

Their embarkment on yet another European tour is more than proof that the soul and disco trio The Three Degrees are still very popular, even though the original group were already formed in Philadelphia (US) in 1963. The group was particularly successful in the UK, achieving 13 top fifty hit singles between 1974 and 1985. Valerie Holiday sang on all these hits, including TSOP (The Sound Of Philadelphia) which also topped the *US Hot 100*, *When Will I See You Again*, *Woman In Love* and *Giving Up, Giving In*. The current line-up consists of Valerie together with Helen Scott and Freddi Poole.

Where do you still get the energy to keep on touring?

[laughs] Well now we've been off for two years, so a lot happened within that time frame, but it will be nice to get out there and be back on stage again.

In 2009 The Three Degrees released their Undercover album, for which you recorded a version of the ABBA song Voulez-Vous. How were the songs selected for this project?

In fact for this project we were approached by *Reader's Digest*, a company from Belgium. While we were on tour, they came to see a show and told us they would get back to us with a list of songs by different artists that they wanted us to do on an album. We were quite amazed that they had selected the ABBA song from their *Voulez-Vous* album. It was quite interesting because it was, funnily enough, the one that we would always sing along with whenever ABBA came on. So it was really fun and they included a few more in there: Stevie Wonder, Bee Gees, Lionel Richie...

So the inclusion of that specific ABBA song was a lucky choice for The Three Degrees?

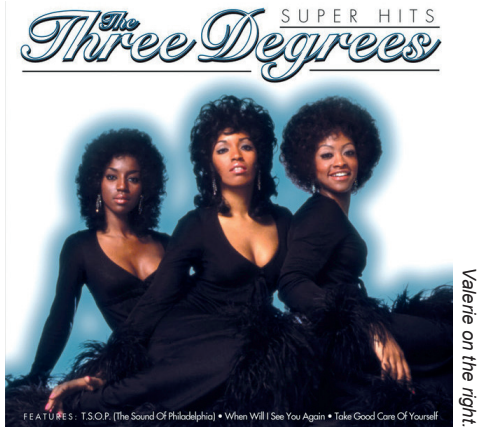
We had always been ABBA fans, so yes, when we saw the songs that were listed on the collection, we were quite excited that this song was included.

Your version is very soulful. Although it is a very famous song, you still succeeded in adding The Three Degrees' feel to it. How difficult was it to start from this ABBA song and make it your own?

Well, any time that you record something that has been very, very popular, you have to be careful in how you reframe it because you don't want to take away from the artist's version of the song, but you want to put a couple of little twists in there that kind of make it your version of it. So that's what we did.

If we look at Voulez-Vous, it's one of their danceable tracks. It has this disco rhythm feel. Maybe that's why it was perfect for The Three Degrees?

That's exactly right. You're absolutely right. **Is it your favourite ABBA song?**



Oh yes, *Voulez-Vous* is my favourite one. I love the energy on that one.

Is ABBA's so-called disco era the period that you prefer?

Yes, but I also like Money, Money, Money, for example. [Sings "Money, Money, Money, must be funny, in the rich man's world."]

Do you watch the Eurovision Song Contest, or did you in the past?

No, I don't watch it, but my friends keep me up to date on what's going on.

What do you think of ABBA's winning song Waterloo from 1974?

I liked it for that it was nice and bouncy. Yes, I did like it. It sounds very European, also with a title like that of course!

At the time of the Voulez-Vous album, their sound was more sophisticated which I gather you prefer?

Yes. And the instrumentation on it.

What do you think is so special about ABBA's music?

I've always loved their arrangements, the musical instruments that were chosen and how they utilised them in combination with the voices. All their tracks were always very, very full, and full orchestration is my favourite.

This full soundscape that was created by ABBA and their sound engineer is indeed very typical for their recordings. It's also something which is present in those of The Three Degrees.

Yes, because to me it makes the music better. I'm kind of partial to the music from that era because of the orchestration and because the instruments are live. They're not computer generated, they're by live musicians. The strings and everything are actual string sections. It's not something that you plug into the computer and program.

Absolutely. And what do you think of the voices of Agnetha and Frida?

Oh, they sound fantastic. We were having

difficulties at one point, 'cause those notes that they hit, oh my goodness! And their harmonies are beautiful. Just beautiful.

The combination of the two different voices creates something unique.

Yes. The difference in the ranges, that's about all.

As important as the harmonies are for ABBA, this is also true for The Three Degrees. Could you explain how these harmonies came to life?

The harmonies are always there, in tune with what the mood of the song is, and we've always been very careful in making the background just as important as the lead vocal, and we appreciated that we all felt that same way.

Why do you think ABBA are still so hugely appreciated and now even more than ever?

Because of the music! In the first place the music, but then they also recorded songs when lyrics were worth listening to [smiles]. And fortunately, the lyrics don't sound dated. The same lyrics that they sang back when they recorded are still very relevant now. We kind of share that, that the music that we recorded in the 1970s, with the lyrics that Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff penned for us, all the songs are still very much relevant. They're not words of which you can say, 'OK, but that was then, that happened back in 19 something'. You can't do that to their songs because all the things that they write about we're still experiencing.

Do you think that the composers who wrote your hits, as well as Björn and Benny for ABBA, put more effort into writing the material compared to nowadays?

Yes. They would sit down and take time to pen words that when you listen to them, you could identify with.

What is your personal favourite era of the group?

[exclaims] Ah, wow! Well, I think I probably would go back to our *Philadelphia* album.

Oh, yes. And why?

The lyrics to the songs that we recorded during that time were a bit more personal. They were a bit more in keeping with my thoughts and feelings on things. After that, a lot of the songs were not necessarily our taste. We've never really had the option of choosing exactly what we wanted to sing. It was always down to the producer what songs you recorded. As time went by with the different eras, disco and techno, you had to keep up with what the music industry was doing at that particular time. So some of the songs that we recorded might not be my absolute favourites, but I still enjoy the delivery of them.

How was it to work with the producer Giorgio Moroder?

That was exciting because he created a different mood from what we had done before. So it was good.

What was the difference in approach?

It lifted us off into our disco era. Our disco

period. And at that particular time, that was very hot.

With maybe fewer real instruments in the studio?

Yes. That's the other thing. They had gone over to techno by then, you know? Synth drums and things like that. For the record companies it was probably great because then they didn't have to spend a lot of money on musicians [giggles].

Belgium was one of the countries where Dirty Ol' Man was a huge hit in 1973, earning you a Gold Record over here. The song is still very popular, is it a favourite when you perform this one?

Oh, it still is number one. Well, I won't say it's number one because When Will I See You Again is there. So I have to say yes, that's our second anthem.

Recently, you released your jazz-flavoured intimate solo album, In Bloom. Can you tell me something about that?

It was something that I had wanted to do quite some time ago and I started compiling the songs that I wanted to record. The difficulty was in finding the time to go into the studio and do the recordings. So I started, I figured it out, it took me five years to complete this album. Whenever we would get home and I had a couple of weeks, where I could book some studio time, I would go in and maybe record one or two songs and then take them and listen to them over the trip and decide if I was happy with that. If not, I would go back in the studio when I got home and redo where I wanted to do corrections or changes. It took me quite some time to get it together, but I was really happy with the finished product and I was very blown away when everybody else was happy with it as well.

Well, congratulations with this album. It's a very nice surprise, after having already done so many great records with the group. Is there also a specific combination of the trio that you prefer? Did the Philadelphia era also have the best combination of the three voices?

Yes. Because Sheila (Ferguson), Fayette (Pinkney) and I [the line-up from 1967 to 1976], at that particular era – the beginning of our career – had the time we wanted. We would spend hours just harmonising, just singing together. So the unity of those three voices was my favourite because of the sound. To me that was and is the sound of The Three Degrees. We have had different ladies come in, but vocally, Sheila, Fayette and myself, that is my favourite vocal combination.

What is your all-time favourite The Three Degrees song?

When Will I See You Again. And of my solo album, *In Bloom*, my favourite track is Here's To Life.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH