

Plaque unveiling for Alan Morris, 24 February 2021

Speech by business partner and co-founder of *Mojo*, Allan Johnston¹

120½ Underwood Street ... Our happiest and most successful years were here. Mo would be chuffed to have his plaque right here ... we both loved the place.

John Singleton owned the building, and still does ... he had his SPASM agency here before us.

I first met Mo when he was the creative director at Mullins Clarke and Ralph where he had won a Caxton Award for his print work for Jaguar. It was the seventies and a lot of creative people were tired of the formal structure of established ad agencies and decided being freelance would mean more freedom and more fun. We used to gather at the Park Inn Hotel where you could grill your own steak and have a glass of cheap red which suited our meagre earnings at the time.

One day Mo, or Alan, as he was known then, asked me how I was handling the freelance gig. I said I found it hard to get motivated and was sleeping in and generally just hanging around. "Me too" he said, "I have to get in the car and drive around the block to pretend I'm going to work!"

So we decided to rent an office together and found a place in Burton Street, Darlinghurst for fifty bucks a week plus 5 bucks we'd sling the film company receptionist downstairs to take messages while we were at lunch. You couldn't miss lunch in those days. That's where Mo introduced me to Judith, who, unfortunately can't be here today, and we asked her look after our paltry finances. She still looks after Mo's estate nearly half a century later.

We both had separate clients in the beginning, but began bouncing ideas off each other as time went by. After a year or so we decided to form a partnership and split everything down the middle. Just a simple handshake kept us together all those halcyon days.

We decided on the name Mojo because it was supposed to be a lucky charm but mainly because it was the first two letters of our surnames. The MO from Morris and the JO from Johnston. The traditional agencies, in those days, liked to sound like lawyers, with names like Hansen Rubensohn McCann Erickson, or Walker Roberts, McGuire. Made them sound important or something.

Anyway, the first time Mo answered, "Mojo" it was a fellow copywriter, John Anstey, who said, "Mojo! Sounds like a bloody Mexican restaurant." Just about everything is called Mojo today from bottles of wine to beachwear. Ahead of our

¹ This document contains the text of Allan Johnston's speech as given on 24 February, 2021. The layout was re-formatted and a title added by Woollahra Libraries staff.

time. Another caller asked to speak to Alan. (We were both Alans) “Which Alan?” Mo asked. “The short one.” “Which short one?” “The short one with a beard.” “Which short one with a beard.” And so it was we became known as Mo and Jo.

As business began to grow we moved to Mary Place, in Paddo which had more room for the art directors we would hire from time to time, as we were both writers, and couldn't do a layout or design a logo if our lives depended on it.

That's when we bought our first answering machine which allowed us to escape to lunch. There were often deathly silences when the caller heard our little ditty on the other end:

*The Mojo ain't home, the Mojo ain't home,
Just leave your name on the answering phone.
Wait for the bip, wiggle your lip.
We'll ring you back, lickety split.
Oh, the Mojo ain't home, the Mojo ain't home,
Just leave a message on the answering phone.*

I give Mo credit for most of that insanity. It's a wonder we ever got any business.

But a good businessman he was ... when we'd quote a job he'd add 10 percent then stamp less 10 percent if payed in seven days. It worked a treat back then. If they didn't pay in seven days we made the extra 10 percent. No flies on Mo.

Before we teamed up I used to charge \$250 for a Winfield script with Paul Hogan. The whole commercial production was around \$40,000. My fee was a pittance. Once we started collaborating, Mo upped the fee to \$2,500. No one complained, so a few months later he upped it to \$5,000 and in the end we were charging \$10,000 per script.

Another time Dick Smith got us over to his office and told us how he and the family were going to tour the world in a helicopter and Channel 10 were going to make a 13-week TV series. He wanted us to do him something like the musical theme for the hit series MASH, to introduce every episode. “How much would you want for that?” he asked. \$10,000 dollars says Mo. Wily Dick Smith says, “I'll give you five!” Quick as a flash Mo says, “We'll give you half a song.”

We didn't get the job, but he'd just spent half an hour bragging about this Cecil B. DeMille production and then tried to screw us. So screw him.

We were doing pretty well, so we bought a huge terrace in Glenmore Road, near Five Ways. One of our mates dubbed it “Tara,” as in Gone with the wind.

