



ABC's line-up, with Martin Fry second from left. Picture by Paul Cox

Mary Harron describes the hit group, ABC's recipe for success, reverting to a clean image

Sophistication to the last letter

ON A tiered stage draped with chiffon, a miniature orchestra begins tuning up. On one side sits the classical element, a demure female string section, on the other a brass section who seem to have wandered in from a Sixties soul review. Sedately elegant, familiar, but impossible to place in time, it looks like a scene from a Hollywood musical set in a nightclub in the sky. Then the orchestra launches into a Broadway style medley, a creamy voice announces "Ladies and Gentlemen—ABC!" and an audience full of raucous Edinburgh teenagers rises to its feet.

"We always wanted to make a spectacle of ourselves," explains ABC's singer and lyricist Martin Fry. With 16 people on stage it is an inordinately expensive show for a group on their first major tour. ABC are riding on the strength of a No. 1 album, *Lexicon of Love*, and on a trend towards old-fashioned showbusiness values that began two years ago with Adam Ant.

ABC's front man, Martin Fry, dresses in lured dinner jackets or gold lamé, and presents the image of a jaded lounge lizard with a broken heart. Offstage in an Edinburgh hotel room Fry is a friendly, gangling, scrupulously polite 24-year-old graduate from Sheffield University.

He met the other ABC founder-members, Mark White and Stephen Singleton, in an obscure electronic outfit called Vice Versa. He was editing a fanzine called *Modern Drugs* — dedicated to the theory that music could serve as a modern drug. They dropped the electronic principle when they decided it was better to get a real drummer than to try to reproduce a drum sound on faulty equipment, and added David Palmer.

In Sheffield they developed a cult following and a market strategy, issuing "manifestos" to their fans: "ABC represents... respect for in-built obsolescence and inbuilt adolescence. A technicolour flag. High-tech, low-tech and dishegoue. Respect for the single. Revolutions happen at 45 rpm." ABC, and Fry in particular, are an "endless source of witty but vacant catch-phrases. The language of politics — "ABC: the radical dance faction, a democratic dance party" — was used for style not content: ABC probably have a less radical effect on society than the Archies singing *Sugar Sugar*. The key phrase was "We're tired of matt and into gloss," reflecting a commitment to immaculate production, elegant packaging and showbusiness sheen.

By the summer of 1981 ABC were roped in with the

"white funk" movement, a label which ignored a range of influences stretching from Tama-Motown and the Brill Building to Cole Porter and Frank Sinatra. Most important was probably the influence of David Bowie and Bryan Ferry.

"It's not like Madame Tussaud's waxwork museum," says Fry defensively. "It's not our job to duplicate the past for nostalgia's sake. We're less reverent to our sources and kick 'em around a bit."

If everything is borrowed, at least the synthesis is original. *Lexicon of Love* kept the archness in check to create a brilliant slice of pop melodrama, full of swelling passions and dying falls, reflecting the ideal Phil Spector set years ago of writing symphonies for teenagers.

Half the credit goes to their producer, Trevor Horn. He was not an obvious choice for a stylish new group. Not only had he been part of Buggles, he had been a member of Yes, the epitome of early Seventies pomp rock

and a name calculated to raise howls of laughter on any dance floor; and produced Dollar, then classified as Woolworth's pop. The relationship worked to their mutual advantage. As Fry puts it, "We said 'Make us a good record, Trevor, and we'll make you fashionable.'"

"We wanted to make use of some of the corniest show-business maxims, because there is truth in them—in the idea of value for money, the idea of professionalism."

And that is the great irony of ABC. British pop music

begin as a step-child of British showbusiness, as young rockers dutifully played their part in Christmas pantos and Royal Variety performances. Even so the trade papers were full of protests wondering what had happened to showbusiness, to tradition, to professionalism. Twenty years on, after pop has broken away and gone through every possible permutation, the most stylish and "innovative" group of the year is reaching its hands out to bring the circle to a close.

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