

Along with Liz Mitchell, Maizie Williams and Bobby Farrell, Jamaican-born Marcia Barrett was part of the most famous Euro-Caribbean Disco group of the 1970s, Boney M., which was founded by German record producer Frank Farian. Marcia and Liz were the only actual singers that could be heard on the group's numerous megahits and million sellers such as Rivers Of Babylon, Daddy Cool, Ma Baker and Belfast.

This year, while a new generation is rocketing the Boney M. hit Rasputin back into the charts worldwide (with Majestic), Marcia also released her album *Survival (Expanded Edition)* that is available on all digital platforms.

When I contacted Marcia, she told me that she "would be delighted to share her thoughts on the career of the incredible ABBA that took us through decades."

When was the first time you heard ABBA?

At about the same time when we were in the charts. It was really great to see them at the Eurovision competition. Together they had produced a good song and you felt they were gonna be great.

What makes ABBA so special in your opinion?

Songs like The Winner Takes It All are so beautifully written and everything they recorded is so well produced, it's lovely. It's not something that you sit and have a laugh about. None of the songs, you know what I mean? You take the songs and sing along, and you say, oh how nice and everything. But there's nothing funny to giggle about – like Rasputin or some other Boney M. songs. I would say with ABBA, what I think of is that they're even more popular than Boney M. Did you know we were rivals in the charts? We were always in the charts together, that made it very interesting. When Boney M. were N°1, ABBA were N°2 and when ABBA were N°1, Boney M. were N°2 and was like that for some time.

So, it was a healthy competition between the two groups?

I think so, because we didn't get in each other's way. ABBA had their fans and Boney M. had their fans. And then sometimes you find that both fan groups like both groups. Why? Because it's music, and if the music makes you feel good, that's great.

The origins of both groups are quite different, of course.

They were couples, weren't they? A totally different thing from Boney M. We were strangers put together, but it worked, which is fantastic. Each one brought their little thing with them; my thing was my voice and my image, and it worked. And there could be no Boney M. without Liz's voice and Bobby putting in his beautiful creative moves onstage, no man can dance like that, that was Bobby's thing.

With ABBA, is it their gift for great

melodies that you appreciate in particular?

The melodies are really very important. To me that comes first.

And the voices of the ladies?

Of course! You have to deliver properly. Both ladies, Agnetha and Frida, have beautiful voices. And for me it doesn't matter which one was singing what. It's the same thing in Boney M. When we did the singing Liz [Mitchell] was chosen to sing particular songs, and I was chosen to sing certain others. So, it's about the same concept, isn't it?

When I think of your voice, immediately the song Belfast comes to mind.

Belfast was a song that was written for me years before Boney M. started, by a German star Drafi Deutscher and Joe Menke, who was the man who believed in my voice and believed I could do something in the business. I performed with my solo show *Marcia Barrett From Jamaica – The Chocolate Beauty*. That's how the Germans used to call me. I added Belfast to my playback show. When I started with Boney M. I was the only member who had already been on the road with a show. It was my use of 'half playback' tape that started Boney M. in the disco. The roadie/sound engineer that was taking us around in our little Ford Transit from town to town doing our little PR told Frank Farian, "There's this song that Marcia is singing from her repertoire called Belfast. People are going mad about this song!" and then Frank decided to add it to Boney M.'s repertoire. In England they didn't play this song on the radio [for political reasons], but it got to number 8 anyway, and was also a hit in other countries. When we did a live concert in Dublin people almost tore the roof down.

Which other Boney M. songs are close to your heart?

You know what Stany, I love all of the Boney M. tracks. They're like my babies. With each track I could just remember being in the studio. I have never sat down thinking what's my favourite. With so many albums that would be very one-sided, wouldn't it? It's more important that people can name the tracks that they enjoyed. I love them all. Daddy Cool was the first song I recorded with Boney M.

And *Take The Heat Off Me* was the first album. I especially like the title track.

Take The Heat Off Me is actually very me. You can put on this naive air, it's like being an actor. And it's very provocative at the same time, like take the heat off me, yes I'm burning (*laughs loudly*). That's what I do. I can just get into the song, get into the role. It's sung a little bit pitched. You can't believe this is a woman who can throw down a rock song (*grins*) or a ballad. But that's the art of being a songstress.

For ABBA the studio work was also very important and even more so than the live concerts. For Boney M. the studio was the main reason why the group existed.

Yes. At the end of the day, people go out and buy your records, then afterwards CDs and now it's streaming. Thank God we had a producer who had a sharp ear. Frank was brilliant, he knew what he was doing. So, it's a melting pot of a fantastic team.

How was the atmosphere in the studio?

It was very nice. I want to end the lie that there was a rivalry in the studio with Liz. I can't recall having a cross word with my former colleague or colleagues. It was always Frank, Liz, me and the musicians. We always had fun. I love my champagne, while Liz preferred cognac. She would have a sip and then we'd go for it! Well, you can't have two sips because you have to concentrate, because you never hear these songs before you get into the studio. You take them from the top, doing all the backgrounds, both of us, then we go down with all the harmonies and so forth. And then we leave them with Frank, and he mixes them down.

