

THE COMPLETE

ABBA



A 40TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Simon Sheridan

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SIMON SHERIDAN

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'We only write for ourselves. We write songs that we would like to hear.'

BJÖRN ULVAEUS

(OCTOBER 1980)

DISCLAIMER: This book is written from a primarily British perspective and the opinions within these pages are those of the author only. They do not necessarily represent the views of Björn, Benny, Agnetha or Frida. Additionally, this book does not catalogue the hundreds of ABBA television, radio and press interviews, nor TV music performances, unofficial documentaries, biographies, bootleg tracks or remixes.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2009 concert promoters AEG Live were left with a big problem – how to fill 50 empty dates at London’s O2 Arena after the premature death of pop superstar Michael Jackson. The O2, officially the world’s busiest arena, has a seating capacity of 23,000 and only a select few acts can be assured of filling it. Scrambling around for replacements, Madonna, Bruce Springsteen and The Rolling Stones were all mentioned, but then another name came into the frame: ABBA. British tabloid *The Sun* alleged that the Swedish supergroup had been approached by the venue’s promoters to reunite for a ‘mega-bucks deal’. Within hours chat-rooms and bloggers around the world were buzzing with the announcement. Even television and radio news reported the story, but, unsurprisingly, it wasn’t true. ‘No-one’s asked us and if they did we wouldn’t say yes,’ Benny Andersson told the BBC. ‘It’s really a treat for the ABBA audience that we’re not doing that, you know, because they would regret it immensely, as would we.’ Then he tantalisingly added, ‘but never say never.’

The fact that, for the umpteenth time, another rumour about the reformation of the world’s most popular pop band still managed to generate such worldwide interest is testament to ABBA’s incredible mystique. This is the band that famously ‘never came back’ after breaking-up in 1982, yet still remains a bona fide musical phenomenon. With sales of 370 million albums so far – and their hits still playing nightly on stage in virtually every capital city worldwide – they have emerged a bigger global pop brand than even The Beatles. No longer is ‘Dancing Queen’ just frozen in time in a glamorous 1976 Stockholm discothèque, wall-to-wall with beautiful clubbers, dripping in pearls of sweat. There is something far bigger going on. ABBA’s music has transcended nostalgia and is still resolutely contemporary, even decades after the group first originated pop clichés with glossy harmonies, lush orchestration and smooth melancholic vocals. Their fearlessly catchy lyrics, mocked by lesser songwriters as merely flippant back in the seventies, are now universally celebrated. Björn Ulvæus and Benny Andersson are arguably pop’s greatest partnership since Lennon and McCartney and their beautiful, dreamlike compositions continue to captivate and enthrall. The uninhibited girl on the dancefloor in ‘Dancing Queen’ still exists, so does the abandoned lover in ‘The Winner Takes It All’, and even more frivolous work like ‘SOS’ still has the power to dazzle. Since 1992, and the release of the astoundingly successful ‘ABBA Gold’ compilation, the group has been re-assessed and embraced by a younger generation of musicians. That same year Björn and Benny were invited on stage by U2 to perform ‘Dancing Queen’ during one of the rock band’s gigs in Stockholm. ‘As a teenager I wanted to behead them, but later I came to love them,’ confessed Bono.

The release of ‘ABBA Gold’, the proliferation of tribute acts and the global dominance of the musical *Mamma Mia!* on both stage and screen has created an almost-insatiable hunger for all things ABBA. And the public – if the newspapers are to be believed – want the band back. But Björn told *TH*

Sunday Telegraph that ABBA would never reform, not even for a night. ‘We would like people to remember us as we were, young, exuberant and full of ambition. There is simply no motivation to regroup,’ he said. ‘I remember Robert Plant saying that Led Zeppelin were a covers band now because they cover all their own stuff. I think that hit the nail on the head!’

But even if the group aren’t going on tour again any time soon, ABBA are still, alongside Volvo cars and IKEA flat-pack furniture, Sweden’s biggest brand-name. But, in fact, only three of the members actually hail from Sweden. Björn Ulvaeus (born 25 April 1945 in Gothenburg), Anni-Frid Lyngstad (born in Ballangen, Norway on 15 November 1946), Benny Andersson (born 16 December 1946 in Stockholm) and Agnetha Fältskog (born 5 April 1950 in Jönköping) all had very different upbringings, but all came together through their love of song. Illegitimate Anni-Frid, better known as Frida, moved across the border to the outskirts of Eskilstuna in Sweden when she was just 18-months old and was raised by her maternal grandmother. Her father was a German soldier and the Lyngstad family feared reprisals from Norwegians angry with those who had fraternized with Nazis during the occupation. All four future ABBA members had music in their formative lives. Agnetha wrote her first song when she was aged just five, Frida made her stage debut in a concert at 11 and Benny and Björn were heavily influenced by their fathers – respectively accordion and mandolin players. As teenagers they all found varying degrees of solo success, but as a quartet in their twenties and thirties they were virtually unstoppable.

Björn Ulvaeus was the first to find pop fame with his band The Hootenanny Singers (‘What a silly name that is! Sounds so stupid!’ he once admitted), a four-piece folk-cum-skiffle-cum-county outfit. An unlikely-looking bunch of proto-pop idols, their homely, reassuring music nevertheless touched a nerve with the Swedish record-buying public. The group enjoyed their first big hit single in 1964 and built up a loyal following from TV appearances and performing at Sweden’s numerous *folkparks* – open air theatres which could be found in the centre of most major towns or cities. There is no doubting that the Hootenannys worked extremely hard; in 1966 the band played an incredible 120 gigs and it was whilst on their summer tour that Björn first ran into Benny Andersson, in Linköping, a picturesque city in the south of the country. The two men – despite coming from very different musical backgrounds – had an instant affinity with each other from the outset. However, Benny was a rock star in a band with considerably more street-cred than Björn’s folk quartet. He was the keyboardist/vocalist with The Hep Stars, the nearest thing Sweden ever got to a home-grown alternative to The Beatles. Initially, they were ostensibly a covers band – they performed high-spirited versions of famous rock ‘n’ roll songs, and although they never became serious contenders to British rock groups in Europe, they did actually manage to outsell The Beach Boys in Sweden. The Hep Stars branched out with their own compositions – including the bizarrely-entitled ‘Bald Headed Woman’, a Number 1 smash in the summer of 1965. However, it wasn’t until a song Benny wrote called ‘Sunny Girl’, which hit the top of the charts in the spring of the following year that he gained a new sel

confidence in his songwriting abilities.

