



single. Not an overnight sensation but it made enough noise and the press were running hot on ska at the time anyway:

"When that single came out I didn't think it would do very well. And we went on this tour called the 2 Tone Tour with the Specials and Selecter and during the tour our second single, 'One Step Beyond' came out and it did even better and we started to move away from the Specials a bit but we still like them and we see them every now and then."

'One Step Beyond' was the band's second single and their first one for Stiff, the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Albums, Seriously Though

One Step Beyond became the title of their first album, a lively fusion of bouncing ska covers and Cockney-life originals. It was warm, different, danceable and instantly likeable. The best songs, however, were those that dealt with life's little tribulations and victims in deceptively light-hearted tones. Barson's 'My Girl' and 'Bed and Breakfast' had hidden undercurrents of melancholy as did the Foreman-McPherson 'In the Middle of the Night'. This more serious side of the band has been played down and even neglected in favour of nuttiness:

"Maybe we were a wee bit too comical for some places though we were a comedy band, a Bonzo Dog Doo Da Band or something. We do like to have fun but we don't want people to think that we're some silly sort of pop band. It's really hard coz we don't want to be taken too seriously either."

The more serious ambitions of Madness are all too apparent on their second album, *Absolutely*, a gem, and a vast improvement on *One Step Beyond*:

"When we did the first album the songs on it were about all we had of our own and we just had enough skill to record them half-way decently. By the time of *Absolutely* we were much more experienced in writing and recording and so it was more polished."

Vocalist Graham McPherson, alias Suggs, contributed considerably more material to the second album:

"Well, he's the vocalist and we see it as his job to write the lyrics. Him and Lee write most of the lyrics but they don't write much music. The way we did the *Absolutely* album was we went and rehearsed and we wrote some songs and while we were writing them we recorded them on cassettes and we gave copies of them to everyone in the group and everyone went home and listened

to them and came up with the lyrics. It's usually music first, lyrics second."

Absolutely contained all original material and, as mentioned above, it revealed a more experienced band and one with a growing desire to be taken at more than their initial face value:

"It sort of upsets me really the way the critics sometimes think of us, especially over the second album. I really like it but none of them went over the moon. On the other hand I don't really mind about that coz we've never really had the critical acclaim the Specials have had so they've got more to live up to than we have."

To a certain extent Madness's lack of critical recognition for their more profound moments is a situation of their own making. Their marketing, demeanour and attitudes have all reinforced their proclaimed anthem 'F**k Art-Let's Dance':

"It just doesn't mean art, it means anything, y'know, the atom bomb or whatever. That is one of our basic manifestos or beliefs."

Seconded.

Kilburns and Conclusions

Madness are Cockneys and their songs have often been compared to the humorous moments of another Cockney, Ian Dury:

"We haven't been so much compared with the Ian Dury as he has been lately, but a long time ago he had a band called Kilburn and the High Roads and we really liked them. They were one of the first groups to play in pubs and they used to play reggae and rock'n'roll and we always wanted to be like that and they had a nutty image as well."

Lyrically, though, Madness seem to owe something to the present Dury:

"We don't ever say we'll write a song just like Ian Dury or whoever. I wrote the lyrics for a song about shoplifting and I must say that coz I heard this Ian Dury record, the B side of 'Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'Roll' which was about shoplifting and I thought I've got to write one of me own coz I'd always wanted to. It wasn't the same but it was the same sort of style."

Where it came from doesn't really matter, what does is that Madness music is growing, developing and becoming its own man. The tendency to dismiss their music as mere dance floor silliness still persists and this narrow attitude to the band will have to stop. There's two sides to Madness and they're both sane.

George Kay

