

JIMMY MACK

Some Kind of Wonderful

John Knight

PRELUDE

One Fine Day – The Chiffons (Stateside SS202 –1963)

Saturday 27 July 1963

Effy sat cross-legged on her bed, gazing out of the open window. A Penny Catechism lay unopened beside her on the white counterpane. The lyrics of *One Fine Day* by The Chiffons, diffused by a tiny red transistor radio, pervaded her thoughts. Surely she wouldn't always be invisible? Surely one day he would notice her? When he did, would he want her for his girl? Somehow, someday, Effy Halloran was going to make James MacKinnon hers one fine day.

CHAPTER 1

Stubborn Kinda Fella – Marvin Gaye (Oriole 45-CBA 1803 –1963)

Saturday 10 October 1964

So these were Mods. Like the ones who had battled it out with Rockers last May on Brighton beach. The national newspapers had been full of it. Seeing these Mods on their scooters left Mack feeling stunned and excited. Only one word summed them up. Cool. Seriously cool.

Two days earlier he had turned fifteen. Walking down Godwin Street, trailing his mum at a teenage-safe distance, he saw the Mods ride past. He had almost frozen midstride at the sight. It was a cold, crisp yet still sunny afternoon. They were heading downhill in the direction of the Co-op department store. The same direction he was heading. His mum had given in, agreeing to buy him a Dansette record player on a proviso: that she accompanied him to buy it. It was the alternative late birthday present he wanted. Getting it had taken much frustrating persuasion. Why he couldn't

use the radiogram in the front room was quite beyond his mum's understanding. It had cost enough. Why wasn't it good enough? Why did he have to have a gramophone in his bedroom? Gramophone? Well, he'd thought, I ask you? This was the Sixties. Nobody used wind-up gramophones any more. Talk about a generation gap. Dad had the final word. Not to mention the cash. The record player was about to become reality.

As much as Mack was anticipating the Dansette, when he saw the Mods go past on their scooters he was transfixed. They were an amazing sight.

For a moment it was as though he were experiencing an epiphany on the road to the Co-op. Right then, right there, he knew. He had to get a scooter. He had to be like them, the epitome of cool. His conversion was complete. He was determined to be like them when he turned sixteen.

Their scooters were moving works of chrome art. Rear-view mirrors sprouted in profusion. Extra spotlights festooned on the leg shields glinted in the pale sunlight. Mack knew little about scooters but what he saw was, he imagined, something akin to falling in love. The last of the Mods turned left at the lights into Kirkgate, looking awesome in a French beret and aviator sunglasses. A paisley cravat and an olive-green US Army parka completed the ensemble. These guys were the business and they knew it. It was all style: style that was smart and sharp.

Waiting for the traffic lights to change Mack watched them parking their scooters.

Some experiences become deep-seated memories, unforgettable turning points in life. Everything that happens has a cause and serves a purpose. In less than two years, on this same spot, he would deal his own brand of vigilante justice on an attempted rapist.

Mum prodded him back into the real world as the traffic lights changed.

"Young tearaways." Jane MacKinnon had noticed her son's interest in the Mods and their scooters. "They're nothing but troublemakers disturbing the peace by causing fights. I don't want you associating with youths like that, James. I've heard they take drugs, too."

"They're not doing any harm, Mum." Mack found himself defending the Mods. "For a start, we're a long way from Brighton and Margate so I doubt they would have been down there. They're only local lads."

As he crossed the road he could see his mum's disapproval.

"Besides," he continued, "they're too interested in looking smart to go causing trouble. Those scooters look fantastic."

"All the same, James, I don't want you getting any ideas about scooters or Mods. It's bad enough your brother with his motorbike playing at being one of those Rockers."

How little his mother knew about Adam. He didn't play at it!

"So it's okay for Adam to be a Rocker who might go beating up Mods?"

Jane MacKinnon gave him a frosty knowing look. She was well aware it was a possibility she could not discount. Adam was like human barbed wire, doling out incessant emotional pain to his parents.

Schoolmates knew James MacKinnon as Mack because MacKinnon was a mouthful, and James was too posh for Bradford lads. Mack was easy on the tongue and ear. Jimmy, he found acceptable. But he preferred Jim. Jim sounded stronger. Neither Jim nor Jimmy was acceptable to his parents. At home it was always James. No one ever called him Jim, though he'd tried to get it accepted. Only Mack ever caught on as a nickname.

The Co-op was a 1930s building on the corner of Sunbridge Road. It was a less pricey department store than Busby's, although nowhere near as upmarket as Brown & Muffs. The Co-operative gave customers dividends, something the other snooty stores didn't. Mack and his mum went through a side entrance and down the long wide stairs into a huge basement sales area.

Tucked into the corner to the right of the stairs was the electrical goods department. Mack loved this place. It was a teenage boy's dream haunt. Most Saturday afternoons he would go just to look around. On display were reel-to-reel tape recorders, record players and transistor radios: items he coveted. There were also selections of records for sale but nothing he found interesting. It was mum and dad type music for those with ghastly tastes. Crap LPs by the likes of the Black and White Minstrels, Liberace and Semprini. On Sunday afternoons his dad would sometime play his Semprini LPs. This guaranteed self-imposed exile to Mack's bedroom. The Tubby Hayes Jazz recordings were okay, though not to his mum's taste – which was why Mack suspected his dad played the jazz LPs so they left him alone.

