Yes. It's still you know, I still the noise levels above a certain level. I just can't handle it. But as I got older, as I got into my thirties and forties, I went back to, you know, I started sort of going back to rock and roll and even country music. And I mean, I've played country music, God, you know, and I grew up listening to rock and roll and country music. I grew up listening

to all that stuff, you know? I mean, you know, I can. I've forgotten more about country music than most cats know. Yeah, just because. Because I spent so long, so many years listening to it. Yeah, but. But it's all stuff. All stuff from the fifties, sixties and seventies. Now, once it gets past about 1990, I can't remember who did what.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: So, you know, but but I'm very good on stuff from about, you know, from 1950 to 1980. I'm pretty good. Yeah. So but you know, so yeah, country music, rock and roll and I've played I can play rock and roll, I can play country music, I can play I've played, I've played church music. I was a church organist for 16 years. I didn't start doing that until until 1983 when I was 30, whatever. I was 26 and did that for 16 years. That was fun. And I did it all from memory because I'd grown up singing all these things. You know, I was raised in the Catholic Church and I knew all these hymns, you know, you know, and I just was able to play them from memory and, you know, just to figure out what went where on the organ. That's yes, yes. So so yeah. You know, fit into each other.

Annie: Why do you think you changed your style?

Jeff: I don't think I changed my style. What I did was I added I added to the , I added to the palette of music that I was, you know, that I was listening to and and and playing. It wasn't so much that my style changed. I think anyone anyone who knew me, I think, you know, you talk to someone like Greg Quigley is known me for 40 years. Yeah. He'll pretty much tell you that. You know, I still play pretty much the same way as I played 40 years ago. I just. I probably just play better. Yeah. And, you know, and I mean, I just found. No, I just went back to I went back to my roots, essentially. I went, yes. You know, I mean, I remember a very good friend, another very good friend of mine. Warren Trout was started trying to convince me back in the early 1990s that I ought to do a tribute to Ray Charles. Now, I grew up listening to Ray Charles, and I love Ray Charles and I know I know all his backstory. And yes, you know, my mum my mum managed to survive reading his autobiography to me. It's a pretty raunchy thing for for a dear old lady like my mum to be reading but she did it. Yeah. And. So I knew all the back story to Ray. You know how he went blind and all that something. You know, I knew all that.

Jeff: And I loved Ray Charles music, but I didn't want to become, you know. For years, I said I said to my friends no, I don't want to do it, you know. You know, I do not want to get known as that blind guy who plays Ray Charles. You know, and anyway, eventually in 1999, I said, yes. I said, look, okay, now I feel comfortable enough with who I am as a musician that I can go and say, right, okay. I'm Jeff Usher, you know. Prominent Australian jazz pianist. And, you know, this is my tribute to the fabulous Ray Charles.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: We then proceeded to do I think we did six tunes in six, six tributes in five years. Nobody wanted to buy it. Wow. It's really interesting. You know, Warren was convinced that the clubs would fall over themselves and they didn't. It was bizarre.

Annie: That's interesting.

Jeff: And I don't know how that worked. I did want to just just recently on the 16th of June 2022, just down down at Hope Island. And I'm going to do another one with the Brisbane Big Band over here at the Brisbane Jazz Club on the 21st of August. Right. And that's all some of some of it will be Ray Charles, but it's going to be me doing a few Ray Charles tunes, plus some of my own stuff and that I've arranged for Big Band, which would be a bit better.

Jeff: But the one I did down at the Gold Coast was actually a full hour and a half tribute to Ray Charles. Right, and stuff like that. So, I mean, I felt suddenly in 1999 when I was 41, 42, I felt comfortable about starting to feel comfortable within myself, about doing a Ray Charles thing and not being labelled as that blind guy who does Ray Charles. Yes, the blind white guy who does Ray Charles. Come on. Yeah. So anyway, that's that's kind of an example of the sort of thing where I expanded I just expanded into other areas and frankly been listening to all my life and yeah, yeah. And somebody else came along to me in 1995 and asked me would I like to do a tribute to Hal David and Burt Bacharach and oh my goodness, I've been listening to those cats since I was three, you know, and I know I know all their tunes and no one's ever asked me to play any of them. And I know all these tunes. I know. I mean, I just. I knew all these tunes, you know? I just knew. I knew enough about all these tunes. I could sit down and reproduce them on

the piano from memory, and that's very sevantic. But they are. There it is. That's. That's who I am. And what I what I, what I do, how I work. It's how I roll, you know? Yeah.

Annie: What motivates your work in the disability art space?

