

# I don't see anything normal in this modern secular life

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*When I mention the word normality, what is your first thought?*

📦📦📦📦📦📦📦. It is a kind of a balance between the safety of being part of a conformist society that functions, where you can live and be safe. But also on the other side of the coin it is like a prison, someplace suffocating which you want to break out of. It is an ever-shifting balance between these two things. If you break out too much then you lose your security and that feels abnormal; conform too much and you feel trapped by the situation. That feels abnormal as well.

*Is the balance between these two positions achievable?*

I think it is. Most people are doing that most of the time. That's why, regardless of the circumstances, everybody is trying to achieve a certain stability, some status quo that will work for them and to an extent that is what is called normal.

*Would you describe your upbringing as normal?*

I would say it wasn't normal because it was different from the majority. But in other ways it was normal. I had a mother and a father, who were together, who had jobs, did gardening at the weekends. I have three younger sisters. I suppose that it was slightly abnormal. Where I grew up, in a village called Oakley in Bedfordshire, most people had two kids. My parents moved there from London because of my dad's job. He was working for Unilever as a research scientist. My mum stayed at home when we were little, but she was teaching here and there: she found a job when my youngest sister was at school. We were the abnormal ones because we didn't have a brand new TV and a brand new car. I always had that sense of non-conformity when I was growing up, of somehow being different from other people. It is hard to describe. Maybe it was that I saw that other people had a more materialistic approach. Their houses were usually set up in a different way, with no books and the TV that was

constantly on. Where I grew up it was more of a ramshackle mismatch of furniture, homemade clothes. It was slightly eccentric.

*So your parents were structuring their lives according to their values of what normality is?*

I think my mum's parents were a significant factor. They were forward thinking for their time. They had anti-establishment ideas in a gentle way. For example, they were quite disapproving of receiving interest on money from the bank. They were equals in terms of their intellectual status as husband and wife; they had a mutual respect and were very much on the same level. My grandad was a scientist and a lecturer at a polytechnic. He used to walk six miles to work rather than drive. When he did drive later, he would never take motorways, instead picking cross-country routes and small roads. They were people who allowed themselves to be individual, particularly him. He would describe himself as a very singular person. When they went on holiday, my grandmother and my mum and uncle would take a train and he would cycle separately. It was not normal; it was a bit strange. But they were completely devoted to each other. I suppose their influence indirectly affected my childhood.

*Do you think that those values have anything to do with the presence of Methodism in the lives of both sets of your grandparents?*

Possibly. Methodism promotes a simplified way of life. The churches are simply built; there's no grandeur there. Methodists don't drink during the mass, so instead of communion wine they have blackcurrant juice. My grandmother on my mother's side was the only dedicated worshipper. On the other hand, my dad's grandfather on his mother's side was the last of the Charles Simmons Methodist preachers who had been serving in Cornwall since John Wesley founded Methodism there. In the meantime modern society and the 1960s happened. But they kept their values about not being extravagant or extreme, instead simply being kind. It was a lot to do with openness, tolerating other people and being understanding.

*Isn't that 📦📦📦📦📦📦📦?*

I don't know about that. I think the world is lacking in that, to be honest. It would be a nice normality.

*So the individualistic approach to materialism made your family differ from others?*

I remember as a kid I was told, "You can have stuff, but why would you

need it? You don't need it, you just think you do." My sisters and I were kind of indoctrinated into not being materialistic and not joining the consumption frenzy. We were always eating homemade food and wearing handmade clothes. I remember when sliced bread came out. It was like a miracle and everybody was eating processed white bread. At school everybody else had white bread sandwiches with sliced ham and cheese and I had this crumbly homemade bread with leftovers from the previous day's meal and a Tupperware pot with apple crumble. I was sitting there eating my lunch and looking around and thinking, "I am not normal. There's something different about my family." It was a bit embarrassing and people picked on me.