I always wondered how difficult it must have been for the other two members of the band who were not really singing in the studio?

Oh, they didn't bother. They had holidays when we were in the studio (*laughs*). Maizie [Williams] even took care of my mother in Munich while I was in the studio. That

was very sweet of her. It was like a beautiful relationship between us. They would hear the song for the first time when we had to go on TV, but everything was fine.

During the concerts everybody was singing live?

Yes, and don't forget we had three back-up ladies, and therefore they were taught the harmonies; since they didn't do the lead, we'd give them a pitch. I used to give Bobby his pitch, even on live stage because he was beside me. I related to the audience at the same time, and it worked. And the musicians were fantastic.

Arguably Boney M. are most famous for their TV performances.

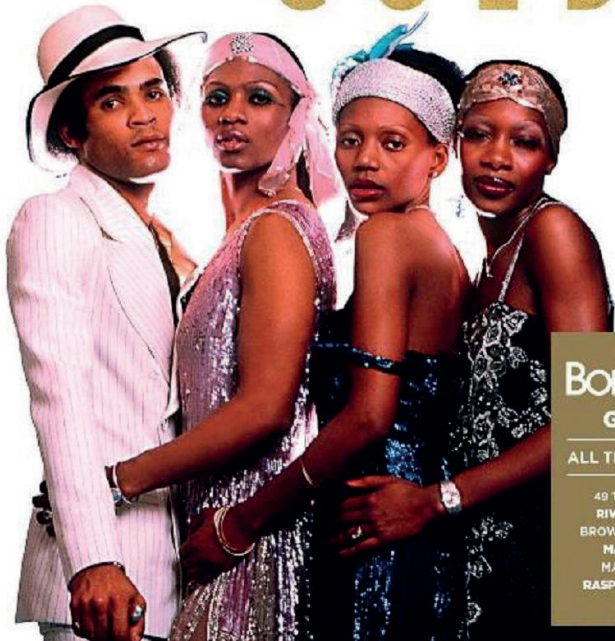
With Boney M. we've been to quite a few countries. For TV, from Germany to Mexico. It's fun, it's still fun.

Do you remember the BBC *Snowtime Special* you did in Leysin? Do you have any particular memories of meeting ABBA?

They were very nice people, but it was always brief, everybody had to do their thing. When we did meet it was like "Hello" and "How are you?" and everybody smiles and that was it. We never sat down and had a meal together or as I can recall. But ABBA were very nice and each one of them were professionals. We were so very

Boney M. GOLD

From left to right: Bobby Farrell, Marcia Barrett, Liz Mitchell and Maizie Williams



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busy and met so many artists, but ABBA stood out. They're so unique. That was actually the last time I saw ABBA together. I never bumped into them again.

Have you got a favourite ABBA song?

Well, they started with Waterloo on the international scene, I like that song. The song which I actually like the most is perhaps The Winner Takes It All, even though it's sad and I don't like sad songs. Andante, Andante is another favourite, and all the rest I can take anytime! Very nice melodic songs that are well-produced.

Do you also like their songs that are more disco-oriented?

I like their disco too. Those ABBA songs have a lovely hook, you can move to them, not heavy movements but they are very good melodically. So, it's not only ballads. I like everything they did.

So, you can understand why they are still so huge.

No question about it. And then of course between you and I, there was their business sense too.

ABBA's manager Stig Anderson played a very important role securing several record deals worldwide.

That was very important for ABBA. That's a different thing with Boney M. We had no manager. The producer was deciding everything. It happened so quickly, unbelievably. After we went into the studio to record Daddy Cool and that was a hit everywhere, you had to get the next single and album out. There was no time to even look around for a manager.

A parallel is that both bands have a very strong logo. Boney M. were one of the first groups with a memorable official logo.

The logo is good. It stands out. They both stand out.

Both ABBA and Boney M. had a very strong image. What do you think of the importance of the image?

I think that's very important. The image you're portraying is there to go with your songs. It was important when ABBA stood there you could identify them immediately and the same when you saw Boney M. It's very important to have the right attire on when you're portraying a song, taking care that the costumes are always going well with the songs.

Did you like ABBA's image?

Oh yes, ABBA had very poppy costumes, except for these boots and the knickerbockers they had in the early days, but it suited. But I prefer Boney M.'s attire. I'm an extrovert in my clothes you see. After forty years people are still staring at me. I'm that type (*smiles*).

How do you feel about the renewed success of the Boney M. hit Rasputin?

Isn't that something else? After forty-odd years the young kids are smitten with Boney M. too. I find that very, very exciting. I would say, thank God, not many people can say that. I never really thought of it as a hit, I just went into the studio and did my job. But that

it's never-ending is fantastic. It must be good stuff. I always thought that Rasputin has a very interesting, funny story about this Russian monk. To tell a story like that in a song with this lovely upbeat that you can dance to, trying to use the Casatschok [inspired by the Russian song *Katioucha*] and so forth, I think that has a lot to do with its success.

