

Tony Hadley became famous fronting Spandau Ballet with his unmistakable powerhouse of a voice that still brims with the same passion and urgency as it did when they debuted. Spandau Ballet were part of the New Romantics movement in the late 1970s – early 1980s and later scored megahits such as True and Gold, selling a staggering 25 million albums. Following the group's split in 1990, Tony launched a successful solo career that he rekindled when the reunion with Spandau Ballet (since 2009) came to an end in 2017.

When I met Tony, he was everything you would expect him to be and more. Suave and a true gentleman, he offered me a glass of wine in the backstage area of the renowned new wave W-Festival in Belgium before we settled down on the couch for an open-hearted interview about ABBA.

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

The first time I ever heard them was when we were watching the *Eurovision Song Contest* at home (starts humming the beginning of Waterloo) and I remember sitting there with my mum and dad, and we all just went, [with emphasis] "That's the best record by far! If they don't win ..." It just had a sound to it, they looked fantastic, they were glam rock, it was instantly recognisable, you could sing along to it, it was a bit of a milestone really.

***How much have you appreciated ABBA since then?***

Well, they're a brilliant band. They are an incomparable combination – two girls, two guys – and the ABBA songs are unique. It's like when you put The Beatles on, you instantly know it's The Beatles. As soon as you hear an ABBA song, you instantly know it's ABBA. I mean, they have such a unique sound, and that's what music is all about. It's having that identity, whether it's Elton John, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart, ABBA ... They just have a stunning sound, with those intricate harmonies and the melodies that are very classical; a lot of their music is classically influenced. I don't think there's many people who don't like ABBA.

***But maybe not everyone wants to admit it.***

Maybe there was such a time, but what you have to understand is that every decade has its day and every decade is considered naff at some point. If you go back a few years, the 1970s were considered pretty naff and ABBA weren't relished in the same way that they are now. The same way I suppose the 1980s is looked upon fondly now, but there definitely were times where people looked at the bands in the 1980s and went, "Oh, really? Cool?!" People looked down on those acts that were dressed up like prima donnas [the New Romantics] and everything else, and some of the music was great, but some of it was pretty naff as well.

We all look back at things and we have to let enough time go by to look back with, not rose-tinted glasses, but some degree of fondness. ABBA have had that in spades the last few years [sniggering], where people have really realised what an amazing band they were – incredible songwriters, incredible sound. It's just time really.

***Nowadays more and more famous artists are coming out as ABBA fans.***

Sometimes it gets really boring when certain artists don't want to look at other artists because it's not considered to be cool. I don't think I've ever subscribed to that. I've always been into people like Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Jack Jones. I remember during the punk days, for instance, people would say, [in a disdainful voice] "Frank Sinatra???" But I've never been afraid to say that I love certain singers and certain bands, and ABBA are certainly one of them.

***Possessing a unique voice yourself, how much do you appreciate Agnetha and Frida as singers?***

Well, thank you, first of all. But they really are brilliant, just brilliant. I mean, those harmonies are just stunning. But even when they sing a solo, they have feelings and there is a sentimentality in their voice. Some of the songs are extremely heartfelt and there's sometimes sadness actually in their voices. So they sing brilliantly as individuals but then when they come together and do the harmonies ... I can tell you, those harmonies are difficult, they're really tough stuff! If you listen to them as singers they're top of the range.

***So they're an important ingredient of ABBA's success?***

Yes, you have to have identity. Singing is about identity and what's interesting about ABBA is that they not only have a musical identity, they have a vocal identity as well. To be honest, you don't have to be technically brilliant, but you want to be identified. I'm not technically the best singer, I'm pretty good, I trained with an opera singer and everything else, but if you ask me to do R&B twiddles or do what Whitney Houston did, forget it, I can't do that kind of stuff, that's not my style. But as soon as you put a particular record on, you should go, "Oh, that's Spandau Ballet or that's Culture Club, Bryan Ferry, Rod Stewart, Elton John ..." As soon as you put an ABBA record on, you instantly know it's an ABBA record. But even if it's not, just the harmonies and the girls' singing, their vocals are unique and that's what it's all about. Agnetha and Frida are certainly two of the best singers around, definitely.

