



A little travelin' music: One pilot's journey to connect people and why his Grammy-winning bandmates choose Delta

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Pictured above: Capt. Dean M. Collins (left) and Kenny Aronoff (right)

by Stan Heaton, Flight Ops Communication

Dean M. Collins is a 737 captain based in LAX, a 22-year Delta employee, a former Navy C-2 pilot and an old Kentucky guy like me. He also happens to record rock music with Grammy-winning legends. I spoke with him ahead of this year's Grammy Awards on Jan. 26 to figure out how he found himself among rock's elite players and how music and aviation intertwine.

Dean's story is the kind of Hollywood tale people dream about. He had lunch with an old friend where he met a guy who knew another guy who just so happened to

be world-class drummer Kenny Aronoff. Kenny has played with the living Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Lady Gaga, Johnny Cash, John Mellencamp, Meatloaf and more. He's also a raving Delta fan.

"Delta is my number one favorite airline to fly in the USA and all over the world!" Kenny said. "I love the planes, the comfort, first class for sure, the service and the Delta lounges."

Like Dean, Kenny is from a small town, and when he heard that Dean was writing music that tried to connect people back to those roots, he was eager to record, and he connected Dean with even more world-renowned artists.

Humble beginnings

Dean was a kid, roving around Bardstown, Ky. with his guitar in the late 60s and early 70s when that community had the highest per capita losses of any city from the Vietnam War. He remembers being particularly struck by John Mellencamp's song "Scarecrow" about a lost farm:

"The song was about the family farm and farmers losing that. All these farms that had been in these families for generations were getting sold on the auction block for pennies on the dollar. And I remember sitting on the front porch of our farm, and I'm looking at subdivisions going in and families leaving, and it really hit home."

That feeling of loss and the importance of preserving connections has influenced Dean as a pilot and as a musician ever since.

"My job as a pilot with Delta is to connect humanity," Dean said. "I connect families, loved ones, friends, coworkers, people with a new job, a new city, a new beginning, or I bring them back home. And as a singer/songwriter, my goal is to connect people to their own humanity."

The cockpit vs. the studio

I asked Dean how he sees his two professions complementing each other, knowing the obvious differences between life in the cockpit compared to life behind a microphone.

"I actually feel so comfortable in both places," Dean said. "When you're working

with absolute professionals in the studio, you can't go in there and mess around. You have to know what you want. You have to be prepared. In that sense, the studio is similar to the cockpit."

Dean noted that while the studio is a creative space, the cockpit is definitely not.

"The cockpit is all regimented with checklists and radio calls and everything. From that point of view, it's two different sides of the brain. But as far as having a game plan, having backup plans, having contingency plans, and having the prep and training going into it, they're similar spaces."

It's all about connections

When I think about music and aviation, I can't help but think about certain songs have come to define generations. Each track is a little signpost that welcomes listeners to the parade. It signals that we're going somewhere because we have something to do, and we're going to do that thing together. Flying can be that same kind of cultural touchpoint where people assemble and share an experience if only for a while.

"Music can take you on an introspective journey and helps you travel in a different way," Dean said. "In all the hustle and bustle in today's world, we sometimes forget to check in with ourselves and with those feelings which make us human. My hope is that my words, melodies and flying can foster that."

Delta is the official airline of the Grammy's.

More from Dean

What's your favorite aircraft?

The 76ER.

Who's your favorite rock songwriter?

Paul McCartney.

Where do you most like to fly?

Europe.

When you want to unwind, do you listen to music or play music?

I play it. I actually get up in the morning with a guitar, a pad of paper, a pencil and an iPhone.

What's your favorite layover city?

I love Athens, Greece. I'm also a big fan of Rome.

What's your favorite city for music?

Nashville. You can go down Broadway in the middle of the day in some bar where your feet stick to the floor, and there's someone playing the guitar who's just phenomenal. But for classical music, Prague. There's a guy playing a cello on this corner. There's a violinist on this corner. And there's three symphonies in town.

Are you watching the Grammy's this year?

Yes. I would love to go and represent Delta in uniform sometime in the future.

In their own words . . .

Several of Dean's other bandmates are also Delta fanatics.

Thom Russo (16-time Grammy winner): "Time and time again, Delta has been the reliable source for travel myself and my family, for all personal and professional needs, including transportation to the Grammys! Oh, and one of my dearest and closest colleagues is a fantastic and artist and musician, who I've known and worked with for over 30 years . . . and who coincidentally happens to be a longtime Delta Pilot! Now that's knowing how to fly in many ways!"

Ty Bailie (Keyboardist for Grammy nominated Katy Perry): "Last tour with Katy Perry we hit 35 countries in one year alone. I don't always get to fly Delta, but when I do it feels like home away from home as soon as I step onboard."

Ralph Cacciurri (4-time Grammy winner): "I never fly anyone but Delta. I even ship my Grammys through Delta Dash!"
