Between Sweden and the World: Documentary Films about ABBA's International Success

ABBA, which consisted of Agnetha Fältskog, Björn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson and Anni-Frid (Frida) Lyngstad, is the most popular pop-rock band which originated from Sweden and the entire Scandinavian Peninsula. It is also one of the most popular bands of all time, selling between 150 and 350 million records during its career, lasting from 1972 to 1981, with *The Visitors* (1981), being its last studio album, although the band never did break up officially, and now there is a planned comeback. As Ola Johansson observes, ABBA was not exactly the first act from Sweden which made a mark on the international arena. 'Sweden had its musical moments before ABBA. A quirky, 1960s instrumental band called the Spotniks was popular both in Europe and Japan, and the band Blue Swede scored a number one hit single in the US with "Hooked on a Feeling" in 1974. But such forays into the world of pop paled in comparison to ABBA, who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1974 with the song "Waterloo"' (Johansson 2010: 134). ABBA's international fame also played a major role in encouraging artists from their country and entire Scandinavia to try reaching a wider audience, as demonstrated by successes of such acts as Roxette, Ace of Base and Avicii, to name just a few (ibid.). In due course, Sweden, as Johansson and Vuletic notice, became a Mecca of popular music: a place where international stars go to have their hits produced by professional 'hit-makers' (Johansson 2010: 134-36; Vuletic 2018: 64-5).

This article attempts to examine ABBA's phenomenon, by looking at the documentary films about this band. I am particularly interested in comparing domestic and foreign take on ABBA. When doing so, I will draw on the concept of authenticity, as a quality of music and the relationship between the artists and their audience, as well as authenticity of the documentary.

ABBA's global success and the question of authenticity

It is difficult to establish all reasons for ABBA's global success, and some of them will be mentioned in the course of my discussion, but I would like to mention here those I find most important, except from the quality of their productions, which I take for granted. One is the fact that ABBA made its international debut in the mid-1970s, when rock music, dominating in the 1960s, which was created largely in the Anglo-American world, was in decline. This created a space for newcomers, coming from outside the centre of popular music. Another factor was their perfect composition of two couples in love with each other; and all four being friends with each other. This authenticated their songs, which frequently considered love, and rendered their behaviour on scene natural. One could conjecture that ABBA's behaviour on stage was an extension of their behaviour in private life. There is therefore a movie-star quality to ABBA's members, not just in their international recognition but in the assumption of their authenticity, and there being no gap between their stage and private identities. This perception and aura carries over into the documentaries. Importantly, ABBA stopped performing and recording shortly after their marriages fell apart, despite very lucrative offers, adding to the sense of their authenticity. Moreover, in contrast to the stereotypical pop act, and especially Europop, a genre to which ABBA is assigned ("Star Profiles II"), members of the band wrote their own repertoire. The male members composed music; the lyrics were usually written by Björn Ulvaeus and the band's manager Stig Anderson. Occasionally, their

repertoire also included songs with lyrics authored by Agnetha Fältskog. They thus fulfilled one of the conditions which, according to Allan Moore, plays important role in assigning authenticity to the artist, namely that 'that artists speak the truth of their own situation' (Moore 2002: 2009).

Finally, their successes coincided with the time when music became more visual and they played up their visual dimension, by offering their fans well-designed record covers and music videos, directed by Lasse Hallström, who subsequently became a successful director of fiction films, such as Oscar-nominated *The Cider House Rules* (1999).

Although ABBA's success was global, and its Swedish roots were overlooked and of little consequence for the bulk of their fans, we can find an argument that ABBA was in fact a very Swedish band:

> ABBA's roots grow from the Swedish dance-band culture's enormous innocence. ABBA sings about princesses and radiates virginity. They sing about the sun and sand and love, all of which are Swedish dreams. To me, Sweden is a real ABBA country: a land filled with people who dream romantic dreams about things that don't exist: sun and happiness and eternal love and broken hearts and such. (Swanberg, quoted in Broman 2005: 50)

If we accept this argument, this confirms ABBA's authenticity in another sense, as mentioned by Moore: speaking the truth of their own culture (Moore 2002: 2002). It was also argued that ABBA spoke truth of the situation of Europeans, because 'they used the banality of the Europop genre to articulate something of the banality of new European affluence' assigned ("Star Profiles II": 200).

