

THE WINNER TAKES IT ALL:
TRANSMEDIA INFLUENCE ON THE AFTERLIFE OF ABBA

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Abstract

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Title: The Winner Takes It All: Transmedia Influence on the Afterlife of ABBA

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In an entertainment industry saturated with competing texts, media scholar Henry Jenkins maintains transmedia storytelling as an economic imperative. From ABBA's inception in the 1970s to its contemporary revivals, the band's irresistible pop anthems have achieved a level of international staying power comparable only to that of the Beatles, due in large part to the music's multimedia presence. ABBA, with its kitsch fashion and distinctive melodies, emerged from an era that was captivated by the British Invasion and was prone to "disco demolitions." Yet over the years it has managed to find a way into the narratives of movies, musicals, and drag performances alike. How does this mass, cultural co-opting contribute to ABBA's enduring fame? Further, can the band's unique business acumen—a trait responsible for an ever-expanding fandom by way of museums, musicals, video games, and virtual concerts—serve as a model for modern immersive music experiences?

Sociocultural analysis provides reasoning for the band's early reception (and rejection) by international audiences, while historical research may clarify a precedent for finding success out of the Swedish music industry. Additionally, this paper interprets both qualitative and quantitative data from music magazines such as *Creem* and *Melody Maker*, industry sales charts, and a variety of art and entertainment critiques. By using these sources and methods, I clarify both the particular factors that contributed to ABBA's popularity and those cultural and social sentiments that detracted from it. I also attempt to determine to what degree the band's several revivals and business savvy have solidified their position in the popular music canon.

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Table of Contents

Prologue.....	4
Chapter 1: What is Transmedia Storytelling?.....	8
Chapter 2: Early Reception.....	14
Chapter 3: Staying Relevant.....	24
Chapter 4: Mamma Mia!.....	32
Chapter 5: The Story Goes On.....	37
Conclusion.....	46
Bibliography.....	50
Biography.....	54

Prologue

I shared an iTunes account with my mom when I was in grade school, a circumstance for which I blame my love of Billy Idol, the Dixie Chicks, and the Swedish pop group, ABBA. Out of thousands of songs in that shared digital library, my mom and I agreed that ABBA's disco anthem, "Dancing Queen," was distinctly ours. The song's celebratory piano and lyrics had the unique power of transforming any setting—the car, the kitchen, the driveway—into a makeshift dance floor. When ABBAMania came to town during my senior year of high school, I couldn't resist dragging a group of friends with me to experience first-hand what would undoubtedly be the world's greatest, if cheesiest, tribute concert. My friends and I were the youngest in attendance by decades, but the show's more stationary audience members seemed to admire our energy. Any semblance of endearment garnered from our elders must have faded quickly, though, when we belted out familiar lyrics as if it were our last earthly chance to sing.

After the show a group of apparent best friends—nine middle-aged women from somewhere in Eastern Europe—approached us. One of the women, who was sporting a leopard print dress that ABBA's own costume designers would surely endorse, pulled out her phone to take a picture with us, her "new favorite people."

"How do you know this music?" she asked with a thick Slavic accent and fascinated disbelief.

"Good parents?" I guessed.

Up until that point, I had always taken ABBA's seemingly-universal popularity as a given, à la the mania that defined the Beatles. While it is true that my mom's taste in music informed my own listening habits, the question posed to me that night warrants a more thorough answer. How is it that this Swedish quartet's songs have achieved such widespread familiarity? How did its music survive decades of changing cultural norms and artistic trends, ultimately accomplishing, as entertainment critic Elisabeth Vincentelli describes, the rare feat of uniting "European drag queens and Midwestern housewives, New York hipsters and Japanese students"?¹

In order to contend with the complexity of factors involved in ABBA's success, I first turned to the framework of media studies. In an entertainment industry saturated with competing films, shows, and songs, media scholar Henry Jenkins maintains *transmedia storytelling*—the use of multiple media platforms—as an economic imperative. From ABBA's inception in the 1970s to its contemporary revivals, the band's irresistible pop anthems have achieved a level of international staying power comparable only to that of the Beatles, due in large part to their music's multimedia presence. Emerging from an era captivated by the British Invasion and prone to "disco demolitions," the quartet's distinctive melodies and kitsch fashion managed to find a way into the narratives of movies, musicals, and drag performances alike. How does this mass, cultural co-opting contribute to ABBA's enduring fame? Further, can the band's unique business

¹ Vincentelli, Elisabeth. *ABBA Gold*. New York: Continuum, 2004. p.1

acumen—a trait responsible for its ever-expanding fandom by way of museums, tribute bands, video games, and virtual concerts—serve as a model for modern immersive music experiences?

This paper provides cultural analysis as context for the band's early reception (and rejection) by international audiences, while historical research clarifies a precedent for success borne out of the Swedish music industry. Scholarly conversations regarding ABBA's influences within and on the music industry are referenced with a focus on emerging themes and links among authors. Many of these links highlight criticism of the band's seemingly-commercial motivations, a quality that may have been essential to its lasting success.

To map a thorough and chronological explanation of my primary questions, I interpret both qualitative and quantitative data from music magazines such as *Creem* and *Melody Maker*, industry sales charts, and a variety of art and entertainment critiques. From this data emerges two distinct phases of the band's commercial success, a structure that will guide my analysis. The paper examines ABBA's commercial trajectory from its first big break in the 1974 Eurovision Contest, to the band's disappearance from the public eye in 1982, to its revivals and current wave of resurgence. I examine academic analyses of tribute bands, compilation albums, musicals, and retrospective museums as methods of cultural reproduction in order to evaluate their combined effect on ABBA's popularity.

By using these sources and methods, this thesis attempts to clarify both the particular factors that contributed to ABBA's popularity and those cultural and social sentiments that detracted from it.

I argue that the transmedia model of entertainment is the linchpin in explaining ABBA's staying power. In doing so, the thesis also attempts to determine to what degree the band's several revivals and business savvy have solidified its position in the popular music canon.

Chapter 1: What is Transmedia Storytelling?

Explaining the popularity of any modern media object is complicated, and it is daunting to trace the origins and factors of a particular fandom in a world connected by new, non-physical platforms. Such an effort is aided by the framework of contemporary media scholarship, which takes into account interactions across industry and culture. Henry Jenkins, a media scholar at the University of Southern California, provides a helpful framework that he calls transmedia storytelling:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.²

Jenkins uses the example of the *Matrix* universe to illustrate this concept. The complete *Matrix* story does not exist in any one media object, but is instead a multifaceted narrative spread across films, animated shorts, comic books, and video games. The same explanation could easily be applied to the familiar *Star Wars* franchise, whose original story continues to update and transform with new films, video games, theme parks, and toys.

In his writings, Jenkins calls this movement across media an economic imperative for modern entertainment franchises. He links it to the corporate notion of synergy and claims that “a media conglomerate has an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many

² Jenkins, Henry. “Transmedia Storytelling 101.” *The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 22 Mar. 2007, henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html. (Jenkins’ original definition can be found in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York; London: NYU Press, 2006. pp. 95-96.)

different media platforms as possible.” Indeed, today’s most powerful modern media companies profit from a similar notion of horizontal integration. Instead of perfecting just one mode of production, companies with enough capital prefer to house multiple modes under one roof. Television networks, for example, look to hold interests in development, distribution, and advertising in order to control more aspects of production, thereby cutting costs, increasing efficiency and extending their reach and viewership.

Just as Jenkins breaks down successful media franchises and cinematic universes through his framework of transmedia storytelling, it may also be worthwhile to consider an ABBA universe, containing within it the multiple creative offshoots originating from the band’s original product—its music. In the same way Jenkins explains the link between transmedia narratives and sustained franchise, perhaps we can better understand ABBA’s long-held preeminence in pop culture as a result of the music’s presence in multiple media channels. While I would personally like to think that ABBA’s long-held success can be explained solely by the artistic feat of creating iconic pop anthems, I am inclined to believe that the phenomenon also has much to do with the just-as-rare feat of attaching these songs to projects outside of the music industry.

