

**By Darrin Baker**  
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*The Polish scientist and astronomer Copernicus was party to an idea that now seems as commonplace as tap water, but at the time shook the foundations of power in Europe. He, along with others, observed that the earth was a celestial body that took its place in the universe in an arc around the sun, and not vice versa. John and I would often marvel at this wondrous fact, staring like madmen at the night sky...*

*And now to a brief series of orbits, the arcs and intersections of Johnny Baker. For this first orbit I would like you to indulge me briefly and close your eyes, because although this tale ends bathed in light, it begins in darkness.*

**Orbit 1: One of my earliest memories of John, perhaps my first.**

I'm perhaps 3, maybe 4. I am standing in the backyard, facing the house, it is afternoon. John is about to play a magic trick of sorts on me. He has a basketball in hand, and he explains the trick. He is going to launch this ball into space with one almighty throw of his, and it will orbit the earth and return, and would I like to see this happen?

"Yes," I say greedily.

"Okay," he says, "I'm going to throw the ball up into space, and then you have to close your eyes for a moment, okay?"

I nod, excited at the thought of a basketball heading around the planet.

3, 2, 1...BLAST OFF! John lifts the ball and hurls it directly above his head, and almost instantly yells out to me CLOSE YOUR EYES! I obey, then a moment later he says,

"you can open your eyes now". I open them to find nothing. He's standing there, smile on his face, head tilted toward the sky.

"What now?" I say.

"We wait for it to return," he explains, and so we stand there in the backyard for a minute or so. For added effect he implores me to keep a look out, so that we don't miss it upon its return. I'm straining my eyes, searching out the clear blue sky above for any sign. He's getting excited now.

"I think I see it" he cries, but I can see nothing.

"There!" He says.

"I can't see it?" I reply anxiously.

"Close your eyes a moment, I think it's coming back!" He cries out, and I obey.

"Here it comes, open your eyes!!?" He yells excitedly.

I look up in time to see the ball, now falling back down toward earth, into John's arms. He catches it and shows it to me, and we inspect it for, well...we inspect it for signs of having orbited the earth.

Magic and music. Same amount of letters, same beginning, same ending. Both born from the desire to entertain, to startle and transform, and to create from nothing, something, with little more than one's hands and a few fashioned props.

### **Orbit 2: The spreading of wings, the loosening, the gathering anew.**

He is possessed. The house at Rooty Hill shakes, the afternoon game shows our dad watches in the lounge room are mime, nothing in the house can be heard over the combined weight of sound emanating from the bedroom, as John and his friends play prog rock songs through amps turned up to 11. The house is literally vibrating. Mumsy is wrestling fried chicken in the kitchen. Kids are riding their bikes up and down the road laughing and listening to the sound. It is immense. I am lying under the bottom bunk in the bedroom where John and the band are playing. There's an unusual smell in the room, the blinds are drawn and candles are perched precariously around the room. The band is in full flight. I'm lying under the bunk, in total darkness, and I'm being enveloped in a wall of sound, passing through my entire being.

Before long John has moved out to Harris St in Parramatta, where the house fills with even more amps and guitars. His orbit from home has begun, and our family go like pilgrims, to see and experience where his journey extends. More people, the chaos and laughter of others, orbits intersecting as others make their way from homes dotted amongst the suburbs of Sydney. The world exhales and for those who are ready with wings raised, they are carried, into flight.

### **Orbit 3. The lover of arcs and journeys.**

Music carries John to and from us like a comet. Music has possessed him, reinforcing a seat of love forged within him. His pace is furious, a need for speed great. Whenever he appears back at Rooty Hill it's as if a caravan of noise and laughter and people are constantly in tow. Our home fills with his friends, his lovers, his guitars, he takes me on trips to guitar shops for strings, we go to cake shops for lamingtons.

Mum fires up the old large frypan, and gets in massive quantities of chicken drumsticks. She cooks while John and his troupe talk and laugh and play guitar and he tells of his travels and his next musical adventure. He jumps in the car and drives off to visit Chook, he heads off to see Barb and Lawrence, he races off to a gig, he naps, he talks. Mum shakes her head and keeps the fried chicken coming, she sees the essence of his being. Music, she says, is his life. And then he's gone, the comet leaves again and again, his arcs growing ever wider, more complex, richer as they gather force and attract other celestial bodies, orbiting each other in a furious dance of energy born from music.

We all leave home, and he finds his way onto cruise ships, a new form of arcing around the globe for him. He writes long letters about the ocean, especially at night, the play of the moon's light across vast heaving seas. He meets Greg and Murray and many others, he plays, and he plays, and he falls in love and in love and in love. His heart heaves like the ocean. He admits to me on one particular visit to shore that he has seen many places, but now is the time to grow his music, to write. At uni at the time studying writing, I encourage him, knowing that his poet's heart needs to find its voice.

