



Pictures: RAYMOND PRESTON



A STRANGE thing happens to time when Alex Jay speaks — it gets crushed. Maybe it's the skill of any great radio DJ — an ability to cram a large amount of words into a small pocket — but after what seemed like a two-hour interview with The Jay Thang, I glanced down at my Dictaphone and saw the thing had been recording for less than 90 minutes.

That's not to say time drags when you're in Jay's company — his manic demeanour makes that impossible — but his voice, with all its drowning giggles and glassy rims, tricks time. And you don't mind because when you're face-to-face with Jay, and you hear him speaking, you feel like you've transcended into some dark, crackling realm between the visual and auditory. You're not sure where the physical ends and the invisible begins because the voice is so, so familiar, yet the facial expressions that accompany it are not. Without a face, his voice has no solidity; it just drifts through the tiny holes of your speaker cover, becoming tangible only once it's in your mind.

Now, sitting across from him, the voice has a body, it's an apparition made of frequencies. Meeting Alex Jay is like some bizarre, radio-melting acid trip. Even his surname isn't real (he refuses to reveal what it is).

Ironically, for a man who can squeeze and shape time, it is length of time that has transformed Jay into this dual being. This year marks the 25th that he has been on radio — seeping into our cars, homes and offices and being a million places at once. He now presents the *Afternoon Drive* on 94.7 Highveld Stereo weekdays from 3pm to 7pm. The 47-year-old Thang has been omniscient for a quarter of a century.

He was there in the '80s and early '90s when things were bad; he was there when things got good and there when the world choked on the steel and smoke of 9/11. He was there when we won and when we lost, when we were happy and when we were scared. Like a friend of mine remarked, if you were on a plane that was going down and Alex Jay's voice was slithering through the PA, it wouldn't seem so bad. You might even find your impending death funny.

If it hadn't been for Jay's admitted inability to keep a band together, and a chance phone call, most of us would never have heard The Voice. After his band, Tangent, broke up in the early '80s, Jay applied for a job as a sound engineer at Talk Radio 702. He was told by a woman over the phone that there were no positions available but that he had "a lovely voice" and should consider coming in for an audition. In 1983, he sat behind a mic for the first time.

"I'm in radio because my band broke up, because I decided I didn't want to be an actor, because I couldn't cut it as a journo and because law takes too long," Jay says. "Radio was a happy accident."

Jay, who was born in Scotland and moved to South Africa when he was four, has always been a dissenter. There are several times in the interview when he uses the word "anarchy" and, when he does, he throws his hands out to give the term a shape, and that impish giggle of his flutters behind it. When he and Barney Simon were the only two South Africans on 702, they deliberately played new music in opposition to the '60s and '70s stuff the older British DJs were playing. "It was great because no matter what we did, we were in sh*t. We just didn't toe the party line," he says.

When he appeared on television as the presenter of *Fast Forward* in 1987, he had the opportunity to unsettle a whole new audience. Remember his spiky

The voice on the other end

This year marks Alex Jay's 25th on radio. He speaks to Oliver Roberts about evil earrings, eight-tracks, and how it's all been one big, happy accident

blond hair and that large, colourful earring?

"The hate-mail campaign when I started doing TV was fantastic," says Jay. "I mean, I wore a f**king earring, and the next thing all this sh*t hit the fan. The best was the dominee who took the trouble to register and post me a coiled-up coat hanger with a note that read: 'Stick this in your ear why don't ya?' So I tried to, live on television. I was like 'Ow! Sh*t, dominee — are you sure this is brotherly love?' You know, taking the piss. That was fun, it got people talking."

For someone with a natural inclination to question and provoke, the power of radio during the apartheid years must have been strangely frustrating in its allure. Wearing the earring of the anti-Christ on TV was one thing, but openly mouthing off the government on an SABC-owned radio station was to risk too much.

"I mostly bit my tongue on-air during that period," Jay says. "But I thought I balanced it out by what I was saying in a subversive way and, of course, by the

music I was playing. Back then, 5FM was strictly a whites-only station, and we were never allowed to position ourselves for a black audience. I was still acting in those days, and the first play I was in was *Ipi Tombi* so, of course, I was working with a lot of black people. I found out from them that 5FM's black audience was huge, but it had never been quoted as such because audiences under the apartheid government were sold as white, coloured and Asian."

