



## The FRONT Man

*After 17 years of small gigs and background singing, Jermaine Paul wowed the world on The Voice. Here's how he stayed in tune with his dreams.*

by CHRISTINA BOYLE CUSH

Jermaine Paul strolls into his hometown church in Harriman, N.Y., wearing jeans, sneakers and an orange V-neck sweater—and admits he's the classic middle child still vying for the spotlight. Born July 26, 1978, he is the fifth of 10 children to parents who worked hard to move their family from a tough area in Spring Valley, N.Y., to a more family-friendly neighborhood in Harriman. While in Spring Valley, his dad, a preacher, made sure the kids stayed out of trouble and away from drugs by turning their living room into a musical performance area. It was loaded with instruments—piano, drums and guitars—and some of the kids, including Jermaine, formed a group to perform gospel songs in local churches.

Spending lots of time in church, performing and praying as a kid, deeply influenced Paul. "My prayer is endless... In my head, it's like I'm in constant prayer. I need that," he says. "That comes from my parents. As a kid, I'd see my mom in church, and she'd really have a moment crying and singing... The services we went to were very active, with folks jumping up and down. For me, it was the heart of it all."

If, like millions of *Voice* viewers, you heard him sing "I Believe I Can Fly," you may have thought, "That guy has a gift." But Paul would argue, "Passion is my true gift. With passion you can go from not singing one day, to putting in the work and due diligence to get drive and push to become a singer. The prayer aspect is important—it helps me lock in with my passion. Singing is a gift. But passion is my true gift ... and keeps me going."

In addition to regular prayer, Paul relies on morning runs to get centered. "When I run, I think of new ways to stay motivated. I like to do a 5K and run around the pond. My day is usually really good after that." And Paul isn't complacent after his *Voice* victory. "The key is to remember where it all started."

After moving to Harriman as a 14-year-old, Paul broke away from gospel singing and performed rhythm and blues at school talent shows. His dream was beginning to take flight. "I learned to follow my dreams and never give up. You don't get there if you stop trying..."

### The Beginning

Paul formed a group with his older brother Charles and a multicultural bunch of guys. They worked their way from school talent shows to coffeehouses. "By the time I was in 11th grade, all the major stuff started to happen. Charles went off to Albany University and met a guy who we ended up singing with. The three of us formed a new group called 1 Accord. When I was in high school, I drove up to Albany every weekend to do shows. Then we did shows in New York City. I had to let football and track go because my schedule was too crazy."


It was eye-opening for this young man from a traditional background to become part of Manhattan's nightlife. Paul thrived on the contrast. "I was the secret weapon of the group. [The audience] would look at me—I was a skinny little guy, I weighed about 105 pounds and was 6-foot-3—and I wasn't afraid at all. I was the 'take it on home' guy of the group."

By the time Paul graduated from high school in 1996, 1 Accord made a demo that landed a deal with Shaquille O'Neal's label. "There was another company interested in me as a solo artist, but I had been with my brother for so long that I didn't want to leave him. I don't regret it because I would've gotten lost and would've been a totally different person," he says.

After signing with O'Neal, the group had a song on the soundtrack to the Jamie Foxx movie *Boozy Call*. As an 18-year-old, Paul was thrilled to hear his song playing during the movie's opening credits. But the momentum stalled and the band soon dissolved.



Justin Lubian/NBC/NBCU Photo Bank via Getty Images



After being announced the winner of the second season of *The Voice*, Jermaine Paul serenades the audience with "I Believe I Can Fly." Behind him, his wife Melissa is being interviewed by backstage correspondent Christina Milian.



## Your Personal Best



Brian Hinesline/Retna Ltd./Corbis

Jermaine Paul performs as the opening act for Alicia Keys in Atlantic City, N.J., on March 20, 2010. Paul's video for his new single "Butterfly Kisses" features fathers with their daughters, including his two girls.

