



ABBA

BY JIM FARBER



Yes, the way ABBA dressed could qualify them for a lifetime achievement award on *What Not to Wear*, the way they piled their harmonies and instruments on top of each other could make Phil Spector's Wall of Sound seem like a modest lark, and the joy their songs exuded suggested a level of pleasure that bordered on the lunatic. Yet ABBA's songs also hold a sophistication, beauty, and rarity that accounts for more of their undying and still-broadening success than people commonly acknowledge.

It's routine to talk about ABBA's rich array of songs as fun, insouciant, and endlessly singable – no small feats unto themselves. But the group's deep catalogue represents more than just tinsel, distraction, and goo. It also brought to bear innovative production techniques, challenged rigid standards for rock "credibility," and made the entire globe safe for pop that emanated from places and traditions other than those anchored on the usual U.S.-U.K. axis. Before ABBA, who in the American or British music establishment took Swedish pop seriously? After them, who would dare not?

By the nineties – with the emergence of key writer-producers like Max Martin, on the commercial side, and urgent artists like José González, on the edgy one – popular music would be inconceivable without the steady influence of that northern land. Yet when ABBA coalesced, more than two decades earlier, they qualified as the ultimate outsiders. Their success, initially established through a wide variety of individual projects, confined itself mainly to their homeland – though, in that realm, their achievements were formidable.

You can trace the interlocking roots of the boys in the band – Benny Andersson (born 1946) and Björn Ulvaeus (born 1945) – to a key pair of groups from the mid-sixties. Andersson took part in an outfit big enough at home to be known as the Swedish Beatles. Dubbed the Hep Stars, Andersson's group even created its own budding corporation, Hep House, equivalent to the Fab Four's future Apple Corps. After starting out as a cover band, the Hep Stars turned to original tunes from Benny,

like "No Response" and "Consolation," which either hit, or grazed, the top of the Swedish charts by 1966.

At the same time, Ulvaeus was playing in a popular Stockholm-based skiffle group: the Hootenanny Singers, an outfit managed by Stig Anderson, a man who would later help elevate ABBA's career to the top. Working in a country so small made it inevitable that

the two writers would run into each other. But it was their simpatico natures and similar aspirations that inspired them to pen their first song together in June of 1966: "Isn't It Easy to Say." Despite several more glancing dalliances, the pair didn't record a full album together until 1970, released under a title that tele-

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graphed the good will their songs so eagerly evoked: *Lycka*, or "happiness" in Swedish.

During that same period, the women who would be ABBA already had their own careers in gear. Agnetha Fältskog (born 1950) scored a Number One Swedish bull's-eye at the soft age of 17 in 1967. Anni-Frid "Frida" Lyngstad (born 1945) had been singing from age 13, first in cabaret-oriented jazz bands. For her, the summer of 1967 meant snagging the top title in a national talent smack-down, earning her a solo recording contract with EMI-Sweden.

Agnetha first met a future ABBA man in the spring of 1968, when she ran into Björn at a concert. Later, she cowrote a song with Ulvaeus and Andersson for the men's joint album. (The lank-haired blonde would marry the teen-idol-cute Björn on July 6, 1971.) Frida first encountered Benny in March of 1969 during Sweden's Melodifestivalen contest – a prep event for the famed Eurovision Song Contest. It wasn't long before the two became romantically bound. Frida's live appearances on the nation's most popular TV program catapulted her solo songs up the charts, and by 1971 her fiancé Benny was producing the records. His sympathetic production led to Frida's first Number One, in 1971, "Min egen Stad" ("My Own Town"), a song that featured all four members of the still-forming ABBA.

Yet it would take a few more years – of the men recording as Björn & Benny, and the women cutting solo projects – for the power foursome to finally gel. In



Riding high in England: ABBA in Brighton, 1974

June of 1972, a song credited to Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Anni-Frid, titled "People Need Love," appeared, presaging something key. It hit Number Three on a leading Swedish radio chart, and even nicked America's *Cash Box* survey at Number 114.

Things took an even more pivotal turn in 1973, when the four members entered the Melodifestivalen contest for the first time as a unit. More important, their frothy bid for the prize – "Ring Ring" – featured engineering from Michael B. Tretow, who would prove seminal in honing their studio style. It was Tretow who masterminded ABBA's answer to Phil Spector's Wall of Sound, whipping up a many-tiered-wedding-cake of sound, bunted with rich vocal cascades and iced by deliciously echoed instrumental flourishes. While "Ring Ring" only earned the group third-place honors in the Swedish contest, it became the title track of the quartet's first album and scored a hit not only in Europe but also in South Africa, foreshadowing the band's impending global hold.

Around this time, manager Anderson cooked up the idea of calling the group ABBA. The moniker not only contracted the band members' unwieldy names, it made winking reference to the name of a famous Swedish fish-canning company. It even had international, if not downright Biblical, resonance: ABBA means "father" in both Hebrew and Aramaic.

By 1974, few habitants of Earth would fail to recognize the band's savvy new acronym. Ironically, the song that brought them the recognition they deserved took its name from a great defeat. "Waterloo" cemented the ABBA sound, with its giddy glam-rock-style rhythm, its escalating waves of vocals, and a melody that expressed undying exuberance. "Waterloo" had the goods to take top prize at Eurovision, a feat that helped shoot the song to Number One not only in their homeland, but in the U.K., Germany, and as far away as



Rehearsing in 1978

Switzerland. It even bolted up to Number Six in the market ABBA coveted most: America.

Still, the band's corresponding album, also dubbed *Waterloo*, didn't do nearly as well Stateside, only inching up to *Billboard's* 145th spot. Likewise, the blissful follow-up single, "Honey, Honey," just made it to Number 27 on the *Billboard* singles chart. All of which caused some to wonder if this very Euro-sounding group could launch a sustained career in the insular world of 1970s America.

The decade's middle year – 1975 – would set that fear to rest. The group's third album, *ABBA*, contained "S.O.S.," which cracked the Top Twenty in America and became one of the country's most played songs of the year. The album also featured the propulsive, and witty, "Mamma Mia," which went Number One in territories from Mexico to Australia.

It took a bit of hubris for the band to shoot their success to the next level. Thankfully, they didn't want for it. Having only scored three Top Forty hits in the U.S. and U.K. didn't stop the ambitious group from issuing a *Greatest Hits* disc in 1975. The ballsy move paid off. *Hits* earned the group its first chart-topping album in the U.K. and its first Top Fifty LP in America. One song written especially for the album, "Fernando," hogged the chart's top perch in no fewer than twelve countries, nailing that position for an amazing fourteen weeks in Australia.

For the next five years, ABBA's record of success proved bulletproof, marked by high points ranging from the "Cabaret"-like theater of "Money, Money, Money" to the grand seesaw choir of "Knowing Me, Knowing You" to what may stand as the group's quintessential record: "Dancing Queen." There's an almost Mozartian elegance to the song's melody, not to mention a sense of triumph and glee in its chorus that's uncontainable. No wonder "Dancing Queen" has managed



ABBA in their custom-built Polar Studio with manager Stig Anderson, 1978



All that glitters: Benny, Stig, and Björn with three more Golden Gramophones, 1982



Onstage, they appeared B-A-A-B: Live in the mid-seventies



ABBA celebrate their first greatest-hits LP, 1976

to become both a universal gay anthem and a favorite song to spin at weddings around the world. A classic of pop cream, “Queen” went Number One everywhere from South Africa to Germany. Amazingly, it also became the quartet’s sole song to earn that hallowed distinction in the still relatively aloof America.

The somewhat tempered response to ABBA in the United States underscored our cultural isolation, a disconnect with the rest of the world many Americans maintain to this day. At least ABBA did their part to help ease the gap. But for a long time there lingered a suspicion about ABBA’s resolutely Euro brand of pop, due to their music’s distance from the soul or “rock” influences that commonly signify credibility to a certain strain of critic, and to a corresponding body of serious music fan.

It didn’t help that ABBA never played live in America until nearly the close of their career. On September 13, 1979, the group addressed that point by beginning their one and only North American jaunt, kicking it off safely, in the netherworld of Edmonton, Canada. Around the same time, the group released its closest thing to a hard-rocking album, *Voulez-Vous*, which included the peppy, semi-new wave single “Does Your Mother Know.”

ABBA turned more introspective – at least by their zippy standards – on their next album, 1980’s *Super Trouper*, which included the mournful smash “The Winner Takes It All.” The song’s regretful tone reflected the unraveling marriage of Agnetha and Björn. (The couple divorced in 1979.) The disc also included one of the most elaborately constructed, and harmonically poignant, vocal chorales of their career in “Lay All Your Love on Me,” which doubled as a dance-floor fave.



Live in Rotterdam, 1979



Agnetha takes center stage, Boston, 1979.

One year later, the group's other couple, who had married in 1978 – Frida and Benny – fell apart, right before the release of the group's eighth album, 1981's *The Visitors*. Much like "The Winner Takes It All," one of the band's final singles, "When All Is Said and Done," dealt with a longtime couple coming undone.

While ABBA, the group, never formally announced its demise, they would never release another album of new material. By 1983, Benny and Björn were collaborating with lyricist Tim Rice on the musical *Chess*, while Agnetha and Frida were once again back to concentrating on solo careers (the latter more successfully in America with her Phil Collins-produced album, 1982's *Something's Going On*).

After a run of hits so dense and consistent, it makes sense that both the group, and the audience, would want to take a breather. But, as so often happens in pop, a decade after ABBA fell silent, the world began to launch a revival without them. Two collections of hits scored significant, and surprising, successes in the early nineties, followed by a pair of movies that made a new fetish of ABBA fandom. Both films came from the country that had long housed some of the group's most ardent admirers: Australia. In *Muriel's Wedding* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, ABBA songs became virtual characters in the film – vehicles to express the fictional characters' inner lives. The dynamic got at something deep about ABBA: As with the movies' outsider characters, the very quirks that caused some listeners to mock the group – their unchecked enthusiasm, their rococo use of sound, their blissful ignorance about what's considered cool – turned them into icons of individuality. ABBA became an ideal repository of good will for the misunderstood, the liberating voice for the misrepresented or invisible.

Ironically, that cult point of view developed into a mass market phenomenon by the time of the smash musical *Mamma Mia!* After opening in London in April of 1999, the play went on to snake its way around the world, devouring previous box-office records everywhere it went. Inevitably, 2008 saw the theatrical blockbuster turned into a parallel film, resulting in a multimedia juggernaut so enveloping, one wouldn't be surprised if one day it inspired its own version on ice.

If only by accident, however, the *Mamma Mia!* sensation wound up underscoring what it missed about ABBA's original recordings. The shows, and cast albums, couldn't hope to recreate the unique brilliance of the group's studio sound. The exact timbre of Agnetha and Frida's voices, recorded in such close tandem, married to the group's elaborately constructed peaks of production, gave ABBA's albums something entirely their own. For all the versatility, and malleability, of their tunes, their recordings stand as unrepeatably artifacts. As pop records, they are every bit as precise and irreducible as their packaging was camp. In the end, they gave the world a sound that's nothing to snicker about, even if it is one guaranteed to make you smile. ♪



Benny and Björn in 2008, the year 'Mamma Mia!' the movie was released