



# FAB:

*An Intimate Life of Paul McCartney*

**HOWARD SOUNES**

AUTHOR OF *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan*





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To hear a playlist of music by Paul McCartney, chosen by the author and discussed in *Fab*, please visit  
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F A B

AN INTIMATE LIFE OF  
*Paul McCartney*

H O W A R D S O U N E S



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**PART ONE**

**WITH THE BEATLES**

## A LIVERPOOL FAMILY

### AT THE START OF THE ROAD

‘They may not look much,’ Paul would say in adult life of his Liverpool family, having been virtually everywhere and seen virtually everything there is to see in this world. ‘They’re just very ordinary people, but by God they’ve got something - common sense, in the truest sense of the word. I’ve met lots of people, [but] I have never met anyone as interesting, or as fascinating, or as wise, as my Liverpool family.’

Liverpool is not only the city in which Paul McCartney was born; it is the place in which he is rooted, the wellspring of the Beatles’ music and everything he has done since that fabulous group disbanded. Originally a small inlet or ‘pool’ on the River Mersey, near its confluence with the Irish Sea, 210 miles north of London, Liverpool was founded in 1207, coming to significance in the seventeenth century as a slave trade port, because Liverpool faces the Americas. After the abolition of slavery, the city continued to thrive due to other, diverse forms of trade, with magnificent new docks constructed along its riverine waterfront, and ocean liners steaming daily to and from the United States. As money poured into Liverpool, its citizens erected a mini-Manhattan by the docks, featuring the Royal Liver Building, an exuberant skyscraper topped by outlandish copper birds that have become emblematic of this confident, slightly eccentric city.

For the best part of three hundred years men and women flocked to Liverpool for work, mostly clustered around the docks. Liverpool is and has always been a predominantly white, working-class city, its people made up of and descended in large part from the working poor of surrounding Lancashire, plus Irish, Scots and Welsh incomers. Their regional accents combined in an urban melting pot to create Scouse, the distinctive Liverpool voice, with its singular, rather harsh pronunciation and its own witty argot, Scousers typically living hugger-mugger in the city’s narrow terrace streets built from the local rosy-red sandstone and brick.

Red is the colour of Liverpool - the red of its buildings, its left-wing politics and Liverpool Football Club. As the city has a colour, its citizens have a distinct character: they are friendly, jokey and inquisitive, hugely proud of their city and thin-skinned when it is criticised, as it has been throughout Paul’s life. For Liverpool’s boom years were over before Paul was born, the population reaching its peak of 900,000 in 1931, since when Liverpool has faded, its people, Paul included, leaving to find work elsewhere as their ancestors once came to Merseyside seeking employment, the abandoned city becoming tatty and tired, with mounting social problems.

Paul's maternal grandfather, Owen Mohin, was a farmer's son from County Monaghan, south of what is now the border with Northern Ireland, and it's likely there was Irish blood on the paternal side of the family, too. McCartney is a Scottish name, but four centuries ago many Scots McCartney settled in Ireland, returning to mainland Britain during the Potato Famine of the mid-1800s. Paul's paternal ancestors were probably among those who recrossed the Irish Sea at this time in search of food and work. Great-grandfather James McCartney was also most likely born in Ireland, but came to Liverpool to work as a house-painter, making his home with wife Elizabeth in Everton, a working-class suburb of the city. Their son, Joseph, born in 1866, Paul's paternal grandfather, worked in the tobacco trade, tobacco being one of the city's major imports. He married a local girl named Florence Clegg and had ten children, the fifth of whom was Paul's dad.

Aside from Paul's parents, his extended Liverpool family, his relatives - what Paul would call 'the relies' - have played a significant and ongoing part in his life, so it is worth becoming acquainted with his aunts and uncles. John McCartney was Joe and Flo McCartney's first-born, known as Jack. Paul's Uncle Jack was a big strong man, gassed in the First World War, with the result that after he came home - to work as a rent collector for Liverpool Corporation - he spoke in a small, husky voice. You had to lean in close to hear what Jack was saying, and often he was telling a joke. The McCartneys were wits and raconteurs, deriving endless fun from gags, word games and general silliness, all of which became apparent, for better or worse, when Paul turned to song writing. McCartney family whimsy is in 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer' and 'Rocky Raccoon', also 'Rupert and the Frog Song'.

There was a son after Jack who died in infancy; then came Edith (Edie) who married ship steward Will Stapleton, the black sheep of the family; another daughter died in infancy; after which Paul's father, James, was born on 7 July 1902, known to all as Jim. He was followed by three girls: Florence (Flo), Annie and Jane, the latter known as Gin or Ginny, after her middle name Virginia. Ginny, who married carpenter Harry Harris, was Paul's favourite relative outside his immediate family and close to her younger sister, Mildred (Milly), after whom came the youngest, Joe, known as Our Bloody Joe, a plumber who married Joan, who outlived them all. Looking back, Joan recalls a family that was 'very clannish', amiable, witty people who liked company. In appearance the men were slim, smartly dressed and moderately handsome. Paul's dad possessed delicate eyebrows which arched quizzically over kindly eyes, giving him the enquiring, innocent expression Paul has inherited. The women were of a more robust build, and in many ways the dominant personalities. None more so than the redoubtable Auntie Gin, whom Paul name-checks in his 1976 song 'Let 'em In'. 'Ginny was up for anything. She was a wonderful mad character,' says Mike Robbins, who married into the family, becoming Paul's Uncle Mike (though he was actually a cousin). 'It's a helluva family. Full of fun.'

