

Who hasn't danced to Never Gonna Give You Up, I Should Be So Lucky or Respectable, to name just a few of the Hi-NRG pop songs by British songwriting and record producing trio Stock, Aitken & Waterman? SAW dominated the charts in the '80s on a worldwide level. Pete Waterman is also an avid admirer of ABBA and the driving force behind the *ABBAmania* project and the *Super Troupers* documentary. He very kindly welcomed us to his London headquarters to talk about the greatest pop group ever.

***As ABBA already experienced in the early '90s, recently there has been a renewed interest in the SAW songs from the '80s, reaching a whole new generation. Do you see a parallel there?***

I think it is why I always got on so well with ABBA. I understood what they went through. They were absolutely enormous, all over the globe, and then suddenly they were hated. We experienced exactly the same. The public loved us, but the media hated us. We sold 500 million records, so somebody bought them and somebody liked them. We certainly made a conscious decision not to care, as long as people bought the records and we were getting great articles and great write-ups in kids magazines. There was indeed that period, where it wasn't cool to play ABBA and people didn't even talk about ABBA although every party I went to still played the ABBA records. So even if it wasn't cool to say you liked ABBA, secretly you probably danced to ABBA at least once a month or you heard ABBA in your house. I spent my life defending what we did. ABBA spent a long period of their life defending what they did. Obviously the great thing for them is you can't keep great songs hidden, they are always out in the end.

***In 1999 you conceived and produced the ABBAmania TV special. How did that come about?***

I did the very first television series to go on air all night called *The Hit Man And Her*, and I remember we played ABBA. We were the most uncool television show. In fact, we were so uncool, now we're considered the coolest there was ever on TV (*laughs*). Everybody could see why I was protecting ABBA because it was pop music, but the audience were staggered that Elvis Costello, who was this amazing singer-songwriter, also defended them vigorously. This was the seed that led me to do an ITV Saturday night ABBA show that I would produce. One of the very famous British television directors from



the '50s was called Jack Good, and I wanted to do ABBA the way he would have done it. We wanted it to make it a real experience and put the audience in and around the acts. We would have three or four stages and the acts.

***It must have been an expensive show to produce?***

Purely by luck, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, turned around to the record industry and basically said if the record industry was so proud of its records, it should do something to raise money to put music back on the school curriculum. I came up with the idea that if the Prime Minister put his name to the show we would raise money, mainly by record sales of an ABBA charity album, for buying instruments for schools. By making it a charity, I knew that we could do whatever we wanted to do. They [the record companies] would rather give their artist into this charity than give the government a big large wedge of cash, that was the bottom line. That's how the *ABBAmania* show came about. It wasn't an easy show to work on, I have to tell you, because ABBA is not an easy act to copy. They are very difficult songs. It was agreed that I would produce the music. We didn't change the chords or the melodies. All acts had to do them like ABBA. When everybody sat down and started to play ABBA, they realised you almost can't because they are superbly, superbly crafted songs.

***The songs are more complicated than you would imagine?***

Far, far more complicated than people think they are. And people don't give ABBA the credit for the quality of their recordings. Their recordings were exceptional, I mean exceptional.

***You're the right person to judge.***

I've analysed them inside out, upside down, backwards. They are just awesome, to the point of almost over-the-top at points. It's like when you look at a Salvador Dali painting and

because it's almost scribbles and drips and drops, you think, "Well, that's easy," but actually it's not, and that's the truth about pop music. If you make great pop records, they're probably the hardest to make. There is a very fine line between where you could overdo it and where it's underdone.

#### ***ABBAmania was a huge success.***

It was *ABBAmania* that really set things on fire; it was smouldering, and everybody was talking about ABBA. It was phenomenal. By the first break, the Head of Light Entertainment at ITV was calling me, saying, "Oh my God, this is unbelievable! We've got like 11 million viewers, and it is going up!" It was just surreal. I think they showed the show about four times. It got 33 million viewers, we sold 2.4 million albums and had two Top 3 singles. Everything seemed to happen together. Then we did the Brit Awards, where we closed the show with Thank You For The Music, which was the biggest-ever television audience for the Brits.

***It was a nice tribute to change the lyrics of Thank You For The Music on that occasion [to 'Thank ABBA for the music', ed.]***

At the end. Yes!

#### ***Did you have to ask permission for that?***

I did ask permission, but I wanted it as a surprise. So I didn't ask Björn and Benny till after I had recorded it. I said, "Look, you have to trust me," and they did, because we had become friends by then. They knew I wouldn't have done anything to their songs that would have spoilt them. There was a lot going on because we already had been involved with *Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert*, which Richard East came up with.

#### ***I didn't know you were involved in that production as well.***

Yeah. Well, originally, when I went to see it in Australia, the whole musical was based on SAW songs. The only reason it became ABBA songs was because originally the film was going to be made by Virgin, then, when it went on to be made by Universal, they wanted the songs, that was part of the deal. So they changed the music to ABBA. The whole Priscilla thing went sideways, by which time the whole ABBA thing had started to move with *ABBAmania*. ***It was around the time Mamma Mia! was getting its première.***

It was almost like a snowball that was rolling down this hill, it was gathering momentum. *ABBAmania* and *Mamma Mia!* took away any 'anti' there was, and Steps had been enormous. Let's not kid ourselves. Steps were absolutely my biggest band ever. From day one with 5,6,7,8, it was always said it was ABBA on speed. When I signed the band, I

just saw it as my version of ABBA, particularly with Claire. Claire very much had a Frida-type voice, pure. The one thing about ABBA is their voices were pure.

#### ***Do you remember when you first heard ABBA's music?***

Being a DJ in Scandinavia, I knew of Björn and Benny before ABBA. I had been playing them in clubs. What you have to understand, in that '70s period, there were very, very few acts that weren't British that were in the British charts. If you look at it, the number of Europeans that have influenced British pop music is limited to ABBA, James Last, Bert Kaempfert and, funnily enough, Demis Roussos. Everybody forgets Demis Roussos, but he was enormous to British pop music. When I came back to England and played Björn and Benny records, they didn't work here. The amazing thing is, if you listen to the records pre-Eurovision and post-Eurovision, you see the difference.

#### ***What's your opinion on the lyrics of the ABBA songs?***

The Winner Takes It All is obviously a classic, but The Day Before You Came is the most underestimated ABBA song of all time. The lyric is unreal, and these guys did not speak English as their natural language. My God, if you listen to some of their songs, you would even think they spoke English as a first language! Swedish writers after ABBA, and we come to Max Martin and those guys, they fake it. They fake it, they make up lyrics. They don't make sense because they rhyme lyrics. ABBA's lyrics do rhyme, of course they do, but they're far more thought through than, "Baby, hit me just one more time." I'm not saying it's wrong, I'm just saying it was a different era, and a lot of the Swedish songs of the last ten years lack the quality of the ABBA stuff.

#### ***Have you got a favourite ABBA era?***

When you start to listen to the later ABBA records, they're far more comfortable, they're less closet, they're far simpler in a more musical way. There is lots of thought gone in but, if you listen to the melodies, they're far more substantial. They're far more stable. If you listen to The Winner Takes It All, it does everything that a great song should do. I still think it is the greatest ABBA song; it's one of the greatest songs of all time. The melody of that song is absolutely perfect. You can't do that if you try it. It happens or it doesn't. I know that sounds weird, a bit sort of airy fairy, but if you're a songwriter or producer you have to believe in God. I don't mean that in a mystical way. Somebody guides you and you don't know why. Things happen that you are not controlling. You don't control. It just happens.