Given its global success and the status of trailblazers, at least in the Scandinavian context, it is not surprising that the band attracted huge attention amongst filmmakers. We can find different types of films with or about ABBA: documentaries, films using its music extra-diegetically, fiction films inspired by its music and hybrid, documentary-fiction films, presenting spiced-up versions of ABBA's history. Of these films Hallström's 1977 film *ABBA: The Movie*, which is a drama-documentary about the band's Australian tour, deserves special attention. Its significance lies in its footage being used in other films about ABBA, as well as in inspiring great interest in ABBA in Australia.

Discussing in depth even one type of film devoted to ABBA, such as documentaries would require an extended study, going beyond the parameters of this publication. For this reason, I limit myself to only four documentaries about ABBA, which overtly or explicitly examine the band's international career. These are two films directed by Carl Magnus Palm and Roger Backlund: *ABBA – When Four Became One* (2012) and *ABBA – Absolute Image* (2012), and two films which do not credit their directors: Australian production *Thank You For the Music* (2019) and *A for ABBA* (1993), which was produced by the BBC. As the dates of these films suggest, they were made after the band stopped producing new music. By and large, the majority of films about ABBA come from this period, testifying to the endurance and flexibility of its music.

ABBA's Swedish documentary

To regard a film as a documentary about musicians, it is not enough just to present a report of their concerts; the author needs to offer an in-depth representation of an artist, trying to

capture him or her in public and private life, through interviews with this artist or people who have an intimate knowledge about him or her. Such films can be described as 'documentary biopics', except that in them artists play themselves, and there is less emphasis on drama and extraordinary events and more on the ordinary life of the star. All films examined in this article fulfilled this criterion. Each of them also employs different 'authentication techniques', to use Marshall and Kongsgaard's phrase (2012: 354–55), to come close to the 'true ABBA', such as interviews with the members of the band and their fans, archival footage and testimonies of the 'specialists', bringing their knowledge about the said musician.

I begin with *ABBA – When Four Became One*, despite it not being the oldest of those considered here, but because it digs deepest into ABBA's 'pre-history' and offers a Swedish take on ABBA's global fame. Its principal author, Carl Magnus Palm, is a leading ABBA specialist, who has in his portfolio several works about ABBA, including the first full-scale Swedish-language biography of the band, *ABBA – The Story*, published in 2008. He also wrote several books about other musicians, originating from Sweden, as well as a book about the Beatles.

Palm's documentary does not include any interviews with band members, Normally, not including testimonies of the main protagonists would be regarded as a shortcoming of the documentary, but on this occasion it does not come across as a problem, but rather a virtue of the film, rendering it more objective. This is because the testimonies of the band, which can easily be obtained, are replaced by memories of their early collaborators, who inform viewers about less known details from the lives of the band members and appear to have a more objective insight into the lives of the four members than they themselves might have. The process of authentication is augmented by including archival footage, showing early performances of Björn, Benny, Agnetha and Frida and their photographs, including pictures from their childhood. At the beginning of each section, devoted to a specific member of the band, we see a collage of photographs, made of pictures of the future star from his or her childhood, teenage years and the beginning of their career, record sleeves, press cuttings and a map of Scandinavia. The most prominent part of this collage is a large portrait of the subject, put together from overlapping fragments. It suggests that we get here a true portrait of each member, in which he or she will be presented on a rich canvas of the culture of the country from which they originated.