That chance meeting in Linköping was, unquestionably, the best thing that ever happened to Björn and Benny's careers. Their completely opposite musical styles meant they were little threat to each other, but their adoration of English and American music was a shared passion; they sang from the same pop hymn book. Björn was well acquainted with songs like 'Sunny Girl' and Benny had purchased the Hootenannys' latest album 'International', which contained the hit 'No Time', the first single to be written by Björn, and one recorded in London to give it an authentic 'British' sound. While their band-mates partied the night away Björn and Benny sat under the stars and strummed their guitars to Beatles' songs. By 7am the following morning, the seeds of something far bigger had already been sewn. Barely two weeks had passed and the pair met again, at another raucous party, this time in Björn's home-town in Västervik. The duo discussed their future ambitions and – on the spur of the moment – decided to write a song together. Björn invited his new friend back to the Ulvaeus family home and set up their noisy equipment in the basement. Their unholy racket woke Björn's exasperated father and, in desperation, he gave the boys the keys to his offices at the paper mill, which he was employed. With their amplifier raising the rafters Björn and Benny began work on what would eventually be their first joint composition – a song named 'Isn't It Easy to Say'. The track was eventually recorded by The Hep Stars for their third studio album and this charmingly incestuous relationship between the Hootenanny Singers and The Hep Stars continued. The former covered 'Sunny Girl' and the latter recorded a rockier version of 'No Time'. The two disparate groups continued selling records in Scandinavia, but both were on borrowed time. Björn and Benny had a bigger herring to fry.

Not long after Björn and Benny started collaborating, in another part of Sweden a pretty Norwegian girl named Anni-Frid Lyngstad won a Swedish talent competition called *New Faces*. She was just 21-years-old and already a married mother of two. Frida had been singing with a professional dance band since she was just 13 and became dubbed the 'Songbird of Eskilstuna'. Her husband, a shop manager named Ragnar Fredriksson was also a musician – he played trombone and the drums and they started a musical trio with a friend of theirs. They proved extremely popular playing clubs, restaurants and local dances and Frida later established her own charmingly self-titled band, The Anni-Frid Four. Although the singer loved the 'big band' sound of Count Basie, she actually preferred performing covers of the latest English and American songs – Petula Clark's 'Downtown' was one of her favourites as was The Supremes' 'Baby Love'. She dreamt of a bigger career in show business, but even though she entered numerous talent competitions nothing much came of it. Then, in the summer of 1967, Frida applied to be a contestant on *New Faces*. Not only was she surprised when she won, securing a recording contract with EMI Sweden, she also had to appear live on Sweden's top rated TV chat show *Hyland's Corner*. Frida was terrified in front of the cameras, but viewers took to the quietly-spoken young woman immediately, adoring the fact that she was a housewife, a mum and a

aspiring pop star. Less than a week later she was in the studio recording for the first time, but success came painfully slow. Frida's early singles barely dented the Swedish charts – she had yet to find a style she, or EMI, was comfortable with – and she felt a terrible conflict of loyalties between her life as a mother and that of a professional performer. Suffering from depression, and regrets from marrying so young, a divorce was sadly a forgone conclusion. With mixed feelings Frida made the decision to move to Stockholm to further her career, leaving six-year-old Hans and toddler Ann-Lise and Lotte with their father in Eskilstuna. 'How could I, who cannot even take care of myself during my depressions, make any claim to be able to take care of them?' she said.

In the city Frida performed regular cabarets with boogie-woogie pianist Charlie Norman and in March 1969 entered *Melodifestivalen*, the televised Swedish selection show for the Eurovision Song Contest. Her song, 'Our Earth is Wonderful' gave her much-needed exposure but she only managed to be placed fourth. It was that same night that Frida first laid eyes on Benny – he had also submitted a song called 'Hey, Clown' – and whilst it was only the briefest of meetings, Frida was instantly besotted with him. Several days later they met again by chance in a restaurant after a Hep Stars gig – coincidentally Björn was now temporarily playing guitar for Benny's rock band. The get-together moved back to the boys' hotel room and Frida recalled falling in love with Benny from the outset. The attraction was mutual; within months he and Frida were living together. Frida also became close friends with Björn and was enthralled to see their songwriting at full-tilt. The boys had scored their first hit together with a song entitled 'The Good Old Sixties' recorded by veteran stage actress Britt Gellberg Borg, which stayed in the Swedish charts for an incredible 20 weeks. By the spring of 1969 three-quarters of ABBA were already known to each other, but the fourth piece of the musical jigsaw was waiting just around the corner.

Agnetha had crossed paths with Frida on a Swedish TV programme in January 1968, where both artists had performed their latest singles. At the family home in Västervik Björn had watched the show, and although impressed with both singers, he was mesmerised by the pretty blonde teenage girl who showed amazing potential. As a young girl Agnetha had loved Neil Sedaka and Dusty Springfield but she had part-modelled herself on her heroine Connie Francis. Growing up in Jönköping Agnetha had been infatuated with music from a very early age; she was messing about on the piano as a toddler and composed her first song, 'Two Little Trolls', aged just five-years-old. By 13 Agnetha was singing in her local *folkpark* with two school friends and whilst she dreamt of becoming a professional singer she left school in 1965 to work on the switchboard of a local car dealership. Her love of music never left her though, and within 12 months she had begun singing with the Bernt Enghardt Orchestra, travelling Sweden with six male musicians, much to her parents' initial horror. The orchestra developed a healthy following and Agnetha was busy writing songs – including the ballad *Jag var så kär* ('I Was So In Love'), and felt confident enough to send off a demo tape to Cupol Records in the hope of finding a recording deal. However, Cupol were only won over by the lead singer and

October 1967 booked Agnetha into the Philips Studio to start work on solo material including recording of *Jag var så kär* with producer 'Little' Gerhard Lundkvist. 'I was incredibly nervous when I was going to record it,' she recalled in 1976. 'I was only 17 and I'd never been to Stockholm, so I brought my father along to hold my hand.' When Agnetha heard the finished track mixed and ready, she was astounded, recalling it as the happiest moment of her life. With Agnetha's father handling her daughter's business affairs Cupol signed a contract. Agnetha's first single – *Följ med mig* ('Follow Me') – was released in November 1967, but it was the B-side, her own gentle composition, which really appealed to record-buyers. By January the following year her single had reached Number 3 on the Swedish charts; Agnetha cried when she heard the news. Agnetha continued touring with her orchestra and such was her new-found fame both in Sweden and West Germany, where her career was also taking off, she was now top-billed. In May 1968 whilst mid-way through a *folkpark* tour Agnetha first met Björn, who was also appearing with The Hootenanny Singers. For Björn, it was almost love at first sight, although, at the time, Agnetha was already engaged to a German boyfriend.

