

The charismatic and multi-talented Steve Norman, saxophonist/singer/multi-instrumentalist/songwriter and founding member of Spandau Ballet and The Sleevz, is an ardent ABBA fan and it was a real pleasure talking to him from his home in Brighton. His genuine enthusiasm for the band touched me deeply, especially since as a sax player of Spandau Ballet he had left an indelible imprint on me with unforgettable '80s classics and million sellers such as True, Gold and Chant N°1 (I Don't Need This Pressure On), my favourite single from the band.

How big an ABBA fan are you?

Last year we went to the ABBA Museum. I loved it. We've got photographs and a little short video of me in the booth where you can join them dancing. I was there next to [the real] Björn and that was very funny (*laughs*). I loved the idea! You could spend the whole day there and still not see everything. Incredible. I really enjoyed it. It's a lot of fun, isn't it?

It sure is. So you met Björn there during your visit?

I know Björn a little bit by default. His partner, Christina is a dear friend of my partner Sabrina and me. She worked in the same record company as Sabrina and then has left it. Christina always stays with us in Brighton when she comes over. She then obviously met up with Björn and that's really how we know him. We have a very relaxed kind of relationship. We also got to stay with them but I don't want to talk too much about that. I don't want to reveal any of his private matters, other than that I so really get on with Björn. He's a wonderful man and we often sort of question each other about musical things, but not composing. Absolutely not composing. I wouldn't dare. Never! I hold him in awe, in grace. I look at him highly as a songwriter and all that it involves. He's a fine example but I don't think I would ever talk songwriting with him. We kind of meet on other things. He's intrigued by the workings and differences of our respective bands. Whereas ABBA really starts with him and Benny, it's different for Spandau Ballet. He was intrigued about my set-up with Spandau Ballet, which is very different and I was intrigued about his with ABBA. For example, for ABBA it's not as if there's five people and the manager that have to agree on anything. Those kind of things we discuss, but that's as far as I go. I don't feel comfortable playing the guitar or another instrument around him. It's much more loaded, so I avoid it. I'm absolutely not looking to do a show or anything with Björn!

One song would be nice though.

It would be lovely but no! Listen, I'll be honest with you, I don't even want to go there in our friendship. I will say, he's a wonderful man and I've always held him in such a high esteem, and never ever thought to befriend him. You also have to understand I'm not a fan as such, but I

was one of those people that really appreciated their talent and I didn't mind saying it, throughout the years when ABBA were uncool. In fact, the opposite. I was proud to be out and say, "How can you write this this band off as being totally uncool? They might not wear the same clothes as you or wear their hair the same, but they write much better songs than you do!" (*chuckles*).

So you were one of the forerunners in appreciating their songwriting ability?

I've never told this to anybody but here's a kind of statement. They do write much better songs than the majority of songwriters on this planet as far as pop music is concerned. I think Björn and Benny are absolutely an incredible force. In the late '80s – early '90s and throughout that decennium, I always felt proud to be out and say, "You know what? I'm proud of being a fan of ABBA, the music of ABBA." It's not a guilty pleasure for me. Why should it be guilty?

Do you remember how the music of ABBA had an impact on you as a young kid?

I remember when I heard that Dancing Queen for the first time in 1976. I was still at school – I was in the sixth form and that's when you don't have to wear a school uniform anymore. As a sixteen-year-old we went into the pub at the end of the school term semester – when we came out – and the music that was playing on the jukebox or the radio was Dancing Queen. It was like, ooh my God! It was just a phenomenally, incredibly well-crafted catchy pop song and dressed up for the dancefloor at the disco. I recall that sensation to this day. I might have even told Björn, albeit if anything I'm very careful not to gush too much very overtly.

I suppose it's always nice to hear what your songs have meant to people?

There's something about certain songs that elevates them. I've met many people in my life and the fan in me couldn't help ask various people, even Elton John like real fans questions in a way but not going too far. You probably do the same, Stany, you want to say that to the people you admire, you want them to know how much you admire them. I think that's important, too.

Would you say that you were also influenced by them? As a musician?

I wouldn't say as a musician, because literally playing an instrument is not about the song. Of course, it's also about the song but it's what you put over a song. But as a songwriter, yes. I am not a very proficient one, but when I listen to a song or when I write a song, I try to hold certain elements in place and I have to say I've come nowhere as near to even ABBA's B-sides! You know what I mean? (*laughs*) Nowhere close. Nowhere! But as a songwriter I do appreciate them, we all do. All songwriters would be really foolish to not be influenced or at least to be allowed to be influenced by the great pop songwriters let's say. With pop music songwriters, you've got to look at the best. I'm sure everyone does, whether they tell anybody else or not.