Throughout the film the authors implicitly compare the humble beginnings of ABBA with its subsequent fame. In this comparison a specific image of Sweden is conjured up. It is a cultural backwater, in which two types of popular music flourish. One draws on Swedish folk, but is 'spiced up' for consumption in the cities. The other is an imitation of Anglo-American music. We learn that all members of the band at some stage tried their hands at both types of music, but in the end the second type prevailed and they engaged in mimicry of Western music. In the case of Anni-Frid, it was singing jazz and cabaret standards; in the case of Benny, joining a rock group. The narrator also states that for Swedish singers the ultimate dream was to break into an international market, but before forming ABBA, they failed to venture beyond the borders of Scandinavian Peninsula. The presentation of ABBA's beginnings explains this failure well: trying to sell back Anglo-American music or kitschy folk songs from Europe's periphery, which sounds like folk music produced everywhere in Europe, would be unsuccessful. Only taking on the 'centre' at its own game brought a realistic promise of success. Although this is not spelt out clearly in the documentary, it is suggested that the best strategy for artists from the province is to gain popularity in the 'global province'. This is demonstrated by ABBA's repeated attempts to get into the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) and succeeding the second time.

The genre which they offered to global consumption was Europop, a style which reigned in the ESC from the mid-1960s. It was criticised for its 'bouncy beat, just one chorus hook, elementary lyrics' (Frith 1989: 221; see also "Star Profiles II" 198-99) and 'favouring universal themes focusing on consumption, fun and love' (Vuletic 1018: 35). For critics of Europop songs belonging to this genre were interchangeable. Yet, the second film by Carl Magnus Palm and Roger Backlund shows that the further successes of ABBA demonstrated that Europop can be as polished and distinctive as Anglo-American rock. It focuses largely on the work of the people who did this 'polishing' behind the scenes. They include the designer of ABBA's clothes, choreographer and the previously mentioned director of their music videos, Lasse Hallström. All of these people contributed to ABBA's unique style or even brand. This included shiny, colourful and elaborate clothes, which were in the same style, yet also individualised; a simple, yet sophisticated logo, and a specific style of shooting, especially female members – one en face, one in profile. These efforts of branding, augmented by a talent and determination of their manager, signalled that ABBA was 'there to stay', rather than enjoying meteoric success and there was a powerful promotional machine behind it, as in the case of stars signed to Anglo-American majors, even though in reality the budget for promotion was rather low. We learn that the artists involved in producing ABBA's brand made up for the low budget with their inventiveness; for example, Hallström was shooting their early videos in his apartment, as opposed to renting a studio, and their prime motivation was to help ABBA to succeed and prove that the craft of the highest quality can come from Sweden, rather than earn money on the back of the band's success. This film also shows that on numerous occasions Sweden had to pretend to be a location in the Anglo-American world, for example a part of the mockumentary about ABBA's tour in Australia in *ABBA The Movie* is shot in Sweden or a scene which was meant to be shot in Piccadilly Circus in London was moved to Stockholm, because of the inability to arrange it in England's capital. Such moments show that Sweden can easily replace Anglo-American world, metaphorically and literally.

Foreign documentaries about ABBA

Thank You for the Music was made to commemorate ABBA's Australia tour in 1977, which was part of their two-leg tour in Europe and Australia, which in Australia attracted an audience of 150,000 people. The film was made to promote the band's possible return, albeit only in virtual form: as holograms incorporated in a live spectacle. The focus of this documentary is on the mutual love between ABBA and Australia. It is filled with interviews with all members of the band, except Anni-Frid, at a time concurrent with the film's production, namely around 2019. It also includes those who have a special relationship with the band: most importantly Molly Meldrum, a DJ who played ABBA's songs and videos on his programmes, ensuring their popularity in this country and helping them to reach a new audience in Europe. Furthermore, it adds one of ABBA's Australian superfans who attended their Australian concert. We also see fragments of the band's Australian tour, both onstage, as well as meetings with their fans during concerts and scenes between performances. The members retell some memorable moments from the tour, such as performing outdoors during a storm. It is possible that some of the footage used in this film came from the film shot by Hallström, given the similarity of the footage, but the credits do not confirm this. By using original witnesses to ABBA's successes in Australia in two periods (during their original