Jenkins acknowledges the many and varied uses of a transmedia framework. Where I think this structure is most applicable to the ABBA story is in Jenkins’ fifth argument, which explains how a dynamic, multimodal presence leads to increased fan interaction by opening up a variety of delivery channels, “expand[ing] the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segments.” In this way, ABBA’s music found itself placed in a

variety of entertainment worlds, from Broadway musicals and Hollywood movies, to far-flung Australian tribute bands and internationally successful compilation albums.

Analyzing the unique characteristics of these individual projects helps in understanding ABBA's ability to reach listeners across generations. Jenkins points out that various entry points can target certain consumers based on their specific interests, offering up the example of Marvel Studios creating a romance comic in an effort to draw female readers into the Spider-Man story. To this day, ABBA's songs continue to find similar ways of reaching new audiences, whether through high-profile cover albums or holographic concert experiences. The band's managers and members have evolved, along with society, to embrace new trends, technologies, and stories through which to share their music.

A unique aspect of the ABBA phenomenon is that the band has maintained iconic status despite long periods lacking in creative output. Jenkins explains the BBC network's use of radio dramas as a means "to maintain audience interest in *Doctor Who* during almost a decade during which no new television episodes were produced." Similarly, in the decade following ABBA's breakup as a band (1982-1992), its songs somehow managed to linger in public conversations. The band's core audiences of artists and fans authored new chapters in the ABBA story, keeping its musical narrative alive. Whether the band realized it or not, a serendipitous transmedia presence began to form in response to its disappearance from the public eye. Audience-generated demand steadily increased as a result of activity in tribute bands, drag performances, and cover albums curated in the late 80s and early 90s, the years leading up to the 1992 release of the *ABBA Gold* compilation

CD. During this time, ABBA's songs became part of the LGBTQ+ lexicon by being co-opted for drag performances and Pride parades. Hundreds of thousands of tribute bands emerged from the band's touring absence, helping to solidify the band's associations with camp performances and kitsch aesthetics.

There are limitations, however, to viewing the ABBA phenomenon through a transmedia framework in that transmedia storytelling doesn't perfectly fit the ABBA franchise. Any narrative that emerges out of the music's multimedia presence is untraditional in the sense that it does not tell a linear or altogether intentional story. There is no proliferating narrative that requires fans to keep up with musicals or video games in order to understand the complete ABBA story. Although there may not be a singular ABBA fiction that emerges from its music, it is arguable that the experience of ABBA fandom is itself a sort of story, with multiple elements contributing to one comprehensive narrative.

Jenkins writes about a performative dimension typical of transmedia storytelling. Expanding a story outside of its original medium invites fans to immerse themselves more fully into that story's world. This activity often results in a feedback loop that illuminates fan interest in a particular aspect of the franchise. While the band's typical fan is likely not tracking down every ABBA spin-off in an attempt to stitch together a cohesive and complete story, the collective fan response does reflect shared points of interest. Many ABBA fans, for instance, so clearly latched on to the world depicted in the *Mamma Mia!* musical and movies, that their interest was ultimately met with even more iterations on the story. Thus, for example, an immersive theater

and dinner party show was created in *Mamma Mia! The Party*, where fans themselves actively participate in a narrative previously seen strictly on stages and screens. Just as Jenkins claims that transmedia storytelling effectively fleshes out a fictional world, all of these developments in the ABBA timeline work to expand possible narrative associations with the band's music.

Jenkins focuses mainly on storytelling across media, but he makes clear that he is “troubled by writers who want to reduce transmedia to the idea of multiple media platforms without digging more deeply into the logical relations between those media extensions.”³ Because ABBA is not simply repeating a single story or experience across multiple media, it seems to fit better within a transmedia framework than it does within the simpler idea of multimodality. It is important to note that the majority of its musical offshoots are supplementary to the main ABBA story, a characteristic that Jenkins ascribes to a typical transmedia effort. Each offers something new to the table, introducing a casual fan to the wider world of ABBA canon. This wider world refers either to the collection of ABBA-related products or to the complexity of the band's musical history. For instance, by interacting with a museum exhibition or cover album, a casual fan might discover how ABBA's history is steeped in cultural criticism or discover that the music's cheerful melodies often mask deeply sorrowful lyrics.

I will attempt not to completely reduce Jenkins' transmedia terminology to its most basic definition by taking care in imagining how these multiple media forms connect to create a larger ABBA narrative, one which remains familiar to fans with varying degrees of knowledge and

³ Jenkins, Henry. “Transmedia 202: Further Reflections.” *The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 1 Aug. 2011, henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.

fervor. Throughout this paper, I analyze these secondary projects in order to make sense of the larger ABBA phenomenon, specifically as it relates to the intensity of their popularity that has extended for far longer than most bands. It is my hope that this exploration expands the notion of transmedia storytelling rather than simply placing that label on an example of business-as-usual franchising. Because I believe the ABBA franchise to be unique in its crossover with traditional narratives, I offer its case to larger conversations regarding transmedia storytelling and convergence culture.

Chapter 2: Early Reception

The story of ABBA's rise to international superstardom in the 1970s is unique. Long before any entertainment critic attacked the band's artistic motives or before fans began demanding more tour dates, ABBA's members were each hard at work, spending years honing their talents and finding ways to sustain a career in the Swedish music industry. As musicians, Björn Ulvaeus, Benny Andersson, Agnetha Fältskog, and Anni-Frid (Frida) Lyngstad worked tirelessly on their respective careers in the years leading up to a fateful collaboration. For Andersson and Ulvaeus, this meant involvement in popular folk bands, while Lyngstad and Fältskog honed their vocal craft through competitions, cabaret performances, and recording sessions. Although each was heavily influenced by the various genres performed by popular groups like the Beatles and the Beach Boys, they all regularly performed "Schlager" songs, a German style of music characterized by catchy instrumentals and sentimental lyrics.

When Benny and Björn's folk bands crossed paths with vocalists Agnetha and Frida, the four began collaborating on songs and recording under the clunky name of "Björn & Benny, Agnetha & Frida," which would later be simplified to the "ABBA" acronym. The scope of success available to a band in Sweden was limited, however, and the quartet's most pressing goal was to land a spot on the Eurovision stage. This annual song contest was a rare opportunity for artists at the time to present music to audiences far beyond their home countries, as the contest drew the eyes of an estimated 500 million European viewers.⁴ The slow and steady efforts of ABBA's

⁴ "Music Records: CBS Records Mines Bonanza in 'Waterloo,' Eurovision Winner." *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)* 274, no. 11 (1974): 50.

members and managers finally paid off in 1974, when they won at Eurovision with a performance of their now iconic song, “Waterloo.” The band’s emotional lyrics (which compare falling in love to the famous 1815 battle wherein “Napoleon did surrender”); its glittering costumes (silver platform boots and sequined silk tops); and energetic backing instrumentation all made for a performance to remember.

This Eurovision victory was career-defining for the group. ABBA gained widespread recognition by European audiences, with “Waterloo” topping charts in the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Switzerland, and Germany. Within the year, the song also reached the Top 10 in countries beyond Europe, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and South Africa. As catchy as “Waterloo” was, however, ABBA’s arrival to the international stage did not result in immediate ubiquitous praise. The 1974 Eurovision win put ABBA on the global pop music map, but its burgeoning popularity was also met with an onslaught of harsh criticism, especially from voices in Sweden, ABBA’s home country and original fan base.

