

## 1: Lead A Normal Life

*“My family arrived in this country from Spain at the time of the Armada, and the story goes we were adopted by Cornish peasants . . .”*

Peter Gabriel, 1974

*“My dad is an electrical engineer, inventor type, reserved, shy, analytical, and my mum’s more instinctive, she responds by the moment – music is her big thing. And I’ve got both.”*

Peter Gabriel, 2000

WHEN Peter Gabriel spoke of rather trusting a ‘country man than a town man’ in Genesis’ 1974 song ‘The Chamber Of 32 Doors’, he could well have been talking about his own roots. For in his 63 years (at the time of writing), Gabriel has spent less than a decade living in a city. Although he keeps a residence in West London, Gabriel lives in rustic splendour at his home by his Real World studios in Box near Bath in Wiltshire, which echoes the rural idyll of his childhood in the Surrey countryside. The physical roots of his life could be a metaphor for his semi-detached relationship with showbusiness; near enough, yet far away. Surrey is less than an hour from London and his residence now is less than 15 minutes from the bustling city centre of Bath. He can get into the middle of things easily when he needs to, yet he remains far enough removed. It is not dissimilar to his relationship with the mainstream of popular music.

Whenever Gabriel has neared the big time (or indeed, ‘Big Time’, his 1986 hit single) he has been there just enough to receive acclaim and at times, stellar sales, before retreating back to the anonymous comfort of the margins. In this semi-detached atmosphere he thrives, creating works of great, lasting import. Getting a life, as he sang on his 1992 hit, ‘Steam’, with “this dreamer’s dream”; for his family, like many of the post-war burgeoning middle class in the UK, encouraged dreams, just as long as

they were grounded in a degree of reality and accompanied with a huge amount of hard graft.

Peter Brian Gabriel was born on February 13, 1950 at Woking Hospital. He grew up at his family home, Deep Pool Farm, Coxhill, just outside Chobham in Surrey, in the long, empty days of rebuilding and drabness less than five years after the Allied victory that signalled the end of the Second World War. However, although his father had worked with the RAF, it was almost as if the war had gone on somewhere else. The Surrey that Gabriel was born into was peaceful, leafy and well-to-do. Chobham is the epitome of the well-heeled satellite towns to the south-west of London. Originally listed in the Domesday Book as Cebeham, it was governed by nearby Chertsey Abbey. By the 20th century, it was still relatively rural and undeveloped, unlike its nearby neighbour, Woking, which burgeoned when a railway station on the London and South Western railway opened in 1834. With its green common, range of pubs and inns and the River Bourne providing the occasional flood risk, it looked every inch how an idealised British village should look.

At the time of his birth, Gabriel's mother, Edith Irene Allen, had been married for three years to Ralph Parton Gabriel. The family would be completed with the birth of his sister Anne in October 1951. Ralph came from a line of locally-based timber importers and merchants that traded under the name of Gabriel, Wade & English from 1925 onwards. Gabriel's great-great-great grandfather, Christopher Gabriel had founded the family business in 1770. He trained as a carpenter, initially making furniture before concentrating on the importation of timber in 1812. The business expanded greatly in the late 18th century.

The Gabriel family name in the UK is thought to go back to 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada, when ship-wrecked crewmembers found themselves on English soil. Elsewhere it goes back even further, deriving from the Hebrew name 'Gavriel', meaning 'God give me strength'. The name was used in the New Testament of the Bible, as the Archangel Gabriel was the harbinger of the news to Mary that she was to become the mother of Jesus. The family name became popular in the 12th century, and remained so throughout northern Europe.

Gabriel's ancestors had been fairly well-known in the 19th century as politicians and businessmen in Streatham, south London, from where the family timber business was run. According to census reports published in

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the *Daily Telegraph*, Gabriel's forefathers were, thanks to the success of their timber business, reasonably well off, keeping servants and attending the best schools. Gabriel's great-great-grandfather, Christopher Trowell Gabriel was born in 1797, and, in 1833, married Ruth, the daughter of billiard-table maker, John Thurston. Christopher's brother, Sir Thomas Gabriel, was London's Lord Mayor in 1866. When Christopher died in 1873, he left an estate in the region of £200,000. He and Ruth's son, Thomas, received the estate in Ely, while Ruth was bequeathed the possessions in the family residence, Norfolk House.