So, the storytelling in the songs of Boney M. was an important factor of their success?

Yes. I think that plays a big role because quite a few of the Boney M. songs tell stories, you see, real stories. And then it refreshes one's memory, of what was happening then. Even though in Ma Baker we sing about a 'Ma Baker', in reality she was Ma Barker. How would that sound? (*Sings "Ma Barker!"*). It wouldn't sound as good, would it (*laughs*)? So, that was the reason. Here's a funny anecdote. I heard this woman critic on TV who thinks she knows all the history and interprets it better than we do, and she said, "How could they sing Ma Baker when it was Ma Barker?" and she was acting as if we were stupid. I thought, "You're stupid because you don't know why we sang Ma Baker (*laughs!*)!"

Boney M. also had their own musical with Daddy Cool. Do you think that musical was inspired by the success of Mamma Mia?!

You have to ask Frank that (*smiles*). I don't think it's the same thing. Look, ABBA is still sold out with their musical and *Daddy Cool* had some troubles. One man [Frank Farian] wants to do it his way, and it just can't happen that way, can it? Can you imagine that when the *Daddy Cool* musical premiered here in Berlin where I live, I wasn't invited? My husband and I managed to go anyway and on the red carpet all reporters were calling "Oh, Marcia, Marcia...!" I think Frank nearly fainted when he found out. These are the things that you have to observe, to take in, and you move forward.

And you did. You did move forward.

My solo projects had to be put on hold because of Boney M. My husband and I have been composers for years. We met in 1983 and got married in 1984. And nobody got to hear any of these tracks. Now I have lots of time, so I bring them out one after another. You'd better watch out for the next one! I have been very ill, so it took a lot out of me, but the good thing was that whilst I was healing from one cancer after the other, we continued composing. When Frank left the group, I did ask my colleagues if they would need some songs, but nobody showed interest. So, I thought, ok, I'll do it myself later on. And now is the time, so there's lots to do, lots to bring out, and it's very exciting.

Are you happy with the response to the album?

Yes, yes, I am actually. The reviews are very good.

You also worked together with Eddy Grant?

Oh yes, I have two or three of his tracks waiting

to be published. He wrote a couple for me, and they're beautiful. My husband is playing bass on them. Eddy Grant is a very good friend of ours.

Are you also planning new live performances?

There's enough to do here with all the things we have to publish, photos, interviews and such. There is not one boring moment, but still, I miss the stage and the live audiences. I can't wait. As a performer, the audiences are out there, my Boney M. show is fantastic. You're aware there are quite a few versions of Boney M.? There are people everywhere who are saying they are Boney M. Oh my God, it's very hard. I don't like it, because they cannot reference any part of Boney M. It is sad when I see my work out there; strange people, they don't look the part, they look sloppy. We presented Boney M. as an elegant group, with elegant costumes and people like that aspect of us. But I'm not blaming those groups 100%. It's the cheap agencies that go out and know that these people are false, and they book them because they can get them so cheap. But the fans are no fools, so they tend to underestimate the fans. The fans know who they have seen and heard for all those decades, and they even know to identify our separate voices. What one should know is that Boney M. from Daddy Cool straight on, it was Liz Mitchell, Frank Farian and me. There's a sound and a method that nobody can change.

Would you like to get together with the other two girls for a special occasion? Is there any chance...?

One never knows. I wouldn't be against it, after all they are my former colleagues. And if the fans want to see us for a one-off together, I would be glad to do that. My motto has always been "If you have something, don't bring your baggage onto the stage." Come and remember the good days because we've had fantastic years together.

You have undoubtedly heard the news that ABBA have reunited in the studio to record new songs?

Yes, that's very nice. When are they coming out? **Later this year. What are your feelings about this news?**

I think that's a fantastic idea. If they can still work with each other that's really nice, and it's something to look forward to. The voices are still intact, that would be beautiful. And it will be lovely for their fans.

Wasn't this news unexpected?

Sometimes you have to surprise your fans (*laughs*), you know what I mean? It's a nice thing. At least they are willing to record new stuff and they're loving it. I think it's great.

What is your favourite song from your latest album?

Every song has a meaning but with *Only The Strong Survive* I wanted to send this message out, from the illnesses that I suffered, that only the strong survive. Don't give up easily on what you're going through in life. If you have a goal, stay with it because there will be disappointment and there will be downturns. You have to believe in yourself and what you're doing. You have to know that the time you took to put things down on paper or to do a demo, that it was worth it, that you believe in that piece of work. There's nothing to really complain about, is there? Especially when it comes to success. And I feel very good about it, and that keeps me going.

And you can be very proud of your career.

Yes, I'm very proud.

It's good to hear that music can touch people in that way, isn't it?

Oh, music is very important. Music is the key. Music is like food. You need it. When you're going, you're going with your heart, soul and body.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH



MARCIA
BARRETT
of Boney M.

Survival

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