*Does it mean that you felt uncomfortable with the fact that you didn't fit to the standard concept of what normal was?*

Well, in fact I was against it. I felt some kind of solidarity with my parents and what they instilled in me from an early age. I felt indignant towards certain things I was seeing outside so I thought, "This is wrong." I didn't know how to express it so I suppose I was dismissive of it.

Yet it did also make me feel an "abnormal" outcast. As a boy you must play football to be a part of the group. That's it. Full stop. This football thing defines everything about being a boy and I wasn't interested at all. And if you didn't play football, it was like, "What team do you support?" "I don't support anybody." "What do you mean, you don't support anybody? You must support a team!" Why would I? I couldn't get it at all. And then I crumbled at some point and said, I better do something. I think I was nine or ten. I remember I needed a new schoolbag so I got my mum to get me one with "Spurs" on it. I picked the team at random. It was a half-hearted attempt to join in, and then I went to school and the first guy I saw said, "Spurs? They are rubbish!"

*But soon enough you found your crowd among musicians?*

Yes, at an early age. My mum was teaching music on Saturday mornings at a school run by her friend. Every Saturday from the age of eight or nine I went to that school and there was a whole other crowd of people and some sort of shared thing going on, a shared experience of being into music, being a bit weird like everybody else. None of that awkwardness at school was present in this environment. It was a huge relief because being excluded or bullied makes for a lonely place to be. Suddenly finding a group where I was accepted was a good feeling. I suppose 99% of people want that too.

*As someone who is 44, are you surprised with the changes in British society that have happened since your childhood? Did you find the past*

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I don't see anything normal in this secular modern life. To me it is completely nuts in the way that people are led like sheep to everything flashy and attention-grabbing. It is almost as if the masses are so malleable because there is nothing holding them together anymore.

It's all about money and ego, about the cult of individualism. People are being told that they are individuals in the way they dress, etc. As in reality shows, for example, it is all about the personalities of these people. But who cares? It is all built on the idea of sharing these people's experiences, talking about themselves. The process of ups and downs, emotions and everything else are on public display. It is accentuating the worst parts of human beings.

*How do you feel about it as a musician?*

I feel ♫•🎸□□□■◆♫♫. In this country there is never enough striving for quality. I am still kind of proud of this country because it seems a well-balanced place that functions pretty well. It's not as if we just faded into the background. We are still up there as a major player. But I am disappointed in a way, especially in the culture, that everything always seems to come down to the lowest common denominator rather than any kind of striving for quality. Anything really good can't be seen under this blanket of mediocre crap. Maybe it was always so.

*And what the media are promoting is driving public opinion on what is good or bad and then the audience is asking for more of what they have been given. It's a closed circle.*

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The media are in control and the government does nothing about it. It is the influence of America obviously, but I am not sure if it has affected other European countries like France and Germany. They don't seem to jump on the bandwagon with such commitment as we do. I am not saying that everything that comes from America is bad, but it seems that we took the worst elements. It's all so dull: on telly it's just another police drama, like the one I used to watch in the 1980s called *Juliet Bravo*.

*But people compensate for something they lack in their "normal"*

*○◆■♫🎸■♫ ●✂️♫ with such entertainment?*

It's a buzz. It's like buying something: you do your dull job every week, get the money and treat yourself by getting new clothes, a new sofa, or going

to John Lewis to get some curtains. It's as if people feel in control of their lives when they are consuming. I don't like that feeling. The sense of disappointment comes immediately. For example when you are buying clothes, you get a slight feeling of excitement but then you realise that after a few washes they look like a dishrag. At the end you have this horrible feeling that you are being manipulated and channelled into the mantra of consumerism. Even the politicians tell you, "We really hope everybody this Christmas is going to spend, to help the economy." I think, "What? We are going to spend our way out of recession? It's madness!" I see people joining in with the thrill. Eventually they don't even know what is happening anymore. First they say, "Something's happening, we must join in. And it's so exciting, isn't it?" But is it really?