Music played a large part in family life. Granddad Joe played in brass bands and encouraged his children to take up music. Birthdays, Christmas and New Year were all excuses for family parties which involved everybody having a drink and a singsong around the piano, purchased from North End Music Stores (NEMS), owned by the Epstein family, and it was Jim McCartney's fingers on the keys. He taught himself piano by ear (presumably his left, being deaf in his right). He also played trumpet 'until his teeth gave out', as Paul always says. Jim became semi-professional during the First World War, forming a dance band, the Masked Melody Makers, later Jim Mac's Band, in which his oldest brother Jack played trombone. Other relatives joined the merriment, giving enthusiastic recitals of 'You've Gone' and 'Stairway to Paradise' at Merseyside dance halls. Jim made up tunes as well, though he was too modest to call himself a songwriter. There were other links to show business. Younger brother Joe Mac sang in a barber-shop choir and Jack had a friend at the Pavilion Theatre who would let the brothers backstage to watch artists such as Max Wall and Tommy Trinder perform.

As a young man Jim worked in the theatre briefly, selling programmes and operating lights, while little later on ~~Ann McCartney's daughter Bett took as her husband the aforementioned Mike Robbin~~ a small-time variety artiste whose every other sentence was a gag ('Variety was dying, and my act was helping to kill it'). There was a whiff of greasepaint about this family.

Jim's day job was humdrum and poorly paid. He was a salesman with the cotton merchants ~~A~~ Hannay & Co., working out of an impressive mercantile building on Old Hall Street. One of Jim's colleagues was a clerk named Albert Kendall, who married Jim's sister Milly, becoming Paul's Uncle Albert (part of the inspiration for another of Paul's Seventies' hits, 'Uncle Albert/Admiral Halsey'). It was perhaps because Jim was having such a grand old time with his band and his extended family that he waited until he was almost forty before he married, by which time Britain was again at war. It was Jim's luck to have been too young to serve in the First World War, and now he was fortunate to be too old for the Second. He lost his job with Hannay's, though, working instead in an aircraft factory during the day and fire-watching at night. Liverpool's docks were a prime German target during the early part of the war, with incendiary shells falling almost nightly. It was during this desperate time with the Luftwaffe overhead and Adolf Hitler's armies apparently poised to invade from France, that Jim McCartney met his bride-to-be, Paul's mother Mary.

Mary Mohin was the daughter of Irishman Owen Mohin, who'd left the old country to work in Glasgow, then moving south to Liverpool, where he married Mary Danher and had four children: a daughter named Agnes who died in childhood, boys Wilfred and Bill, the latter known as Bombhead, and Paul's mother, Mary, born in the Liverpool suburb of Fazakerley on 29 September 1909. Mary's mother died when she was ten. Dad went back to Ireland to take a new bride, Rose, whom he brought to Liverpool, having two more children before dying himself in 1933, having drunk and gambled away most of his money. Mary and Rose didn't get on and Mary left home when still young to train as a nurse, lodging with Harry and Ginny Harris in West Derby. One day Ginny took Mary to meet her widowed mother Florence at her Corporation-owned ('corpy') home in Scargreen Avenue, North Green, whereby Mary met Gin's bachelor brother Jim. When the air-raid warning sounded, Jim and Mary were obliged to get to know each other better in the shelter. They married soon after.

Significantly, Paul McCartney is the product of a mixed marriage, in that his father was Protestant and his mother Roman Catholic, at a time when working-class Liverpool was divided along sectarian lines. There were regular clashes between Protestants and Catholics, especially on 12 July, when the Orangemen marched in celebration of William III's 1690 victory over the Irish. St Patrick's Day could also degenerate into street violence, as fellow Merseysider Ringo Starr recalls: 'On 17th March St Patrick's Day, all the Protestants beat up the Catholics because they were marching, and on 12th July, Orangeman's [sic] Day, all the Catholics beat up the Protestants. That's how it was, Liverpool being the capital of Ireland, as everybody always says.' Mild-mannered Jim McCartney was agnostic and he seemingly gave way to his wife when they married on 15 April 1941, for they were joined together at St Swithin's Roman Catholic Chapel. Jim was 38, his bride 31. There was an air raid that night on the docks, the siren sounding at 10:27 p.m., sending the newlyweds back down the shelter. Bombs fell on Garston, killing eight people before the all-clear. The Blitz on Liverpool intensified during the next few months, then stopped in January 1942. Britain had survived its darkest hour, and Mary McCartney was pregnant with one of its greatest sons.

