

Cindy Alter was the lead singer and guitarist of the South African all-female rock group Clout (the other members being bassist Ilene 'Lee' Tomlinson, drummer Ingrid 'Ingi' Herbst, keyboardist Glenda Hyam and guitarist Jenni Garson), formed in Johannesburg in 1977 and best known for their worldwide hits Substitute and Save Me. Upon Clout's emergence onto the global music scene, ABBA had already reached unparalleled heights in their career. It comes as no surprise that the four Swedes also made a significant impact on the Clout members and their producer. Therefore, Cindy eagerly agreed to be featured in our gallery of famous ABBA fans decades later.

What is so special about ABBA for you?

ABBA came at a time when we were waiting for something new. We'd been hearing a lot of pop music. There was a lot of stuff going on, European music, American and English music, and suddenly there was this pop band that was so orchestrated. It wasn't just sweet pop. It was so clever and it made such an impact on all of us, especially as musicians. We suddenly saw this thing happening in front of our eyes: the singers, the composers, the musicianship... they took it to another level and that's what hit me the most, that suddenly it was 'Wow. Pop music can be like this as well.' It doesn't just have to be straight up, putting all the same ingredients that are the usual suspects. You know what I mean? It was an eye opener. They brought something really new to pop music. It was fresh. New. Exciting.

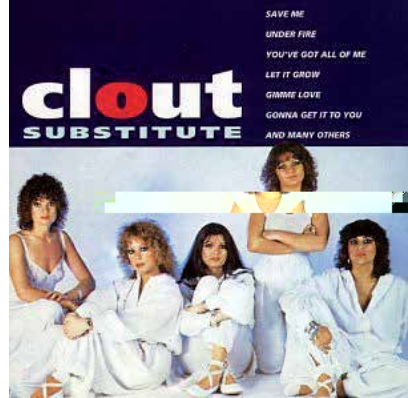
Did ABBA's influence extend to the point where they also inspired the music of Clout?

Yes, definitely. Because Clout was also orchestrated. We weren't just a straight up pop band. There was orchestration. There was a lot of thought put into the picking of the songs. There was the fact that I was a strong voice and we had the good harmonies. I don't believe our manager/producer (Grahame Beggs) ever said, "We are going to do something like ABBA." It was never that, but ABBA were definitely an influence on his producing.

Do you remember the first time you heard ABBA?

I was in a club and they played Dancing Queen and my mouth literally fell open. It was a feeling of "What is this?!" (*gaping in astonishment*). I remember that every song of ABBA brought me joy. The sad ones made me weep because they were so beautiful. And the happy ones made me dance because they were so beautiful. I have such great respect forever for each one of them for what they must have gone through emotionally to keep the band together when things weren't great in their relationships. I know this because I was in a relationship with a man when I was in Zia

Cindy Alter on the right.



(Cindy's multi-racial pop-rock band after Clout), he was the drummer. We had a horrible relationship. We loved each other very much, but it was toxic. It was bad. Nevertheless, I had to stay in the band because the band was the bond. The band is bigger than your problems or your personal issues. So, I understand what ABBA were going through. They kept it together and they stayed professional because the band was bigger than them.

Musically, I think they're absolutely brilliant. One of a kind, never to be seen again. I mean, nowadays...the pop bands, I don't even remember their songs. I'm like, "What is that song? I don't know who sang that." Nothing is memorable now, and I'm not an old-fashioned person. I listen to everything. I listen to new music, old music. But I'm trying to remember things. Oh, I remember a few songs maybe of Kelly Clarkson, maybe a song of Christina Aguilera, maybe a song of Pink. I love those artists, they're good artists. But the songs are not telling these memorable things that will stick with me for the rest of my life. But I can say ABBA songs will stick with me for the rest of my life!

That's great to hear. Absolutely. What do you think when they were using the songs in the musical *Mamma Mia!* and in the movies? Did you enjoy that as well?

I loved it. It was fantastic. I saw the stage production of *Mamma Mia!* and I saw the movie. It was joy. It's pure joy.

A noteworthy similarity lies in the geographical roots of both ABBA and Clout. It was remarkable during that era to witness a Swedish group overcome barriers and achieve global success. Similarly, the emergence of a prosperous pop group from South Africa was equally uncommon.

When ABBA became popular there were very few foreign bands that weren't from mainstream USA or mainstream UK. When we started, there were more bands coming from all over, but with Clout we were boycotted and banned everywhere because of apartheid

in our country. We were not allowed to go to another country and play our music, and other artists from another country were not allowed to come to play music in our country because of the political situation. So, the fact that Clout came out of a situation that was unheard of into mainstream Europe, America and the UK was absolutely mind-blowing at the time. What I realised was that the power of music is greater than any kind of political situation.