Jeff: Yeah. This is a good one, because. Because for many years, I didn't actually work in the disability art space. Not for any better reason than what I you know, from when I first became a professional musician in the late seventies, what I wanted to do was I wanted to play with with just whoever was able to play good jazz.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: And over the years, I've managed to expand that to playing with some of the best, the best musicians in Australia and occasional visitors from America. Yeah, I went to, I've been to France, I've been to to England, I've been to Indonesia or been to India or been to Sri Lanka. I've been a few other places, South Africa in 1996 and I've played with musicians from all over the place, you know what I mean? Somebody wants to ask me, you know, how many countries have, you know, how multicultural is my musical experience? Well, I think I think currently the number of countries stands at 60.

Annie: Wow

Jeff: number that are not that I've visited but but who's but who's people I've played with. Yes. Yes I can point to 60 countries, you know, everywhere from from the regulars, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, you know, right through to, you know, to to places in India, Sri Lanka and Kenya. Yes. You know, the Congo, you know, Morocco. Azerbaijan, you know the old Soviet Union. I've played with Russians, play everybody.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: You know, Poles, Hungarians, my goodness me. You know, the list is endless. And so I guess.

Jeff: I just wanted to play with whoever played good jazz. Right. And they. And they apparently wanted to play with me. Yes. Apparently, I was good enough that they wanted me to play with them. And it was it was actually years before I really sort of play. I mean, obviously, I came up through through a blind primary school, which is over here at Barberton in the sixties, and then and then a school down in Sydney playing with other musicians, you know, who were blind like me. But then when I got away, when I got out of school and was doing other things, I was I still had blind friends. I played blind cricket for many, many years. I still do,

Annie: yes.

Jeff: But most of them weren't musicians. And I mean, I just wanted to music was my my professional focus. Yes. I didn't really sort of get into playing much with with other actively with other disabled artists until 1996, when suddenly my friend Janelle Cahoon from the Conservatorium, who would I sort of knew slightly because we'd been at the Con at the same time in the 1980s I went I was one of the first people through the jazz course in when it was established at the Con in 1984 and my friend Greg Quigley helped to set that up as well, interestingly enough. And Janelle was an opera singer, is, is an opera singer, but she was an opera singer, you know, able bodied opera singer, though all the faculties functioning. She was in Germany in 1996 and she suddenly got she suddenly got Type A diabetes and went blind.

Jeff: Wow. And anyway, when she when she sort of came back home and sort of settled down and started thinking about what to do with the rest of her life, she got in touch with me very, very quickly because she wanted to set up this agency called Salubrious Productions.

Annie: Okay.

Jeff: I think it was Janelle that actually got me in touch with you.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: Yeah. And Janelle and I are great mates and we've been to India several times together now in Sri Lanka and we've done a whole bunch of stuff together here, mainly

here in Queensland, but for when they've had disability access for a week and stuff like that. And she's worked for me and I've worked for her and that was kind of the beginning of it, you know, started, I started getting, getting worked through her occasionally with it. But even that a lot of that was solo work, but some of it was with other people. But I started meeting other artists with disabilities and, you know, she she also was, you know, people anybody that's that's at the disadvantaged end of the community. You know, she works with Aboriginal. She worked a lot with Will Barton, one of the wonderful didgeridoo virtuoso, great mate of mine. And our brother Will - love him to bits. He's great. Yeah. And his mum Delma, his aunty Delma, she's just beautiful and wonderful, wonderful singer and I met them through her and we did some work together and stuff like that, you know, and gradually as time went on, you know, and you know, and then I, I, in the mid 2000's I started going to a festival down at Horsham in Victoria, right, which was an arts and disability festival and that was the first real sort of.

Jeff: Oh, and then there was the Water Bocce Festival here I should mention in 2003, Janelle, I was, I got involved in Access Arts sorry. This sort of, this is like, you know, just keeps unfolding. I did get involved with Access Arts in, in 1992 and that was through a friend of mine called Don Mortis, who I'm still friends with. The guy is a paraplegic and plays French horn and really nice cat. We're good friends still and through them. I went to Indonesia in 1995, so it actually goes back further than what I said. But then 1996, then Janelle went blind and she got in touch with me and my, you know, my involvement with, with artists with disabilities became a bit more regular thereafter, I guess. But certainly I was I've been a member of Access Arts for 30 years. I almost forgot about that. It's just so much. It's like this unending spool of stuff that I got to kind of remember. Yeah. And and then in 2003, this this Pan Pacific Art and Disability Festival called the Water Bashii Festival, these Japanese for Dandelion Seeds. Apparently the festival started off by this fabulous Japanese cat whose name I can't now recall, came to Brisbane. Yes. And the then director of Axis Arts, Neil Price, had said to me a couple of years earlier, he said, we've got this festival coming.