## **JAMES PAUL McCARTNEY**

Although the Luftwaffe had ceased its bombing raids on Liverpool by the time he was born, on Thursday 18 June 1942, James Paul McCartney, best known by his middle name, was very much a war baby. As Paul began to mewl and bawl, the newspapers carried daily reports of the world war: the British army was virtually surrounded by German troops at Tobruk in North Africa; the US Navy had just won the Battle of Midway; the Germans were pushing deep into Russian territory on the Eastern Front; while at home Prime Minister Winston Churchill's government was considering adding coal to the long list of items only available on ration. Although the Blitz had passed for Liverpool, the war had three years to run, with much suffering and deprivation for the nation.

As his parents were married in a Catholic church, Paul was baptised into the Catholic faith at Philomena's Church, on 12 July 1942, the day the Orange Order marches. Though this may have been coincidental, one wonders whether Mary McCartney and her priest, Father Kelly, chose this day to baptise the son of a Protestant by way of claiming a soul for Rome. In any event, like his father, Paul would grow up to have a vague, non-denominational faith, attending church rarely. Two years later a second son was born, Michael, Paul's only sibling. The boys were typical brothers, close but also rubbing each other up the wrong way at times.

Paul was three and Mike one when the war ended. Dad resumed his job at the cotton exchange, though, unusually, it was Mum's work that was more important to the family. The 1945 General Election brought in the reforming Labour administration of Clement Attlee, whose government implemented the National Health Service (NHS). Mary McCartney was the NHS in action, a relatively well-paid, state-trained midwife who worked from home delivering babies for her neighbours. The family moved frequently around Merseyside, living at various times in Anfield, Everton, West Derby and over the water on the Wirral (a peninsula between Liverpool and North Wales). Sometimes they rented rooms, other times they lodged with relatives. In 1946, Mary was asked to take up duties on a new housing estate at Speke, south of the city, and so the McCartneys came to 72 Western Avenue, where what four-year-old Paul came to think of as his first proper home.

Liverpool had long had a housing problem, a significant proportion of the population living in slums into the 1950s. In addition to this historic problem, thousands had been made homeless by the bombing. In the aftermath of the war many Liverpool families were accommodated temporarily in pre-fabricated cottages on the outskirts of the city while Liverpool Corporation built large new estates of corporation-owned properties which were rented to local people. Much of this construction was undertaken at Speke, a flat, semi-rural area between Liverpool and its small, outlying airport, with huge industrial estates built simultaneously to create what was essentially a new town. The McCartneys were given a new, three-bedroom cosy house on a boulevard that leads today to Liverpool John Lennon Airport. In the late 1940s this was a model estate of new 'homes fit for heroes'. Because the local primary school was oversubscribed, Paul, along with many children, was bussed to Joseph Williams Primary in nearby Childwall. Former pupils dimly recall a friendly, fair-faced lad with a lively sense of humour. A class photo shows Paul neatly dressed, apparently happy and confident, and indeed these were halcyon days for young McCartney, whose new suburban home gave him access to woods and meadows where he went exploring with the *Observer Book of Birds* and a supply of jam butties, happy adventures recalled in a Beatles' song 'Mother Nature's Son' in which Paul sings of playing in grass fields, dotted with daisies, under the sun.

In the evening, Mum cooked while Dad smoked his pipe, read the newspaper or did the garden, dispensing wisdom and jokes to the boys as he went. There were games with brother Mike, and the fun of BBC radio dramas and comedy shows. Wanting to spend more time with her sons, Mary resigned from her job as a midwife in 1950, consequently losing tenure of 72 Western Avenue. The family

moved one mile to 12 Ardwick Road, a slightly less salubrious address in a part of the estate not yet finished. On the plus side the new house was opposite a playing field with swings. Resourceful Ma got a job as a health visitor, using the box room as her study. One of Jim's little home improvements was to fix their house number to a wooden plaque next to the front doorbell. When Paul came back decades later with his own son, James, he was surprised and pleased to see Dad's numbers still in place. The current tenant welcomed the McCartneys back, but complained to Paul about being pestered by Beatles fans who visited her house regularly as part of what has become a Beatles pilgrimage to Liverpool, taking pictures through the front window and clippings from her privy hedge. Paul jokingly asked, with a wink to James, whether she didn't feel privileged.

'No,' the owner told him firmly. 'I've had enough!'

Her ordeal is evidence of the fact that, alongside that of Elvis Presley, the Beatles are now the object of the most obsessive cult in popular music.

## THE BLACK SHEEP

As we have seen, the McCartneys were a large, close-knit family who revelled in their own company getting together regularly for parties. Jim would typically greet his nearest and dearest with a firm handshake, a whimsical smile, and one of his gnomic expressions. 'Put it there,' he'd say, squeezing your hand, 'if it weighs a ton.' What this meant was not entirely clear, but it conveyed the sense that Jim was a stalwart fellow. And if the person being greeted was small, they would often take their hand away to find Jim had slipped a coin into their palm. Jim was generous. He was also honest, as the McCartneys generally were. They were not *scallies* (rough or crooked Scousers), until it came to Uncle Will.

Considering how long Paul McCartney has been famous, and how closely his life has been studied, it is surprising that the scandalous story of the black sheep of the McCartney family has remained untold until now. Here it is. In 1924 Paul's aunt Edie, Dad's sister, married a ship steward named Alexander William Stapleton, known to everybody as Will. Edie and Will took over Florence McCartney's corporation house in Scargreen Avenue after she died, and Paul saw his Uncle Will regularly at family gatherings. Everybody knew Will was 'a bent little devil', in the words of one relative. Will was notorious for pinching bottles from family parties, and for larger acts of larceny. He routinely stole from the ships he worked on. On one memorable occasion Will sent word to Edie that she and Ginny were to meet him at the Liverpool docks when his ship came in. Gin wondered why her brother-in-law required her presence as well as that of his wife. She found out when Will greeted her over the fence. As Ginny told the tale, Will kissed her unexpectedly on the lips, slipping a smuggled diamond ring into her mouth with his tongue as he did so. That wasn't all. When he cleared customs Will gave his wife a laundry bag concealing new silk underwear for her, while he presented Ginny with a sock containing - so the story goes - a chloroformed parrot.

Will boasted that one day he would pull off a scam that would set him up for life. This became a McCartney family joke. Jack McCartney was wont to stop 'relies' he met in town and whisper: 'I see Will Stapleton's back from his voyage.'

'Is he?' the relative would ask, leaning forward to hear Jack's wheezy voice.

'Yes, I've just seen the *Mauretania*<sup>1</sup> halfway up Dale Street.' Joking aside, Will did pull off



colossal caper, one sensational enough to make the front page of the *Liverpool Evening News*, even *The Times* of London, to the family's enduring embarrassment.

Will was working as a baggage steward on the *SS Apapa*, working a regular voyage between Liverpool and West Africa. The outward-bound cargo in September 1949 included 70 crates of newly printed bank notes, destined for the British Bank of West Africa. The crates of money, worth many millions in today's terms, were sealed and locked in the strongroom of the ship. Will and two crewmates, pantry man Thomas Davenport and the ship's baker, Joseph Edwards, hatched a plan to steal some of this money. It was seemingly Davenport's idea, recruiting Stapleton to help file down the hinges on the strongroom door, tap out the pins and lift the door clear. They then stole the contents of one crate, containing 10,000 West African bank notes, worth exactly £10,000 sterling in 1949, a sum equal to about £ 250,000 in today's money (or \$382,500 US<sup>2</sup>). The thieves replaced the stolen money with pantry paper, provided by Edwards, resealed the crate and rehung the door. When the cargo was unloaded at Takoradi on the Gold Coast, nothing seemed amiss and the *Apapa* sailed on its way. It was only when the crates were weighed at the bank that one crate was found light and the alarm was raised.

The *Apapa* had reached Lagos, where the thieves spent some of the stolen money before rejoining the ship and sailing back to England. British police boarded the *Apapa* as it returned to Liverpool quickly arresting Davenport and Edwards, who confessed, implicating Stapleton. 'You seem to know all about it. There's no use in my denying it further,' Paul's Uncle Will was reported to have told detectives when he was arrested. The story appeared on page one of the *Liverpool Evening Express* meaning the whole family was appraised of the disgrace Will had brought upon them.

'Jesus, it's the bloody thing he always said he was going to have a go at!' exclaimed Aunt Ginny.

Stapleton and his crewmates pleaded guilty in court to larceny on the high seas. Stapleton indicated that his cut was only £500. He said he became nervous when he saw the ship's captain inspecting the strong room on their return voyage. 'As a result I immediately got rid of what was left of my £500 by throwing it through the porthole into the sea. I told Davenport and he called me a fool and said I would take a chance with the rest.' The judge sentenced Uncle Will to three years in prison, the same with Davenport. Edwards got 18 months.

The police only recovered a small amount of the stolen money. Maybe Davenport and Stapleton had indeed chucked the rest in the Atlantic, as they claimed, but within the McCartney family there was speculation that Will hung onto some of that missing currency. It was said that the police watched him carefully after he got out of jail, and when detectives finally tired of their surveillance Will went on a spending spree, acquiring, among other luxuries, the first television in Scargreen Avenue.

## GROWING UP

Paul's parents got their first TV in 1953, as many British families did, in order to watch the Coronation of the new Queen, 27-year-old Elizabeth II, someone Paul would see a lot of in the years ahead. Master McCartney distinguished himself by being one of 60 Liverpool schoolchildren to win the Coronation essay competition. 'Coronation Day' by Paul McCartney (age: 10 years 10 months) paid a patriotic tribute to a 'lovely young Queen' who, as fate would have it, would one day knight him as Sir Paul McCartney.

Winning the prize showed Paul to be an intelligent boy, which was borne out when at the end of his time at Joseph Williams Primary he passed the Eleven Plus - an exam taken by British schoolchildren aged 11-12 - which was the first significant fork in the road of their education at the time. Those who failed the exam were sent to secondary modern schools, which tended to produce boys and girls who would become manual or semi-skilled workers; while the minority who passed the Eleven Plus typically went to grammar school, setting them on the road to a university education and professional life. What's more, Paul did well enough in the exam to be selected for Liverpool's premier grammar school, indeed one of the best state schools in England.