By the time of Peter's birth, Gabriel's family also ran a dairy farm. Although well-off, Ralph did not fit the image of the gentleman farmer, employing a bailiff and a tractor driver to look after it day-to-day. As Gabriel was to note, "my father was much more of a thinker than the rest of the family". Ralph was, in fact, something of a visionary. He became an electrical engineer after gaining a degree at the University Of London in the Thirties. Deep Pool Cottage, where he settled after his marriage, was part of the family farm and was the second and last dwelling of his 100-year life; it had been given to him as a wedding present by his father, and was across the way from Coxhill, the house where he was born. During the Second World War, Ralph worked on projects for the RAF. "The Germans developed this very clever system for guiding their bombers because of the blackout," Gabriel's friend and one-time Genesis tour manager Richard Macphail said. "They made a radio beam that would point at, say, Birmingham. All they would have to do would be to fly along the beam at a certain speed, and then at a given moment open the bomb doors. It was very clever. But Ralph was part of the team that figured out a way of bending the beam without the Germans knowing, so they would fly off course. He must have saved hundreds, thousands of lives, these bombs would drop harmlessly out in the countryside."

"My father was a quiet, thoughtful inventor and electrical engineer," Gabriel said in 2007. "He invented a thing called Dial-A-Programme in 1971, accessed through the dial of a telephone. I saw his passion, and I love to get involved with all sorts of techy things. All of this was entertainment on demand. My father was campaigning for the future."

Ralph would work for countless hours on new inventions in the workshop behind the house. He was often a little too ahead of his time: "He invented cable television for Rediffusion," Macphail adds. "He figured

out how to get a television signal down the phone line but Rediffusion couldn't see why people would pay for television when the BBC were supplying it for free."

To counterbalance the methodical, eccentric, scientific approach of Ralph, Gabriel's mother inspired him musically. "My mother was the one who was interested in music and performing, running on adrenalin. My dad was more meditative. He would come back from a day working in London and stand on his head in the garden doing yoga."

It is clear that Gabriel senior is at the root of his son's lifelong restless inquisitiveness. For a man with the scantest of human vices, Gabriel's vice has become technology; early adopting. A man who, according to biographer Spencer Bright, bought a bio-feedback machine in the early days of Genesis and a floatation tank in the early Eighties. He learned sophisticated yoga techniques, and experimented wearing gravity boots and this before his pioneering, ground-breaking use of technology in music began. All of this can be traced back to his father's experimentation in the workshop at the family home.

Irene Gabriel, known to all as 'Ireney' was one of five sisters; two of them studied at the Royal Academy Of Music. The Allen family were musical, and Irene's mother had sung at the Proms, the world famous concerts established by Sir Henry Wood and Robert Newman in London in 1895. She could play the piano confidently, and her family had enjoyed certain luxuries as benefitted the daughter of the Chairman and Managing Director of the Civil Service Department Store in London's Strand. Her father, Colonel Edward Allen, was a sporty, self-made man who started off as a carpenter's mate, with a passion for gambling. He would take Irene and her sisters to places such as Monte Carlo so he could play the tables.

"Music was my mother's passion, she played piano, Christmases were always full of members of the family singing and playing different instruments, it was quite an occasion," Gabriel said in 2012. It was this clear combination of his respective parents' personalities and love of music that has coursed throughout his work. "His mum was a very strong character and she would dominate the proceedings with her easy charm," Charterhouse friend and future Genesis founder Anthony Phillips would say. "Peter and Ralph would be quite quiet in her presence. His parents were very generous; they'd often have us over for supper and they would trust Peter because he was always extremely sensible."

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“Ralph was a fairly distant figure,” Gabriel’s future best friend, Tony Banks, adds. “He used to wander around in the shadows. He would come out with these little phrases. It’s interesting how Peter has picked up his original thinking and inventiveness, and fortunately he has his mother’s gregariousness and charm – he’s got the right combination of the two.”

Gabriel had a fairly idyllic middle-class childhood. As well as the love and support, there was also the withdrawn, stiff-upper-lipped demeanour that characterised many post-war families of similar stature. He had the run of the farm, he could watch and immerse himself in nature, playing with dragonflies, making fires with sticks, and damming the River Bourne. He would play with his sister and the children of the farmhands. However, with his sister sharing her mother’s love for horses and ponies, Gabriel would often be alone from choice. Coxhill, the house on the farm where his father was born, was a big Victorian manor with, as he recalled to Armando Gallo in 1979, “wood panelling, a billiard room and a croquet lawn”. The homely, yet slightly eerie detachment of the place would later inform his work. As a child Gabriel was quite convinced he could fly, running round four pear trees in his lawn flapping his arms to achieve lift off. “I was reading a lot of Superman comics at the time, so reality got a little confused.” It is impossible not to hear his later songs, ‘Willow Farm’ or ‘The Nest That Sailed The Sky’, without this mental picture being evoked.