successes and in the present time, before ABBA's virtual tour), *Thank You for the Music* approximates to a biopic, as much as a documentary film is able to do so. The conclusion points to the continuity between the 'old' and the 'new' ABBA. Although, inevitably, the members of the band aged, as did their Australian fans, they essentially stayed the same: down to earth and friendly. Moreover, they preserved their youthful charm. This applies especially to Agnetha, whose attractiveness in her late sixties is the subject of many comments published on YouTube. The film proposes that there is a special rapport between Sweden and Australia. This has something to do with the isolation and provinciality of both countries and its people being down to earth. It also draws attention to the importance of provincial areas in forging the global success of a performer. Was it not for Australia, ABBA might never have sustained its success, following its victory at the Eurovision Song Contest, because subsequent interest in their songs was on the wane. Playing their songs continuously on Australian radio and television and going on tour there ensured that ABBA did not share its fate with other winners of the ESC, who drifted into obscurity. The authors of the film also mention the role of the Australian film's *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), directed by P.J. Hogan in prolonging ABBA's afterlife. This film also pointed to the special relation between ABBA and Australia, through featuring ABBA's super-fan at the centre of the narrative and contributed to ABBA-mania, which in the 1990s became comparable to the popularity the band enjoyed in the 1970s.

A for ABBA, the documentary about ABBA produced by the BBC, inevitably looks at the band from a British perspective. This is signalled by beginning the film in 1974, when the band won the Eurovision Song Contest, held that year in Brighton. Moreover, the film punctuates the story of ABBA with those of their songs, which reached the highest positions in the British charts, equating its global fame with its fame in Britain. It also includes fragments of British television programmes, in which ABBA participated. Most of the film is filled with opinions on ABBA of various British people. However, unlike in the Australian film, they do not adopt the position of ABBA fans, but impartial 'experts', who know best what is 'quality music' and assess the band against this standard. This approach is conveyed by the choice of the narrator of the film: John Peel, one of the best known British popular music experts and trend-setters. Other experts expressing their views on ABBA include prominent musicians appreciated for their arthouse pretensions and intellectual aura, such as Elvis Costello, Ian McCullouch, the frontman of the rock band Echo and the Bunnymen, Eddi Reader from the band Fairground Attraction and Ray Davies from the Kinks. Significantly, there are no British musicians here whose sensibilities were closer to ABBA, such as Susie Quatro or members of Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet. One gets the impression that the choice of guests replicates the old hierarchy of pop-rock, according to which rock is a higher genre than pop, which is presented as a diluted version of rock, addressed to less sophisticated listeners. In his first entrance Peel states that the songs of ABBA resisted the ravages of time. He confesses that ABBA's melodies rung in his ears in the 1970s and 1980s, more than more noble sounds of British progressive rock, exemplified by Pink Floyd and anguish-ridden productions of the American band Nirvana. Peel thus shows appreciation of ABBA's enduring appeal, yet also questions ABBA's place in the pantheon of popular music classics. The rest of the film is meant to account for both sides of ABBA: the longevity of its fame contrasted with the suspicion that this fame was not fully deserved.

One answer to the question why ABBA gained global popularity, given by Ray Davies, was a decline in British popular music in the 1970s. British pop-rock 'lost its way'