The Liverpool Institute, or Inny, looked down on Liverpool from an elevated position on Mount Street, next to the colossal new Anglican cathedral. Work had started on what is perhaps Liverpool's greatest building, designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, in 1904. The edifice took until 1978 to finish. Although a work in progress, the cathedral was in use in the early 1950s. Paul had recently tried out for the cathedral choir. (He failed to get in, and sang instead at St Barnabas' on Penny Lane.) Standing in the shadow of this splendid cathedral, the Inny had a modest grandeur all its own. It was a handsome, late-Georgian building, the entrance flanked by elegant stone columns, with an equally fine reputation for giving the brightest boys of the city the best start in life. Many pupils went on to Oxford and Cambridge, the Inny having produced notable writers, scientists, politicians, even one or two show business stars. Before Paul, the most famous of these was the comic actor Arthur Askey, at whose desk Paul sat.

Kitted out in his new black blazer and green and black tie, Paul was impressed and daunted by the new school when he enrolled in September 1953. Going to the Inny drew him daily from the suburbs into the urban heart of Liverpool, a much more dynamic place, while any new boy felt naturally overwhelmed by the teeming life of a school that numbered around 1,000 pupils, overseen by several looking masters in black gowns who'd take the cane readily to an unruly lad. The pupils got their own back by awarding their overbearing teachers colourful and often satirical nicknames. J.R. Edwards, the feared headmaster, was known as the Bas, for Bastard. (Paul came to realise he was in fact 'quite a nice fella'.) Other masters were known as Cliff Edge, Sissy Smith (an effeminate English master related to John Lennon), Squinty Morgan, Funghi Moy and Weedy Plant. 'He was weedy and his name was Plant. Poor chap,' explains Steve Norris, a schoolboy contemporary of Paul's who became a Tory cabinet minister.

The A-stream was for the brightest boys, who studied classics. A shining example among contemporaries of Paul's was Peter 'Perfect' Sissons, later a BBC newsreader. The C-stream was for boys with a science bent. Paul went into the B-stream, which specialised in modern languages. He studied German and Spanish, the latter with 'Fanny' Inkley, the school's only female teacher. Paul had the luck to have an outstanding English teacher, Alan 'Dusty' Durband, author of a standard textbook on Shakespeare, who got his pupils interested in Chaucer by introducing them to the sexy passages in the *Canterbury Tales*. 'Then we got interested in the other bits, too, so he was a clever bloke.' Paul's other favourite classes were art and woodwork, both hobbies in adult life. Before music came into his life strongly, Paul was considered one of the school's best artists. Curiously, Neddy Evans's music lessons left him cold. Although Dad urged Paul to learn to read music, so he could play properly, Paul never learned what the dots meant. 'I basically never learned anything at all [about music at school]. Yet he loved the Inny, and came to recognise the head start it gave him in life. 'It gave you a great feeling of the world was out there to be conquered, that the world was a very big place, and somehow you could reach it from here.'

It was at the Inny that Paul acquired the nickname Macca, which has endured. Friends Macca made

at school included John Duff Lowe, Ivan 'Ivy' Vaughan (born the same day as Paul) and Ian James who shared his taste in radio shows, including the new and anarchic *Goon Show*. In the playground Macca was 'always telling tales or going through programmes that were on the previous night,' James recalls. 'He'd always have a crowd around him. He was good at telling tales, [and] he had quite a devilish sense of humour.' Two more schoolboys were of special significance: a clever, thin-faced lad named Neil 'Nell' Aspinall, who was in Paul's class for art and English and became the Beatles' road manager; and a skinny kid one year Paul's junior named George.

Born on 25 February 1943,<sup>3</sup> George Harrison was the youngest of a family of four, the Harrison being a working-class family from south Liverpool. Mum and Dad were Louise and Harold 'Harry' Harrison, the family living in a corpy house at 25 Upton Green, Speke. Harry drove buses for a living. It was on the bus home from school that Paul and George first met properly, their conversation sparked by a growing mutual interest in music, Paul having recently taken up the trumpet. 'I discovered that he had a trumpet and he found out that I had a guitar, and we got together,' George recalled. 'I was about thirteen. He was probably late thirteen or fourteen. (He was always nine months older than me. Even now, after all these years, he is still nine months older!)' As this remark implies, George always felt that Paul looked down on him and, although he possessed a quick wit, and was bright enough to get into the Inny in the first place, schoolboy contemporaries recall George as being a less impressive lad than Paul. 'I remember George Harrison as being thick as a plank - and completely uninteresting,' says Steve Norris bluntly. 'I don't think anybody thought George would ever amount to anything. A bit slow, you know [adopting a working-class Scouse accent], a bit *You know what I mean like.*'

Paul's family moved again with Mum's work, this time to a new corpy house in Allerton, a pleasant suburb closer to town. The address was 20 Forthlin Road, a compact brick-built terrace with small gardens front and back. One entered by a glass-panelled front door which opened onto a parquet hall, stairs straight ahead, lounge to your left, with a coal fire, next to which lived the TV. The McCartneys put their piano against the far wall, covered in blue chinoiserie paper. Swing doors led through to a small dining room, to the right of which was the kitchen, and a passageway back to the hall. Upstairs there were three bedrooms with a bathroom and inside loo, a convenience the family hadn't previously enjoyed. Paul bagged the back room, which overlooked the Police Training College, brother Mike the smaller box room. The light switches were Bakelite, the floors Lino, the woodwork painted 'corporation cream' (magnolia), the doorstep Liverpool red. This new home suited the McCartneys perfectly, and the first few months that the family lived here became idealised in Paul's mind as a McCartney family idyll: the boy cosy and happy with his kindly, pipe-smoking dad, his funny kid brother, and the loveliest mummy in the world, a woman who worked hard at her job bringing other children into the world, yet always had time for her own, too. Paul came to see Mum almost as a Madonna, as he sang in the Beatles' song, 'Lady Madonna'.

