



In July 2009, the song *Story Of A Heart* by the Benny Andersson Band (BAO), with Helen Sjöholm on lead vocals, was released in conjunction with the band's concert on London's Hampstead Heath. With its multi-layered harmonies and soaring female vocals, it certainly reminded some radio listeners of ABBA.

This year, 2017, has seen no less than two cover versions of the song appear – firstly from the British pop group Steps, who have covered the song for their fifth studio album, *Tears On The Dancefloor*, and secondly (and perhaps more surprisingly) courtesy of Kerry Ellis and Brian May, who have included the song on the album *Golden Days* for which they have teamed up as a pair. We talked to Kerry Ellis, best known for her starring roles in London's West End and on Broadway, about the duo's take on the song, as well as about her other work, including her interpretation of further songs by Björn and Benny.

Kerry shot to fame when she originated the role of Meat in the Queen musical *We Will Rock You* and playing the character Elphaba in the award-winning West End smash hit show *Wicked*. Her many other credits include the roles of Nancy in *Oliver!*, Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, Ellen in *Miss Saigon* and Fantine in *Les Misérables*. As a recording artist, Kerry has also achieved chart-topping success with her debut album *Anthem*s.

How did your new album with Brian May, *Golden Days*, originate? What was the idea behind it?

We are always working on new songs and ideas. We had been on tour and were trying a few things out but, essentially, we record music we both love. It's as simple as that.

What is the biggest difference between this album and your previous ones?

I think we have grown as an act over the years. Our working relationship has

developed, and I think it's now at its best. We understand how each other works and share a passion for the music.

One of the highlights on your new album is a Björn and Benny track, *Story Of A Heart*. Do you consider it a homage to ABBA?

Well, we have often honoured their music through our albums - *Anthem*, *You Have To Be There* and now *Story Of A Heart*. It wasn't deliberately planned as a continuation on a theme, but I love the song and think we have found our own way of making it something special.

How did you approach this song in the studio, and how was the arrangement of it decided?

We wanted to make it a little heavier and rockier, which I think we have done. Hopefully we will get to perform it live sometime, too.

How do you relate to the lyrics of the song, and how important are lyrics to you in general?

Lyrics are hugely important. You have to relate and find an understanding in them. You have to speak to the listener and allow them to go on a journey with you. That's exactly what I tried to bring on with this vocal.

Have you met Björn and Benny, or did you receive feedback from them regarding your interpretation of this song?

I haven't met them. However, I was told they were thrilled with my interpretation of the song and performance.

Would you explain the writing process for the songs you did together with Brian May, such as *Love In A Rainbow* and *Roll With You*?

They all happened in different ways, really. We developed the songs together, but they usually would start with an idea from Brian, a riff or a melody, and then we would work on them together. It's always a very relaxed and in-depth journey, but I think we have produced some really special songs this time round that I'm very proud of.

When did you first meet Brian May and start your collaboration with him?

Way back when I was in *My Fair Lady* at Drury Lane in London, Brian came to see the show and asked me to audition for *We Will Rock You* – and the rest is history.

How do you appreciate ABBA's music? Do you share Brian May's enthusiasm for ABBA? Are you a fan?

I'm a huge fan - I think they are amazing. I have sung many of their songs over the years, and audiences react with much joy. I don't think people realise quite how complex some of their songs are. They seem very

simple but, actually, when you start looking deeper, they are very complex.

What is your favourite ABBA/Björn and Benny song and why?

I think it's You Have To Be There because I was the first person to perform the song in English, at the Hyde Park tribute show with a huge orchestra in front of 70,000 people. It was a magical performance I'll never forget, so that remains very special to me.

How was it decided that you would record this song with Brian May?

We decided to record it after the Hyde Park performance. It was such a powerful and dramatic moment that I felt we had to make a recording. Brian readily agreed, and off we went.

What do you remember of the recording sessions of this song?

I remember going to Abbey Road Studios to record it. The orchestra was amazing, and I was moved to tears. I feel very blessed to have had the honour of premiering the song.

How was it to perform the same song live on your *Anthems* concert tour?

It was great to be able to perform the song in a slightly different way. We didn't have an orchestra, so we made it work with just our small band, and it was still a joy. We were able to retain the dramatic effect very well.

Did you see the musical *Kristina*? What is your opinion on its story and music?

Sadly I didn't. I would have loved to have been involved in the Carnegie Hall concert. Maybe it will come up again, and I can be a part of it.

You played the role of Svetlana to critical acclaim in *Chess* at the Royal Albert Hall. How was the atmosphere during rehearsals? How was it to work with Idina Menzel and Josh Groban?

I had already crossed paths with Idina in my *Wicked* days, and she was wonderful, and Josh is just a dream - such a humble and talented man. I adore him.

How did you prepare for the role of Svetlana?

Well, it was quite a whirlwind, really. I had just finished playing Elphaba in *Wicked* in London and was about to transfer to Broadway, and so I didn't have a great deal of time. However, I knew one of the songs already, and it was great fun to learn Someone Else's Story. To perform the show at the Royal Albert Hall was a dream.

How involved was Sir Tim Rice in this production?

He was very present throughout. Tim is wonderful, such a talented

man and very gracious. It was amazing having him around.

What is your opinion on the story and score of the musical *Chess*?

I think the music is wonderful and works brilliantly in a concert; there are so many famous songs from the show. It has such a following and is constantly touring all over the world - I think that speaks volumes about its success.

Your album *Anthems* was named after the song Anthem, written by Björn and Benny. How much do you like this song, and what do you remember of the recording session?

This song is magical. I love performing it; the arrangement Brian produced is so powerful, and it is a joy to sing and perform. It moves the audience every time.

Would you be interested in being part of forthcoming productions such as the *Chess* revival on Broadway in late 2018?

Absolutely - if they want me!

What is your opinion on the musical *Mamma Mia!*?

I love it.

Which of your Broadway/West End roles is the closest to your heart and why?

That's tough. I have loved every show I have been involved in, and they all have a special place for me. Each role is like a part of you and makes me who I am today, so I'm grateful for each and every one.

What are, for you, the other highlights of your career so far?

Well, the Hyde Park performance is very much up there but, more recently, Brian and I performed in Verona in the huge outdoor coliseum - with a huge orchestra, choir, band and about 80,000 people watching, and it was shown live on TV. It was incredible.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH

