

A few years before ABBA entered the pop music arena with a bang, it was a Scottish band who defined the Europop sound of the early 1970s. Middle Of The Road's trademark was a combination of catchy tunes, distinctive harmonies and the lead vocals from Sally Carr. They had several million sellers up their sleeves with Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep (one of fewer than fifty singles to have sold over ten million physical copies worldwide; ABBA's Fernando is also on that list), Soley Soley, Tweedle Dee, Tweedle Dum and Sacramento.

Via Zoom, I spoke to one of the four original and founding members of Middle Of The Road (MOTR), their jovial drummer and vocalist Ken Andrew (the other members being singer Sally Carr, guitarist Ian McCredie and his brother bassist Eric McCredie), from his recording studio in Glasgow.

How do you feel about the fact that MOTR are considered to be the first Europop band of the 1970s, even before ABBA?

I feel very proud about it. I know that in the UK we were certainly not regarded as a UK band. As history has shown us, they were not as enthusiastic about MOTR as Europe was, though we had some very big hits here. But the UK is the UK, I think we know that! (*smiles*) To be perfectly honest with you, we didn't realise that we were a Europop band until well into our success. We'd always regarded ourselves as just a Scottish pop band, and it really only came to light to us when we realised that our popularity was much greater in Europe than it was in the UK. It made us quite proud actually, because there was an awful lot of stuff going on in the UK that we didn't really identify with during these days. Nearly all of our songs were being written by Italian composers; with English writers the songs definitely did not always fit into what was a UK set up. So ultimately we were aware of the fact that we were a Europop group, which is affirmed now that time has come to pass and all the history being written about it.

Björn and Benny apparently acknowledged MOTR as an influence at some point. What do you know about that recognition by them?

We didn't know anything about that at the time, back in the 1970s. It was only recently when we'd seen some interviews with Björn and Benny, and they mentioned that the sound of MOTR was what they wanted to emulate. That was probably quite easy because they had two girl singers and the sort of predominance of a finer voice, female voices went quite well. MOTR very often sang in falsetto. We had relatively high voices anyway, the middle members. And that gave us maybe that sort of tight pitched sound and it matched Sally's voice perfectly.



Ken Andrew on the right

The whole thing became that type of sound, and that suited what ABBA were doing at the time. We didn't have any knowledge of them following us in any way at all, because we were travelling about ourselves.

People have often asked us at the time, when we were actually performing, what we thought of contemporary music, and I have to admit that we were travelling so much we never really got the opportunity to listen properly to the music that was going on round about us. Our record company, RCA, pushed us all over the place to do television, to do the radio interviews, to perform at anything that was a promotional exercise, and so the only time we ever came across the contemporaries of our time was when you met the artists themselves. I have to say sadly we never met ABBA but, when we were travelling in Sweden, we did a lot of *folkparks* and it was ABBA's management/agency that handled us in Sweden, so we had some sort of contact with them without realising it.

What is for you ABBA's greatest talent?

The talent with ABBA is not only the music and singing, it is the writing of the music and that was a big key thing ultimately. If you wrote your own music, sang it and recorded it yourself, you earn a lot of money and hold control over it. As far as I'm aware, the control they had over the music really pushed them much harder than we were ever to be pushed. We were just recording artists and our singing was exploited in a sense. We had no real control over our music. I must admit I admire ABBA for what they did and for the music they've created over the years. They had a very strong library of really good stuff. I didn't jump to all of them – some of the songs I couldn't be bothered with – but recently, when the film *Mamma Mia!* came out, it was really

very enjoyable to watch. The other thing that is good about it was that the music they created and they wrote was performed by other people, and just as good in some respects, except for Pierce Brosnan. The songs were on the match of who were singing them.

What is interesting about the MOTR story is that you were not a manufactured band, the group came together organically. Something you have in common with ABBA.

That's quite true. We worked and did meet as friends. Ian, Eric and myself performed together for quite some time before we met Sally. And then Sally came along – it is funny when I think back on MOTR, I think back on us as a sort of family. We treated our musical career in the beginning as a pleasant hobby. The fact that it brought in some money – not as much as I wish it had – gave us some security. This hobby side meant we weren't pushing in the same way as the people behind us were trying to push us. The record company liked us as far as we were going with our records with the Italian connection, with our writers Mario Capuano and Giosy Capuano and producer Giacomo Tosti. They were terrific, I have nothing but admiration for them. But, although we never considered ourselves to be writers or composers, we could write a few songs and some of them were not too bad.

Would you say that fate played a major role in the initial success of the band?

When we recorded Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep, which was the very first thing that we professionally recorded in Italy, our record company was having a conference for all the RCA branches around the world. They were all invited down to the studio where we were just doing final work on 'Chirpy' and it caused such a fuss. Exactly every RCA person caught a copy of the recording with them, saying, "We want to exploit this." A touch of fate, a touch of luck. When 'Chirpy' was released, we were still trying to get enough money to pay off all the debts that our stupid manager had left for us but, within six months in the middle of 1971, we realised things were going in the right direction and we would benefit from it.

A very important ingredient of the sound and the success of MOTR is Sally's very special, recognisable voice. You can have a great song, a good arrangement, a good production but in the end, it is the voice that captures people's hearts.

Yes. I totally agree with that. Sally's voice is what MOTR fans identify with, because they recognise it has a unique sound to it. To me, MOTR is Sally's voice. Even today, if I wasn't singing it wouldn't make much difference, as long as Sally's voice was there. Sally's voice was distinctive, but our voices complemented that, it seemed to fit in nicely. Whenever we went to television and we did some live stuff and it was badly rehearsed or there was no rehearsal, we didn't get the proper balance

and all the rest of it, the one thing that held it together was Sally's voice. Her voice still got that magic sound to it and she has a wonderful rapport with the audience. She loves an audience and they love Sally right back.

Here is another similarity with ABBA: even if Björn and Benny have written great songs without the two ladies in mind, you need the two voices to make it ABBA, to create that special sound.

I think that is quite true. It's magic, isn't it? Some things just happen in the mix. You get voices that work but it lifts even a good song to higher. And I think that's what it is about. But when we watched the *Mamma Mia!* film, Meryl Streep singing *The Winner Takes It All* is utterly amazing. That song is a very strong song, it's one of my favourite ones. And to listen to Meryl Streep singing it, I was knocked out, but it didn't take away from the original. The original was what it was, it was a group sound and it was lovely. The songs that ABBA have written, they're just amazing. They're lovely songs.

Do you have a favourite ABBA song?

Well, *The Winner Takes It All* is my favourite one. And I do like the one, *Super Trouper*, because it mentions Glasgow and that's... super (*laughs*).

What are the ingredients for a good hit record in your opinion?

(*With conviction*) Melody and harmony. Melodies are very important and if you can get harmonies into a song as well you can't beat it. That is to me the art of singing, of music. And ABBA did that. And MOTR did that, although we didn't have control over our own arrangements. I'm just amazed that a hobby we started in 1965 is still here, and people are still promoting the songs. If you'd asked me in 1971, what would happen with the recordings in years to come, I would have said, "People will forget" and I am just amazed – I'm delighted that people are still enjoying the songs that we had so much fun making in the 1970s. It was pure fun.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH



Did you know?

In 1973 Agnetha covered the MOTR song *Union Silver*. In Swedish it became *En Sång Om Sorg Och Glädje* [A Song Of Sorrow And Joy]. The song topped the *Svensktoppen* chart for seven weeks in 1973/1974, making it one of her most successful hits.