

LIFE
STORIES

LIFE STORIES

D.J. CARSWELL

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What Is Normal?

It all began when I attempted to compose a letter to a newspaper about something that had infuriated me. My wording went wrong in the first sentence: ‘Having come from a normal background ...’

Barely had these words escaped from my fingertips when they seemed to rush accusingly straight back into my head, carrying a loaded question: ‘What is normal?’

For some, ‘normal’ is having a celebrity lifestyle which includes a mansion and fast cars, but for others it is being a bus driver or playing sport, while for a few it is performing brain surgery. They are not my ‘normal’! What is yours?

The ever-rising production and output of books, magazines and newspapers plus the plethora of television programmes, websites and social media all reveal our fascination with the intimate details of other people’s lives. All the stories contained in this book are about real people. You may even recognise some of your ‘normal’ in their lives.

In my first book, *Real Lives*,¹ I interviewed people from different backgrounds and experiences who each had a story to tell of a changed life since coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

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Many more were willing to share what had happened to them. Some of them, in the following chapters, will let you follow the twists and turns of their lives as they discover the true meaning of life and hope for the future.

1

Paul Jones and Fiona Hendley – A Blues Singer and an Actress

*The blues tells a story. Every line of the blues has
a meaning.*

(John Lee Hooker)

*Blues are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are
the songs of hope.*

(Mahalia Jackson)

Tousle-haired, and still with a cheeky smile and twinkling blue eyes, Paul Jones is one of the enduring legends to have come out of the sixties musical explosion. A harmonica player, radio personality and TV presenter, Paul might be more easily recognised by some from the famous bands which brought him fame: Manfred Mann and The Blues Band. His acclaimed Radio 2 programme about the R & B scene ran for over thirty-two years, serving and entertaining a dedicated and well-informed audience. Still on the road

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doing gigs up and down the UK with his beloved harmonica (he is president of the National Harmonica League), he will also find time to chat publically about another passion of his. Something happened to him that was to change the course of his life but not his career.

Although his grandfathers were both musical (they played the trumpet, saxophone and clarinet) and his parents took up the piano and violin, Paul had no interest in playing an instrument. Despite growing up in the naval city of Portsmouth, nor did Paul follow his father into 'the senior service'. After a spell at grammar school, Paul moved to Edinburgh Academy for his final two years of schooling, before heading down south again to Jesus College, Oxford, having won an Open Exhibition. But the academic life was not to be, as consequently he left behind the lofty spires of Oxford and chose the more precarious but exciting world of pop, rhythm and blues, bands and the charts.

Paul, looking back at those early days when the whole world of music was being revolutionised, explains:

As a member of the cathedral choir, I knew that I enjoyed singing. I really didn't mind what kind of singing it was. Two boys in the year above me, who were both music fans, recommended me buying some records by Jo Stafford and Percy Faith. Well, I didn't like that music. Instead I took home Nat King Cole's 'When I Fall in Love'. I also bought 'Because of You There's a Song in My Heart'. Sammy Davis Jr. did a

PAUL JONES AND FIONA HENDLEY

very entertaining version of that, a two-sided 78 rpm. On one side he imitated singers and on the other he imitated actors. It was all uncannily brilliant. I became a lifelong fan of the man.

Along came Lonnie Donegan, who became a star with the big hit song 'Rock Island Line'. During the course of an interview Lonnie was asked, 'What on earth gave you the idea of writing this song?' In reply Lonnie admitted that he hadn't written it at all; Lead Belly had. By this time I was into jazz – Count Basie and others of that genre. Not knowing about Lead Belly, I enquired at my record store if they had anything by him. 'Lots,' they told me. So that was when I bought my first blues record and I have been a blues fanatic ever since.

Fans, including Paul, used to hang out at a club in Ealing on a Saturday night to listen to Alexis Korner's band, Blues Incorporated. Three of the people who used to go there fairly regularly were Brian Jones, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards. Charlie Watts was already in Alexis' band. Paul recalls an extraordinary conversation with Brian one day:

Brian told me that he was forming his own band and asked would I like to be his lead singer. I turned his offer down so Brian chose Mick Jagger instead! When asked if I regret that decision, I have to say that I did not turn down The Rolling Stones; I turned down a band that Brian was forming. If