then, which created space for newcomers. ABBA filled this space. Another reason was ABBA's boldness, their ability to venture where British pop-rock musicians had no courage to go, namely into the territory of bad taste. This is reflected by almost all Peel's guests using terms such as 'corny', 'kitsch/y' and 'literal'. Their praise of ABBA is a simultaneous criticism of ABBA, because they declare that if British artists were less self-restrained and more focused on commercial success, as opposed to privileging art and self-expression, ABBA would have no chance in this competition. A variation of this argument is that ABBA's songs lacked nuance; their lyrics had to spell out every emotion to the last letter, so to speak, which can be seen as a reflection of its belonging to Europop, a genre addressed to the listeners with only rudimentary understanding of English. By the same token, however, they were more accessible to the mass audience than music which conveyed emotions in a restrained manner or did so indirectly, using metaphors. Some of Peel's guests go even further by saying that ABBA's popularity was simply down to its vulgarity, epitomised by their over-the-top outfits. Lowri Turner, fashion editor from the 'Evening Standard', claims that ABBA tried to be hip, but once they performed in the ESC in their 'hideous outfits', there was no way back; they had to look more and more awful, to sustain their popularity. The opinion that ABBA was kitschy is underscored by using in the film footage of parodies of their performances, including by the famous female duo French and Saunders. Its purpose is to project ABBA as over-sentimental and 'literal', leaving nothing to the listener's imagination. It is worth mentioning that this aspect of ABBA subsequently became seized by Australian films, especially the previously mentioned *Muriel's Wedding*, but also *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994), directed by Stephan Elliott. It is also celebrated by queer subcultures, which see ABBA as its icon (Gaydar Girld 2020). This appeal can be explained by the fact that for peripheralized groups ABBA's admittedly bad taste and emotional explicitness was empowering.

Despite the overall critical tone, these 'ABBA experts' also acknowledge some of the band's genuine accomplishments and innovations. One is their catchy melodies, resulting in the hit value of a large proportion of ABBA's productions. Their songs seem effortless, prompting some people to claim that everybody can 'do this kind of stuff', but as the lyricist Tim Rice observes, this is not true. The rule is that the 'lighter' the song sounds, the more difficult it is to write it. Another accomplishment is including elements of classical music in their work. Although neither of the experts mentions it, by the time ABBA started its career, classical music had been incorporated into progressive rock. Bands such as Yes, Emerson, Lake and Palmer and Jethro Tull heavily borrowed from the classics, such as Bach. However, in Anglophone pop music this practice was uncommon. ABBA changed this and encouraged more artists from Europe, such as Falco (whose songs referenced Mozart) to broaden their palette of inspirations and references towards classical works. One participant of the programme, who wrote a dissertation about ABBA's music, mentions the skill with which ABBA combined repetition of musical motifs with change. One can assume that this made their songs captivating, yet not boring. Finally, a couple of guests suggest that ABBA filled their music with melodrama. Although this idea is not elaborated on, it probably means that their songs create complete stories, often drawing on the members' biographies, particularly in the last period of the band's career, following the divorces of their members, such as 'The Day Before You Came'. This melodramatic dimension is augmented by the voices of the female singers, whom Eddi Reader describes as 'sirens'. This melodramatic dimension became an important reason why ABBA's music was used in fiction films not simply as

background music, but as a topic, as in *Muriel's Wedding*, whose protagonist identifies with the songs' characters and stories. Finally, the film suggests that ABBA's enduring appeal has something to do with their likeability, conveyed by the band's interviews. In particular, Björn and Benny admit that their music was corny and it is astonishing that audiences around the world stuck to it for so long. Listening to these confessions I wondered how many British artists have the courage to assess one's career with this level of honesty.

Conclusions

In conclusion, all documentaries account for the phenomenon of ABBA's extraordinary success, given its humble roots in a country on the periphery of Europe, without any significant prior achievements in popular music. They draw attention to such factors in ABBA's success as: singing in English; having a manager whose lifetime ambition was to make the artists whom he nurtured famous outside of Scandinavia; relying on one's own material; taking part in the Eurovision Song Contest and hence reaching the world via Europe; and staying on the side of pop, rather than venturing into rock. Another factor is the visual side of the band: the attractiveness of the female singers, their penchant for elaborate costumes, which rendered their performances colourful spectacles, and cheap, yet innovative videos, allowing ABBA to reach the audience who couldn't attend their concerts. These films also use different means to prove their claim to show the real ABBA. In the case of the Swedish films, this is relying on archival documents; in the Australian documentary, on interviews with ABBA's members and their Australian fans, who remember the band from their Australian tour, in the British one, using testimonies of music and cultural 'experts', able to locate the 'ABBA phenomenon' in the context of international pop-rock. Each of these approaches is partial, but together they provide a precious insight into ABBA's history and afterlife.

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