

VARIOUS WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT MADNESS

- who exist in one way as the group you think you know because of all their inedible hit singles, when they ruled the roost, and the antic highly coloured videos that went with them, all the way, but who exist in other ways as well. So they are Madness, as nutty, nifty and natty as the clichés goes, don't watch that watch this, living in their house, where they wear the baggy trousers, lovers and husbands and fathers and sons, brothers and best of friends, getting the blood flowing, clearing the head all for one and one for etc, nothing more, nothing less, the working man's Pink Floyd, public house romantics, maybe it's because they are Londoners, there's no place like home, and they are also Madness, free from sentimentality and soft soap, shrewd and sharp vernacular artists, provocative, touching anglo-surrealists, domestic dramatists, a biting Brechtian bubblegum pop group, psychedelic ska struck sages, strategic Camden groove gentlemen connecting the mysterious dots between Magritte and the Maytals, vaudeville visionaries celebrating individual energy in a fallen world, underestimated comic masters committed to the unprettified surface of real experience, never given enough credit for the penetrating candour of their work, there'll never be anymore of their kind, treasure them, in old money and in new, I love them.

1.

I love Madness, because there's much more to them than meets the eye or ear. To some extent, seven grown men capering in style, they're a never ending sit com, a cartoon series, a soap, a musical, a day time quiz show, an early evening magazine programme, a bundle of crazy, caring double acts, a look at the weather, a gossip between friends, an after the match panel discussion, a television commercial, a gripping reality show. They're Jackanory, they're The Trumptions, they're The Flowerpot Men, they're The Monkees that part that was from England, they're How ?, they're Magpie, they're nice to see you to see you nice, they're just like that, there'll never be another, they're Beyond the Fringe, they're the Steptoes, they're "the old Church Bell won't ring tonight as the verger's dropped a clanger", they're step cousins of Monty Python and Mighty Boosh . . . then again, they're The Avengers, The Champions, The Prisoner, The Saint, abstract crime fighters, moral heroes, secret agents, outsider spirits, a force for good, and so they're Dr. Who, they're Robin Hood, seven of them, battling amongst themselves for the control of the Tardis, of Sherwood Forest.

2.

I can imagine their singer, or any of them actually, given the right circumstances and the chance to shine, in a late night tv studio discussing this, that and the other, or Guinness, the time of day, late Victorian social reformers and Cadbury's chocolate with AJ Ayer, Alistair Sim, Billy Bragg, Ken Tynan and Edith Sitwell . . .

3.

For all the brash salt of the earth carnival vitality of the group there is something curiously science fiction and disobedient about them – they might have beamed in

from a seething, haywire past, according to the available records, but they also seem a little stranger and even more pleasantly sinister than they would if they were merely cosy, nostalgic padding.

On one hand they are the Madness of, well, Madness, the pop group who are so obviously from England, where it is London, real and unreal, messed up and straight talking, where the streets have names, and they live right over the road from where you live, and they're in the pub on the corner, and they keep turning up for work, and have things to say, and let's have some fun. But on the other hand, it's not all fun and games, and Madness are so obviously from inside their own turbulent, esoteric imaginations, which can turn the facts and fictions of a daily existence positioned on this strange, isolated island into a kind of melodic, gossipy magic, and they should be regarded as belonging on a list with Richard Thompson, Elvis Costello, Robert Wyatt and Luke Haines.

4.

They're from London, did I mention that, which is everything that it is and everything else, all that you know and all that you don't know, a hotchpotch of curiosities, a cacophony of voices, squalid and enchanting, squalor and wealth, ancient and modern, a fluid, tightly packed, multi-layered mix of time, people, generations, families, ideas, social facts, familiar themes, routes, periods, markets, maps, music, history, murder, drifters, treason, villages, sewers, absence, minds, misfortune, alleys, victims, buildings, realities, blood, billboards, greed, leases, clubs, churches, dreams, tourists, fishmongers, flippancy, smut, flower sellers, drunks, attachments, bridges, migrants, window sills, survivors, cakes, belonging, smells, parks, obscenities, cops, choirs, noise, visitors, bus stops, armpits, money, tactlessness, illusions, intoxication, mistakes, officials, death, pleasure, vinegar, virgins, voyeurs, aliens, roots, generosity, snails, lamps, sniggers, developers, back yards, affections, cynics, souls, wires, destinies, loners, tailors, cafes, mums, dads, kids, closeness, horseplay, plants, seats, love, knives, ghosts, ignorance, monsters, riddles, relatives, superstition, dissidents, sky, favourite arm chairs, celebrities, soil and stream and potential destroyers, a flailing around for sense, at the edge of an everywhere and nowhere England it is barely connected to but continually represents, and if you pay attention you can feel all of that in the songs of Madness, and know that this marvellous mixed up mix is what they are hinting at, and blatantly describing, on their new album, *The Liberty of Norton Folgate*.

(Now just a short section of the A10 linking Bishopsgate with Shoreditch High Street, Norton Folgate was formerly a well-known mercantile neighbourhood. As Mr Burgess says in Shaw's play *Candida*, 'I never met a man as didn't know Nortn Folgit before.' Until its merger with the parish of Spitalfields in 1911, Norton Folgate was an extra-parochial liberty, which meant that it resisted the influence of the church. The playwright Christopher Marlowe was living here in 1589. The City of London theatre, which specialised in 'domestic and temperance melodrama', opened on Norton Folgate in 1837 and closed in 1868.)

This album is that side of Madness that is not the carry on Greatest Hits model, but another darker, deeper and more ambitious side that was always there even when they were young, and bright, and impossibly winning, and doing their random dances of joy on Top of the Pops, and acting as though time would never run out, and they would always be that loved. This more questing, questioning side of the group is why

those early hits, which superficially have the zing and tang of gloriously frivolous novelty hits, haven't diminished in weight as time goes by but take on greater and more poignant strength. No one else was writing about being alive in such a place at such a time in such a way, and the fact that Madness became a pop group on the cover of Smash Hits acting the slap stick goat in their videos obscured their genius as alert social observers and sensitive chroniclers of various emotional and environmental peculiarities.

5.

An extract from the last time I reviewed Madness – a show in London a year or two ago, it was Christmas, and there had been drinking.

A Madness audience, mostly clean shaven men on bleakly masculine missions, have quite an appetite for the large, the hectic and the vital. Madness positively satisfy this hunger, taking over Wembley Arena with their beautifully turned out examination of truth, honour and the mysterious English way, rallying the troops with a cavalier celebration of pluck and poise, making it very clear that there's nothing wrong with a bit of hearty, rousing male bonding.

Men who like Madness and aren't ashamed to admit it are very keen on the idea of having a simple, straightforward good time, one that doesn't appear to involve anything remotely sensitive, neurotic or ornamental. They just want to get stuck in, preferably with hat on head, fag in hand and pint in hand. Madness, for all the actual subtlety and sophistication of their pop songs, their dashing stylishness, their wonderfully fastidious funkiness, supply gallant, unpretentious entertainment for the kind of feisty alpha male that wouldn't usually be caught dead dancing in public. When Madness hit their wide, wise stride, and nimbly toss off their most beloved hits, brisk, rueful English songs about trousers, adolescence, humiliation, love, lamp posts, shops and heartbreak, it's always a treat to watch often quite heavy and intoxicated men in the audience suddenly break into a kind of joyous slap dash knees up, ducking and diving turned into dance.

Madness pop music is a mischievous hybrid of stubborn ska, bracing pop, sparky soul, music hall verve and blokey punk, cleverly made to sound simple and direct, and, superficially, sternly unsensual. Without making any kind of sentimental, maudlin fuss, Madness take care of business with an unstoppable energy that mixes the menacing, the charming and the cheerfully self-mocking. Gentlemanly singer Suggs is as always a wonderfully dispassionate witness to proceedings, leading his rowdy, mouthy gang of personalities, ego's, ne'r do wells and good time Charlies with nonchalant grace.

At times, Madness bounce off the walls of their thirty year career as if they have written the all time greatest sequence of witty, absurdly dignified one off hits – Our House, Baggy Trousers, My Girl, Wings of a Dove. They present themselves as if they are a comedy group, a bunch of well scrubbed up but slightly shabby wind up funsters who refuse to take anything seriously, including themselves, shamelessly happy to cash in on their past. As blatantly nostalgic as it all is, the group are still sharp enough, and the chatty, profound songs so impeccably delivered, that the show never descends into cynical worn out panto.

There was always something old fashioned about their rhapsodic longing for lost youth and a lost England, but also something radical in their defiance of the way the domestic abstract magic of their street, their home town, their county, their country was being brutalised by evil outside commercial and cultural forces. It's this defiance, this continuing opposition to homogenisation, decay and banality, expressed with a shrewd lightness of touch, that means Madness don't merely go through the dull motions of being Madness, affectionately remembered 80s nutty boys. Their shows remind us that they are one of the great English pop groups, and great not just because they know how to flamboyantly inspire a man sized damned good time. Even as middle aged ex pop stars recalling the glory days for half-crazed Christmas audiences they remain a model of creative integrity in a slack age.

6.

So, Madness, 30, or so, years together, on and off. Some of those have been more eventful than the others. They haven't necessarily been working as a whole group for those thirty years, not always writing and performing like the teenage pals they once were, occasionally having to come back and catch up, to sort themselves out, but they were always too close, loving and intimate a group to stay apart for ever. It makes sense for Madness to be performing together once more, all that they were and all that they are now, on a mission, to entertain, and enliven, before the curtain comes down, and the last bus leaves.

7.

I love them because I believe in them as the Madness, hyperactive fresh faced 2 Tone warriors turned zany hit machine who lorded it over the charts between 1980 and 1984, becoming as a down to earth but absurdist gang of duckers and divers, chaps and heroes, clowns and poets, one of the greatest pop groups in a British history that includes the Beatles, the Kinks, the Who, T.Rex and the Smiths. I also believe in them as part of a landscape, a story, a series of moments and memories and figment's of the imagination, a company, a reason for living and thinking and being and belonging that includes : Liberty's, XTC, Richard Burton, Sooty, Charles Babbage, the Spice Girls, Oxo Cubes, the decimal point, Ian Fleming novels, Mars bars, Buzzcocks, Spike Milligan, Tim Berners-Lee, Petula Clarke, pounds, shillings and pence, Deaf School, Henry Cooper, Batman, Jimmy Greaves, Mike Leigh, Grandmaster Flash, Kilburn and the High Roads, Wilkins Micawber, the Small Faces, music hall, sound system, Lola, Lionel Bart, Jenny from the block, Terry-Thomas, the Adverts, Island Records, liquorice papers, Tate Modern, Saxondale, Martin Amis, Joe Orton, the Skatalites, Clockwork Orange, Heinz, Christopher Wren, Sir Peter Blake, Max Wall, Samuel Beckett, Benny Hill's bald mate, Vivian Stanshall, Marcel Duchamp, Old Mother Riley, Francis Bacon, Marty Feldman, Andre 3000, John Peel, Martin Amis, Martha Reeves, Kentish Town, Rico, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Donald Pleasance, Toad of Toad Hall, crumpet, Joe Meek, Ralph Steadman, Kes, Benjamin Britten, Lady Penelope, Michael McIntyre, Banksy, Billy Smart, George Orwell, Marmite, Ian Fleming, Mark E Smith, George Best in plaster, Ian McCulloch, Tony Wilson, Kingsley Amis, Cassius Clay, Ian Dury, John Cooper Clarke, Peter Bonetti, the adhesive postage stamp, Pet Shop Boys, cats eyes, Stanley Holloway, Vic

and Bob, Harold Pinter, Derek Jarman, the Match of the Day theme, Punch and Judy, mini-skirts, Dennis Potter, the Spitfire, the Specials, Sid James, Performance, Stirling Moss, Marmite, Tommy Cooper, Bryan Ferry, Winifred Atwell, Chris Morris and driving on the left.

Paul Morley