What Mack wanted was a stereo system that he'd read about in one of his dad's magazines. The Stereo 20 would have been the business with its 10 watt per channel output. Mack's dad planned to get one someday, although the price being what it was, it wasn't going to happen any time soon. The priority of a new motorcar topped his father's shopping list. Stereo was not an option. It was 1964. Mono sound was the inexpensive choice when it came to buying a record player.

Jane MacKinnon had to have the last word with her son as she paid for the Dansette. "You'd better look after this record player. It's an expensive purchase. Your father must have lost his marbles giving you the money to buy it. He's become far too soft with you of late."

"Yes, Mum. Of course I'll look after it. You know I will."

"And I don't want you playing it so loud that I can hear it downstairs. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mum." He sighed.

"It's bad enough with your father listening to those expensive records on the radiogram," she muttered. "I can't believe he paid 32s 6d for that last LP. To say the Scots have a reputation for prudence – he's profligate when it comes to buying records."

"They do give him a lot of pleasure, Mum. It's not as if he smokes or goes to the pub. It's his only pleasure apart from going to the footie." There he was defending his dad now. "And didn't he take you shopping to Leeds to buy you a new hat, coat and two dresses this summer?"

The words elicited a tight-lipped smile as Mum admitted the truth of her son's words. Half an hour later Mack was the proud owner of a brand new mono Dansette in red and cream livery.

Humming and hawing over the different prices, the salesman had offered his mum HP terms. She refused, paying with the money his father had handed over to her. Jane MacKinnon did not believe in Hire Purchase. Hire Purchase was debt, and debt was something she didn't tolerate. As she was always fond of telling Mack and his brother, "Never buy what you can't afford to pay for there and then." Given his dad's line of work, HP was definitely not even a consideration. The MacKinnons were quite well off.

The record player was a hell of a weight to carry, so they took the No. 8 trolley bus home. Mack's delight was such, he wouldn't have minded if it had weighed twice as much. He would have carried it all the way.

From being a kid he had been mad keen on music. That had never changed. Some of his earliest memories were of songs and music played on the radio. He could still hear in his mind Eddie Calvert's trumpet on *Oh My Papa* and Johnny Ray singing *Walking in the Rain*. Later on Nancy Whisky's *Freight Train* fed his love of listening to music. So, too, did Johnny Duncan's *Last Train to San Fernando*. When he was eleven he'd heard The Drifters' *Some Kind of Wonderful*. This awoke a serious interest in soulful sounds. It became the first record he ever bought. It remained his favourite version until he heard Marvin Gaye's rendering a few years later.

What had fired Mack's imagination was the sound of Marvin Gaye, an American singer. When he heard *Stubborn Kind of Fellow* played on an open market stall he knew he had to buy it. A week later he bought the record with his pocket money. The yellow cover displaying the word "Oriole" introduced him to the Motown sound. Over the next weeks and months he hunted out more records by artists like Mary Wells and The Marvelettes. Whenever his parents were out he would play his small but growing record collection. Not that there were many occasions when he could do so. Getting the Dansette was about to change all that. Next week he would have enough money to buy a copy of The Supremes *Where Did Our Love Go*. It had reached Number Three in the Top Twenty.

Today the afternoon was complete as his brother and father were out. Mum would let him get on with it. Whilst he was upstairs she would be busying herself preparing the evening meal. He'd overheard Adam saying he was off to a mate's house to help fix a motorbike and he wouldn't be back for tea. As for his soccer-mad dad, it would be five o'clock before he returned.

Robert MacKinnon spent most Saturday afternoons down at Valley Parade watching City play. Given the club's poor performances, Mack couldn't understand why his dad supported them. No doubt he would return home grouching. As usual this would be about the manager needing sacking. There would be the usual full-scale inquest, delivered with Shakespearean passion, extolling the on-field doings of Roy Elam. Then other team members would be denigrated for under-performing. The studied angst of wondering why they had let "Bronco" Layne go to Wednesday would surface. City had received a staggering £26,000 record-breaking transfer fee for his services. As a bank manager, the finer points of this financial transaction seemed to elude him. Mack's headmaster was also called

Lane and nicknamed “Bronco”. So the tired, lame joke about why would you want a headmaster playing for City ended up being repeated over and over again.

When they had lived in Halifax Mack remembered going to watch Halifax Town at the Shay. Soccer never appealed to him after that visit. It had been a cold, joyless, rainy afternoon that he hadn’t enjoyed in the slightest.

He unpacked the Dansette. Having fitted a three-round pin plug, he was almost ready to put on the first record when Jane MacKinnon came upstairs to check his wiring.

“Yes,” she confirmed, when she’d seen the brown, red and blue wires in their correct positions. “It’s safe. You can screw the top on. Now let’s check it works. If it doesn’t, it will have to go back.”

“Mum, you know I can wire a plug. For goodness sake, I’m fifteen. Dad showed me how to do it when I was eleven. Don’t you trust me to do it right?”

In an instant Jane experienced her moment of truth as a mother. Her son’s words were those of a young man who was no longer a boy.

“It does no harm to double-check. I don’t want the guarantee invalidated by you doing something wrong.” There was sadness in her voice as she spoke and a look on her face he found inexplicable.

Everything worked.

“Don’t play your records too loud.” It was less of a warning reprimand and closer to an adult request as she left the room.

“Yes, Mum. I heard you before. I’ll keep it down.”

It was going to be a great afternoon. Juke Box Jury would be on television with David Jacobs reviewing the latest releases. At last Mack was in his own personal heaven listening to the sound of Marvin Gaye. As each treasured single went on the turntable his thoughts kept returning to the Mods. The afternoon became a haze of musical fantasy. Mack imagined himself on a scooter riding alongside those guys.