Just like Frida, Agnetha broke away from the safety of her band and moved permanently to Stockholm. A stream of hit singles followed, plus an eponymous debut album in 1968 – on which she wrote, or co-wrote, nine out of the 12 tracks. Now single, Agnetha met Björn again whilst appearing on the same Swedish TV special – *Count the Happy Moments* in May 1969. They became inseparable. Meanwhile The Hep Stars' career was on the wane. Although 'Sunny Girl' had also been a hit in the Netherlands, it never charted in Great Britain, much to Benny's frustration. Benny began supporting Frida on her cabaret shows with Charlie Norman and they became engaged in August 1969. That same month Benny's group played their last ever gig and he and his fiancée decided to work together from then on, with Benny producing. The first single to emerge from this partnership was 'Peter Pan', co-written by Björn; it was a momentous occasion since three future-ABBA members had already collaborated on one song. It was not a commercial success, but Björn's manager Stig Anderson made a startling prediction: 'One day the pair of you will write a song that will become a worldwide hit'.

Stig pushed the partnership as far as possible and encouraged them to submit music for the forthcoming erotic film *The Seduction of Inga*, directed by American filmmaker Joseph Sarno and starring former ballet dancer Marie Liljedahl. Recorded in 1969, Björn and Benny's stand-out number for the movie was 'She's My Kind of Girl', a wistful, echoey ballad recorded with English lyrics. Released as a single it was summarily ignored by Swedish DJs, but some 18 months later became a Number 1 radio hit in Japan, its vaguely-far eastern sound helping it to shift half a million copies in the process. 'She's My Kind of Girl' was an important record for the songwriters but it was actually another song which would be the turning point in Björn and Benny's careers.

In 1970 they released their first album as a duo. *Lycka*, with a sound heavily influenced by The Beach Boys and The Beatles, was patchy at best, but it contained a simple ditty named *Hej Gamla Man!* (translated as 'Hey, Old Man!'). The boys wanted it to have the feel of a Salvation Army

marching anthem and asked Agnetha and Frida to join them on the choir chorus. None of the four realised the far-reaching consequences of entering a recording studio together, but it was a milestone in ABBA's development. The tune sat at the top of the Swedish radio chart for 15 straight weeks. 'I don't think the song would have become such a big hit if Agnetha and I hadn't been on it!' Frida modestly commented.

Hugely encouraged by the track's unexpected success the duo began writing more strictly 'pop' material, primarily in English, to give it the broadest international appeal. However, all four performers were still busy with their individual musical careers. Frida finally had a substantial hit with a cover version of Edison Lighthouse's British smash 'Love Grows (Where My Rosemary Goes)' and her jazzy eponymous debut album, produced by Benny, was a critical triumph.

Agnetha – now an old hand in the pop business – was already onto her third solo album by the time she landed the part of Mary Magdalene in the Swedish production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, but something unmistakably special still drew all four performers much closer to each other. For a start the Swedish public were really hooked on the idea of the two couples working, and romancing together. When Agnetha and Björn were married on 6 July 1971 in the small village of Verum, the ceremony was supposed to be a quiet event. But details leaked to the media and dozens of press photographers turned up. Frida was unable to attend as she was touring, but Benny showed up to play Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' on the ancient church organ. The nuptials were covered by all the main Swedish newspapers and if there had been any doubt before, now it was conclusive – these young Swedes had stars in their eyes.

Epic, who had released 'She's My Kind of Girl' in Japan, wanted more of the same, leading to a flurry of intense activity for Björn and Benny. In early 1972 they returned to the recording studio and laid down two new songs with a deliberate eye on the Japanese market – as it turned out neither 'San Rosa' or 'Merry-Go-Round' would set cash registers ringing; instead it was a third song which was to change everything. After the Swedish success of *Hej Gamle Man!*, Benny and Björn had had a lightbulb moment; their partners' harmonies were probably the key to further hits and 'People Need Love' recorded late March 1972 at Stockholm's Metronome Studios, could well be it. This forgettable lightweight hippy protest song was the genesis of ABBA and would pave the way to a decade of audacious hits; every single release would sound astutely different, but *unmistakably* ABBA – verse, chorus, irresistible hook, bang!

The enduring image is of four pop stars in platform heels, glittery flared pants and ludicrous lapels, but there were actually five people in the ABBA marriage. Stig 'Stikkan' Anderson (born 20 January 1931 in Hova, Sweden) is often credited with being the driving force behind the band. In the music business since the 1950s, Stig made a name for himself as one of Sweden's most prolific, and colourful, songwriters of all time – what he didn't know about Scandinavian pop music probably wasn't worth knowing. He had also been the manager of The Hootenanny Singers throughout the

sixties, and was later was the Svengali-like figure behind the solo careers of Benny and Frida and was instrumental in bringing the individual components of ABBA together and nurturing them.

The three artists were all eventually signed to his Polar Music label – the most famous Swedish record company of all time and ABBA’s permanent home throughout their ten year recording history. Agnetha, in a solo capacity, was signed to Cupol Records, a subsidiary of CBS, but even she, by the end of the 1970s, came under Stig’s managerial wing. ABBA’s manager was a very visible character and this extravagantly moustachioed figure was never very far away from the group’s press conferences and public appearances – and he certainly had no qualms about playing himself in 1977’s *ABBA – The Movie*.

Stig’s pretty much unblemished track-record with songwriting also led him to co-write many of the lyrics of ABBA’s most iconic songs, including ‘Mamma Mia’ and ‘Dancing Queen’, although Björn and Benny have become, over the years, the very public face of ABBA’s creativity. However, Stig’s importance cannot be underestimated in ABBA’s triumphant story – and although he very publicly fell out with the band members during his final decade, due to a legal dispute over royalties, he still remains something of a cult figure in Swedish entertainment. When he died on 12 September 1997 his televised funeral was more akin to a state event, than the requiem for a flamboyant pop baron.