In college Paul met his endlessly supportive wife, Melissa. While dating, he consulted her about leaving college to pursue his musical dreams and she agreed with it. "Funnily enough, I was studying Music Business [in college]. And I've learned all the ins and outs of it by experiencing it over 17 years."

### Family Time

Paul still didn't have a clear path, though. "We got married at the age of 20 in 1999. We had our four kids when we were 19 through 22.... I'd work 9 to 5, doing everything from cleaning houses to stacking boxes; then I'd perform in the city at night.... I never stopped believing. There were times I didn't sing for weeks or write a song for months, but I never stopped believing."

His main objective was affording a nice place to raise his kids, which ended up being Harriman. "My biggest success is having my kids watch me reach my goals, me being able to sustain my family, and me getting to the places I want to be in business while keeping my family intact," says Paul, pulling out a wallet full of photos of his wife and children.

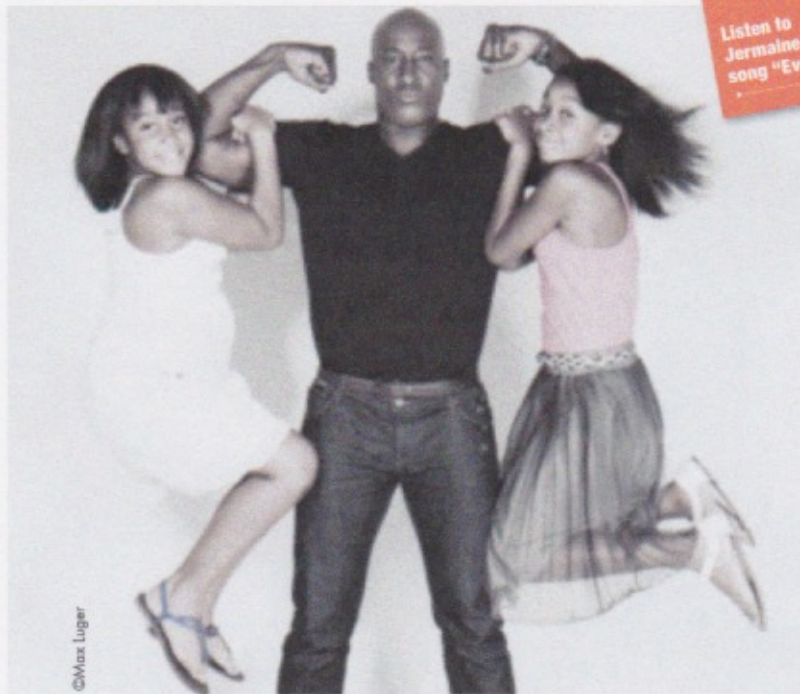
When he was about 23, Paul put together a band with guys from Long Island, N.Y. "We started doing shows and wreaking havoc in the city," he says with a grin. "We had a little hip-hop look, and we all played instruments." One record label after another looked at them and passed.

How did he recover from the painful rejections? "When I realized it didn't go the way I'd hoped, it was disappointing. But it taught me how to erase the hype. I'd always get so hyped about a performance that I'd mess up my own chances. I'd get in my own way. I learned to be more patient." As Paul matured, reading would pull him out of the dumps. "My favorite book is the Bible. It's the wisdom and proverbs that make so much sense to me and helped me on so many different levels. There are so many different stories that fed my soul and helped me understand how to react and to keep moving."

One fateful night, his Long Island band realized Alicia Keys was in the audience, right after the commercial success of her first album, *Songs in A Minor*. Paul called her up to sing with him. She refused, so he walked over the tables and chairs in the club to sing to her. "The crowd went crazy. It was one of the coolest things!"

### On the Road Again

Keys soon asked him to sing backup for her on the road, which he did for about eight years. During that time he tried out for *American Idol*. Randy Jackson, Simon Cowell and Paula Abdul were not impressed. He was firmly told, "No."



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look at my personal situation. Is it in line with those things? You are an individual so set your goals to fit you."

Soon Paul was back in Harriman forming a band with high-school friends and some of his brothers. They did local shows and developed a modest fan base. Meanwhile, Melissa and Arealyah, Paul's older daughter, urged him to try out for the second season of NBC's *The Voice*. There he won the professional mentorship of country singer Blake Shelton, the \$100,000 prize and a three-album deal with Universal Republic that gives him creative control.

### The Big Break

Paul thinks touring with Keys prepared him for the grueling TV rehearsal and taping schedule, which wore out some competitors. "It was tough during the week, but the work was constant. I'm good with a schedule." Another winning factor was being emotionally dialed in to the songs he performed. "People respect and honor honesty. I didn't want to sing what I couldn't emotionally connect to."

A conscious professional shift from being a singer to becoming a brand happened on *The Voice*. "I wanted to look like I owned a yacht—like Frank Sinatra from the Rat Pack. I want to be Sammy Davis [with a suit] tailored to fit me to a T. That's when the branding started. I thought, 'I am gonna be the classy black artist [who's] sophisticated... clean... cool.'"

For professional advice, Paul turns to a lawyer and business managers. "I can articulate the kind of success I want, but it's important to have advisers. It's important to have fresh blood on your team *and* someone who can show you how to do it and what it takes. Cover all your bases. Have youth and knowledge and wisdom around you."

As "The Voice" of the year, Paul gets to choose his production team. In fact, right after our interview, he was meeting with potential music producers. For his debut album, he's tapping the library of songs he has written. "I am energized. This has given me a drive like none other. I have not yet accomplished what I want with my music. I want it played on the radio. I want to put my own album [being released as this magazine hits newsstands] out there and have it be recognized and win some Grammys and music awards."

Now that he's gotten his big break, Paul says "this is when the real work starts. This is like when the entrepreneur finally gets investors and can manufacture the product and get it out there." He knows during this critical phase that brand integrity is essential. To stay true to his mission, he asks himself, *What are you doing to make your brand better every day?* "You have to take advice and listen, but at end of the day, you've got to be more excited about your product than anyone else."

At only 34, this singing phenomenon has already nailed what ultimately separates the winners from the losers. **S**

That fueled his desire to prove them wrong. "I never gave up on my dream. I kept my spirit on the right path by going to church every Sunday and running a few times a week. I took care of my family and believed that the Greater Good will move on my behalf. Something will take me out of my normal situation and help me be the artist I want to be. It has always been in my mind as long I can remember. I knew it would happen with patience and passion. Those two things got me here."

On the road with Keys, Paul bonded with DJ Walton, who started as her tour-managing assistant and eventually became her manager with Jeff Robinson. Paul liked doing background vocals for and duets with Keys. But "I wanted my moment," he says. So he spoke to DJ and Jeff about getting an opening spot. "I said, 'I am out there with her already, so you don't have to pay me. I just want a chance to perform my own stuff.'"

Paul opened for her for about four years, he says, but wanted to leave "Alicia's world" for one of his own. Paul said he told her, "No disrespect, but I gotta do something different."

Giving up a stable career to chase a dream is what Paul considers his defining moment. "I believed that walking away was giving myself a chance. I said I am gonna risk it all—that was the beginning of it all. What caused that was I realized I wasn't really happy, even though I was making money. I always felt like something was missing. I had a void, and it was affecting my personal, emotional and spiritual life."

He wanted to be recognized in his own right. "You feel like you put the work in and are deserving of it, but you have not been recognized yet." So by walking away from Keys, he was saying to the music industry, "Consider me." It was a huge financial risk for a father of four, but he was educated for the road ahead. He had studied Keys carefully—how she carried herself on stage, in meetings and with fans.

And Paul left with a fully formed goal. "Goal-setting: It's the epitome of what I do. You need to start with a premise or a standard—I will never compromise on this; I want to get to this place, whatever that is. First, I look at my goal and at those who've done what worked for them. Then I

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