

February 10, 2015

Across light years



Boney M and Maizie Williams

Rest In Vinyl... close to three decades, that's what Boney M's music has meant to me. A dusty LP sheathed in a jacket crowded with three women and a man in tight silver suits with bell bottoms and huge Afro hair-dos. One made a concession at Christmas though, but then one always makes concessions at Christmas... the band's pop-disco version of the carol 'Mary's Boy Child' played across stores and in our hearts.

You never admitted you listened to Boney M but you did admit that they were an inevitable part of your growing-up years — when the afternoons were long, the music deep and the sound poured in through slatted windows. Boney M were the poster people for all those in search of an identity in the 1970s, although you really couldn't put a finger on who they were. Named after a half-Aboriginal detective in an Australian TV series and put together by German singer-songwriter Frank Farian, the band had the ragged-voiced Bobby Farrell from Aruba, model-turned-singer Maizie Williams from Montserrat, Jamaicans Marcia Barrett and Liz Mitchell. Between 1976 and 1982, Boney M ruled the airwaves across Asia, Europe and Latin America with their disco-glitter songs so iconically different from one another.

And so, they traversed from the 'Rivers of Babylon' to the heart of Tsarist Russia with 'Rasputin', from the sectarian violence in 'Belfast' to the core of a Hermann Hesse novel with 'He Was A Steppenwolf'. Reggae ruled their version of Neil Young's 'Heart of Gold'. After many chart-topping albums — *Nightflight to Venus* and *Oceans of Fantasy* — the members of Boney M went their own way. Frontman Bobby Farrell died a couple of years ago in St. Petersburg on the same day and the same city as 'Russia's greatest love machine', mystic Grigori Rasputin who inspired one of the band's greatest hits. And so, it came as a huge surprise that Boney M was to perform in Chennai. And last weekend they did, with a new line-up of musicians, featuring Maizie Williams from the original band.

I drive through the inky darkness of YMCA Nandanam guided only by the coloured strobe lights arcing across the sky and the sound of music. The audience, some clearly past their prime, is up

on its feet dancing to 'Sunny'. Maizie and the other two vocalists, Zara Leigh and Samantha Scott, have given up the band's signature erotic costumes and look like they're heading to high-school proms in their floor-length pastel gowns. Kelly Rahman, the lone male vocalist in a sunset orange suit, takes centrestage to belt out the gravelly 'Daddy Cool' from the band's debut album *Take The Heat Off Me*. They perform with panache, with Maizie now 63, still at the heart of the fervour. The summer anthem, 'Hurray! Hurray! It's A Holi-Holiday', the fast-paced 'Belfast' and the story of 'Ma Baker' follow with the musicians dropping much of the psychedelic chord progressions of the Seventies. The harmonious Swahili song 'Malaika' is next with deep resonance from the instruments — drums (John), keyboards (Darren and Toby), guitar and bass. Next, the ladies, now in black velvet dresses, ask 'Baby Do You Wanna Bump?'

"Any time is Boney M time," shouts out Maizie before belting out the ever-popular 'Brown Girl In the Ring', a traditional children's song from the West Indies that the band gave the world. The crowd joins in the chorus, dancing with Maizie, who by now, has plunged into the audience. There are various rounds of the song before Maizie heads back to stage. Next is 'Rasputin', bringing with it the quirkiness of a band singing of life in Pre-Bolshevik Russia. And finally, the concert draws to a close with the melodious 'Rivers of Babylon'.

I quickly dial a friend and hold up the phone and for a brief moment, we are transported back to some of the best years of our lives. I head home and dust the LP, all the while humming 'Tra la la la la'. Any time is Boney M time.