In his writings about the band, musicologist Per F. Broman attributes this early, critical reticence to the Progg movement, a largely left-wing push for anti-commercial music in Sweden. The movement, which began in the 1960s, hit its peak in 1975 when the Eurovision competition was held in Stockholm in the year following ABBA’s win. One of the key ideologies of Progg as a genre and movement insisted that music convey “a relevant political message” or otherwise have

“aims beyond pure entertainment.”⁵ This sentiment made an opponent out of ABBA and Eurovision when an alternative music festival was created in direct response to the band’s triumph at the contest and on international charts.⁶ Because of ABBA’s connection to Eurovision, Sweden was not ready to heartily support its first globally successful pop group, and the band’s costumes and lyrics only amplified the contempt. As ABBA biographer Carl Magnus Palm puts it:

The moment they decided to step into those Euroglam space suits and participate in a high-profile event dedicated to the inconsequential, their place in rock history was decided for them... Indeed, it wouldn’t be until well into the 21st century that ABBA became widely regarded as one of the all-time greats.⁷

Swedish criticism of ABBA extended into its national publications several years after the initial Eurovision pushback. A 1977 edition of Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* included a number of negative opinions about the band, one of which suggested protecting children from ABBA’s “mediocre and plain” music.⁸ In a Swedish music journal called *Tonfallet*, critic Hans Samuelsson argued that ABBA merely offered a conglomeration of other hit songs.⁹ A common theme in early criticism clearly took root in anti-commercial ideas regarding music as an art form. Even as critics voiced a worry that capitalist-driven music would manipulate the minds of young listeners, Swedish musicologist Johan Fornäs offered a perspective that vindicated the band:

ABBA fulfills needs of the mass audience—they [audiences] are not fooled into something they “really” do not want. These needs have to be criticised, or rather the

⁵ Palm, Carl Magnus. *Bright Lights, Dark Shadows: The Real Story of ABBA*. London: Omnibus Press, 2001. p. 201

⁶ Palm, p. 264

⁷ Ibid. p. 225

⁸ Domnérus, Leif. “Apropå ‘veckans företag’: Akta våra barn!” *Dagens Nyheter*, Aug. 1977: 10.

⁹ Samuelsson, Hans. “Man kan lära folk tycka om...” *Tonfallet*, (1975): 2–3.

society that causes one to not have the energy or desire to do anything other than listen to ABBA after coming home from work at night.¹⁰

Fornäs claimed that what some viewed as dangerous pop music did not oppress society at all, but was rather the *result* of an oppressive society; the music fulfilled needs not otherwise met by capitalist modes of production. Disparaging critiques, then, seem to lack an inherent joy typically associated with ABBA.

At a time when harder-edged punk and progressive album rock were gaining traction, it was decidedly uncool to have a soft spot for ABBA's inoffensive, often-celebratory music and flamboyant fashion. British musicologist Philip Tagg later referred to this criticism against ABBA's style as a "petit-bourgeois radical movement," one that carried more contempt toward the band's enthusiastic fans than the music itself.¹¹ To ABBA's defense came Swedish composers who claimed that, compared to other pop music of the time, ABBA's songs were inventive in their chord progressions and formal structures.¹² It wouldn't be until well into the band's peak popularity in the late 1970s, however, that more Swedish critics would concede to ABBA's overwhelmingly positive influence on the country's musical landscape.

Apart from the subject matter or formal structure of the music, others argue that ABBA was underappreciated in its era because of a failure to completely adapt for English-speaking audiences. This defining characteristic made for responses by a predominantly anglophone music

¹⁰ Fornäs, Johan. *Musikrorelsen: en motoffentlighet?* Goteborg: Roda bokforlaget, 1979.

¹¹ Tagg, Philip. *Fernando the Flute: Analysis of Musical Meaning in an Abba Mega-Hit*. Liverpool: U of Liverpool, 1991.

¹² Gefors, Hans, and Lars Hallna "'s. "Ni ljuger om ABBA: Musiken inte dalig." *Dagens Nyheter*. 23 Aug. 1977.

market that were very different from those directed at the Beatles and the Bee Gees. In the comments section of entertainment writer Owen Gleiberman's July 2018 *Variety* article titled "The Secret Majesty of ABBA," one fan speaks to the dual effect of the band's unapologetically-European sensibilities:

I am an Asian American growing up in Europe and I remember so well, after the 'Eurovision Contest' in 1973 [sic], ABBA was loved and appreciated by all European people. Unlike the Beatles, or the Bee Gees, ABBA sang songs not only in English, [but] also in Spanish, French, Italian and their native tongue Swedish.¹³

Indeed, Spanish versions of some of its songs helped open the market for ABBA in Latin America.¹⁴ The band even went so far as to seek pronunciation coaching for entire Spanish-language albums.

What certainly served them well in smaller international markets may have detracted from early success in the U.S. and the UK. Some critics, such as Peter Hackman, felt as though ABBA's members were unable to properly pronounce their own English lyrics, that "they [were] completely insensitive to the energetic rhythm of English language." The Swedish band's eager effort to sing in a variety of non-native languages calls into question the xenophobia that surrounds American and British assessments of the musicians' occasional semantic missteps. In still other cases, ABBA's language barrier is commented on in terms of its endearing qualities. In

¹³Gleiberman, Owen. "The Secret Majesty of ABBA: They Were the Feminine Pop Opera of Their Time." *Variety*, 27 July 2018.

¹⁴Cobo, Leila. "ABBA En Español? A Look At The Group's Mega-Successful Latin Career." *Billboard*, 10 Aug. 2018.

a 2002 interview, American singer Dionne Warwick admitted, “I watched ABBA on TV during their breakthrough. Their English wasn’t good so I thought they were adorable.”¹⁵

Regardless of how listeners perceived it, English language was an important vehicle in the band’s early stages of recognition. As Simon Frith and Peter Langley wrote in a 1977 article in *Creem* magazine,

Rock is an essentially Anglo-American enterprise, and most other countries do have their rock groups. ABBA, by entering the Eurovision Contest, made clear they weren't one of them.¹⁶

What’s more, the band collaborated primarily with Swedish musicians and in Swedish studios instead of working with prominent American or British producers.¹⁷ To the band’s credit, ABBA never eschewed its Swedish identity—a trait that, as Vincentelli points out, was likely as important to European audiences as the songs themselves. ABBA ultimately achieved ten Top 20 singles in America, one of the countries where the band was historically *least* popular, despite the early cultural hurdles.¹⁸

It is an overstatement to suggest that ABBA was universally written off by American critics. Many American music reporters, in fact, positively reviewed the band. Former *Rolling Stone* writer Tom Moon notably called ABBA’s songs “models of impeccable craft.”¹⁹ John Rockwell, the then music critic of the *New York Times*, loved ABBA and did not hesitate to profess his

¹⁵ Quoted on p. 62 in the endnotes of Per F. Broman’s “When All is Said and Done”: Swedish ABBA Reception during the 1970s and the Ideology of Pop1. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 17: 45-66. 2005.

¹⁶ Frith, Simon and Langley, Peter. “Money, Money, Money: How ABBA Won Their Waterloo,” in *Creem*, March 1977.

¹⁷ Vincentelli, p. 119

¹⁸ Vincentelli, p. 18

¹⁹ Moon, Tom. (2008). *1,000 Recordings to Hear Before You Die*. New York: Workman

enjoyment of its music. After travelling to Stockholm to meet the band, Rockwell wrote a glowing feature in a 1978 Sunday section of the *Times*. By 1983, *Rolling Stone* declared them “the best pop group of the last decade.”²⁰ In his review of ABBA’s 1982 double-disk collection (*The Singles*), Christopher Connelly finds “more infectious melodies, grabby hooks and danceable drum beats on one side of this two-disc set than in most artists’ entire catalogs.”²¹

What is undeniable about this era’s divergent critical opinions is that ABBA’s music sparked passionate responses. Broman speaks to this phenomenon in his study of the band’s reception:

I find it more fascinating that one group could trigger responses within so many discourses: art music as well as rock and alternative musics. It points toward a society that deeply cared about music, with a vital and engaging—albeit occasionally misinformed and too ideological—public sphere. The story shows that symbols are important; they connect people and create a sense of community. It also shows the danger of negative symbols: while the criticism poured over ABBA and commercial pop music, the members of ABBA just kept working, creating hit after hit.²²

As ABBA gained popularity in the late 1970s, critics and music listeners the world over had no choice but to view the band as a formidable force in the music world. What’s more, ABBA itself had to quickly adapt to this growing popularity and subsequent demand from its fans.

The band was far from traditional in its promotional efforts. Unlike their musical contemporaries, ABBA’s members were never interested in extensive touring, something commonly linked with rising popularity and album sales. As a way of combating the clamor for

²⁰ Connelly, Christopher. *Album Reviews—ABBA*. 3 February 1983. (Retrieved from the Wayback Machine digital archive. See bibliography for web link)

²¹ Ibid.

²² Broman, P. F. “When All is Said and Done”: Swedish ABBA Reception during the 1970s and the Ideology of Pop1. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 17: 45-66. 2005.

international tours, ABBA instead released music videos to air on TV specials across the globe. Swedish director Lasse Hallström produced these videos, taking care to develop a visual vocabulary that matched the band's emotive songs:

Where there was a dance beat, as in songs like “Dancing Queen” and “Voulez-Vous,” the group would be filmed in a discotheque environment. When the lyrical theme was loneliness and heartbreak, as in “The Winner Takes It All” and “When All Is Said And Done,” Agnetha or Frida would act the part of the solitary woman, whether standing all alone gazing out over a wide ocean, or being the odd one out in a group of friends.²³

In many of the clips, Hallström's dramatic camera movements often framed singers Fältskog and Lyngstad in a striking, perpendicular eyeline—if one looked directly into the camera, the other looked, in profile, across the same frame.

Any pop fan who grew up in or after the age of MTV may find it hard to conceive of a world without music videos. In the 1970s, however, few artists could match Hallström's prolific output of videos. For its time, ABBA was on the cutting edge of this multimedia tool, utilizing it both for creative expression and commercial promotion. Albeit a product of necessity, ABBA's early use of what was then a non-traditional medium hints at a larger legacy marked and extended by its multimedia presence. These promotional clips established a memorable visual language that would stick with the band for decades to come. Initially, however, ABBA used the videos simply as a way to avoid extensive traveling. TV specials that aired the clips were wildly popular in Australia, a country that was particularly eager to get a better glimpse of this mysterious band from Sweden. Instead of quelling the masses, however, these visual bread crumbs only intensified calls for widespread tour dates.

²³ “In Focus: How The ABBA Videos Were Made.” *ABBA*. abbasite.com/articles/how-the-abba-videos-were-made/.

ABBA's lack of stage presence was unprecedented for a group of its superstar status. Palm posits that this concerted avoidance of extensive touring may have actually contributed to the band's longevity. Unlike contemporary American peers like the Eagles, the Carpenters, or Fleetwood Mac, ABBA never ran into the grueling task of writing, recording, and touring, which Palm points out led many of the aforementioned bands into personal struggles and band dissolution. Because of ABBA's restraint in the touring arena, its members were "able to produce regular albums of high production values which consisted entirely of original material from the group's two songwriters."²⁴

ABBA's aversion to touring produced another counterintuitive result when a buzz began to form around its rare public appearances. When the band finally embarked on its first major European tour in 1977, the demand for live performance far exceeded the supply. The Royal Albert Hall in London reportedly received 3.5 million individual requests for its 12,000 available tickets. Those who were lucky enough to grab a seat witnessed a set in which the band played twenty-five songs, some of which were showcased with a mini-musical called "Girl with the Golden Hair." Although the musical was met with tepid critical reviews, ABBA's creative experimentation perhaps foreshadows what was to come from the band in terms of inventive transmedia storytelling.

²⁴ Palm, 301

Out of these early efforts appeared the foundations of an ABBA narrative that would continue to spread in the years and decades following the band's initial period of fame. Clear visual components emerged from television specials and music videos—a style that embraced melodrama and camp as a means of expressing the triumphantly-melancholic emotion in their songs. In some critics' minds, this music filled a void created by capitalism, thus responding to oppressive societal structures as opposed to aggravating them. ABBA's music, then, offered an escape and a means of expressing deep emotion that living in a capitalistic society did not. It is clear that the story resonated with listeners and viewers during the band's first phase of popularity, but how is it that it lingered in the minds of fans, even after the band faded away from the spotlight?

Chapter 3: Staying Relevant

In its first eight years of global fame, ABBA created a body of work rich in emotional and visual language. But in 1982 the band broke up and faded away from the entertainment limelight that propelled them to superstar status. It was decidedly uncool to like ABBA when they were the biggest pop stars in the world, but the tone of critics and casual listeners would start to change when the quartet removed itself from the international pop landscape. While the musicians themselves quietly stepped away from the spotlight, the songs they created as ABBA took on a life of their own, due in large part to their being co-opted by fellow artists and performers during the next decade.

Perhaps more important than critical analyses from the late 1970s and early 1980s was the large contingency of fellow musicians who began to publicly recognize a superior craft found in ABBA's music. In 1992, band members Andersson and Ulvaeus joined U2 onstage in Stockholm for a cover of "Dancing Queen;" the song was also added to the setlist during all other dates in the Irish band's *Zoo TV* world tour. Long before U2 adopted the song, a young Elvis Costello incorporated a "Dancing Queen" inspired piano riff in his 1979 song "Oliver's Army." He went on to quote entire lines from the song in 2002's "When I Was Cruel No. 2." The Munich Symphony Orchestra followed suit in 1992 when it put out an entire album of ABBA covers, which managed to sell 130,000 copies.²⁵ It is telling that many artists and producers who have

²⁵ Davis, Adam. *Billboard*. 27 June 1992.

covered the band's music have made the same observation: ABBA's presumably lightweight pop proves to be incredibly intricate when one tries to recreate it.

In time, ABBA became a popular band within another important artistic sect—that which is produced and vetted by the LGBTQ+ community. Vincentelli claims that ABBA's revival in the late 1990s was not only anticipated but also spearheaded by the gay community.²⁶ ABBA biographer Carl Magnus Palm agrees, stating that “it is an undisputed fact that this was where the ABBA revival experienced its underground beginning in the late Eighties.”²⁷ At a time when ABBA seemed to be losing mainstream relevance, the group's camp aesthetics were appreciated more than ever in queer spaces. The band members' personas and fashion choices aid in understanding them as gay icons, though such connections are often drawn with stereotypes.

Hedonistic nightclubbing, kitschy fashion and tragic movie stars like Judy Garland or diva-like singers like Barbra Streisand were already staples on the clichéd list of gay interests. Now ABBA were suddenly absorbed into this culture, a most natural process since the group's attraction contained a little of all these elements.²⁸

Although most of ABBA's music was composed by two straight men, the artistic product flew in the face of traditional masculine norms, embodying dance and unrestrained enthusiasm. ABBA's costumes were often heavily sequined and the band's stage show emphasized the women in the group. More importantly, perhaps, was the fact that ABBA's music exemplified escapism—a powerful tool for anyone whose identity limits access to sufficient support networks.

²⁶ Vincentelli, p. 43

²⁷ Palm, p. 508

²⁸ Palm, p. 508

Vincentelli suggests that the UK band Erasure “put a face on ABBA’s gay following” when its July 1992 four-track ABBA tribute EP, *Abba-esque*, peaked at number one on UK charts.²⁹ Erasure’s successful cover album kick-started an ABBA revival, the seeds of which had been planted by other popular musicians and tribute band performances in previous years.

In 1991, the same year as Nirvana’s *Nevermind* release, Kurt Cobain asked Australian ABBA cover band, Björn Again, to open for Nirvana at the Reading Festival in the UK. Cobain’s own struggles with reconciling art and commercial success perhaps explain his admiration of ABBA, a group that seemed to bridge that gap with relative ease. A *Melody Maker* music reporter’s account of Nirvana’s Reading Festival show mirrors ABBA’s earliest gloomy critics:

Which brings us to Björn Again who are a total contrivance. A straw poll halfway down the field reveals several irked souls who feel like this is a party to which they haven’t been invited. “They’re a fucking disgrace” says Dan from Windsor. A few yards away though, a girl who can only have caught some of the original ABBA in the womb, is kicking up mud and singing every word of “SOS.” Gradually the crowd’s collective cool is discarded.³⁰

One key element to the tribute band insurgency, especially one embraced by popular musicians at the time, was that it introduced a new generation to the music. After ABBA’s members removed themselves from the pop culture scene, their most ardent fans took it upon themselves to share the band’s musical catalogue in new ways.