What happened next is the defining event of Paul McCartney's life, a tragedy made starker because the family had only just moved into their dream home, where they expected to be happy for years to come. Mum fell ill and was diagnosed with breast cancer. It seems Mary knew the prognosis was not good and kept this a secret, at least from her children. One day, in the summer of 1956, Mike found his mother upstairs weeping. When he asked her what was wrong, she replied, 'Nothing, love.'

At the end of October 1956 Mary was admitted to the Northern Hospital, a gloomy old building on Leeds Street, where she underwent surgery. It was not successful. Paul and Mike were packed off to Everton to stay with Uncle Joe and Auntie Joan. Jim didn't own a car, so Mike Robbins, who was selling vacuum cleaners between theatrical engagements, gave Jim lifts to the hospital in his van. 'I

was trying to put on a brave front. He knew his wife was dying.' Finally the boys were taken into the hospital to say goodbye to Mum. Paul noticed blood on her bed sheets. Mary remarked to a relative that she only wished she could see her boys grow up. Paul was 14, Mike 12. Mum died on 31 October 1956, Hallowe'en, aged 47.

Aunt Joan recalls that Paul didn't express overt grief when told the news. Indeed, he and his brother Mike played rambunctiously that night in her back bedroom. 'My daughter slept in a camp bed,' says Joan, 'and the boys had the double bed in the back bedroom and they were pulling arms off a teddy bear.' When he did address the fact that his mother had died, Paul did so by asking Dad gauchely how they were going to manage without her wages. Stories like this are sometimes cited as evidence of a lack of empathy on Paul's part, and it is true that he would react awkwardly in the face of death repeatedly during his life. It is also true that young people often behave in an insensitive way when faced with bereavement. They do not know what death means. Over the years, however, it became plain that Paul saw his world shattered that autumn night in 1956. The premature death of his mother was a trauma he never forgot, nor wholly got over.

## JOHN

### HAIL! HAIL! ROCK 'N' ROLL

A dark period of mourning and adjustment followed the death of Mary McCartney, as widower Jim came to terms with the untimely loss of his wife and tried to instigate a domestic regime at Forthlin Road whereby he could be both father and mother to his boys. This was not easy. Indeed, Paul recalled hearing his father crying at night. It was thanks to the 'relies' rallying round, especially Aunts Ginnie, Milly and Joan, that Jim was able to carry on at Forthlin Road, the women taking turns to help clean and cook for this bereaved, all-male household.

Crucially, as far as the history of pop is concerned, Paul reacted to the death of his mother by taking comfort in music. He returned the trumpet his father had given him for his recent birthday to Rushworth and Dreaper, a Liverpool music store, and exchanged it for an acoustic Zenith guitar, wanting to play an instrument that would also allow him to sing, and not liking the idea of developing a horn player's callous on his lips. Learning guitar chords proved challenging because Paul was left-handed and he tried at first to play as a right-hander. It was only when he saw a picture of Slim Whitman playing guitar the other way around (Whitman having taught himself to play left-handed after losing part of a finger on his right hand) that Paul restrung his instrument accordingly and began to make progress. Schoolmate Ian James also played guitar, with greater proficiency, and gave Paul valuable lessons on his own Rex acoustic.<sup>4</sup> As to what the boys played, there was suddenly a whole new genre of music opening up.

Until 1955, the music Paul had heard and enjoyed consisted largely of the jazz-age ballads and dance tunes Mum and Dad liked: primarily the song books of the Gershwins, Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hart; while trips to the movies had given Paul an appreciation of Fred Astaire, a fine singer as well as a great dancer who became a lifelong hero. Now bolder, more elemental rhythms filled his ears. The first real musical excitement for young people in post-war Britain was skiffle, incorporating elements of folk, jazz and blues. A large part of the genre's appeal was that you didn't need professional instruments to play it. Ordinary household objects could be used: a wooden tea chest was strung to make a crude bass, a tin washboard became a simple percussion instrument, helping define the rasping, clattering sound of the music. Despite being played on such absurd household items, skiffle could be very exciting, as Scots singer Lonnie Donegan proved in January 1956 when he scored a major hit with a skiffle cover of Leadbelly's 'Rock Island Line' (though the recording features a standard double bass). Almost overnight, thousands of British teenagers formed skiffle bands of the

own, with Paul among those Liverpool skiffers who went to see Donegan perform at the local Empire theatre in November, just a few days after Mary McCartney died.