Despite his mutinous tendencies, Jay has never been a shock jock. Rather than mindlessly offending listeners to create on-air debate, he presents his audience with a persona of calmness. You don't listen to Alex Jay to get angry; you listen to him because he makes you feel like everything is going to be okay.

"I've heard guys on-air making the most stupid comments, and it's because they're not thinking; they forget they're talking to a broader audience," says Jay. "I've never been crude; it's not in my nature. I'm a pleaser, that's unfortunately how I am.

ALEX JAY'S TOP 25 ALBUMS OF ALL TIME

(In no particular order)

OK Computer — Radiohead
Kid A — Radiohead
In Rainbows — Radiohead
The White Album — The Beatles
The Grey Album — Danger Mouse/Jay Z/The Beatles
The Hissing of Summer Lawns — Joni Mitchell
Zandisile — Simphiwe Dana
The Song Remains the Same — Led Zeppelin
The Chronic — Dr Dre
Dark Side of the Moon — Pink Floyd
Never Mind the Bollocks — The Sex Pistols
Heavy Weather — Weather Report
Aja — Steely Dan
The Joshua Tree — U2
Mezzanine — Massive Attack
Fulfillingness 1st Finale — Stevie Wonder
Graceland — Paul Simon
4 — Peter Gabriel
Goddank vir Klank — The Springbok Nude Girls
Continuum — John Mayer
Autobahn — Kraftwerk
Violator — Depeche Mode
New Adventures in Hi-Fi — R.E.M.
Sign 'O' the Times — Prince
Remain in Light — Talking Heads



'I'm always in the mood for my show. No matter how I'm feeling before, within five minutes of being on the air, I'm smiling, I'm having a jol'

I can only be happy if everyone around me is happy."

And the remarkable thing about Jay is that, on-air, he's forever happy, even at five in the morning: "I'm always in the mood for my show. Nobody will believe this but, no matter how tired I am or how I'm feeling beforehand, within five minutes of being on the air, I'm smiling, man, I'm having a jol."

DJs are the keeper of *zeitgeist* because they are the average citizen's instant sounding board. Their responsibility is that they speak for the masses and define boundaries. And while no editing can stop the faceless oracle from speaking, she or he also can't hide from the feelings of the millions who roam unseen in the physical realms of sunlight and sleep. The invisibles on the other end of the wire are the DJ's static burden and, over 25 years, Jay has been part of our liberal nurturing.

"This country has changed radically, and the youth were the first to embrace the change when the Nats loosened the collar a bit," he says. "Now, 25 years later, we are almost beyond where I thought our kids would be. They are confident and have blind faith in their ability to speak their mind. We're world beaters." He rates 5FM's Anele Mdoda as the hottest thing on local radio right now.

Rapid advances in technology have changed radio forever. We have satellite and Internet radio and crisp, digital music. But like the old photographer who loves his digital camera but misses the smell of lab chemicals and the gentle dance of film in his hands, the old-school radio DJ misses the corporeality of chunky mechanics.

"When I started, our choice was vinyl, quarter-inch tape and this horrendous, bastardised version of the old eight-track," Jay says. "What I miss about those days is that it was more tactile. The idea of queueing it up and taking it back that quarter turn, getting it ready and hitting go... it all made you feel like you were more a part of the process. However, the computer stuff now gives us a level of control and the ability to mess around that we never had with vinyl."

Surely all this nostalgia can't mean The Jay Thang is getting old, can it? The thought of him disappearing from the unseen is somehow unsettling as if, to find him again, you'd have to go to a large cerebral library full of old vinyls and spend days searching for him among all those faded covers. Without Jay's voice, our airwaves would weigh less and be slightly cooler to the ear's touch.

"Have I got 25 years left? Not in this country," is his blunt rebuttal. "I'd like to travel the world and do radio. There are lots of possibilities; my wife and I just have to wait for our three kids to grow up and get through varsity. I've done the math, I think it's eight years. Then I can relax."

Let's hope Jay's voice doesn't do its spooky thing and make those eight years feel like three.