Björn Again, a rare, commercially successful cover band, paved the way for an onslaught of similar acts. Only four ABBA tribute bands existed prior to 1992: Björn Again (Australia),

²⁹ Vincentelli. p. 22

³⁰ *Melody Maker* 1992: 31

ABBA UK, Voulez Vous (UK), and ABBA Alive (Germany). However, the number of eventually grew to more than 100 groups in the UK alone.³¹ In his writings on the tribute band phenomenon, cultural studies researcher John Neil asserts a supplementary function offered by such a unique musical outgrowth. It is rare for a band to tour in places like Australia, for instance, and when they do, the cost is often prohibitive to travel beyond a few venues. In this way, a tribute band offers a supplementary experience of the “real band,” instead of operating on purely nostalgic levels. For a band like ABBA, which toured for a total of five years, this idea would explain its popularity in the tribute and cover band realm. ABBA’s split and subsequent absence from stages around the world fueled a need to produce performances, just as early attempts to avoid touring resulted in the need to provide television specials to global audiences.

Despite its proxied presence on tribute stages, there were critics who still believed that ABBA’s inclusion in cultural conversations would soon fade—and perhaps for good reason. After all, the band hadn’t released music in more than a decade and there was no foreseeable reunion on the horizon. Speaking about a tribute band’s function as a historical act, Björn Again co-founder Rod Leissle admits to thinking early on that a tribute band “had to be Elvis, the Beatles, or ABBA, because you know they would not reform.”³² Despite ABBA’s resonance in the artistic world, journalist and author Håkan Lahger voiced a commonly-held belief that the band was on its way out:

³¹ Neil, John. “The Music Goes on and on...and on -- popular music’s affective franchise.” in *Access All Eras: Tribute Bands and Global Pop Culture*, edited by Shane Homan, pg 85. Open University Press. London, 2006.

³² Leissle, Rod. Interviewed by John Neil, 2004. In *Access All Eras*, pg 85.

ABBA were actually considered a bit passe at that time [the early '90s], no one cared about them. Björn and Benny were involved in other things, and neither they nor anyone else believed ABBA has much glitter left.³³

Even The Official International ABBA Fan Club's website remarks that its own formation in 1986 came about despite all odds:

If there ever was a time when not to start an ABBA fan club, 1986 was that year. The fans had finally started to accept that the band would never get together again, the ABBA Magazine had ceased to exist, and most fan clubs had already closed down or were about to. Worst of all, when the much awaited live album was finally released, it failed to chart at all in most countries and was not even released in the UK. Just a few years earlier, it would have topped the charts all over the world.³⁴

This dejected outlook, however, underestimated the impact of lingering ABBA-related activity coming out of the previous decade. As Vincentelli points out, "ABBA's popularity had not evaporated in the '80s, but simply gone underground."³⁵ The growing ABBA mania was described best by Rick Dobbis, who was the president of the PolyGram Label Group in 1992. Recognizing a shift from early resentment to seemingly-unanimous celebration of the band, he stated: "With ABBA, the timing really is excellent because of the building interest in this music and this era. Enough time has passed that it's no longer uncool."³⁶ The coming success of PolyGram's *ABBA GOLD* compilation album release is a testament to just how ready the public was for the band's resurgence.

³³ Quoted in Lahger, Håkan. "ABBA Sold" in *Scanorama*, April 2000. Retrieved via Vincentelli's *ABBA: Gold*.

³⁴ "The History of the Fan Club." *International ABBA Fan Club: About Us*, www.abbafanclub.nl/about_us/history.php.

³⁵ Vincentelli, p. 21

³⁶ Duffy, T. (1993) "PLG finds 'Gold' in ABBA's vault." *Billboard*, 105 (40): 8.

At the same time people were predicting ABBA would disappear from music memory, the digital compact disc was growing in popularity as a means of musical distribution. This commercial trend enabled “best-of” compilation albums which served to introduce new listeners to the music of previous generations. ABBA’s own greatest hits compilation, *ABBA Gold*, highlights this modern-meets-nostalgic trend and its effect on facilitating society’s refamiliarization with back-catalogue songs. *Gold* sold over 5 million copies outside of the U.S. in its first year of release, and has since become the band’s highest selling album, with an estimated 25 million copies sold worldwide.³⁷ The CD contains ten of the band’s Top 20 U.S. singles and acts as a key reference point for longtime fans; above all, it serves as a primer for its newest listeners.

The success of *Gold* is due in large part to the critical mass of ABBA-related interest in the years and months leading up to its release in 1992. Notably, the album’s sales were significantly higher in the towns where Björn Again toured.³⁸ Because of this widespread embrace, *ABBA Gold* “single-handedly retooled the band’s image and symbolized the moment when it became acceptable to take ABBA seriously.”³⁹ By compiling ABBA’s best tunes into one wildly popular CD, a new contingency of fans came to recognize recurring themes in the songs. For an increasing number of listeners, ABBA’s often-sorrowful lyrics became just as memorable as its catchy melodies. More than just danceable pop, these songs often approached melancholic subject matter. Vincentelli recognizes the band’s feat in her description of its hit song about divorce:

³⁷ Vincentelli, p. 9

³⁸ Leissle, Rod. Interviewed by John Neil, 2004. In *Access All Eras*, pg 91.

³⁹ Vincentelli, p. 27

“Knowing Me, Knowing You” takes takes sadness and loss very seriously. Pop is usually associated with teen angst but this song deals with adult emotions. It hits as hard as anything by critics’ favorites like, say, Lucinda Williams. But it gives the listener the frisson of immediately accessible pop music that eschews self-pity even as the lyrics sink into pits of despondency.⁴⁰

The tune of critics had now shifted widely in ABBA’s favor. Notably, by the time *Gold* was released, the band had become as celebrated in Sweden as it had anywhere else. Not surprisingly, the majority of ABBA tribute bands entered the picture after the band’s compilation album took off. In the years directly following *Gold*’s release, several newly emerging tribute bands reference the CD in their titles: ABBA Gold and Real ABBA Gold (both from the UK), and ABBA Gold (New Zealand), to name a few. As Neil analyzes, this popularity is in part an effect “of the tribute band phenomenon and the widespread ‘perpetual present’ that ABBA tributes maintain along with the ‘present market’ they contribute to forming.”⁴¹ Even the International ABBA Fan Club took off when it began to receive thousands of inquiries about the band after the club’s address was included in the compilation album’s booklet notes.

Gold played a significant part in cementing ABBA’s tunes as classics, and listeners in the ‘90s were more willing than ever to label them as such. Despite the band’s split, the music lingered in international culture not only through the proliferation of tribute bands and fan clubs, but also by its being adopted by the LGBTQ+ community. Just as ABBA struck a chord with audiences in its active years, the songs and aesthetics remained in the minds and hearts of fans and artists in the ‘80s and ‘90s. This mass cultural co-opting of ABBA’s music made it ripe for revival by

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 46

⁴¹ Neil, John. p. 91

keeping the melodies and stories in the minds of loyal fans, marginalized communities, and new generations of listeners. Because of the music's transmedia presence, the world was ready for more from the band.

Chapter 4: Mamma Mia!

If tribute bands and cover albums set up *ABBA Gold* for success, the compilation album's own commercial reception did the same for the next big development in the ABBA universe. After dabbling in the theatre world with the musical *Chess* in 1984, band members Andersson and Ulvaeus teamed up with producer Phyllida Lloyd and playwright Catherine Johnson to form an entirely new story using ABBA songs. The result was *Mamma Mia!*, a feel-good jukebox musical about a young woman who invites three of her mother's former lovers to her wedding in hopes of determining which one of them is her father. In the same way *ABBA Gold* offered a compilation of the band's essential verses and melodies, the *Mamma Mia!* musical served as its own concerted collection of ABBA tunes. This time, the project did not simply repackage the songs, but rather took care to weave them into a memorable storyline.

With *Gold* ushering in a renewed ABBA craze in the mid-90s and introducing younger generations to the band's catalogue, it is no surprise that *Mamma Mia!* was a huge success. The year 1999 marked the height of publicity buzz for the West End opening of the musical in London. Since then, more than 65 million people around the world have seen the stage show.⁴² The story has been performed by theatrical casts in more than fifty productions and in sixteen languages. These impressive figures come from the website of Judy Craymer, the show's original producer. *Mamma Mia!*'s global success led to a film adaptation created by Craymer,

⁴² Craymer, Judy. "Press Centre | Facts & Figures." Judy Craymer, Borkowski PR, www.judycraymer.com/press-centre/facts-and-figures.php.

along with writer Catherine Johnson and director Phyllida Lloyd—the same all-female team behind the stage show.

The creative team’s decision to adapt their stage musical for the silver screen fell in line with a contemporary cinema trend to move from stage to screen or vice versa, indicating “the importance of cross-media flow.”⁴³ This trend reflects Henry Jenkins’ assertion that media makers benefit from expanding franchises across as many different media platforms as possible. Similar to the dispersive nature of transmedia storytelling, the story’s movement from stage to screen created new aspects of both the ABBA and *Mamma Mia!* fictions. For one, the story was now connected to major Hollywood stars Meryl Streep and Pierce Brosnan. Visual associations to the Greek island of Skopelos also strengthened its appeal, as much of the movie was filmed on location.

In these ways, *Mamma Mia! The Movie* offers an experience that is unique yet closely related to that of the musical; if it didn’t have both of these qualities, the movie-going public would have little to no reason to purchase a ticket. Proof of the franchise’s successful transmedia presence lies in the film’s record-breaking commercial success in 2008. In the UK, *Mamma Mia!* became the highest grossing film ever screened in the country up to that date.⁴⁴ It also became the number one musical film of all time in 44 countries, including Germany, Spain, Sweden, Australia and Korea.

⁴³ Fitzgerald, Louise and Williams, Melanie. *Mamma Mia! The Movie: Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon*. I.B.Tauris, London. 2013. p. 5

⁴⁴ Anon. “Mamma Mia! rules UK,” *Screen International*, 19 December 2008, p. 5.

This level of international box office success was unprecedented for a film with a heartfelt mother-daughter storyline. While most major contemporary films banked on appealing to a young, male demographic, *Mamma Mia!* spoke directly to a “perpetually overlooked female audience.”⁴⁵ Moreover, it emphasized the desires and conflicts experienced by the story’s oldest female characters, in sharp contrast to a typical “chick-flick.”

In her writings on the stage show, music scholar Naomi Graber describes how *Mamma Mia!* was a natural fit for theatre audiences for this very reason. In the early 2000s, 62.6 percent of Broadway audience members were women.⁴⁶ In the 2001–2002 season, 68.5 percent of audience members were over the age of 35.⁴⁷ While the success of the stage version of *Mamma Mia!* may come as no surprise, Jenkins reminds us that transmedia franchises are unique in that they offer entry points for audiences of diverse interests and demographics. By taking on the more male-dominated cinema box offices, the story presented itself in a medium with which male audiences were more comfortable. This is evident in many film reviews which depict skeptical male audience members eventually dancing and singing along with the rest of the crowd.

The *Mamma Mia!* project is yet another example of a creative offshoot that worked to extend the ABBA narrative beyond its original scope and to new audiences, both building on and adding meaning to the music. New narrative associations with ABBA songs resulted from the participatory feedback loop Jenkins describes in his writings on transmedia storytelling.

⁴⁵ Fitzgerald, Williams, p. 4

⁴⁶ Graber, Naomi. “Memories that remain: *Mamma Mia!* and the disruptive potential of nostalgia.” *Studies in Musical Theatre*. 9: 2, p. 190. 2015.

⁴⁷ Hauser, K. (2013), *Who Goes to Broadway?: The Demographics of the Broadway Audience: 2012–2013*, New York: The Broadway League. pp 18–23

Transmedia projects, he claims, often respond directly to audience reception in a way that influences future iterations of the story. Transcending the songs' original meanings, the *Mamma Mia!* story has been celebrated for its writers' chosen feminist themes; the musical honors female friendship, questions the necessity of marriage, and never shames its characters' promiscuity. Many analyses note the film's "distinctive politics of representation and the fact that it gave significant narrative space to characters more frequently marginalized in mainstream cinema."⁴⁸

The reconfiguration of ABBA's music into feminist statements is not unique to the *Mamma Mia!* franchise, however. The 1994 Australian film, *Muriel's Wedding*, utilized the band's aesthetics and songs to convey a wedding-obsessed young woman's emotional journey to finding self-love. In *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, a film from the same year and country, ABBA's music and kitsch fashion help tell a celebratory story about a group of drag queen characters and their often-stigmatized identities. As a result of these projects, ABBA would continue to be tied to progressive social movements in later years.

While *Mamma Mia!* presents the band's songs alongside fresh, even political subject matter, it also reflects familiar emotional truths found in the original ABBA catalogue. The emotional beats that distinguish the *Mamma Mia!* storyline—a combination of interpersonal turmoil, melancholic reflection, and unbridled fun—mirror the unique emotional complexity found in ABBA's songs. Critical reception of the musical even contains language strikingly similar to the way most people describe ABBA songs. Both the stage and film versions have been described as

⁴⁸ FitzGerald, Williams, p. 2

“feel good frivolity,” and as “uninhibited, fun, [and] cheesy.” The critical consensus seems to be that the storyline is a manifestation of pure celebration, as its characters use song and dance to triumph over difficult circumstances and emotional lows. The success of the musical and its film adaptation is often attributed to a desire for uplifting and escapist entertainment amidst difficult social and political realities. In the same vein, however, harsher critics fault productions for being schmaltzy, awkward, and excessive. The film and stage show, like ABBA’s music, elicit polarizing yet passionate responses. One review of the 2008 movie went so far as to claim that “no film has ever had a more irrelevant story.”⁴⁹

The commercial success of the *Mamma Mia!* franchise nevertheless kept the sounds and emotions of ABBA music in people’s minds, in their headphones, and on sales charts. Notably, in the week following the film’s release in 2008, *ABBA Gold* climbed again to the top spot in catalogue album charts. While each of ABBA’s transmedia offshoots demonstrates the power of story to further cement music and visuals into the minds of audience members, *Mamma Mia!* certainly made a significant contribution in that regard. For ABBA fans and casual listeners alike, the band’s music is inextricably tied to this franchise. At the end of each stage show, it is tradition that cast members invite audiences to join in dance and song for a final performance of “Dancing Queen.” This philosophy of participatory joy and celebration would serve as the basis for many more ABBA-related transmedia projects in the following years.

⁴⁹ Bradshaw, Peter. “Super Pooper,” *Guardian* (Film and Music), 11 July 2008, P. 7

Chapter 5: The Story Goes On

ABBA's transmedia universe has continued to expand rapidly during the past decade, and the commercial market for similar content shows no signs of letting up. Characteristic of the transmedia franchises described by Henry Jenkins, the ABBA story is now not only spread across films, musicals, and compilation albums, but also has found its way into projects unprecedented for a band.

Inspired by audiences' joyful reactions to *Mamma Mia!*, Björn Ulvaeus dreamed up an entirely new entertainment experience based loosely around the musical's setting and storyline. If people were already dancing in the aisles of theatre performances and film screenings, what type of event could cater even more to an ABBA-induced celebration? Ulvaeus's answer came in the form of a dinner theater production called *Mamma Mia! The Party*, which offers guests "an immersive theatrical performance, a sit-down meal, and the opportunity to dance to ABBA music after the show."⁵⁰ Guests are welcomed to a *Mamma Mia!* themed party at a fictional Greek taverna owned by "Niko," who decided to capitalize on his town's tourist influx after the movie's film crew packed up and left. Performers move freely around a courtyard set filled with olive trees and fountains, and interact with guests as they enjoy a three-course Mediterranean meal. Along with the ABBA hits that score the original musical, Niko's storyline incorporates some of the band's lesser known songs. The Party's first iteration opened in January of 2016 in

⁵⁰ "FAQ." *MAMMA MIA! THE PARTY*, www.mammamiatheparty.com/gb/en/faq/.

Stockholm, but after its third sold-out year the show is now set to appear throughout the late summer and fall of 2019 at The O2 arena in London.

Mamma Mia! The Party is an inventive entertainment experience with basic elements that fall in line with the tenets of transmedia storytelling. It responds directly to audience reception of both ABBA's songs and the *Mamma Mia!* story, and as a result of this feedback loop, it offers a new medium in which fans can further immerse themselves in an ever-growing ABBA narrative. In the same way that Disney theme parks allow visitors to surround themselves with the stories they see on screen, *Mamma Mia! The Party* offers a participatory experience for the band's most enthusiastic fans.