Jeff: He said, there's got to be a story about your love of trains and music. And I said. I'd really love you to write a plot. Write a one man play about it. Okay, well, it took me two years, and I produced it. I finally produced the script three weeks before the festival started. Poor Neil. Neil Price was the guy's name, a wonderful man. And, you know,

he's just poor guy was wondering whether whether this play was ever going to materialize. And, you know, less than three weeks before the festival started, I sent him the score. Yeah. And sent him the, the script I should say. And anyway, so that was. So I got "Confessions of a Blind Train Spotter", right? A wonderful play that I did. And I went or ran around all over the place getting recordings of trains. Yes. Stuff like that. And, you know, so then so. So yeah. Over a 30 year period. But but it's been in and out in amongst my my just trying to be a trying to be a regular musician, just working regular hours as much as possible. Really? Yeah. I've never had a full time job in my life. And but over the years, you know, and then eventually my friendship with Janelle led me to led me to join her going to India in 2016. And we did that four years running and only stopped because of the pandemic.

Annie: Right.

Jeff: We're possibly going to go again this year, but if not this year, definitely next year.

Annie: And what do you do in India?

Jeff: We go to a thing called the Sambav International Festival, which is an art and disability festival in New Delhi, run by a dance school for a dance school for disabled people right in in New Delhi disabled kids. And they put this festival on in November every year. And we've been going we've made some wonderful friends over there. And it's, you know, the the only they want us to do we whenever go, we ought to do Aussie music. But that's been interesting too, because this got me, you know, suddenly sort of coming up with jazz arrangements of Great Southern Land by Ice House, which is great. You know, one of these days I'll write the damn thing down and orchestrate it for for my band. One of these days. I may do it very soon and, you know, stuff like that. But but it's but it's, that's kind of got me back into doing a bit of Australian music, which obviously my music is my, I'm an Aussie so obviously, you know, my music must be Australian music and you know, I know a swagger I'll, you know, old colonial songs and that sort of thing but you know, to actually get back and do that because somebody asked you to do it, you know, it's a different thing. Yeah, sorry. That was a long answer.

Annie: That's okay. So what do you think the public would say are the key milestones or big major happenings in the history of disability arts in Australia?

Jeff: That's hard to say because. Because I think that the public perception. I don't know whether the whether the public even thinks much about it, except that I think, you know, obviously there's been you know, there's always been cats, you know, around who have you know, who've I mean, like there's always been blind pianists. Right. And I mean, you know, everybody knows about Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder. Yeah, I never met Ray Charles. I did meet Stevie Wonder in 1987. That was wonderful, too.

Annie: Okay.

Jeff: You know, it was a great that was a great event to have done that. Sadly, nothing more came of it. But but at least I got to meet him and, you know, stuff. And we've had our own, you know, we've had a couple of really good, you know, I got, there was a couple of mates who I went to school with, who I'm still friends with, and one of whom is an extraordinary guitar player called Jackie Garbler. Wonderful cat is it had a lot of sickness in the last few years and it's messed up his nervous system, unfortunately, and it made it very difficult for him to play guitar. You know, we're still good pals and. Yeah. And you know, and you know, he's he's not known outside of Brisbane basically. But but he's a fantastic guitar player. Yeah. There's always been, there's always been cats around the place who can play.

Jeff: Can you tell I'm a jazz musician?, you know, call people cats and chicks and you know, but I mean, there's always been cats on the scene who've, you know, you know, there's always been blind musicians, Jose Feliciano and and stuff like that, you know, wonderful, wonderful players, you know, the Andre Bochelli, you know. So, yeah, you know, it's always been those kind of Is it Andre Bochelli?

Annie: Yeah he's the blind opera singer.

Jeff: I think he's the blind guy. Yeah, he's yeah yeah. And you know, stuff like that zoo has been those you know an occasionally there's been some cat in a wheelchair will tell the Jeffson John

Annie: Yeah

Jeff: the wonderful soul singer here Australian soul singer for the 1960s.

Jeff: Yeah. Great salsa the best, one of the best soul singers this country ever produced. These you know, one of the things that you used to delight doing doing spins on stage and his wheelchair and fabulous cat you know Jeffson John, man you know, you've always had, you've always had cats who've done stuff but in terms of actually art and disability, you know, disabled people actually doing stuff together, it's been pretty much a gradual thing. And like, I mean, I got I got invited to go to the, the Awakenings Festival in Horsham, which unfortunately no longer exists. But it went it went for a number of years from the mid to the early 2000 through till about 2010 or thereabouts.

