

No matter how successful ABBA would become in the second half of the 1970s, for many people the Swedish Fab Four will always be associated with their glorious win at the 19th *Eurovision Song Contest (ESC)* in Brighton, UK in 1974. Waterloo is still rightfully considered to be the main catalyst of their ascent to worldwide stardom. Since then, *Eurovision* has transformed dramatically, with more countries joining the European scene (a result of the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989) and the abolition of the live orchestra and live stage instruments.

When interviewed by Zoe Ball for BBC Radio 2 in November 2021, Frida admitted she no longer followed the competition. "I'm not so interested because it has changed so much over the years and it's not what it was at that time. Now it's more like a show, it's very technical and there are some good songs coming out of it, but I cannot say I'm a fan of *Eurovision*." She added, "Maybe I shouldn't say it, but I did it anyway."

Björn, however, expressed a more favourable opinion about the contest in an interview with *Radio Times* (UK) a good year later. "*Eurovision* may seem shallow and just for fun, but there is a deeper meaning to it. For those hours that it is on, Europe is unified," he stated. "I hope that it unites Europe behind Ukraine."

ABBA's own *Eurovision* victory must still hold a special place in their hearts, as illustrated on several occasions through the years.

The Semi-Final of the 2004 contest even premiered a brand-new ABBA video, *Our Last Video Ever* (aka *The Last Video*). It brought doll-size versions of ABBA – courtesy of Jim Henson's Creature Shop – to millions of viewers across the world in an inspiring and funny story, with cameos by all four.

Although none of the ABBA members were present at *Congratulations: 50 Years Of The Eurovision Song Contest*, a TV show organised by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), they must have felt immensely proud when Waterloo was chosen as the contest's most popular entrant of its fifty years.

In 2013, Benny, Björn and Avicii joined forces and composed the *Eurovision 2013* anthem *We Write The Story*. This unique song was premiered at the Grand Final on 18th May 2013.

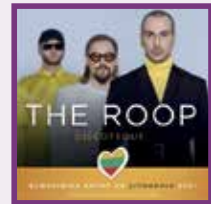
Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the 2020 contest was cancelled, the first time this had ever occurred. Björn gave a short heartrending virtual speech in the replacement programme in May of that year, to reminisce about ABBA's *Eurovision* victory. "The *ESC* is one hell of a launching pad. And it still remains one of the most genuinely joyous events in the TV year," he said. "And it's so disarmingly European, it so allows you to escape and be happy. Even forget about the coronavirus for a little while."

In November 2022, to celebrate all things *Eurovision*, *Het Grote Songfestivalfeest [The Big Eurovision Party]* was held for the second time at the Ziggo Dome in Amsterdam. This starred many former Eurovision artists and was a vibrant and representative showcase for the eclectic nature of the contest. The show, in which Waterloo was covered by the Dutch trio OG3NE (*ESC 2017*), was also broadcast by Dutch (AVROTROS) and British (BBC One) national TV. Prior to the show, I had the opportunity to talk to several artists about *Eurovision* and ABBA during a hectic, well-attended press meeting.



JOHNNY LOGAN
IRELAND

What's Another Year, 1980 winner
Terminal 3 (Linda Martin), 2nd in 1984
Hold Me Now, 1987 winner
Why Me? (Linda Martin), 1992 winner



THE ROOP
LITHUANIA

On Fire, 2020;
Discotheque, 8th in 2021



CAROLA
SWEDEN

Främling [Love Isn't Love], 3rd in 1983
Fångad Av En Stormvind [Captured
By A Lovestorm], 1991 winner
Invincible, 5th in 2006



FRIZZLE SIZZLE
NETHERLANDS

Alles Heeft Een Ritme [Everything
Has Rhythm], 13th in 1986



MÅNS ZELMERLÖW
SWEDEN

Heroes, 2015 winner



SHELDON RILEY
AUSTRALIA

Not The Same, 15th in 2022



ANTIQUE
GREECE

(I Would) Die for You, 3rd in 2001



HELENA PAPANIZOU
GREECE

My Number One, 2005 winner



SUBWOOLFER
NORWAY

Give That Wolf A Banana, 10th in 2022

What is the importance of Eurovision for an artist? How serious is it as a diving board towards (international) success?

Vaidotas Valiukevičius (The Roop): Eurovision is very important because it's the biggest platform where to show your music.

Måns Zelmerlöw: I've always loved Eurovision, and Eurovision was a very, very good stepping stone for me. So I'm very thankful for everything Eurovision has given me.

Sheldon Riley: It changes an artist's life big time. I mean, I was one of the most unbookable acts in Australia before Eurovision. It was very hard for me. I worked my ass off to get any job I possibly could get. But no one could understand why does he dress like that or why does he sing like that? And then came Eurovision and that was the first time where people were like, 'Oh, I get it. Now I understand'. So now I'm traveling, working non-stop, I never sleep and my whole world's changed because of it. Look at the line-up tonight. Everyone's world's here completely changed because of it. I didn't win Eurovision and I'm working every day very, very hard. It doesn't matter where your place is in the competition, Eurovision changes lives. It just depends on how hard you're willing to work for it.