The initial portrayal of Clout with the five women was undeniably powerful. How important do you believe the image is for a band?

ABBA were so established with the two girls and the two guys, they were all together. That was like 'the thing.' It was so lovely that they were married and it was a creation of this beautiful 'thing.' Plus, this musical genius. I think theirs was a very strong image and it was always very well perceived and taken. We were always like, 'That's ABBA!' I suppose if you'd added another woman, we'd have said, "Oh, there's another lady in ABBA." The people are very resistant to change, as we know, as we go along. An example is some of the big rock bands of the day where the lead singer left, like Steve Perry did with Journey. They got another guy in who sounded just like Steve Perry, but it wasn't Steve Perry. So as an audience we go like, "Oh, it's not the same. That's the guy from Bad Company (*waving hands in dismissal*)."

And of course, it's not the same, but look, I just saw Queen when they were here for a concert. Freddie Mercury was Queen, but it was still beautiful. Absolutely. Adam Lambert did the most incredible work and he didn't try to be Freddie Mercury. He was just being Adam Lambert, singing these beautiful songs with the best heart and soul he could do it.

When it comes to ABBA, do you have a preferred song or era from the group? I understand it can be challenging to choose just one song, but it's always intriguing to learn about personal favourites.

For me, one of my absolute favourites is The Winner Takes It All. And surprisingly, Fernando. When I was a young girl, we used to go on holiday and I always took my guitar with me. We'd sit around the pool and I would play Fernando on my guitar, and people used to go mad and I loved it (*smiles*)! And then there is the absolute genius of Dancing Queen, there's so much in there. And even the later stuff...I was driving to the airport when I was in the UK, heading for Germany. My friend Tim that got this interview for me drove me to the airport and we had *ABBA Gold* on. All we did was sing the whole way to the airport. Not only did we sing the songs, but all the keyboard lines of all these songs (*imitating keyboard sounds*). It just blows you away. Each song is gold.

Have you listened to their final or latest album, *Voyage*?

Yes, I've got the album. I love it. I want to see *Voyage* when I go to the UK next time. I want to see that show. I think it will be quite

incredible. I loved what the girls did solo as well. Frida's *Something's Going On* was absolutely fantastic and Agnetha's songs as well. The new and newer stuff, I'm not sure about. I'm a fan of the artist, put it that way.

The secret in the magic of ABBA, aside from the compositions, might lie in the blending of the voices and harmonies?

Yes, of course. Because that was the sound and the backing was always orchestrated and very well put together and catchy and smart. The songs were crafted so well. But without those voices, what was it going to be? They were absolutely essential.

ABBA's popularity extended to South Africa, and they gained a significant following in the country. Can you recall any details about how well-received they were there?

They were huge in South Africa. Funny story. Our manager owned the publishing rights for the ABBA songs. There was a bit of a controversy because, apparently, he wasn't paying them for it. Björn and Benny (or their manager) had planned to go to South Africa with a lawyer, but the Swedish Music Union said, "Don't go, you will be banned in your own country if you go to South Africa. So don't go." I don't know if later they managed to get their money but that was the story we heard. They didn't get paid.

Are the hits of Clout your favourites, or do you have favourites that are maybe on the albums?

I can't say favourites because a lot of the stuff were favourites. Of course, I like *Save Me* and *Substitute*, but I was tired of them, I was always singing them. There was a song I wrote it about the man I was involved with in the Clout years. He was a wonderful, wonderful man. I wrote the song for him called *Tomorrow* and it was on the album *Six Of The Best*. That song meant a lot to me. I loved *You Make My World So Colourful* and *You've Got The Best Of Me* and some of the later stuff is beautiful. There was a song we did, *Miss America*, which was so light and had a guitar line in there later used in a song by a South African band, and it became a huge hit for them. You know how that works with music. Someone steals a little bit here, a little bit there...so, yes, I think there were some good tracks. There are three good compilations out there: *20 Greatest Hits*, *The Best Of Clout*, and a new one, *Anthology*, with some songs that were never put on compilations.

Do you have any plans of performing in Europe in the near future?

I'm trying to get to Europe in 2024. I'm still very active in the music business. I want to see what happens here because I'm slowly working on an album called *Nashville*. I've just released three songs from it and then I'll do another three, eventually finishing a 12-song album. It's available on Spotify and all the music platforms. It's my new incarnation and it's a different style.

TEXT: STANY VAN WYMEERSCH