Annie: Right

Jeff: I went to one, two, three, four, five. I went to every festival from 2004 to 2007, missed two years, and then went again in 2010 and. In 2005, I was, I was actually funded. They managed to get funding for me to be the resident artist at that festival. Yeah. And that was, I had to write a, write this letter to the Victorian Council of the Arts explaining why, you know, why they should allow me to be the resident artist, not some Victorian cat. Right. Well, actually. Okay, so let's do this. It's the best letter. It's the best promotional letter I've ever written in my life.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: Okay, let's. Let's go. Okay. The best comparison between me and another similar, similarly endowed artist would be Ray Charles. As you know, Ray Charles is a composer and an arranger, the same as I am. Ray, Ray had just recently died as a teenager and died in 2004. This was 2005. And since then, Ray, a wonderful composer, songwriter and arranger. Yeah. So that's, that's. I do that, too. And piano player, obviously. Singer. I do. I even sing the blues. Yes. A good, pretty good singer. The one thing is, one thing I got over Ray Charles is Ray doesn't do workshops, at least not that I know.

Jeff: He didn't do workshops. I teach and I and I'm doing a master's degree at that point. And so I said the stuff, there's areas that I do that Ray didn't do and that not too many other cats that I can think of in this country have done, certainly no other, you

know, blind people so that's, and they went, they apparently took a look at this and went well yeah, this sounds pretty good. So I got paid a small fortune to go down and spend two weeks at the Awakenings Festival as the resident artist.

Wow.

Jeff: And that was really good. So, you know, that was, I used to love going down to that festival, made some wonderful friends, and then it all stopped. Yeah, you know, because I decided to do it. And just purely instead of doing concerts, they decided to do it as just workshops, which, which was very nice for the disabled people who went there but didn't really, didn't really do much, from what I can understand, didn't do much for the, the outside community.

Right.

Jeff: Whereas the concerts where they were people were actually coming to see some cat in a wheelchair or some cat, some cat with a leg missing or, you know, so some cat with one red ear and one blue ear.

Jeff: And, you know, somebody somebody like me is blind pigeon was wasn't the only blind musician at the festival either. Was quite a few of us that went down and played. You know, and, and oftentimes we'd finish up jamming together or whatever, you know, collaborating in some form and got the public right in. I don't know why they stopped it. Maybe they missed out on funding or something. I don't know why, something went wrong there. And, you know, you know, there's so, you know, I mean, there's been an increasing number of festivals, you know, that have come along. I went to an Adelaide high beam that used to be an artist and disability festival in 2004, did Trainspotter down there and you know, stuff like that. I've done a few things like that. Then in 2015, I was approached by a lady called Karen Lee Roberts. I dunno whether, I dunno whether you guys need any extra people or if you've got her on your list. But she'd be worthwhile talking to.

Annie: Okay, that's great to know.

Jeff: Yeah. And Karen Lee Roberts is a playwright and an author, a songwriter. I, all kinds of things. She's quite a, she's got quite a lot of strings to her bow. She approached me about accompanying her musically for this play that she'd written about, about mental wellness, as in overcoming the challenges of, overcoming living with bipolar disorder, which she has.

Jeff: Yes, and it's a wonderful play. And we've been doing it. It's just it took us, it took us years, you know, but we, but we're starting to reap the benefits of that and including, including a couple of visits to the Adelaide fringe, one in 2018 and one this year. Right. The Adelaide Fringe Festival. Yeah. A season at the Butterfly Club in Melbourne in 2019 and we're now starting to get some bookings coming in for some festivals in North Queensland next year.

Annie: Okay.

Jeff: Stuff like that. And we've got you know, and this place, the place called the play is called chameleon.

Annie: Okay.

Jeff: And so we've been. And that got me involved in what she was doing as her musical accompanist and also, you know, playing some bit parts in the play as well as as this character called Mr. Sunshine he's kind of the the straight this sort of, you know, this kind of straight man to her, you know, to her, very zany, very, you know, seesaw kind of character. You know, that, you know, she she even she even manages to sort of, you know, to to stage a seizure in the play, you know, and and one night when we were doing the play, that the seizure actually materialized into a real seizure. And somehow or another, I don't know how she did it, but she pulled it.

