Bill Luckett & Morgan Freeman

In the skies above the Mississippi Delta, are they having fun yet?

The bosom buddies are up to something. Just more hi-jinx, no doubt. They have flown their fractionally-owned Hawker to San Diego to scout out a Cessna 421, and as luck would have it, Bill Luckett and Morgan Freeman both agree: she's a beauty. Yes, that Morgan Freeman. Oscar-nominated star of *Driving Miss Daisy*, *The Shawshank Redemption* and 50-plus other well-known films. Having wrapped *The Big Bounce* the actor is paling around – as always – with his co-conspirator in cain-raising, a certain attorney from Clarksdale, Mississippi who goes by Bill Luckett and says this of their relationship.

"That's us. Out there raising hell."

"But I fell in love with him first!" laughs Freeman.

Deep in the heart of the Delta, where the bosom buddies both hail and to where, 16 years ago, the actor returned to build a home on the precise spot where his childhood shack once stood, the skies above the town of Clarksdale seldom see the likes of these two.

"He's just a cowboy in the sky!" says an admiring Luckett of his buddy.

"And he is very couragous," says a flattered Freeman of his pal.

Truth is, both are multi-engine- and instrument-rated, co-own a gorgeous refurbished Seneca II and fly so well together you'd almost swear they're dancing a cockpit pas de deux. "In the air we're like new lovers," jokes Freeman. Luckett already was a pilot when in 1966 Freeman sought his legal help on the house he and his costume-designer wife, Myrna Colley-Lee, were building in the Mississippi town where as a child he would spend Saturday afternoons downtown at the segregated theatre, "at the picture show. If it was a movie about cowboys, I tried not to miss it," says the actor who gained fame for playing everything from steely-eyed pimp (Street Smart) to military nut job (Dreamcatcher) to President of the United States (Deep Impact). The two became fast friends. And as Luckett buzzed here and there in his Cherokee 6, Freeman between films would go up with him, for fun.

"I always wanted to be a pilot as a kid," says the actor. But his 1955-59 Air Force stint as a radar mechanic ("I had no aptitude for it," he laughs) didn't put the stick in his hand. Luckett did. Says Freeman: "Bill and I started hanging out…."

"And that was the end of me." says Luckett. "He just took the controls and attacked it! Up in the air I would cross my arms and he'd do everything. And with such aggression!"

"Like I say, he was very courageous," says Freeman, who in 2002 officially earned his wings.

"I only had to save us every once in awhile."

Luckett attributes his buddy's adroit way with a plane to his accomplishment as a sailor. Indeed, the man of whom legendary film critic Pauline Kael states, "Is Morgan Freeman the greatest American actor?" has sailed from Rhode Island to the Caribbean in the yacht he docks there and, says Luckett, is a navigational whiz whose chart skills are plenty welcome when the buddies' holy hell-raising faces danger. Like that time in the Virgin Islands when they lost radio contact. Or the Gulfport, Mississippi approach with minimums of 180 feet. Or even the autopilot malfunction the buddies confronted around Decatur, IL.

"Usually I've got to keep the plane in the air – somehow. But Morgan with all his gadget know-how? Well," says Luckett. "I'm always glad he's along."

Back on the ground, the friends who fly together don't part ways at the airport. They co-own Madidi, an upscale Clarksdale French restaurant, and they are founding partners of the town's Ground Zero Blues Club, an authentic honky-tonk juke joint that celebrates this Delta region's rich blues history. From Muddy Waters to John Lee Hooker, legends that define one of America's greatest music traditions were singing the blues back when native sons Luckett and Freeman were chasing their own stars.

While Luckett earned a law degree from the University of Mississippi Law School (class of '73) and established the Luckett Tyner Law Firm, his thriving litigation practice (as well as Rossie, Luckett, Parker & Ridder in Memphis), Freeman was quietly, powerfully, collecting Obie awards for his New York stage work in, among other hits, *Coriolanus* (1979), *Gospel at Colanus* (1984) and *Driving Miss Daisy* (1987). A Golden Globe award and Oscar nomination for his role as chauffeur Hoke Colburn – a performance critic Roger Ebert called "so gentle, so perceptive, so smart – a revelation" – in the film adaptation of *Driving Miss Daisy* launched the 67-year-old actor into the stratosphere of film-making and fame. And yet, he could never forget: home.

"I've been to a lot of nice places," says Freeman, who has four children and 10 grandchildren. "However, when I have come back home there is this feeling of letting your breath out. To me, it's a safe haven here in the Delta. It's a wonderful place."

Hell, says Luckett, who could be called Clarksdale's biggest booster for all the historic preservation his real estate development interests have entailed. Why ever leave? Not when around here you've got a pal who is so much fun. "We do pull a little on people because we look so alike," laughs Luckett, who with wife Francine has four children and five grandchildren. "We like to introduce ourselves as each other."

So, now that the bosom buddies agree a 421 might be their next co-acquisition, where do they go from here?

"Onward and upward!" says Luckett. "Bigger and faster. Hey, Morgan, how about an F-18?"

"No, I'm thinking just a small Citation."

And so they go, Luckett and Freeman, sure to fly off into the sunset…together. And, as always, joking. ✕

Photograph by Robin Rushing

Just a couple of holy hell-raisers. Freeman and Luckett share a rare serious moment pre-flight (above); the business partners sit one out during a night of dancing at their popular venture, the Ground Zero Blues Club (left)