

From The Times  
January 13, 2010

## A tuneful return to Abba World



Pete Paphides

Midsummer 1996. It's the evening of the Sex Pistols' 20-year reunion gig. Someone has decided that when John Lydon's reformed icons appear on stage, it should be to Abba's *Dancing Queen*. By playing a record that embodies what a sorry state pop was in at the time of the Pistols' ascent, the reformed group can come on halfway through and remind the throng just how sorely needed they had been. Just one problem: on hearing the Abba song, everyone starts dancing, having the time of their life.

In two weeks *Abba World* — the world's first officially endorsed Abba exhibition — opens at Earl's Court. Among this labyrinthine, interactive stroll through the Swedish monoliths' success, it would be nice to think that the organisers will have set aside some sort of memorial to that evening in Finsbury Park. Some sort of Abba-fying console, perhaps, which allows visitors to mix t Frida and Agnetha's deathless harmonies into *Anarchy in the UK*, say. It's a notion that, as it happens, isn't so far from the truth. Among the displays of original costumes (including the clashing satin and suedes of their Eurovision-winning performance), the original *Arrival* helicopter and specially filmed contributions, the exhibition features the Tretow MIX Challenge, which enables visitors to create an Abba-style mix using elements of existing songs and whatever they care to add.

Arranged as a "walk-through", the exhibition takes you through more than 20 "rooms", each of them themed around an aspect of the Abba story. You may choose to move briskly through some of the earlier rooms, such as the "folk park" room, dedicated to the municipal spaces where the two couples first performed together, and a recreation of the office of their manager Stig Anderson. But farther in, *Abba World* uses technology to facilitate what, for many fans, will be the ultimate karaoke experience: holographic opportunities to sing "on stage" with their heroes.

Seven years ago, when I interviewed Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson at Polar HQ — the Stockholm studio where Anni-Frid Lyngstad cried on hearing *Dancing Queen* for the first time — Björn recalled the dying days of the group's collective life in bittersweet terms. "By the 1980s we were out of fashion," he said. My instinct was to point out to him that Abba were never really in fashion to start with.

Their existence beyond the sphere of critical approval was illustrated by the surroundings at Polar. Waiting for Benny to finish walking Björk around the block (his dog, not the Icelandic pop star), the thing that struck me was the lack of Abba awards on display. It can't have been modesty, because you couldn't move for posters and discs relating to *Chess*, the 1985 musical they wrote with Tim Rice. "Actually, there aren't as many Abba awards as you might imagine," Björn said. "For the main part of our lifespan the critics despised us."

By now, you hope, Björn will have registered how much love the world has for Abba's music. He had taken umbrage at the early success of the tribute band Björn Again, failing to realise that ironic tributes — even ones that involve the copious use of a comedy Swedish accent — are the first step along the road to a full critical and commercial resurrection.

Back in 1992, though, we weren't entirely sure if we ought to go public with our affection for *Dancing Queen* and *Knowing Me, Knowing You*. There's a reason why that year's 28 million-selling *Abba Gold* compilation bore minimal artwork. Early prototypes of the CD with pictures of the group on it had had a bad reception from focus groups. Reissuing the hits in a plain black sleeve with little more than the iconic Abba logo on it was the album marketing equivalent of the brown paper bag.

But then, it had always been like that with us and Abba. Since the night they stormed the 1974 Eurovision Song Contest a fascinating tension existed between our superficial misgivings and the gravitational pull of the music. "From the 'My' on [the first line of] *Waterloo* I was an ex-listener," sniffed Pink Floyd's Roger Waters. He wasn't alone. One of my old copies of the children's magazine *Tops* includes a comic strip showing Abba's rise to glory. One frame depicts the worried group sitting in a café trying to figure out how they can possibly arrest their post-*Waterloo* run of flop singles. "Maybe we took the wrong song for the A-side," ponders the cartoon Björn. "More likely, plain British prejudice — they're always against groups emerging from the Euro contest!"

There was probably an element of truth in that. But if you stick at it long enough pop is a meritocracy. *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell's study of the amount of time that the Beatles spent together in their early years, revealed a prosaic but undeniable truth about genius. Without long, tedious application, the years of mistakes made in relative anonymity, genius has nothing from which to grow. Gladwell could just as easily have studied Abba and come to the same conclusion.

The astonishing creative purple patch that propelled them to immortality began in earnest in 1975 with *SOS*, which reached No 6 in Britain. For a group beyond the critical pale the achievement must have tasted as sweet as all seven of their ensuing No 1s put together.

Brian Higgins of Xenomania — the team behind every original Girls Aloud song — says that “SOS was the benchmark song I chose to indicate the direction I wanted us to aim for. That was the standard we aspired to reach melodically”. It isn’t hard to see why. It’s all there: the tart, serendipitous synergy of Agnetha’s soprano and Frida’s mezzo-soprano; hints that what you’re hearing might be coloured by autobiography and the obsessive attention to detail of writers who couldn’t help but filter their love of Phil Spector and the Beach Boys through all this Nordic melancholia.

It’s the magic combination, common to almost every great Abba song. All that changed with every passing album was a canny tweaking of the formula to acknowledge the trends of the day. On *Abba: The Album*, the songs *Name of the Game* and *Eagle* wield a palpable debt to the Eagles, while *Voulez-Vous* factored disco into the equation, cementing their already strong gay following.