An upcoming virtual reunion tour is yet another production that will insert participants directly into an ABBA narrative. Unlike previous projects, which were rooted in ABBA-inspired fictions, the story being told this time is a historical one. The tour will feature holographic projections (ABBAatars) of Frida, Björn, Benny, and Agnetha as they would have appeared at the height of their early fame in the late 1970s. Vocal tracks will be lifted from the band's 1977 Australia tour and accompanied by live instrumental backing. With an expected release date of late 2019, the show is being billed as a chance to experience an on-stage performance from the band, an opportunity that was rare even in ABBA's late 1970s heyday. This new virtual tour offers a supplementary experience for today's fans in the same way the band supplemented its lack of stage presence in the first phase of its career with television specials and music videos. The avatar tour effectively marries the past with the present, promising to stage a show steeped in

1970s glory made possible by cutting-edge performance technology. Fans will get a glimpse of ABBA's peak performing years while band members can continue to enjoy life without a grueling touring schedule. As Benny Andersson remarked: "It's perfect. We can be on stage while I'm home walking the dogs."⁵¹

While a virtual tour allows the band to keep its distance from the realities of a physical tour, ABBA's members are as embedded in the creative process as they've been in decades. Alongside news of the ABBA^{tar} tour in late 2018, the band announced that it had recorded two new songs. Set to be released later this year, "I Still Have Faith in You" and "Don't Shut Me Down" will give the public its first listen of new ABBA songs since the band parted ways in 1982.

In the years leading up to this monumental announcement, ABBA's original catalogue of songs was given new life in the form of contemporary soundtrack and cover albums. 2018's *Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again* film sequel was a massive success at the box office, raking in \$466 million and going on to become the fastest-selling DVD ever in the UK. An accompanying soundtrack album, featuring reworked songs from ABBA's oeuvre, reached the number one iTunes position in over 40 markets.⁵² The *Mamma Mia: Here We Go Again* CD included performances by Cher, the legendary "Goddess of Pop," who joined the franchise's star-studded cast for the 2018 sequel film and capitalized on its success.

⁵¹ Adams, Cameron. "Thank Him for the Music." *The Courier Mail*, 28 September 2017. (Originally quoted in a 2017 report by Australia's *Herald Sun* newspaper).

⁵² Craymer, Judy. "Press Centre | Facts & Figures."

Cher went on to release her own set of ABBA covers in an album called *Dancing Queen*. She didn't hesitate to tap into the prosperous pool of ABBA nostalgia, as evidenced by the album's visual components. Her "SOS" music video directly quotes ABBA's iconic imagery, as soft glow filters and exaggerated camera movements evoke the melodrama of Lasse Hallström's original version produced in 1975. In Cher's reimagining, an all-female cast takes turns looking dramatically into and away from the camera (as Frida and Agnetha did in early ABBA videos), indicating a tragic, damaged relationship. But the 2018 video transforms a song about romantic heartbreak into a call for solidarity among women. Just as Catherine Johnson gave new meaning to ABBA's music with *Mamma Mia!*, so too does Cher reimagine "SOS" as a feminist anthem.

Cher is currently performing "SOS" along with ABBA classics "Waterloo" and "Fernando" to hundreds of thousands of fans as an integral part of her 2018-2019 "Here We Go Again" concert tour. ABBA's imagery and lyrics live on in both modern and nostalgic senses, much to the enjoyment of those who interpret and embrace them. In fact, *Dancing Queen* became Cher's first number one album on U.S. sales charts.⁵³ With a second cover album in the works (*Dancing Queen II*), there are no indications that this capitalization and proliferation of ABBA's music, Cher included, will let up any time soon.

Cover albums, dinner parties, and hologram tours barely begin to scratch the surface of modern ABBA spin-offs. Perhaps there is no better place to contextualize this growing number of ABBA-related projects than ABBAWORLD, a touring museum project developed to honor the

⁵³ Caulfield, Keith. "Cher Ties Solo-Career-Best Rank on Billboard 200 as 'Dancing Queen' Debuts at No. 3." *Billboard*, 7 Oct. 2018.

career and achievements of the Swedish quartet. Following the success of *Mamma Mia!*, the project set out on a global tour in 2010 before settling in its now permanent iteration, ABBA The Museum, located in Stockholm where the ABBA story was born.

The museum now works to preserve and present the band's history to avid fans in one location, and its curators make significant efforts to engage a diverse and widespread set of attendees. In a 2011 study on the touring ABBAWORLD exhibition in Sydney, Australia, communication studies professor Gaëlle Crenn observes how a pop culture museum achieves this feat:

Blockbuster exhibitions are of high interest to the cultural industries because they attract large audiences and enhance the fidelity of the products on display. The exhibitions attract fans, users of the products (from movies and comics to videogames), and families sharing intergenerational knowledge and interest in the subject. The museum is a new social interface for cultural industries: a place where mass cultural production can be exposed, legitimized and appropriated by audiences (including possibly new museum-goers) in the social sphere.⁵⁴

Today the permanent museum bridges experiences for generations of ABBA fans through a series of interactive exhibits that allow for collective physical and emotional participation from visitors, who are invited to perform on a stage as the fifth ABBA member and to record and save their own vocal tracks to the band's biggest hits. These activities mirror familiar karaoke and TV show formats, ensuring that users feel comfortable while participating.

⁵⁴ Crenn, Gaëlle. "Negotiating the Values of Popular Music in the Museum: Curatorial Process and Exhibition Narratives in the ABBAWORLD Exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney." *Popular Music History*, vol. 10, no. 2, May 2015. p. 140

Crenn's interviews with visitors at the Sydney ABBAWORLD exhibit reveal many of the same joyful reactions associated with ABBA's previous creative projects and the permanent museum today:

Visitors [...] acknowledged the power of the exhibition to make you 'simply feel happy,' to recall strong memories, and to provide pleasure through sharing fun activities: singing, dancing, etc. The museum insisted on pop music's ability to support and encourage individual or collective identification.⁵⁵

These responses reflect various understandings about how pop culture functions in society, either as a shared celebration or as personal liberation from oppressive social norms. For some, ABBA's music offers joyful public consensus, but it also allows individuals and groups to express counter-culture views as a means of resistance.

Crenn describes the Sydney exhibition as an extension of a "multi-mediatization strategy" conducted by ABBA's historical producers. True to Jenkins' ideal transmedia project, ABBAWORLD "appeared as a means to acculturate new museum goers (ABBA fans) to the museum and to symmetrically develop the acculturation of museum visitors to new cultural industry products." At the same time the museum's travelling tour began in 2010, for example, the official ABBA website announced the launch of a brand new ABBA sing-along mobile app. In this way, the exhibition provided on-the-go pathways for deeper audience immersion outside of a fixed museum experience.

While the band's projects work together to forge avenues for deeper engagement and commercial activity, it is important to recognize that ABBA's successful transmedia effort was

⁵⁵ Crenn, p. 150

not a premeditated master plan to gain fame or fortune. Björn Ulvaeus himself has said that each project he was involved with was simply born out of “a wish to experiment.”⁵⁶ In fact, the band reportedly turned down a billion dollar deal to reunite and tour in 2000. With that in mind, the transmedia framework that surrounds ABBA’s afterlife is a lesson for contemporary artists on how to reach a larger, more diverse audience—one that includes fans outside of any intended or perceived demographic. This may seem at odds with purely artistic sensibilities, but the relationship between art and commerce directly impacts artistic survival. With ABBA as the example, the two seemingly disparate camps have worked well together to keep one band’s music alive for more than 40 years.

In many ways, ABBA the Museum effectively links the band’s earliest history to its most recent revivals. Crenn’s study of the Sydney exhibition describes a museum’s unique ability to visualize ABBA’s musical legacy and reinscribe it as a story worth transmitting:

Various media and different cultural forms—from best-of albums to a musical and an exhibition—enhance ABBA’s cultural legitimation and ensure the widespread diffusion of the music. This massive diffusion strengthens the place of ABBA in the common cultural pot, transforming it into an essential classic.⁵⁷

Such a project wouldn’t be possible, however, without the vast pool of media products that populate the ABBA universe. Nintendo’s ABBA: You Can Dance video game, Sweden’s A*Teens cover band, a French jukebox musical for children called *Abbacadabra*, and a Facebook meme page with 25,000 likes called “take a chance on memes”—these are just a few

⁵⁶ Ulvaeus, Björn. Personal interview. 13 March, 2019.