Björn and Benny developed as skilful songwriters in their own right, meeting each day at Björn’s summer house on Viggso, an island in the Stockholm archipelago, an hour’s ferry ride from the city centre. They would convene at 10am, sometimes earlier if the weather was fine, and sit there and wait for something ‘to happen’, usually after 30 minutes or so. ‘It’s a very small cottage,’ explained Björn in the TV special *Dick Cavett Meets ABBA*. ‘It’s a piano, usually out-of-tune and a guitar in-tune and we just sit there playing; playing with the chords and playing with rhythms and singing some kind of pigeon-English, just the sound of English. And we can do that for hours and hours and hours. Hopefully, eventually, something comes out to keep on working with. That’s the whole thing really. Viggso was an idyllic place to spend summers writing. Stig Anderson also owned a home there and later Benny and Frida built a wooden house there too.

The duo would come up with three or four melodies and try them out with dummy lyrics. Björn soon became an expert in dreaming up nonsensical rhymes to go with the music. Even when they went into the studio with engineer Michael B Tretow the odd lyrics would spew forth. ‘They could be about mashed potatoes or something,’ recalled Tretow many years later. ‘A love song about mashed potatoes? Björn was very fluent. He could write a lyric for his song in five minutes and it would be good, but silly!’ Björn believed that even if the embryonic lyrics were nonsense they still created a certain atmosphere for the song; having said that the original title for the beautiful-sounding ‘I Have a Dream’ was actually ‘Take Me in Your Armpit’. As time went on their methodology for songwriting altered slightly, although they always had the ability to stop involuntarily if they both recognised

good melody. ‘Very often the song and the recording together suggest a certain kind of lyric that you don’t know before,’ confessed Björn in 1981 documentary *Words and Music*. ‘So the old way used to be write the melody and the lyric before you went into the studio, but it’s the other way around now. What never changed was the intuition between the two musicians. ‘It’s the two of us together all the time,’ added Benny. ‘So if I miss something Björn will hear it and say “what was that?!” and it’s the opposite way round.’

There was widespread suspicion that Björn and Benny’s incredible hit-making success rate meant that they had to be working to a secret ‘formula’, allowing them to churn out million-selling records over and over again. This imaginary pop conveyor belt, operated solely to serve their perceived greed, was a criticism levelled at them in countless interviews throughout the 1970s. Journalists insinuated they must be ‘cheating’ somehow; how could two musicians – with the Swedish language as their mother tongue – actually write songs as clever as ‘Money, Money, Money’? In an article which appeared in *The Daily Mirror* in the mid-seventies the duo were even described as ‘cool, calm, collected and very, very calculating’, but this opinion was not untypical; bitter tales of tax avoidance continually dogged the group at every press conference they gave.

In 1976, during an embarrassingly ill-researched television interview on the BBC, the female host took a cynical view of their songwriting, blatantly doubting Björn and Benny’s creative abilities. The usually calm Björn was incredulous at her attitude. ‘It is very, very irrational and it’s just from inside and it’s *never* speculated,’ he said. ‘It takes a long time and is *very* hard.’ In another interview for Swedish TV the same year Björn elaborated further: ‘We are always met with distrust. They think “you just throw together a song and reap loads of money.”’ Some sections of the media took an even dimmer view of Agnetha and Frida’s contributions to the ABBA sound: they were ‘pretty’ to look at, one had a particularly ‘gorgeous bum’ and they sang ‘sweetly’, were the usual remarks. But Björn and Benny knew only their partners could sing their compositions; they were notoriously difficult songs to perform.

Agnetha’s voice is soprano (higher), whereas Frida is a mezzo-soprano (lower) and their vocal blend was unique. A number like ‘Dancing Queen’ has an amazing two-octave range and is nigh-on impossible for a solo vocalist to sing adequately. But not all ABBA songs were blessed with a dual lead vocal; Björn and Benny tried to take it in turns to give each of their significant others a shot at the lead. ‘It was very fair,’ said Björn many years later, but it did create healthy rivalries between the two singers and also some jealousy. ‘Sometimes I envied the choice of Agnetha, I must admit,’ confessed Frida in 1999. From the outset Björn and Benny always knew which one of the ladies would best suit a particular style of song. There were also marked differences in Agnetha and Frida’s approaches to performing live. Frida thrived in front of a roaring audience but Agnetha came to hate touring. ‘My musical home is the studio, not the stage,’ she said years later recalling what it was like recording the ABBA hits. ‘There, in a private gathering of Björn, Benny and Frida I’m in control of everything and

my voice shows itself off to its advantage.’

Björn believed it took a whole year to create a perfect album, nine months to throw things away and three months to record what was left. ABBA approached every song as having the potential of being a big hit single. ‘We got rid of all the rubbish during the writing period so we never went into the studio with something half-finished,’ remembered Björn. He and Benny were complete perfectionists and virtually everything ABBA ever recorded has been released in one form or another, even the odds and ends which Björn now describes as ‘curiosities’. ‘When an album was put together it was all the best songs,’ recalled Michael B Tretow. Björn was the first person to experience Tretow’s brilliance in the studio and from then on ABBA worked exclusively with him. Most of ABBA’s magic was created either at Metronome Studios, and later the custom-built Polar Studios in the Vasastaden district of Stockholm.

ABBA used an experienced, and very loyal, group of session musicians to play on their records, most famously, guitarists Janne Schaffer and Lasse Wellander, drummer Ola Brunkert and bassist Rutger Gunnarsson. The band’s distinctive multi-layered sound was inspired by the work of Phil Spector and The Beach Boys, giving each song an incredible depth and texture. ‘Benny added synths after synths, until no corner of the record was empty,’ remembered Michael B Tretow, who considered his time working on the mixing desk with ABBA as the most magical experience of his life. ‘And I only experienced that with Björn and Benny. It never happened otherwise. All the other recordings that I did after that and before that... it didn’t happen; just on Björn and Benny’s!’ More overdubs were added until the rich, deep sound was finally achieved. Then it was mixed. Björn and Benny considered each of their songs to have an inherent life all of their own and the ‘feel’ of a composition would guide them to its final conclusion. ABBA were never convinced which single should be the first off an album and usually sent out six or seven of their favourite numbers to a group of ‘trusted friends’, mainly record executives and publishers. They would have to rank the songs in order of popularity and let Björn and Benny know. Normally whatever came out as the consensus favourite would get first shot at the world charts.

ABBA chose, primarily, to record their songs in English, since they always considered it to be ‘the language of pop’ and this was certainly the right decision for their performance of ‘Waterloo’ at the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest. ‘Swedes weren’t brought up with pop music,’ Björn once said. ‘All our pop knowledge was gleaned from the British and American charts.’ Although Sweden, West Germany and Australia were first to fall for ABBA’s charms, it was Great Britain where the band most sought critical and commercial approval. After ‘Waterloo’ had hit the top of the UK charts Björn told the now-defunct *Disc* magazine: ‘It’s just like an incredible dream. It’s always been our ambition to get a record to Number 1 in Britain. It means more than a Number 1 in the States to us. You see, for years Britain has been at the top, the headquarters of pop music.’

By 1975, after a couple of false starts ABBA soon were sitting on leather chairs in the boardroom

of Brit pop HQ – scoring 18 consecutive UK top ten hits, eight of those Number 1s. But perhaps even more remarkable than ABBA's chart statistics was the fact that the foursome continued to record together – and enjoy chart success – even after the personal relationships within the band had begun to fall apart. It gave the media something else to be endlessly fascinated by, and lyrics to songs like 'The Winner Takes It All' were scrutinised for any hidden titbits. 'I think our problems did add to our appeal,' Björn admitted to the London *Evening Standard* in March 1999. 'I try and see it from the outside and, of course, this is very strange: two married couples from Scandinavia, very exotic! Was it a gimmick that they got married? And then they split up with a short space of time! Of course that's fascinating; it would be in any group.'

ABBA ceased recording together in 1982, but the band's demise was frustratingly inconclusive. There was no big announcement, no official farewell single, not even a big public spat – instead, the quartet simply drifted apart; Agnetha and Frida to make solo albums and Björn and Benny to work on their stage musical *Chess*. But the eighties' music scene was a very different animal from the innocent days of the mid-1970s. Absolutely, ABBA had already weathered the threat from punk, but had they stayed together post-1982, quite how their music would have competed with the likes of Culture Club, Duran Duran and Frankie Goes to Hollywood remained to be seen.

But to make a comeback you must first fade away for a period and ABBA did just that. But the renaissance was not generated by a desire to reform; it was through a multi-million selling compilation. By nature all musical tastes are cyclical and when 1992's 'ABBA Gold' became a smash hit it had very little to do with the band members themselves; their involvement was wholly incidental. There were no new songs, no forgotten gems plucked and polished from the ABBA archive to drive this rebirth through. It was simply the ABBA 'classics' which were re-energized, and the timing was by sheer luck, just right for 'Dancing Queen' to strut back out onto the centre of the dancefloor and rightfully reclaim its pop crown. The band, and more importantly their record company, owed Erasmo a sincere debt of gratitude for getting the party started, but almost overnight you no longer had to be gay to admit to liking ABBA. Even Bruce Springsteen voiced his approval – ABBA's music was officially cool again.

ABBA's rehabilitation surprised everyone, none more so than Björn, Benny, Agnetha and Frida, but with their new 'greatest hits' topping the charts around the world, the fans and the media were requesting, nay demanding, a proper reunion. But there never was one, and this gave the perfect opportunity for tribute groups like Björn Again to take to the road, providing a 'live' outlet for the deceased band. And what of 'new' material, or air-brushed versions of old songs produced to feed the ravenous ABBA appetite? Björn and Benny have resisted any tampering with the original ABBA tunes – allowing, to date, only two artistes, The Fugees and Madonna, to sample their riffs.

Instead pumped-up cover versions of ABBA greats partly satisfied – first by Almighty Records' Abbadabra group (churning out disco-fied mixes since 1991) and then by a bunch of Swedi-

upstarts. Formed in Stockholm in 1998, the ABBA Teens, later abbreviated to A*Teens after the swi intervention of Benny, were two unprepossessing boys and two winsome girls who sang speeded-up ABBA songs, painfully proving just how impossible it really was to match Agnetha and Frida's peerless harmonies. Some people even thought they were the 'love children' of the original band. They were most certainly not, but they still managed to sell four million copies of their debut album 'The ABBA Generation', although a Number 1 position on the Swedish charts was perhaps one tribute too far. In the digital, file-sharing age unofficial remixes of original ABBA numbers are prolific. 'Trancing Queen' anybody, or how about a heavy metal mash-up of 'Chiquitita'? You only have to check out YouTube for the plethora of millennium remixes of 'lost' ABBA track 'Just Like That'.

The biggest source of frustration – especially in the press – is ABBA's categorical refusal to reform. Band reunions are big business. Cliff and The Shadows have been doing it for years, The Rolling Stones have never gone away, and even the Sex Pistols came back for the filthy lucre. Incredibly, even the dead still tour; Elvis's original backing band now travels the world with his singing hologram. But still ABBA says no, the only supergroup left in the world where the original members are still alive and young enough to do it. ABBA's loyal friend and one-time tour promoter Thomas Johansson, thought if ever the time had been ripe for a reunion it would have been in 1999, the height of publicity surrounding the West End opening of *Mamma Mia!* But the time passed and nothing happened, despite the best attempts of the media and the fans. That year a consortium of businessmen allegedly offered the four original ABBA members over \$1 billion to reform for a series of 100 concerts (although this amount has since been disputed). Benny & Björn, Agnetha & Frida rejected the offer, surely contradicting their image as rapacious money-grabbers. 'Our legacy is best served by not reforming,' said Björn in an interview with *The Guardian* in March 1999. 'We have resisted more money than you'd ever believe. I like being the band that never came back.'

However, Björn and Benny have not entirely turned their back on their desire to have a hit single. In May 2009 the duo unveiled their first new 'pop' song in over a decade – 'Second Best to Non Original', bizarrely, by the employees of Benny's own hotel in Stockholm. A month later saw the release of the *uncannily* ABBA-sounding 'Story of a Heart' performed by Benny's own orchestra and sung by Helen Sjöholm. It was enough to induce goose bumps just about everywhere, but despite journalists' desperate efforts to translate the song's high profile release as the start of an 'ABBA reunion' it still wasn't on the cards. 'I was in ABBA and I'm in this band, so obviously if you try to do a pop song there will be similarities, right,' said an exasperated Benny.