I didn’t realise it until I actually met Benny and Björn, but while people always go on about the two marriages in Abba most of the loving, honouring and obeying in the group happened between the men. They even had the air of man and wife: Benny the alpha male, taciturn and bordering on truculent when asked to talk about his feelings. Björn often directed his answers at Benny, as if keen not to misrepresent him.

For many, the best of Abba was embodied in *Dancing Queen*. Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy is by no means alone in citing it as the apex of everything achievable within the parameters of a pop song. Björk (the Icelandic pop star, not Benny’s dog) calls it “the biggest song in pop music history, pure ecstasy, it makes you want to fly”. Björn, meanwhile, was “so excited, I just could not rest ... I drove all over Stockholm looking for someone to play it to”.

All four members of Abba are said to have had input into the design, content and feel of *Abba World*. In Agnetha’s case it’s hard not to wonder what this would amount to. The dark shadows that extended over the group’s output, from “these old familiar rooms [where] children would play” in *Knowing Me, Knowing You*, are impossible to separate from Agnetha’s experience of being in the group. In her autobiography *As I Am*, chapters covering the late Seventies had titles such as *Abba’s Last Tour Was a Success But Awful for Me* and *There Was a Fever, There Were Ovations, There Were Sweaty Obsessed Crowds*.

Look at footage of the group now and it seems fairly clear that she wasn’t enjoying herself. She’s barely a presence in the video of *Name of the Game*, sad-eyed and frankly unwilling to commit to what, in fairness, looks like the most impenetrable board game ever invented. She hated touring because she missed her children — a situation made appreciably worse when the European press corps voted her the possessor of the continent’s sexiest bottom. Not an Abba video went by without her being asked about her bum. Speaking to Noel Edmonds in 1982 she icily informed him: “I’m not just a sexy bottom.” For Agnetha, Abba had always been a trade-off. She was a well-known singer-songwriter in her own right before she started dating Björn in 1969. In Abba, her songs barely got a look in.

By contrast, behold Frida — steady with Benny, no young children to care for — in the video to *Take a Chance on Me*, jumping up and down like a spiral-eyed sex weasel. In the verité-style promo for *Summer Night City*, directed by Lasse Hallstrom, we see

Benny and Frida unsteadily negotiating their way back home, their palpable chemistry somehow heightened by the fact that they seem to be having a blazing row.

You suspect that Björn may not have realised how much he was giving away on the lyrics to Abba's final two albums, *Super Trouper* and *The Visitors*. How did we know that *The Winner Takes It All* — written while drunk — was about the dissolution of his marriage? How could we not know? And what kind of a sadist would write such lines as, "But tell me does she kiss/Like I used to kiss you? /Does it feel the same/When she calls your name" and get his ex-wife to sing them?

As the female voice on *Shoot out the Lights* — the legendary break-up album she recorded with her husband Richard Thompson — Linda Thompson has also been there. "If someone had given me that song," she says, "I would have gone through 33 broken hearts. A broken heart will always mend, but a song like *The Winner Takes It All* is there for ever."

The Abba fan whose interest in the group extends to *Abba Gold* probably hasn't spent much time with the group's final album *The Visitors*, which is a pity. It's one of the maddest records ever made. The title track described the plight of "a Russian dissident slowly going crazy while waiting for that knock on the door". *Soldiers* is about a woody autumnal death march allegorically addressing the rise of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. What a shame that Roger Waters thought himself above this stuff. Those final songs resemble nothing so much as the murky neurotic terror of Pink Floyd's *Animals*.

The tone of *Abba World's* marketing rhetoric — "A mind-blowing journey through the music memories and magic of Abba!" — suggests that the exhibition is more about consolidating the brand than expanding people's perceptions of it. If it was up to the fans, of course, the best sort of brand consolidation would be one last reunion tour. "There isn't a generation of fans to whom that wouldn't appeal," one promoter told me, suggesting that the group could pocket £10 million to £12 million for ten nights at the O2 arena. Björn himself says that the last "crazy" offer totalled \$1 billion. In the end, the thought of "the looks on the faces in the audience as they realised we had grown old" sealed his decision not to go ahead.

In a world before *Heat* and *OK!*, a world less maddened by voyeurism and celebrity snooping, Abba allowed us a peek into their personal disarray. If you were in a comparably successful group now, you'd be nuts to invite that sort of scrutiny. That means, of course, that there can never be another Abba. Which may account for why we can't let go of them.

*Abba World* is at Earls Court, London SW5 (0871 2200260), from Jan 27 to March 28

## **THE STARS COME OUT FOR ABBA**

"They were great, great records: great chords, beautifully played, clever arrangements and often an incredible musical motif that often matched the main vocal melody in quality. That's incredibly difficult to do well and yet that's what they delivered time and time again. Finally, the girls could, really sing. They made beautiful sounds, which made every lyric totally believable." - Brian Higgins, *Xenomania*

“It was very unfashionable to like Abba at that time. Their songs are beautifully crafted and the production was always immaculate, everything beautifully tuned in time.” - Brian May

“Abba have written the best pop music of all time.” The Edge

“The way I see it, Abba made Dancing Queen and, from that moment on, every musician who has heard it faces the struggle to come to terms with their own imperfection. Dancing Queen is just so glorious. After some time I have finally figured out how to play it on an acoustic guitar. If nothing else, it means that Abba and I can share just a little common ground.” Jeff Tweedy, Wilco

“Not only were Abba brilliant pop songwriters, they were also incredible producers. They were one of the pioneers of multi-tracking the lead vocals, layering take upon take to create a rich and penetrating sound that to the naked ear sounded like one voice.” - Sam Sparro