

While flicking with much interest through the latest issue of our magazine, English soul singer Paul Young enthusiastically pointed at the photo of Benny playing the accordion, explaining that this instrument is also prominently used by his Tex Mex band Los Pacaminos, formed in 1993. This band is just one of Paul's projects during a very successful career that started in the '80s and made him a household name, with mega-hits such as *Love Of The Common People*, *Come Back And Stay* and *Everytime You Go Away*. In 2016, Paul may not be that young anymore, but his boyish appearance and waggish eyes are still there to charm you, while he continues to be an energetic live performer. It was a pleasure to meet him in Utrecht (Holland) during his current live tour.

Could you describe what ABBA's music has meant to you on a personal level?

I was in my late teens when ABBA came out, and I was kind of dismissive at first. It was just pop music. I was even like that with The Beatles and Simon & Garfunkel because I was really into blues and soul. But I do remember them being on TV a lot. However, I was a bit too young to get into the songs and to understand how complex they were. That came much later. I kind of started to get an appreciation for them once I started to be a musician myself. I would buy anything and everything on record. I've got rap, blues, latin, soul, pop and rock in my collection. Everything interests me. Then I started to appreciate what ABBA were doing much more.

What do you consider ABBA's greatest merit?

I think their talent; when they write a song, they make it sound very simple. When I was a kid, I just thought, oh, these are very simple songs. But they are far from simple, they are much more complicated.

In your opinion, what is the reason for their lasting appeal?

I would say it's one of those occasions when you get the perfect band together like The Beatles did, or even when the perfect sitcom like *Friends* was established, when the characters or the personalities in the right order all start to gel. With ABBA, you've got two very good songwriters and very good musicians. You've got two girl singers with great voices. They're able and capable of doing really complex harmonies. It's one of those lucky things that happen when the right people find each other, and it's the chemistry - the chemistry works.

Is the production of the ABBA records something that interests you as well?

I remember Prince's first self-produced records. I was thinking, perhaps he needs somebody in. But, towards the end, he was really good; from *Diamonds And Pearls* on the sound was great. With ABBA, there has always been a good sound, it's one of those things. I wouldn't say their production stood out more than certain other records; it's more the songs

and the arrangements that interest me.

Do you understand ABBA were criticized in the Seventies because their songs were not socially engaged?

And they weren't dealing with serious issues? That doesn't bother me at all because I don't feel that music always has to have a political involvement. If that's what you want, you buy records by Sting and U2. If you want pop music, you go somewhere else. In the same way, I don't think every artist should be a songwriter. I don't think that's imperative. It was never a problem for Frank Sinatra. It was never a problem for Tony Bennett and so many others. It was never a problem for The Drifters that their songs were written by Carole King. So to me it doesn't matter. There are so many different areas in music, why should we all have to conform to one thing? So, okay, they didn't do much in the form of social comment but when they did songs like *The Day Before You Came*, there's that much darker element; they showed they have a kind of a darker side.

Did you ever cover one of ABBA's songs?

No, I haven't, but my friend James Moses who is in my band back home has played them many times. He always says to me, it's so complex, it's so difficult to learn the ABBA songs and once you've learnt them and want to play the songs, you've got to learn the harmonies. He says it's just so tough, it's a very tough gig.

Would you consider doing an ABBA cover?

It's always a possibility because I never know what I'm gonna do next. Sometimes I just hear a song and think, oh yeah, that's great, and at other times I hear a song and think, oh, I could do this in a different way... Hmm, I think about that, you know. And then there are songs hanging around for 20 years and I think, one day I will do that song, and I will find a different and new way.

What ABBA song would be a contender?

Probably *The Day Before You Came* because I think there's a lot of room for to do a rearrangement. In some of their early pop stuff, the arrangement is a big part of the song, like in *Waterloo* and certain other songs. If you take the arrangement away, I don't know if it works so well. And I don't think I would do *Dancing Queen* [laughs]. In contrast, in *The Day Before You Came* the lyric is the most important part.

Since you are well experienced in that area, what is the secret when it comes to making a good cover version of a song?

Yes, I've done it a lot [smiles]. There are different things, really. Like for *Love Of The Common People*, I heard it as a reggae song, and it is very difficult to get away from it [demonstrates the rhythm section reggae-wise]. I couldn't get the reggae out of my head, and the only way I could do it was to start create a pulse [demonstrates the rhythm section of his final version of the song], which creates the same feeling as reggae but is not actually reggae. And for other songs my question was, how do I make it



sound more soulful? For Love Will Tear Us Apart, I came up with The Four Tops. So you always have to get further away from the original version, and then you come back to it if you want to.

Are there any ABBA covers that you like?

The most interesting cover I've heard recently is my friend Susie's. In fact Susie [Webb] has done a bossa nova album of ABBA songs, and there's a really nice version there of Knowing Me, Knowing You where the bossa nova works really well. She's done exactly what I've just explained. She's taken it away from the comfort zone where it was and put it in a different genre.

In your musical circles, how was ABBA perceived in the '80s? Do you notice a difference with today's appreciation for the band?

I do. I think the re-appreciation started in the late '80s. Before that time, everybody was very wrapped up in themselves and what they were doing, including the technological advances in the '80s. Once we came to terms with those technological advances and started to use them, that created the appreciation of what ABBA had done in their era; how they managed to orchestrate pop, more than The Beatles did. The Beatles didn't orchestrate it so much. The ABBA arrangements were much more complicated and open to orchestration.

If we talk about their influence, that's what you mean?

Yeah. The ABBA sound was more orchestrated, it was bigger. I think they saw things as the big whole. If you look at The Beatles, Paul McCartney re-released Let It Be because he didn't like what Phil Spector had done to it. He re-released it and took the Phil Spector strings and everything off, and I think they [the songs] still stand up after a fashion but with ABBA stuff, the songs were orchestrated from the very top to the very bottom. The whole thing, it works as a whole. The great thing with ABBA is when you hear a song, it's a complete thing. Take away some of the parts and it won't work as well. It needs everything that's on the record.

Have you ever met the ABBA members?

No, I haven't.

Do you understand why ABBA never reformed for a reunion tour?

I don't really know, although I do know I worked very closely with some musicians in the '80s and although we were so close - we were like that - [puts right middle and index finger together], things change. My former keyboard player Ian Kewley for example has moved to another country and we respect each other, but I don't know if we can ever work together again. It's just one of those things. I think if you work hard and are together 24/7, it's like a marriage. You really have to work at it. I won't go into the whys and wherefores, but sometimes it gets a bit too much, too much of an intrusion into your own life.

Do you think the visual aspect of a performer is important?

Very, yeah. I don't think people take enough time and trouble now. Yes, you've got a few artists like Beyoncé and Rihanna who put on fantastic shows. But the thing is, a lot of the show comes from the dancers and the people around them, not the band themselves. I want the band to entertain me, not their dancers. So I do love show; I think it's very important, but I like it to come from the musicians.

So you think it was alright that ABBA were dressed up like they were?

Oh yes, absolutely. I'm all for dressing up [laughs]. I think it's the bit that is missing now. Everybody is dressing down. I think the glam period was actually not a bad period because people made an effort. You paid and you saw something, not just heard something.

What are your favourite songs from your own repertoire?

Now it's all about performing live. We all have to work live a lot. Of the hits, Every Time You Go Away is one of my favourites. The other one I really enjoy doing for some reason is Senza Una Donna. Another one I like is a track on the Vangelis album *Voices*. He got different guests on different tracks, and I'm on one of them. The vocal that I do on Losing Sleep is not typical Paul Young at all, and that's why I like it. I really enjoyed working with Vangelis.

The Tex Mex Music you're doing with your latest band is also very different from what you did before.

Los Pacaminos is very different and, with the latest Paul Young album [*Good Thing*], I've actually come back to my roots of R&B and soul music.

What was for you the highlight of your career? Was it the success in the US?

Yeah, it has to be, really. I always wanted to have a career as a musician and I got one, so I'm very lucky. I've still got one! Probably the best part was Band Aid, doing something worthwhile, and Live Aid, being up on stage with the calibre of other musicians that were there was a highlight.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH

More famous fans in the book 'We all love ABBA', available at our shop.