Helena Paparizou (Antique): Do you want me to be totally honest? Totally honest. I'm gonna speak from the bottom of my heart. I am a truthful, big, big fan of Eurovision. I've been watching it since I remember myself and I still continue and have people coming over at home to watch it with me. We do our own voting at home every year. I believe that Eurovision is the biggest European feast of the year, a true music feast. And actually you see that it's not only in Europe. We have many countries that enjoy it, like the country down under Australia. It's broadcast in America, Azerbaijan, Armenia, in so many countries. I believe that Eurovision is always opening a door. It gives you a lot of opportunities and can help you a lot in your life. But then next year another new winner is coming, so it drops you off a little bit, but you continue doing your job. I think that Eurovision can only do good for an artist. Nothing bad. That we need to give our focus to the next winner and the next winner and the next winner, that's the way it should be, that's the right thing. I mean, I always feel honoured when I come to Eurovision. They always make me feel honoured because I have participated as Antique and as a solo artist I won... (gasps) seventy years ago, it doesn't matter (laughs)! And I know that the Eurovision fans love me. They love Antique, they love Carola, they love Måns, they love everybody. And I feel like Eurovision is a community by itself, where we are all people who are happy. We are happy people, Eurovision fans. We are happy and I'm a fan too.

At the time, ABBA obviously made the utmost of their Eurovision win.

Helena Paparizou: When it comes to ABBA, back then songs were not broadcast and promoted in the way it happens today. If I would have the opportunity to speak with Björn or Benny I would like to ask them – because this is what I believe, "When ABBA became very big in America after Eurovision, did you not sit in a van for full months traveling around all the country to go from one radio station to another? Because you used to do promotion in a different era". Do you understand what I mean? We did not have internet or Spotify, we didn't have anything like

that. You needed to go with your own LP into the radio station and say, "Hi, we are these artists. Can you play this record please?"

So it was more difficult for them then?

Helena Paparizou: Yes, definitely. It took time to build a career and I think it's very important for the young people to know it because they're a little bit spoiled today. If they don't have internet, they become like maniacs (*panic in voice*) "Ooh, I don't have Wi-Fi!"

Nikos Panagiotidis (Antique): Do you remember when we were in Germany?

Helena Paparizou: Yes. When we worked in 1999 - 2000 we were in Germany, it took a lot of time for us to get familiar with all the radio stations over there, but right now you only have to put on Spotify and you can have artists from all over the world. You can listen to music from South Africa, Australia, Zimbabwe, from everywhere. It's totally different.

How much do you appreciate ABBA and what do they mean to you personally?

Helena Paparizou: I appreciate ABBA a lot. There's a lot to write about them these days. We should make a statue of them! That's what I think. They've been offering a lot to the pop culture all over the world. Benny, Björn, Agnetha and Frida have been working very, very hard for it too. They have influenced so many artists over the years.

Subwoofer (feat. Keith & Jim): We appreciate ABBA very much. ABBA is one of the gods on earth for sure.

Vaidotas Valiukevičius (The Roop): Wow, I think ABBA are an iconic band. We always think about ABBA as the role model for us because, before ABBA, Sweden was just a little country in the music world. And now ABBA did that job to spread the message. So Lithuania now is in the same position, so we really love ABBA.

Johnny Logan: Waterloo was probably the best *Eurovision* song of all time. It was the one that sort of set the gold standard for, even to this day, how a song should be structured and how it should be presented, with a bit of flamboyancy. My memories of ABBA back in 1980 when I won (*Eurovision* for the first time) are wrapped up in the fact that I really admired ABBA, but also their manager who wanted to manage me in that. I never found out until years later that my management at the time in Ireland never told me. And it's been a source of regret. On a happier note, the white suit from when I won the second time in 1987 was in the ABBA Museum for over a year. They borrowed it from me. You know the reason why and what the deal was? I told them that if they could get the champagne stains out of the suit, they could have it for a year. And they did!

Carola: ABBA are a very big part of my life because I'm raised up with them and every song, singing them at school. I got the fortune

to be at their last premiere for *Voyage* in London in May 2022. It was amazing, and then they even came onstage. I also met Agnetha several times in private clubs in Stockholm. She's amazing. So sweet. It's just that as Swedish people we are so proud of them.

Laura Vlasblom (Frizzle Sizzle): I still like the songs, despite the fact that they were recorded so long ago. They are great songs and people still dance to them, still turn up the volume in the car to listen. It's one of those acts that you still love today.

Sheldon Riley: Ah, they're amazing. ABBA completely changed the game for everybody, right? I think for Australia especially, ABBA were the first *Eurovision* act to make Australia go, 'Oh, we're really gonna pay attention. This is a big deal'. I'm very grateful for them. If it wasn't for them, Australia probably wouldn't have recognised how important *Eurovision* was as well. They're iconic. Their entire world is legendary. You know what I mean?

Måns Zelmerlöw: I do appreciate ABBA for everything they've done for music. I've met them a couple of times and they are truly amazing people. Very genuine and nice. Benny actually came up to me once, at the beginning of my career, and said, "I just wanted to let you know that you are one of those artists that give so much on stage and you don't take energy!", which was amazing to hear, obviously.