So here we are, nearly three decades on from the band that just faded away. Each new ABBA compilation continues to sell by the bucket-load, *Mamma Mia!* the stage musical has now been seen by over 30 million people worldwide, the spin-off film smashed box-office records as did the DVD. You can play 'Sing Star ABBA' for Playstation PS2 and coming your way is the ABBA touring museum, where you can get up close and personal to some vintage Agnetha spandex. And still w

want more. People don't just like ABBA's music; they are liberated by it, unquestionably more now than even during the band's seventies' heyday. In November 1976 ABBA were asked on BBC series *Nationwide* whether they could imagine themselves still playing music when they were claiming an old-age pension.

'If we enjoy it like we do now, I think we'll continue,' replied Benny, 'as long as we like it.'

'I don't think you'll see ABBA 60 years old,' countered a chuckling Björn.

'No, probably not,' added Benny. 'But we could hope that *one* song that we make during the year will last, even if ABBA doesn't.'

One song? Just *one* song? Little could ABBA ever foresee how their legacy would endure through the decades. How about 50 songs or more... 'Dancing Queen', 'The Winner Takes It All', 'Mamma Mia', 'Fernando', 'Knowing Me, Knowing You', 'Super Trouper', 'SOS'...

Thank you, ABBA.

THE COMPLETE ABBA

‘PEOPLE NEED LOVE’ (SINGLE)

Released June 1972 (Sweden)

Written and Produced by Benny Andersson & Björn Ulvaeus

Flipside ‘Merry-Go-Round’

No video produced

Highest chart position: #17 (Sweden)

To all intents and purposes, ABBA’s first ever single release wasn’t actually ABBA at all. It was a song by Björn & Benny, the duo, which just so happened to co-credit their girlfriends as guest vocalists. This was the ‘Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Anni-Frid’ show; ABBA, as we now know them, hadn’t even been invented. ‘People Need Love’ was never intended to be the beginning of something bigger for the quartet; there was no four-way album planned, no tour – this was strictly a ‘one off’, albeit one which unknowingly created a beautiful pop monster.

The song was recorded at Metronome Studios in Stockholm on 29 March 1972 and marked the first time all four soon-to-be ABBA members had sung together totally in English. While the joyful, utopian message of the song has much in common with The Beatles’ 1967 single ‘All You Need Is Love’ the inspiration actually came from Blue Mink, a British band fronted by singers Madeline Bell and Roger Cook. Blue Mink’s distinctive girl/boy vocal harmony style was unique in the pop charts of the era and for ‘People Need Love’ Björn and Benny attempted to emulate the relationship between male and female voices. In many of Blue Mink’s biggest hits – including 1969’s ‘Melting Pot’ and ‘Banner Man’ two years later – Bell and Cook traded uplifting lines, sometimes in a call-and-answer style. ‘People Need Love’ would try a similar trick with Agnetha and Frida responding to Björn and Benny’s vocals in a song about what men and women really, really want; apparently the girls desire ‘matrimonial harmony’, whereas the boys need ‘female sympathy’, amongst other things.

‘People Need Love’ is a gingerbread pop jig, garnished with Salvation Army flourishes and some embarrassingly naïve pre-pubescent lyrics; yet it is emphatically, unashamedly, happy. Against all the odds the song still managed to hit the easy listening bullseye with an enthusiastic Swedish audience lapping up every syrup-coated note. The huge success of ‘People Need Love’ caught Björn and Benny on the hop. Peaking at Number 3 on the renowned Swedish top ten radio chart *Tio i top*, and Number 17 on the official Swedish pop charts, the number, quite unexpectedly, became one of the boys’ biggest hits to date. Despite being sung in English ‘People Need Love’ wasn’t a hit anywhere outside

of Scandinavia. Bizarrely, for such a wholesome song, in the US it got a limited release on Hugh Hefner's Playboy label but bombed out at a disappointing Number 115. Over there it was preposterously credited as being by 'Björn & Benny featuring Svenska Flicka' (aka Swedish Girls) presumably to make its sound slightly more alluring and playing heavily on the reputation of Swedish females being more libidinous than their American cousins. However, back home, the fans were hungry for more and Björn and Benny had little option but to try and replicate the single's addictive formula and give their public more of what they wanted...

'HE IS YOUR BROTHER' (SINGLE)

Released November 1972 (Sweden)

Written and Produced by Benny Andersson & Björn Ulvaeus

Flipside 'Santa Rosa'

No video produced

Highest chart position: #1 (Swedish Radio Chart)

After the Swedish chart triumph of 'People Need Love' Björn and Benny recognised that their music enjoyed a much higher profile when their partners took centre stage. Although the quartet had not decided to work together again on a second single, and an album, the name 'ABBA' didn't exist as yet, such and Agnetha and Frida were still enjoying solo careers – both had released albums in 1972. Agnetha's *När en vacker tanke blir en sång* (aka 'When a Beautiful Thought Becomes a Song') and Frida's eponymous *Frida*. Björn and Benny were busy producing and songwriting for other acts and quite frankly, collaborating with the two girls on an album was little more than a novelty or a 'hobby' as Björn referred to it.

Work on the album commenced at the end of September 1972, and the quartet's second single was recorded a month later. Benny knew that in order to repeat the success of 'People Need Love' the girls' voices had to have prominence on the next single. 'It just sounded much better when they did the singing,' admitted Benny, many years later, however, Björn wasn't going to relinquish his love of taking a lead vocal just yet. 'He Is Your Brother' followed the formula of their earlier song, alternating male and female gospel-style vocals and quasi-religious lyrics about a utopian dream where everybody gets along in perfect harmony, regardless of race, creed or culture.

The high-spirited T-Rex electric guitars and dashing keyboards lead into an idealistic tale of how a chance encounter with a beggar-cum-prophet in the street changes the protagonists' lives from that of loneliness and emptiness into one of fulfilment and compassion. Promoting a lifestyle of mutual respect and benevolence, 'He Is Your Brother' could quite easily be a church hymn rather than a pop

tune, but its simplistic theme is to be commended and resonates as much today as it did in 1972. The Swedish public, again, liked what they heard and pre-ABBA's new song hit Number 1 on the country airplay chart. The group obviously held the song in great affection since they dusted it down for the European and Australian tour in 1977 and two years later ran through the chorus during a hesitant celebrity sing-a-long for UNICEF's *A Gift of Song* concert in New York, during which Rod Stewart quite obviously hadn't bothered to learn the words. Their simple, good-natured tune promoting a feeling of world harmony was perhaps the most appropriate, yet oddly forgettable, song ever to be performed in the echoing chambers of the United Nations.

'RING RING' (SINGLE)

Released February 1973 (Sweden)

Written by Benny Andersson, Stig Anderson, Björn Ulvaeus (with Neil Sedaka & Phil Cody)

Produced by Benny Andersson & Björn Ulvaeus

Flipside 'Åh, Vilka Tider' (aka 'Those Were the Days')

Video directed by Lasse Hallström

Highest chart position: #1 (Sweden)

ABBA's long and illustrious career will always be synonymous with the Eurovision Song Contest and their winning tune 'Waterloo', but Björn and Benny's association with the competition actually predated their 1974 Brighton victory. In January 1972 the duo began working on an album with blonde newcomer Lena Andersson. One of the songs they wrote for her was a touching ballad entitled *Säg det med en sång* (aka 'Say It with a Song') eventually short-listed as a possible Swedish entry for Eurovision that year. Prior to Eurovision all competing Swedish songs had to be judged at the legendary *Melodifestivalen*, a competition which has been screened by Swedish broadcaster Sveriges Television since 1959 and is overseen by a panel of judges. Sadly, 'Say It With a Song' was placed third, beaten to the top by pop group Family Four, who ironically only finished 13th in the actual Europe-wide contest.

Not to be downhearted, Björn, Benny and Stig Anderson were encouraged by a panel of record executives to submit another song for the next *Melodifestivalen*. In late 1972 it was announced to the press that the songwriters would be performing the track as well, under the 'Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Anni-Frid' banner. The song chosen to fly the flag for Sweden was 'Ring Ring', a deliberately catchy bubblegum pop anthem which had 'Eurovision' written all the way through it like a stick of pink Brighton rock.

The original lyrics, composed by Stig, were sung in Swedish for the first recording but, with

hindsight, the track was a forerunner to ABBA's later smash 'SOS'; the song is cut from exactly the same gold polyester. A lonely, heartbroken woman pleads for her man to ring her and break the spell of anticipation and despondency; the sound of the telephone is, as we all know, 'the happiest sound of them all'. Björn wanted a 'good English lyric' to help with the song's international appeal and coincidentally through a publishing contact, Stig happened to know veteran American singer-songwriter Neil Sedaka. At the time Sedaka was enjoying something of a comeback with a re-issue of his iconic 1959 hit 'Oh, Carol!' Stig sent Sedaka a tape of the song, with a rough translation of the lyrics, and asked him to rework the Swedish words into English, which the star did extremely quickly with the help of musical collaborator Phil Cody. It was obvious to everybody that Björn and Benny were keen to get away from Swedish-language songs, fearing that they would never gain worldwide appeal unless the lyrics were written in English. 'I was sick and tired of all this Swedish stuff,' said Björn recalling the circumstances surrounding 'Ring Ring', many years later. 'I just wanted to make real English pop.'

However, English-sounding pop was obviously not what the judging panel at *Melodifestivalen* were looking for that year. Incredibly, just like Lena Andersson the year previously, ABBA finished disappointing third in the Swedish heats, pipped at the post by 'You Are Summer', sung by the long forgotten 'Nova and the Dolls' and a Eurovision flop which only made Number 12 on Sweden's domestic chart. Stig Anderson was furious with the decision, accusing the expert panel of having a lapse of taste and judgement. For the moment, it seemed, Eurovision glory was set to evade ABBA. Nevertheless, 'Ring Ring' still had a life beyond *Melodifestivalen*. The song was released as a single in February 1973 and became a colossal hit in Scandinavia. In Sweden the original version (backed by a rather Teutonic-sounding new song *Åh, Vilka Tider* aka 'Those Were the Days'), occupied the Number 1 spot, while the English translation sat prettily at Number 2. Combined sales of both records topped 100,000 copies, a remarkable achievement for a Swedish band. In other parts of Europe the English-language version became a hit in Norway, West Germany, the Netherlands and hit Number 1 in Belgium, making it the biggest commercial success the quartet had yet experienced.

The international release of 'Ring Ring' also marked the beginning of ABBA's long, and fruitful relationship with director Lasse Hallström. For nearly a decade the filmmaker produced the majority of ABBA's visual output and spearheaded the way in which artistes used promo films to perpetuate their image around the world, particularly in far-flung markets like Australia and South America. The charming promo for 'Ring Ring' set the tone for how ABBA's image would develop over the next decade. Oddly enough it is not Hallström's film of ABBA singing the song which most sticks in the mind. For his 1977 feature *ABBA – The Movie*, the director chose to film a group of young Australian ballet-dancers warbling along to the tune. One teeny girl, in particular, is so enraptured by the song that she chirrups 'Ring...' at the wrong time, before clapping her hand over her mouth in utter embarrassment. The moment is so charming it was even used in the original movie trailer. As ABBA

success spread throughout the world the huge importance of Lasse Hallström's promo films increased. Agnetha was not keen on flying, particularly after she started a family with Björn, and with singles being released on both sides of the Atlantic the band could not be everywhere at the same time. Unknowingly, ABBA were at the forefront of a new art-form, which wouldn't properly be appreciated or exploited, for another decade.

One country which seemed immune to the super-infectious 'Ring Ring', or its promotional films, was Great Britain. Initially the song was turned down by all the major record labels – Decca, Pye, EMI, Polydor and WEA. Eventually after Stig Anderson pulled a few strings with his publishing contacts in London he was able to secure a distribution deal with Epic, a subsidiary of CBS Records, and later the British home of Michael Jackson. The record, released in October 1973, bombed in the UK, not even leaving a dent in the precious Top 75. The lack of British success was hugely discouraging for Björn and Benny who dreamt of their records rubbing shoulders with the likes of T. Rex, Roxy Music and Slade. 'We had such confidence in the group that something big was going to happen from now on. But, as usual, the British record companies were stone cold,' recalled Björn many years later. "“Oh my God, they're from Sweden – forget it.” It just wasn't on, you know.'