Although not a regular attendee of church, religion was a constant presence in Gabriel’s upbringing, and the quest for spirituality, gleaned from perusing his father’s books on eastern religions, would interest Gabriel throughout his career. Gabriel reflected on the place in which he grew up in 1978: “It’s become Esherised. Reproduction print shops and reproduction antique shops taking over the local groceries.” But then, although sleepy, rarefied and select, it was a strong working and farming community, not just a commuter suburb.

Gabriel attended Cable House primary school in Woking and then, from the age of nine, the year he holidayed for the first time in Spain, St Andrew’s Preparatory School for Boys situated in a marvellous old building; Church Hill House in Wilson Way, Horsell. It was in his final year at St Andrew’s that he became a weekday boarder. Although not a gifted academic, Gabriel would work hard and diligently to get results. Inherently shy, he found it relatively easy to get on with the other boys, but from that age, no doubt because of the influence of his mother, sister and

the daughters of the farm-workers, preferred the company of women. “I wasn’t a macho, sporty male,” he was to say later. “I would prefer doctors and nurses with the girls behind the flower beds to cowboys and Indians.” When he and his friends cycled to school, the working-class children of the village would regularly make fun of the ‘posh boys’. As a result, Gabriel built up a thick skin.

“I had this dream when I was 11,” Gabriel told Bright in 1988. “I saw a fork in the path where I could either be an entertainer or a singer, or a farmer . . . but I never thought that I would be a singer, because I didn’t think I could sing. When I was young they thought I had a nice choirboy voice, but when I tried to sing rock songs, it sounded terrible.”

It was while he was attending St Andrew’s that teachers noticed Gabriel had some promise as a singer, and although he was ultimately to forego them, he spent some time following in his mother’s footsteps by taking piano lessons. Gabriel had expressed an interest in drumming, and at the age of 10 had purchased from his friend’s brother his first drum, a floor tom-tom for around £10. It was to be his first association with the rhythms that would so drive his work. Although on more than one occasion he has referred to himself as a ‘failed drummer’, throughout his career Gabriel has often returned to his first love: percussion. Even when he abandoned percussion altogether for his *Scratch My Back* concept in 2010, he made the strings sound like percussive instruments. Bill Bruford, drummer in so many key bands of the Seventies, opines that a gig with Gabriel was one of only three gigs that drummers would kill for in the late 20th century – the other two being King Crimson and Frank Zappa.

Gabriel wrote his first song, entitled ‘Sammy The Slug’, at the age of 12, and later joked that “everyone else was writing about girls and I was writing about slugs, which shows what I was interested in.” This was the first example of his off-kilter approach to the art form that would one day make him his living.

Aware of her nephew’s interest, one of his opera-singing aunties thought she would assist him on his path. Gabriel was later to recall, “She gave me £5 once to go and find out how professional singers sing.” Gabriel bought the first Beatles album instead. He had first heard the Liverpool group’s debut single, ‘Love Me Do’, on the radio in the back of his parents’ car, and as he remembered “it was way more radical sounding than punk when I first heard it”.

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Gabriel was exactly the right age at the right time to absorb this new phenomenon. He was too young to have appreciated the first impact of rock'n'roll in the Fifties, after which the music scene quickly became somewhat staid. Soon after Gabriel turned 13, in March 1963, The Beatles released their debut album, *Please Please Me*. The impact it had on teenagers hearing it for the first time was simply enormous. That summer, as Gabriel came to terms with leaving the relative comfort and security of St Andrew's for the next stage of his young life, The Beatles seemed to be everywhere.

Although Beatlemania, as it became known, was yet to break, their first three singles, including their first number one, 'From Me To You', provided an intoxicating soundtrack to innocent days. And their debut album's somewhat eccentric mixture of self-written material and black American R&B covers (including songs by The Shirelles, Isley Brothers and Arthur Alexander) showed that it was acceptable to write your own songs, while also opening a gateway to mysterious, soulful artists who would provide a seed for Gabriel's intelligent, enquiring mind. To complement his floor tom, he was bought a snare drum by his parents. Gabriel was on the way to assembling his first drum kit.

The Beatles were number one in the UK charts with 'She Loves You' when, aged 13, Peter Gabriel began his first term at Charterhouse, a public school in Godalming, in September 1963. And it was to be their influence, together with other fellow travellers, that was to have far greater impact on Gabriel than anything merely academic.