And then an arc becomes a binary star system. He meets Gayle. As mumsy said to him, son, she is your Waterloo. He sees it and knows it. Theirs arcs, once

fused, cannot be broken. He announces one day to us that he's moving to Adelaide, and mum is relieved. She's the one, she says, and mumsy is right. Gayle and Adelaide is for John a whole other complex arrangement of arcs and celestial bodies. His music grows with Gayle, his writing sweetens and ripens, his lifelong love of poetry and prose now finding another voice. They write, they play, they travel, they gather force in their own arcing. John is embraced by all in a new home, and he feels beloved, which is reflected in the music he writes.

### **A final autumn arc, the leaving and the light.**

One of our final journeys together was a walk we took from the home he shared with Gayle down to the river. The sky was clear, the sun warming us as we shuffled down Autumn Ave. John had just finished his induction into the SA Hall of Fame only two days before. He had been buoyed by the occasion, it had lifted him, because it had brought so many of the people he loved together. Many of you here today were there.

But our walk had started on a sombre note. He had asked that we stroll, and he wanted to talk. He opened the conversation by saying that he had regrets in life, and asked me if I ever felt that same.

"Of course" I said, and I meant it. "How does anyone live a life and not feel regret? And surely, without regret, how does anyone ever assess what they have done, the things they've tried and failed at, as well as succeeded?"

My response felt simplistic. A dying man wants to say he has regrets, why not let him speak? I could see that although I had placated him, I had not heard him out, and so I asked him what he felt regret over.

John's response was intriguing. He said that it was no single or nameable thing, it was more a feeling, like something that had crept into his bones and he could not get it out. He said that looking at old photos made him sad, that music moved him very deeply, and that he drifted in and out of melancholy a lot.

By now we had made it down to the mighty river Torrens. We saw some young men fishing, they had caught nothing, but seemed happy to be just out trying their luck.

John - as ever - was curious about what I was doing, what I was reading, exploring. I told him that I had been looking at scriptwriting, but coming at it from a very fresh, new perspective. I was very interested in an idea around identity, and that it intersected quite deeply with my reflections upon John's life.

"Why me?" he asked.

"This writer talks about character, and notions of identity and essence within characters. In great storytelling, regardless of what form, a similar journey takes place."

As ever, I could see that glint appear in his eye, we were heading toward the marrow, to the deep, a place where he loved to be, a place where ideas are free, where our minds could roam.

I explained Mike Hauge's theory that the character's arc or journey, was the same as the author's journey, and that of the audience as well.

"But what's the journey?" John asked.

"It's the journey from identity to essence. To put it simply, everyone has an identity, and that identity is shaped by the things we buy, the careers we have, the houses we own; by things. Things are important, they help us navigate through life. But things also are what we use to cover ourselves, to conceal our deeper selves, our essence. Great storytelling reveals this desire for us to understand this journey from identity to essence, from the things we acquire along the way, to the inner journey toward the centre of our own being." We stopped for a moment, he drew breath, we examined a flower. In the distance traffic drifted along.

"And what has impressed me," I said, animated, now realising why we were talking about this, "is that you have lived closer to your essence than anyone I know. Music, and your love for it, filled you up from the inside. It is your essence, and you made it your essence, and it allowed you to love the people you love and play music your entire life. Not many people can truly say that about their life."

We were by now walking back toward the flat. We were walking slowly, there was no hurry, but he was getting tired. There was silence between us, I could tell he was processing what I'd said.

And in a moment that was rare for John, he put his humility to one side and reflected upon my observation of his life.

"You're right" he said, with little or no fanfare. "I have lived my life like this, and I have tried to remain close to my essence. Music, once it entered the core of me all those years ago, has been there all along."

And the final moments of this conversation revealed his lack of envy.

"I never really wanted what other people strived for, but I always respected the fact that people strived for things. Everyone strives for things. I strived to follow music, and the mysteries contained in it."

We stopped at the letterbox and collected the mail. Bills, letters from the hospital. John gathered them, and we shuffled up the stairs.

We sat down outside and had a cup of tea and some chocolate wafers, whilst my children played table tennis nearby, and we were bathed in sunshine. The breeze picked its way through the bamboo behind us.

I said to him that I thought *There is a Truth* was the finest song he had written, that in its construction and execution he had achieved entirely what he had set out to do. And most importantly the song had captured something of his essence, the richness of his inner life. He humbly accepted the praise, and then I asked him for one last favour: would he mind playing the song for me, one more time, there in the light, and of course, he did.

And now, one more time for all of us, *There is a Truth*...(video rolls)