***ABBA were never a politically or socially engaged band. What do you think of that position, which provided food for criticism, especially in Sweden?***

I don't think a pop group has to be engaged at all. My view on it is, look, if you want to change the world, be a politician, if you want



to make music, be a musician. It's very easy. Also, you have to be very careful when you're in a position of power. A band like ABBA were hugely influential to young kids – they crossed the age divide, they really did – but when you're as big as they were, and they were massive, a huge band, their political allegiances could influence young people. You have to let young people form their own opinions about things.

**Is there a specific ABBA era that you prefer? Do you prefer their earlier or later records?**

There isn't anything I don't like actually. Generally speaking, I've seen the *Mamma Mia!* films and my kids also love these. I've seen the stage musical and I went to the Leicester Square Empire to see their concert film, *ABBA: The Movie*. Whether it's the early stuff or the later stuff, it's all good-quality music.

**But musical progress is very important for a band, I suppose? I've been following Spandau Ballet since the beginning and there's a big difference between the early days and the later recordings.**

Oh God, yes, when we got to *True* and other stuff.

**I still love your first record, *Journey To Glory*, produced by Richard James Burgess. Would you explain this gradual musical evolution of the band?**

Well, it just changes. We were 18 years old when those songs were created and we were in a club environment. The whole music scene in England was changing. Interestingly enough, bands like ABBA were becoming not so cool anymore because of punk and because of the Blitz club scene [named in reference to the notorious London nightclub *The Blitz*] and the New Romantics. All those big glam-rock artists weren't really considered to be too cool at the time. We were in this era where synthesizers had become the fashion, music was more for on the floor, hence *To Cut A Long Story Short*, a much more danceable track. But, as you move on as a band, you tend to spend a little more time in the studio, especially if the record company is paying you [smiles]. You become more creative. Musically different influences come into the band and you go in a slightly different path. Consequently, songs like *True* and *Through The Barricades* came along on a

later day, which were completely different from the very synth-orientated early stuff.

**Do you prefer the band's later recordings?**

Well, no, I don't. I mean, I love *To Cut A Long Story Short* and the 'Blitz' stuff was great but listen, *True* [from the eponymous album produced by Tony Swain and Steve Jolley] was No. 1 in 21 countries around the world [grins]!

**Which one is your favourite Spandau Ballet song?**

*Through The Barricades*, which was a later song, from the eponymous 1986 album, is my favourite Spandau Ballet song to sing because it tells a story, it has the soft vocal bits, it has the big anthemic outro with the drums coming in, where it gets kind of stadium rock. All in all, for me that's my favourite song.

**And which is your favourite ABBA song?**

I have to say my two favourite ABBA songs are *Dancing Queen*, which just makes everybody happy, and *The Winner Takes It All*, with such an incredibly sad lyric and just so emotional.

**You already said that when Spandau Ballet became cool, ABBA weren't considered cool anymore, so this proves that image for a band is very important?**

Oh yeah. If you look at ABBA and the glam-rock era, it was considered passé in the early 1980s. And because ABBA were considered to be very pop, they were sort of in the same mould as *Sweet* and some of the real pop glam-rock stuff. There was a period when you thought, ABBA? Oh no, no, no, we don't talk about ABBA. To be honest, Spandau Ballet went through that period, probably in the 1990s, even though there was a certain coolness to the band because of *To Cut A Long Story Short* and the *New Romantics* connotation, and *True* was always being played, but there were certain people indisputably that would not have admitted to having a Spandau Ballet album.

**Isn't it also a matter that if you're too successful, the critics will bring you down?**

Yes, sometimes if you're too successful there's always a backlash. People love to see someone fail, especially in the UK. They absolutely love it [grins]!

**Can you understand why ABBA are still successful and have that appeal?**

There are a lot of ABBA songs that are classics and, with the advent of the film and the stage production, those songs are literally in people's blood. My young kids of 12 and 7 absolutely love the ABBA songs, so they've captured a new generation by doing these films and everything else. And they're good songs, brilliant songs.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH

*You can read Stany's more extended interview with Tony Hadley about ABBA and Spandau Ballet in his book *The Legacy of ABBA – Volume Two*, which is available at our web shop and costs 45 euro. An interview with Steve Norman of Spandau Ballet will also appear in a future magazine.*