

# Flying Heavy Metal:

## A CONVERSATION WITH BRUCE DICKINSON

STORY *Ken Donohue*

**BRUCE DICKINSON IS KNOWN BY MANY AS THE LARGER-THAN-LIFE LEAD SINGER OF THE BRITISH ROCK BAND IRON MAIDEN. HIS ALTER EGO IS THAT OF A PILOT AND BUSINESSMAN. AIRWAYS HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SPEAK WITH DICKINSON ABOUT HIS AVIATION AND MUSICAL PURSUITS.**

### How did your interest in aviation start?

My godfather, John Booker, was a flight sergeant in the Royal Air Force in World War II, and he participated in the siege of Malta. He was a very talented working class guy, and he passed on the aviation bug to me. I would go to airshows with him and sit on his shoulders. And I remember hearing the noise from the airplanes and thinking that it was impressive.

I would play with these apprentice airplane models that John would build. They all had a story. Like the felt on the bottom of the four-engine Liberator that came from a pool table that had been bombed, or another where the parts had come from the melted windshield of a Spitfire.

Later, when I was in Army Cadets, I had the key to the training buildings and, in one, there was an old Link Trainer [a type of flight simulator built between the 1930s and 1960s]. I would sneak in and play around just trying to keep the wings level.

### When did you start thinking seriously about becoming a Pilot?

I was a bit of a late starter. I was 29 when I took a trial flying lesson. Our drummer, Nico, had his private Pilot's license, and I had gone flying with him a few times. I thought that maybe I should have a go. After that first introductory flight, I asked myself why I hadn't done this 10 years earlier. Probably because I was more interested in being a rock star back then.

That first flight was in a Cessna 152, the same airplane that got most people into flying. I was in Florida and the trial flight cost \$35. I went back every day for a week, and I had seven hours in a temporary log book.

I returned home to England and asked a Flight Instructor if he could take me up and teach me some things. Then, while on tour in New Zealand, I went to a flight school, and they had an aerobatic plane that looked cool, so I asked if we could do some spins. I had been mucking around a bit and the Instructor took me inside and

I did about seven hours of class work. I learned about lift and drag, and I thought, wow, this is cool.

It got my brain churning and I started reading about aerodynamics—it was all very interesting. I never thought I could be a Pilot because, in grade school, I had flunked out of physics and hated math. Then, I realized that, with the right motivation, you can learn everything you need to know. I look back at the useless teachers I had and wonder why they couldn't have motivated me.

I was working on a solo record in Los Angeles, and I thought that this was the perfect opportunity to get serious about flying. I went to a flight school in Santa Monica to get my Pilot's license. I would show up at the school at seven each morning and then, by mid-day, I'd be at the recording studio until eight in the evening, and then I'd hit the books.

### How did you get started in music?

Strangely enough, I only got interested in music when I was about 13 years old. At the time, I was more interested in being a drummer, but I realized that wasn't going to work out, and a band at school needed a new singer. They said that I was better at singing than being a drummer.

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/ airways interview / BRUCE DICKINSON



When I was 17, I got kicked out of boarding school, so I had to take my exams to get into university elsewhere. I didn't do a whole lot of work in university, but I did get a degree in modern history, which I know is kind of an oxymoron.

While in university, I was in a band, and we were semi-professional—doing shows in pubs. We even had an agent, although he was useless. At one of our shows, someone came in looking for a singer for their band. I told them I had to finish my degree first, but I could join them in three weeks. I went straight from my last exam to rehearsing with this band called Samson.

We put out three albums, and the genre was the new wave of British heavy metal. We were in the same space as Def Leppard and Iron Maiden. We all knew each other. In fact, one time, we were on the same bill as Maiden, and I was backstage. I thought to myself, "Wow, if I was in that band, imagine the incredible things we could do!" I admit that there was a little arrogance there.

A year later, Iron Maiden was looking for a new singer and they asked me. That was in 1981. I asked them if they were sure they wanted me. I told them I was very opinionated and I would be a pain in the ass, wanting to change things up.

**Do you feel that Bruce the musician and Bruce the Pilot are different characters—like Jekyll and Hyde?**

One is an external character and the other internal. There are a lot of similarities. Everything in music is external. It's big and blown up. It must be that way to

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be successful, because you need to entertain people. So, that's the view that people see. Flying is the opposite. It's very internal. No one knows what problems you have had to resolve before they became problems. There is a huge satisfaction in flying airplanes.

Music is not dissimilar. People ask what it's like to be on stage with 25,000 people in front of you. I'm too busy to think about it. At the same time that I am working my external persona and waving my arms, I am singing my ass off, while also doing complex music with the band. We have to make it all look and sound seamless. It's hard work, but it's not a million miles away from flying a plane.

**Your tour planes have all been called Ed Force One, when did this start?**

Ed Force One was conceived when I was with my solo band, and we rented a Piper Navajo in Texas for a tour of the US. The plane was a rust bucket; we crammed all our equipment in and I flew the band from city to city. It was quite an experience, and this was before I was flying commercial. We ended up calling that plane Ed Force One.

At the end of that tour, we were flying to New York, and I told the band that Detroit was down below. They started singing Detroit Rock City by KISS. I was talking to Air Traffic Control, and all they could hear was the band singing, and they asked me if everything was okay up there.