Jeff: She managed to pull even that because she's such a professional. And she even pulled that together and got out of it really nicely. A fabulous character and we'd been friends. It took us about a year to get used to each other, I think. But, you know, and but you know, we just work so well together and stuff like that, you know, it's just been really good to have this other thing going on. I guess. Again, I don't know. I you know, I certainly did. I didn't avoid doing it because I did want to be involved with with artists

with disabilities. As I say, I've never regarded it as a I've always regarded as my only criteria. I just want to work with good artists.

Annie: Yes, yes.

Jeff: With cats who are cats and chicks who are good at what they do.

Annie: Yes.

And, you know, I don't I don't care. I don't care what what they what country they come from. I don't care what religion they are. You know, and I you know, I don't care if they're gay. You know what? You know, I don't care. What I do care about is that are they good artists. Yeah. And can they function with me? Yeah. Can I function with them? That's really all I care about. Yeah. Yeah.

Annie: So is your art political? Do you think art should be political? You know, creating change in how people think and act and treat each other.

Jeff: I've done some very political things at times. I was involved with a poet called Willie Bach back in the early nineties who's, who was a pacifist and who was writing poetry from his experience of having been in the British armed forces in the 1960s and having found himself involved in some clandestine operations by the British armed forces, building airstrips for the Americans to use in the bombing of North Vietnam. And he was building these in Cambodia, and he never got over when he came (He was only 18 at the time) And when he sort of, you know, got out of it, eventually got out of that and, you know, moved on with his life that really haunted him, that he'd been involved in that. And so I've been involved in political stuff. Mainly I try it, but from the point of view of my own music that I do. I come at it from a very often times a very spiritual point of view, because a long time ago I wanted to I wanted to try and use my jazz as an expression of my spiritual beliefs. Yeah. And. I was inspired to that by listening to the music of John Coltrane, especially.

Annie: Yes,

Jeff: A Love Supreme, one of the greatest jazz albums, if you could call it jazz. It's almost it's so it's it's it's beyond jazz. But it's, you know, it's it's such great music, and certainly comes from a jazz standpoint. That was recorded in December 1964. I, you know, I discovered that album in the early eighties.

Jeff: And, I mean, I got to, you know, I just loved John Coltrane's music already, you know what I mean? To get it, to get I knew that he wanted to try and use his music as an expression of where he saw himself in relation to the God he believed in.

Annie: Right.

Jeff: And I thought, you know, I can do the same thing. I'm a church organist, for heaven's sakes, and I'm going to do the same thing. Most of the cats who ever played jazz, especially the black musicians, they all grew up in church.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: And they all went to the first they all went to the First Baptist First Methodist Church or the First Baptist Church or the the Abyssinian Baptist Church or whatever in their hometown. And that's where they learned to play music oftentimes, you know, and so they could do you know, they could do it. And then, you know, the cats that became Muslims and so forth like that, you know, who used their music as as a spiritual expression. And there was no way I couldn't do the same thing. So a lot of my music comes from a spiritual point of view, but a lot of it also occasionally I do write things that are very political, you know, that are definitely a statement of what I what I believe politically.

Annie: Yeah,

you know, but it's politically, spiritually, you know, I mean, it's like I write a thing called Battle Song. I was writing it in in 2001 when 9/11 happened. I was in the middle of writing this very stark composition which I still occasionally play, and I decided to launch that as a political protest as my my personal protest against religious bigotry.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: The kind of thing that led to, you know, this bunch of no hopers attacking, you know, attacking, attacking and killing 3000 people they never that they had no idea about. And, you know, they finished up, you know, it wasn't an attack on America. It was an attack on the whole world. They killed there were 23 Australians died in that attack, one of whom was a friend of a guy I was teaching at the time. Yeah. So, you know, not even, you know, six degrees of separation. We'll live with two degrees of separation for me.

Annie: Yes.

And and one of my good friends who I still play with, who is Martin Kay, wonderful alto saxophonist, was in New York at the time and saw it happen.

Annie: Wow.

He had an apartment two kilometers from the place. He could see it. And, you know, so I mean, ... I had some personal connections with that. But as you know, I'm... it's just... this whole thing of religious extremism on whatever side it comes from, ... whatever religion it comes from is wrong.

Annie: Yeah.

And ... it doesn't help anybody. In fact, it harms people.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah.

You know, so, so, yes, in that respect, my music is, has, has been at times political. Yeah.

Annie: So I guess there's there's two sides that we're asking here. So is, is that is it that art should be political, creating change in how people think and act and treat each other? Is that part of how we should define success, or is it about aesthetic quality and appeal to a mainstream audience or both?