⁵⁷ Crenn. pp. 140-141

of the ABBA byproducts not examined in this paper. The question then becomes: How have these various media offshoots served to prolong the band's popularity?

The most compelling argument that Jenkins defines applies well to the ABBA case:

Transmedia storytelling practices may expand the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segments. [...] the strategy may work to draw viewers who are comfortable in a particular medium to experiment with alternative media platforms.⁵⁸

Transmedia storytelling, by its nature of working across media and ignoring the need for having just one target demographic, offers more entry points to audiences who would have otherwise never connected with a given story. The resulting participatory nature of ABBA's transmedia approach encourages fans to take an active role in keeping the band's music alive. Even today, the International ABBA Fan Club, which publishes four magazines a year to a membership base of thousands, hosts an annual International ABBA Day with dance parties, speakers, and trivia.

The loyal behavior of ABBA's most avid fans is not the most interesting outcome of its transmedia effect, however. Around the world, ABBA's music is the backdrop of social gatherings for all age groups who have had varying exposure to the band. In Los Angeles bars, for example, twenty-somethings host regular ABBA nights, where the group's songs are reworked and paired for disco celebrations; partygoers are encouraged to dress in gaudy, '70s style clothing and to embrace the joy and emotions of the music and lyrics. Thousands of miles across the Pacific Ocean from Los Angeles, ABBA remains a similar impetus for community gatherings in Australia. An annual ABBA Festival in Trundle, Australia, draws crowds of five

⁵⁸ Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101"

thousand visitors annually. During the town's current drought-related economic hardship, the festival has injected \$1.3 million into Trundle's economy.⁵⁹ The country's own tribute act, Björn Again, headlined at the 2019 festival, demonstrating the cyclical nature of using ABBA's music, which emerged decades ago, to continually uplift people in new ways.

⁵⁹ Jurd, Taylor. Western Magazine. 2 April 2019.

Conclusion

While ABBA seemingly experienced a fairytale rise to international success, the progression was in fact rooted in years of dedicated songwriting development. The band's unconventional attitude toward fame appeared at first as if it would hold them back from global stardom. ABBA's lyrics were met with harsh critique by the left-wing progressive art movement, which perceived the songs' apolitical narratives as commercially motivated. Criticism toward ABBA was further exacerbated by a language barrier, the band's refusal to tour extensively, and its kitschy costumes.

On the surface, all of these factors should have spelled doom for a band competing in the global music market at a time when progressivism was heralded as the only true art. Surprisingly, then, it was ABBA's Swedish sensibility and limited stage presence that created an air of mystery, leaving fans across the world wanting more. Their use of languages apart from English and their native Swedish helped ABBA stand out in the eyes of international audiences. Lasse Hallström's promotional videos created a camp yet emotionally-earnest visual brand that would work its way into later projects and become part of ABBA's extended legacy. The band's initial years of international success were filled with the first signs of inventive marketing techniques and creative choices. Promotional efforts such as early TV spots were only the beginning of the band's use of alternative media to satiate demand from fans across the globe. When it did tour, the band was inclined to incorporate narrative elements as a way of engaging audiences with the songs, a creative instinct that would be used again in later transmedia projects.

Out of curiosity, a desire to experiment, and with the help of other musicians and receptive audiences around the world, ABBA developed its own horizontally-integrated production house that transformed a limited career trajectory in the 1970s into a global phenomenon in the 21st century. The result is a rare level of commercial success by any market's standards, achieved in part by collaborating with creative talents—screenwriters, software engineers, and museum curators—all well outside of the band's original wheelhouse. ABBA's approach, then, offers a compelling case to work beyond one's artistic comfort zone. Theirs is a lesson for fellow musicians, and for anyone with a story to tell.

Indeed, studying the trajectory of ABBA's music brings up further room for exploration and more complex questions than easy answers. For instance, many of the band's transmedia offshoots were created in response to its members' aversion to the typical trajectory of a musical career. ABBA's limited stage presence rarefied opportunities for fans to experience the band's music live and in person. This fueled offshoot tribute bands and numerous, supplemental ABBA-related spin-off entertainment, perhaps reflecting basic theories of supply and demand. As a result, ABBA's music is not so much linked to the musicians themselves, but rather to the stories created in response to their music.

After the band broke up in 1982, new individuals and groups used ABBA's songs as a means of expressing themselves in response to oppressive societal conventions. Although ABBA was originally criticized for being politically neutral, it is ironic that as time has passed people have

recontextualized the group's lyrics to express views on timely issues such as feminism and sexuality. Such responses were made possible by the remarkable narrative progression of ABBA's music—stories first told in three-minute songs were next woven into a stage show and adapted into a feature-length screenplay, which then evolved into an immersive, live-action event, and so on. Jenkins defines this transmedic, “world-making” storytelling strategy as

...the process of designing a fictional universe that will sustain franchise development, one that is sufficiently detailed to enable many different stories to emerge but coherent enough so that each story feels like it fits with the others.⁶⁰

Each story in the ABBA universe, though woven together by individuals in different settings, seems cut from a shared cloth of uncynical joy and acceptance. ABBA's embrace of what some deem as camp sensibilities never compromised the quality of its music. In fact, the band took theatrics quite seriously. “Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment,” wrote Susan Sontag in her 1964 essay, *Notes on Camp*. Prefiguring ABBA's balancing act of irony and earnestness, Sontag continues:

Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of “character.” . . . Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as “a camp,” they're enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.⁶¹

Nowhere was ABBA more successful and popular than in the LGBTQ+ community, which understood this notion that artifice can convey suffering with as much poignance as subtler artistic approaches.

⁶⁰ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York; London: NYU Press, 2006. p. 294

⁶¹ Sontag, Susan. *Notes on Camp*

As Per F. Broman pointed out, ABBA's music caused intense and varied reactions from diverse audiences over the years—so much so that it is nearly impossible to land on one single answer to how transmedia continues to permeate the band's discography and amplify its long-held popularity. Regardless of anyone's best guess, ABBA's heritage and business acumen continue to be remarked and reinscribed into the popular entertainment marketplace through the activity of band members, fellow musicians, and fans alike. The collaborative effort both capitalizes on and sustains the popularity of the Swedish band and serves to keep its music alive and in the minds of people of different tastes, cultures, and generations. The success of ABBA's projects indicates a public consensus that, now more than ever, delights in embracing the moody lyrics, sweeping melodies, and camp aesthetics of the band.

What a study of any of these academic surmisings cannot capture is the delicate and elusive essence of what ABBA's music offers—a brilliant combination of happiness with melancholy, romance with heartache, joy with sorrow—all relatable feelings and experiences set to bold, victorious melodies. So many ABBA songs, by combining sorrowful lyrics with bright instrumentation, allow listeners “to think of misery as something that can be alleviated through the joy of creation.”⁶² As long as the world is at times difficult to live in, there will remain a need for this type of artistic response, one intended for pure enjoyment rather than explicitly political purposes. ABBA's music is a timeless reminder to embrace dark feelings and daunting circumstances as parts of life, and to dance alongside them. After all, as is asked in every production of *Mamma Mia!*, “without song and dance what are we?”

⁶² Vincentelli, p. 46

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Biography

Anna Christian is a senior undergraduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, where she studied in both the Plan II Honors program (College of Liberal Arts) and the Radio-Television-Film department (Moody College of Communication). During her time at UT, Anna enjoyed working as a barista at Irene's Restaurant and as an agent assistant at Collier Talent Agency. She often performed alongside comedians and improvisors at Austin's Coldtowne Theater and had the joy of watching friends develop their talents on stage. She spent most Friday afternoons leading after school programs as a volunteer for the Girls Empowerment Network, whose curriculum teaches self-efficacy to students in the Austin Independent School District. In the summer before her senior year, Anna interned with Abso Lutely Productions in Glendale, California. After graduation she plans to return to the Los Angeles area to pursue a career in comedy television development. She is excited to continue her research on ABBA with input and guidance from Mr. Ulvaeus and the curators of the ABBA Museum in Stockholm.