Then we hired a young lad as an assistant. He was a terrific young bloke and everyone liked him. One day he called to say he had sprained his ankle and couldn't walk. Mo sympathised with him and then asked where he was calling from. (No mobiles in those days). "The public phone box", Neil replied. "How did you get there?" Mo asked. Big silence.

You had to get up early to put one over Mo.

Seaview Wines, who were based in Melbourne had a job for us, so Mo went down for the brief. When he returned he was very impressed with their Coonawarra range, and, as they let him have them at wholesale prices, he bought some. Good thinking, Mo. A few days later a semi-trailer arrived and delivered a pallet ... That's 64 dozen from memory and came with an invoice for \$3,000 dollars, which was serious money back then!

"Mo!! I said, 'we've got to go on an economy drive!'" He snapped back, "No! We've got to spend our way out of this poverty!"

We had boxes of wine stacked to the ceiling in every corner of the rooms. Mates would drop in for a drink after work, and seeing all this top shelf vino would, naturally ask if they could buy some. And so the stock dwindled down fairly quickly and mostly on the 'I'll pay you later' basis. Mostly, none of them paid; but mates tend to do that.

A lot of agencies were making big money from campaigns we had created, so we started thinking about becoming an accredited agency so we could reap the benefits of our own work. We asked John Singleton about it and he was adamant we should stay as we were but charge a royalty for any increase in sales. It was a good idea, but we couldn't see Tooheys or Meadow Lea buying it, as their sales had gone through the roof.

I looked out the window as he left Tara and said, "Mo – he's just driven off in a Rolls Royce!" That was it.

Mo's brother Don was Managing Director of the Masius Agency and he organised for Masius to finance us in exchange for shares. When one journalist questioned Mo as to why we had become an agency when we had turned our backs on the system years before, "It appealed to our sense of greed!" he quipped. Stopped the journo in his tracks.

Underwood Street had become available after a while, so we jumped at it and it was the best decision we ever made. There weren't many of us to fill the Bonython Gallery - there were only a dozen or so of us at the time - so rather than have a half-empty building we invited some of our freelance mates to share the space.

There was a big kitchen with two big fridges and a big island table where we would all gather for drinks after work. Drinks were all on the house and every night was a hoot. The girls were as wild as the boys and I clearly remember a couple of the girls arm wrestling over the table and being cheered on by all and sundry. Guitars would come out and we'd have singalongs and there was an old pianola we'd brought with us from Glenmore Road and Sandy Wheatley would pedal away and play all the old songs of yesteryear.

Life was pretty good and business was booming. There was one copywriter working for us who wouldn't get in till mid-morning and go home mid-afternoon. Now that was okay, because he didn't go to long lunches so he was putting in as many hours as the lunch bunch. But not for Mo. Mo was an early starter and so he nicknamed this guy, "Lawrence." I asked him why and he said: "After Lawrence Dry Cleaners ... In by ten out by four." The name stuck.

Mo was a lateral thinker and saw things differently than other people and was as sharp as a tack. He was a great print writer and his lyrics were always fresh and often inspired. However, his rhymes were often questionable and being a fan of Cole Porter and Rogers and Hart I was pretty finicky about strict rhyming.

"That doesn't rhyme" I would say. "No, but it Rims," he would retort. And it worked. "When you get cut so horrible you have to go to hospital" and Albert Namatjira with Waltzing Matilda ...

And so it went, that assonance became part of our trade mark. As long as there was a resemblance of sound we were good to go. The funny thing is that all the hip hop of today does it all the time.

Then came the merger with Monahan, Dayman and Adams, which John Singleton described as "Like merging the Beatles with the Post Office." He was right, it wasn't a good culture mix, even though our client billings grew to \$250 million and we moved to swish new premises in Cremorne' things were never the same; even Mo and I began to have our differences.

Eventually we sold out to the Los Angeles Creative Shop, Chiat-Day, and Mo had tired of the whole thing which had turned out to be everything we'd escaped from in the first place.

But the years here were unforgettable ... exciting and adventurous. We were one big happy family and keep in touch to this day. Those years produced ad campaigns people still recall fondly and put Mo and I in The Advertising Hall of Fame. He was truly an unforgettable character, and this plaque will be witness to that.

Thank you all.