Jeff: I think it's probably about all of those things.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: ... yes, ... I write a lot of blues tunes, you know, and they're just blues tunes, you know, ... I wrote a great little one a few years ago ... which is called "Every Kind of Blues", you know, it's just kind of like a, you know, "you've gone away and left me, baby. what am I going to do?" You know, "you've gone away and left me, baby, what am I going to do?" So now I've got those ... my baby done me wrong She's gone and left me all alone, this house ain't a home I don't think I can carry on blues" and and in the next I'll do "the baby's found somebody else. She's gone and left me on the shelf. She didn't care how I felt, I think I'll go and top myself blues". And then the last, you know, the last line is "my baby's left me behind. So now I'm cold, drunk and blind". That's a great line. "I'm about to lose my mind because I got every kind of blues". But again, I mean, and ... that's pretty much the blues, you know. Yeah, but the blues is all about.... Down on the bottom. Down on the muddy bottom today.

Jeff: But you better believe it. I'm going to be back up tomorrow. Yes. That is what the blues is all about.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: And when I was coming up as a musician, I made friends with Wiley Reed, ... who was a legend on the Brisbane Blues scene. He was a black American from Jacksonville, Florida, and came out here ... during 1967 entertaining the troops during the Vietnam War.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: And married an Aussie girl with a Polish background and never went back. And just the most marvellous cat. I was friends with him for 25 years. And we even used to do duet keyboards together.

Annie: Yeah,

Jeff: him on piano and me on synthesizer and he always loved my blues singing, you know, I always reckoned I always credit him as being a guy that I learnt to sing. I learnt that I could sing the blues.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: From listening to him. He never gave me a lesson.

Annie: Right.

Jeff: But I,.. listening to him and and working with him and getting to meet him and that I worked out that I could sing the blues. Up until that time I'd been very reluctant to - I was just this white kid from Brisbane, ... But it runs a lot deeper than that, you know. And I've got the voice for it.

Annie: Yes

Jeff: I got the voice for it. And ... you know, I've paid my dues.... certainly haven't had... it hasn't been a hell of a bad life, but... it's had its rocky bits and pieces.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff:... and of course, I've spent the whole of that life, you know, having little or no eyesight. Yes. I had colour vision ... when I was a young kid. And that still influences how I think when I write the fact ... that I had colour vision. I'm a synesthete yeah I associate words and colours right. And ... my two blind sisters do as well and we have interesting discussions on that because, you know, no two synaesthetes agree on what, what word should be what colour and but yeah the three of us are word to colour synaesthetes and I didn't even get a chance to talk about that in my thesis that I wrote

for my PhD. But ... it actually is a very important factor in ... how I think when I'm composing, I see all these weird and wonderful colours when ... when I write music, you know, and in my mind's eye sort of thing,...

Jeff: but I'd physically lost the ability to see colours by the time I was about 14 or 15. ... and this piece that I've written for symphony orchestra is about that for the for the Queensland Eye Institute. They've got a project called "the last seen" s.e.e.n.project where people write music that's ... inspired by the last thing they ever remember seeing and the last thing I ever remember seeing that I could name - -put a name to anyway- was my great friend Kathleen Kerr, the music teacher that I was telling you about turning up to take five or six of us to a concert at Sydney Town Hall one afternoon in about 1973, just before they opened the Opera House. And she turned up this particular afternoon, she had on a lime green full length dress, right. And I love greens and blues ... I don't ever remember after that - I was about 14 or 15 anyway when that happened and I don't remember. So I wrote this piece called "Angel in a Lime Green Dress" for Symphony Orchestra. And so that's the kind of thing, you know. Yeah. So colours influence were, you know, you know I think when I write how does it tie in with...

Annie: Oh I was asking whether art is political or aesthetic.

Jeff: Yeah. So in that sense, yeah, definitely it's aesthetic. Yeah. You know, I mean for me, I mean so I do write to satisfy me, you know, and when I write a piece, I wrote this lovely little thing. Back in 2000 and between 2010 and 2011, I completed this lovely little, simple little tune, but it goes through a sequence of 12 chords, chromatically, but it's got a 15 note melody. And I called it 15 because I always wanted to write. I mean, I always wanted to write something that it had a 15 bar improvisational section in it as well. Yeah, this beautiful little piece called "15". And I wrote that for my PhD and. It's. It satisfies me. You know, it's my little it's my little companion piece. Yes. This is my little love interest. I love little "15". She's my little favorite little piece I ever wrote. And she speaks to me. She sings at me, you know, and, ... so I've sort of built up this whole kind of ... almost Alice in Wonderland world, you know, around this little composition that I wrote, as you do, ... I mean, you know, music. Music is just like writing fairy tales, but it's like you're telling stories. You're creating you're creating images, you're taking a journey.

Jeff: Yes. I often liken it to when I'm improvising, it's like I'm walking through a garden and suddenly I see a beautiful flower off to the side and I've got to duck off to the side and examine this flower before I continue. And then I sort of, you know, in some way or another that sort of influences the rest of what I do when I'm improvising that piece, you know, you just keep getting distracted and distracted and distracted. And ... it's fabulous this fantasy world, you know, it's almost a fantasy world. I love that aspect of it.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: And I always keep saying to people, you know, have a good time when you're doing this stuff because you're going to be doing it, particularly the young cats, I said you could be doing this when you're 150.

Annie: Yeah,

Jeff: because science is advancing, you know. I mean, ... you could be doing this at 150, you better be bloody good at it now because, you know, you could be doing this for a long time, so go and have a good time.

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

Jeff: You know. Yeah ok learn your scales and ... all this other rubbish but heavens above, you know, I once tried to sit down and analyze how many scales I knew and- I lost count when I got to 21 and that's, that's 21 in all 12 keys.

Annie: Wow.

Jeff: I went, I'm not doing this anymore. This is crap. You know, this is just a waste of bloody time I reckon. Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, I just went. Just have a good time. Just enjoy yourself. You know,... Don't go walking on stage with a long look on your face if you can help it. I mean, you know, sometimes it's how you feel.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: But, you know, it's like you go on stage, you might have holes in the bottom of your shoes, but you still got to look like a million dollars. Yes ... So - aesthetically, definitely. you're creative. You're an actor. You know, you're really speaking, you're doing what an actor does. Every, every time they act. It is an act. it is a charade to an extent. But hopefully it's a charade or a veneer ... that comes from an attempt. to write or play something that's genuine.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: You know, I do get very annoyed when I hear idiots trying to be the next prophet –

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: - and bring in our calling it awake is the new sleep.

You know what I mean? Just forget trying to be smart. Yes. You know, just play the music. Yeah. ... don't try and be something you're not, you know? And I mean, so what I do try to be. Yeah, it's a charade. Yes, it's a veneer to an extent, but it's - it's like painting, you know, it's like painting your house.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: In a different colour to what it was last week. It's still the same house.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: It's just a different colour. And you know, I really do try to sort of come at my music from ... as genuine an angle as I possibly can. ... this is who I am. And I can write really dirt simple things and I can write really complex things. and I love everything, everything that I do, you know, I love everything that I write.... But, you know, ... occasionally I'll fill a wastepaper basket up full of ideas, too.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: But, When I did my PhD, I set myself to write six or seven or eight tunes, and I anticipated having a lot of misfires. Yeah, I finished up writing 20.

Annie: Wow.

Jeff: And I think I discarded about three or four ideas, that I didn't go on with. But I came up with some absolute clinkers, including "15", including "Kathleen's theme" that I wrote for my dear friend and I dedicated my PhD in her memory, and you can find that album on YouTube. ... The album's called "Bird Wings", right? "Jeff Usher and the Love Supreme Super Band live at the Brisbane Jazz Club". Okay, recorded, released in 2015 and recorded in 2014 and 15. And yes, some six or seven of those songs are on that album. So it's this ten piece band. And so we just went in there and just had fun. ... There's a couple of the songs. Kathleen's theme obviously is a statement of it's kind of a, ... it's kind of my, ... testimony to how I stopped quitting music when I was 13, all because of this wonderful lady who had come into my life a year earlier and stopped me from quitting music.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: Simply by being nice to me. Yes. ... and just saying, yeah, you know, you can redo grade four. You know, you'll get it.... it's a long story. But you know, these idiots made me do grade four in six months and I'd just taken two years over grade three in the middle of which my mum had a stroke.

Annie: Oh goodness

Jeff: Nobody in the school bothered to investigate any of that. Wow. And, you know, they wondered why I only just passed grade four by the skin of my teeth. Yeah, but having scored honors in all of my previous three exams, I could have done the grade three and got it, and I would have got honors for that too. But they didn't want to do that. They wanted to push me to grade four. So anyway, so I reached that grade four honors the next time. Amazing. Yeah. And ... like I say, you know, there's any wonder I stayed friends with this lady. And, you know, she was the most gentle teacher you could possibly imagine in an era where people regularly ... used to get their knuckles bruised or, you know, or get beaten severely by some,... by some curse of a teacher who

shouldn't have even been teaching. Yeah. For making some silly bloody mistake on a c major scale, you know. ... I'd do a scale, you know, I'd make a mistake and do it again, making the same mistakes and. Oh, well, let's just keep working at that. We'll get it right next week.... I just, you know, I just adored her. She was fabulous. Yeah. and so ... that was really good.

Jeff: Like I say, when it gets to that sort of point, it's suddenly, you know, you try ,you're just trying to be everything that you can be and as good as you can be.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah.

Jeff: You know, and ... the best thing I ever did was become a composer, because that gave me my own voice. I always figured, you know, ... I'm never going to play all the things you are, ... or, ... body and soul or days of wine and roses or autumn leaves ... as good as the guys I hero worshipped, I might - I maybe - may do it as well as they did, but ... I'm never going to come up with anything fancy that's innovative on those tunes. It's all been done. But I can compose my own stuff.

Annie: Yes, yes.

Jeff: And the more I composed my own stuff, the better I got.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: And ... gradually over time it started to express the kind of the simple, the simple aspects and the complex aspects of who I am, ... so. I mean, you know, I've done all sorts of complex ...academic stuff and musical stuff and all that. And basically, I'm a country kid at heart.

Annie: Yes

Jeff: You know, ... I loved nothing better than coming home in the eighties and nineties and coming home in my black suit and my tie and everything else from a music gig. It's three in the morning. And ... my dad would say, right, let's go fishing, you know, and I'd jump into my jeans and my jacket and... you know put my boots on and off we'd go. Off

we go down to jump and pin and put the boat in the water and go across into the Stradbroke passage and fish for three days. I used to love doing that, ... and, ... I got that in common with cats like Tony Joe White, the great American songwriter. Again, when he, when he wasn't writing songs, he'd go out in the bayou fishing somewhere, you know, ... be up the Mississippi River somewhere, you know, ... fishing for catfish ... So, yeah, I've got that in common with those cats and I love that. Yeah, ... that's the north Queensland you know, that's the Queensland side, you know, that's, that's me, you know, and ... and I've played sport, I play blind cricket, played for Queensland, against New South Wales. I mean how good's that.

Annie: That is good. Yeah.

Annie: So Geoff is there something we haven't asked about that we should?

Jeff: I think I covered it, I sort of covered it when I said when I sort of said a when I talked about what sort of work I've done... out of the arts and disability.

Annie: Yeah.

Jeff: And I think I've covered that already.

Annie: Okay. Yeah.

Jeff: And, ... that was one suggestion of mine. And... you've told me that you've got that from a few other people as well. I'm not surprised.

Annie: Yeah,

Jeff: certainly. But yeah, certainly ... most of my career still is. I mean, it's funny. People sometimes people used to ask me, so would you play with other blind the rest of the guys in the band blind? for Christ's sake? No, I mean there isn't that many blind musicians in Brisbane who can play what I play. Yeah, ... now, you know, ... if I want to play - play Cherokee it's 350 beats per minute. I want to have cats ... who can play Cherokee at 350 beats per minute. Yes. You know I wrote a thing called Spirit Train,

which goes even faster. And, you know, I said, I want to be able to play with cats who can play that stuff. Yes. You know, ... look, if a blind cat comes along who can play that.

Jeff: And there's been a couple. And there's ... one young man that I started teaching when he was ten back in the 1990s and he's gone on. I don't know where he is now. I think he's in Melbourne, a wonderful piano player and you know, I taught him for three or four years. Then he went to the con for a year or so in the early 2000s. I got to teach him again. And you know ... But when I finished teaching him but then he sort of grew an arm and a leg after that. By the time I encountered him again, he was a really good pianist, you know, and then he did that all by himself, you know, which is really good. So, you know, there's cats around who can, you know, and but ... by choice, I don't go, you know, the other cats have got to be blind. Yes. Yeah. Because if I did that, I'd cut my career very, very short. Very, very quickly. Yes. You know, and I love playing solo gigs.

Annie: Yes.

Jeff: I'm doing a very good one on Saturday night at a place called Helios Brewery.

Annie: Okay.

Jeff: It's at 15 Palomar Road, Yeerongpilly.

Annie: Right.

Jeff: And the beer's great. And it's a number 15, right? It's just like my little piece that I wrote 15 years ago. And it's across from the railway line.

Annie: Yes, perfect setting, then.

Jeff: Perfect setting. ... my perfect solo gig where I can kick back and play for 3 hours, get paid handsomely for doing so. And there's train's across the road from me and ... there's a burger van out the back. Yeah. And the beer is great.

Annie: Oh that's awesome.

Jeff: The address is number 15. Yes.

Annie: We, we, we might end it there. Thank you so much for your time. That's been wonderful.

Jeff: Yeah, that's. That's all right. It's been my pleasure. Lovely.