Close on the heels of skiffle came the greater revelation of rock 'n' roll. The first rumble of this powerful new music reached the UK with the 1955 movie *The Blackboard Jungle*, which made Bill Haley a fleeting sensation. In the flesh Haley proved a disappointment, a mature, heavy-set fellow, not a natural role model for teens, unlike the handsome young messiah of rock who followed him. Elvis Presley broke in Britain in May 1956 with the release of 'Heartbreak Hotel'. The singer and the sound electrified Paul at the age when boys become closely interested in their appearance. Elvis was his role model, as he was for boys all over the world, and Paul tried to make himself look like his hero. Paul and Ian James went to a Liverpool tailor, who took in their trousers to create rocker-style drainpipe legs; Paul grew his hair, sweeping it back like 'El', as they referred to the star; Paul began to neglect his school work, and spent his free time practising Elvis's songs, as well as other rock 'n' roll tunes that came fading in and out over the late-night airwaves from Radio Luxembourg. This far-away European station, together with glimpses of music idols on TV and in jukebox movies at the cinema, introduced Paul to the charismatic Americans who sat at Elvis's feet in the firmament of rock: to the great black poet Chuck Berry, wild man Jerry Lee Lewis, the deceptively straight-looking Buddy Holly, crazy Little Richard and rockabilly pioneer Gene Vincent, whose insistent 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' was the first record Paul bought.

Paul started to take his guitar into school. Former head boy Billy Morton, a jazz fan with no time for this new music, recalls being appalled by Paul playing Eddie Cochran's 'Twenty-Flight Rock' in the playground at the Inny. 'There must have been 150 boys around him, ten deep, whilst he was singing ... There he was, star material even then.' Paul imitated his heroes with preternatural skill. But he was more than just a copyist. Almost immediately, Paul started to write his own songs. 'He said, "I've written a tune,"' recalls Ian James. 'It was something I'd never bothered to try, and it seemed quite a feat to me. I thought, *He's written a tune!* So we went up to his bedroom and he played this tune, [and] sang it.' Created from three elementary chords (C, F and G), 'I Lost My Little Girl' was of the skiffle variety, with simple words about a girl who had Paul's head 'in a whirl'. By dint of this little tune, Paul McCartney became a singer-songwriter. Now he needed a band.

## THE QUARRY MEN

The Beatles grew out of a schoolboy band founded and led by John Lennon, an older local boy studying for his O-levels at Quarry Bank High School, someone Paul was aware of but didn't know personally. As he says: 'John was the local Ted' (meaning Lennon affected the look of the aggressive Teddy Boy youth cult). 'You saw him rather than met him.'

John Winston Lennon, named after Britain's wartime leader, was a full year and eight months older than Paul McCartney, born on 9 October 1940. Like Paul, John was Liverpool Irish by ancestry, with a touch of showbiz in the family. His paternal Irish grandfather Jack had sung with a minstrel show. More directly, and unlike Paul, John was the product of a dysfunctional home. Dad was a happy-go-lucky merchant seaman named Freddie Lennon, a man cut from the same cloth as Paul's Uncle Wilf. Mum, Julia, was a flighty young woman who dated various men when Fred was at sea, or in prison, he was during part of the Second World War. All in all, the couple made a poor job of raising their



only child,<sup>5</sup> whom Julia passed, at age five, into the more capable hands of her older, childless sister Mary, known as Mimi, and Mimi's dairyman husband George Smith.

The relationship between John and his Aunt Mimi is reminiscent of that between David Copperfield and his guardian aunt Betsey Trotwood, an apparently severe woman who proves kindness itself when she gives the unhappy Copperfield sanctuary in her cottage. The likewise starchy but golden-hearted Mimi brought John to live with her and Uncle George in their cosy Liverpool cottage, Mendips, on Menlove Avenue, just over the hill from Paul's house on Forthlin Road. Much has been made of the social difference between Mendips and Paul's working-class home, as if John's was a much grander household. As both houses are now open to the public, courtesy of the National Trust, anyone can see for themselves that Mendips is a standard, three-bedroom semi-detached property, the 'semi' being a type of house built by the thousands in the 1920s and '30s, cosy suburban hatches for those who could afford to take out a small mortgage but couldn't stretch to a detached property. The essential difference between Mendips and 20 Forthlin Road was that the Smiths owned their home while Jim McCartney rented from the Liverpool Corporation, by dint of which the McCartneys were defined as working-class. It is also fair to say that Menlove Avenue was considered to be a much more desirable place to live.

