

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY GEORGE KAY

GABBA GABBA EH?

POP AND THE HUMAN LEAGUE

When the Human League split down the middle last year, few people gave Phil Oakey and Adrian Wright a chance of seeing the insides of a studio again, never mind the possibility of their being the current hit machine.

Four hit singles (or is it five?) and two million copies of *Dare* later and these boys sure have come a long way from the wet-behind-the-ears Sheffield synthos who started out on Bob Last's humble Fast label in 1978.

It's late May 1982 and the League are doing two nights in Sydney as part of a world tour. Adrian Wright's dry and tired voice creeps through a crackling Sydney connection. The tour has sold out, naturally, and Wright can't get over Australian audiences.

"They're probably the noisiest and most energetic audiences we've ever had."

They probably don't know what to expect?
"This is true. We're not like any other group I can think of. Mind you I wouldn't be in the group if we were."

You place a high price on originality?
"I don't think any group is original, not in songs. If you want to write pop songs then you have to use certain structures. Even Cole Porter and Irving Berlin used established song structures. Originality comes in other areas like lyrics."

What do you define as pop songs?
"Phil Spector and Goffin and King songs, 'I'm a Believer' by the Monkees - songs where you walk down the street and you can't get them out of your head even if you don't like them."

How do you distinguish pop from rock'n'roll?
"Rock'n'roll is just usually all guitars and the lyrics are about girls and not very interesting."

Surely the difference is in sentiments expressed not in
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instruments used? Long pause:
"It depends coz a lot of pop music is silly but the good stuff has words that people can identify with. It's a very personal definition and to me pop is by far the nicest genre of music. I love Abba for the stylishness and lyrics of their songs. I have five of their albums. I love the Monkees and the Ramones. I think 'Sheena Is a Punk Rocker' is one of the best pop songs ever written coz it's so economical and direct."

All this seems a far cry from the apparently idealistic and unusual approach of forming a purely electronic band four years ago:

"It wasn't idealism, we used synthesisers because keyboards were the easiest instruments to play if you didn't know any music. The first time I touched a keyboard I wrote a song in twelve hours and I didn't know anything about anything. Admittedly it wasn't 'River Deep Mountain High'. Anyway we only realised later that no one else was doing what we were."

From past press on Human League I always gained the impression of ardent Kraftwerk inspired intellectuals bent on turning rock'n'roll on its head:

"No, we didn't listen to Kraftwerk. The things that were influential were 'I Feel Love' by Donna Summer and Walter Carlos' soundtrack to *A Clockwork Orange*. I think Martin (Ware) had a Kraftwerk album but I never listened to them. They have a distinct style which hasn't altered in six or seven years and which is OK in small doses but I don't like it because



it's repetitive."
Was the band ambitious right from its inception?
"From the outset we wanted to be number one and we said we wanted to be as big as Abba. We never managed it but I think that any group that says they don't want to be enormously successful are kidding themselves."

How did the band relate to punk?
"We had nothing to do with punk at all. We liked it because it was a break from the awful stuff of the seventies, but we didn't have any ambitions to have green hair and play two minute noises. There were only a few groups out of the punk thing that wrote good songs."

Who?
"The Sex Pistols' first four singles are the best four from any band apart from the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Monkees and Ramones."

What about the Buzzcocks?
"I loved them as well but I didn't buy any of their singles at

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the time. They wrote classical sixties' pop songs as opposed to new pop songs. I've bought all their singles since and I love 'What Do I Get'."

Do you see the present Human League as creators of what is specifically eighties' pop?

"No, pop is pop and we just write good songs. I don't think it's like electro pop or punk pop or eighties' pop and the fact that it's on synthesisers doesn't have a lot to do with it. It's successful because the songs are good."

Good songs, the pre-requisites of fame, were on short supply on the first two Human League albums, *Reproduction* and *Travelogue*. Sure ideas flew around but a sense of

incompleteness and confusion prevented the songs from being satisfying and memorable. Agree?

"Yeah. I didn't write any of the songs for those albums as I didn't start playing keyboards until about two months before we split up. I used to go in and tell them when they were writing songs that they should have choruses but they were still learning how to play."

"Now we're older and Jo (Callis) has come into the group and he's had a history of writing songs and so he knows how to structure them and he's good as an arranger. Back then we didn't even use a producer much as Martin and Ian (Marsh) thought they knew everything about writing songs, which transparently they didn't."

Do the albums have any saving graces?
"There are songs that are very good but they're surrounded by others that don't stand up. 'Empire State Human' is good and 'Circus of Death' is one of my favourite Human League songs. The versions of many of the songs on the album aren't very good. 'The Path of Least Resistance' is a really good song but the version on the album is terrible."

On *Travelogue* 'Gordon's Gin' is very good, Martin
"We were just getting on each other's nerves and Phil and I wanted to be successful."

arranged it well and it's a good tune and I like the heaviness and powerfulness of 'The Black Hit of Space'. But on both albums there was too much going on and the production was ropey as they were done on an eight track in Sheffield."

So what precipitated the break-up of the original Human League?

"We were just getting on each other's nerves and Phil and I wanted to be successful. The break-up was acrimonious as we don't talk to each other and they've been silly in the press by slugging us off all the time and Phil and I feel this is very childish and funny. We've avoided slugging them as it's too easy - it's like a love affair when you fall out with a girlfriend - it's too easy to say things when you know all about them. I can't be bothered, what's the point? I'm sure people don't want to read about our petty squabbles in '78 or '79. We'd rather just get on with our current success. We've proved that we're good which is all we wanted to prove."

It's obvious enough that there was no love lost between the present Heaven 17 duo, Martin Ware and Ian Marsh and the current Human League phenomenon of Phil Oakey and Adrian Wright who seemed to take the back seat in the original band and therefore had axes to grind when the two factions parted company. What about it Adrian?

"When the group split me and Phil were termed as the two that would never do anything and I'm glad we've proved the critics wrong as we're now successful in every country in the entire world. We can stand back on our record sales and say we've managed it. It was like me and Phil against the world and we proved them all wrong."

Surely not everyone opposed you?
"Only Simon Draper of Virgin Records stood by us and said we could carry on and he gave us the money to live on until we could write the songs."

Draper's faith in the band has been vindicated with superlatives to spare, and dollars. But cynicism aside *Dare* proved that Oakey, Wright and Callis had a way with a tune, but Wright sees *Dare* as only the beginning:

"The next album will be better as the songs and arrangements will be much better. The arrangements on *Dare* were very simplistic as we spent more time writing the songs and on the production than getting the actual sound that we wanted from the synthesisers. 'Darkness' comes off pretty badly on the album compared to the demo that me and Jo did but everybody seems to like that song especially live. Jo and I wrote it entirely on our own and the words are about reading a scary book in bed and not being able to sleep. It's inspired by Stephen King's 'Salem's Lot', the only book I've ever read that's really scared me."

Then follows a conversation in which I defend Kubrick's film version of *The Shining* and Wright and I compare opinions of King's literary achievements. But back to *Dare* and specifically 'Seconds', a Wright-Oakley lyric about the assas-

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THE HUMAN LEAGUE

TRAVELOGUE



Marketed by EMI V2160

ALSO AVAILABLE

7" Singles

'Don't You Want Me' VS466
'Sound Of The Crowd' VS416
'Hard Times'/'Love Action' VS435

DARE!



no.1 album

Virgin RECORDS

V2192/TCV2192

REPRODUCTION



V2133/TCV2133

12" Singles

'Don't You Want Me'/'Seconds'
'/Don't You Want Me (dub)'
VS46612
'Hard Times'/'Love Action' (VS43512)