

The ABC of Sheffield music nostalgia - SLIDESHOW

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Just like old times: Heaven 17's Glenn Gregory and Martyn Ware, top right
ABC's Martin Fry and, above, Phil Oakey



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By John Quinn

A MAJOR pop music event took place on Saturday night.

But let's ignore The X Factor.

Several thousand Sheffields did, instead opting for a night of not-just-nostalgia with three of the best-known acts ever to hail from around here – The Human League, ABC and Heaven 17.

Whatever entertainment Simon Cowell's crew provides, one negative effect is spoiling the suspense and potential surprise of the race for the Christmas number one single.

However the crowd at an impressively almost-full Arena preferred to hark back to the days when the festive chart-topper could be made by a weird synthesizer group whose singer had responded to a split in the ranks by recruiting two teenage girls with no musical talent except the ability to dance and sing. Well, sort of...

The city's music scene at that time consisted largely of electronic experimentalists, some of whom suddenly discovered they could write pop songs. Very good pop songs at that, which sold by the bucketload until the tide of fashion changed.

The acts still exist, albeit after several line-up changes each, and occasionally release albums to diminishing returns, so whoever decided to combine all three pulled off a masterstroke. Other dates on the tour have apparently gone well but it all built up to this grand finale – a hat-trick in front of a home crowd.

Heaven 17, the group formed by the other half of the original Human League after the split, were up first. First time around they never played live but original members Martyn Ware and Glenn Gregory – the other founder, Ian Craig Marsh, is apparently taking study leave – have been joined by a proper band which fills out their sound.

Singer Glenn, looking cool in a hat – probably to hide lack of locks – pointed out that not only both his

parents, but also his little son Louis were watching. The senior and junior Gregorys probably weren't either the oldest or youngest people there - although the majority will have been teens during the 80s, there was quite a crossover of crowd ages. However it took until the title track of H17 debut album *Penthouse And Pavement*, and an extended version of their biggest hit *Temptation* to really get them up on their feet.

Martin Fry is the only original member left in ABC and is obviously much too mature to wear gold lame nowadays, but still keeps the sharp-suited image, sashaying across the stage like he owns not only it but the entire venue.

But it wasn't always this way, as he notes with a mention for the scruffy student house on Barber Road at Crookes where the avant-garde *Vice Versa* became ABC and wrote their first proper song and first hit, *Tears Are Not Enough*.

There's a fine line between parodying cabaret and actually being cabaret and a couple of times during the set ABC straddled that line, but a fair selection from *The Lexicon Of Love*, their debut – and best – album brought back all the memories, both good and bad, As Fry pointed out during *The Look Of Love*, "25 years on" people still ask him if he'll ever find true love.

He was a year out but we'll forgive him.

The Human League – who unlike the others still actually live in Sheffield – always know how to put on a show, and had a split-screen set-up with an extra stage in the middle. This was used to great effect on the first number *Seconds*, with the lower tier showing a selection of random red numbers, like a deranged digital watch – LED astray so to speak. After that we got bugs, buildings and much more, while a surprisingly athletic Oakey sprinted across the stage and Joanne and Susan were...well, they were Joanne and Susan.

They were the only one of the three acts not to do a completely new song, but with a back catalogue like theirs, they don't really need to. The hits kept coming, *Love Action*, *Open Your Heart*, *Mirror Man*, *Tell Me When...* even a passable version of worst-ever single *Louise*, complete with a name check for Tony Christie, who has recently released a cover version, and Richard Hawley, who produced it.

Oakey thanked the fans who had made their way to the "Meadowhall flood plain on the coldest and wettest night of the year", and after finishing the set with that 1981 Christmas chart-topper, *Don't You Want Me*, they returned for an encore consisting of first ever single *Being Boiled* and the Oakey/Georgio Moroder collaboration *Together In Electric Dreams*. It has undoubtedly been a dream of all three bands to play venues this size and with the response they got, you can almost guarantee that the Steel City Tour will become a recurring reality.

By the way, who did win X Factor?