Do you think that these days, more artists, more musicians admit that they are admiring ABBA?

Yes! Absolutely. Of course. That shows the hypocrisy of it all. It's like all of a sudden, oh no, they're okay now. Well, they didn't do anything else, besides the latest songs that came out recently [on the *Voyage* album]. But prior to that, it's the same songs that have been there and you've heard all of your life. But now, somehow, it's okay to like it. Well, what's the difference? It's either really good what they do or it's not. You can't suddenly say, "Well, now it's good." It's the same thing when before it wasn't. When people used to say, "ABBA, you're joking!", laughing at them, I would stand up for them.

Were there in the '80s and the '90s other musicians that you know of who, just like you, admitted to liking ABBA?

I didn't know any fellow musicians, not in my band, nor other musicians who would. But I had a friend with whom I met up fairly often, once a week, to play 'five-a-side' football, just to keep fit, he would always pick me up in his car. That was when we started brainstorming music because we were music aficionados, fans of music. We were both not only into the music itself, but also the history of how bands came together, the dynamics within the band and specific facts that people wouldn't normally know. There were two bands that we kept going back to: ABBA and the Bee Gees. Everyone was like 'not talking about the Bee Gees fever', they were uncool because of their disco and the *Saturday Night Fever* hype, right? So they were not cool. You've got to wait twenty years after an artist has been successful, before they're cool again. If you're still cool then, you get called a legend and that's another ridiculous thing.

Was the problem that ABBA were too successful? Or was it their image?

What the problem was in other people's eyes? I just think it's the way they looked. It was all '70s mainly, wasn't it? What I can see is that they were not giving – excuse my language – a f*ck about being cool or not. I think they were having fun and they did all these 'touristy' pictures of everywhere they went. Bands do it and you have to understand as well, certainly in the UK, I don't know about other countries, I'm sure in Sweden they were never ever seen

as uncool – maybe they were I don't know, but that's the fickleness of the public, you have to remember. Especially in the UK, if you have your moment in the sun then people are almost quite happy to see you go. And it's like you've gone and they are quite rude about it in this country. We were certainly not legends until we waited twenty years and then it's automatic 'legend'. Like you do an old-age pensioner: 'senior citizen'. ABBA never had to work on that cool thing, why should they?

For me the coolness of ABBA is that they just didn't care about being cool.

Absolutely and you are right, Stany. I loved them for that because by their total 'uncoolness' they've become totally cool. They didn't give a f*ck (*laughs*).

And now their clothes have become iconic.

Yes! I've seen them at the museum, that was great.

Is there a specific ABBA era that you prefer?

Not specifically. I liked all that early stuff as well. Ring Ring, I've only heard about that one after *Waterloo* but it came out before, didn't it?

Indeed, but Ring Ring was released with a remix in the UK after Waterloo.

Yes, and you only heard it sort of after *Waterloo* when they started to handle the ones before that, which are fantastic tunes, too. But I'd be happy to have written *Waterloo* (*chuckles*).

Do you have a favourite ABBA song?

Well, I've already mentioned one or two of my favourites. It would be a hard choice. There's *Dancing Queen*, it's got to be, that's the go-to one but I would be lying if it was not up there for contention at No. 1. If I could not have a choice and just say that those following would probably be Top 3 in this moment: No. 1: *Dancing Queen* which keeps coming back to me. I hear it and I get that same lift. You always get that with *Dancing Queen*, a lift, don't you? A hopeful sort of lift. Full of hope. Then there's the greatness and the construction of *The Name Of The Game* at No. 2. Recently – only a couple of days ago – I heard *The Day Before You Came* again and it's really like, "oh my God, I've forgotten all about this one!" You see there's a really killer tune – at the time no one was doing stuff like that – so that's No. 3. It also used to be *Thank You For The Music*, which was the last song in *ABBA The Movie*. But everyone goes there with that one now!

Having thanked Steve for his candid opinions and enthusiasm, a few minutes after the interview I received the following text message: "I've just had a thought that made me chuckle. ABBA pinched/borrowed from Spandau Ballet when they called their album ABBA Gold. Just thought I'd mention it."

An extended version of the interview with Steve Norman will be published in Stany's upcoming book We All Love ABBA – Expanded Edition – which is available for pre-order at our shop (Release date: 7th October 2023).

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH