

## THE HOUSE OF FUN

An interview with Carl Smith from Madness

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One does not normally associate the craft with the world of Pop music, so I was somewhat encouraged to recently learn that the guitarist from a prominent 1980s band, Madness, had become a Freemason. Madness enjoyed a string of successful chart-topping songs during the 1980s, such as 'One Step Beyond', 'Our House', 'Embarrassment', and 'House of Fun', before splitting up in 1986. However, with the band now reformed and Carl working on a solo project, I was tipped off that I might be able to meet and talk about his Masonic involvement at the Canonbury Masonic Research Centre in Islington, an apparent regular haunt for Carl. After packing my camera with film, I caught up with Carl to talk about his career in music and his various interests on a sunny afternoon. After making ourselves comfortable in the ambient wood panelled rooms of Canonbury's sixteenth-century tower, once the home of Queen Elizabeth I's chancellor, Francis Bacon, I began by prying into his background.

Carl Smith was born the first of London Irish parents, and spent the majority of his formative years, growing up in Muswell Hill, North London. His father was a champion Irish dancer, an interest that evidently runs in the family, as his grandfather had also been the proprietor of an Irish dance school. Besides the dancing, his father was an engineer by profession, which involved a good deal of travelling, which Carl indicated may have led to his enquiring and open mind.

Due to my father's job we travelled quite a lot with him, which had its good sides and bad sides. It's a bit like being in the military I suppose, you just get used to being with a bunch of people and then you're off again. I visited Babylon when I was eight and the Vatican soon afterwards, so I saw some interesting things. In Baghdad we lived next to a mosque, so we used to hear the call to prayer, it was really interesting.

Madness began as a collection of kids, a sort of youth gang. I probably met the other members of the band when I was fifteen, although some of the band members had known each other from primary school. One of the guys thought that we could spend our time well by forming a band. So we did what young kinds normally did in those days, we got some instruments, rehearsed, played some youth clubs, got a bit more proficient at playing. After two years of playing a guy at Warner Brothers heard about us, we did a demo and that became our first single on the Two Tone label, called 'The Prince'. It got to number 16 in the charts, and we were surprised at the success. In fact I think we were always surprised and I think considering, we kept our feet on the ground pretty well. After that we released our next single, 'One Step Beyond', which also went into the charts and that was the beginning really'.

*I've always felt that 'House of Fun', would make a good theme tune for the craft. What was the idea behind that?*

That was about when you're a teenager and coming of age. You know, the difficulty of walking into a chemist and asking for a prophelactic for the first time. Madness I suppose, tends to write songs about normal life, we just take a segment of every day life and blow it up to cinematic proportions. I suppose the kind of things everyone can relate to.

*You've kept the same line -up?*

Yeah, but we did stop though in 1986. Circa 1984, our founder member left and we carried on, but we had lost some of that sparkle and felt we were just going through the motions for our career, the record company and so on. We were not really enjoying it. So we just decided to call it a day. We left it from about '86 until about '90. Then I was working in a record company and heard our greatest hits was going to come out on Virgin, and thought it would be a good idea to reform the band. So we reformed the band and realised how much we liked playing together, the live performance, the energy you get back from a crowd.

*Do you have a favourite period of the band 's existence?*

I think it was fantastic reforming, when we played a gig at Finsbury Park which drew 72,000 people over two days. That was a real high, pretty unbeatable for an experience, but there were loads of other moments. We did a show last year in the Universal Ampitheatre in Los Angeles, which delivered a great energy. I look forward to the energy now of performing and seeing the effect on the crowd.

*Do you think you 're hitting a younger crowd now?*

I suppose its quite difficult really, because we're probably seen as old farts. That's a bit weird! We have our own very loyal fan base, but no, I don't know what type of effect we having on a youth today.

*Suggs of course is a pretty well known face on British TV now.*

Yes, he's doing two shows; 'A Question of Pop', and 'Nightfever'.

*What are you working on now?*

Well at the moment I'm forming my own band, called 'The Velvet Ghost', which I'll unveil in a little while. It's not a million miles away in style from Madness but its more acoustic based.

*What were your influences?*

Pretty wide I suppose. Very much a child of pop music, Mark Bolan, The Sweet, Small Faces, The Kinks, The Beatles. British pop really I suppose. As I got older, I listened to some Genesis, Wishbone Ash, Crosby, Stills and Nash, that kind of thing.

Carl joined the craft in 1994 and was initiated into the Yarborough centenary lodge No. 6991, since which time, his interest has snowballed, and has seen him joined a Royal Arch Chapter, Enoch No.11, aswell as one or two other side orders.

*What made you join? When did you first hear of Freemasonry?*

I'd be one of those kids and who'd look in shop windows and go 'oh, that looks interesting, what's that blue square and compasses, what's that about?' Then in the 1980s there were a number of 'shock-horror' books which I read while on tour. Later on I found myself working with a mason, who asked me if I was interested in going to a lodge of instruction supper one night, and I really enjoyed it, so I joined. I then joined a Masonic trip to Washington DC a couple of years ago, and I became really enthused, so I came back and joined a Mark lodge, the Rose-Croix and a Royal Arch chapter, in which I'm currently Principal Sojourner. I'm also now Junior Warden in my craft lodge.

*What do you think ritual does for you?*

I think it tempers the wild side of me. You know you've got to plan ahead to learn your work and that gives me a discipline, and I think it gives you a good sense of succeeding as an individual. It's a great to be part of a body of men that you're growing with, and I think the more you put in the more pleasurable it becomes, you begin to live it.

*Where do you see Masonry going?*

I think I've come in at a very interesting time, I think its going through something of a renaissance. I was interested in Buddhism for a while and used to get involved with going away on retreats, introspection I suppose. I've also noticed that there are a lot more books, both good and bad on this subject in bookshops now, which I suppose shows people are more spiritually open than they used to be.

*It's interesting that many people in the music business are interested in these kind of subjects, Peter Gabriel, Sting, and Madonna is very interested in the Jewish and Christian Kabbalah. Do you think its because they've achieved wealth, fame and a certain amount of power, that they can see that there is more for them to find?*

Yes, they are not worried any more about material security. I think Masonry could have a great appeal in the future because its non-denominational, with its emphasis on ethics, brotherly love and tolerance. I think openness is the right way forward, but I think we ought to keep the Temple work a mystery so it's a surprise for the initiate.

*Yes, a friend of mine said if you're too open concerning your ceremonies, it's a bit like taking the lid off a pressure cooker, it won't work any more!*

Yes, exactly. It's no good having a mystery school if everyone knows your business, you've lost your mystery, lost your charm. Ground, path, fruition you know, the ground is the lodge, the path is the ritual or charitable work, whatever makes you compassionate for others. And fruition I think, is some kind of understanding of the self.

*There are those who would say there is no esoteric content in Freemasonry, but it seems to me you've been drawn largely by that.*

Yes, well although I was interested in Buddhism, but the more you get involved it inevitably involves more retreats etc... Well, I made a commitment to a wife and children, so I wanted a system that was compatible with my lifestyle, to live in the community, as a mason, not just in the confines a lodge. To be consistent as a man, to be honest with yourself. You know, the second degree instructs us to go off and research into the hidden mysteries of nature and science, to get out there and learn. I confess I still don't know the difference between Ionic, Doric and Corinthian (laughs), but they're on my shopping list of things to learn. I've got St. Augustine on the shelf and I keep meaning to read it, but I do pick up the Bible occasionally, and I've recently been dipping into Job and Revelations as its important to look and to question. I feel like it's a good time to be in Masonry.