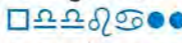
*Is it actually more of a loss of a critical point of view?*

Totally. For example when Barack Obama was elected I thought, "Great. This is a seminal moment." But I didn't want to watch the inauguration because I knew it would be a feeding frenzy. Maybe I was just a grumpy bastard but I could see how everybody wanted to feel as if they were part of it, to take ownership of it.

*And to feel "That light is shining on us too".*

It's a blinding light! It blinds them to any kind of reality that normally happens in these situations. I was thinking, "Let's just calm down a bit. Yes, it's great, but the colour of his skin doesn't tell us anything about his programme or anything that is behind the scenes and that he still has a job to do." And we were judging him as special because of the colour of his skin. It's ironic.

*Do you feel a bit alienated in situations when you stand alone against the views of the majority?*

That used to bother me with girls. You won't get them if you are not part of the group because nobody wants an , do they? They go with somebody else who was quite obviously normal in a conventional way. That used to piss me off but then I got over it. I saw that all those girls I might end up with I wouldn't be able to hold any conversation with anyway because they were all invested in the group. That was one of the big ones. But other than that I didn't care. As a musician I live on a periphery of society anyway. I see people when they are out socialising. I don't have any idea what their lives are really like. I see them all dressed up in a jazz club or theatre or pissed in a pub, which means that I get an almost abstract view on society.

*In what way is your life different from the majority of people and in what way do you find your crowd of musicians more normal to you?*

Well, what is normal for us musicians is completely abnormal for most other people. For instance, the crazy travelling: crossing timelines, jet lag, being spoken to in different languages, working out prices in different currencies. One of the main things, though, is that there is no routine at all. You always have to be on the ball, one step ahead, checking your diary frequently to plan the next few days and anticipate any problems that might arise because you have to make the gig. I've been in many situations where I and my fellow musicians have managed to get to the venue and home again despite floods, snow, air traffic control strikes, Tube strikes, even volcanoes. It is hard for us to find people from other walks of life who understand our normality.

*When you were 20 you quit the oboe course at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and enrolled at the Royal Academy of Music on the jazz course. It seems that by that choice you removed yourself from the conventional idea of a normal life and career.*

I was surrounded by a lot of people who were pushed by parents who controlled them, and thinking that it is absolutely the most important thing ever. They were very driven young people. It was almost like sports. In the wind-playing world people were backbiting and cutthroat. There was little sense of camaraderie or solidarity. I immediately felt a lack of love for music. There wasn't any fun. Jazz seemed to me back then more laid-back, relaxed. It made sense to an Englishman to go down the route of European classical music, but I got seduced by the rhythm of jazz, this African rhythm, exotic and fascinating. Jazz's concept of a groove does not exist in classical music. Classical music can be a bit stuck up and "precious", which can be suffocating. It is high art and you are privileged to be part of it. This is an amazing thing really, however what drew me was the exploration of groove. It is related to a heartbeat, something which is constant, flowing rhythmically, that doesn't really exist in classical music. In classical music there is constant chopping and changing, moving from one thing to another and slowing down and speeding up, whereas jazz has got a beat.

*Do you think then that jazz feels more natural?*

Maybe. The sort of jazz I like has that primeval energy. You can put as much information as you like on top of that but this beat and this feeling have to be there.

*Did it feel more normal, then, to play jazz?*

I would say it was  $\circ\circ\circ\mathcal{M}$   $\times\circ\mathcal{M}\mathcal{M}$  although that's not even true either, to be honest. Because in the improvisational side of things you are much more in control of what the music is, but then you are trapped by your own limitations, because everything is turned on its head. What it did give me was an opportunity to get my hands dirty and to actually get involved with the elements of the music. When you play classical music it's all about interpreting what is written on the page and the page is full of information: there's the tempo, the key and everything else, but there are also tons of expression markings, so you are reading how to express the music in the way the composer intends. Also you need to master your instrument. While with jazz you might get a page with 32 bars and the chord symbols, but you need to make up all the notes, the expressions and the rhythm. It's much more hands-on, dealing with the raw elements. That is why I picked jazz.