I landed the Navajo at New York's JFK Airport at three in the morning. I remember that the landing fee was \$16. We were taking our equipment out of the

plane, and an airport worker asked if we had a limousine coming. I told him we couldn't afford a limo, but asked if he had any shopping trolleys we could use. The British Airways terminal wasn't open that early in the morning; so there we were, hanging out in front of the terminal with our long hair, drinking beer, and our trolleys full of equipment. The morning sun began reflecting on the wings of parked planes, one of which was the Concorde. And I thought, "This is what it's all about. This is cool."

**Why did you choose the Boeing 747 for your Book of Souls world tour?**

On previous tours, we used the Boeing 757. It was cheap to lease, and we made some modifications to fit in all the equipment. Our payload, then, was 14.5 tons. The first time we did it, we weren't sure we'd make money. But we did, and had two other world tours with that aircraft.

The 757 was a game-changer for us, but it was kind of like the moon landing. The first time you do it, it's like, "Wow!" The second time it's still cool but, by the third tour, it was like, "OK, that's been done."

When we started thinking about another tour, I met some guys from Air Atlanta Icelandic and, over coffee, I asked if they had a spare airplane in a passenger configuration. They had a Boeing 747 in all white, so I asked them if they wanted to do a world tour with it.

There was a little delay, because I was diagnosed with throat cancer, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to sing again. After

going through the treatment, I was cleared to sing and we set a 72-date world tour.

The 747 was a 2003 model that had originally flown for Air France, and was in great shape. I needed to be hired as a Pilot with Air Atlanta and had to get type-rated on the big Boeing. I have about 7,000 hours on heavy jets, with more than 5,500 hours of that time as Commander on the Boeing 757, so I did about three weeks of ground school and 11 simulator sessions.

### **What was it like flying the 747, compared to the 757?**

The 757 is a rocket from the crypt. It's overpowered like you can't believe. Boeing was crazy to have stopped producing them. I flew this type when I was a commercial Pilot with Astraeus Airlines before they went out of business. The 747, of course, takes things to a new level. It handles extremely well and the technology on that aircraft is wonderful—it's a great airplane. And it was like having my own tour bus with two bunks.

### **Did you do most of the flying during the tour?**

I flew most of the sectors and I must confess that I tried to do as many of the landings as I could. The longest sector was a 12.5-hour flight from Los Angeles to Tokyo's Haneda Airport. And the shortest was a 25-minute hop from Seattle's Sea-Tac International Airport to Everett's Paine Field, the production facility for Boeing's 747, 767, 777, and 787 aircraft.

I have a namesake at Boeing who is the chief project engineer of the 747 program, and he was jazzed about us flying the 747, so he invited us to the Boeing

facility in Everett. They gave us a water cannon salute. I had an opportunity to chat with employees and toured the factory line.

One challenge in flying the aircraft was dealing with the huge variety of weights. We had max fuel of 170 tons for the Los Angeles-Tokyo flight and, at other times, we'd take off with very little weight. Sometimes we had to tanker in fuel, so we had a lot of weight, while landing on short runways. Like in Perth. The long runway was closed, so we could only use the 7,500ft runway. If there was any float on the landing we'd have to go around.

### **Did you have a role in designing the aircraft's livery?**

I can't take any credit for it. I was involved only in as much as reviewing it on a regular basis. Sarah Philp, who works in our Phantom Music office, designed the livery. She's very talented and a Pilot herself.

### **Was it an emotional letdown when the tour ended?**

It was a long tour—about six months. At 58, I'm the youngest in the band, and you get tired and don't seem to ever get untired. The adrenaline kicks in when you do a show, but you can't have a bad day, because of social media. There is a lot of pressure. And the adrenaline only works for so long before you run out of gas. Our batteries are recharged now and we're going on tour in the coming year for about three months.

### **Will you kit out an Airbus A380 for your next tour?**

[Laughs.] No, we'll use a truck for this one. Although, maybe we

should do it by train so we can lower our carbon footprint.

### **What is your role in Cardiff Aviation?**

I'm not much into titles, but I'm the Chairman. I have a business partner and we started Cardiff Aviation in 2012. We do three things: we fix airplanes, we fly them, and we train Pilots. We're based at a former Royal Air Force base, in southern Wales. It's a superb facility. Along with having flight simulators for the Boeing 737-400 and the Sikorsky S61 helicopter, we also have a four-bay maintenance facility that can accommodate four narrow-bodies or two Boeing 767s. We're certified to do C-checks on all Boeing and Airbus narrow-bodies and, soon, we'll have certification to do C-checks on the Boeing 767.

We also have a couple of Boeing 737-400 aircraft that we operate through wet lease agreements. In the next year, we'll add more 737s to our fleet and we'll have our Boeing 767 operational. We're guns for hire, really. We did a lot of flying this past summer for Meridiana, an Italian airline. And we are now operating for Air Djibouti. My business partner is the CEO of that airline and, later this year, we'll have five aircraft flying for them.

### **What advice do you have for people not sure what they want to do?**

Find out what you're passionate about and explore it. Go for it, and throw yourself into it, if you want to grow yourself and stretch yourself. Whatever kind of endeavor you do, find your passion or you'll drop out of it. 🎧

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