Sheldon Riley: I do appreciate ABBA's songs and vocals. Very much so. I mean, these were some of the first songs that I ever sang! Dancing Queen was the first song I ever sang in front of an audience. So they really changed everything for me. I was in front of a big friends and family dinner party situation. It was so nerve-wracking, but it was good.

What is special about their music?

Subwoofer: The way they compose music, it's very touching because they write lyrics about what people engage in. And the songs apparently smell very good (*deadpan voice*). We've been smelling on the songs multiple times and, yes, we enjoy ABBA very much.

Helena Paparizou: An ABBA song can never become old. The songs are still played and they still feel fresh. It's almost like if I would take a song of Mikis Theodorakis for example, because they have a similarity in the sweet melodies. Not that they use the same musical instruments, but the sweetness of the melody. That's how I feel. And I'm very happy and want to say 'Thank you' because there is a doll at the ABBA museum with me performing My Number One. I really wanna say thank you for that (*laughs*). That's fantastic.

Carola: It's amazing to see how the guys, Benny and Björn, are taking care of their gift. That's inspiring for all of us. It doesn't matter how much fame or fortune you have acquired, you always want to take care and be better or develop what you have on your heart. Look at what Björn's been doing now with Pippi

Långstrump [Pippi Longstocking] in Stockholm (referring to the musical *Pippi På Cirkus*). So, their music is all over. It's for children, it's for grown-ups, it's for your mind. It's amazing. So, they mean a lot to me.

Karen Vlasblom (Frizzle Sizzle): ABBA is really for young and old.

Mandy Huydts (Frizzle Sizzle): Yes, and there is also a certain melancholy in their songs, actually, in all their songs, which really appeals to me. And the songs remain good, it never gets boring.

Laura Vlasblom (Frizzle Sizzle): Because ABBA is not just Dancing Queen and Mamma Mia. The later albums with very autobiographical lyrics are so poignant and very beautifully made. The music is so well produced that it still sounds fantastic.

Mandy Huydts (Frizzle Sizzle): I had to get used to the new ABBA songs but it still has the magic, the voices and the harmonies are still there. But I also like to hold on to things as they were in the past.

What is your favourite ABBA song?

Johnny Logan: With ABBA there are so many songs that over the years are like sort of evergreens, not just one. I think Dancing Queen has always been one of my favourite ABBA songs.

You also did a cover of Waterloo.

Johnny Logan: Yes, I've sung Waterloo, but I've never done a copy of it, I've sung it because they've asked me to on a TV show occasionally. Normally only the chorus.

Subwoofer: (deadpan) Of course we have a favourite ABBA song and that's Grandma Mia.

But you are not going to eat her?

Subwoofer: Oh, we can't guarantee anything. But, you have to listen to our new song that comes out tomorrow, which is called Having Grandma Here for Christmas.

Måns Zelmerlöv: My favourite ABBA song is probably Money, Money, Money.

When you hosted the national final of the UK in 2018, You Decide, you performed an ABBA medley with Lucie Jones (featuring Waterloo, Dancing Queen, SOS and The Winner Takes It All). You even played piano for a semi-acoustic Waterloo.

Måns Zelmerlöv: It was the production team (for the BBC) that had that idea and I was obviously on board because I'm a Swede and ABBA is very Swedish! It worked out really well.

Carola: We did like an ABBA medley (with Thank You For The Music and Waterloo) for the *Rhapsody in Rock* show in Sweden.

Are their songs difficult to interpret?

Carola: No, but it depends on in what context. And then of course I take it a little bit serious because I wanna do it as good as I can. But you know, there's only one Agnetha and only one Anni-Frid. So we are just having a good time with it!

Sheldon Riley: Waterloo is my favourite. It always has been and The Winner Takes It All also which I actually listened to on the plane pretty much the whole way here. Funny (giggles)!

Robertas Baranauskas (The Roop): Now I'm thinking about Mamma Mia.

Vaidotas Valiukevičius (The Roop): But I have a lot of songs that come to my mind, it's like they had hit after hit.

Robertas Baranauskas: You can't choose one ABBA song. That's a fact.

Vaidotas Valiukevičius: Dancing Queen is definitely there.

Robertas Baranauskas: It's not a fair question (laughs).

Mandy Huydts (Frizzle Sizzle): The Day Before You Came.

Karen Vlasblom (Frizzle Sizzle): Thank You For The Music.

Laura Vlasblom (Frizzle Sizzle): Gosh, there's so many. I think Dancing Queen is still my favourite.

Helena Paparizou: Oh, I have many. When it comes to *Eurovision*, of course it's Waterloo.

Nikos Panagiotidis (Antique): Mamma Mia is a very good song.

Helena Paparizou: I like Gimme! Gimme! Gimme! more to be honest, and Fernando and Chiquitita.

You even sang Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!

Helena Paparizou: Yes, I have done that once. But we love ABBA! Statues all over Sweden. Statues!

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH

