

*Madeline Bell's career reads like a music library. The US-born singer started out singing gospel and touring in the early 1960s, before taking up jazz and soul. She then settled in England, working with Dusty Springfield, Elton John and Joe Cocker to name a few. She became one of the world's most sought-after session singers, gracing innumerable classic songs with her distinctive harmonies and musical versatility.*

*Madeline continues to perform today, still thrilling audiences, be it in an intimate jazz club or as guest vocalist in a larger setting, and spoke to me from her Spanish home. As an iconic figure from a golden musical era, I was curious to know more about the vocalist who had influenced ABBA as part of the group Blue Mink that had hits such as Melting Pot and Banner Man between 1969 and 1974.*

**Both Björn Ulvaeus and ABBA guitarist Janne Schaffer confirmed they listened to Blue Mink records in the recording studio and were influenced by them in the early ABBA years. How do you feel about that?**

I think it's fantastic! For a long time, I didn't know that. I heard about that a couple of years ago actually, watching an old *Top of the Pops*, and they had ABBA on, and it was sort of like unknown news that came up underneath them [Author's note - this refers to screen subtitles.] When I saw that, I thought, that's fantastic! That's wonderful. I mean, I'm one of those people who is not ashamed to say I really did like ABBA. I'm proud to say it. I don't understand why you would be embarrassed to admit it; it shows in particular you have some taste!

**Perhaps some people criticised them because of their image?**

It just shows you where some people's heads are at! We're talking about the music; we're not talking about the clothes they wore. What's that got to do with anything? They were dressed according to and went along with the time. At the time, that's the way people dressed. At the time, women didn't shake their asses to sell records. That was a different time, a completely different style.

**Did you already like them back then in the 1970s?**

Yes. They wrote great songs. To me, they were on par in many ways with Lennon & McCartney. The fact that they were Swedish, that they weren't even English, and they wrote these great catchy songs that the world loved.

**Can you hear Blue Mink's influence on the early ABBA records?**

Over the years we, and I, have been copied so much that I tend to have a deaf ear. I don't listen out for it anymore whenever there are harmonies. Blue Mink were always into harmonies. ABBA's harmonies were really good. One or two of the tracks that I can think

of from the top of my head are Fernando [starts to sing, "There was something in the air tonight the stars were bright, Fernando..."] and Dancing Queen. I don't have any ABBA music in the house because I can't say that it is my style of music, which is more Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye... But in the early days, when we were in the studio, we were aware of everything that was coming out, before it came out. So we knew when a track was going to be a hit, and we were always right with ABBA!

**How do you appreciate the vocals of Agnetha and Frida?**

They're great singers. And I've worked with so many singers, so many backing vocalists, I'm almost like, if singers get together and they can harmonise, then that's good. And Frida and Agnetha, they were good at what they did. I wouldn't criticise them at all. All I can do is compliment them, but I can't analyse them because how do you analyse that kind of success? Millions of people thought it was good, why would I say anything other than that?

**So you agree that their voices and harmonies are a major part of ABBA's success?**

Yes, but also the stories. The stories were always good. That has always been important. What is the story that you're telling? The Winner Takes It All, when one of the couples was splitting up, comes to mind. Roger Cook [vocalist and songwriter in Blue Mink] used to say that he used to try and write stories when composing. I had the pleasure of meeting Hal David, and he thanked me for singing one of his songs, and I thanked him for his stories because that's what's important.

**The ABBA songs are now also used in blockbuster films. What do you think of that?**

It all speaks for itself. It doesn't even need to be questioned. The film companies wouldn't be using that music if they didn't think that it was a) good and b) that the public was going to remember it. Because that's what they want. They use songs that they know the public love. Because that reminds them of a time or a place and the stories that they told in their songs. Everybody, as soon as Dancing Queen comes on, every dancing queen in the room, even the non-dancing queens, get up and dances because it's telling the story of their own lives. The music is almost as important, if not more important than anything else because it sets the mood. And ABBA are instantly recognisable. Their music is instantly recognisable, which is brilliant.

**Blue Mink were quite revolutionary in the late 1960s, with their mixed race constellation and often sociopolitical messages. Do you think all this was too radical at that time to have a breakthrough in the US?**

Yes [with conviction]. When you think Melting Pot [a plea for racial harmony], America wasn't



ready for that, and they are not ready for it now more than 50 years later. But then again, neither is the UK because last year they actually banned Melting Pot from the airwaves [a decision by Ofcom, the media regulator who deemed references to certain race and skin tones in the lyric offensive].

**In the late 1960s, though, the band and its repertoire with a clear message were well received in the UK.**

Well, quite a lot of the stuff that we did was like messages. Our World was another one [dealing with the subjects of pollution and war]. That song really is talking about basically what's going on now [with lyrics such as "Why does everybody try to ruin everything that really matters in this world today?"]. Roger Cook and Herbie Flowers - all of us, in fact - were heavily influenced by Marvin Gaye's What's Going On. Because people were trying to talk about what's happening in the world then, and the same problems still happen now.

**What is your favourite ABBA song?**

I think it is Thank You For The Music. That's the one that comes to my mind. It's very poignant to someone who is in the music business. You know, Thank You For The Music, it's a great song. It would have been nice, but I have never met any of them.

**Do you remember ABBA's performance at the Eurovision Song Contest?**

I didn't watch that particular one, but I have seen it on YouTube, yes! But a year later, in 1975, I was in Stockholm for Eurovision. I was doing backing vocals for Joy Fleming [with the song Ein Lied Kann Eine Brücke Sein [Bridge Of Love]], the German entry. Sue, Sunny and I had done backing vocals in Germany, in Munich, and then they asked us if we would go to Stockholm with the German representative. But we knew that they wouldn't win because of the singer..., no one liked her. She wasn't the easiest person to like.

**Do you remember the winner of the year when you performed at Eurovision?**

Yes! It was Teach-In with Ding-a-Dong. I still know that one. We thought that one was the catchiest song at that time [starts belting out, "Ding-a-Dong every minute...when you think your lover is gone, gone, gone, sing ding-ding-dong. Dinge-dinge-dinge...]. I mean, it was thought out. A lot of people thought it was a bit childish, but for a Eurovision song it was perfect. Like Puppet on a String, that's the kind of stuff Eurovision goes for.

**What did you think of the whole Eurovision circus?**

Well, to me it was a lot more pleasant than it is now. Now it really is a circus. It's got nothing to do with the song.

**There used to be a real orchestra, too.**

Now it's all backing tracks and tapes, and people dress up to get attention. It's all gimmicks now.

**Do you prefer to sing live or do you prefer to work in the studio?**

Personally, I prefer to sing live.

**ABBA always regarded themselves more as recording artists rather than being a live band.**

That was Blue Mink as well. We were never intended to be a live working band, but we just had to go on the road.

**What do you think of the fact that ABBA are coming back and have recorded new songs?**

Well, I can only hope that the new songs are as good as the old songs! ABBA don't really need to do any more. They've given the world so much to remember them by. They can just step back and discover new talent, put their talent to great use and find new talent who can write stuff as good, not exactly like it but write some good songs and things. They don't need to go back on the stage. And the blond lady, from what I've seen, her stories and everything, doesn't really like being on the road anyway.

**Do you still enjoy performing?**

Yes, I still enjoy performing, but I'm not in the greatest business. It used to be a great business to be in, but it's not like that anymore. It's a whole new kind of music business.

**You purely mean that you don't like the business side of it anymore?**

Neither the music side. I'm looking for the music. Today's music doesn't have musicians. How can there be music if there are no musicians in it? It's all electronic now. And autotune can make people sound like they can sing, and a lot of them cannot sing, but they've become multi big stars. That's not how we did it. But then again, I'm sounding really old and antique here.

**Who are your musical heroes?**

I'm a Stevie Wonder fan. I listen to a lot of Stevie Wonder, Georgie Fame, Bill Withers and Marvin Gaye. I listen to old stuff mostly. I'm not into today's music. Today's music does nothing for me, nothing whatsoever. Occasionally, I might see something on television that I enjoy. I enjoy watching people that I consider to be talented. Like I watch Beyonce because the woman works her ass off. She works really, really hard. But I don't see much of that. There's a lot of posing on stage as far as I can see. It's a fake business now. Musicians are out of work, thanks to the virus, but musicians were being put out of work for a long time. Ever since karaoke came in, and clubs and bars could replace live musicians with machines, that took musicians' work away, and now musicians are lucky to get a gig. There's no respect.

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