John's childhood was upset again when Uncle George died in 1955. Thereafter John and Aunt Mimi shared Mendips with a series of male lodgers whose rent allowed Mimi to make ends meet and who, in one case, shared her bed. One way or another, this was an eccentric start in life, and John grew to be an eccentric character. Like Paul, John was clever, with a quick wit and an intense stare that was later mistaken for a sign of wisdom - he seemed to stare into your soul - whereas in fact he was just short-sighted. He also had a talent for art and a liking for language. Like many solitary children who have suffered periods of loneliness, John was bookish, more so than Paul. John's voracious reading accounts in part for his lyrics being generally more interesting than Paul's. The literary influence of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll is strongly felt in John's penchant for nonsense, for example, which first found expression in the *Daily Howl*, a delightful school magazine he wrote and drew for fun. The tone is typified by his famous weather forecast: 'Tomorrow will be Muggy, followed by Tuggy, Weggy and Thurgy and Friggy'. This is also the humour of the *Goon Show*, which Paul and John both enjoyed. Above all else, the boys shared an interest in music. John was mad for rock 'n' roll. Indeed many friends thought John more or less *completely* mad. In researching the story of Paul's life it is remarkable that people who knew both Paul and John tend to talk about John most readily, often with laughter, for Lennon said and did endless amusing things that have stuck in their memory, whereas McCartney was always more sensible, even (whisper it) slightly dull by comparison.

Like Paul, John worshipped Elvis Presley. 'Elvis Presley's all very well, John,' Aunt Mimi would lecture her nephew, 'but I don't want him for breakfast, dinner and tea.' (Her other immortal words on this subject were: 'The guitar's all very well, John, but you'll never make a living out of it.') In emulation of Elvis, John played guitar enthusiastically, but badly, using banjo chords taught him by his mum, who was living round the corner in Blomfield Road, with her current boyfriend, and saw John regularly. Playing banjo chords meant using only four of the guitar's six strings - which was slightly easier for a beginner. Having grasped the rudiments, John formed a skiffle group with his best mate at Quarry Bank High, Pete Shotton, who was assigned washboard. The band was named the Quarry Men, after their school. Another pupil, Eric Griffiths, played guitar, and Eric recruited a fourth Quarry Bank student, Rod Davis, who'd known John since they were in Sunday school together. Rod recalls: 'He was known as *that* Lennon. Mothers would say, "Now stay away from *that* Lennon."' Eric found their drummer, Colin Hanton, who'd already left (a different) school to work as an upholsterer.

Finally, Liverpool Institute boy Len Garry was assigned tea chest bass. Together, the lads performed covers of John's favourite skiffle and rock 'n' roll songs at parties and youth clubs, sometimes going weeks without playing, for one of John's signal characteristics was laziness. Indeed, the Quarry Men may well have come to nought had they not agreed to perform at a humble summer fête.

Woolton Village is a short bike ride from John's house, just east of Liverpool, its annual fête being organised by the vicar of St Peter's Church, in the graveyard of which reside the remains of one Eleanor Rigby, who as her marker states died in 1939, aged 44. Starting at 2 o'clock on Saturday July 1957, a procession of children, floats and bands made its way through Woolton to the church field, the procession led by the Band of the Cheshire Yeomanry and the outgoing Rose Queen, a local girl who sat in majesty on a flatbed truck. The Quarry Men followed on another, similar truck. Around 3 o'clock the new Rose Queen was crowned on stage in the church field, after which there was a parade of local children in fancy dress, and the Quarry Men played a few songs for the amusement of the kids as the adults mooched around the stalls. Looking at photographs taken that summer afternoon one is reminded that, although John's band was named the Quarry Men, they were mere boys, gangly youths in plaid shirts, sleeves rolled up, their expressions betraying almost total inexperience as they haltingly sought to entertain an audience comprised mostly of even younger children. Typically, one little girl in a brownie uniform is captured on camera sitting on the edge of the stage looking up at John with the mildest of interest.

John, who had let his hair grow long at the front, then swept it back in a quiff, was standing at a stick microphone, strumming his guitar and singing the Dell-Vikings' 'Come Go With Me'. Unsure of the correct words, never having seen them in print, John was improvising lyrics to fit the tune, singing: 'Come and go with me, down to the penitentiary ...' Paul McCartney thought this clever. Paul had been brought along to the fête by Ivan Vaughan, who knew John and thought his two music friends should get together. The introduction was made in the church hall where the Quarry Men were due to play a second set. A plaque on the wall now commemorates the historic moment Lennon met McCartney. John recalled: '[Ivan] said, "I think you two will get along." We talked after the show and I saw that he had talent. He was playing guitar backstage, doing "Twenty-Flight Rock".' In emulation of Little Richard, Paul also played 'Long Tall Sally' and 'Tutti-Frutti'. Not long after this meeting Pete Shotton stopped Paul in the street and asked if he'd like to join the Quarry Men. He was asking on behalf of John, of course. 'He was the leader because he was the guy who sang the songs,' explained Colin Hanton, who was surprised how quickly John made up his mind about this new boy. '[Paul] must have impressed him.'

## EARLY SHOWS

That summer Rod Davis went to France on holiday and never rejoined the Quarry Men. John Lennon left Quarry Bank High, having failed his O-levels, and was lucky to get a place at Liverpool College of Art, which happened to be next door to Paul's grammar school on Hope Street. In their summer holidays, Paul and Mike McCartney attended scout camp, where Paul accidentally broke his brother's arm mucking about with a pulley, after which Jim McCartney took his sons to Butlin's in Filey, Yorkshire, where Paul and Mike performed 'Bye Bye Love' on stage as a duo.

Girls started to feature in Paul's life around this time. A pale, unsporty lad with a tendency to



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