'RING RING' (ALBUM)

Released March 1973 (Sweden)

Produced by Benny Andersson & Björn Ulvaeus

Written by Benny Andersson & Björn Ulvaeus (tracks 2, 4-10, 12)

Written by Benny Andersson, Stig Anderson & Björn Ulvaeus (track 11)

Written by Benny Andersson, Stig Anderson, Björn Ulvaeus, Neil Sedaka & Phil Cody (track 1)

Agnetha Fältskog & Björn Ulvaeus (track 3)

Engineered by Michael B Tretow

Highest chart position: #2 (Sweden)

Track listing:

'Ring Ring'

'Another Town, Another Train'

'Disillusion'

'People Need Love'

'I Saw It in the Mirror'

'Nina, Pretty Ballerina'

'Love Isn't Easy (But It Sure Is Hard Enough)'

‘Me and Bobby and Bobby’s Brother’

‘He Is Your Brother’

‘She’s My Kind of Girl’

‘I Am Just a Girl’

‘Rock ’n’ Roll Band’

Additional tracks on 2001 reissue:

‘Merry-Go-Round’

‘Santa Rosa’

‘Ring Ring’ aka ‘Bara du slog en signal’ (Swedish version)

Despite three hit singles sitting comfortably under their belts ‘Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Frida’ were still not yet ABBA. When sessions for what was to become their first album as a foursome commenced, the group, as such, did not exist. The resulting long player was merely an elaborate ‘experiment’; two acclaimed singer-songwriters performing with their two exceedingly popular girlfriends on ‘guest vocals’. However, Björn and Benny would have been fools if they had ignored the real reason for their recent good fortune in the European pop charts – it wasn’t the boys’ voices and personalities the public were buying into, it was their opposite numbers. Agnetha and Frida were still enjoying considerable success as solo stars, but it was Stig Anderson who was the driving force behind the concept of an album featuring all of his protégés. For the four performers a new album was little more than an enjoyable ‘side project’. There were other distractions, none more so than Agnetha’s pregnancy which partly explains why recordings for ‘Ring Ring’ took – bar a couple weeks – an astonishing full 12 months – from the single sessions for the buoyant ‘People Need Love’ in March 1972 right through to the final note of the gooey ‘I Saw it in the Mirror’ exactly a year later.

Not surprisingly, for a project which was recorded in fits and starts, ‘Ring Ring’ is a decidedly mixed bag of songs; at best muddled and at worst downright messy. This is a chaotic collection of primeval ABBA tunes presented in a careless and slapdash fashion, but what the album lacks in cohesion it still delivers the occasional flash of inspiration. All tracks were recorded and engineered by Michael B Tretow at various locations in Stockholm – Metronome, Europafilm and KMH Studios and perhaps the lack of geographical uniformity behind-the-scenes helped create an album which is neither texturally stout nor especially tenacious. Thankfully Tretow (born 1944) was the master behind the mixing desk and was one of Abba’s most trusted musical collaborators. He had begun his association with Björn in 1967, while working with The Hootenanny Singers and later worked with Björn and Benny on their 1970 album *Lycka* as well as participating on several of Agnetha’s early solo tunes. Employed initially by Metronome, Tretow was the obvious choice to helm the debut ‘Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Frida’ album since the band held him in extremely high regard. They even praised

his 'never-ending source of ideas' on one of their later LP sleeves. Benny loved the engineer's huge perseverance and the fact he never gave up on trying to produce the best sound possible: 'He was constantly trying new ideas, which was very inspiring.'

After the recording of their first hit 'People Need Love' and its recycled Far Eastern-tinged B-side 'Merry-Go-Round' the quartet booked in further blocks of studio time intermittently working on other new songs. Commencing with second single 'He Is Your Brother', recorded in the late summer of 1972, the vast majority of the foursome's output was recorded between September that year and the following spring. Aside from the album's delicious glam rock title track there's little else on offer here that sounds like the ABBA the world now knows and loves, but the pick 'n' mix approach makes the entire concoction all the more fascinating. This is nothing less than ABBA in embryonic form, playing cavalier with their music.

For an album so loosely strung together it's understandable that several tracks don't really sound like they were created by a four-piece at all. A few songs feature only Björn's lead vocals and, taken out of context here, one track seems little more than an Agnetha solo production. The frugal ballad 'Disillusion' showcases Agnetha's only songwriting contribution ever to grace an ABBA album. Oddly – since the singer had already claimed her songwriting merits from her teenage years onwards – Agnetha felt uncomfortable submitting new compositions to her husband, and to Benny, despite the men's enthusiastic encouragement. Unfortunately, 'Disillusion' is not Agnetha's finest work; being little more than a meandering heartbreaker with lyrics so bleak that not even the plucky electric guitar can raise its spirits. It's hard to believe that Agnetha recorded such a depressing song just weeks after the birth of her and Björn's first child, Linda Elin Ulvaeus, who arrived on 23 February 1973. Most of the album sessions had to be worked around Agnetha's pregnancy, although she did cut down on overseas promotional work during this period. Most infamously, when the band appeared on celebrated West Germany TV show *Disco* in January 1973, Agnetha was actually absent from the lineup. Instead, Frida's friend Inger Brundin lip-synched along to Agnetha's vocals with the studio audience none the wiser. However, at no point did Agnetha attempt to disguise her pregnancy. She was seen heavily laden with child when performing 'Ring Ring' at the *Melodifestivalen* and a black and white photo from the TV broadcast was eventually used on the back of the band's first album.

Far more satisfying than 'Disillusion' are the fluffy pop tunes which intermittently grace the album and provide a fascinating glimpse into ABBA's rainbow-coloured future. 'Another Town, Another Train' is, taken at face value, a tragic song about a restless wanderer leaving his lover after enjoying 'a groovy time', but its milkshake melody and childlike pied piper keyboard pretty much render the lyrics obsolete. The railway theme is continued in the intro to 'Nina, Pretty Ballerina', one of the album's unexpected pop highlights: the whimsical tale of a shy office wallflower, who nobody takes the slightest bit of notice of. But hidden beneath her boring exterior she has a 'little secret': every Friday night this dowdy secretary transforms herself into a reckless raver at the local

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